

# A New World Opens

By Luca - Jan 27 2009

“

...And he strides among the treetops and is taller than the trees;

And his voiced through all the garden was thunder set to bring... ”

...

The air was brisk, clean, and refreshing. Nebulan breathed it in, watching the waves roll onto the shoreline as he walked through the flowering cherry trees. He ruled a tower devoted to study and learning of the arts of what can be felt but not seen. Forsaken by those who couldn't understand or, rather, those who were in fear to understand. Nebulan continued to manage his tower with apprentices who may have been perhaps more skilled than he, but he would never notice. His friend, Gutaraie, perched just within Nebulan's sight overlooking the sea. All his life Neb had known him, but never did he change. Gutaraie kept the same expressionless face as he always had with the same glossy eyesight that seemed to see through to everything but look at nothing. Even though he appeared in his mid-twenties, he always looked the same. But that was just another thing Neb never came to see.

He walked through his cherry trees now, moving towards the shoreline and feeling every aspect of his trees as he progressed through them. Suddenly he stopped and looked back to find his trusted lieutenant, Duran, to be behind him.

"Lord, what will we do?" Said Duran, knowing full and well what the best course of action was. Quoth Nebulan in the gentlest of tones:

"We cannot leave this island."

"We will die," said Duran.

"Yes...and death is nothing more than a portal to the next chapter. Do you fear it Duran?"

"No, my lord," said Duran, raising his chin and looking beyond Nebulan, into the distance.

Nebulan nodded. "How long?"

"Less than half an hour now, my lord."

"Then we will begin our defenses."

"Yes, lord," said Duran, walking beside Nebulan to the tower gate."

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Nebulan stood in the thrown room of his tower. It was a small a small room which one could only enter through another chamber shaped like a cross and sealed with massive stone doors at it's four points. Four guards were all that stood with Neb, joining Duran and Gutaraie. There were two on both sides of the stone door that separated the thrown room from the cross room.

Duran overlooked the shoreline from a thick piece of wavy glass which was the only other opening to the room.

Neb sat in a bare-wood chair before a wooden table adjacent to his thrown overlooking a bowl of water. He rubbed his soft, oily forehead as visions of what would come to pass flashed before him in the bowl of water.

"Three," said Nebulan softly.

"My lord?" responded Duran.

"There are three ships in the attacking force; all of them hold over two hundred men."

Duran slowly lowered his head.

"That's incredibly excessive for even a tower of the arts," said Neb. "What could they want? We have nothing but crumbling texts and wiry minds over our four levels."

"My men will fight with the courage of a thousand, my lord," said Duran with a final glance at the dock. "They will be at the gate within moments, I will join my men in battle"

"You will not."

"My lord?"

"You will stay where you are, brave sir knight."

"My lord, I will do no such thing!"

Nebulan cast a stern glance upward.

"Even now they die defending this tower, it would be a crime against the gods to sit idly while my men die," Duran stressed.

"Your men will die regardless of whether or not you are present," said Gutaraie, breaking his silence.

Duran grew very angry as he glanced out the window, seeing Lord Turin's soldiers have made there way to the tower's gate already. *How can they be so skilled that they throw down my best knights as if they had the fighting skills of a tomato?* "What would you have me do?"

"You wi...", Neb began but stopped mid sentence and looked into the chamber of the cross. On some invisible signal, he rose and moved into the chamber with great strides and the complete knowledge of what he was doing. Something had pierced the shield that protected him from common sense. Duran started to follow him into the other room.

"No," said Gutaraie calmly, not even looking up. "He knows what he is doing," he finished and continued to write in his journal

As if someone had just struck him from behind, Neb made a pulling motion to the four doors to the chamber of the cross. Quickly, the massive stone doors slid shut with a large booming echo, sealing Neb in the room alone.

"I was wondering when I would be seeing you again, Lord Turin," said Neb, flipping horizontally again, this time with a bolt of lightning in his hand that shot out with all the intensity

of a solar flare. Then, as one would reel a rope, the lightning was pulled into a hand that was emerging from the shadows where it turned and spun.

"Did you seriously think that your pathetic knights had the power to stop me from entering *your* tower?" replied Lord Turin as his hand rolled over the lightning as one would stroke a pet. "You didn't even go to the lower levels to watch them fall?" His hand continued to roll around the perfectly contained ball of violence, turning it from its white/blue glow to a hot fiery red. Neb summoned a swirl of light purple and crimson aura designed to protect him from the strongest of magics. "I am disappointed," said Turin as he set loose his sphere of red lightning. Nebulan watched it tear through his attempt at a shield and threw him into the stone wall. "I'm afraid you're out of your league," Turin said as his hands passed over the pile of robes against the wall, surrounding Neb's head and limbs with a dark red chain, preventing them from moving. "Unfortunately, you don't have the luck that I would be so kind as to throw a brick at your head; I prefer torture," Neb heard as it became dimmer and dimmer.

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He awoke to find himself in a cell, in some archetypal evil doer hide-out. Four holes in the ceiling was all that could be found that let light in from the (surface?). There was also a small wooden door that showed less signs of being broken through than the stone walls around him. A simple matter for the (former) administrator to the tower of the arts. The only challenge for him was the size of the fireball. Just enough to punch through the stone wall (assuming there was something on the other side) but not too much that if it goes wrong it kills him. He sat in concentration for a moment with his eyes closed. After the usual preparation time he threw his arm out at the wall, expecting fire to leap forth from his hand, but with no such luck. He did however, notice the iron shackles around his hands glowing with bright blue runes he had not seen before.

He slumped in his cell, now without another idea for escape, he thought like a five year-old about how he got into this position. Why did he stay at the tower? Why didn't he personally oversee the defense preparations? Why was he such a moron? How did he get in so fast? Everyday a small section in the large wooden door would open up and a small hand would place a bowl of food or water on the stone floor. Everyday Neb would take it, shrink back down into a corner and think about all the men that died due to his ignorance that he never saw. After a period of about ninety days the entire door opened with a blinding light. Neb's shaggy face looked up with his hand trying to shield him from the light.

"Nebulan!" said the eerily familiar voice of Lord Turin. It was actually chipper and joyous. "Wake up Nebulan, I've worked for so many days, I want your full attention to see my greatest work!" At this, Lord Turin walked out and was replaced by two guards that took Nebulan by the arms and followed Turin.

He was led through a series of rooms with various mechanical equipment, scientific instruments, and bubbling vats of material whose contents was best left to the imagination. Suddenly the guards stopped and Turin made a turn into another cell. He called out some more joyous words, ducked out, and continued walking. He was followed by two more guards carrying another prisoner. This time it was Gutaraie, who was barely conscious.

"Gutaraie!" Nebulan called out.

"Neb...Nebu...you nee....to know....I'm...not who I...." Attempted Gutaraie.

"Chain them up," said Turin as they stopped at the center of a great hall. Nebulan's arms were cuffed to chains attached to the ceiling. "Oh, it looks like we've run out of shackles. Don't worry Gutaraie, we have a noose just for you," said Turin delightfully. Gutaraie was attached to the noose beside and facing the same direction as Neb."HmmHmmHmm, well, lets get to the fun stuff!" Turin took a seat before the terrified two, pulled a small book out of the pockets of his robe, and started to read. His words were illegible but echoed loudly through the hall they were in. As he kept his place with his fingers, so they started to glow with a rancid green light. At some point during the ordeal, he stopped reading, but his echoed words continued on, reciting the same page again and again. Suddenly it came to a stop and the only noise the room was left with was the sound of a building fire. When this became clear, Turing flew up from his chair and released the roaring green energy that had built up from his hands.

The energy smacking into Gutaraie throwing his body against the wall, but leaving his head attached to the noose. As it fell to the floor, there was an image of Gutaraie with his head in the noose, a blue blur of him standing there. Slowly, as Turin began chanting again, the blur moved closer to Neb until at the last second it snapped into him like one relocates a removed knee. Suddenly his shackles opened up and he fell against the far wall. He took a moment to realize what had just happened and he looked at himself, his skin was turning darker and darker. His skin became so black that it lost all detail. His hands rose to feel his head, but failed. His hands instead, moved through where his face should be. He could still see but could no longer feel, it was just darkened mist. Then, with terror, he looked to his friend who lie on the ground with his head removed. Finally, his gaze turned to Turin, who stood there with a smile on his face so firm and unmoving, one would think it was made of stone.

Then there was a click in his mind. Like a waterfall, Neb's anger poured out of him, shattering the blue runes around his arm. He sent out a stream of purple energy that instantly vaporized the lower torso of Turin. Neb then slammed his fist into the ground that caused the Kardia itself to shake and fractured the tower. As the tower started to collapse, Neb looked at the remains of Turin and watched him mouth the words: Just as I planned. Still filled with rage and some new found power, Neb motioned a hand grasp and smashed his skull. He threw a robe over himself, covered his head with a hood, and exited the crumbling tower.

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## Short Introduction: Yndigo

By Galadriel - Jan 27 2009

"Michel! Fang's gotten into the trash again!"

Yndigo surveyed the octagonal room with disgust. Sunshine spilled through the high windows onto the expensive hardwood floor, revealing smears derived either from yesterday's dinner or

from Michel's latest biology experiment. Little scraps of cloth covered in a questionable substance added to the ambiance.

Sighing, Yn scritchd the demonic beast behind one ear while she contemplated the day's tasks. Impossible to work in this environment. "Your creature, your mess!" she called to Michel, being careful not to let Fang creep out with her as she slipped through the doorway.

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Sheltered on three sides from the ever-blowing island winds, the courtyard was an oasis of calm in the midst of a sandy tempest. Orange trees thrived near its arcaded walkways; the calm of a marble reflecting pool contrasted with the chaos of the crashing waves to the south.

Yn settled herself on the ground next to the pool. Yawning, she regretted her lack of a proper breakfast; she was always muddle-headed before her first cup of coffee. Still, to go back inside would mean crossing through the Room of the Unknown Biological Substance. Better to first spend some time settling the day's priorities, and for that she'd need information.

Taking a deep breath, Yn centred her thoughts and gazed into the water's surface. Hawk Isle, her own island, appeared in the pool as if seen through a hawk's eye. Bathed in sunshine, the small island gleamed as a bright gem in the sapphire ocean, attended by its own small harbour with sailing and fishing vessels. No enemies lurked on the horizon; no storms threatened.

Touching on the neighbouring islands one at a time, Yn moved outward in a spiral from Hawk Isle. Granite Cliffs, fine. Pelican Reach, fine. Nebulan's tower...

In the calm surface of the reflecting pool, Yndigo watched in alarm as three ships descended on Nebulan's tower. She would have thought the tower adequately defended by a squad of male human guards -- after all, she had spent some time assessing the magical and military strength of all of her neighbours, which just made good sense -- but they were quickly outmatched, and the island overrun.

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Shivering despite the warming sunshine, Yn steeled herself against the future. Her island's defenses were good, if less visible than a conventional military. Still, defenses could always be tightened, and preparations needed to be made if she were to pursue these pirates -- or whatever they were -- beyond the local area. In any case, her first step was clear. One should never enter muddle-headed into a game of strategy.

Yn picked herself up and headed to the kitchen for a much-needed cup of strong coffee.

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# Lost in Translation

By Bloodmoon - Jan 30 2009

Deep down in the underground, Raanil sensed something... a power. He quickly stands up from his desk and exit though The Library of Madness then he enter highest tower The Tower of Blood then he gazed at the pool. He quickly scry to find th source of power and then, He witness a man dragged to some sort of laboratory then he sees that man started to perform a ritual then everything is blank. "Amusing" he said, "Naish" then a voice speaks "Yes,Master? ", "Prepare the portal I want to use it 5 minutes later" . Then he go to his chamber and take out his favorite weapons and cloak the Crimson Staff , Dagger of Midnight and the Cloak of The Bloodmancer. Then he leaves.

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After He used the Portal He found himself in his former sanctuary now become the Gate to his realm. He smiled rembering his past then he remembered why he must go to surface and leave. "Testing" said a voice "Naish I told you don't speak to me unless something go wrong." "Sorry Master but I forgot to give you something."that voice said "What, Naish" The voice continue "This is the map of this region you position is 100 miles to east from the target, you must memorize this map Master maybe will helpfull" with that Raanil closed his eyes then he remember every small details of the region. Then he continues.

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# Driftwood

By Jewels - Jan 30 2009

The cold wind and salty waves rocked her to and fro hour after hour, day after day. She had given up hope of ever leaving the tiny boat alive but still she clung to life, fearing the alternative. Time no longer held meaning for her as she focused only on her own breath. *Keep breathing... just keep breathing.* The unexpected jarring of being run aground caused her to cry out but quickly her hoarse voice could be heard laughing as she peeked over the edge of her previous prison at the lush island in front of her. She was very weak, but her mind was still sharp. Thinking quickly, she crawled out onto the sand and slowly staggered towards the thick vegetation. She'd need a fire and some water if she was going to survive.

About an hour later she sat on the beach in front of her fire collecting condensation she had boiled off the sea water. She had taken her time as she assessed the plant life for anything edible. Her brief search was rewarded with fleshy tubers and green bamboo which she munched on in between sips of warm water. The sun would set soon. She'd need to find some shelter. As soon as she felt she had enough strength for the trek, she headed inland hoping to find an empty cave. She had traveled less than ten minutes when a sickly stench reached her. She slowed her pace as

she reached a large clearing. She would have turned to run if she thought she'd have had the energy. As it was a sea of rotting corpses lay between her and what looked to be an abandoned building... *Shelter*.

She was no stranger to death or to war but she had put herself on that boat to escape from that life. Covering her nose and mouth with her tattered shirt she picked her way carefully towards the building. She couldn't help but survey the plain for anything salvageable as she walked. The habit was too ingrained for her to ignore the rusted armor, the battered shields, and the shattered swords she passed. The sun had almost disappeared over the canopy when a glint of metal off to the right caught her eye. The tarnished shortsword that stood vertically out of it's victim seemed to beckon for her to come closer. She admired the handiwork of the blade and reached a tentative hand out to grip the finely worked hilt. The feel of it was comforting. Though she wanted to leave the past behind her, perhaps it would be best to arm herself for protection. Nodding at the reasoning she neatly pulled it out and strode more confidently towards the looming building. Hopefully she'd be able to find a room inside without a pile of bodies in it.

She didn't know her exact location, but wherever it was Adrasha Vaux had arrived.

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## Lineage

By Sudanna - Jan 30 2009

The desk was grand old thing. Stained the color of fresh blood, it gleamed with varnish in the flickering candlelight. Parchments and papers were scattered across the surface, but seemed orderly nonetheless. Drawers lined the left side, and a cabinet graced the right. The whole of the desk appeared solid, sturdy. Well-made, practically made. There was little ornamentation, only simple, high-quality utility. Every edge and corner and surface of the desk was well-worn, by generations of nobility. Treaties and commandments and battle plans had all rested upon this desk. Conferences that would decide the fate of thousands gathered around it. The lineage of this desk could be traced back to kings of old.

The man sitting at the desk, in many ways, resembled the desk. He was tall and somewhat muscled. Gray of hair and beard, with a blocky face and heavy hands. Like iron or steel, his hands, but his face was of carved, worn wood. His hands of iron cradled parchments and papers that threatened to tear to shreds. His face of wood creaked and groaned as he shifted expressions, unaccustomed as he was.

Duke Hexen, in many ways, resembled this desk. He was nobility, and of the highest breed. His lineage was indeed traced back to kings of old. He was simply made - Nothing outstanding, nothing appearing so, anyways. Sturdy of mind, he was, and legendary for it. Duke Sensible, he was often called. As friend or enemy, depending upon the speaker. A strictly practical man, he did not indulge in fine foods, fine clothes, or fine drink as many others did. His veins did not burn with ambition or bloodlust. Money he had amassed in great amounts, but only as a tool. He

had partaken in momentous events - the coronation of four kings, two formal military victories, dozens of battles (As a reliable tactician). Also, countless remarkable laws, stunning edicts, powerful meetings. Successful, content, and in all ways secure.

Now, late at night, in the light cast by several candles, he perused his missives for the day. Personal correspondence, news from the ever-present but rarely eventful front, news of trade and news of the lack of news. Some interesting proposals from neighboring fiefs, and a number of ridiculous ones. The usual, as it were. Good news.

"Hmmpf. That hothead Turin took down a mage enclave. This is getting ridiculous."

A clinking in the shadows, and a rustling of cloth to the Duke's back. "Yes, sir."

"Didn't put up much of a fight, little cost, but it was completely unwarranted. No threat, negligible gain. His bloodthirst is exactly what we don't need among the nobility. It's infectious. Count Turney and Baroness Victoria lauded his daring."

The creaking of a chair. "Yes, sir."

"Oh, stuff it. If you're not going to say anything meaningful, do be quiet."

A silence. The Duke waited expectantly, and then deflated.

"What's the matter with you? You're depressed all of a sudden."

"Not true, sir. Merely tired."

"Hogwash. I've been around you long enough to deduce your moods." It was a command.

"It's just this madness among the nobility, sir. War after war. The commoners seem accustomed to it. The kingdom is growing larger and richer, and the surrounds are being crushed underfoot. Noble blood is synonymous with power, pride, happiness. The peasants are more docile than lemmings. It's social, cultural, economic, intellectual, political, religious, and military centralization, sir, and I don't like it. It can only end in corruption and ruin. Half of you are inbred. Not to mention the superiority complex."

"True, that. These glory days won't go on forever. But they do, for now, and changing ways will only get me - and everyone underneath me, including you - killed. Nobility has three things to fear - Crown, Church and Nobility. All of which profit from your 'centralization'. Besides, you've lived with it for this long. Get over yourself."

A rattling, clinking from the shadows. A metallic cacophony accompanied by scratches and scrapings of wood on metal.

"Stop." It did. "Continue."

"You've *made* me live with it. I had no choice in the matter."

"Made you? What would *you* do? Overthrow them all in a day, and retire to an enclave? And when the Turins come along, to tear up your decentralized world? Would you do it again? There won't be much of a world left after long."



A grunt, a sound of primal anger from the shadow. A heavy rustling of cloth, a heavy clinking of chains. Shuffling feet. A man came into the candlelight. An old, old man. Ancient. Dust creaking from joints, hair of brightest white. Lines etched deep in sagging flesh.

And then the illusion broke. It was a young man, really, but old. Tragically old. Lines etched deep, into a beardless face that had barely seen a score of years. His pale, ghostly face was framed with unnatural red waves. A back hunched over with a weight too heavy for a million to bear. A frame skeletal, all flesh eaten away by parasitic troubles. Great, golden manacles around his quivering hands. The heavy chain hung down to the floor.

"No. Stop." The Duke. "I don't even know why I talk to you. It always ends this way. Shut up, sit down, brood on your own. Go fuck a maid later on, you glorified battery."

The ancient young man shut up, sat down, and glowered. The manacles glittered more than the candles allowed for. "You know I don't roll that way."

The manacles sparked and seared. "Quiet."

The Duke finished reading his letters, drafted a few responses, filed the rest away. Moved to a rather large, fairly nice map and moved some labeled chips of wood around. The man in the corner sat and sulked.

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## Lost in Translation II

By Bloodmoon - Jan 31 2009

After a while Raanil then arrived at a ruins of tower he felt a magical residue here, and decided to investigate it. Raanil entered the crumbling tower, from the destruction he can only detect the tower is destroyed by some sort of earthquake magic. Then he found a decapitated body of a man, "But the head where is the head?" Raanil then search the room and found dust probably a human dust from its scent of charred bones and flesh. Then he found the decapitated man's head then he placed his hand on the head then started to examine the memories. He saw this man name is Gutaraie was captured by a man named Turin then he sees his friend a man called Nebulan then he sees a horrifying sight as the ritual continues to the decapitation of this man and a energy entering Nebulan then all goes black. He open his eyes then then search for a book that Turin used, then he remember the ashes and try to poking on that ashes and he finds a small book in a black color. He then take the book and try to open and read it but he cannot read it. "Maybe I could translate it at the tower." he thinks then he leaves.

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He returned to his tower trying to translate the demonic book. After several weeks he only can find that this book is named Daemonica a damned book of a long forgotten demon worshiper cult. Frustrated he decided to search for that man the man in the ritual, Nebulan. Then he try to scry again this time using the focusing crystal.

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# The Spire

By Ackrovan - Jan 31 2009

The workers grunts were heard all across the threshold of the Spire. For nearly ten hours each day, they hauled themselves out of bed, got dressed, picked up their tools, and began the day with the backbreaking task of restoring walls, fixing floors, and reconstructing a ruin. When they weren't working, they spent their time in a tight camp outside of the Spire, that was undersized and undersupplied for the capacity its occupants. Food was usually a moldy, semi-toxic mix of dry roots and over-salted vegetables. "Sloop" as it was becoming named. Even the foremans had little luxury in the art of substances. Everyone and everything was being treated like dogs. The Archon did not enjoy giving his subjects such pathetic conditions. He would rather not hear the moans of hunger, or the chatters of disgust. But what could he do? The war has left the Kingdom upperclass desperate for more power and starving for more control. These people, their lands scorched away from them by the countless wars, have nothing. They were accustomed to what they had given to them.

The Archon was usually lingering in the Spire's Library. It was the one part of the Spire that had truly stood against the test of time. Its books had been given a powerful shield to protect it, which it had done exceptionally well. The Archon before Ackrovan, seeing the approaching doom of the Spire, had her mages cast a nearly impenetrable shield to preserve the millenia of knowledge. All of Ackrovan's desires, whether it be magic, science, history, or even war laid on these shelves. Ironically, because of the barrier that had protected the library for so long, it was impossible to reach up and grab one without your hand being incinerated into a neat pile of ash. So he stared at them, wishing his own mages were smart enough to Peirce threw the barrier. It was an irony of sorts.

Ackrovan's assistant opened the massive door that protected him from the outside world. He spoke, "My lord?" The Archon's head turned toward his assistant, Beth. She was a young and vibrant woman, especially for her almost inept knowledge of magic. Almost thirty years of age, her blond hair and peach skin had yet to show the countless hours she had spent deep in books, both of mundane and arcane kinds. Whether it was a legitimate tan or slight magical altering was up for grabs. "Yes, my disciple?" he responded without a lack of interest. It was rare for her to disturb him while he rested. Another reason why he liked her. "My lord, we have important news to share with you." She waited for his ahead. He nodded, "Continue," He started walking the halls of the library, motioning her to follow.

"My lord, we have uncovered another wing of the Spire. We believe its holding a special room, filled to the top with magical tomes." Beth's interruption was completely forgiven. Getting access to one of the Spires training rooms was one of the prime reasons Ackrovan has been attempting to dig up a fossil. Among other things. "Interesting indeed," his mussels eased, "So what are we waiting for? Lets get it open." Beth shook her head, something Ackrovan dreaded. "We have but

one.....small interference, my lord." Ackrovan's glee wavered, "Do tell," he asked, not bothering to hide the disappointment in his tone. Beth continued, "We believe that the controls have been damaged. They are not responding at all to our commands. We've even tried recharging it, but that's not the problem. It's just not responding." She waited for a response. Ackrovan's head dropped. It was the last thing he wanted to hear. His goals were so close, yet so slippery. He nodded, "Very well, my disciple. Lead me to the room." Beth nodded, "Of course, my master". They preceded out of the room.

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## The News is Not Good

By Nioca - Jan 31 2009

The *Lioness* stalked the waters, following her prey. Captain Honja Torres peered through the night mist at his prize; the *Jennidean*. Captain Torres had been attempting to track down the *Jennidean* for over a year; the small Barquentine was a vanishing act. Appearing in civilized lands with a skeleton crew, then disappearing back into the unknown. Ships that tried to track her wound up disappearing as well. But not this time. Not for Captain Torres. If she escaped her pursuers via magic, he had a full compliment of mages to track it. If she escaped through force, she'd have a few things to learn about the capabilities of a man-of-war.

Though, at the moment, Captain Torres was more concerned about the *Jennidean* escaping by the sheer fact she was faster. He had been using one of his mages since dusk to magically accelerate the *Lioness* past what her sails could manage. They were pushing 11 knots just to keep up. Still, he knew that when the time came, he could push her faster. But until then, he stalked in the distance. He didn't just want the *Jennidean*, but also her berth.

"Sail, Ho!" The lookout cried from the crow's nest. Captain Torres looked up at the watchman, then at where he was staring. Two frigates with black sails had uncloaked just under half-a-league away. They too were sailing after the *Jennidean*, and apparently had been for some time, remaining under magical concealment. Now that they had revealed themselves, they sprung into action. One ship steered off and prepared to intercept the *Lioness*. The other pursued the *Jennidean*, closing quickly with her.

Captain Torres was enraged. A year of searching, a year of circling islands, and this was how it would end? With a pirate claiming the prize as he watched? Not if he had anything to say about it. And he did. "Man tha ballistae! Roll out tha pitch and torches! Prepare the trebuchets!"

Men scrambled to the massive ballistae around the ship, with barrels of burning pitch and torches being brought forth. Ports on each side of the *Lioness* opened, revealing three more decks bristling with ballistae. Ten men surrounded the two large catapults on the upper deck, loading large, lead balls into them. Small flickers of flame could be seen on the approaching pirate ship as they made similar preparations. Taking a glance at the *Jennidean*, Captain Torres saw that the fighting had already begun, with flaming ballista blots perforating the air around her.

The massive man-of-war turned, revealing its port ballistae. Mages climbed to the upper deck, preparing spells to fire at the enemy vessel. The ships closed to fighting distance.

"FIRE!" Loud thuds greeted the command as the ballistae fired, releasing heavy flaming bolts into the pirate vessel. They pockmarked the frigate with small holes, which quickly started smoldering. The trebuchets then released their ammo, and the heavy projectiles splintered a mast and punched a hole through the aft of the vessel. The pirates returned fire, but their attempts had nowhere near the success; shields conjured by the *Lioness's* mages stopped the bolts cold, letting them ricochet off into the dark, moonlit waters. The two vessels released another volley of bolts. The pirate vessel was now partially aflame, and the *Lioness* still lacked any damage.

Suddenly, the fires on the pirate vessel went out, like a candle that had just been snuffed. A dark field of energy started emanating from the forecastle, sparking out as if rending reality itself. A mage stood at the center of it, his eyes glowing with a sinister light. Suddenly, the energy struck out, lashing the *Lioness* like lightning bolts. The magical shields were shattered instantly, and a hole was blasted into the side of the once-majestic vessel, running a half of her length and almost reaching down into the water.

Captain Torres picked himself up and stared in horror. All of the port ballistae were gone. The trebuchets were gone. Only one mage was left alive, and he was too busy jumping overboard to care about the ship. Just like that, the battle had turned.

Torres hit his knees, praying to whatever god would hear him. The pirate mage was preparing another attack, and it was clear the *Lioness* wouldn't survive. The pirates had won.

But only against the *Lioness*. As if in answer to his prayers, blasts of fire and lightning assaulted the pirate vessel. One lightning bolt struck the pirate mage, flinging him overboard and disrupting the spell. What seemed to be an orange, horizontal lightning bolt struck the pirate vessel across the stern, shattering the entire front of the craft. It started taking on water, and slowly started listing to starboard. It was going down.

Captain Torres and what was left of his crew stared in astonishment at the sinking pirate ship. One minute, it had been reducing the *Lioness* into driftwood. The next, it was being claimed by the sea. Torres turned to look at his rescuer. And his jaw dropped.

It was the *Jennidean*. Slightly scorched, but little worse for the wear, the proud Barquentine had turned around and was sailing to intercept the battered man-of-war. As Torres watched the ship he'd pursued so long come to him, he could only hope that her crew would be cordial.

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Griseham watched the sun glide above the horizon, a pit of worry in his stomach. He wasn't the only one; several men and women were standing around, watching the inlet to their island and waiting for a familiar sight. Trying to assuage his fears, Griseham pulled a wand from his belt. The cylindrical rod was tipped with a white sapphire, and seemed to glitter in the morning light. Tiny, delicate runes ran down the ebony base, written in a golden, flowing leaf. One of his best works.

The wandmaker finally couldn't take it anymore. "Where are they?" He asked outloud to no one in particular. "The *Jennidean* should have been back last night!"

"I'm sure they're fine." A soothing voice stated from behind. A heavily-built man walked up next to the tall, thinly-built Griseham. "Maybe a storm delayed them."

"If there was a storm, we would have known about it." Griseham started pacing, his fine silk clothes catching the breeze and rippling ever-so-slightly. "Why did Anaya have to captain this trip? Horit was perfectly willing to go to the mainland."

"Your wife ran this trip because it's what she does. She's a ship's captain. A commander of the sea, and a fine one at that."

"Easy for you to say." Griseham muttered spurnfully. "But setting aside the fact she's my wife, if we lost the *Jennidean*... not to mention all the goods or gold it would have been carrying... it's a disaster!"

"It's not that bad. The *Red Dove* could easily be sent in the *Jennidean*'s place for trade, and we can still make ends meet even if we did lose a ship full of goods."

"Forgive me, blacksmith, but you haven't a clue about ships." Griseham snapped bitterly. He pointed at the inland lake that served as a wharf for about eight ships. "The *Red Dove*," he began, pointing at a tall, shining ship, "is a Galleon, and our only fullsize warship. Aside from the fact we'd have to dump most of the weaponry just to make room for the cargo, it's our only defense against the oh-so-wonderful pirates that have decided to build a fort here. And before you even suggest it, the Sloops wouldn't survive the journey, and the Corvettes are too small, not to mention needed to keep an eye on our neighbors. And the Brigantine can't carry half the cargo the *Jennidean* does. Or did."

"Well, you need to come up with something. We all know who really runs this village." The blacksmith marched away, leaving Griseham to brood.

Griseham watched the sun continue to rise. Soon, noon arrived, and the *Jennidean* still wasn't back. A Corvette had been dispatched to see whether the *Jennidean* was still afloat. Griseham stifled a yawn, then turned around and stared at the small village of Tanton. A wooden wall wrapped around small stone houses with wooden roofs. Tiny puffs of smoke rose from their smokestacks, and villagers in expensive dress went about their day. A little under 250 people lived in this forgotten nook of the world. Those who sought solitude and those fortunate enough to wreck here discovered a peaceful life, away from the so-called society kingdoms past sought to impose. The villagers here lived by their own rules with only a single constraint: no harm to others.

Of course, they weren't the only ones on the passably large island of Tanton; indeed, they only occupied the northwest part of the island. There were also the Tantonites from the central forests, simple natives who lived by simpler rules and culture. Most of the venison Tanton got was from the natives; thanks to swift thinking on Griseham's part when he first arrived, the Tantonians and the Tantonites were on friendly terms. Tanton supplied them certain amenities from the outside world that fascinated them, along with wands to hunt and protect themselves, and the Tantonites provided food and herbs that could be found only by them.

Then there were the most recent arrivals. A pirate clan that called themselves the Hojick Ravagers. They decided that the island of Tanton would make a good place to build their base of operations. For now, the pirates had no idea that the island they chose was inhabited. But it was

only a matter of time. Already, attacks on Tantonian ships had been on the rise. And it would only get worse.

Griseham passed the village by and hiked up toward a rather impressive manor. Impressive by rural standards, anyway; it was a two-floor house with a basement. His house. Built by his and his wife's hands. Griseham took a rattling breath as the thought crossed his mind. His wife... where was she? Was she still alive, sailing home to him? Or was she eternally resting with the *Jennidean* on the ocean floor?

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The sun had dropped partway back to the horizon. With a steady hand, Griseham was etching gold-leaf runes into an ebony rod. The tip of the rod was hollow, awaiting a gem with a magical charge. Finishing the delicate runework, Griseham proceeded to grab a small shard of topaz and affix it to the end. Holding his hand over the gem, he muttered an incantation. The seams where the topaz and the ebony rod met glowed white for a moment, then sealed. Another incantation crossed Griseham's lips, and a flow of energy left his finger and streamed into the gem. It glowed with increasing intensity as more energy filled it, eventually illuminating the basement.

Then the spell stopped. The energy stopped flowing, and the topaz resumed its unilluminated state, though a small spark could be seen within.

A pounding came from the front doors above, startling Griseham out of his work. Keeping the wand at his side, and noting the six-or-so wands at his belt, he charged up the stairs. Passing through the parlor and into the foyer, he opened the door a crack to peek at the man. It was one of the people who left on the Corvette. He opened the door completely and prepared for the worst.

"Exactly what kind of mission was your wife on?" The man asked, seemingly humored.

"A supply run." Griseham answered, impatient.

"And how exactly does a man-of-war figure into supplies?" The man laughed. Griseham stared at him, confused. "The *Jennidean*'s roughed up, but is otherwise fine. And she's dragging a huge warship! That's why she's taking so long! They're moving at little more than a crawl."

Griseham couldn't help but smile. Leave it to Anaya to go out for supplies and come back with a warship. Still, a note of worry crossed Griseham's mind. If they were moving slowly, they were prime pirate fodder. "Tell Yori to man the *Red Dove* and have it escort the *Jennidean* back to port."

"No need, sir. She's already setting sail as we speak." The man said. "Barring any changes, the *Jennidean* should be here within five hours. Give or take an hour."

Griseham nodded, hardly able to contain his relief. Everything was fine.

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As promised, the *Jennidean* had returned to port with her prize; A severely damaged man-of-war named the *Lioness*, hauled by ropes. Its captain, a man named Torres, and what remained of the crew (including a rather sodden mage) agreed to stay in Tantonian. The village shipwright set to work on fixing the damage to both the *Jennidean* and the *Lioness*. A new day had dawned

Griseham was content. His wife was back, they had supplies for both comfort and for new wands, and all was right in the world.

At least, it was.

"Griseham!" Someone shouted, pounding on the door to Griseham's manor. Griseham opened the door to greet the fellow, only for the grizzled, gray-haired man to barge past and head for the parlor.

Griseham shut the door, completely unperturbed by the occurrence. "What brings you here, Captain Dalmas?"

"I just got back from the scouting trip." Captain Dalmas replied.

"Pirates?" Griseham stated, worried. "Is the *Loveless* alright?"

"Nay, the corvette didn't find a fight. You know the Tower of the Arts, twenty miles northeast of here?" His voice resonated concern.

"How could I not? The buffoon there, Nebulan, is it?" Captain Dalmas nodded. "Anyway, he seems to think that magic is all about inner focus and study. A pompous fool." Griseham seethed. "After our meeting, I had half-a-mind to give him the inner focus of a discharging fire wand jammed up his-"

"Ye gods! Children are present!" Captain Dalmas exclaimed, looking at his shocked apprentices.

"So?" Griseham responded.

"Anyway, it's gone."

"Gone?" Griseham yelped. "How-"

"Lord Turin." Captain Dalmas replied.

Griseham blanched. Lord Turin? Here? It was difficult enough to stay clear of Duke Hexen, the de facto master of the islands. But Turin? "My gods. Lord Turin... is there no place free of him?"

"Once he discovers us, ye can forget Tantonía. It'll be a slave colony if it isn't razed." Captain Dalmas said hopelessly.

"Like hell it will. I'm not running from that bloated jackal again. If he wants to take Tantonía, he better be prepared for war." Griseham responded bitterly.

"Aye. It'll be the epic tale around the world. A rag-tag group of villagers with a lackluster navy gettin' pulverized by Lord Turin." Captain Dalmas fired off sarcastically.

"You have a better idea?" Griseham responded. After hearing nothing, he added, "We're not charging right off to battle. But we need to be ready for when the battle comes to us." Griseham paused. "Ready the *Loveless*. There's an island near the once-tower of the arts that belongs to a rather private mage. With luck, she'll know more about the circumstances than we do." Griseham walked off, heading back down into the basement.

"Where are ya goin', Griseham?" Captain Dalmas called after him.

"With you, of course. Secluded mages can be touchy, and I have extensive knowledge in regard to magic. Even if I can't use it." Griseham came back, loaded down with a large variety of wands, including one that resembled a large oar with a diamond fitted on the end. "Let's go."

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## Like a magical puppet...

By Sudanna - Feb 1 2009

Aodhan sat, exhausted, breathless, in his small section of Castle Hexen. The Duke was doing something big, somewhere in the upper levels of the keep. His fingers twitched and traced, danced and spun, as sounds too gutturally alien to be named words wrenched themselves from his lips. Ethereal glows emanated from the manacles, as lines of black fire traced random paths along the cuffs and chain. Sweat beaded his forehead and his breathing rasped through his dry mouth and into beleaguered lungs. He could feel the power well into being, deep inside himself. Feel it rise, rise, teasing him, crazing him. Feel it wrenched away on the very edge of release, far away, leaving nothing but a empty, empty, sickness. He retched through his chanting.

The manacles, the infernal manacles, had him dancing like a magical puppet, like a burning marionette on strings of cool, extinguishing water. But he *wanted* to burn. The chains clinked and rattled as his hands, his arms went through the gestures of power. His harsh breathing and hoarse, black chanting were eerily distinct in the still night, even to his own ears. A strand of long red hair had found its way into his mouth, but he could not pick it away with his dancing fingers, could not spit it out through his gasping lips. The stillness of the night seemed to mock him, seemed to mock his fevered, involuntary activity. Seemed to mock his helplessness.

At long last, after an age of this, he stopped. His arms were allowed to fall heavily to his sides, the chain of the manacles across his lap. He stopped his mouthing of eldritch songs, and drew in a long, rattling breath. His mouth was painfully dry. With great effort, Aodhan heaved his body out of the chair he had collapsed in and felt his way along the wall in the dark. The pitcher of water was where he had left it, next to the door. He heaved the thing up with his weak, stick-thin arms, and bent his head to drink.

Ah, but no. He was summoned. The manacles glowed slightly, gently tugging on his consciousness, growing more insistent as he hesitated. They would burn, soon. After that, they would hijack his body, leaving him feeling sore and clumsy for days.

Aodhan set down the still-brimming pitcher with regret, and walked to the heavy door, which he opened slowly. Walking out into the dark hallways that he knew well, he found and ascended the stairs.

Some minutes later, he arrived at the Duke's workshop. The Duke called it a workshop, anyways. It was far too expensive to be a humble workshop. A square foot of this room, sold to the right person, could feed a thousand peasants for a year, provided they ate simply. The entire place was a nuclear furnace of magical power. Aodhan felt some of his weariness lift within moments of



entering. But the power that lurked just outside of him, tickling at his skin and itching at his eyes, nose, and mouth left him feeling worse than before. If only he could take it! If only the power was his again!

"Sorry for asking you here, Little Flame, but I need you rested." Little Flame was a term of endearment his teachers had had for him. Nowadays, the Duke used it for unknown reasons. It served only to remind him of less. . . enslaved days.

"What are you *doing*? I can barely-" And here he could only rasp.

"Nothing too dramatic. Just enriching a couple thousand acres of farmland."

"Obviously-" \*hack\* "not. You look troubled."

"You know the enclave that Turin destroyed? I've been looking at it, and at the invasion. The level of magical power there is uncanny. The tower itself isn't too badly damaged, but it's as if someone brought the gods themselves down on the place. Here, feel."

Hexen flicked two fingers at him, and here Aodhan could only gape.

"The leader of the place, he was named Nebulan. I believe Turin took him hostage, but I can't penetrate the defenses of Castle Turin to be sure. Not that I didn't try. Why, I don't know. He was never particularly distinguished, by power or skill."

Aodhan tried hard to focus. The sensation of that power still ached in him.

"It was extremely difficult to penetrate the leftover magic around the tower, and then to do a past scrying from this distance. . . You have my apologies."

"Still, you can't have gotten that detailed of a report. Not with that kind of interference."

"I know. Which is why I've sent a mage out to investigate the ruined tower."

"Just one?"

"He's good. Exile. The foreigner." There was only one foreigner above the rank of foot soldier.

"Ah. I. . . know him. Do you trust him enough to stay loyal? If he suspects Turin of doing that, he might betray you out of fear."

"He has a vested interest in staying with me."

Aodhan glared at him out of gray eyes circled in red and underlined with heavy bags.

"No, I'm not holding his family ransom or anything else that didn't work for you. He just knows I'll be watching."

Aodhan groaned. "Must you? Could at least warn me when?"

"Yes."

The Duke started to turn away.

"Wait! What are the other nobles doing about this? It's a blatant act of aggression. The King and Church, as well."

"Some of the nobles laud his daring, but most just don't care. I can fend for myself well enough, against that hothead. The King frowns on it, but he knows better than to meddle in our petty squabbles. His father's and grandfather's deaths taught him that. Plus, nothing exciting is happening on the front, so he can't protest the waste of men and magic. The Church has gone on another mage-burning spree. The newest appointment for Lector is trying to stop it."

"And Turin himself?"

"He's circulated some story about the enclave being a nest of rebels and whatnot. Implying that I willingly avoided doing anything about it. He knows I'll take it, but he doesn't know that I'll get him back. He's about to lose several thousand denars worth of farmland. Fires can be so-"

And now came a sense. Hexen felt it, a ripple, a hole being filled, somewhere far away. A strange sense, of loss and death and emptiness. Aodhan felt the tickle of his sense being diverted to Hexen, but nothing more.

"What happened?"

The Duke ignored him, walking instead to a crudely lashed-together circle of sticks propped against the wall. A wave of his hand, a convulsion of Aodhan, and a pile of rubble shimmered into view.

"Hexen?"

The Duke turned towards him. Now, his face was of hard, cold steel or rock, rather than warm wood.

"Turin just died."

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## The Archon Needs to Know

By Ackrovan - Feb 1 2009

The halls of the Spire were only halfway completed. Pieces of marble stone had been destroyed, and the walls were missing chunks of granite. Almost all of Ackrovan's laborers efforts were centered on restoring the Spires defenses, with only a small portion maintaining the docks and ships. Even the sailors and shipmasters had to occasionally pitch in and help with repairs. It was a grinding, grueling, impossible task at the best of times and a dream at the worst of times.

Ackrovan and Beth were forced to move between different hallways to get to the stairs leading down to this new wing. It took an aggravatingly long time to get there, between the lack of floor's and the constant workers passing by, each carrying a pile of stones, or a sack of tools. After these constant distractions, they managed to get down towards this new wing.

The two of them entered the wing, and were greeted by a company of armed guards(Ackrovan had yet to get the Spire's foundry up and running, so he was only able to 'properly' equip only about 500 soldiers) surrounding and protecting a group of mages. As Ackrovan entered, they

immediately saluted him. Ackrovan nodded, "Return to your duties." The mages obliged him. Ackrovan and Beth approached the club of mages, each trying different ways to find out what was wrong with the command panel. One was repeatedly turning the crystals to get the door to open. Two more were trying to break open the magically defended hull, which might as well been plastered with, "Indestructible." Another two were rereading tomes about ancient inscriptions, seeing if they are only doing the commands wrong.

A sixth mage, however, was hawking over them, making sure they were not screwing anything up permanently. When Ackrovan and Beth approached him, he turned towards them. If a zombie could put on clean robes, hide their scent, and talk without any lingering stench, then it would be this man. His skin had more wrinkles than a shriveled up fish, and his hair was in less quantities than a bald eagle. His bony fingers desperately clung to a thin staff that looked like it could give out at any moment.

The mage slowly nodded his head, "My lord," Ackrovan responded, "Jokian," He nodded toward the machine, "What's the problem?" Jokian sighed meekly, "I'm not sure what else I can tell you that Beth has not already. The controls are simply not responding to our commands." Ackrovan glanced at the controls and jotted his eyes back to him, "Is it possible you misread the runes?" Jokian looked offended, "My master, with all do respect, I *never* get the inscriptions wrong." Ackrovan nodded. Jokian was the Kingdom's first-most expert on ancient inscriptions. He at one point even served under Duke Hexan at castle Hexan itself. He faked his on death, however, to join Ackrovan, in promising the secrets of the Ancients, which has always fascinated him. If he was sure that the inscriptions were right, they must be.

The Archon edged the mage reviewing the controls way, too look at it himself. They were pretty simple, actually. A series of crystals ran across the board, each aligned with an adjacent crystal and markings that matched the shape of the crystal. If Jokian was correct, all you have to do is turn the crystals in the correct order and the command will be entered(in this case, the door will open.) He waved the mage he pushed aside to hand him the book. She obliged him. Carfully reading the deciphered message, Ackrovan turned two crystals left, and one right. A slight hum wavered around the table, but nothing came of it. The door laid ever so shut.

Ackrovan sighed. He didn't have the slightest idea what was wrong, and as long as he couldn't see inside the panel, he wouldn't. He turned to Jokian, "Keep me posted on this door," he nodded to the two mages still working on opening the door, "and make sure you get that open We'll only know whats inside it only after we can look at it." Jokain nodded, "Yes, my lord." Seeing nothing left, Ackrovan exited back to the library. Beth also departed to her own study.

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Captian Rovon sailed with all haste, ever so careful not to alert any unwanted attention. Five ships were in his fleet, a total of two thirds the Archon's fleet. The flagship, which was the one he was personally commanding, was a freshly built two-mast Corvette, named the *Stalker*. Due to knew information about masts discovered in the Spire, she could easily top 16 knots, but was forced to adapt a mere 9 for the three transport ships in toe. Two were carring all so important food and new equipment, and the last one was transporting fresh workers to fill the ranks. The last ship in the group was another Corvette, named the *Waylander*. Its main role was to defend the transports and support the *Stalker* in the event of an attack. The other two ships in the

Archon's fleet are three Man-o-War's, named the *Usurper* (Ackrovan's flagship), the *Harlot* and the *Sentinel*, which stayed at the Spire and defended it. Even nearly three hundred miles east, at the outer most eastern edge of Duke Hexan's territory, there was little possibility that they would be discovered and deemed a threat by old Mister Hexan. However, the Archon had made it clear to be ever so careful, for Hexan wasn't the only threat on the high seas.

But that's not what Rovon was in such a rush about. About a week ago, Lord Turin launched a random attack on Nebulan's Tower. It was so random and unexpected. The Archon needs to know about it.

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## A Peaceful Hovel

By Jewels - Feb 2 2009

*Wolves, snarling for blood, surrounded her. How stupid could she have been? Of course the carnage outside would have brought scavengers in droves. The shelter she had so hoped for refuge in was already occupied. Holding her sword at the ready, she circled quickly, looking for a way out or a vantage point at least. Teeth barred, one jumped at her. The sword easily cut right through. Another took a chance snapping at her leg and found itself clove in two. They still surrounded her, more seemed to creep out of the shadows every second. They advance on her, closing her in. Then they pounced. Three fell easily but when her head was turned a fourth found purchase on her arm sinking its teeth in.*

Adrasha awoke with a cry of pain. Her arm throbbed. She had rolled over on it in her sleep. The fire she had made to keep her warm still crackled soothingly. In its light she checked her wound. It was healing nicely. No signs of infection which was almost miraculous considering her presence in the midst of death. She supposed searing the puncture wounds with her fire sanitized blade may have helped, but even so, she considered herself very lucky.

Adrasha lay back down and stared up at the ceiling wondering where she should go from here. When she had set out, her hope had been to live out the rest of her life on a deserted island. This one seemed to be abandoned but there was no guarantee it would stay that way. Dare she head out to sea on her tiny boat again? She had barely survived the first attempt. No, this island would have to make due even though the stink of decay surrounded her. There was also some advantage to having found a furnished bedroom complete with fireplace still intact in this place. Perhaps with a little work... a little elbow grease, she could turn this place into a home. A peaceful hovel in a war wracked world. It wouldn't be easy though, not all by herself, but that is what she wanted wasn't it? Solitude? Mind made up and heart set, Adrasha fell back asleep with new purpose.

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After over a month of digging graves, hauling bodies, repairing damage done to the tower, and salvaging anything even remotely useful, Adrasha sat contentedly resting by the fire. A fine

longbow she had found hung neatly on the wall next to a quiver full of a variety of arrows. It had come in handy when hunting for supper. Next to that, also mounted on the wall, was the sword she had grabbed on the first day. After a good polishing and sharpening, she had christened it *Atholasha* in honor of her new beginning. A small round shield also glinted in the firelight on the other side. Then neatly in a pile in front were folded the best fitting leather jerkin, chainmail, helmet, boots, and gloves she could find. She hoped she would never have to wear it all again, but it gave her comfort to know it was there. Ready if the need ever arose.

Next to her, four young wolf pups whined. She had found them soon after she had started clearing out the place. Left in their den while their mother had been hunting 'her', Adrasha had been filled with compassion for them. Her life on the isle wouldn't be so lonely with them to care for. She gave them each a bowl of coconut milk and a chunk of meat while stroking their little heads. "Eat up now. We all want to grow up to be strong and healthy, right?" One by one, they finished and jumped into her lap, vying for the attention of her hands and eventually falling asleep. Not wanting to disturb them, Adrasha closed her eyes to rest by the fire with them. Peace lulled her to sleep. She had never been happier.

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## Lost in Translation III

By Bloodmoon - Feb 3 2009

A voice then suddenly echoes "But Master why don't you scry again that tower now look for the past?", Raanil then said "That is a good idea but I think I try to scry that man first." He then tried to scry but everything is still blank. "Hmmm, maybe because the demonic power that Turin summoned to that man blocked my vision." Then he decided to scry again but at the tower. He sees the again the process but now its very clear after the man decapitated Nebulan then kill Turin with amazing power, then the vision shift to the no crumbling tower but now theres a light there. He try to focus and see a women sleeping in a room that he not bother to investigate he see the women is repairing the tower,"Why" he thinks "Maybe because she is a refugee, a criminal? He decide to ask her tommorow .

Next Morning

He is traveling to that tower now but in a disguise he dont know wether the women is hostile or not but better with caution so he takes an Amulet with him.

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# You May Need More Coffee...

By Galadriel - Feb 5 2009

Fang had many friends. Part dog, part flame, part shadow, intelligent enough to distinguish locals from interlopers, wily enough to plan an effective ambush, incorruptably loyal, they honed their skills in stealthy play on Hawk Isle, on Granite Cliffs, on Pelican Reach. Soon, soon, they would also roam the ruins of Nebulan's tower.

The waters, too, teamed with allies, both natural and modified. Michel had done his work well, and Yndigo was grateful. Most younger brothers would have rebelled against such a strong older sister, and left to seek their own fortune elsewhere, but Michel had never been interested in politics or people, only in the minutiae of shaping genetics. Yn smiled to herself as she remembered a six-year-old Michel lost in wonderous contemplation of mollusk-shell colour patterns, as if those striations held secrets beyond her ken. Yes, Michel was in his element directing his magical energies into reshaping creatures. Yn had never seen him so much as light his path with magic; his attentions were so entirely focussed.

But this new partnership went beyond her wildest expectations. Focussed on her own magic and on the bardic college, as well as the governing of Hawk Isle, Yn had never considered participating in Michel's experiments. By chance, one day Yn had flounced into Michel's extensive lab complex, looking to lure him away from work for an afternoon of sailing. It was mere coincidence that in her fit of pique at being rebuffed she had directed a bit of magical flame towards Michel's work-table, where a not-quite-dog was being shaped. It was miraculous that this spare bit of flame would *imbue* the creature, rather than burn it. It was a testimony to the strength of Michel's shaping that the creature could encompass not only Yn's flame, but also her subsequent burst of shadow-energy. Fang was sublime, a creature of both genetics and magic, born of the best of Michel's science and Yn's power.

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"Ellyn, explain to me one more time why we had no bards at Turin's Castle?"

Yn's tone and expression betrayed her intense displeasure. The well-dressed woman at whom her glare was aimed paled, and let out a small-but-audible almost-whimper before replying. "Tuwel thought the environment there was becoming... unhealthy... and ... well... ran, I mean, sailed, ..."

"And such an important task had been entrusted to this lily-livered lummo because..."

"Because his voice is heaven itself, and we thought to charm the Lord!"

Yn's frustrated sigh was audible. Her frustration was enhanced by the sure knowledge that she'd brought the situation upon herself, by promoting Ellyn to a position she was unsuited for. Ellyn was a master musician, an excellent teacher, just the person to nurture the nascent talents of sensitive young artists into real solid skill and deep creativity. But she was driven by the music,

always by the music, and had very little understanding of the political and intelligence-gathering aspects of the career. Yn had been wrong to delegate these functions to her.

"Well, we'll need to send someone to sing for the teenager. Someone young and fine, but not flighty. Male, I think, with a substantial, but subtle, magical talent."

"Stefan, perhaps? Although his voice is not so fine as Tuw..."

At Yn's sharp look, Ellyn stopped herself, looking abashed.

"Stefan it is; send him to Turin's son. Dismiss Tuwell, but gently -- tell him he's matured beyond our teaching. And send Laura and Flore to Hexen. The more agents we can place, the more secure I'll feel."

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In the chill of the approaching twilight, Yn walked south from the campus of the bardic college, through the shoreside town that kept it well-supplied with food and staff. Shadow creatures bounded from their hiding places for ear scratches and other doggie greetings before dissolving back into the darkening countryside.

A flurry of activity encompassed the town harbour, as the crew of the locally-moored three-masted sloop *Amethyst* poured out of homes and taverns towards the dock. "About five miles southwest, ma'am," informed the stout muscular harbourmaster as Yn approached. "A corvette, the *Loveless*, unknown registration, probably not hostile, but..."

"Yes, safety first, Phillip, you're right. Escort it in, and bring the captain to see me at his earliest convenience, please? I'll be at home."

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## The Game Catches *You*

By Jewels - Feb 5 2009

When Adrasha awoke the sun hadn't yet peeked over the horizon. *Perfect time to catch today's supper*, she thought to herself. Putting on her leather jerkin and chaps, she grabbed her bow and arrows and a dagger she'd pulled out of some poor soul's back. It worked well has a hunting knife after she had cleaned and sharpened it. "You guys stay here," she cooed at the wolf pups. "When you're older I'll let you come along, but you have to learn some self-control first." As if in protest, one started chewing on the heel of her boot. "Jasper, cut it out," she scolded. "Go play with June and Jade." Adrasha pointed at two of the pups that had decided to occupy themselves by playing tug-of-war with the rug. Jasper ignored her finger, nipping at her pant leg instead. "Or maybe Julian will share his bone." Adrasha picked Jasper up and took him to his brother. Julian didn't look like he wanted to share but Jasper started chewing on the bone with him anyway. Adrasha slipped out and away grabbing a cloak and an empty haversack on her way out the door.

Adrasha stopped on the threshold of her new home and took in a deep breath. The salty sea air wafted over the canopy mingling with the fragrance of wildflowers. A stark contrast to the stench she had found when she had first come. Instead of a pile of carrion, a wide grassland opened up in front of her before retreating into thick woods. The natural beauty of the isle blossomed where it had been marred before. "You did good, girl, you did good." She could definitely see herself living her for the rest of her life. It was perfect. Casually she strode off intent on catching herself some wild game.

Adrasha had found herself a perch on a sturdy tree branch just as the sun began to rise. She waited in silence, bow in hand, arrow notched, and eyes closed. The sounds around her came into focus. The rustling of leaves in the wind, the buzzing of a fly, the occasional call of a distant seagull... A half-hour had passed before she heard the sound she was waiting for. *Snap, snap, rustle, crunch*. An animal was headed her way. She opened her eyes to look towards the sound but the trees were too thick in that direction. She lifted her bow and aimed, ready to let loose as soon as her prey came into view. *Snap, crunch, snap*. The sound of heavy steps grew steadily. A deer maybe? Whatever it was, it was bigger then she had at first thought.

A stray ray of sunlight cut through the trees to shine in her eyes just as she caught a glimpse of movement between the trees. Adrasha closed her eyes to the glare, swearing silently to herself. She shifted her weight ever so slightly to move out of the light but it still left residual blind spots. She attempted to blink them away futilely. *Snap, crackle, crunch*. The animal was within range. She could make out a rough outline, but it wouldn't stay long if the animal spotted her or caught her scent. She needed to take her shot if she didn't want to wait another half-hour. Adrasha took aim at the middle of the beast and pulled back on the string. *Ready... ready...* Her fingers loosened on the taunt bowstring.

"Achoo!"

The startling sneeze echoed in her ears as, in an instant, the string twang out of Adrasha's hand. In her attempt to miss her mark, she swung her bow up with as much force as she could muster throwing herself off balance. She swore out loud and had to struggle not to fall out of the tree. It was in vain, though, as a burst of magical energy soon hit her full force. She couldn't help but cry out as the ground rushed up to meet her. So much for perfection...

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## Lost in Translation IV

By Bloodmoon - Feb 6 2009

Raanil is walking to tower when he see a large tree, he thinks that he should clim up the tree to see the tower first. He walked to the tree when he suddenly realized this that nearby of this tree is a Black Orchid a plant which its pollen will make him sneeze, but when he realized this a gust of wind then burst right into his face then "Achoo!" then he heard a leave rustling and an arrow shot from the top of the tree, he then shot a burst of magical force right to the arrow, but suprised



when the arrow pierce the magical force, then he feel the pain as the arrow meet its target but he had evaded in the last moment so its only hurt him in the arm. Then a women fell from the tree, unconcious and have some scrath mark in her arm. He then pull out the arrow and approache the women, he touch the wound and see this women identity. He then see this person name is Adrasha but unable to find out more he decided to take her to the Tower, he summons some imps to help him then he use the crystal of returning.

Arrived in the tower a voice is immediatly "Who is she master" "No, question now Naish." then he commands the imps to take her to a room "Naish I want you to watch her, lock her room and windows but let the air in" "Yes, Master". Then Raanil went back to the tower, and he immedeatly went to the lab and go searching the research records. After several hours he didnt find anything then a voice speak "Master the women is awaken now should I make her sleep again?" "No, let her I want to meet her, I want to know what is her purpose to come to this island, I will be on my way to Tower."

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## Must be Missing Something

By Galadriel - Feb 6 2009

A series of attacks. By different means, a series of attacks by different forces on different inhabitants, but always on that one island.

Yn leaned away from the pool, and the image reflected in its tranquil surface shattered, leaving only the leaves of the orange trees rustling in the twilight breeze. Whatever the initial military attack had been after, its instigators hadn't found what they sought. If neither Nebulan nor his tower had been the target, something on that island must be very important.

A twinge of guilt manifested itself on Yndigo's face as she thought of the young woman she'd seen so ably taming wolf pups and hunting for game. Stupid, stupid, to assume she could offer neighbourly greetings and continue to operate safely within her own well-defended perimeter. Well-defended against physical assaults and evocation magic, yes, but kidnappings via previously-inextant portals which appeared and disappeared at will?

First things first, though. The approaching corvette she'd spied from Song's harbour was no scheduled trading ship, nor was it likely to have hostile intent, sailing openly and singly for port. Perhaps the captain sought the intelligence capabilities of the college; in that case, he would bear pieces of the puzzle, badly needed information to help identify the threat.

Yndigo sighed and stood, brushing the island sand from her clothes. She needed coffee, yes, and some of those cinnamon rolls Sara had made. She headed back inside to brew a fresh pot.

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# So Many Questions

By Ackrovan - Feb 6 2009

Ackrovan fell into his throne as he was told what Turin has done. Turin had been a partner of his for nearly four years, about the time he first arrived at the Spire. He has been supplying him with supplies and information about the kingdom, making him a very important asset in the his campaign to restore the Spire of Archon's and salvage the Ancients technology. Ackrovan was outraged at this betrayal of trust. But, then again, how could he be really surprised? He had long seen the anger and greed in that mans eyes. It wasn't the first time that man had done something.....rash. But what was there to gain from sacking a little mage refuge? A tome? And why would Turin keep this leader, Nebulan? So many questions yet no answers. Not here at least. No, Ackrovan would not get any answers sitting around here. He would have to go to Turin himself.

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Ackrovan's personal Capital class Man-O-War was called the *Usurper*. Given additional weapons scavenged from the Spire's docks, it was armed to the teeth with firepower, and able to pull at least 11 knots, which was an unheard of feat to shipmen. Balistea, Catapults, Crossbowman, and Mages filled its weapons chambers to the maximam. With firm, quadruple layered blackned oak wood it was impregnable to any normal attack. He would use this ship to transport him to Turin's castle.

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# Change is Coming

By Nioca - Feb 9 2009

"SAIL, HO!" A cry rang out. Griseham stood near the bow of the ship, his hand reflexively reaching for a wand at his belt. The *Loveless* hadn't encountered any trouble, which meant that now was the perfect time for something to go wrong. They were three miles off; the shadow of an Hawk Island could be seen on the horizon. But another ship was approaching.

"Mage!" Griseham shouted. A man in green robes ran up to him. "Scry." Griseham barked.

The mage closed his eyes. A red glow could be seen underneath his eyelids as an incantation escaped his lips. Then they fluttered back open again. "It's a sloop. The *Amethyst*. Lightly armed, and no magical powers as far as I can tell."

"Yes. *As far as you can tell.*" Griseham hissed, squinting as the vessel named *Amethyst* took on a distinct shape. Griseham pulled out the wand his hand once rested on. The white-sapphire tip glittered slightly in the fading sunlight. *Tyinomatas* was the wand's name in Tantonite; In their

native tongue, it meant *Death-bringer*. Griseham thought it was fitting for a wand that could bore four inches into solid adamantine with a single shot. Now, he was ready to use it on the oncoming ship. "Captain Dalmas!" Griseham called.

Dalmas soon stood by Griseham's side. "I've already got the ballistae ready to fire. Just waiting on my orders, sir."

"Good. But I was hoping for your prognosis of the situation. Though it seems you may have given it to me already." Griseham replied tritely.

"Well, the ship doesn't appear to be a pirate vessel. No flag, so it likely isn't one of Hexen's ships. That leaves a ship unaffiliated with the kingdom, or-

"Or a ship from another lord running a false-flag operation." Griseham finished for Dalmas.

"Maybe. But another captain saw the *Amethyst* around these parts previously, so it's likely an unaffiliated ship." Dalmas countered hopefully.

"Anything else on the *Amethyst*?" Griseham inquired.

"Not really..." Dalmas replied, his voice low with shame. "I, ah, was a bit drunk and... not paying attention."

"Lovely." Griseham said distastefully. He walked away from the captain to the bow. A large post jutted from the deck, ending in a fork that rotated easily. In the fork was a large wand the size of an oar, tipped with a diamond. Griseham grabbed the handle and moved it around slightly. The wand pivoted up and down easily, and rotated from side to side, yet was secure. Noting this with satisfaction, Griseham rotated it so that it pointed directly at the other ship.

The ships closed. Tension mounted on the *Loveless* as the sloop came forward. Griseham signaled to Dalmas to drop anchor and pull the sails. They needed to stop. If the ship was hostile, they'd soon find out. It'd turn to the side so as to open up on the now parked Corvette. If it was friendly, it would pull alongside.

Griseham watched the *Amethyst* slow. They were in ballista range of each other now, and the *Amethyst* showed no sign of attacking. Griseham breathed out; it appeared that this was a friendly vessel. The *Amethyst* pulled alongside the *Loveless*.

Captain Dalmas quickly scampered to the starboard side of the *Loveless* as a man shouted from the *Amethyst*. Griseham couldn't make out the words, but Dalmas fired a response back. The banter continued a while, and Griseham waited with bated breath. Then, with a smile on his face, Dalmas went to Griseham's side. "As I thought. An unaffiliated vessel. They're from Hawk Isle, and they're out here to escort us to port."

"Good. Let's go." Was all Griseham said in reply.

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The *Loveless* bobbed in what almost seemed to be an enthusiastic manner. Now anchored in the port of Song, the ship waited for the return of its owner and Captain. Griseham took a long last look at it in the setting sun before proceeding to let the harbormaster lead him away.

Griseham couldn't help but be puzzled. According to his previous intelligence, this was the home of a mage. So what was a bardic college doing here? Nonetheless, he watched it carefully as he and Captain Dalmas was ushered past it. Then he saw the tower; far more in line with a mage.

Griseham approached the tower and saw a large pool near the front door. As the harbormaster continued to prod him along, Griseham couldn't help but notice a creature staring at him from a nearby hedge. All he could see of it were its eyes, but they unsettled him nonetheless. Shaking the thoughts from his head, he stepped into the tower.

He noted that the tower seemed clean. It surprised him; most of the mages he knew didn't keep their abodes so orderly. Not that he kept his own all that tidy anyway. But it still impressed him ever-so-slightly.

"Sir!" Captain Dalmas yelled. What looked to be a menacing cross between a dog and a demon had come around the corner. Captain Dalmas reached for his sword and yanked it out, starting to step between Griseham and the creature.

However, Griseham grabbed his arm and pulled him back. "You fool, put that away!" He hissed, yanking Dalmas's sword arm down. "Do you really think someone with any kind of power would let untamed creatures meander about her tower?!"

"But it's-" Dalmas began.

"Likely her familiar!" Griseham cut him off. Muttering to himself, he added, "Knew I should have handled this by myself."

The dog creature stared for a moment before wandering off. Shortly after, a woman came around the corner. "Newcomers. I am Yndigo, the ruler of this island. And you are...?"

"Captain Dalmas, my fair lady. A humble ship's captain on a quest for his-"

"Are you done yet, or should I get a seat for this riveting performance?" Griseham directed at Dalmas, annoyed. Turning to Yndigo, Griseham stated blandly, "Don't know what possessed me to give him a promotion. I'm Griseham, professional wandmaker and de facto ruler of Tantonía."

"Tantonía?" Yndigo asked curiously. "Never heard of it."

"I suppose that shows how good we are at hiding. We're a small, independent group of people on the isle of Tanton due southwest from here, desperate to stay out of the Kingdom's grasp. We're here seeking information."

"Interesting... But what kind of information are you looking for?" Yndigo asked.

"The attack on the Tower of Arts several miles northwest of here. We believe you may have more intelligence than us about the assault, and why Lord Turin would launch such a campaign." Griseham stated.

"Lord Turin..." Yndigo said slowly. "Unfortunately, you know more than I. All I know is that the attack was quick and extremely efficient."

"Efficient? How so?" Griseham asked.

"What would you call three ships ransacking a well-defended tower of the arts?" Yndigo replied.

"Highly disturbing." Griseham responded. "It makes me question what Turin has in mind-"

"Lord Turin is dead. His son has taken control." Yndigo said curtly.

Griseham paled. "Turin takes out a stronghold like Nebulan's, then gets killed off like he's some upstart..." Griseham shook his head. It seemed wrong; if Turin had so much power as to take out Nebulan's tower on a whim, how was he killed so easily? He knew Lord Turin. He'd worked with him personally once before. He wasn't the kind to play fast and loose with his own protection.

"Ma'am?" The pushy harbormaster was back. "Sorry to interrupt, but there's *another* unidentified vessel heading this way."

Yndigo looked at Griseham. "You expecting someone to join us?"

Griseham pulled *Tyinomatas* from his belt. "No."

Yndigo followed the harbormaster out the door. Griseham and Dalmás hurried after her.

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Uytha sighed. He was on lookout duty again in the small, concealed observation tower at the mouth of the inlet to Tantonía's port. He worked up the energy to cast another scrying spell.

A runner sat next to him. "Rough evening, eh? Gotta wait for the *Loveless* to come back in God-only-knows how long-"

"Now." The mage said abruptly.

"Sorry?" The runner asked, puzzled.

"The *Loveless* is coming in hot! Get a message back to Tantonía! She's coming in hot at 25 knots!" The mage shouted.

"25 knots?! Is Turin himself chasing them?!" The runner asked, aghast.

"Just go!" The mage shouted back.

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Tantonía's port was bustling. People were frantically scampering onto the decks of multiple ships, afraid of an imminent attack. Ballistae were loaded, wands were readied, and alarms were ready to sound. Anaya stood anxiously, watching the *Loveless* haphazardly corner the inlet and pull into the small lake. The ship then ungracefully came to a halt, its bow tipping right down below the water as the mages that once sped the ship to such incredible speeds brought it to a halt just as quickly. Griseham, in a hurry, jumped over the side of the railing into the water, swimming to the shore. Anaya and the mayor came running. "What's going on?" The mayor asked.

"Not now." Griseham dismissed them. "Hontis! HONTIS!" He shouted.

The master shipwright came running. "What?"

"Get the *Lioness* repaired and ready for sailing within the next three days. Then start working on new warships." Griseham barked.

"Griseham, have you lost-?!" The shipwright began.

"THIS ISN'T UP FOR DEBATE! Work through the night if you have to, but get it done!" Griseham hollered.

"Y-yes sir." The shipwright stammered.

"Mayor Gabthen, we need weapons. Have Horace smith some new ones. Swords, spears, halberds, flails, so forth. If it mutilates, kills, and otherwise desecrates the human body, I want several dozen made and ready for use. Then tell Fletch that we need as many bows as he can churn out."

"Griseham, what in the hells is going on?!" The mayor roared.

Griseham paused, then turned, ashen-faced. "There's been another attack."

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## The *Undine*

By Bloodmoon - Feb 12 2009

A salty wind breeze through the cave then, from the darkness a two light emerges. "Interesting" said Adalia, "Anything happen Mistress?" a deep voice said to her. "Yes, Ralandar a powerfull entity has been summoned to this world" said Adalia, "Do you want me to search it Mistress?" said a strange creature that look like from underwater. She smiled then answer "Yes, but I must turn you to human for few days, maybe weeks" then he replied "Anything to serve you Mistress". Then she get out from her throne in started to walk away to the deep waters then she said "Prepare yourself, we don't want to be weaponless to face this entity" he then silently left the room. She waited at the outer carvens when she again sees the sunlight. Adalia then remembered the life before the day her power awakened, then a creature approaches "Mistress your Royal Guard has ready in the transformation room." then she walked though the chamber of the cave and found the transformation room. "Are you ready for this Ralandar?" she asked "Yes, Mistress I am ready." then she begun to chant an ancient spell. There were sudden bright light then a creature once standing in the circle was replaced by a man. "Prepare your self, we do not want to weaponless" Adalia commanded the man. The man silently walk to the next room.

Then she walked to her port in the underwater, she then approaches the water then she chant "Undine I summon you to serve me!" a ship then emerges from the deeps, she have called the *Undine*, her war ship then a stairs shaped from the water immediatly appear as she walked to the ship. The captain immediatly greets them at the ship "Welcome Mistress Adalia to Undine what is your command?" then she anwer "Go to this island and more instructions will come if we near." then she entered the ship then sit in her throne inside and then the ship submerged to sea, and begin its journey.

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# The Inquisition has Arrived

By Jewels - Feb 12 2009

Adrasha woke up chilled and in incredible pain. Eyes taking in the dementions of the room in the dim light, it didn't take long to figure out she was in some sort of prison cell and her right arm was broken. Oh, what she wouldn't give for some whiskey. If she could just dull her senses, it wouldn't hurt near as much when she set the bone. As it was, she'd just have to make due. Gritting her teeth, she prepared herself for the inevitable excruciation, but it still caused her to cry out and left her whimpering. The sound of scampering came from outside her cell. Looks like they knew she was awake... whoever 'they' were. She lay still as the waves of pain slowly subsided into only an ache and looked around the room for something... anything that could be useful. Alas there was only straw. Not even a bucket to club her jailer over the head with. She quickly checked her belongings. Her bow and arrows were gone... her haversack and dagger were gone... looks like the only thing she'd been left with was her clothing. At least that was *something* to be thankful for. She supposed, if she needed to, she could try to make a sling out of her jerkin but it would be awfully difficult without a knife of some sort. And there was no way she felt up to trying to take it off over her broken arm at the moment.

Having no other options, Adrasha closed her eyes and waited. It didn't take long before heavy footsteps echoed in the halls outside her door. The clanking of a lock and the creaking of her door sent shivers down her spine. She did *not* want to go through this... *not again*... Her thoughts were desperately forlorn as the memories of possible waiting atrocities flooded her mind.

"Are you awake?" A low voice intoned. She refused to open her eyes... refused to respond. She would not give them *anything*! The voice whispered seemingly addressed to another. "I thought you said she was awake."

A raspy voice that made Adrasha's skin crawl answered him. "Yes, Master, I looked in myself when I heard her screaming. Perhaps I can rouse her for you." Light scraping footsteps came right up to her as she lay still. With a grunt of effort, it kicked her broken arm.

Unable to remain silent, a cry escaped her lips and Adrasha curled up to protect her arm from further attacks. Finally opening her eyes, she was greeted to the sight of a hideous creature grinning wickedly at her. The imp brought it's foot back for another strike but Adrasha was not about to let it find purchase. With her left hand she grabbed the foot still on the ground and whipped herself around at the waist to crack it against the wall. A moan of pain came from the creature as it collapsed to the floor.

"Never underestimate your opponents, Naish." Adrasha looked at the robed figure in front of her. He seemed... old, but she couldn't really tell. He didn't have that many wrinkles but there was just something about his eyes that she stared defiantly at. Something that made her feel he was much, much older than he looked. He stared back with neither malice nor amity but rather... indifference. It was actually more unsettling. He brought in a chair from just outside the door and sat down. He left the door open which seemed rather odd to Adrasha especially after his last statement. "My name is Raanil. Your name is Adrasha, yes?" Adrasha just stared at him in response. "What is your area of expertice?" Only silence. "I know that you have only just

recently come to the Isle I found you at, where did you come from and why did you make the journey?"

Adrasha sat wondering how long it would take before the beatings began. It didn't matter if you answered or were silent. There were always beatings in an attempt to draw out more... *always*! Her eyes wandered to the open door that he sat in front of. The imp that he had called Naish had picked himself up and limped out it just a minute ago. There were undoubtedly many more waiting for her beyond the door. What chance did she have of escaping this place? She didn't even know where 'this' was. Slim to none... that's what kind of chance... but at least it *was* a chance. If she waited for the beatings it would be too late. She would be too weak to make the attempt. She closed her eyes still keeping the picture of the room in her mind. First things first... she had to get past this Raanil with his cool, indifferent eyes. She visualized her options as she listened to him continue. "I came to the Isle to find out who you were. Why did you..."

Adrasha jumped up. Drawing on all her training, all her reflexes, and all her instincts, she pulled her broken arm to her chest and focused. Raanil sat in the chair between her and her objective so she ran straight at him. Just before running into him, she made a neat front flip over him as he ducked, using the back of the chair as a pivot point with her good arm. She landed lightly and turned, bent on sprinting as far as she could as fast as she could. Not halfway down the hallway, though, she collapsed. She couldn't breathe... or at least she couldn't breathe enough. The air she sucked in gave her body no relief. Imps surrounded her and piled on to hold her down. She was dizzy, on the verge of blackout when Raanil stepped over her and released her from his spell.

"Never underestimate your opponent, Adrasha, I am a Bloodmancer... That means I can control how much oxygen gets to your brain. Now, please answer my questions. I am most curious. Why did you try to kill me?"

Adrasha returned to her defiant stare but felt compelled to defend herself. "I didn't try to kill anybody!"

"And the arrow you shot into my arm?"

Adrasha sighed. It wasn't like he was going to believe her anyway. "...was meant for some wild game," she answered lamely. "The sun was in my eyes, I couldn't see you... I... I didn't try to kill you."

"I see." Raanil gestured to the imps and they drug her back to the cell. Thankfully by her left arm as opposed to her right. When Adrasha's back was against the far wall Raanil sat down in the chair again and tossed her a small bottle. "Drink it. It will heal your arm."

Adrasha had no reason to believe him. For all she knew it could be poison or worse... truth serum. Of course, she had been thoroughly trained on how to answer questions when under it's influence but still... if he asked the right questions she might let something slip. She looked at the bottle, she looked at Raanil, she drank the contents for better or worse. To her surprise, her arm started feeling better. She gave it a hesitant test and found it good as new. Adrasha was at a loss. Her training had included 'good guard, bad guard' but in her experience, *nobody* actually played the good guard.

"Are you prepared to answer my questions now?" He waited expectantly with a calm demeanor.



The answer to his question was a resounding 'no' but she didn't really want him to know that yet. Maybe she could bluff her way out of this place and back to her island... and back to her pups! The sudden realization that her wolf pups were still confined in their room without food or water for who knows how long sent her over the edge. "No! I'm not *prepared* to tell you anything! Why do you even want to know? I just want to live in peace and be left alone. Quite frankly it's *none of your business!* Now take me back!" Adrasha's anger gave way to fear letting her tears flow. "Take me back," she cried, "before they starve..."

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## Ramblings

By Sudanna - Feb 12 2009

The man was at odds with his surroundings. He was clad in a deceptively simple and flagrantly colorful outfit, all confusing lines and loudly clashing primaries. All assumed strangeness, all supposed eccentricity, all self-created intricacies. Jarring brightness, mind-bending illusion. A thousand thousand details that the mind created for itself. A thousand thousand tricks and deceptions, different for all and given with no effort or direction. It seemed that the man inside was invisible, undetectable, unnoticeable. A nonissue - for what could he be, in comparison to this appearance?

Ah, but an issue he was, though most made him that by their own actions.

The ship was a shoddy affair. No warship, this. Not even a decent mercantile vessel. Barely even seaworthy. The world around it exuded an all-pervading aura of mediocrity and melancholy, or so it seemed to Exile. This glorified rowboat certainly didn't help, and the crew might have been golems made from the ship itself, they resembled it so. There was no apparent captain or officers - or if there were, they had, like all rational men would, drunken themselves into a stupor somewhere belowdecks for the duration of the trip. As far as Exile could tell, the people onboard had no purpose but to toil in apparent purposelessness for all of eternity. He'd been given worse by his superiors, but not often.

Ah, yes, his superiors. Smug, arrogantly ignorant heathens, the lot of them. All but chuckling as they gave him the worst of the worst resources, ranting and raging at him for his failures, and *punishing* him for his successes, rather than simply choke down their pride. Blame the foreigner! Was their mantra, their bread and butter, the stuff of their messages to Hexen and Aodhan. Who, thankfully, saw through it, at least when they received the truth or anything close to it. Which was less and less, of late.

And now, to interrupt his hobby - self-pity - was a crewman. Or a crewthing, anyways. Hesheit mumbled an unintelligible mumble, which Exile chose to interpret as a notification that this depressingly mediocre ship would soon be out of his life. That is, that they were nearing their destination. Indeed, he could see land on the horizon. Had a tower. Rocky, it looked. Cold, rough, and inhospitable. Damn.

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# Of Power and the Fleet of Foot

By Nioca - Feb 13 2009

Griseham let his mind wander as he entered his house again. Ereton Rock, a small island with an enclave of elite warriors, gone. Well, no; the island was still there. But the same could not be said for anything that had taken up residence there.

"It doesn't make sense!" Griseham said aloud to himself. Indeed, it didn't; Ereton Rock was a stronghold of Lord Turin's. Furthermore, it was home to some of the strongest warriors in the world. Lord Turin nor his successor had any reason to take them down. It had to be someone else.

"I heard about Ereton Rock." A voice came from his doorway. "What do you think is happening?"

"I don't know." Griseham replied to the mayor. "I really don't have a clue. Turin taking down Nebulan's tower was sensible, in as far as Turin was concerned. A mage enclave that doesn't have loyalties to him is a problem. What I don't get was the subsequent counter-attack. And what concerns me is that something or someone out there has the kind of raw power to take down Lord Turin *and* his castle with little difficulty. *Then* we have an out-of-the-blue attack on one of Turin's favored enclaves, which may be some kind of retaliation. And finally, we have the power vacuum left by Lord Turin."

"A vacuum?" Gabthen asked, puzzled. "But you said Turin had a successor. How-?"

"Ah, my good mayor, you clearly haven't been around Kingdom politics, have you? Of course not, you were a young child when you arrived here. Let me explain: Unlike previous nations before, the Kingdom doesn't value financial prosperity, political clout, nor royal blood for its nobility. Those naturally factor in, of course, but what it boils down to is **power**. It values power above all else. Be it sheer magical force or massive hordes of followers. In fact, there are only two nobles who lack any magical proficiency. Or at least, that's how it was the last time I checked. Anyway, the more power you have, the stronger a pull you gain on the political workings of the Kingdom. More land, a greater say, so forth."

"And Lord Turin was the strongest." Gabthen finished, predicting where it was going.

"Exactly. If he had wanted it, he probably could have overthrown the King himself. He had powers far beyond any other noble, with a massive number of subjects and islands as a result." Griseham sighed. "And that means trouble. Now some newcomer is taking the role of Lord Turin, likely without the same level of power and experience of the person he's replacing. He might be able to hold it together for a week, maybe even a month. But mark my words, he will fall out of favor, and he'll bring the entire Turin dynasty to ruin. The result of that will be one of three things. One lord may step up and make a power-play, gaining most of Turin's original land, subjects, and power. Or it'll be split amongst them all. Or, worst yet, the resultant squabbling and fighting will completely destabilize the Kingdom and lead it to anarchy."

"Why doesn't the King step in himself?"

"He enjoys living!" Griseham said with a laugh. "A noble is pretty much free to do whatever he or she pleases, so long as the majority of nobles doesn't oppose him or her. If the King started interfering with their affairs, he'd likely have most of them turn on him."

"So, what now?" Gabthen asked.

Griseham paused. Then he paced. Finally, he answered, "It took only three ships to sack Nebulan's tower. Yndigo stated as much, anyway. But how would a measly three ships take down a powerfully-guarded enclave... unless..." Griseham paused. "The only answer I can give is that Lord Turin took the tower down himself. But why would he personally oversee an attack?" Griseham looked into the distance, then abruptly faced the mayor. "This doesn't sit right. Not at all. There's a bigger portrait here than any of us fully realize, and I for one want to find out what the reasons are behind this madness, if there are any." Griseham took a breath. "First, get the *Davos* ready to launch and send it to Hawk Isle. It's there to negotiate with Yndigo; we'll agree to leave a Tantonian there and bring a bard back to Tantonian. Plus, we'll supply various wands in exchange for intelligence on the islands."

"And then what?" Asked the mayor.

"Prepare the *Jennidean*, *Red Dove*, *Loveless*, and *Tranilous* for launch. We're going to Nebulan's Tower."

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The moon was setting as the triangular formation of ships approached the rocky island that had once belonged to Nebulan. The *Red Dove*, a powerful galleon, led the group. In the middle was the Barquentine *Jennidean*. Trailing slightly to each side were two corvettes, the *Loveless* and the somewhat-shoddier *Tranilous*. As the ships came close to the shore, they broke formation. The *Red Dove* veered off, preparing to keep an eye on the waters. The *Loveless* slowed, taking up position behind the *Jennidean* and stopping. The *Jennidean* and the *Tranilous* approached the shoreline, coming within a couple dozen feet and setting anchor on the south side of the island.

Griseham turned to a mage on the deck of the *Jennidean*. He nodded and scried the island. "The tower's completely blocked. I can't see a thing... wait..." The mage paused for a moment, then cursed. "Sir, we have company."

"Someone else is here?" Griseham asked.

"Two someones. There are black sails on the west edge of the island. Multiple ships... Must have arrived shortly before us, they're still making preparations to go ashore."

"Figures. Looks like the vultures have arrived for the carcass." Griseham hissed.

"Feeling hypocritical, sir? Or are we not scavenging supplies like you said earlier?" The mage asked, bemused. Griseham threw him a very nasty glare. The mage got the message loud and clear. "And there's a ship approaching the island from the north." The mage paused. "It's a ramshackle ship, and it doesn't appear to have any affiliation."

"I wasn't bargaining on trying to rush our way through, but I guess the matter is out of our hands. Inform the other ships of the situation. Tell them that we're proceeding as planned, and that the

landing party is to meet me on the shore *quickly* for briefing." Griseham fired off quickly. The mage nodded. Griseham turned and ran to the railing of the *Jennidean*, climbing over and dropping into the shallow water. He then rushed to the beach while others disembarked. Soon, about forty men were gathered on the shore, waiting for Griseham. "Listen up! We've got a lot to do in not a lot of time. As we speak, pirate raiders and an unidentified crew are getting ready to go after Nebulan's tower. For now, we have the advantage of knowing about the other crews, which they don't. I guarantee you, that will change shortly. So we need to move now! We're running, not walking, to the tower. We'll get in, try to gather as many supplies and find as much information as we can, and we get out! And be ready to use your wands, there's a good chance we won't get out without trouble. Clear?!"

A nod went through the waiting party. "Good. Let's go!" Griseham shouted, turning and running into the mountains.

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## Lost in Translation V

By Bloodmoon - Feb 13 2009

"Who?" Raanil asked.

"My pups!" Adrasha said with tears starting to come out of her eyes.

"Do you mean those wolves at the Tower?" Raanil asked her again.

"Yes!"

"Then don't worry. I have brought them to this tower. If you want you can also have your belongings." She looked so surprised that Raanil tried to explain. "I mean you no harm. I'm just curious why you are here on this island. It's been abandoned since that demon came."

"What demon?" She asked and Raanil told her everything he knew.

"Can I have my stuff now?" she asked.

"Of course, and if you want you can move now, you don't need this cell." he answered. "Naish, release here from the bonds," Raanil commanded.

A voice suddenly echoes, "Yes, Master."

Adrasha felt like something has been removed from her. "What did you just do to me?"

"I put a geas on every prisoner so they cannot escape through the gate like you just tried to do. You couldn't breathe, could you?" Raanil led Adrash to a room with all of her belongings and her pups.

"Do you prefer to stay here or you want me to transport you back to that tower again?" Raanil asked....

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# Windows to the World

By Luca - Feb 14 2009

“ They rush in red and purple, from the red clouds of the morn;  
to the temples where the yellow gods shut up their eyes and scorn. ”

"Come," said a stern voice as massive stone doors opened. Nebulan stepped thoughtfully as he entered the private study of High Mage Darnel, who stood looking out a window that showed a tower none of the others did. No one would ever give this a second thought in a tower of the arts, especially of this caliber. The pentagon room was massive and contained dozens of bookshelves set out on the tiled floor that was covered in red velvet in the walkways.

"So, you didn't perish," she said still looking out the window, then she turned around. "Or did you?" Her robes were a dark purple with spiraling design that was kept quite clean. Her face was still full of the interest and enthusiasm of a youth, but her body was dying. Her once cheery perspective on life had turned recently to stern attitude of following protocol. Even standing before this terror, she looked upon it unmoved, with an expression that occasionally moved from unamused to boredom.

"By now, most know of the attack on your tower. Few, but still many, know of what has become of you...and Turin."

"How? There was no one around us." Nebulan said bitterly.

Darnel gave an amused chuckle. "How easily you forget, even the walls have ears."

"No, High Mage, it is just that your walls have enchanted windows of far sight."

"My windows do not see everything, Nebulan. Or, really I should say, Nebulan Gutaraie. The ancient guardian has been fused with the blind and deaf battlemage. No Nebulan, my windows do not see everything, just as they did not see the surprise attack on your tower. But *you* weren't surprised were you?"

Nebulan simply stood there silently, the curse placed on his life had left a shadow of darkness in place of a face, but it would seem to anyone who saw, that Neb was smiling a twisted and bitter smile, whose only purpose on the Kardia was to mock those who saw it for misinterpreting it to be more than it was. He said nothing, but in silence, he spoke volumes.

"What do you want, fallen leader of Rouen Isle?"

"To hunt the son, High Mage."

"Oh, you would have me to let you exact a more meaningful vengeance then crushing a skull with your thought," said the High Mage in a sarcastically enlightened tone.

"You are a fool if you think that this attack is as shallow as a whim's desire. You know what was under that tower, you know what they didn't find," said Neb flatly.

"Then you know also that I have returned it to the dungeon of your tower," she said in a half fearful and half cynical voice. "You wouldn't dare."

"Oh, but I do, the closer a relic is to danger, the further it is from harm."

"Right, the famous last words of people making the sounds of having their legs thrust into meat grinder." They said nothing for many moments at the temperature in the room dropped.

"Take a ship and do what you will," she said. Nebulan turned on his heel and exited the room, with a tension of a tornado following in his wake. It was almost like the stone hallways became darker when he passed. "And don't destroy *my* tower on your way out."

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## My Pups

By Jewels - Feb 18 2009

"June, Jasper!" the pups seemed excited to see her. "Jade, Julian! You're all here... and you all look all right. Looks like they've given you better accommodations than me." Adrasha eyed Raanil warily. She still didn't trust him but as she gathered her dagger, bow, and arrows, she figured he couldn't be all that terrible. "Hey, listen. I think we kinda got off on the wrong foot. Thanks for the offer of a room but I'm kind of a loner. Not really ready to be moving in and picking out curtains or anything. I think I'd like to go back to my humble abode for now and... I wasn't planning on making friends with anybody but... maybe you can stop by for dinner once in a while. I make a mean deer burger and arrowroot soup. Just don't go flouncing about the woods when I'm trying to catch it, huh?" Raanil nodded expressionless. No smile, no frown. It might have been comforting if it didn't really creep her out. "Do you think you can get us teleported closer to the building? Like in the clearing somewhere?"

"It is manageable." Raanil gestured to a few imps and soon they were away.

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## The *Usurper*

By Ackrovan - Mar 2 2009

Ackrovan clasped the wall as another of the seemingly endless series of waves attacked the *Usurper*. The ship threw itself onto to the ocean, only to rise and be hit with another one. It has been like this for two whole days now, contradicting the nearly perfect weather up to this point. And with all this weather, Ackrovan had to deal with a stunting reality. A merchant vessel

had passed by them, and said that Turin was killed and his castle laid to waste. If this was true, than this entire trip was for nothing. Struggling to stay a foot, Ackrovan barked at the mages hovering around the Scrying pool, "How far have we been blown off?" Beth, almost toppling over, responded, "We can't keep the pool steady. Its impossible to find....," they were interrupted by another wave, "...out unless we can keep the pool still." Ackrovan glanced down at the pool and found that she was quite correct. Ripples were erupting all over the pool, completely forbidding them to use it properly. Ackrovan nodded, "Keep trying. We need to know where we are." Beth nodded back to him, "Yes, my Lord." Ackrovan stepped out of the room and onto the deck.

The deck was riddled with confusion and mayhem. Sailors and soldiers were running in every direction, desperate to keep the ship afloat. Sea water was breeding throughout the deck, completely taking over the ship. This pitch black out, it was impossible to see any one's faces unless they were right in front of you, or to see the *Stalker*, which as far as Ackrovan knew had been swallowed by the sea. Jogging past the frantic shipman, Ackrovan approached a small, perky witch called Dorothy. She was leaning on the railing, attempting to be prepared for the retching attack that was striking at her. Ackrovan put his hand protectively over her shoulder, "Are you alright, darling?" Dorothy shook her head with almost fearful quickness, "Yes, my master. I'm just trying to keep track of the *Stalker*." Ackrovan nodded, "Where is she then?" Dorothy pointed yonder west of the ship, "Right there." Ackrovan squinted his eyes and looked very closely. He could just barely make out a small corvette waddling across the water. "Ackrovan turned back to Dorothy, "Send up a flare. I want to see if they're still alive." Dorothy nodded. Pointing her small oak wand upward, a burst of blue light pounced out of it, trailing up towards the sky. A few seconds later, another one also rose from the *Stalker*. Ackrovan smirked, "Thank you. Return to your....observation." Ackrovan trotted away to the bridge, leaving Dorothy bending over the railing, still preparing for the retch attack.

As Ackrovan ran across the deck towards the bridge, he stumbled onto a Soldier. He was struggling to hold onto a rope that was about to give way to the storm. Screaming several more sailors towards them, Ackrovan helped the Soldier hold onto the rope as it was tied down to the mast. Too dark to see his face, Ackrovan leaned in to fight the sound of the wind across the sky. He queried, "Who are you, son?" The Soldier looked surprised, "Captain Kerry of the ninth platoon." Ackrovan grinned as he nodded. Kerry was one of his finest soldiers. He was glad he was helping out with the rest of the sailors. "You did good Captain. Stay well, and we can wait out this together." Kerry, very pleased that he got a compliment by the Archon himself, rapidly shook his head up and down. "Yes, my Lord!" Ackrovan moved past him to the bridge

Ackrovan ran up the stairs, struggling to not trip on the wet wood. Captain Dalite was present, along with an assortment of lesser lieutenants. He was a burly man, with a fat beer belly to boot. A thick beard ran around his face, and a thick smile as well. He was a man that was more interested in his wife's cooking skills than her bosom. Barely holding onto the wheel as it fought him for control, he let go with one hand and tried to salute him. "Good day, my mas..." Ackrovan cut him off, "Drop that fucking hand Captain, this is no time for formalities." Captain Dalite grinned, "Yes sir" and resumed holding onto the wheel. Ackrovan continued, "Any guess as to how far this storm is?" Dalite shook his head, "Nay, my Archon. The clouds are as black the sea at this point. We don't even know which ways north and south at this point." Ackrovan nodded,

"Very well." He turned back towards the *Usurper*, one of the strongest vessels ever to sail. "How much damage has she taken," Ackrovan said as he turned back to Darlite. Anticipating the question, Darlite sighed and answered him, "My Lord, she's a damn fine ship. One of the best I've ever seen. But after all this, I doubt she can take much more." He pointed to his left, "And quite frankly I'm surprised the *Stalker* is still afloat. If the *Usurper* is reaching her point, you can be damn sure that the *Stalker* too." He turned his head behind him, "My Lord, we have to pull out. Turin isn't worth this, especially if the merchants on that vessel were truthful when they said he was killed." Ackrovan at this point had two choices. One, he could continue to ride out this storm in the hopes it would pass soon. Or, he could turn back now and stop chasing this monster and not risk losing his life and crew. If Ackrovan was alone, he would of kept going. But he was not. He had men and women under his command, who expected him to keep them safe. They had families who would want to know why they died. No, it was not worth it. Ackrovan would have to save both ships and accept the huge delay. He turned to Darlite and said, "Captain tell your crew and the *Stalker* that I'm ordering that we are to pull out of this storm. Effective immediately." Darlite shook his head, "Yes my Lord"

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Several hours later, now out of the storm, Ackrovan could see just how damaged the two ships were. Two of the six masts on the *Usurper* was leaning slightly, three of them damaged by the water. Only one had somehow made it out of there without any real damage. Some of her sails were torn, and the water had fell into the lower decks, flooding them. Another few more hours of that and the ship might well of been broken. The *Stalker* was just as bad. Observing the damage and helping to count the missing crew, Beth ran up to Ackrovan, almost slipping on the water. She frantically said, "My Lord," she stopped to catch her breath, "We managed to Scry the area, and we've got good news and bad news." Ackrovan nodded, "Tell me the good news first" Beth nodded, "We are near an island, off to the southeast. There seems to be some structure in the center. We can stop by and harvest supplies to repair the ships." Several crewman cheered as they heard this. Ackrovan nodded approvingly, "Very good. Now tell me the bad news." Beth continued, "Well...there appears to be a battle about to take place. There is a fleet of pirates just to the south, three in all. A fleet of vessels are on the south end of the Island, deploying there troops as well. But they are too far away for us to make much of them. And another small ship is off to the east of the Island. Ackrovan nodded aggravatingly. Why does he have to be caught up in a battle now, of all times? Well no matter. He has to have control of that island to repair his ships. Ackrovan turned back to Beth, "Are they aware we are here?" She shook her head, "No my Lord, I don't believe they do. They are moving to our position at all." Ackrovan began calling up Soldiers from below the deck. As they arrived, fully donned in armor. He began shouting orders at them. "We need control of that island if we are to repair our ships. Move to the center of the island and secure it from the enemy. Try to avoid a fight if possible, but don't hesitate to fight if they force it on you." All 70 soldiers circled around, Captain Kerry in command. The mages arose from the inner deck and started to teleport them onto the beaches. Beth leaned over to Ackrovan, "One more thing my Archon." Ackrovan turned to face her, "Yes?" She continued, "I believe this is the island that Lord Turin attacked."

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Kerry began ordering his troops into formation. Two groups of 35 each, all very thick with steel armor and weapons. In one swift shout, they began marching up towards the ruined tower.

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## Holding the Tower

By Nioca - Mar 3 2009

Griseham had ahold of his knees, panting. Magic and Ralyin Brew be damned; 83 years was still catching up to him, and fast.

Griseham examined his surroundings as he caught his breath. They had arrived at the tower, and it seemed that they were the first ones here. His men rushed into the tower, holding either wands or bags for supplies. Griseham noticed that the area was clear of bodies. It would have been a refreshing change, except that corpses did not decompose that quickly. Alarmed, Griseham took a closer look at the surroundings. The tower was in ruins, but the debris and some of the damage had been cleaned up.

A mage ran up to him, panting heavily. "Sir, the..." The mage coughed and took a sputtering breath. "The... The pirates... this way... five minutes..."

Griseham nodded. "Anything else?" He wheezed.

"Two more... ships landed... Unknown... Another... approaching..." The mage gasped out.

Griseham caught his breath. "How prepared are we to fight?"

The mage took a couple deep breaths. "Everyone in the landing party is armed with wands. Problem is, only a third of them are armed with actual combat wands. The rest are using Hunting Wands." The mage took another breath. "We weren't expecting an actual battle. Not with armed soldiers."

"The pirates aren't soldiers, so we have a slight advantage there." Griseham marched with the mage toward the tower.

"They do have numbers, though. Almost 100 strong." The mage countered.

"Lovely." Griseham sighed. They passed through the entrance of the tower, where presumably doors had been. "Alright, I hope none of you had plans!" Griseham shouted to the people gathered in the tower. "We may be staying here awhile. Commander Dulford," He stated toward a man wearing chainmail and a longsword, "we're going to need everyone moving fast. Make sure everyone who can wield a wand efficiently is up here by the windows and damaged walls. Make sure they're out of sight; no one knows we've got the tower, which means that when the pirates get here, we'll be able to take out a large portion simply by letting them walk into a trap." Griseham clipped Tyinomas securely by his side. "I'll look around and see if I can't find any supplies of interest, and also get a fix on everyone else."

Dulford nodded. Various people, a few armed with swords, took positions near the windows and wall cracks. Griseham made his way through the ruins and found a set of damaged stairs heading up. Working his way up gently, he found the second floor mostly intact, though damaged. Working his way higher, he got to the third floor, which consisted of a floor and a few standing walls. Griseham instantly got a little woozy. He *hated* heights.

Working his way carefully to a damaged wall for cover, he looked southward. He could see the pirates coming, a large group comprised mostly of filthy men in torn clothing. He noticed an unusually large number of eyepatches; it appeared these pirates either took joy in the stereotypes, or had a freakishly high number of eye injuries.

Then, with alarm, Griseham spotted another group. About 70 soldiers making a beeline for the tower, heavily armed. He also noticed a house in the near distance, which was being rummaged through by more pirates. The terrain around was rocky, and the tower could only be approached from the north thanks to the mountainous environment. They were completely blocked in, but at least they couldn't be attacked from all sides.

Griseham looked south and only just saw the masts of the Tantonian ships waiting patiently. He could see other ships as well; the mounting odds were not putting him at ease.

Griseham turned and headed back down the stairs. He might as well get a few supplies before the impending fight. He browsed through the second floor, but discovered that a lot of the stuff had been destroyed by falling rubble. It occurred to him that someone had been cleaning here as well. He then came across a Tantonian man trying to force open a padlocked door. "Here, let me try." Griseham said, startling him. Pushing him aside, Griseham pulled out Tynomatas. Positioning it so that the wand was not pointing into the locked room, he fired. The bolt of energy burned through the lock and burrowed a circular hole through multiple wrecked walls. Yanking the broken padlock off, Griseham opened the door. Inside was a small trove of reagents and magical equipment. "Pack it all up, but for the love of gods, *be careful*. This stuff is delicate." The man nodded and entered with his sack.

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Commander Dulford's eyes narrowed. Men in filthy clothes approached the tower, shouting in glee and trading banter. He noticed an array of swords and hatchets amongst them, along with several bows and quivers. He noticed that it appeared there wasn't a mage with them of any kind; however, he knew that there had to be at least one or two. Not even pirates were stupid enough to go after a magic tower without someone on hand to dispel enchantments.

Their leader, a man dressed in clothing a little above the norm for the ragtag group, ordered them to hold up. The entire group gathered, staring at the tower for a moment. The leader's yells could be heard clearly in the tower. Dulford shushed the others, then made a rapid-fire series of hand signals.

Griseham came down the stairs, and Dulford ushered him over. "They're here." Dulford whispered urgently. "I've told the man with the fire wand to attack first when they're close, and the woman with the blitz wand to attack second to catch anyone still left in formation. Problem is, I'm betting there's a mage or two in their ranks, which means that our attacks after that are liable to be deflected."

"You're right. It feels like there's three... maybe four magicians out there. Attack as you planned, and let me worry about the wizards." Griseham whispered back.

"How will you-" Dulford whispered.

"They'll be the ones shooting back. Conserve energy; more are on the way." Griseham bolted back up the staircase.

The pirates, with a cheer, approached the tower. Dulford held his hand up, waiting for them to get closer. Soon, various minute details could be made out about them, but Dulford continued to stall the attack. Finally, when individual footsteps became audible, Dulford brought his hand down.

A man at the other end of the tower leaped up and took aim at the front part of the group. A massive gout of flame sprang forth, engulfing half of the group in immolating clouds. Those at the front, including the leader of the group, got an instant cremation, with hardly anything left but a charred skeleton. Others caught on fire, running in a blind panic. As they attempted to put themselves out, and the back half of the group tried to figure out just what had happened, a woman close to Dulford leapt up and pointed a diamond wand at the back of the group. Bright white lightning bolts instantly connected the wand with multiple men, and those men with several of those behind them. The victims were launched backward, smoldering from the strikes. Only a few got back up again.

Then the rest let loose. Another wand sent a red orb of light into a pirate's chest, causing him to keel over from an instant heart attack. Still another sent a tiny green mote of light flying that, on impact, exploded into a small fog of toxic gas. One wand's blue bolt froze a pirate solid. And another launched a sharp piece of metal into a pirate's chest. The rest of the wands were hunting wands, firing tiny white orbs of light. Tiny jolts of energy caused the pirates to stumble and, if hit enough times, fall unconscious or die.

The pirates retreated, desperate orders and profanities being barked amidst the confusion. Suddenly, the wands' projectiles started absorbing into a shield covering the pirates. A desperate magician shouted arcane incantations, trying to stop the flurry of death headed his way. Griseham, on the second floor, took aim with Tynomatas and fired. A bright white bolt of energy flew from the wand and burnt a circular hole through the magician's head, completely ignoring the various wards and shield he had raised. Another mage stepped forward, a fireball forming in his hand. However, with another two blasts, Tynomatas claimed another victim.

On the first floor, Commander Dulford waved wildly at the other Tantonians, ushering them to slow their fire. The storm of magical projectiles thinned as the pirates took cover behind rocks. They spread to the mouth of the valley leading to the tower, pinning the Tantonians down. Several archers fired arrows at the tower. Most of them clattered harmlessly off the stone, but two found purchase on the people inside. Two Tantonians fell injured. The rest returned fire, and most of the archers fell prey to hunting wands.

Then it was quiet. The wands stopped firing, and the arrows stopped flying. Both sides waited for the other to make a move. Griseham could feel that there was one more mage out there... but whoever it was saw what happened to the first two, and was staying concealed. He noticed that

some of the pirates were being healed; obviously, it was a healer of some sort. Griseham then looked into the distance; no sign of the other group of soldiers... yet.

A healer named Synthia was tending to the two that had been hit. A couple people came up from the dungeons, holding more supplies, along with a few who had scavenged the first floor. Griseham came down from the second floor. "Status?" He barked out.

"These men will live and recover, but I can't put my full energy into them." Synthia responded. "Not without draining my reserves for later."

"The pirates are pushed back, but they're holding the mouth of this valley. They can't take the tower by force, but they aren't letting us out either. There's still about fifty of them out there." Commander Dulford replied.

"We've gotten most anything that seemed valuable." One of the scavengers added. "Mainly magical reagents and lab equipment, but there's a few interesting finds. One of us found a small caches of enchanted weaponry, and there's a few artifacts that we don't recognize. Along with some gemstones and a few potions."

"Any sign of what Turin was after?" Griseham asked.

"No. My best guess is that Nebulan was the target." The scavenger replied.

"So, we got supplies, no answers, and no way out." Griseham snapped.

A mage stepped forward. "Might not be able to help with answers, but it might be possible to get a few of the people the supplies out of here."

"How?" Griseham asked.

"Well, I specialize mainly in scrying and spellbreaking, but I do have some talent with wards. If there were a sufficient enough distraction, I could slip a small group past their lines and get back to the ships." The mage responded.

"Alright, we can do that, um...?" Griseham responded.

"Uytha." The mage responded.

"Okay, Uytha, how many people can you get out?" Griseham asked.

"Eight. Ten, if you want to push your luck."

"Okay, let's do this." Griseham stated.

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The mage Uytha bolted out of the tower, followed by several people. Some of them had packs full of supplies slung over their shoulders, and a few had wands ready to repulse an attack. Once the group cleared the tower, a fireball flew and struck toward the center of the pirate's line. A small blast of flame plumed out, igniting the vegetation and some of the pirates. Arrows and a few crossbow bolts flew toward Uytha, and the Tantonians in the tower responded by opening fire. A barrage of flame, lightning, and other magical projectiles forced the pirates to take cover. A shield was conjured by the remaining pirate mage to protect them, but Griseham still couldn't locate him or her.

A few pirates charged the fleeing group of Tantonians, who responded with wandfire. A bolt from Tyinomatas sent the pirates after the group scurrying for cover as two pirates got cut down by the blast. Uytha made it past the pirate line, and the group escaped.

Griseham sighed. Once again, the fighting ground to a halt. He decided to recharge some of the wands in the stalemate.

Suddenly, after a few minutes of silence, Commander Dulford spoke up. "Sir! There's more soldiers approaching!"

Griseham went to a damaged window. Dulford was right; the soldiers he had spotted earlier were now visible. The pirates seemed to get edgy as they approached. So did the remaining Tantonians. Odds were, the new arrivals weren't on either's side.

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## Wait for Us

By Jewels and Bloodmoon - Mar 6 2009

"Once again, I'm sorry for my mistake in taking you prisoner." Raanil bowed to her noting that she still seemed uncomfortable around him. "You are afraid because of my face, aren't you?"

Adrasha looked confused. "What do you mean? What about your face?"

"It is expressionless because I traded my emotions for my powers. Now I can fake emotions but I can't feel them." Adrasha stands silently thinking about what kind of person would want to trade their emotion for power?

In an instant, Raanil and Adrasha are teleported to the middle of a woods. "Wow!" she breathed, flailing one arm to regain her balance from the vertigo. "I didn't expect us to get here so quickly but... where exactly is here?"

Raanil looked around. "I must have had my trajectory off a bit. I assure you, though, we are on the right isle. Now, do you want me to help you move these things or can you do it yourself?" He made as if to pick up her arrows but Adrasha waved him off.

"No, no. It's fine. I can manage." Adrasha slung the quiver over her shoulder and grabbed up her bow. Two wolf pups stayed by her feet but the other two ran off together to the north. "Jade... Jasper," she called. "Wait for us."

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# Beset on All Sides

By Nioca - Mar 7 2009

The ship had stopped some distance from shore. A leaky rowboat was scrounged up from somewhere belowdecks. Why it had been there in the first place, Exile didn't know. He was, understandably, very unwilling to see what lurked in the depths of this ridiculously depressing ship. The crew dropped it unceremoniously into the water, over the low railing. It occurred to Exile that this ship had a worryingly high waterline. Ah well, it seemed to have the grim endurance of the walking dead. It wouldn't sink while he was traipsing around on this island. If he was lucky, it wouldn't leave either.

Clambering down into the little dinghy, Exile pulled the paddles inside and quickly gestured. The dinghy gently glided away and, after a bit of fussing, towards the island. Exile idly inspected the tower as he approached. Then attentively. He focused his senses. There was a lot of magic here, as was expected, but there were a lot of people too. There were ships dotted around the small island, and the annoyingly large amount of people also present must have come from those. Exile sighed and set about getting some more detailed information.

The largest group was, thankfully, almost completely unthreatening. Several mages of no consequence, inferior equipment, shoddy organization.

The second group, and the farthest away from the tower, was still quite large, and much better equipped. They were just gathering on the shore.

The last group, almost to the tower, was the smallest, but spattered all about with magical instruments of various strengths. Amulets, most likely, though they felt more like wands. One figure in particular was very powerful.

Shaken from his reverie by the boat running aground, Exile got out and sloshed the short way to shore, dragging the boat with him. Leaving it well above the high-tide mark, he waved away the seawater on his ornate clothing.

Exile had no intention of walking into what might turn into a battle unprepared, especially against the force with an amulet fetish. He spun arcane symbols around himself, laying down wards and shields and traps. When he felt secure, he turned invisible and silenced all of his movements. By now, the magic-bearing force had occupied the tower, the largest force was nearing it, and the better equipped group was beginning their travel. Exile, lacking the patience for the short walk, whisked himself into the air and flew to the tower. He was always looking for excuses to fly.

Looking down on the two forces visible from the air, he was glad to see that his senses had been correct. One force was larger and clad in ragged clothes and bearing rusted weapons, while the other marched in orderly ranks, looking quite formidable in their polished armor. Verifying the reports his magic gave him had always been a pet peeve.

Swooping silently down to the tower's windows, he saw men and women bustling about inside. Surprisingly, most of them bore wands. Interesting. Not many people could afford to outfit their soldiers with wands. Or maybe the tower had had a stash somewhere. Most, upon closer inspection, looked harmless.

Darting from window to blasted hole to window again, Exile looked throughout the tower. Eventually, he found the powerful device he'd sensed earlier. unsurprisingly, a wand. Probably for combat. On the belt of a middle-aged looking man. Exile let his senses shift to the mystical and was promptly dazzled by the sheer amount of energy in the man. Not bad, not bad at all. He could easily pass for any one of the nobility if magic was the criterion. He carried a wide variety of wands, for whatever reason. He really didn't have to, with that kind of juice.

Hovering above the shattered walls of the third story, Exile listened in. Nothing special, they were just planning for the oncoming groups. Pirates apparently made up the closest. Exile shifted into intangibility with a sound that might have passed for a falling rock and slipped through the floor. The place was crawling with unidentified soldiers, almost all of them carrying wands of some sort.

Exile didn't know who these people were, and some cursory eavesdropping didn't help. They were too well outfitted to be run of the mill looters, and they were here too soon to be anything but residents of some nearby islands. He didn't know what they were after either, but the sacks of magical (or just plain expensive) equipment seemed to indicate that they were simple opportunists, if strangely well-equipped ones. That marauders could have such a quantity of magic at their disposal was disconcerting, but not his problem. He was here as an investigator.

It was at this point that the soldiers stationed in the tower launched the first barrage against the pirates milling around outside. The sound didn't reach him noticeably, but the magical disturbance did. He tried to hurry upwards, but it was like slipping through molasses. He sacrificed a lot of speed for intangibility. By the time he broke through the last floor, most of the pirates had been slaughtered. Small, sparking bolts flitted from the tower to the remaining pirates. He was just in time to see the powerhouse mage level his wand and fire. Tore straight through some decent wards to burrow a hole through the eye of one of the pirate mages. A second and third shot, a second kill. He wasn't a bad shot, considering the distance. That wand looked absolutely vicious. Perhaps he'd gotten it from the tower?

At any rate, he couldn't just let these people walk away with anything that might help him in his mission, and he was willing to bet that this wand-wielder was the leader, or at least valuable. Following him, the ghostly Exile waited for an opportunity. For a commander, he didn't seem to have much in the way of security. Before too long, he was the only person remaining on the gutted third floor, where he had been watching some of his soldiers flee to the ships.

Exile dismissed his intangibility and flight, drew two daggers from his ornate clothing. Walking silently over to stand just behind the mage, he dismissed his invisibility and silence. Placing one dagger at the man's throat and the other at his back, he spoke gently.

"Don't go for the wand."

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# Devil in Hamtorn City

By Azuma - Mar 8 2009

Dreary sky and heavy hearts. Those were the two most prominent description of the small city of Hamtorn. Situated beside the aptly named Marsh of Despair to the east and the justified Infernal Warrens to the north, surrounded the by Treacherous Ocean, it was in no sense a city fit for a glee or a hoot. It was a wonder on why it was built, but the history and reason altogether is for another story.

Her quiet gait was quickly noticed by the bar patrons. Meekness was no part of a city laced by sorrows and grudge. Cumbersome gazes followed the newly entered patron that did not even stop at the counter. She walked to the near stairs, then to the third door on the right, on the left turn, and with shaking hands, brought out the key and unlocked the room. She closed the door almost immediately as she entered. The bed welcome her lithe body with its carressing sheets. She did not bothered to bathe nor even just to wash her face. Slumber was her priority. It only is. Sleeping, more or less, solves any problems. Maybe this one too, she thought. And she fell into deep sleep. She did not dream.

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The dark sun filtered thru the frayed blinds of the room, waking the mistress. Still alive? Has he failed? The woman was still in distraught but consciousness was assured. She was still alive, breathing, moving. He must have failed. He MUST!

The woman's fair complexion was complimented by the dim rays of light. She got up from her rented bed, the gracefulness she is. She took of her clothes, her supple body almost chiseled by the most skill artisans. Her slender stature, her bosom most well developed, and herself pure. She went for the bathroom, to wash away the filth she disillusioned that covers her. The water was cool and refreshing, but was not enough. She did not feel cleansed but she can do nothing more. Her home abbey was in shambles from his attack. Its attack. Nothing like that can be called a man, even a proper, sentient being. The vicious beast. She stuttered, sobbing. Her friends died, all died inside, in sleep. No one expected it, a murderer never is.

She dressed up again. The same clothes she wore though more frayed this day. She was doubting that this was real but nevertheless, she continued on with the day. She opened the door, half expecting the assaulter to appear in front of her but nothing. The same, shifty Iolwood wall greeted her with its blank face. She went down the stairs, expecting the usual patrons dead and bloodied, maybe a head or two decapitated and the barkeep's body severed in several ways that she cannot properly describe and the attacker, standing, with the devil's smile but she was just overreacting. The patrons were there, drunk as ever. The barkeep was there, still serving the half-cold ale the patrons well patronize. Outside, the sun was still dark and foreboding. Safe as she was now, she never considered herself that. She knows all too well that the bastardious beast is here. And he will get her. And Josephine, the tired woman, believing that every step she made, every movement she did, will lead to her end, tried to, even though she cringes, live on and continue her life, for nothing.

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# Forty Four

By Azuma - Mar 8 2009

He saw her, the gracefulness. She seemed lost. Wandering around. No path to follow. No goal to pursue. He stayed in his place, like the demon he is. He continued to watch her. His dark singing a death song for the victim.

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He was running, half-dead, from the Marsh. He was sustained only by the primal instincts all beings have when put on the brink. The people continued to grieve on the day. The man struggled on unnoticed. His plight was not uncommon in the city. No one cared. He was just another stranger that will be cleaned up by the city's sanitary workers after a while. He was staggering. He was dying. Death was at crawling on him and he felt it, feet to crotch to abdomen to torso to throat. Contrary, his life did not pass through his eyes. The darkness of death enveloped it. It was near. His time has come. He accepted fate. Fate! Fate has not decided that this is not his time. An angel helped him up.

The man woke up inside a adequately furnished inn room. The bed provided him ample rest. His wounds have been dressed and recovering. He sat up and surveyed the room around to see who his savior was and he saw her, a crying angel, oblivious that the man has regained consciousness. The man knelt in front of her and stroke her face, stirring her up. The lady surprised, embraced the man tightly, causing him slight ache. The man himself did not know what to react. He just let her continue, grasping him and her tears falling like stars.

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The next day dawned. The man slept on the bed while the lady on the chair, siding against the wall. She insisted it. He was about to disagree when he saw tears swelling up in her eyes again. He was vetoed. He woke first. He did not thought of waking the lady that helped her, she was too tired. His wounds still hurt but not to excruciating extent, and not to fatal cause. He was saved. For the while. He remembered. The massacre. He saw it in his mind, the blood, the desecration, the- he forced his thoughts to halt. The memories trailed off. Locked inside his mind. He sighed and sat on the bed. The lady woke up. The man was startled by her wake. Even though newly awake, the lady was a sight to behold. Her unruly hair made her more beautiful, like a wild dryad, untamed, gay. Her crumpled clothes showed more than what was expected from a lady from an abbey. She smiled at the man. A wondrous thing to be beheld.

The man was stunned. A beauty like her should have never existed in the world, let alone be living in this dank city. But there she was, staring at him, with her beautiful gaze and a smile. Such a smile. And he was here, alone with her. No! He would not! The thought may have crossed his mind but that is all that it did.

The lady walked to him, at his side. She caressed his wounds. She asked if the man was well. He nodded. She embraced her one more time. The man was still taken aback by this though he didn't

mind. He felt her. So warm, so soft, so... No! Never! He wouldn't. He shouldn't. The woman let go of him and blushed. Josephine, she introduced. The man replied that he was Patrick. The angel smiled at him again. He smiled at her too.

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He was outside the inn the two were staying in. His dark, ragged clothing swaying with the wind. It smelled of blood. It will always will, the foul stained that he is. He was staring, at the open window of the room the two were inside. The dark inside him was shouting. Kill them now! Kill them now! But no! Death was too magnificent for them.

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The lady felt a cold breeze blowing from the window. She moved over to close it and she saw him. Her heart raced. She saw him staring at her, and with that smile. It cannot be called a smile. A smile is something of joy. A statement of happiness. His "smile" was of malice. Unholy and unpure. She felt dizzy. She fell back. The man with her held her up and brought her to the bed. He looked out to the window. No. He was expecting the thing that caused the lady distress to be gone but he saw him too. He was there. The rank of blood and death was apparent. The inhuman chill stalked across his spine. And the man outside walked away.

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## Washed Again by the Tides of War

By Jewels and Bloodmoon - Mar 11 2009

"Wait," Raanil raised a hand but it was too late. She was already off.

"Jasper... Get back here. Jade! Come on girl..." Adrasha ran after her pups weaving around the trees while trying to keep them in her sights. A yelp rang out just ahead and she picked up speed, fear in her voice. "Jade? ... *Oof!*" While rounding a very wide oak, Adrasha ran straight into the chest of a very filthy man. She fell back dazed having had the wind knocked out of her.

Five more men came into view and surrounded her all brandishing tarnished swords and toothless grins while one wrestled her protesting pups into a dirty bag. "Well, well," one of them sneered, "What do we have 'ere?" He yanked the quiver of arrows off of Adrasha's back.

"Looks like a little lost lass," another mocked while kicking away the bow she had dropped.

"Been a long time since we seen a nice lass." A third bent down to stroke her cheek with a grubby finger. His wretched breath filled her nostrils as he spoke right next to her face. "The Cap'in wouldn't mind if we spared a few minutes, I don't think. Praps we should help her, gents."

"Yeah," another stepped forward putting his cutlass to her throat, "help her right out of those nice clothes!"

The group of them started bellowing in crude laughter as they groped at her. "No... No!" she hollered aloud whimpering at their roughness. *Wait for it...* Adrasha urged herself as her sleeves

were ripped off. "Please... don't!" she begged while wincing at their lustful jeers. *Wait for it...* her calm thoughts focusing on the opportunity she needed instead of the wandering hand on her thigh.

"I get her first, lads," one announced cheerily as he struggled with the button on her trousers.

"Wut?!" came an indignant cry. "Why do you get 'er first? I wanna go first." Their hands let up and slowed their roaming as they began to push each other away.

The one who held the cutlass, dropped it to pull the other two off. "I outrank you all. I get ta go first!"

That was all Adrasha needed.

Deftly, Adrasha grabbed the head of one of the bickering men and snapped his neck. With well-trained muscles, she threw his body back into the man behind him. Pulling her legs in and kicking up, her boot met the head of the man that had been trying to hold them down. He fell back with blood pouring from his nose. At the same time, she freed the dagger from her other boot and slit the throat of the only one still trying to hold her down. With acrobatic ease, Adrasha brought herself back to her feet holding her dagger out menacingly. While one man yowled holding his nose, the other three stood back drawing swords and taking a fighting stance. They circled, swearing at each other and yelling threats at her. Adrasha kept her back to the wide tree and waited. The one in front of her moved in to strike with his sword, but she caught the blow on her dagger. Then the men on her right and left both thrust with their blades. Adrasha shifted her weight dropping down and pulling her opponent forward to be run through by his comrades. They both recoiled in surprised. Pulling the cutlass from his dying grasp she flung her dagger to her left. *Thwock!* It sunk in between the victim's eyes. Then setting her legs, she sprung at the last standing adversary spinning to beat his blade to the side with her commandeered cutlass and coming around to run him through. Her momentum effectively pinned him to the tree behind him.

After he groaned his last, all fell silent except for Adrasha's heavy breathing and the whimpering of her captured pups. Stepping over to the bag, she quickly let them out gushing over them and checking them over for injuries. Suddenly, her head was yanked back violently forcing her to stand as rough fingers tangled themselves in her hair and a jagged blade pressed harshly into her neck. "You broke my nose," came the soft sing song accusation. "You'll pay for thaaaahhhhh... arrrgggg..." Just as suddenly the man let go of her hair and his sword to clutch his own throat staggering back.

Raanil stepped out from behind a tree with his hand raised. "Are you alright?" he asked.

"I'm fine," she seethed. "I didn't need your help. I could have taken him."

"You're welcome," he intoned hand still raised as Adrasha's malefactor fell to his knees gasping.

She sighed and shook her head. "I'm sorry. I..." Adrasha adjusted her now ripped blouse self-consciously though it did little to cover her better. "I just. Hate. *Men!*" She kicked her last attacker viciously with each word before he died. "No offense."

"None taken," Raanil quipped lowering his hand. "I suppose I'd hate men too, if they treated me like that. At least... if I had emotion." he chuckled awkwardly. "That was funny, no?"

Adrasha rolled her eyes. "Hilarious." Adrasha retrieved her dagger wiping it off on the dead man's shirt. "What were they even doing here?" she asked frustrated.

"I sense the blood of many more. I tried to tell you before but you ran too quickly."

She swore hanging her head. "Why is my life so cursed?!" There was a long silence between them both before Adrasha looked up at Raanil with quiet determination. "How many more?"

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Raanil cast *Haste* and *Stealth* as the pair snuck towards the tower. More filthy pirates held the mouth of the valley. "There are three distinct groups here," he told her. "One inside the tower and one is approaching from the south."

"I need to get inside," she whispered. "Will this stealth spell hold?"

Raanil nodded. "Unless you touch someone. That would allow them to see through the enchantment. If you must kill someone, don't allow them to cry out or you will be detected by the others."

Adrasha adjusted her bow and quiver as she gripped a rusted cutlass in each hand. "You'd better stay here. Too risky for us both to get through."

He nodded again but more hesitantly. "Are you sure you want to do this? The offer of my guest quarters is still open."

She was silent for a moment. "I... I left something inside. I have to get it back. I... I just have to. If I don't make it," she looked at him with an appeal, "take care of my pups." With that she took off silently. Carefully she picked her way through the camp holding her breath from the stealth as well as the fear someone might hear it. They all seemed to be hiding out of sight of the tower, though unable to turn back as the group from the south made their presence known. All eyes were on the newcomers and an eerie silence filled the vale. A twig snapped underneath Adrasha's foot and she froze, sure that someone must have heard. That someone would have noticed. But still no one looked her way. Breathing a sigh of relief, she continued on finally coming into view of the tower. Her heart skipped a beat at the massacre she saw. No wonder they were in hiding. The plain was once again littered with corpses and charred bones. All her effort... all her work... for naught! A tear of sorrow ran down her cheek as her hope of a peaceful life was torn to shreds. Then... she lingered too long.

Someone ran into her from behind. "Hey," the foul man called out, "Who are you?" Adrasha gutted him before he could say another word, but it was too late. The spell had been broken and a score or armed ruthless men descended on her position from all sides.

*Great*, she thought to herself. *So much for making it out of here alive.* Her blades flew with lightning speed as she defended herself, but even she knew that she wouldn't be able to keep it up for long.

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# Pirates Don't Carry Wands...Do They?

By Ackrovan - Mar 11 2009

"All units hold!"

Kerry struggled to keep his voice over the clanking of the armor on the soldiers. They were still in two blocks, firmly covering themselves with their shields in the event of an attack. Kerry and the two officers had retreated back with six soldiers from each block, protectively encircling them. They began to debate their options.

"We should attack them while they're not ready. Look at them, they can barely call themselves a rabble," spoke Officer Prentson, the youngest of the three of them and the one with the least experience. in official combat. Officer Ulyyas shook his head, "That would be foolish. We don't even know their strengths, barely their numbers. There might be a wave of reinforcements coming up as we speak and we would be caught directly in a skirmish." Ulyyas was nearly 65, the oldest and most experienced. A thick beard had manifested itself on his chin.

Prentson glanced towards the pirates. Turning his head back, he said, "They're pirates. These aren't professional soldiers, just a group of thugs with a few ships. We should attack them before they attack us." Ulyyas pointed to the people that had captured the tower. "And what about them? Have you forgotten that they're still there? Armed with wands, they would cut us up as we charged." Prentson looked doubtful, "Look at the marks on the ground? They're fresh, not old. They are not their friends, and certainly not going to care if we attack them." Kerry raised his hand, "Enough. This bickering is pointless. We're not getting anywhere with this." Kerry stiffened his back, "The Archon ordered us not to attack anyone unless provoked, which we will follow. We will try to talk to them first, if not just to perhaps ease the situation. Then we can...."

Suddenly, a Corporal from Prentson's platoon shouted frantically at the officers as they continued to debate. "Sir! They're beginning to mobilize!" Kerry glanced back at Ulyyas and Prentson, giving them orders from his glance to return to their platoons. All three getting up, they ran back into position. Kerry and the twelve soldiers arrived at the center, seeing from themselves what was going on.

The pirates were running around in every direction. Hysteria had somehow taken control. Some pirates were turning inwards, trying to see what was happening inside their ranks. Others were now unsheathing their weapons and charging at Kerry and his troops. Panicked, they were starting to break ranks and edge closer to the pirates, only held in check by their Officers shouts. The pirates, in turn, stopped at awkward times and reconsidered their attack. It was like a ballay of sorts.

Eventually, though, the glass had broken. The two sides charged at each other.

Kerry cursed at this situation, and led his personal guards behind the soldiers as they charged at the pirates. The pirates wielded their cutlasses and slashed at the Archon's soldiers. In turn, they began to slash back.

They never stood a chance.

The soldiers easily cut the pirates as they came. Archers emerged, desperately trying to stave off the inevitable onslaught. Most were cut down within the first minutes. Kerry ran slipped behind them, cutting them off from their ships. As they tried to flee, they were met with Kerry's blades. The priest and several others tried to climb up the rocks to escape the slaughter, only to be thrown back down and stabbed to death. In a matter of minutes, every single pirate was killed.

His troops trying to celebrate, Kerry shouted at them to hit the rocks to hide from the possible wands. A few minutes later, they were in the exact same position as the pirates.

Damn.

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## Between the Knife and the Sword

By Nioca - Mar 12 2009

Griseham winced as the daggers hit his throat and back. It had been a while since he had been in a fight with a mage, and, unfortunately, he had forgotten what the more powerful were capable of doing. Like flying and concealing their power.

"Don't go for the wand." The mage repeated. "You and I are going to have a little talk."

"Of course we are." Griseham sighed. He couldn't keep an eye on the battlefield in his current position, and he was completely powerless against the mage. He did note, however, that his voice sounded foreign. Unusual.

"Yes. About your imminent departure." The mage hissed. "You don't belong here. You and your crew of scavengers need to leave. Immediately."

"How charming." Griseham snarled. "Tell me, how do you expect us to leave while we're being bottled up by pirates and enemy soldiers?"

"I don't know. I don't care. That's your problem, not mine."

"It's both of our problems, considering you can't get what you want until I'm gone." Griseham replied angrily.

"I could just kill everyone downstairs..." The mage hissed. "Considering how easy it was to slip up on you, it shouldn't be a problem at all."

"And then the soldiers will come." Griseham fired back.

"And then they'll die." The mage replied shortly.

"And what about the other mage?" Griseham said. He felt a new mage on the edge of his consciousness.

"Other mage?" Griseham felt the knife around his throat slip away slightly.

"Yes, the other. Tell me, how do you plan to kill him when you didn't even notice his arrival?" Griseham pushed slightly.

"I..." The mage began, startled.

Griseham didn't hesitate. His hand shot to the dagger around his throat, batting it away. He stepped sideways as to avoid the dagger at his back, slamming his elbow into the mage's face. A solid crack and wet blood indicated that he found his mark. Griseham snatched Tyinomatas up and whirled around, but the mage was gone again. Realizing he had only a moment's opportunity, he started firing wildly. Six bolts flew. Five of them flew off into the mountains. A scream of agony greeted the sixth; whilst the mage had turned intangible, the bolt had diffused part of its energy into his form while passing through. A white silhouette briefly appeared where the mage stood. His intangibility and invisibility faded, and he collapsed to the ground. Griseham closed with him, but the mage flung himself over the edge of the tower.

Griseham approached the edge and looked over. The mage was gone again. Sighing, he decided to head downstairs. He kept the wand aloft as he descended to the first floor. "I just got paid a visit." Griseham stated to the crouching Commander Dulford.

"What?!" Dulford yelped. "Oh god, I'm sorry, I should have-"

"Save it. What's going on?" Griseham asked irritably.

"Well, the soldiers took down the pirates. There appears to be one left... Take a look." Dulford pointed out through a window. Griseham peered through and saw a woman standing with a torn shirt and a pair of cutlasses. She looked cornered, taking glances at the soldiers behind her and the tower in front of her.

"She's stuck?" Griseham asked, bemused. "How unfortunate."

"Indeed. But she looks deadly." Dulford amended.

"At any rate, we need to leave." Griseham stated. "The mage that attacked me up there and the constant stream of new forces are making that abundantly clear."

"New forces?" Dulford asked.

"There's anoth-" Griseham started. Suddenly, he blinked and stumbled backwards. Something was disturbing his consciousness. "There's..." Griseham blinked again. "We need to go. Now." Griseham stated with urgency.

"What's wrong?" Dulford inquired.

"*Something* is coming. Something powerful enough that I'm feeling it from miles away. And I got a slight suspicion that anyone on the island when that thing arrives is going to be sorry they ever set foot here." Griseham's voice shook slightly. "Be it negotiating or blasting our way out, *we need to go!*"

Dulford nodded. "What's the plan?"

"You're going to go out there. I'll be on one side, and um..." Griseham looked through the frightened faces with him. "You will be on the other." He said, pointing to the woman carrying

the blitz wand. "We'll have 4 more people surrounding each of us, and the rest are to remain in the tower in case it goes bad."

"What about the woman out there?" Synthia the healer spoke up.

Griseham walked to a window. Pulling a wand with a topaz tip from his belt, he leveled it and fired. A golden aura surrounded the woman, who, with a gasp, collapsed. "Two of you will carry her back to the tower. She's coming with us in any event; I want to know more about these pirates." Griseham looked through the group. "Ready?"

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Commander Dulford ran out of the tower, wand and longsword drawn. Griseham stayed to his left with four people forming a half-circle around him. The woman was on Dulford's right, keeping her wand aloft with her half-circle of compatriots. Two more rushed out of the tower to grab the stunned woman, carrying her back to the tower.

"ATTENTION, SOLDIERS!" Dulford shouted. "WE WISH TO NEGOTIATE THE PEACEFUL DEPARTURE OF OUR PEOPLE FROM THIS REGION!"

Griseham's wand gripped Tyinomatas tightly. He could feel the three magical presences. That of the mage that had held him hostage, concealed and in a direction indiscernible. Then there was the more recent arrival, somewhere off to his right in the wooded area near the mouth of the valley. And, finally, the super-presence en route to the island, moving ever closer. He doubted the other mages knew of the super-presence; it was his massive reserves of energy that had allowed him to notice the super-presence from as far off as he did. But they would know shortly. Griseham just fervently hoped that the super-presence hadn't noticed him.

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## Lost in Translation VI

By Bloodmoon - Mar 14 2009

Raanil watched from a distance as Adrasha ran with stealthy agility. After only a few minutes, though, he sensed his spell was starting to wear off. Something was wrong. Raanil backed off as the din of a battle started to sound. The men from the south were attacked by the pirates but it was evident they were no match for the skilled soldiers. Raanil moved around trying to get a better vantage point. What had happened to Adrasha? It didn't take long for the battle to die down so Raanil snuck in closer renewing his own Stealth for good measure. When he finally spotted her, Adrasha was incapacitated being surrounded and captured. Two men drug her towards the Tower. "Hmm... why do I get the feeling that she has been captured before?" At least knowing where she was, Raanil went back to where he had left Adrasha's pups. Muttering some words and carving some glyphs in the ground surrounding them he said to himself, "This should make them safe."

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Raanil had watched and waited. He was very patient. At an opportune moment he silently slid to the Tower, stopped for a minute to touch a corpse then he began to change into a mage with the same clothes as the people that had



captured Adrasha. He remembered something then raised his hands to one of the pirate corpses and reanimated it. He took a stick, and merged it to a blood crystal "Hmm not perfect but this sure can deceive some of them." With that he began to walk to the Tower with the reanimated pirate.

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## It's Been too Long

By Sudanna - Mar 15 2009

Somehow, captors always were surprised when their captive took advantage of an opportunity, and Exile was not immune to that failing. He was surprised, to say the least. Why hadn't he thought of simply disarming the man? The belt that his wands dangled from was a simple band of cloth, he should have sliced that off first thing. And why had he been talking so much in the first place? Had it been that long since he'd done this? This was downright embarrassing. What really annoyed him is that he had dropped his daggers. There was no excuse for that.

Eh, at least his magical reflexes were well-honed. He was fully ghosted in less than a second. But then the wand started firing randomly, and his intangibility only allowed him to move so fast, even through empty air. The white-hot shot of burning pain through his leg ripped his concentration to shreds, even if it hadn't been a surprise. His wards did too little to mitigate it, and even his intangibility wasn't enough. Damn, that smarts. He couldn't stand on a leg that had been burned all the way through, and he was too befuddled to fly anywhere.

Ah, now his old assassin's reflexes wanted to kick in. His legs kicked - agonizing, but Exile was miles away at this point anyways. This man had an unusually dazing face-smash.

Several feet under the ground, Exile worked up a flight spell. The all-encompassing earth was comforting, in a way, but he knew well enough that intangibility can be horribly disorienting. He didn't want to spend the rest of his (short) life waiting for the spell to expire so he could be atomically glued to solid rock, unable to find the surface.

His skills at healing left much to be desired, but he slapped himself back into workable shape after a few minutes spent crouched in some bushes, visible and corporeal. It had never been his best discipline, and he needed to concentrate fully to do it fast enough.

Now he flitted back to the top of the tower, using only invisibility and flight. Tossing a few trap spells at the top of the stairs, he dismissed his flight and settled in to watch. Sure enough, the nasty wand-wielder was leaving, shouting at the armored force for parlay. Exile would wait and watch, for now. If they tried making off with anything that might be useful for his investigation, he'd just drop chunks of masonry on the people carrying it. No need to waste magic, and the sky was a lot bigger than this floor of the ruined tower. If he had to, he'd drop down and simply knife them. Let's see them try firing into their own troops, eh?

In the meantime, Exile patched his wards. That was a nasty wand. . .

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# The Art of Being Civil

By Ackrovan and Nioca - Mar 15 2009

Beth stood above the Scrying pool, completely motionless. She had observed the movements on the island, in most particular the battle that just took place. She was happy to see the hard training had paid off. But she couldn't focused on it. Something was moving towards her, or rather, the island itself. It was something that could rip them apart in a matter of a few minutes. It was too powerful to ignore yet too far off to confront. How did it feel? Angry.....no, it's not that intense. It felt as if it was on an urgent mission, something much more important than a few sails or some trinkets. Either way, they needed to move very far away. And very soon.

Meanwhile, on the deck, Ackrovan was getting edgy. All he could see was an island, and all he could hear were some distant screams. The fleet to the southeast was unnerving as well, and the few pirate ships weren't making anything easier. No, he would have to get rid of those ships and see if they have any supplies. That might help quicken this whole transaction. He adjusted his hand to wave forth his Sparkman, Dorothy. He pointed at the *Stalker*, "Tell Captain Rovon to take control of those ships after two volleys of Balistae fire from the *Usurper*." Dorothy nodded, though somewhat shaken by the sudden order for a battle. Ackrovan moved up back to the bridge. He began speaking to Captain Darlite, "Captain, prepare to fire an immediate two volleys of Balistae at the pirate ships, on my order." Darlite made a quick glance at the pirate ships before responding, "But my Lord, from this distance, only our four Heavy Balistae would be able to hit those." The Archon responded, "That's all we'll need, Captain. On my orders." That last sentence was an incentive to shut it. Fortunately, Darlite got it, "Very well, my Lord. Which ship would be targeted first?" Picking up a telescope, Ackrovan got a close up view of the ships. Two were unmanned and were corvettes. He'd venture that they would be the ones who actually hunted down the ships and fought the battles. One appeared to be banged up, and the other one seemed to be fresh and new. Most likely bought of the back market not too long ago. The last one, which still seems to be manned, was much larger, and looked like a cargo holder. Most likely, that ship would actually carry the loot and goods. Ackrovan made his target (the banged up corvette) and gave Captain Darlite the location. After several tedious minutes of getting the correct coordinates, Darlite issued the command to the sailors down below. Because of the storm, all of the Balistae were put deep inside the ship. Now, wheel's rolling, four of them perked out, and took aim at the ship. In a steady minute, they opened fire.

The first two shots hit straight into the belly of the ship. Causing damage, the ship shook violently as the third bolt hit square on the main mass, throwing it into the sea with a thunderous boom. The fourth bolt smacked into the bow of the ship, causing the front platform to partially break off. Loading another volley, the Balistae began firing again. Two more hit dead on the port side, whacking the majority of the ship's balance right off. One more hit the bow of the ship, fully knocking off the lead platform. The fourth missed its mark, but it did little difference. The ship was now completely listing to port, and in an hour would have sunk into the ocean.

With the volleys now ending, Rován began ordering the *Stalker* to move towards the remaining ships. The battle will be short.

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Hearing the plea to resolve this outbreak, Kerry slowly lifted his head upwards and responded, "DISARM YOURSELVES. SEND ONE FORWARD AND YOU WILL BE MET IN KIND!"

"WE WILL NOT DISARM!" Commander Dulford shouted back. "WE ARE WILLING TO SPEAK, BUT ONLY ON OUR TERMS!"

"YOU ARE TRAPPED HERE. WE CAN SIMPLY STARVE YOU TO DEATH IF KILLING YOU IS OUR INTENT. YOU ARE IN NO POSITION TO NEGOTIATE" Kerry rose off the ground. Taking two steps forward, he sheathed his sword and dropped it to the ground. So he did with his shield in turn. He spread his arms wide, "WE ARE NO THREAT. WE ONLY WISH TO RESOLVE THIS BEFORE BOTH OF US REGRET IT." Kerry waited for their response

Commander Dulford stepped forward. He let his wand drop to the ground, along with his sheathed sword. The others stayed behind, keeping their wands aloft. "Fine. Let's talk. We want to leave. No tricks, no fighting. Just walk on out of here and never come back."

Smiling, Kerry lowered his arms. "I'm glad we could work this out like civil people. Now, as I said before, we mean you no harm. We have no intention of spilling any more blood today" At the corner of his eye, Kerry saw a woman being dragged off by two of these people, one on each side. She appeared unconscious. He ignored it, "However, to be sure you mean us no harm, my master must trust you. Which means I must trust you. So please tell me, who are you and what is, or was, your purpose on this island?" Dulford nodded. "I am Commander Dulford, leader of this expedition. We came here to investigate the tower's destruction and to salvage supplies." Dulford took a breath. "We also did not intend to get locked into a battle today."

Kerry smirked, "Understandable. We too were not expecting to find sieging pirates, or an old Tower either. I am Captain Kerry, 1st Rank. I am under the service of Lord Ackrovan, whom you will soon have to meet, Commander Dulford. We are the victims of a horrible storm that just blew through the area, and are in dire need of supplies to fix our ships. But I must ask, you avoided my question. I asked who are you, not who you are. What flag does your.....group fly under?" Kerry made a quick glance upward around the tower. Dulford paused to take a glance over his shoulder, noting that his escort was still waiting a few yards behind him. He then turned back to Kerry.

"None."

Kerry's smirk vanished into the breeze "You lie." He stated, and continued "You are not Kingdom Marshal or a Noble's soldiers, for if you were, we would be having a fight, not negotiation. You are not mercenaries; no mercenary group in this area is wealthy enough to afford all those wands. You aren't pirates, obviously. You can't be some mindless rabble of civilians hoping to get a quick buck on the corpse of death, for you are too well trained and disciplined for that. And it would take far too long to organize this many adventurers this quickly. So, please enlighten me, what country are you from." Kerry looked Dulford right in the eye, hoping his guess about their nationality was worth it.

"What country?" Dulford asked, putting on an air of incredulity. "The Kingdom rules these waters! No other nation lies close to the eastern border." Dulford stared back. "We are naught but nomads. Wanderers. And as for our arsenal, it helps to have a wandmaker with us."

Kerry smiled ever so slightly, "Of course. God bless the King, right?" Kerry continued, "Now that that is out of the way, let's talk about how we can both leave this island. Can you please take us to a port? We can pay extremely well." Kerry then realized that he is speaking out of authority. Nonetheless, if he can secure a port to sail to, or supplies, The Archon would forgive him. Hopefully. "I..." Dulford started, caught off guard. "I cannot escort you to a port, I am afraid. We are making a long journey north, and time is of the essence. However, I can inform that Hawk Isle, to the southeast, has a fully-functional port. You would surely find whatever you needed there." Kerry noted the hesitation. "Thank you. We were traveling from the north as well. Did you hear that Iosipes Crescent has had a plague?" Kerry waited to hear his answer. "Iosipes Crescent... Never heard of it. But I'll make a note to stay away." Dulford paused. "We've actually been somewhat hesitant, considering the problems Turin's land has been encountering." .

What a dumbass. Isopites Crescent is nowhere near to the north; its south, almost directly inbetween the Spire and Hexan's island. If he thought he was getting out of this easily, then he's got another thing coming. Either way, Kerry continued, "Great. Hate to see that thing get spread. Now, if you'll excuse me, I should take my leave. My Lord Ackrovan with his assistant will be here shortly." Kerry tried one last time to disillusion him, "If, in the unlikely event, you are not the leader of these people, I suggest you drop the facade by the time my Lord comes here. We have ways of telling." Now that was a true and complete lie, but hopefully, the point was put across.

"Make sure you hurry." Dulford stated plainly. "We won't wait forever"

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*Slash!*

The blood of the pirates neck wringed the soldiers wrist as he cut through him like a fish. Only about 30 pirates were left to defend the ships, the rest had ran off to the island. The last of them killed, Rován and his men began to search the lower cargo hold for any equipment or supplies (or gold, if their fortune would hold off a little longer) A few minutes into the search, Rován and his men had come across their bounty; sails and dry wood. "Quickly, everyone get this back to the Ships now, so we can leave this place." Directing the sailors to the deck, they each picked up a piece of the sails. Rován then ordered them to be put on the dingy's that they had traveled here on, and further directed them to the two ships, also ordering the one going to the *Stalker* to bring her around back to them and pick them up.

Just as Rován was getting ready to get comfortable, a lone sailor approached him. "Sir, may I have a moment?" Rován nodded him to go ahead. "Captain, I believe we should commandere these ships. They are both in very good condition, and would certinly prove to be useful." Rován looked over to him, "What is your name, sailor?" to which the sailor replied, "Private Nufasgs, sir" Rován, nodding, continued, "Well, Nufasgs, we don't have enough men to command a whole transport ship and a corvette. And it be foolish to try." Thinking that the conversation was over, Rován turned his head away from the sailor. Nufasgs, however, continued, "Then perhaps just one? Surely we can manage that." Rován started on a rebutle but then stopped. He did have a

point there. Rován relented, "I don't have the authority to make that decision. Only the Archon does." Rován then waved Private Nufasgs off, which he did. He then sat there, thinkinh about the suggestion.

As the *Stalker* began loading them all back up, Rován told his under captain to take the wheel. And to drop him off with the *Usurper*.

Beth appraoched Ackrovan as he paced the dock with a furious strive, "My Lord?" Beth quiered. He responded, "What is it?" Nodding, she continued to fill him in on what had happened on the island, about the fight, the women being taken prisoner, and the apparent "negociation" that was taking place. When she finished, she did not leave. "Is there somthing else?" He quieried. She nodded, "My Lord, I strongly suggest we leave here now. There is somthing coming here that is distubingly powerful, and I don't think its in the mood to chat." Ackrovan asked, "What do you think it is, Beth?" He hadn't sensed anything at all. She went on, "My Lord, I believe it is an entity. A very vibrant one at that. Whatever it is, its coming here, and as I said before, it isn't in the mood to play games. It will likely be very angry that we are here." Ackrovan moved his head from side to side, "Well, then, this.....complicates things." Just as Ackrovan was about to continue, two small dingy's were approaching the ship. One was from the *Stalker*, which, if Ackrovan's eyes were not mistaken, contained Captain Rován. The other one was a soldier from the island. He got to Ackrovan first.

He bowed, "Good day my Lord. I am an envoy from Captain Kerry. We had...." Ackrovan stopped him, "No need for that. I am fully aware about the pirates demise and Kerry and "Dulford" speaking." The soldier began again, only to be again interrupted by Ackrovan, "I shall prepare myself. Dorothy, get some underlings to get him a fresh set of cloths and a hot meal." The soldier, smiling, took his leave, thanking Ackrovan in a thousand different way's.

Several minutes later, and Ackrovan was ready to land. He had doned a leather jerkin with leather breaches. A long cape hung on his back as well. Just then, Rován approached him, "My Lord, do you have a moment?" Ackrovan continued to fix his cape, "Make it quick." Rován bowed and continued, "My Lord, one of my sailors brought this up to me. We are capable of capturing one of the two pirate ships, the transport or the corvette. I request your permission to proceed, and direction on which one to take." Ackrovan paused for a minute, considering. "Take the corvette. It would take to long to get the transport up and running. If you are not ready by the time I'm back, abort the mission and abandon the ship." Rován replied, "Thank you, my Lord. But why is time of the esscence?" Ackrovan away from him, him and beth preparing to be teleported, "I will explain when I return," And with that, he was gone.

---

Ackrovan and Beth appeared in back of the troops. Kerry moved forward and greeted him. "Good day, my Lord. Beth" She gave a light bow. "As my envoy no doubt told you, I believe we can resolve this without further bloodshed." Ackrovan nodded, "Good. Anything else to report?" Kerry then leaned in and told him of his suspiscions. Ackrovan and Beth then approached Dulford.

As Lord Ackrovan walked towards the man, he flinched. A huge aura of magic now became obvious. As he approached, he started combing the salvagers, trying to pinpoint the source of this power. He could not, however, get an exact fix. But it was just so strange. It was as if he had

already sensed it before. A quick glance at Beth revealed that she sensed it to, but was too focused on the other source of magic to care. Ackrovan turned to face Dulford. "Well, let's cut to the chase, shall we? I am Lord Ackrovan. We are in need of dire supplies. So please tell me, did you uncover anything that you might be willing to sell?" Ackrovan had to fight a bit to both speak and find that damn energy.

"We have. Unfortunately, we sent those supplies back to our ships, which are on the south side of the island. And, unfortunately, I don't think it's anything you could use." Commander Dulford stated.

"Great then. We can both leave here. But one last thing. You mentioned to my subordinate that there was an island around here, no? Do you mind waiting a bit so my servant can fetch a piece of paper and you could draw a rough map to it?" Ackrovan didn't let him refuse, "Thank you" He motioned Beth to retrieve one. She fell back to the rocks, but she knew that it didn't matter. It was just an excuse to continue to search for that power barrel.

Ackrovan moved past the crowd of wand wielders with his eyes, taking advantage of Beth's delay. Closing them, he began to see in a different way, one which saw magical power rather than physical features. It did not take long to find it. It was as if all the sunlight worth a year had been squeezed into a small jar, as if an ocean was held together in a small pond. He had sensed it before, once with Turin. Had it been a mage? No. A priest? No. Then he remembered.

"*Grisham*"

Beth, now sensing Ackrovan's revelation, took a piece of paper from her pocket and rejoined them. Ackrovan began to speak to Dulford again, but not in the same way. He was not in charge, only a proxy one at that. "If you would be so kind...." Dulford obliged him, and began writing the general direction of the island. Eventually, he gave the paper back to Ackrovan, "Here you go. Is that it then?" Ackrovan ignored him, staring deeply into his Grisham's eyes. He had been killed, hadn't he? Apparently not. The Ultimate Paradox of the magic world still lived. Breaking his gaze, Ackrovan turned back to Dulford, halfheartedly. "Yes. Good bye, Commander Dulford. May the sea angels bless thee with good waters." Ackrovan then returned to his troops, motioning them to move back to the ship.

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An hour later now, and everyone had returned to the ships. Including the new one, which Rován named the *Paladin*. They sailing to the southeast, Beth scried a closed eye on the "Nomad" fleet. Instead of sailing north, like they claimed, they were sailing almost directly south. Ackrovan saw this as well, and issued a new order, "Rován, I am coming with you back to the *Stalker*. The *Paladin* and the *Usurper* are to sail to Isopites Crescent and await my arrival." He turned to Rován, "We are going to find out who these nomads are and what they are doing. Are we ready?" Rován nodded, "Yes my Lord, we are." Ackrovan smiled, "Good then. Let's get to it." They both left the *Usurper* and boarded the *Stalker*.

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## New Ambitions

By Nioca - Mar 15 2009

Griseham felt his insides dance uneasily as he watched Ackrovan leave. Time hadn't robbed him of his memory; he knew that mage. Ackrovan... someone who had worked with Lord Turin in the past. Who may have been working with Turin up to his untimely demise.

Nevertheless, the coast was clear for now. He could only feel that it would be for naught but a short time. "Alright, let's get the hell out of here before someone else shows up." Griseham stated bluntly. He made motions toward the tower. Tantonians quickly poured out, hope shining on their faces. "Time to go, people!"

---

Anaya watched the rocky shore carefully. She was on the verge of an anxiety attack; with a wry smile, she realized how Griseham must feel whenever she was out on the seas. Still, Uytha had arrived what felt like eons ago. And every passing minute added to her worry.

Suddenly, she spotted motion in the nearby woods. Several Tantonians raised wands aboard the *Jennidean* as something approached. Then burst through one of the Tantonians. Signaling the others to lower their wands, Anaya watched hopefully as the Tantonians ran to the ship. When her husband appeared, she let out a sigh of relief.

The Tantonians scrambled aboard the *Jennidean*. Anaya came forward as her husband boarded and embraced her. "Thank the gods." Griseham said. "The way it was getting, I was afraid I'd never see you again." They broke apart. "We need to set sail at once. It seems there's a never-ending stream of people coming to and from the island, and there's something approaching that I'd rather not show down with."

Anaya nodded. "Yes. I'll see to it that we launch shortly."

Griseham turned and headed below deck to the cargo hold of the *Jennidean*. Several large sack sat at one end, being rifled through by various Tantonians. Commander Dulford came up to him wearing a new shortsword. "Look what I found!" He said somewhat excitedly. He unsheathed the blade, and Griseham could feel the magic within. "I found it in a room that had been cleaned up. It's got some sort of enchantment on it, but I-"

Griseham waved his hand as a signal for Dulford to quiet. "What exactly did we recover, total?"

"Um, we mostly got reagents and alchemical equipment. Some of it's pretty rare, too. We also found the armory, which had a good portion of its weaponry and armor intact. Plate mail, longswords, halberds, you name it. High quality, too. We found a few intact tomes, and something else..." Dulford thought for a moment. "Oh, yes, Uytha wanted to see you. He found a scroll tube, and is really excited about it. It's a bit scary, actually, seeing him so worked up over-"

"Where is he now?" Griseham asked, cutting Dulford off.

"In his quarters." Dulford replied.

"And the captive?" Griseham inquired further.

"In the brig." Dulford responded.

"Good. I want you to interrogate the pirate when she recovers. We need to know more about what the um... Hojick Ravagers, correct?" Griseham said. Dulford nodded at the last part. "What they have planned, and anything that'd help us excise them."

"I'll make her talk." Dulford said darkly. He made to move past Griseham, but Griseham grabbed him by the arm and pulled him back.

"You will *interrogate* her. I won't have atrocities worthy of Turin on my hands or my ship." Griseham hissed. "Talk to her, intimidate her, but under no circumstances are you to deliberately harm her. Is that clear?"

"Yes." Dulford left the cargo hold.

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"You wanted to see me?" Griseham asked as he entered Uytha's quarters.

"Yes, you have got to see this!" Uytha responded. He jumped up and pulled a massive, worn scroll tube from a nearby chest. Opening it, he emptied the scroll out on a table, then laid it out for Griseham to see. "It's a map!"

"I can see that." Griseham stated, unimpressed. "We have a few of those back in Tanton, you know."

"Not like this. Look!" Uytha urged.

Griseham stepped forward and gave it a more thorough examination. He then saw why Uytha was so excited; it was a map to end all maps, charting islands Griseham never knew existed. More than that, it gave the locations of towns, cities, fortresses... Griseham looked at his home of Tanton and saw that both Tanton and the pirate fortress were accurately marked. He scanned further over it, surprises at every turn. "My gods..." Griseham whispered. He could only imagine how much scrying had to be done to get this much information. How many blocks had to be pierced to keep it accurate.

"Do you mind if I keep this?" Griseham asked.

"No, go ahead. By all means." Uytha responded.

Griseham rolled the map back up and put it back in its tube. He had some studying he had to do.

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Griseham was poring over the map in the Captain's quarters when Anaya entered. "We're on our way, and barring disaster, should be back at Tanton within a few hours." She sidled over to his side, looking curiously at the map. "What is that?"

"A blessing." Griseham stated. He looked up at her with an enterprising look in his eyes. "Every island within a 250-mile radius of Rouen Isle has been charted here by Nebulan."

"Impressive. But what's with that look?" Anaya asked.

"Plans for the future." Griseham said ambitiously. "You remember how I've talked about expanding Tanton from one city to a true nation?" Anaya nodded in response. "Well, I think I may turn talk into action." He pointed at an island. "Greyfolk Isle. Had two towns on it, one a farming town, and the other a mining town. Originally owned by Duke Hexen, if the map is



right, they've been since abandoned. All it'll take of us is to move into the abandoned towns. We wouldn't even have to build! Just take over what's left."

"You're serious?" Anaya asked, sitting down on the bed. "That'll be tough to sell to the others."

"Not really. Some of the Tantonians have been itching to get out of that cramped little village of ours, and some Tantonites want to explore the rest of the world. And, quite frankly, I don't think we'll remain hidden much longer anyway."

"What do you mean?" Anaya jumped up.

"I met up with one of Turin's associates on Rouen Isle. A mage by the name of Ackrovan. Met him a few times back when I still worked for Lord Turin; they were working jointly on a project I never heard about." Griseham sighed. "Well, he was there, and I'm absolutely certain he recognized me."

Anaya fell back on the bed. "That means..."

"Not necessarily." Griseham said. "But more than likely. Which is why now is the best time to expand. We have nothing to hide anymore."

"Fine." Anaya got back up and meandered over. "I still don't care for it. Greyfolk Isle was likely abandoned for a reason."

"Yes, we both know about the creatures it's named after." Griseham stated blandly. "That's why we're bringing wands with us."

Anaya looked at him critically. "Any other crazy ideas?"

"As a matter of fact..." Griseham said, a fiendish grin spreading across his face. "I think I might have just the thing for the newly-appointed young Turin." He pointed at an island far to the north. "Tearstone Island. Cornerstone of the Turin economy, a wealth of gemstones just waiting to be dug out." Griseham leaned back. "The young Turin likely lacks the charisma to hold his military together, and his magical power is likely limited. That means that the one thing that's keeping everything together is money. Wealth. And if the wealth was shut off... Well, that'd be the final nail for the Turin dynasty."

"Tearstone Island is one of the most heavily-fortified islands east of the Mainland. Entire armies have landed on its shores only to be slaughtered. Tell me, husband, how do you plan to succeed where they failed?" Anaya demanded.

Griseham pulled Tyinomatas from his belt. "Firepower. They have an army, fortresses, and a fleet. But we have far superior firepower. And if we were to bring down our wrath in one earth-shattering assault, breaking their walls and army before they could even react, we would likely take it with only minor difficulty."

"Griseham, what has gotten into you? Taking Tearstone Island would be suicidal!" Anaya asked, aghast. She put a hand on Griseham's shoulder.

"Relax. It is naught but a fantasy..." Griseham said slowly. "At least, for now."

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## Oversee it Myself

By Luca - Mar 15 2009

“ They rise in green robes, roaring from the green hells of the sea,  
Where fallen skies, evil hues, and eyeless creatures be. ”

Nebulan walked alone upon the cobblestone walkway that led to his ship. Sea salt was always the ranking smell in the air to no one's surprise. Neb headed towards a pier to his promised ship. Upon looking at it, Neb saw that it really didn't fit into any category. The ship appeared almost dhow-like in its possibility for being a cargo hauler, but the body was slim, streamlined, and clearly modified for speed. From the pier, Neb headed to the front of the ship to see the word "*Jaunt*" written in bright white letters along the side of it.

Fitting he thought. Nebulan was not a sea loving person, the feeling of stability beneath his feet always gave him comfort, even in the high reaches of a tower. The lack of the threat of being thrown over by even a simple atmospheric phenomenon had no presence in his tower. The plan was only to get there and get back, spending as little time on the sea as possible. He was sure to be careful traversing the gross plank leading up to his ship so as not to plunge into the frigid waters of the mainland. Upon reaching the top he found someone very familiar.

"You live," said Nebulan blankly. Standing at attention with a small company of men was Duran, his trusted lieutenant, who had somehow managed to survive the attack and get to the mainland.

"As do you, but I am surprised that you would have expected me dead, sir," Duran replied. Nebulan came up to him and hugged him, patting him on the back. *Years I have worked with him. Never has he done that...* Duran thought.

"No Duran, I almost planned on you being here. Perhaps unconsciously though, forgetting about the attack. But your creativity and capabilities never cease to astound me. I trust that you can guess our heading."

"Yes sir,"

Nebulan slid into a desk in the cabin of the *Jaunt*. He removed a pen, ink, and paper from the storage bays. He set the pen to the paper and started writing. He planned to reach Rouen Isle by nightfall even though he had no idea how fast this new type of ship could travel.

---

*Tap-tap-tap.*

Nebulan looked up, ceased his writing, and eased his hands. He seemed to be smiling, though no one could tell now. "Come in, Jenn," he said and continued writing. The door opened and the redheaded woman stepped in. "Doesn't the High Mage have better things to do than to check up on me?" he asked gently. "So you followed me?"

"Nebulan, you always underestimate my skill in magic," Darnel responded.

"Feeling guilty then?" The High Mage cocked her head to her left. "I...am just making sure timing plays out and...certain threats...are removed. The artifact needs to be recovered," she responded in a confident and authoritative voice.

"What threats?" Nebulan almost but was stopped by the unusual feeling of being tossed around in a ship.

"Neb, it's a mage tower. Pirates would kill for instant power, to learn ancient secrets without having to spend their life in study.

He paused to control himself. The thought of pirates ransacking his tower made him nauseous, only made worse by the fear of them gaining control of some important artifact and setting loose a plague. "How many then, are looting my tower," he asked after the long pause.

"Hmm, I think they prefer to use the phrase 'Under investigation'." Nebulan walked to the back of the cabin to a pool about two feet in diameter. It was filled with a blue and silvery liquid that rippled with the waves of the ocean, set in a deep bowl with gold trimmed edges. He placed his hand over the bowl and appeared to be thinking. At that time, the liquid in the bowl stopped moving with the tossing and turning of the sea. With another few seconds, it began to move into the shape of a tower on a small island. Around the island the liquid molded into the form of ships slowly moving away.

"Yes, I thought you'd appreciate that little item of mine," quoth the High Mage softly.

"Who?"

"I don't know everything, Neb. I do know that they're not pirates. That alone should be enough to make you feel better."

"No," Neb said moving his hand over the pool, speaking without taking his eyes off the pool.

"That just means they have a better idea of what they're doing."

The liquid in the bowl changed again, enlarging the three-dimensional image of the tower.

---

*Tap-tap-tap-tap.*

"Come," Darnel said instinctively.

The blackened mist shrouding Nebulan's face seemed to frown. The door slowly opened to reveal a shocked look on Duran's face. "High...Mage?" he said bowing.

"Always best not to ask-" the high mage nearly finished.

"How far," Nebulan broke in.

"The tower has appeared just on the horizon, revealed by dim moonlight, my lord."

Nebulan stopped for a moment. "Do I look like your lord anymore!?" Neb said with a clear voice of anger.

"N...I...I..." Duran said, now taking full notice of how terrifying the dark swirling mist of Nebulan's face really was. Duran slowly ducked out of the room, now staring at the floor.

"What was that?" said Darnel.

Nebulan sat at the desk he was writing at. "I never like that tower, I never liked what was under it, and I never like being the one to drive people away to prevent them from finding out. That stone should have been destroyed."

"You were studying it. That research was supposed to give us a great new insight about how to eliminate the reoccurring forces of the shadow," Darnel defended.

"And now you have led them here."

"We don't know that the shadow was behind Turin's attack."

"Now you're being as oblivious as you made me be," Nebulan said bitterly. "How else could he have known...unless you told him?" Darnel gave him a stern look and Neb turned away.

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## Oh, I Remember You...

By Ackrovan - Mar 16 2009

*"Well then, this is.....well," Ackrovan was speechless. He had not expected Turin to have come up with this information this quickly. Turin, seeing his smile, grinned, "Yes, and this is only the begining. Once we storm the fort and take out their commander, the island is ours for the taking." Ackrovan, grinning even wider, began pointing at the map. "How did you come up with this information?" Turin's arrogant grin expanded, "A small patrol of the Hevaten warriors were found and killed. One of them was transporting this." He tapped the map several more times, "We can end the war quickly now." Ackrovan agreed, "Indeed. But let us get back to finding out where to direct the bulk of the army." They both stared down into the map, plotting how their assualt will take place.*

*Ackrovan continued, "Look here. There is a weak spot on their east wall. Thats why they have the extra defenders there." Turin pointed out somthing different, "On the northside, they have much fewer soldiers. If we can overwhelm them there before reinforcements come up, then we can storm the castle before their Queen new what hit them." Ackrovan disagreed, "Just because they have fewer troops there, doesn't mean they're not equally strong. They very well might be Battle-Mages, which would mean launching a full on asualt would be suicidal. Now, their east wall on the other hand, would be filled with peasent soldiers. We can smash through their ranks and bash them before they can bring up their defenders from the other walls, which by that time would have been attack by the rest of our army."*

*Turin fought back, "Have you forrgotten that there is an empty field there? They would surrond us and cut us up before we could defend ourselves. And out soldiers are tired from these 17 weeks of campaging, all 20,000 of them. And they out number us by another 20,000. We need to kill their most powerful soldiers, not get caught up chopping through meat blocks"*

*Ackrovan retaliated, "Exactly, they're weakened by the marches and the snow. Forcing them to engage their Royal Guards, who by this time would have fully recovered from their loss as*

*Opatria. Let them smash the weak ones as the Royal Guards must disengage out strongest warriors and reform, only to be met with blades and a field of their countrymen's carcass."*

*Turin responded, "You seem to be underestimating the "peasant soldiers". They are green and raced into service, true, but they are excellently equipped. They can hold the line long enough for their mages to get into position and smite us. The Royal Guards would be defending the inner citadel itself; they can't afford to leave that unguarded. Their Battle Mages would have to be spread out to cover from all sides. No, the north side is the only weak spot. Please, my friend. Trust me."*

*Ackrovan thought for a minute. Considering all that he had said, he relented. "Very well. I trust your judgment." They proceeded to begin to organize the troops.*

---

## Time Ender

By Azuma - Mar 16 2009

They never saw him again for days. Was he gone? Did he leave them to their own lives? Were they finally safe? No. They knew. He was around, lingering, feeding off of their constant fear. Why was he doing this? Is he a part of a damned cult that massacres those who are of the holy and divine? It cannot be. He has no religious markings inscribed nor did he revel in his kills. Then, what is he? A bloodthirsty beast out for satiation? No, he left survivors, he left them alive.

---

A cool breeze blew through the window where the lady and the man saw the beast. Patrick was aside the windowsill, he was looking out, to the dark night sky with the grim moon mothering teardrops of stars with their gloomed, faded twinkle.

This night was different from the others. Different from the other days. This was the first day where the fear of him did not exist. The fear of him storming the tavern, causing mass bloodletting, and then arriving to them both with his devil face dissipated. The fear of him causing them more harm than he already done was not existent. The fear was not real when he saw her. She was half-naked, coming out of from her bath. The angel smiled at him. His breath was taken away. He neared to her as she neared to him. He embraced her and caressed her back, her buttocks, her hair while he kissed her passionately. And her wet towel fell to the floor...

---

Months have passed and both have eased from the painful memories of their past. They started to live again. Living their own lives. They experienced joy again at last. It could not be better when Josephine's belly began to round. Finally, happiness. They were excited. A child of their own.

---

It was the ninth month of Josephine's pregnancy and she was experiencing pain. She was screaming. The newborn is coming out to the world. Patrick was surely excited. He knew what to

do. He has done it before. Part of his squire training, as his former lord described. Just get hot water, clean your hands, and bring towels. Lots and lots of towels.

It was a quiet night in the tavern, even to the outside vicinity, it was quiet, something Patrick noticed but he disregarded. His full attention must be with Josephine. He grabbed her hand and clutched it tightly. Words of comfort came out of his mouth. Endure sweet Josephine. Endure. Josephine was drenched in sweat and continued on to writhe with pain. Endure, urged Patrick. It's coming out! The newborn's head was peeking out. Patrick smiled with glee. Endure more Josephine! Your offspring is coming out. Josephine screamed out. Then he heard it...

The lower tavern began to noise out again. Bloodchoked screams where all around. He was coming! He has returned! At their most precious hour, he has come. Patrick's heart raced quickly. Josephine was still in pain but she noticed it too. Patrick moved to her side and kissed her hair, tears falling down.

---

*Your time has come. Your time has been spent.*

---

Josephine began to sob though not caused by the continuous pain of birth.

---

*I am here. I am returned. Did you think I would leave you? ---*

Patrick clutched Josephine's hand harder.

---

*And I am here to let you know that your- ---*

Josephine responded to Patrick.

---

**GOD!**

---

Patrick sided his head with Josephine's.

---

**IS NOT!**

---

Josephine gave out one last shout. Then she fainted.

---

**HERE!**

---

He arrived. The rank of blood crossed over the room. Black robes with jagged armlengths and leglengths, with a red belt, and crimsoned outlines announced his malice. Gusts of slicing cold

wind circled around the room, flailing his hell-damned, raven black hair around. And he saw it, the newborn. Frail and helpless. Like life. Patrick saw him eyeing his son.

"NOOOOOOOOOO!" He charged himself against him but to no avail. He was flung away by the dark shadow that was surrounding the man.

The beast grabbed the newborn. The infant boy started to cry.

"Life is the frailest thing... sad." He threw it upwards, the infant's cry woke his mother unfortunately, and she saw it. The shadow consumed the newborn. She was delirious. She was wishing she was dead at this time. But no, she has to see it. Her son. Her offspring. A life given by her, dead. Patrick was still saw it too, with a dark and heavy heart.

"You... you..." Josephine struggled to speak. Her words were drowned by the tears.

The man's shadow gave out a bloodcurdling screech. Patrick, in one last time, charge himself against the man. Fist clenched and readied. He was successful. He hit him but to what use? This... abomination has already killed his son. No amount of retribution can bring the child back. The man received Patrick's desperate attack in the face. Full blow but he was unfazed. The man reached for Patrick's throat and clutched it, raising him above the floor.

"Kill me!" Patrick shouted.

"That would be too selfish. More so for a paladin. Would you want to leave the lady like this alone in the world? Her last love die before her eyes. Again. You should be ashamed for your order." The man's voice was heavily shadowed by the darkness that he is.

"Damn you! You do not know anything about the good paladinic orders. You evil-" The man cut Patrick's mad rave off.

"Evil what? Bastard? Demon? Devil? And do not jest me with not knowing what good is. Without good, evil could never have existed. Your paladin orders are the one who do not know what good is. Their religious wars is full of fallacy. Good never kills." The man let go of Patrick, letting him catch his breath while he knelt on the floor. Josephine watched them, tears flowing.

"You-" Patrick glared at him but he was not answered. The man was already looking at Josephine, and he moved to kneel beside her.

"Do not worry, daughter of heaven. I would not kill you or your love. No. Death is too magnificent for you." The man's dark shadow formed a sickle, aimed at Josephine's heart.

Patrick stood up and tried to run towards the two. The shadow pierced through her heart. Patrick felt it too. He looked down on his chest and saw the dark that ran through him.

---

"Shalos. Have you have any knowings?"

"Indeed I do. Quite interesting, really." A whispered echoed throughout the room.

"Then we're leaving soon."

"Right-ooooo." The shade finally materialized inside the room. Quite normal, human looking, with a quill and paper on his hands. He started scribbling on them.

Patrick woke up though disoriented.

"Ah, awake now?" Shalos greeted him.

"A- a- al-... alive? I'm still alive?" Patrick fell to the floor. He sat beside a wall, noticing the translucent character scribing on paper.

"Alive? No. Dead? No. Still in existing? Yes." The shade continued on to write.

"Josephine? Josephine!" The man raced to her love's bed.

"Still existing." The shade was in the bathroom, making his already wailing voice more ghostly.

"Mmm... p- p- Patrick? We are still alive?" Josephine felt her head with her right hand. She was feeling nauseous.

"Yes. No. I don't know." Patrick embraced her. The shade phased out from a wall, with a wet towel hanging from its head.

"Did I mention that we'll leave soon? If no, then we have to leave soon." The shade said, still writing on the ethereal parchment with his ethereal quill.

"Who are you?" Patrick asked the shade, who was now half bodied through the ceiling.

"Shalos. I'm his scribe."

"His scribe? That... blasphemy's scribe?" Patrick was clearly ticked.

"Yes. And do wake her. We're leaving. Now." Shalos pointed to the again-sleeping Josephine and headed for the doorway.

"No, we're staying here. We're not going with him." Patrick caressed Josephine's hair. The lady was still lying on the bed, sobbing. The memory of her offspring being consumed newly born was still fresh.

"Suit yourself. You have no choice though." Shalos went out.

"Ssssh. Sweet Josephine rest. Rest." Patrick kissed her and she started to cry.

---

The man was already on the city outskirts, looking at the sunrise. His clothes were swaying as the wind blew. The rank of blood was all around.

Shalos hovered over to him. He went to look at what the man was looking at. It was a sunrise. Not exceptional to be too much of an eyecatcher, more so for the man he was with.

"Esrever?" Shalos broke the man's gaze.

"Shalos. I sense something... elusive."

"I thought much. That sunrise was too pfaugh to take your concentration away." Shalos sighed lightly.

"I am interested in it. Is it the one you will say to me?"



"Actually, I was about to say that there was a...", Shalos pulled out a papyrus sheet from his insides and read from it, "...haemomancer in some island eastways. A rare lot these days. Rarer still that he became apparent to others."

"A bloodmage? Maybe it was that one who sold his emotions for power. A trifle considering the being I sensed... where are the two?"

"Still in the city. They won't come. They won't listen!" Shalos crossed his arms in faux anger. "Are you going to fetch... them... Esrever?" Shalos trailed off when he saw that Esrever was already walking towards the city. He was all alone. Poor scribe shade.

---

"Come. We are now leaving these ruins."

"Are you mad?! Or are you just daft?" Patrick snapped.

"No. I am commanding. Come." Esrever waved his hand, indicating that the two follow them. Patrick felt the urge to comply. He fought against it. The urge dissipated. A cold, fierce pull followed it. He had no choice but to abide.

"Wait! The lady is weak. And you want her to walk? She has just given birth!" Patrick protested. He felt a sharp stab as he mentioned the last word.

"Weak? On the far side of it. If you do believe that the lady is weak, carry her then."

Patrick complied and they walked out of the room's door then the tavern's.

---

There was no smell of smoke. No flashes of wanton destruction. It was still real though. The city was in ruins. Bodies were scattered to eyesight's misfortune. Death raged over. Patrick gulped and clutched Josephine tightly. The lady was still in sweet slumber. Her tears dry and empty. Patrick saw the man's shadow move again. A wicked shade of a face looked at him and laughed maniacally. Patrick breathed deeply.

"Down." The man ordered and the shadow diffused. The man waved his right hand, sliding his robes down and revealing intricate markings along his forearm. It glowed a sick, dark violet. Tendrils of eerie light slowly writhed upwards, leaving the inscribed arm, forming a circular gateway. A portal, Patrick thought. The other side looked fuzzy and unclear. Esrever motioned them to go in. Patrick was hesitant but had no choice. He stepped in.

Shalos followed him but Esrever stopped him. Shalos looked at his master.

"You are wrong Shalos. The sunrise was a glorious one." And both of them stepped inside.

---

"A castle?" Patrick looked around wildly.

"Indeed." Shalos answered him cheerily. "Master Esrever's own."

"Esrever? So the beast has its name." Patrick intoned coldly. "Where is he? And can I get a room for the lady?"

"Oh, he went off to some random isle. He said he sensed something... elusive. What ever the hell that means. And a room you say? Hrm... well, there has been a lot of guests staying, and some relatives are coming... OF COURSE THERE ARE ROOMS. We're in the castle of a gods-forsaken, malice-filled man within a gods-forsaken plane, and you think that the rooms will be occupied? Some perceptive paladin you are." An assurance of sarcasm was in the last sentence.

Patrick did not fully listen to him. He was off, opening a room with his foot.

"Sure... don't listen to me..." Shalos slouched and walked off towards the pair. Patrick was already placing Josephine on the bed. The lady was still fair. Gloomed, despair, sad, but still fair. Patrick stood up and sighed. Shalos neared to them.

"So, are we prisoners here?" Patrick inquired.

"What? No. He's evil, not cruel. He'll take you with his travels soon enough. The lady too. I don't know why but he will."

"I... see. So, where did... Esbe-bub go?" Patrick folded his arms and bowed his head, slightly inclining it to Shalos.

Shalos pulled out his parchment from his almost-non-tangible body and read Rouen Isle.

---

## Captured...Again...

By Jewels - Mar 18 2009

She didn't open her eyes. She didn't want to see where she was. She knew enough without her eyes anyway. The steady creaking of wood, the gently sway of the floor beneath her, the smell of salty air and mildew... and the tight shackles on her hands and feet. She was prisoner... again. On a boat... again. The ideas of either was not pleasant and both together made her gut wrench. *The curse has struck again. They will always find me. I will never be free.* And what's worse? She had lost it! She had left it behind to be plundered and destroyed! She had become too comfortable in her little reprieve. She had become too careless and left it there. A whimper escaped her lips that she couldn't stop. *I have failed... All hope is gone.*

Heavy footsteps echoed in her ears approaching rapidly. "Has she stirred?" a commanding voice asked.

"No, sir." another answered.

"The spell should have worn off by now," the first voice asserted. "She has rested long enough." Keys jingled and metal scraped against metal as the door to her cell was opened. "Take her to the interrogation room," he ordered. Rough hands pulled her up as someone heaved her over their shoulder. She moaned in pain as her recent battle wounds were bumped and stretched but she did not fight. As limp as a ragdoll, she let herself be. Even if she could overpower her guards, and

find a key to unbind herself, and commandeer a dingy... Could she really manage to find land again? *Not without it... Never without it.*

Plopped indigently into a rough wooden chair, she winced as the gash in the back of her right thigh smacked down hard onto it. The guard ran a chain around the bottom of the chair and over her arms, tightening it so that she could barely move before taking his leave. She eyed the man who stepped in front of her warily as the door was shut. Always closed doors. Why not let the rest of the ship hear her screams? Why the facade of civility? Everyone aboard certainly knew what happened behind closed doors anyway. She doubted there would be any mercy. Not this time.

The gray strands that intertwined with the rest of his hair belied his probable experience in 'interrogating'. There was neither smile nor frown on his beardless face but his eyes were not friendly. She let her eyes fall down to take in his chainmail vest and scabbard with... *Could it be?* Antholasha hung at his side. She seethed to herself, *Thieves! Thieves the lot of them!*

He must have perceived her disdain for it was echoed in his first question. "So... you think you are better than us?"

She stared back at him coldly. Might as well stave off the beatings. There was no escape this time. "Any *pirate* would be better than you."

He raised his eyebrow at her boldness. "And why do you say that?"

"Because pirates don't pretend to be the good guys when they pillage, ravage, and destroy. They don't look down their righteous noses at the homeless street rats while picking the pocket of their supposed neighbor." She leaned forward as much as her bonds allowed. "No, pirates have the decency to tell you up front that they're going to rob, rape, and kill you."

He actually chuckled at her cold words. "So now you're more descent than us as well?"

It gave her pause. He thought she was talking about herself? *Is it possible they do not know?* The luck of it seemed all but impossible. Why had they taken her captive then if they did not know? Oh, well. If a pirate they wanted, a pirate they'd get. "Descent enough to let you know your throat will be the first I slit when I get out of here."

He laughed again seeming to enjoy her confidence. "What makes you think you'll even get out of this room alive?"

There was something about the way he said it. Something that made her wonder. Something she would have to test. "Well, you must want me for something or I'd be dead already. So why don't we skip all the niceties? What do you want?"

"Everything!" he shot back at her. "We are tired of your *people*, if you can even call them *people*, sinking our boats, killing our people, and stealing our goods. You will tell us everything you know about the Hojick Ravagers and we will not leave this room until I am satisfied that it *IS everything*."

"See," she started, "there you go putting us down again. Not even people... Why should I say anything to a bunch of self-righteous thieves like you?" She waited for a blow. For in all her years on both in the giving and the receiving end of interrogations, such a remark called for one. But though it looked like he wanted to, no blow came. Interesting. She continued to prod. "It's

your hypocrisy that makes our hearts glad to see another of your vessels sink. You are no less sinners than we are and yet you lie through your teeth about it claiming to be good. You are blind! And the Hojick will wipe you out!" Still he held back. "Down to the last squalling baby," she smiled wickedly.

A knife was produced and in seconds it was on her throat as he stood behind her. "Sure you won't change your mind?" he hissed in her ear forcing her head back harshly. "It'd be a pity to die with those as your last words."

The dagger poked her skin but not painfully. *Threats, threats. Empty threats.* She would call his bluff and then see where it took her. With a quick movement, she threw her head forward slicing her own neck on his blade.

She felt his hand jerk away but it was too late. Blood poured from her neck and she closed her eyes smiling as he swore. He ran to the door and yelled out of it. "Get me a healing wand! Quick!" his voice was urgent.

"Yes, sir. Right away sir," came the reply.

She smiled all the more feeling her blood run down her blouse, warm and wet. It had been risky, yes. But oh the thrill of being right. It wasn't more than a minute before she felt a warm tingling sensation envelop her body. It was healing. Her neck and her battle wounds as well. She was better off now than she had been before but she had one more rib planned. Could she pull it off? She'd have to stop smiling for that. *Well that's easy enough.* She thought of home and how she'd never see it again. She thought of her husband... and the look on his face as he died. She thought of her son and the pain she watched him endure... his screams... his pleas... that she was helpless to stop. Tears formed in her eyes and ran down her face. She didn't resist the sobs and let them echo in the room.

"I don't want to die," she wailed. "My life just flashed before my eyes and the devil himself stared back at me."

Her inquisitor seemed happy enough at her sudden mood change. No doubt he figured that she had broken. "Tell me then, if you want to live. What plans do the Hojick have for Tanton island?"

She started stuttering and whispering too quiet for him to hear. *Wait for it...* He drew in closer but still she made sure her words were too quiet. She looked away as he neared mumbling incoherent syllables. *Wait for it...*

Getting fed up he stepped up to grab her chin forcing her to look at him. Face only inches from hers, he screamed at her, "*What are your plans?*"

She feigned to struggle out of his grasp but the instant his hand loosened on her chin, she whipped her head back and forwards again. *CRACK!* Her forehead deftly connected with his nose. He staggered back swearing in pain as she started laughing out loud. "Ha ha ha ha ha! Tell your commander, heh, heh, the one who told you *not* to hurt me, that I will only speak to him. Oh, ho ho."

She continued to laugh as he called the guards back into the room and had her thrown extra-roughly back into her cell. *Heh, heh, heh.* They thought she was a pirate!

---

# Leviathan

By Nioca - Mar 20 2009

Looking out over the edge of the *Jennidean's* railing, Griseham gently rolled a wand over in his palm. Freshly carved and charged, all that remained was to test it. However, he couldn't help but look over the intricate runework one last time, making sure that there were no discernible errors in his work.

Commander Dulford approached him, holding his nose. "The prisoner is awake... She wants to speak with you only."

"Naturally." Griseham muttered. "Take her back to the interrogation. I'll be there..." Griseham paused. "Oh, when I get there." Griseham finished with a smile.

Dulford smiled as well, then walked away.

Griseham looked out toward a blank stretch of sea, free of ships or any other objects. Pointing the new, amber-tipped wand out at the blank spot of sea, he fired. A golden, elongated fireball emerged, throwing itself toward the ocean. It impacted with a splash instead of an explosion, and golden fire sprayed across the water's surface. It then started to burn gently on the surface of the water, the flames slowly spreading.

Griseham watched for a moment as the golden flames continued to spread. As they did, they died down slightly. Massive amounts of steam rose from the flames as the water underneath was boiled. Golden light flickered against the hull of the *Jennidean*.

Griseham then pulled out another wand. This one had an amethyst attached to the end. Also freshly carved, he pointed it at the flames. A light shined from the interior of the gemstone, casting a purple hue across the ship. The flames instantly started dying down, and went out within a few moments.

Satisfied, Griseham charged both wands back to maximum capacity before handing them off to a mage. "Take these down to the hold." He said, passing by him and heading down to the brig.

---

Griseham opened the door carefully. He noted that the woman was chained down securely, then proceeded to look her over. He began to circle, taking in as many details as possible as the woman sat silently. Finally, after completing a revolution, he sat down in a chair across from her. "There better be a good reason why I was called down here." Griseham said slowly, keeping his voice low.

"What do you want?" The woman replied defiantly.

"A lot of things. Most of which probably aren't of interest to you of course..." Griseham paused, looking at her carefully. "Tell me, what were you doing on Rouen Isle?"

A thoughtful pause before she answered, "What do you think?" her voice keeping the tone of defiance.

"I think you were spying on Nebulan's Tower for Lord Turin." Griseham said quietly, a lethal accusation in his voice. "Or Duke Hexen. Or any other noble, doesn't matter which."

"What makes you say that?" The woman said. Griseham noticed that her tone had changed ever-so-slightly; a little bit of the arrogance had gone out of it.

"You're trained. Well-versed in interrogation. And there's no reason for a lone soldier to be on the island by herself." Griseham paused. "None that I can think of." Griseham turned back to her. "So, who are you?"

The woman didn't respond.

"Nothing?" Griseham asked, disappointed. "Where are you from?"

Still no response.

"Why were you on Rouen Isle?" Griseham said, keeping an air of unending patience.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you." She replied, staring him right in the face.

"I see." Griseham said slowly. "Well, in that case, I don't know what to do. We can't keep you around to gather more intelligence on us. But we can't let you go and inform your master of what you've already learned. It seems the only option..." Griseham kept his tone level and deliberate, "...is to dispose of you."

"You wouldn't." The woman said with a laugh. "You believe I have information. Information you want."

"Yes. Information that could be very useful." Griseham said with a smile. "But you also have other information. Information that puts almost 300 lives at risk. Lives that I've sworn myself to protect. So, ultimately, it's your life or theirs." Griseham's face turned ashen. "I find murder distasteful, but you've left me with no other choice." Griseham stood up. "So unless there's anything you want to add, I think we're done."

The woman merely glared at Griseham, but he didn't notice. He had turned to Dulford. "Make it quick. Clean. Then..." Griseham took a shuddering breath. "Dump her overboard." Dulford nodded in reply.

"Worse than a pirate," she seethed as he walked out the door. "You're worse than a *pirate*!"

Griseham exited the room and started down the hall, trying desperately to ignore the woman's shouts. He couldn't believe it; he had just condoned the death, no, the *murder* of a human being. All of the railing he had done against his previous master for doing such acts came back to him. How Griseham had accused him of hiding behind the excuse of "Did what I had to do." Ah, the irony.

"Wait, stop! Stop!" The cry came from behind him. Heart beating fast, Griseham turned and practically flew back down the corridor. He entered the room again; the atmosphere within had noticeably changed. The tension from the stand-off of wills was broken. Commander Dulford

had a hand on the back of the chair, looking impatient. The woman breathed shallowly, as if trying to take in as many breaths as possible before her imminent demise.

"Yes?" Griseham said, foregoing patience.

"I'll... I'll talk. Just don't kill me... please..." The woman pleaded.

"Fine. What's your name?" Griseham stated quickly. He felt relieved that he might not have to have her killed.

"Susan... Susan Werning." She stammered out.

"What were you doing on Rouen Isle?" Griseham questioned.

"I was trying to *live*!" She cried. "Away from this!"

"You were living there?" Griseham asked, surprised.

"Yes! In the tower!" She replied.

Commander Dulford stepped forward. "She's lying! She just doesn't want to get killed! The prospect of someone settling down on Rouen Isle mere days after it was attacked is absurd!" He exclaimed.

A genuine anger boiled out of the woman. "Only about as absurd as you being anything other than a thief!" she shot back at Dulford. "Or did you think my sword was hanging on the wall of my bedroom because it was a present for you?" She stared at him malice in her voice. "*Thief, thief, THIEF!* Who do you think cleared the valley of corpses from the battle? Buried them every single one! I suppose you found the armory? Filled with chainmail vests, gauntlets, swords, and bows? Each one salvaged from the battlefield, repaired, washed, and polished. I leave for one day and guess what? You've stolen it ALL! Blasted my front yard with your fancy wands and riddled it with corpses again. All that work... you ruined it ALL!" Her voice calmed as she finished forlornly. "The flowers were just starting to come back, too." Susan hung her head, a tear spilling silently down her cheek. "And now you've stolen me as well. Taken me from the home I made for myself..." Her voice caught as she whispered almost too quiet to hear, "I have to go back."

Griseham stared at the woman named Susan for a moment, considering. Then he turned his attention to Dulford. "Let her go."

"What?!" Dulford exclaimed. "Are you-"

"Commander Dulford, do not countermand me. She's telling the truth." Griseham glanced at Susan again. She now was staring at Griseham as if she couldn't believe her ears. "Let her go."

Dulford stared at Griseham for a moment. Finally, he conceded. "It's your neck." He stated as he started untying her.

"Yes..." Griseham turned to Susan. "You are free to move about the ship, but you are not in any way to interfere with the way this ship runs. Nor are you to enter the cargo hold. If you're tempted in any way to disregard this, keep in mind that I have no problems with shoving you back in the brig."

Susan nodded, seemingly unable to speak. Griseham turned and walked away.

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Griseham hung over the railing, pondering his decisions, when he heard footsteps behind him. Griseham knew who it was without turning; in a ship full of Tantonians smelling strongly of seawater, she stood out like a beacon. "Yes?" Griseham asked.

Susan stood quietly behind him. "I want to go back. I want to go home."

"I can't do that." Griseham replied softly.

"Why not?" Susan demanded.

"Because we're not going back to Rouen Isle. Not for a very long time." Griseham remained over the railing, watching the sea go by. "As much as I am sorry to have brought this travesty down on you, we may have saved your life."

"Saved?" Susan sputtered. "From what, freedom? Happiness?"

"From ending. From being killed by the..." Griseham sighed. "This wasn't supposed to happen. We thought the island abandoned after Lord Turin attacked it. We were just scavenging for supplies, and looking for some clue of what Turin wanted." Griseham looked down at the sea. "I'll make sure to have your belongings returned to you. What exactly are you missing?"

"An enchanted shortsword. That Dulford has it. Also, a longbow, and-"

"GRISEHAM!" Someone shouted. Griseham immediately looked about and found Anaya running towards him. "Griseham, you need to see this."

Anaya motioned for Griseham to follow as she ran toward the front of the ship. Griseham followed quickly with Susan trailing behind. Anaya pointed at a thin line on the horizon, rising above the shadow of Tanton. "Look."

"Smoke?" Griseham asked rhetorically, alarmed. "Uytha!" He shouted, calling for the mage. Fortunately, he was on deck nearby.

"Let me guess, Scry?" He asked. As Griseham nodded, Uytha closed his eyes and faced the island. Syllables passed under his breath as the others waited tensely. "Scrying's blocked. It's on the east end of the island, but that's all I can tell."

"The pirates." Griseham muttered. "Signal the other ships to go as fast as they can, and to be ready for combat. We may have a problem."

Tantonian sailors scrambled across the deck as Anaya started screaming orders. The sails were adjusted to get every bit of wind possible. The corvettes started moving ahead of the *Jennidean* and *Red Dove*.

Griseham watched with bated breath. The closer they got, the more details became visible. Flashes of light could now be seen, and a new silhouette could be seen against the island. A massive form stood out from the island. A ship.

Griseham's hands tightened against the railing. It couldn't be... Why would one be here? But as they got closer still, the iron tones of the ship became visible. It was impossible to mistake for anything else. 100 feet across, 120 high, 40 feet of which were underwater, and 500 feet long. 15 decks, 5 underwater, housed a dazzling array of men, materials, and weaponry. 8 gigantic masts



propelled the ship, each rising an additional 150 feet to the heavens. Iron plates were embedded into the sides of the ship, forming formidable armor. Trebuchets and massive stonethrowers rounded out the ship's dazzling set of weaponry, along with the eight decks of large ballistae the pounded the pirate fort.

Spells flew from the ship, laying waste to everything that got in its way. Ballista bolts and spells were fired back in vain, as they bounced off of a magical shield surrounding the Leviathan. A pirate man-of-war fled from the Leviathan, but a massive stonethrower on the top deck launched a large boulder before it could get away. The rock smashed the back half of the ship into wood fragments, leaving the front to slowly sink. A small fleet of five ships came up behind it, only to get perforated by a blistering barrage of ballista bolts. A large ballista on the top deck fired fifteen bolts simultaneously, turning a frigate into a sinking porcupine.

"What should we do?" A sailor asked, panicked.

Griseham looked at the sailor. "We go around it. It's not on our route anyway, and so long as we keep our distance and current heading, it'll hopefully just assume we're a merchant ship. With guards."

"Looks like the others know about the Leviathan." Anaya said, pointing at a spot on the northern coast. Griseham squinted slightly; he could just make out a pair of corvettes. "The *Shadow* and the *Qrantal*."

"Navigate us to Tantonian." Griseham said to Anaya. "For now, we shouldn't have to worry about the Leviathan." Griseham then looked up to the Crow's Nest. "Can you make anything out about it?"

"No colors!" The person in the Crow's Nest shouted back. "It's not flying any colors!"

"Oh, damn." Griseham muttered. "My mistake. We should be very worried about it."

Anaya glanced at Griseham. "You mean a ship that's extremely rare and can take down an armada not flying colors could potentially be a *problem*?" She asked sarcastically.

"Yes," Griseham responded, missing the sarcasm. "There is absolutely no reason a ship that large should keep its allegiance concealed. The only people capable of building a ship like this is the Kingdom. You can't buy them. The Kingdom would prefer we didn't know they even existed. I've only heard of five in operation... And those are only rumors. I only solidly know of two, one belonging to Turin, and the other with an unknown affiliation to a noble."

"So, in other words, it should be flying Kingdom colors?" Anaya summarized.

"Yes." Griseham replied. "And the fact that it's not is... confusing."

Anaya walked away, leaving Griseham to ponder. The Tantonian ships continued to move toward the northwest side of Tanton unmolested. The Leviathan made no indication of noticing them, and eventually, slipped out of view behind the island.

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The sun was setting. The Leviathan had, thankfully, left. The *Shadow* had returned from its scouting trip to report that the pirate fort was completely destroyed, and that it appeared there weren't any survivors.

Griseham sat across from Mayor Gabthen, having laid out his plans. 50 Tantonians to each settlement, with the various skills needed to survive. Each group would have three mages to provide magical assistance and, more importantly, to relay information back home quickly via a messaging spell. Furthermore, about sixty Tantonites wanted to go too; they would be split between the two groups equally, with an interpreter in each group.

"So..." Griseham said, exhausted. "There's only one last thing to address. Who will be leading the groups." Griseham paused. "We'll need one mayor to run the day-to-day operations, and a commander to handle military strategy and tactics, should the need arise. Zokqian's wanted to lead an expedition for some time, and Commander Dulford's obvious for the post in the first group..." Griseham paused, watching the mayor's expression. He nodded. "But there's no clear-cut choice for the second group."

"What about Erist? He's always going on about his military experience and bravery." Mayor Gabthen pointed out.

"No. He's too arrogant, and I'm afraid he might try to take on more than he can handle. If it were up to him, we would have gone after the Leviathan first thing. No, we need someone a little calmer." Griseham countered. "What about Leonar?"

"Yes, he would do. And what if..." Mayor Gabthen thought for a moment. "What about Syaha as mayor?"

"The wizard?" Griseham asked, amused. However, his face then turned serious. "Actually, that might work quite well. He's calmed, composed, he used to teach in Baroness Victoria's personal magic college. He just might work."

"Good. I think, for now, that we're done." Mayor Gabthen stood up as he said this. Griseham did the same. They both proceeded to leave the small village hall, in time to see the sun melt below the horizon. As Gabthen relayed what he and Griseham had decided to a messenger, Griseham took a close look at Tanton. Men and women walked onto the *Jennidean* and the *Brigantine Devious*. They wore shining chainmail and plate mail armor, some salvaged and some freshly forged, and for a weapon wore either a sword or a wand. The corvettes *Loveless* and *Qrantal* waited near the mouth of Tanton's harbor to escort the two transports out.

Griseham turned and walked away from the village and up to his manor. He felt... scared. It had been forty years since he had ever truly made his presence known outside of Tanton. But he felt that, with the Kingdom in political turmoil, now was the prime opportunity to attempt such an endeavor.

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Griseham awoke from his drowsing. He wasn't quite sure when he had fallen asleep, nor was he sure why he woke now. The first thing he took in was a piece of parchment in front of him, containing a sketch. Three crossed wands, each with a different-colored gemstone inset on the top. A sketch of what he hoped to become the Tantonian flag.

"It's lovely work, Griseham." Someone said from behind him. Griseham then realized why he woke; he was no longer alone.

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# Yitsograd

By Sudanna - Mar 20 2009

Duke Hexen sat once more at his desk, though it was now in his magic workshop. Now it was almost exclusively battle plans he drafted, war reports that he read. The literary correspondence of the nobles had been sharply cut off; all were preoccupied with making what profit they could out of Turin's fall. Hexen had the good fortune of having a sizable border with the Turin fief, an advantage he had not hesitated to exploit. The very night that Turin's death was verified, armies marched out under the banner of the Hexens, the silver pentagram. His ancestors had been heathen kings; blood sacrifices and demon summoning ran in the family, and nobles held their lineage dear.

His men were claiming lands, reorganizing cities, reeducating peasants. "Aiding the young Lord in the assumption of his new duties" read his missive to the King. The steady campaign had yet to encounter anything more threatening than a few desperate, panicked garrisons. But ahead lay greater cities, fortresses and towers. The real war was just beginning. Turin's fief was falling apart around the new Lord; swaths of land were declaring independence, peasants were revolting, nobles descending on him like a pack of slaving wolves. This new Turin was bereft of the magic that let his brutal father stay in power. Devoid of the experience or allies that Turin had benefited from, the youth was being crushed by his neighbors. Doubtless, the confused teen was being guided by some of the few surviving members of Turin's court, if any had actually stayed. Afraid of competition or assassinations, Turin had kept all of the high-ranking officials, military and otherwise, right under his nose, allowing them only to communicate through magical spells or censored letters. Of course, when Castle Turin collapsed, most people capable of leading the fief in Turin's absence had died. When news reached the rest of the fief, the large cities had declared independence, along with the surrounding land. This permitted the other nobles to attack under the pretense of quashing rebels, and when this heir who was likely as hotheaded as his father attacked them. . . Well, it was self-defense, right? There was no treason here. Move along, move along, dear King.

The scrying of Turin's realm had revealed that most of the armies were assembling at the city that was companion to Castle Turin. It was an overgrown mining and smithing city, a great center of industry, stretching high and deep into the mountains.

The Castles of nobles served as the centers of magical power for their realm. The wards that prevented or at least inhibited scrying were located there, as was protection against long-range magics or curses. The resources needed to defend or attack magically were all kept in the Castles - and this had always worked wonderfully before. To have a centralized power source allowed all defenses to be concentrated there. The castles of nobles were more or less completely impregnable, being strengthened by countless ancestors. Every noble line had had its time in the limelight - each had a more or less equally powerful Castle.

But, of course, Turin's was gone. Shattered. Crumbled. Useless. This left the entirety of the fief vulnerable. And as the new most powerful noble, at least magically, Hexen planned to exploit this.

His forces would reach the mountains that were home to Turin's capital soon enough. Two, perhaps three weeks. Certainly before any other nobles. And he planned on being accepted with open arms.

His forces carried many materials not usually used in warfare. Great wagons of timber, stone, and tools. A ridiculous excess of food. More surgeons than usual. Craftsmen, carpenters, masons.

Relief supplies.

Hexen would magically devastate Turin's capital - Yitsograd, as it were - and swoop in with a kind and caring hand for the peasants and surviving soldiers, as their savior. The desperate new Turin had unleashed magic beyond his control, you see. Didn't care if it slew all of you poor peasants, so long as his own skin lived. No worries; the nice Duke Hexen is here to save the day!

Where was Aodhan, now? Hexen tapped for him mentally. In his miserable quarters, no surprise. The boy hardly ever left them. Come here, mage! We have great work to do!

Aodhan shuffled into the magic workshop a few minutes later, looking as haggard and depressing as ever. Wearing thick and heavy gray robes with a simple belt and the floppy conical hat some wizards still affected. Everything looked as worn and beaten as Aodhan himself. The only color was Aodhan's shock of red hair, which spilled out from under the hat. Altogether, very drab and depressing.

"You do realize that it's nearly dawn, my dear Duke? I know my magic affords you the luxury of eternal wakefulness, but I still need rest."

"Apologies, Little Flame. But the time is not an accident; this is to be a surprise attack."

"Ah. The Turin campaign?"

"Exactly. On his capital. The heir has ordered his mages to piece together whatever defenses they can, but it's no match for us."

"Me."

"Either way, we're going to melt the mountains. Not entirely - just enough for a holocaust in Yitsograd."

"Melt the mountains. As in, heat the stone until it turns into a river of red death hotter than fire itself. Let this lava flow into the densely populated city, where it will kill almost everyone. Even washing into the mines, trapping or murdering anyone in them."

"Yes. I might throw in a volcano, as well. For effect."

"I hate you."

"I know. Let us begin!"

Hexen abruptly turned away, to the roughly-lashed together circle of ancient druidic sticks that were his scrying mechanism. It snapped to attention and expanded to at least eight feet in diameter. Then, after a brief bout with the pitiful, hasty wards, Yitsograd shimmered into view.

It was not a walled city; the mountains provided it with more protection than walls ever could. There were some beginnings to walls scattered throughout the city, but it was always expanding faster than walls could be built. There was activity even at this hour - caravans leaving, soldiers arriving, miners doing both. Some of the workshops were active - the plumes of smoke left trails in the sky.

It was in a long, narrow valley, tightly pressing against the edges to either side. Myriad trails stretched into the mountains, leading to mines or stately merchant homes. This valley happened to come to an end, and the city petered out before it reached the crotch of the mountains.

First, Hexen would slap together an illusion. Blinding light, explosions of color, all of the dramatic flair that laymen associated with magic. That would be easy.

In the city, a blinding light flashed. A wave of color rolled over the houses and shops. Thunder cracked and boomed. The sky darkened.

From the mountains came many small, flaring points of light, moving at great speed. They crashed together roughly over the city, and when the blinding orb of colors dissipated, there was an incandescent human form left hovering above the city. It was a rough approximation of the new Turin, but magnified several times, for recognition.

It popped, showering multicolored sparks over the city and sending another shockwave of light, this time into the mountains.

And it seemed that that was all. Everyone was still, everything was still.

Back at Castle Hexen, Aodhan had been leaning idly against the wall, absentmindedly waving his hands to produce this illusion. Not that this wasn't a great feat - few, if any, other mages could have done it. Hexen's constant use of Aodhan's powers had honed and tempered them. Nobody was as intimately familiar with their own power or with the workings of magic in general than Aodhan. He spent every moment of his life expending energy on any number of enchantments, exotic and mundane. The sort that made rivers keep to their banks and kept crops fruitful and kept disease in check and kept the ground stable and kept the weather manageable and the thousand other things that allowed Hexen to prosper. He also monitored the borders for magic items or persons, sniffed for the spells that mages wove, within and without of the fief, eavesdropped on the conversations of Nobility, Church, and King, laid mystical traps and rained fiery doom. Constantly, he was immersed in magic. Steeped in it. If magic was light, half the land would be blind from him alone, so varied and present was his power throughout the entire realm, Hexen's fief most of all.

No, he was not merely a tool of war, to be dragged out when the going got tough. He was omnipresent in the Kingdom, not just Hexen's lands. Hexen had actually begun using his power in trade - I'll enrich so many acres of your land for so many yards of silk per year. Which was one of the reasons that Hexen was so secure - before they knew it, the Nobility had come to rely on Aodhan to keep their lands prosperous, the Church to keep their people holy, the King to keep

his Kingdom together. The Duke shamelessly exploited all of his resources, and Aodhan was no exception.

Aodhan had, of course, gotten used to it. Magic, like a muscle, grew with usage. And as Aodhan's power expanded, Hexen had more of it to use or rent out. A cycle that left Aodhan constantly exhausted and bitter, but left his power growing and growing, and his mind evolving to handle so many disparate tasks simultaneously. In the end, Aodhan was a normal human - but only because so much of him was being sapped away.

So, no, this illusion was nothing great to Aodhan. Melting enough stone to drown a city in it was.

All around Yitsograd, in a perfect line, the mountains began to glow a low, dull red. Foliage burst into flames, animals roasted. The stones were exposed, caked with char, and glowing ever brighter underneath.

Aodhan gasped and lurched into a complicated weaving of arms and voice. Hexen sat back, watching dispassionately, disinterestedly.

The mountains began to seep, slowly, slowly. The ring of burning red oozed downwards. Faster, faster, hotter, hotter! Until it was a torrent of orange water, a raging storm of mercuric fire!

Though it seemed to carefully flow around the most profitable mines. Odd, that. Not that anyone noticed - the advancing doom monopolized their attention.

The first waves lapped gently against the outskirts of the huge city. Fire, the lesser cousin of this lava, leapt into being and raced throughout the city. People trying to flee were met with a tall red wall of death. The lava crept and consumed, though now it cooled and slowed, rather than gaining power.

People still asleep were washed over by waves of liquid rock. Families trapped in their homes huddled together as fire laid waste to them. Men and women and children were immolated or washed over by lava, trampled and beaten by the panicked crowds. People screamed for mages, but they were helpless. People screamed for their lord, but he was gone or dead. People screamed for the gods, but the great temple of this city had already been buried in a river of stone, and the clerics with it.

The city burned. The entire valley was now lined with glowing flows of stone, rather than the semi-lush greenery it had previously boasted. The people had massive numbers of incinerated dead, the soldiers a greater percentage. The lava had seemed to rush towards garrisons and camps with supernatural hatred.

When the lava flows ground to a halt, about two-thirds of the city was burned or burning. There were some large wells in the city, but the people were too panicked to set up bucket brigades. Strangely, the fire kept itself in check, as if afraid to crush the people it had just wounded. Next to a pile of burnt rubble was a pristine home, a pattern repeated in an oval echoing the city's original boundaries. The air was choked with smoke and gases, the screams of death. The remaining fires struck like precise darts, leaping quickly from building to building, their wakes dying down after a short time. Utterly consuming government offices or garrisons, leaving shops untouched and homes somewhat charred.

Aodhan was sweating and wheezing, collapsed into a sitting position on the floor, propped up against the wall, his manacles clanking about as he shuddered for breath. The remainder of this task could be managed without the gesticulations or enunciations of magic, but it still drained him.

Hexen stood up calmly and waved a hand, allowing the scrying circle to snap back to normal dimensions and roll into a corner. Pausing at Aodhan, he leaned down and congenially squeezed his shoulder.

"Good work, Little Flame."

Mockingly! Oh, please, great gods, let this be done mockingly!

"I'm proud of our work today."

But he was as grave as the stone his soul was made from, and the steely hand on Aodhan's quavering shoulder felt like a vise.

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## Underneath it All

By Jewels - Mar 27 2009

Adrasha stepped back in frustration as the whole ship became abuzz with nervous activity. Not only was she not getting a ride home, but it looked like she was on her own for getting her stuff back as well. At least she had learned a few things from her captors. *Rouen Isle*, she had never been there before it became her impromptu home, but its name held infamy in her memories. *Of all the lands in the sea, fate just had to throw me upon Nebulan's Tower*. The thought had run through her mind a dozen times already and the fact that it had been destroyed and abandoned unsettled her. She shivered as dreadful memories were dredged up once again. She didn't know if she could continue to live there, but still... she had to go back. If there was any chance of finding it, she had to go back.

"Adrasha?" a hesitant voice sounded behind her and she froze. She had told no one on this boat her real name. *How could they know?* She ignored it, not turning around, but listened alertly as footsteps neared. "Adrasha?" he asked again. A hand touched her shoulder.

She turned at the touch feigning being startled but was both glad and angry to see Raanil's somber face. "Susan," she corrected him loudly. "My name is Susan."

He nodded, catching on quickly. "My apologies, Susan. I took the liberty of retrieving your personal effects when I saw that you were freed." He held up her dagger and bow with restocked quiver. "These are the things they... uh, we took off your person when we captured you. I was not allowed to bring you anything else found in the tower."

"Thank you. Thank you very much. I *really* hope you don't get into trouble for helping me like this." She also hoped he hadn't blown her cover though she didn't say so. "And the wolves?" she

asked cryptically. It hadn't escaped her notice that the one she had charged with their care did not seem to be caring for them.

"Home," he answered just as cryptically. She cast a worried glance towards Rouen. Now she really needed to get back. The sooner the better. Sensing her agitation, Raanil lowered his voice so that she had to struggle to hear him over the din of the excited crew. "I have arranged for transportation."

Adrasha's eyes grew big. "A boat?"

He nodded. "Come to the stern with me. Quickly."

"Wait, there's one more thing I have to get first." She took in his disapproving frown. "I'll meet you there. It'll just take me a few minutes."

Adrasha scanned the boat for Dulford. He was portside gazing at a monstrous ship as it blasted a building on land. She quickly stalked up to him. "I want my sword back," she said tersely.

He scoffed at her in annoyance. "And how do you know this is *your* sword?"

"I would know my sword anywhere," she insisted. "When I found it... No. I didn't find it. *It found me.*" Dulford shook his head at her, trying to brush her off but she wouldn't relent. "Atholasha is mine!" she shouted at him as he tried to walk away. He stopped short, startled by a sudden low hum coming from the sword. It started to pulse with white light. Adrasha smiled. "See, it even knows its name."

Still Dulford hesitated. Clearly he desired to have such a sword for himself but Adrasha was becoming impatient. "Am I going to have to get Grisham over here, *thief?*" He cringed at her accusation. "Because I'm sure he wouldn't be happy about that." She stared at him coldly but smiled inwardly as she watched him relent.

"Fine," he said removing the scabbard from his waist. "Take it, Sarah." He held it out.

She grabbed a hold but he didn't let go. "It's Susan, dimwit, And you're still worse than a pirate." She yanked it from his grasp. "You're lucky I'm not or I would have made good on my word and slit your throat by now." Buckling it on, she turned to leave without a thank you or a smile. When she neared the railing where Raanil stood there was no dingy as she expected. "Where's the boat?" she asked irritably. "You said you had a boat."

Raanil simply pointed to the water. "Jump."

"I can't swim all the way back to Rouen, now where's the boat?"

"Adrasha, you must jump," he said stepping closer. "Quickly." Without warning, he picked her up and tossed her over the side. Only years of training and fear of attracting attention kept her from crying out. She landed with a splash soon followed by Raanil. "Deep breath," he instructed after he surfaced from the fall.

"Are you crazy?" she whispered harshly.

"Deep breath," he repeated. "Quickly." This time she heeded his words and took the biggest breath she could before she felt something wrap itself around her leg.



It yanked her under the chill, churning waters, taking her down deeper and deeper. The sunlight faded as her lungs started to feel like they were about to burst. All that trouble to rescue her, only to have her drown in the depths? Her arms flailed. Her body screamed for breath. Her life flashed before her eyes...

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*"No, daddy. Don't hit mommy anymore!"*

"Maybe you'd prefer it if I hit you?" ... "Daddy, I'm hungry. Please can I have something to eat?"

"You won't get a single bite until that hole is deeper than you are, now dig!" ... "Get back here you good for nothing whelp! You try to run away again and you'll be black and blue the second I catch you!" ... "I want to join the army, sir."

"You'll never make it past basic training, girly. Go back home to your momma."

"I ain't got no momma. I wanna learn to fight!" ... "Congratulations, Private. You've just been promoted." ... "You're the prettiest woman in armor I ever did see."

"I'm the only woman in armor in a hundred mile radius, Private Vaux."

"I bet you're the prettiest woman out of armor, too, though."

"You're barking up the wrong tree, soldier. I hate men."

"Well ain't that a coincidence? I'm not too fond of men myself. Now that ain't a smile I see is it?" ... "Adrasha, will you marry me?"

"Yes!" ... "I now pronounce you husband and wife." ... "Congratulations, it's a boy." ... "We need you, Adrasha. Andaria needs you. Be my commanding officer. You're the only one I trust with the job."

"Go ahead honey. I'll stay here with Tyler on the farm. Go be a hero."

"Hero, mommy, hero!" ... "Trouble in the western quarter, sir. They are rebelling. The High Council has ordered all armies to strike fast and burn everything."

"You can't burn the western quarter! That's where my home is... where my family is!"

"I have to, Adrasha. The High Council gives me my orders, and I give you yours."

"Not anymore!"

"Adrasha, don't! They'll only kill you, too!" ... "No... I'm too late... Richard, Richard hold on!"

"I will... always... love you... Addy."

"Seize the boy!"

"Don't hurt him!"

"Come quietly if you want him to live."

"What about her husband?"

"Finish him off." ... "Tell me where the rebel base is!"

"I've already told you. I don't know where the rebel base is. I was never part of the rebellion. I just wanted to protect my family."

"Bring in the boy."

"Wha... what are you doing?"

"Whip him."

"No! I don't know anything! I swear, if I knew something I'd tell you, please!"

"I said whip him!"

"Mommy!"

---

Reliving her past in mere seconds would have taken her breath away if she had any left to take. Adrasha resigned herself to her fate. Failed, failed... she had failed. All hope was gone.

A green glow appeared before her eyes growing bigger and brighter. She was pulled towards the light until it was all she saw. Death awaited her on the other side.

Her knees fell hard onto a wooden floor and she gasped desperately surprised to find air. She coughed and wheezed as Raanil did the same next to her. A woman stood before them.

"Welcome to the *Undine*. The fastest ship under the waves." Adrasha dared to look up and around her. It was as if she sat in the middle of a ten foot bubble on the deck of a large but thin ship with water surrounding them on every side. "Where to Raanil?" the woman asked.

"Rouen Isle, Adalia, and thank you for coming so quickly." They obviously knew each other but Adrasha was in no state to ask about it. In fact she was so exhausted and overwhelmed that her mind just shut down. At least... she thought that was why she was losing focus as her consciousness slipped from her.

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Raanil looked from Adrasha's limp form to Adalia. "I have caused her to sleep. We must make it back to Rouen Isle before sunset."

"Are you sure she is the one?" Adalia gazed at the human in distaste.

"She must be," he asserted. "No one else even comes close to the prophesy."

"But how long can you keep protecting her? She is too fool-hearty for even you to keep up with.."

"Once we get her back to Rouen I won't have to. Not even the devil himself will be able to stop her from fulfilling her destiny."

"Though I dare say," Adalia almost smiled, "he *will* try."

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Adrasha awoke to gentle nudges. "We are here, free spirit."

The sand beneath her hands tickled her skin and she sat up feeling rather refreshed to a late afternoon sun. "Free spirit?" she looked quizzically at Raanil.

"A... pet name," he stammered. "If you don't like it I won't..."

She cut him off with a wave of her hand. "It's fine," she said though she joked to herself how unfitting it was. She had never been free in her entire life... not really.

They started walking into the forest. "You could have warned me about the whole 'going to an underwater ship' thing, you know. Scared me half to death! Thought I was going to drown."

He blinked in her direction. "I am sorry, but there was not sufficient time or privacy to explain it. Besides, would you have believed me anyway?"

She shook her head. "No. Probably not... but next time, if Heaven forbid there is a next time... just say something about it. I don't think I could doubt anything you say after that." After a few steps she added, "And thank you. For everything. You have been... most kind for someone who isn't supposed to be able to care." It wasn't long before she could hear the welcome yapping of her wolf pups. They were excited to see her. Almost as excited as she was to see them. Adrasha knelt to cuddle them all.

"I must go now," Raanil announced. "I have business to attend to, but if you need me..." He reached for her right hand slipping a ring on the middle finger, "...call my name and I will hear it."

She looked at the ring and the large oval blood-red stone it featured. At least she thought it was stone, but the more she stared the more she swore she could see the colors swirling under the surface. She was about to ask him about it when she looked up and realized he was already gone.

Noting that the sun would set soon, she gathered her things and headed for the tower. She tried to ignore the fresh corpses as she passed them. There were more important things to worry about than clean up duty and salvaging what little remained. Especially if she didn't plan to stay here. No. Her biggest priority was to find it. It had to be here. She could feel it was close.

Adrasha picked up speed almost leaving the pups behind only to stop dead in her tracks when she came to what had been her bedroom. They had ransacked it. Those bloody thieves hadn't left a single thing in its place. The books were on the floor, the rug had been ripped in two, the chairs were over turned, and the mattresses stood precariously against the wall as if they had been thrown there. The few intact pictures she had found and hung on the wall were now trampled and broken. Glass shards were everywhere. She nervously scratched the nape of her neck as she resigned herself to the task at hand.

Only a few minutes in, her heart leapt as an ornately carved box was found under a ruined painting. It was only about four inches long on each side. She threw open the lid excitedly only to have her hopes dashed. It was empty. "Where is it!" she fumed aloud. *Calm down, calm down... Just listen for it.* Adrasha took a few deep breaths and closed her eyes. She would listen for it and she would find it. After her heart had settled and her breathing slowed, she tuned her mind to its familiar song. It was here. She knew it was here. Eyes still closed she stepped forward. It drew her. It called her... *He called her.* "I'm coming," she voiced aloud. "Tell me where you are." The heart wrenching pull drew her forward until he ran up against a wall. She opened her eyes and felt the pull drag her to the back of the fireplace. Adrasha ripped out the blackened logs expecting to find it there, but instead she found a vent, two feet wide by three inches thick. She stuck her hand down but could feel nothing. *How deep?* She grabbed a burning

torch off the wall and dropped it down. It felt like it fell forever. When it finally landed there was just a pinprick of light to be seen. How would she ever reach it?

Suddenly she was overwhelmed by a wave of fear. *His fear*. He called for her desperately and she answered tearfully. "I'm here. I'm right here. I will find a way down to you. There has to be a way. I'm not leaving without you. Never again. I promise, never again!"

Adrasha ran for the stairs counting her steps. The vent had to be there for a reason. There had to be another fireplace on a lower level. If she could just get to it... 64 steps south to the stairs, down 15 steps east, 20 steps north to the next stair down, 15 steps west on the stairwell. These were the dungeon cells. Adrasha hadn't spent much time down here. The smell of rotting flesh was not one of her favorites and she had gotten quite enough of that on cadaver duty. She counted her steps north past unoccupied cells. 13, 14... She brushed away a cobweb. 26, 27... A rat scurried across her path. 41... 42... She stared in horror at the bare wall that stood in front of her. She felt his call once more, much stronger, much closer. He was just on the other side. Frantically she searched the wall for something, anything that might indicate a secret passage, but the wall was solid. No creases, no notches, no nothing.

A different stairway then? She ran back up a level searching the walls, searching the floors. His pleas for her became more frequent and more urgent. So much so that they almost overwhelmed all her senses. She lost her count and her sense of direction. Her body was on autopilot in it's search because her mental capacities were drowning in his fear. She almost didn't notice when an unsuspecting part of the wall gave way under her hand. The whole section swung away and she stumbled to catch herself. Too little effort too late. She pitched forward falling down a dark staircase.

The fall had stunned her and the link with him had been broken. The only thing she could really perceive other than a splitting headache was a dark blue light that glowed a few feet in front of her. Ignoring her pained body, she stood up and stepped towards the light. Suddenly Atholasha also began to glow. It's bright white light illuminated the chamber and the shard of glass that hung suspended there. With a tentative hand she reached for it and carefully plucked it out of the air.

She turned the dark blue glass over in her hands. *What could it possibly be? It must have some significance to be hidden away in this room.* As she inspected it closer, she gently ran a finger along the edge. It surprised her how sharp it was, for even with that minimal pressure, it had given her a cut. A drop of blood formed on her fingertip.

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# Shadows Beneath the Light

By Luca - Mar 29 2009

“ On them the sea-valves cluster and the gray sea-forests curl,  
Splashed with a splendid sickness, the sickness of the pearl;  
”

The ship had finally come to its destination. The distance from the mainland to Rouen Isle was great, but the *Jaunt's* design allowed it to cover the waters quickly on this impractical schedule.

"I'd be happy to row you ashore my lo-...I mean sir," said Duran as Nebulan and the High Mage exited the ship's cabin.

"That's alright, Duran," the High Mage responded in a kindly tone appropriate to address the knight she had known for years.

"May I ask why, ma'am?"

"Because you're not going," Nebulan said flatly as he climbed into the dinghy with the High Mage. "The remains for the tower contain items and materials that are to be kept secret."

"I have guarded the tower for years!"

"I assure you, Duran. You have never seen this, and it's better for your health if you never do," Neb said with a finality that clearly showed his lack of patience at this moment. The dinghy descended from the stern of the ship.

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The small boat came ashore upon the rocky coast of the island and a damp Nebulan and High Mage staggered out. The terrain would have been completely black at this hour if it weren't for the large amount of moonlight shone in the clear night sky. Their route took them through the small deciduous forest on the east coast of the island to come out at the back of the tower, with the least amount of open ground to travel. Even if the Island was large, a blind man could have found the tower with the stench that emanated from the bodies surrounding it.

The High Mage's staff pointed at the ground as she and Nebulan rounded the tower, making sure not to make a sound and to look out for any sound of intruders. The staff of the High Mage featured deeply carved symbols and small spirals set in solid oak and topped with a clear crystal spike on a gold headpiece. But the staff's shaft was just simple oak, an odd thing for only one of two High Mages in the entire kingdom to have. It had clearly been through numerous battles, but the shaft looked undamaged.

As Nebulan rounded the outside of the tower he took note of the bodies. They weren't something he liked to concentrate on, but something about them bothered him. He left the isle about a

month ago, but these bodies looked like they had been here no more than a week. His thoughts ran through reasons of why this would be so, but upon realizing that his thoughts were distracted from infiltrating his tower, he let them drop.

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The two of them now stood on opposite sides of the two large wooden doors that sealed the tower. With a quick nod from each other, they quickly opened the doors, prepared to fire large bolts of energy into an intruder's intestine. Nebulan was almost disappointed to find the room to be empty. Darnel let her staff come back up to a non-combat position. "Where?" said in his usual 'bottom line' manner.

"The lowest level of the dungeon."

The pace to the bottom was always in between rushed and wary for intruders, with Nebulan pulling more on the rushed speed. Finally, he stopped. The stone staircase continued on for another infinity it seemed, but Neb came to a stop here. It was a rather...wall...looking wall. The bricks in this section matched up with all the others in terms of their size, shape, and color. Yet, without hesitation, Neb pressed in a small brick at the bottom of the curved wall to have it swing open quickly.

"So, I guess you don't spend much time down here, eh?" The High Mage said to an oblivious Nebulan, or perhaps he was too deep in concentration to reply to sarcasm right now. The debate between the two was quickly solved for Darnel upon his next statement:

"It's gone."

"What? That's not possible, I can still feel its presence."

"We need to clear the rest of this tower," Nebulan whispered quickly and he started up the stone staircase again, this time opting for the stealth, if they knew how and where to find the crystal, he wanted them alive.

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The staircase to the second level of the tower wasn't nearly as easy as it was to get up from the dungeon. The massive attack the tower received had left clear evidence of high-powered energy discharges as large parts of the staircase were missing. Nebulan led up to the second level with colors of dark purple and black surrounded his hands in a nimbus of magical energy. The bright room, illuminated with the moonlight by large sections of the wall being destroyed, was determined clear by the two.

They came up to the third and top floor of the tower, the last one Nebulan remembered being in before the experiment. There was still the stain of his blood against the northern corner of the chamber of the cross. The two massive stone doors at the western corner that led into Nebulan's private chamber were opened slightly. Darnel made a hand motion that there was someone inside. Nebulan placed his back to the door, similarly to Darnel and turned his head inside to get a look. It was a lone woman sleeping on a battered mattress. Neb made another motion with his hand to say she was armed.

The two swiftly entered with all the preparations that if she moved, she wouldn't for very long and took her blade lying at her side. Nebulan almost touched the woman when Darnel made a

gesture with her hand that extended some little bit of magical energy that Neb felt. He turned to see she was staring out the window. He joined her to find a dark figure slowly moving to the entrance of the tower. Neb started to turn back to the woman sleeping on the mattress once his but Darnel grabbed his arm and shot him with a look *strongly* suggesting that this figure was more important.

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They met again at the two large wooden doors at the floor of the tower. "He comes," Darnel whispered as she started to charge an orb of fire.

"No, that's too much noise, we don't need to woman woken up just yet," Nebulan replied. The steps on light armor became louder and louder as the figure came up the stone walkway. The stone walkway, which was flanked by flowering cherry trees on both sides, was one of the only things the recent battles on this island did not affect.

Nebulan removed the sword he had picked up from its sheath. Though the sheath was made of leather it made a soft and persistent ringing sound. Odd Neb thought briefly, but put it out of his mind to concentrate on this figure. The figure slowly opened the door and was immediately caught off-guard by as a sword was thrust deep into his chest. He made a low groaning noise of pain, but his face was twisted and confused.

"Who are you?" Darnel said quickly, trying to extract all the information she could out of the dying man but with no such luck. His eyes had already closed and his breathing stopped

"Ess...srever..." Nebulan said slowly as if he was uncertain. *Why did that name just come to me, why do I feel like I have seen this one before.* The figure's eyes flew open at the mention of this name and then closed slowly.

"You know him?" Darnel whispered.

"...No...No..." Nebulan tried to recall anything else that went with that name but came up with nothing.

"Hmm, would you like your sword?"

"It's not mine." The sword did not move.

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Adrasha awoke to feel a strong grip on her arm. As a reflex from years of military training, she slapped her hand quickly to her left side where a soldier's sword is usually kept.

"Your sword is in the chest of a man down stairs," Nebulan said as he picked her up and set her down at a desk with numerous pieces missing and scorch marks on the corners.

"You can get it when we leave, assuming that we don't find out you work for the shadow until then." Anti-sequential memories flooded her mind as she tried to recall the last night. *Falling, a head ache, underwater ship, drowning...wait...no, not drowning.*

"My name is Jennifer Darnel, do you know who I am?" Said the High Mage gently. Adrasha's hand rose to the back of her head as she nodded.

"I'm a High Mage of the Kingdom, may I ask your name?" Adrasha did not respond. Darnel looked down disappointed. "This is...ah...was, a Tower of the Arts. There was something important in this tower and now it's not here" Adrasha's gaze lowered very slightly. Hardly noticeable by anyone else not paying this close attention to the woman. "You *do* know something about it don't you," Darnel continued softly.

"No, no! I don't know anything about it! Why can't everyone just leave me alone here?" Adrasha's patience with long weeks of being captured, interrogated, and injured had begun to make her crack.

"How long have you been living here?"

Adrasha shrugged "About a month."

Nebulan cast a wary eye, or in this case black mist, at Darnel. "The bodies outside, they are new aren't they?" Said Nebulan

"Yes"

"You didn't kill them, but you did dispose of my knights didn't you?"

Adrasha didn't respond. Even though she knew that silence was just the same as saying yes, she had no idea if this answer would upset her current interrogators.

"I personally don't care if you're living in this tower or not, there isn't much left in here that's dangerous. But the Artifact..." Darnel worded her sentence carefully making sure not to give away any information on the chance that this woman knew nothing. "...is going to lure even more danger here than I can stop." Adrasha's thoughts turned directly to her necklace, still concealed under her shirt.

*If I give it to them, they might not search me. They'll never find it. It doesn't matter who they work for now, I have all that I need.* "In the box," she said pointing. In the corner of the room was a small, brown box with small gold symbols carved on the sides and a large wooded spiral on the top. Nebulan walked over to the box and opened it to find a slightly glowing hexagonal prism of dark blue glass. Nebulan nodded as he tucked the box in one of the secret pockets of his robe.

"Thank you. You can go back to sleep now," Darnel finished kindly as she got up and headed out the door following Neb.

As they prepared to exit the tower, Adrasha appeared at the top of the first set of stone stairs watching them leave. Darnel walked out the door but Neb paused by the body. After a moment of studying the corpse he withdrew the sword and held it in his hands for many moments. Then he turned to the woman. "Your sword...ma'am," he said tossing the sword to the woman, who caught it easily without taking her mistrusting eyes off him. Nebulan walked out the door.

Adrasha's eyes looked at the blood on the sword she now held with both hands and then turned to the body. With a sigh, she walked back up to the top floor of the tower. *I'll take care of the body in the morning.* When she got up the body was gone, only a bloodstain remained.

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# An Alliance is Struck

By Ackrovan - Mar 30 2009

Ackrovan flipped the miniature flag back towards him, "I didn't know you were such an artist. Tell me, how long did it take for you to finalize this design Griseham seethed, mostly at himself. "What do you want?" Griseham stated, ignoring the question.

Ackrovan grinned. Griseham never was the one to parley easily. "Just to catch up, is all. I had thought you were killed. Apparently I was wrong." Ackrovan strode over to another part of the room, admiring the decor. "So, how did you survive?"

"A good question." Griseham muttered. "The Jennidean refused to sink. Carried me and the remaining crew away from the attack." "Interesting." Ackrovan commented. He gave a long stare out the window, observing the populace below. He turned back at Griseham, "And I take it you budded yourself into a city, or is there more to this story."

Griseham took a look behind him, noting a female mage in the corner. "So, what happens next? You return to your new teenaged lord and inform him about us?" Griseham's hand moved toward Tyinomatas.

Ackrovan gave him a long, amazed look at him. He fought a brief, unsuccessful battle not to cackle. Struggling to regain control of himself, Ackrovan replied, "Wait, what?! Ha! You actually think I would serve some...some...child!? Who can't even lift a dungbell without help from his guards. No Griseham, I do not serve anyone. Not anymore. Not Turin, not his son, and no noble." His turn turned serious, "Now, please just answer my question. What happened to you? How did all....this happen?"

"It just did." Griseham stated. His hand now rested on Tyinomatas's handle. "It was a bid for peace. To be separate from the Kingdom and its so-called civilization. From the world's so-called civilization. Like we're some kind of animal to be tamed. Hardly." Griseham eyed Ackrovan carefully, his grip now firm on Tyinomatas. "But what's your interest, if not to report to Turin?"

Ackrovan took note of the fact that his grip on his wand had not moved, "You are in no danger. If my intention was to kill you, what is stopping me?" Ackrovan continued, "Because this usually doesn't happen, and if you remember, I am most interested in the unusual.

"I'm sure." Griseham stated. "I..." Griseham stopped for a moment. "You know, you're not hiding back there, sweetheart. As much as you might like to think otherwise."

Beth stood perfectly still as Griseham turned around to face her. Ackrovan cut in, "Don't mind her, Griseham. She just likes to observe." Ackrovan let a small grin slip and continued, "Please excuse me for asking, but do you really think that the Kingdom will leave you alone forever? What are your plan's for the long run, when that inevitable Kingdom ship stumbles here. And I'm excluding the Leviathan that just blasted its way by your island."

"I wouldn't really call it the long run," Griseham said with a smile. "It's quite simple, really. Your lord's death provides the perfect opportunity of chaos. To expand. To step from the shadows and hit the Kingdom where it's most vulnerable." Griseham idly pulled Tyinomatas off of his belt, rolling it lazily in his hand. He noticed that Ackrovan showed no discomfort or unease; faith in his wards. "But why tell you this? Why not just kill both of you and be done with it?" Griseham's voice grew harsh.

Ackrovan's face turned emotionless, "Try it, and see how far you get"

"Ah. Such temerity... Such ignorance. And to think that you knew of me." Griseham smiled again. "Oh sure, I might die. But I guarantee that one, if not both of you will go with me. If eighty years have taught me nothing, it's how foolish mages can be."

"If eighty years of this have taught you anything, it has brought arrogance with it. You would forfeit your lives just to have a chance that we will be killed in the aftermath by a horde of mindless idiots who can not bear the stomach of a fully fledged Kingdom assault?" Ackrovan shakes his head, "Why do you have such animosity towards me? What had I ever done to you to merit such hate?"

"Animosity? Maybe. I prefer to think of it as distrust. You were Turin's servant. What's to make me think I shouldn't kill you?"

"Servant? No, his understudy would be more exact. But he is dead, and from the power I've found, he would not have been needed him after it all anyway."

"I see. So tell me, what are your plans? What do you plan to do now that Turin is gone?" Griseham asked.

Ackrovan replied, "You'll see soon enough. By God, they'll all see soon enough. Noble Hexan, Noble Valyrai, Noblewoman Ulthis. Once they fall, the kingdom with it. Tell me, what does this sound like to you?"

Griseham cocked his head. "A rebellion? Impressive." Griseham examined Ackrovan carefully. "Tell me, where are you located?"

"Do you remember what Turin was obsessed over for the duration of his early life?" Ackrovan replied, purposely ignoring the question.

"Power." Griseham replied tritely.

"Anything specific you might happen to remember?"

Griseham thought for a moment, and then replied "Let's see, we have the Ornogoth Project. The Leviathan Project, as we all see how well that one went. Some excavation I never really cared for, apparently he thought he found ancient secrets of some sort. Then there's-"

"...Were you about to say The Spire of Archon?"

"No, not really." Griseham muttered blandly.

"Well, I'm not surprised someone such as you did not know. Turin was desperate to chase after this fairy tale. 'It was said to be a place of gold and honey, that not even the gods themselves could compete with it'. He eventually lost interest in it. I didn't."

"Oh. And such a place actually exists?" Griseham asked, an eyebrow raised.

"Due southeast of here, about 100 miles. I'll be honest; somehow, it has remained hidden for so long. It took me years to find it." Ackrovan's voice tensed a bit, "I was hoping you would consider joining me. But as I can see, that is impossible."

"Of course." Griseham said. "Quite a long journey..." He added, thinking quickly. "Are your ships still nearby?"

"You'd like to know that, wouldn't you?" Ackrovan smirked. He tends to smirk a lot

"Yes. You see, for now... I don't see a reason not to trust you. Your captain asked earlier if I knew of a port. And I think I just might." Griseham said with a smile.

"You resort to bribery? What do you wish?" Ackrovan was slightly confused by this statement.

Griseham's smile turned to a frown. "Slow on the uptake, aren't you? Say, how does Tantonía support ships, I wonder?" He asked sarcastically, waving out a window to Tantonía's harbor.

"Hm. How do I know you won't just kill my followers as they land? You've already shown enough abrasiveness to dare it"

"Because if I wanted you dead, I could have already done it. And then sent the Red Dove out to finish the job." Griseham said, annoyed.

Ackrovan ponders this for a moment. After about one minute of silence, he replied, "What exactly do you wish? Food? Weapons? Information?"

"Merely fair barter." Griseham responded.

"You are a wise man, Griseham. Expect a ship in the coming season," Ackrovan and Beth moved closer. Beth began whispering a teleportation spell. Ackrovan turned, one last time, at Griseham, "But one last question. Where do you intend to set off to with all those soldiers out there?"

"Greyfolk Isle." Griseham stated.

Ackrovan nodded, not particularly interested. he motioned Beth to his side, letting her begin teleporting them back to the Stalker. He ended, "Be careful Griseham. These people follow you. And if you lead them down the wrong path, be assured your dream shall go with." Ackrovan unclenched his fist, and as the two of them teleported, magically ignited the sketch of the Tantonian flag.

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## An Impotent King, Indeed

By Sudanna - Mar 30 2009

Hexen's troops had secured almost all of Turin's old territory. The capital had welcomed them with whatever fanfare they could muster, desperate for aid. The forces of other nobles had all backed down; not that they'd gotten very far in the first place. Those troops had been unready,

their armies unalert. They had not even learned of Turin's death until Hexen was well on the way. Some territory around the borders was lost, but Hexen wasn't about to complain. He'd just doubled the size of his fief. The King, spineless and vestigial, had merely handwaved it all away, letting the nobility keep what they took. He had even ignored the fact that some skirmishes had broken out; not even his father would have let that stand. His grandfather would have beaten the nobles around a bit, evened out the gains made. His grandfather's father would have knocked them back to their original borders and scrounged up a cousin to install. This never would have happened, would never have been conceivable, under the king four generations back.

But they were all dead, and the Nobles had free rein. Ruaidhri was called the Red King for a reason; his reign had been brought about by blood, and the Kingdom had descended into bloodletting under him. Not, again, that Hexen was complaining.

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## Dark Glass

By Luca - Apr 1 2009

“ And they swell with sapphire smoke from the blue cracks of the ground;  
Where they gather and they wonder and give worship to Mahound.

”

About eight years ago...

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Just ahead was the entrance to the cave. The battle was decisively won by the Kingdom, but still there was work to be done. The remainder of the rebellious army had fled to the entrance of this secluded cave, hoping that Darnel would be lenient and not pursue them very far. But these rebels had taken too much from her. They had struck down friends and colleagues she had known for years. Even if her orders, given directly from the king, hadn't told her to hunt all of them down, she would have to make them pay.

The mouth of the cave was coming up fast now, there was a small contingent of soldiers at the front line. A mage out sent out a ball of fire as Darnel used lightning sprouting from her fingertips to handle the rest.

Nebulan and Darnel took first place at the entrance of the cave. Shouts could be heard roaring down the large cavern. Small pinpoints of torchlight flickered in the distance, they occasionally vanished at the light passed in front of one of the many columns supporting the cavern. The cavern appearing to be larger and larger every moment, as a dozen torches failed to reach any of the end of the it. Now the race was on to catch them. Perhaps Darnel could be persuaded to

simply imprison them. This was, however uncertain. The pain of loss can drive one to do irrational things.

The group threw caution and stealth to the wind, hoping that their training from previous years of serving the Kingdom would allow them to avoid any traps or pitfalls that may be sprung on them at any split-second. At a word of command, that crystal spike that lay on top of the High Mage's staff glowed with a bright and holy light as they raced to the other end of the cavern. It was appearing that the end turned into a tunnel. Torchlight from the rebels was suddenly cut off and not returning.

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The walls of the cavern were coming into light, they were narrowing; The cavern was turning into the tunnel. The hardened brown stone that was previously the makeup of the surface of the columns turned darker and darker to a blackened stone. The group slowed to resume a cautious approach in the tunnel continued to narrow. The light decreased significantly now that the group was only traveling with a quarter of the torched they had before. But the light was sufficient to examine the ceiling of the tunnel. The blackened stone was not like the rest of the cave. Back in the cavern, the walls had been covered in a hardened brown stone, whose surface, while clearly sturdy, had the ripples of natural construction, built by the hands of time. Now this blackened surface seemed to resemble tile. This was not naturally made, if it was, it was crafted by the gods.

There wasn't much for the group to do but study the black tile like surface that surrounded them on walls, floors, and the ceiling. The tunnel twisted and turned for thousands of feet. The torchlight was impossible to see in these close quarters. Loud screams suddenly echoed throughout the area. The many spirals of the group's current environment caused sound to echo with amazing volume. It seemed to come from everywhere.

Then there came a fork in the tunnel. Darnel wasn't about to only send people down only one tunnel with the chance that the rebels would get away. Nebulan would take the right and Darnel would strafe left. Both tunnels continued on and on.

Darnel's tunnel came at last to a large rounded room. The mysterious black tile wrapped around it just as it had since the cavern. Light barely reached the walls of the circular room, but it was enough for the mage to jump to a ready stance. The rebel's bodies were lying at the far ends of the room. Probably still trying to find another escape route as they fled their attackers. The appearance of hatred on Darnel's face for what these rebels had done to her and her friends suddenly vanished from her face as the thought of what had done this to them might to do her. The thought of vengeance turned to worry that she had led even more of her people into death. Light expanded into the room further by torches carried by several knights. Eventually it expanded to the point of revealing the attacker.

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This tunnel was much smaller than the last. Some of the knights traveling with Nebulan struggled to get through the small openings, none did it quietly. Eventually the knights refused to go forward, they were sure that the tunnel would dead-end just ahead. Nebulan instructed them to wait there, that he would see the passage to it's end. Even though the tunnel was quite narrow,

it still showed signs of being traveled heavily. The black surface showed clear signs of being worn by possibly hundreds of passing hands.

Just like the other, the tunnel turned into a room. It was a small room, with a large hole in it. There also happened to be a gigantic crystal floating in the center. The section that was above the hole was about as tall as a man. No one could tell how far down the hole it went. The crystal was long and wide, jagged edges running all over, exposing miniature crystals that ran the length of a hand. It was dark and glowed from the inside with a purple/blue unholy looking light.

Then it made sense, the symbol of The One-Eyed Lord. Gnuvain, the Lord of Hell and other such underworlds has accepted this place as a shrine to him. That was why there was suddenly appearances of blackened tile, painstakingly dug into this cave that span amazing lengths as well as depths. The crystal was slowly spinning, inviting Neb and the other two mages to become entranced in it with it's blue-purple light. The effect did not work on any of them; years of magical training allowing them to quickly spot objects that could inspire hypnotism.

Nebulan slowly reached out his hand and broke off a small shard of the crystal. This shard of dark glass still had light coming from it, mostly blue, but occasionally a wisp of purple swirled around it. He noticed it was quite sharp also, there was a bleeding crack that ran the length of the shard in his hand. He wasn't sure if it was because of the pressure from breaking it off of the main body or just the light weight of the glass itself. With another glance at the symbol of the dark god, Nebulan cast a bolt of lightning at the glass, shattering it into thousands of pieces. They all fell to the floor, stopped glowing, and changed back to a normal transparent glass—except for the one in Neb's pocket.

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The creature was large enough to hit two knights at opposite ends of the room at once. One would be hit with its massive teeth, and the other with the long, gray, spiked tail. Lightning from a mage in the group launched tendrils of lightning from his fingertips. The lightning, instead of having its paralyzing effects, simply ricocheted harmlessly off into the cave wall. It did however, earn the attention of the creature, who promptly slammed the mage into the wall, killing him instantly. Two knights had grouped together and roared loudly, charging at the beast who barely took notice. This allowed the knights several seconds to attempt to hack away at the creatures leg. When the swords struck the creature it only glanced off, much like striking granite. But their attacks had begun to irritate the creature. It sunk its deadly claws deep into the chests of the valiant men and simply discarded them to its left.

Darnel was working to rally the remaining members of her split party to the entrance, she had after all gotten what she wanted; the death of the rebels. The men were clearing out and, as predicted the four-legged beast of gray matter turned to follow them. But Darnel had already thought about using an old trick: a highly charged fireball directed at the weakest point of the ceiling. The bolt launched and struck true, causing a cave-in, whose debris fell as planned onto the beast. The creature was much too large for it to do any permanent damage, but it succeeded in buying them time to escape.

"Are you all right, Sergeant Duran?" Darnel said.

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# Exilarchy

By Nioca - Apr 5 2009

Captain Dalmas watched as the Barquentine *Jennidean* and the Corvette *Qrantal* split off from the Brigantine *Devious* and Corvette *Loveless*. The *Jennidean*, holding more supplies, was bound toward the back side of the island, and the abandoned mining town on the southeast side. The *Devious* was bound toward the abandoned farming town on the north side.

Captain Dalmas swallowed as they approached. They had heard stories about Greyfolk Isle, and, more importantly, about the creatures it was named after. Strong. Fast. Cunning. Almost legendary. Natural predators of humans.

The ships glided silently up to the coast, finding stable docks. The town was indeed abandoned; however, it couldn't have been abandoned for long. It looked almost as if it was a still-living city; all that was missing was the people. The ships proceeded to unload their passengers. Cautious people disembarked, a few wands already aloft and at the ready. Silence was all that came from the deserted streets and buildings; merely the sloshing and movement near the ships greeted their ears.

Commander Dulford stood toward the front of the group, eyeing the city. He didn't have any experience with the Greyfolk, nor did anyone else on Tanton. Merely what they all had heard. So he decided to take a cautious approach, the same that he would in enemy territory. "Three groups of seven, one on the left, one on the right, and one up the middle. Make sure all the buildings are clear. I'll lead the rest up to the city walls. We'll keep an eye for these Greyfolk." He shouted.

The others nodded, and after a few moments, were split into four groups. The first, led by Dulford, quickly marched toward the town walls, whilst the other three started exploring buildings.

Commander Dulford entered a guard post and climbed a staircase up to the walls. The sides were heavily gouged, large claws digging furrows into the wood as a result of the heavy bodies climbing over. Arriving at the top of the wall, he looked out and saw crops. Acres of farmland, withered in the fall weather, waited for someone to start preparations for next spring.

But it's not what caught Commander Dulford's eye. No, something was moving in the crops. Something large pushed withered crops aside. Then the creature in the crops stopped. It was motionless, but for a moment.

A large head rose from the field. Feral eyes and a jagged, almost-humanoid face stared at Dulford, meeting his own eyes. Attached to a gray neck that seemed to be two feet in length, it continued to rise. Its body followed next, as it reared back to its full height. Fourteen feet, with four massive arms that ended in clawed multi-jointed fingers, and two pillars for legs. Its entirely gray body stood against the earthy tones of the field, its red eyes boring into Dulford's brown.

Then the creature fell back to the earth, its neck curling up and its head disappearing back into the fields. Dulford watched with a pounding heart as the creature slowly slithered away, making a path through the western farmland, and into the dark woods beyond.

Dulford watched critically, then looked the walls over more carefully. Several ballistae were set up, pointing outward. He recalled ballista bolts downstairs, and shouted for someone to bring them. Several Tantonians rushed up the stairs with bolts and loaded them into the ballistae.

The winds changed as the day grew longer. Dulford was keeping an eye on the spot where the Greyfolk had disappeared when he saw it; six more Greyfolk meandered out of the woods, walking upright and heading straight for the town.

The reaction was instantaneous. Some Tantonians with bows and a couple crossbows took aim, waiting for the creatures to get into range. Others pulled wands, and a couple manned ballistae. The Greyfolk moved faster, letting loose an alien roar.

Someone fired a wand. A beautiful orange fireball arced over the field and impacting against the head of an oncoming Greyfolk. It fell with a screech as the fireball exploded, and a cloud of dust rose, mingling with smoke. The Greyfolk rose again, its head charred slightly. A bolt of red light hit it in the chest, and it dropped dead from a heart attack.

Taking the cue, the Tantonian with the onyx-tipped wand fired another red bolt of light. Another Greyfolk fell, but several more ran out of the woods. Tantonians with bows fired arrows at the Greyfolk, but the arrows simply stuck in their thick hide. The ballista bolts fared better, managing to punch into the large creatures. One fell with a roar under a hail of bolts.

Another wand fired, and a glowing blue nimbus surrounded a Greyfolk. It fell, paralyzed. The other wands were having more difficulty; spikes of ice, lances and balls of flame, strokes of lightning, and various other magical barrages served merely to scar the creature's hides. The remaining two Greyfolk collapsed under a hail of ballista bolts, wand fire, and the occasional arrow.

The four Greyfolk further off balked, and ran back into the woods. Commander Dulford breathed a sigh of relief. He understood now why the island was abandoned; dealing with these creatures with a full complement of wands and ballistae was troublesome as it was; dealing with them without wands? A living nightmare. Certainly more than any noble would want to contend with, especially for an otherwise unremarkable island.

Commander Dulford started to turn his back, and the other Tantonians started filing off the walls, when he heard something. A gentle snort. Turning, he saw the paralyzed Greyfolk throwing off the paralysis, coming at them in a bloodthirsty rage. He shouted to the other Tantonians, but they had been caught with their guard down. The Greyfolk opened its mouth wide, and noxious clouds came out. A few Tantonians were caught by the poisonous clouds, and fell gagging. The Greyfolk reached the wall and ripped into it with its claws. They pierced the wooden structure and ripped upward, shredding a ballista on its way out.

Dulford fell flat, stunned. Stumbling upright, he grabbed an unattended bow and arrow, and let it fly. The arrow caught the Greyfolk in the eye. As it roared in agony, Dulford unsheathed his wand and fired directly into the Greyfolk's open mouth. A blast of golden flame flew from the wand down the Greyfolk's slimy throat, erupting in the creature's mouth. The smell of frying flesh filled the air as the semi-liquid fire traveled down its throat into its torso. A gurgling shriek filled the air as the creature was cremated from the inside out.



"Get a disruption wand!" Dulford shouted to a nearby soldier. As the Greyfolk thrashed about, the soldier ran and grabbed a wand with an amethyst off of a rather clobbered mage. He brought it back and pointed it at the now-dead, blackened Greyfolk. A purple light radiated outward, and the visible glow from what was left of the creature's mouth flickered out.

The Tantonians gathered themselves together after the attack. Four Tantonians had been knocked out by the noxious gas the Greyfolk had emitted. A healer was tending to them. The damage to the wall could be repaired. Thankfully, no casualties.

A Tantonian soldier ran up to Commander Dulford. "Sir, we've found some survivors."

"Excuse me?" Commander Dulford asked.

"We've found some people that either stayed or were left behind when Greyfolk Isle was abandoned." The soldier said. "We've been calling for any other people to come out of hiding. So far, we've found about twenty survivors." The soldier waved to someone tagging behind him. "One of the locals."

"Nice to meet you." Dulford said, inclining his head to the islander. "What can you tell me about the Greyfolk?"

"Not much that you haven't already figured out." The islander said with a hallow laugh. "They don't attack too frequently; only their hunters attack, and then only when they're feeling brazen. Believe me, this was a moderate attack; there have been considerably larger."

"Figures." Dulford said. "Anything else?"

"They make nice leather armor. High quality stuff. Plus, they're innate magic-resistant. Their entire body projects some sort of aura. Dampers magical energy. We found this out when we tried to use wizards as the main line of defense and as an early warning system, but with that aura, they become invisible to a mage's senses, and near impossible for a mage to lock onto. It forces mages to resort to more mundane attacks, and even then, the creatures have some measure of resistance against anything magical in nature. And added to their thick skin..."

"Yeah, I noticed." Dulford grimaced.

The Tantonian soldier cut in. "Anyway, you need to report to the town hall."

"No, I need to stay here. I-" Dulford started.

"Griseham's orders." The soldier cut across.

"Why didn't you say that upfront?!" Commander Dulford said harshly. "No matter; take my post." He said, hurling himself down the staircase into the guard post, and out into the city. He ran toward the town hall. Upon arriving, he noted something. A flag was fluttering in the breeze; a solid blue background, with three crossed wands. One had a red tip, another a green, and the prominent wand facing straight up had a white sapphire. Pushing open the doors, he came wide into the audience chamber.

---

Griseham listened intently to a local mage. He had been here for ten years; he had gotten permission to research the Greyfolk, and was getting into details. Griseham found it interesting

to hear about these unusual creatures; apparently, they laid eggs, and came out fully-formed and ready to hunt and mate. It took a mere three weeks for the super-hungry baby Greyfolk to reach full size.

But Griseham was more interested in hearing the uses of Greyfolk parts. They had successfully tanned Greyfolk hide into leather armor, and very effective armor at that. Lighter than metal and more durable than bronze, with a shade of the Greyfolk's magical resistance. Greyfolk meat was edible, and even considered a bit of a delicacy on the mainland.

But what interested Griseham the most was the use of the Greyfolk's heart and blood. It's where the Greyfolk's true magical resistance was locked away.

The mage had given him a pendant as a show of good will and acceptance of the Tantonians. It was large, heart-shaped, and made of red glass except for a gold seam around the pendant, and a golden chain to wrap around the wearer's neck. "It contains the ground hearts of five Greyfolk, and is filled with distilled Greyfolk blood," The mage explained. "Right now, it's naught but a simple trinket for anyone who wears it. If you want it to work," the mage reached into a pocket and pulled out a small bottle of thick, reddish-orange substance, "you have to drink this."

Griseham eyed it warily. "What is that?"

"Greyfolk blood." The mage responded with a smile. "By drinking it, the pendant will recognize you as a Greyfolk and extend its protection to you."

"So if I want this pendant to work, I have to keep drinking this?" Griseham asked.

"Not at all! When you consume the blood it'll change your own. Just slightly. But the pendant will be permanently active for you, and will protect you whenever you wear it."

Griseham eyed the blood for a moment, then hesitantly took it from the mage and downed it as quickly as possible. He swallowed it, and immediately started gagging. Not only did it taste strongly of various unpleasant substances, but it seemed to burn slightly. Griseham's eyes watered as he grabbed his knees for support. After gagging for several moments, and drinking several glasses of water to wash his palette out, he regained his composure. He then wrapped wrapped the pendant's chain around his neck, the pendant falling to his chest. "I don't feel any different..." Griseham noted.

"Well, it takes a little time, and even then, you probably wouldn't notice it until you ran into a situation where the pendant sees use." The mage responded.

"Ah, well in that case-" Griseham began. However, the door opened before he could finish. "Yes, Zokqian?" He asked the mayor.

"Commander Dulford's here, sir." The man said.

"Excellent. Come," he said to the local mage, "we'd be honored to have a local at the meeting."

The mage smiled and they both entered the audience chamber. Commander Dulford, Mayor Zokqian, and Captain Anaya were all present, along with three other people. Zokqian, middle-aged with a dark beard, spoke first. "On the reclamation front, we've made good progress. The city of Horizon has been secured, and we've found some people that were left behind. We've also got the ships partially unloaded."

"We need to get them unloaded now." Griseham intoned. "We're headed to the mainland after we finish here."

"We encountered a Greyfolk attack, as you are likely aware." Commander Dulford spoke up. "Would it be possible to get our wands recharged before you leave?"

"Indeed. I'll do that while you unload the-"

The doors burst open. Uytha, ran in, his hands glowing brightly and a deep incantation on his lips. He paused, looking at Griseham with a mixture of panic and confusion on his face.

Griseham gave him an odd look. "Is something wrong?" He asked sardonically.

"I... I thought..." Uytha paused. "Never mind. I must be-"

"You don't sense him anymore, do you?" The local mage spoke up.

"Yeah. It's like he suddenly disappeared. One moment, I could feel the waves of energy coming off him, and the next, it faded." Uytha said, puzzled. He approached Griseham and got within a few feet of him. Suddenly, he blinked and stumbled back slightly. "There it is." He commented.

"That pendant greatly limits the distance at which other mages can sense you. If Uytha were to try to cast any cantrips directly on you, he'd find himself unable to even get a fix on you, let alone be able to magically harm you. He'd have to use more indirect spells or magical projectiles. And even then, it'd likely blunt any projectile inherently magical in nature."

"Useful." Griseham said, impressed. "Would there be any way to augment its effects?"

"Well, I imagine that pumping power into the pendant would increase its range and effectiveness. But that'd be draining, to say the least." The mage replied.

"Still, it's good to know it can be done." Griseham said. "Now, onto more-"

"Sir!" A Tantonian shouted, bursting into the town hall.

"Again?" Griseham asked, amused.

"A ship's been spotted off the northern coast. It's headed toward the isle." The Tantonian said breathlessly.

"Identification?" Griseham snapped off.

"The *Nautilus*. A moderate-sized sloop, heavily damaged. It's waving the Kingdom flag, but not of any noble's. They're not headed for us, it seems, but rather the northwest side of the island."

"Hmm..." Griseham said, bemused. "Send up a flare. Let them know we're here. Odds are, it's a refugee ship from the north. We could use the extra manpower."

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he *Nautilus* had indeed been a refugee ship. Almost 600 people, either as crew or cargo, looking for a safe place to land. They now inhabited Horizon, and a few were headed toward the other abandoned settlement, now named Darkcliff.

Griseham, aboard the *Shadow*, watched as they circled Tanton. They pulled quietly into Tanton's harbor, and cautiously disembarked. The sun was close to setting, and the harbor

looked eerily empty. Most of their ships, including the recently repaired Man-of-War *Lioness*, were headed toward the mainland. The *Red Dove* had headed southeast, toward the location of Ackrovan's Spire. Nothing special, simply to have talks between the two parties.

Griseham headed toward his manor. He entered and found a man drafting various legislation for the budding nation. He sat down across the table from him, sighing as he looked over the drafted legislation. "So much to do, so little time to do it." Griseham muttered, meeting the gaze of the man across from him, who was busy writing down yet more legislation. The door to his manor opened, and Hontis the Shipwright stepped in. "Ah, how goes the new ship?" Griseham asked.

"The *Hurricane* is coming along nicely. We should have it finished within three days, at most."

"Three days? I tasked most of Tantonian to help with it, what's taking so long?"

"Well," The shipwright stated with a smile, "see, I've always had my own plans for various ship designs. And I thought that, since we're now building our own ships, we might as well build something that stands out. So I decided to go with my plans for a new ship class: the *Millennium*."

"I see. Will it be-" Griseham started.

"Bigger than a Man-of-War, and designed to hold a powerful array of weaponry." The shipwright finished. "And the *Hurricane* will be made entirely out of Etyan timber."

"Impressive. Keep up the good work." Griseham noted the arrival of Mayor Gabthen. "Mayor, any word from the colonies?"

"Horizon has experienced no further troubles with the Greyfolk, and Darkcliff has been secured." Mayor Gabthen replied.

"Good." Griseham went over to a window. "The time of our people being cowed and hiding away, of Tantonian, is over. It's now the time of a proud defiance. Of an independence that flies in the face of the Kingdom and the misery it stands for. As of now, part of our fleet heads to a port city. We're buying their own weapons and ships to use against them. And then, we will fight." Griseham paused, then turned to face Hontis. "The Tantonian Exilarchy has begun."

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Anaya looked into the bag. Glittering coins made of crystal filled the bag. The Kingdom's second-highest denomination, the Deima. Forty years of selling high quality wands had made Griseham quite a fortune, enough to rival a noble's treasury.

Anaya recalled Griseham's requests clearly. Ships of varying classes were to be purchased; a few transports, some corvettes for patrols, and a few Man-of-Wars for actual fighting. Plus the equipment, sails, ballistae, stonethrowers, gemstones, large rods, swords, spears, armor, tools, crews, bows, arrows... Anaya found herself thankful that she only had to handle buying the ships.

The ships pulled into Crynath Port without problem. They identified themselves as a merchant fleet that was hoping for a lucrative contract up north between Tearstone Isle and Port Hexen.

Anaya looked at the ships flanking the *Jennidean*. The corvettes *Loveless* and *Qrantal* were docked on each side of the *Jennidean*. Opposite the *Qrantal* was the *Devious*, and rounding out the fleet, the *Lioness*.

She left the ship, heading toward the shipyard. A likely place to inquire about ships. She soon found the master shipwright, ready to retire for the day. "Excuse me, but I need to inquire about purchasing ships."

The shipwright, a small, fussy-looking man seemed less than enthused. "Well, it can wait till tomorrow. I'm done for the day."

"Are you sure? I pay well." Anaya responded.

"Yes, but they all do. It's why I'm in business. Run along, girl; come back tomorrow once you've gained a measure of sense." The man said haughtily.

"Sense?" Anaya said, her tone becoming laced with venom. "And what sense is there to turn away a paying customer?"

"Plenty. It involves me not staying up all night trying to help some rich princess buy a fancy boat for her parties." The man said, becoming downright irritable. "You'll be back tomorrow."

"No, I won't. This is a one time chance, and considering I want to buy several ships, you'd be an arrogant fool to turn away the business."

The man stopped, his eyes wide. "Several ships...? Now wait just a moment, here," the shipwright said, his tone suddenly friendly, "how many ships are we talking about here?"

"Eight, maybe ten. Two large Barquentines, four corvettes, and two mans-of-war. Maybe a pair of galleons as well." Anaya listed off.

To say the shipwright was downright enthusiastic would be an understatement. "I see! Well, we don't have any Barquentines... but we do have some smaller galleons that'd work excellently for transporting goods. And as for the corvettes and mans-of-war, we have just enough in stock."

"Very well. Show me the ships." Anaya said.

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"No, I'm not joking. We're a merchant fleet heading to Tearstone Isle. We're bringing a massive shipment of weapons and armor to resupply the garrisons there." Jountan said to the quartermaster. He was a young man, barely into his twenties, with piercing blue eyes and dark skin.

"Wonderful. Just freaking fantastic," the quartermaster muttered under her breath. "It's not enough that I work my ass off for the Kingdom which in turn gives me no end of grief..." She said as she started gathering various swords together. "But now I have to handle huge weapon orders when I could be home with my husband, and if I were to tell them to stick it, they'd stick me in a noose."

"You sound bitter toward the Kingdom." Jountan said to her.

"Bitter? Hah! Don't let my commanding officer hear you say that. They'd, well, stick me in a noose." The quartermaster let out a string of profanity. "Yes, I'm bitter! I have to pay taxes through every orifice, work non-stop to make ends meet, and make sure the good commander is happy." The quartermaster swore as she nicked her hand on a halberd. "I swear to you, if I could leave right now-"

"Would you?" Jountan asked.

"Excuse me?" The quartermaster asked.

"What if I were to tell you that it was possible? To leave all of this behind?" Jountan pressed.

"Now look here!" The quartermaster exclaimed. "I'm not joining no rebellion! If I want to commit suicide, I'll tell my commander to shove it."

"Not a rebellion. An independent nation. Free of the Kingdom." Jountan approached her. "Would you go?"

"Well..." She looked apprehensive. "Does such a thing actually exist? The Kingdom-"

"Doesn't control as much as it thinks it does." Jountan finished her sentence for her. "Such a place does exist. Outside Kingdom control."

"Really?" The quartermaster seemed reluctant, yet there was a subtle yearning on her face. "I take it these weapons are not for Tearstone Island."

"Not at all." Jountan replied.

"Fair enough. Help me carry these out to the cart, would ya?" She said, picking up a pile of sheathed swords. Jountan proceeded to aid her in loading them into a large, horse-drawn cart.

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"...So, what's your decision?" The shipwright asked. His face was practically glowing with excitement.

"They're fine ships. And they'll make an excellent addition to our fleet." Anaya responded.

"These will come fully-stocked with all necessary provisions, of course? Weaponry, spare sails, spare rope..."

"Um, well they'll come with whatever is necessary to get them to sail. But the ballistae and such will cost extra. Plus there's taxes on all of that, and a fee for procuring the goods." The shipwright said greedily.

"Fine. How much for the nine ships, plus a full outfitting?" Anaya asked.

The man turned and consulted various papers. Eventually, he came back with, "134 Tolin, 7 Polita, and 36 Arki."

Anaya stared at him for a moment, then fished out 45 shimmering Deima. The shipwright's eyes widened at the sight of the glittering coins. "Keep the change." She said to him.

"V-very well. I'll make sure to have the ships stocked and ready to go by morning." The shipwright said.

"There's an extra Deima in it for you if it's done tonight." Anaya responded.

"Tonight it is, then!" The shipwright handed her the deeds to the ships, then scurried off.

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Anaya watched anxiously. Cultoth had come through with the mercenary crews; their new ships waited idly near the *Jennidean*. In fact, the *Jennidean* was the only ship still docked; the others

were facing out and ready to proceed into the night. All of the other supplies had been retrieved. But Jountan was still unaccounted for, as was Taya. Taya's role was to track down any signs of rebels and try to get them to come with.

She spotted two large wagons approaching. Jountan led the two wagons to the docks, and they proceeded to load the *Jennidean* with a massive quantity of weapons and armor. Then a woman wearing Kingdom armor came up to Anaya. "Allison Thane, previous quartermaster of Crynath Port."

"You decided to join us?" Anaya asked. A few more soldiers got on the ship, and a bunch of Tantonians quickly rushed to assist Jountan unload the weaponry.

"Not just me, but a few other dissenters as well. More than that. I decided to give you guys a 100% discount. Consider it my notice that I'm quitting the Kingdom's military." She said with a wicked grin. "Not only that, I decided to requisition all of the standing weapons and armor. Called it all back for an emergency inspection. Anything that wasn't being wielded is... well..." Quartermaster Thane waved at the wagons. "Here."

"Well..." Anaya stammered, stunned. "Welcome aboard. I-"

"HELP!" Someone screamed. Everyone's attention snapped to the streets leading to the docks. A woman had tore around the corner and was running full-pelt at the ships. Several guards with weapons drawn were in close pursuit.

Anaya acted on instinct. She drew her wand and took aim at one of the guards. A cylindrical shockwave seemed to connect the tip of the wand to the guard's leg with a deafening crack. Blood geysered as the leg seemed to shatter under the wand blast, and the guard was thrown to the side with a scream. Anaya took aim at another guard and fired; the concussive blast hit the cobblestone directly in front of him. The resultant blast threw both the stones and the guard through the air.

The other guards hesitated, buying enough time for the running woman to make it to the ship. She scrambled onboard. "Taya, what happened?!" Anaya asked urgently.

"I don't know! I was talking with this guy about some rebels that had taken residence in the Crynath sewers, and then there were all these guards, and-" The woman explained frantically. She was cut off by the peal of alarm bells. It appeared that it hadn't escaped the guards' notice that the shots came from the ship.

Anaya, seeing that the weapons and armor were loaded and that everyone was aboard and accounted for, gave a rapid-fire series of orders. The crew quickly scrambled, trying to get the *Jennidean* launched. Anaya looked at her surroundings; thankfully, the other ships in the harbor didn't have crews, and thus were unable to react. However, she spotted a few guards preparing to open fire with ballistae mounted on the shoreline.

Uytha approached Anaya. "There's a small army of mages headed this way. I can disable the ballistae, but there's no way I can keep the mages at bay."

"Don't worry about the ballistae. Right now, just get us turned around and headed out." Anaya snapped.

"Will do." He said. An incantation started passing his lips. Anaya felt the water under the ship become unstable. The ship shifted, slowly turning away from the harbor and toward the ocean.

Anaya stopped him. "Take this." She said as he opened his eyes. She handed him a wand tipped with a topaz. "Fire on the mages' locations. It probably won't hurt them, but it'll likely slow 'em down quite a bit."

"Sunfire. Yes, that'd probably do it." Uytha said with a grin. He pointed the wand toward the city, his eyes closed. He found the three mages closest to the ships. Pointing the wand upward, he fired. A blast of golden flame flew upward. Illuminating the city in hold, it followed a parabolic trajectory back down to a building near the mages' position. Within a second, large normal flames and a plethora of smoke could be seen. Screams echoed through the streets as Uytha fired five more shots, some closer to their position and some further. Alarm bells rang with greater urgency.

Anaya, meanwhile, was letting loose on the ballistae using her concussion wand. With a shot, she blasted a ballista into wooden fragments. Another accidentally caught a bolt mid-flight, disintegrating it. Upon spotting that Uytha had fired so many rounds from the Sunfire wand, she snatched it from him. Uytha opened his eyes, baffled. Anaya wordlessly pointed the Sunfire wand at a tightly-packed group of ships and fired. The ball of golden flame struck the water, spraying and causing a huge cloud of steam. The fire spread on the water's surface, igniting several ships as it came into contact with them. Soon, five ships were engulfed in roaring orange flames.

"Isn't Sunfire an illegal substance in the Kingdom?" Allison asked, stunned at its destructive power.

"Yeah. This is why!" Anaya shouted. She pointed at a visible spot of sunfire on walkway. The walkway underneath it had turned to magma due to the incredible heat contained within the flames. Tiny rivers of molten stone flowed into the grass, setting it on fire. The fires were spreading fast; orange flames consumed several buildings.

The *Jennidean* unfurled its sails, and started to gain speed. The Tantonian fleet headed out into the night, leaving the grand city of Crynath Port burning in its wake.

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Griseham sat at his desk, instructing several new apprentices on the art of wandmaking, when a blue crystal on his desk suddenly lit up. Excusing himself, Griseham headed to a different room, then spoke into the crystal. "It went without a hitch, I take it?"

"Not quite, sir." A male voice said from the crystal. "The Tantonian fleet got out of there without damage and with everything they came for, including several fine additions, but they didn't get away clean by a long shot. Guards caught Taya, and it went pretty bad. They had to open fire on the city as they left. About a third of the town has been burnt to cinders, along with a large number of ships."

Griseham shook his head. He had hoped they wouldn't draw that kind of attention just yet. "Do they know who's responsible?"



"Right now, the gossip is that either the new Lord Turin decided to strike back, or another noble's trying to rattle Duke Hexen." The voice from the crystal said.

"Good. That'll likely change, unfortunately, but there's nothing we can do about that. Keep your head down, and let me know of any other tidings. Just don't contact me too often."

"Wait, there's more! Apparently Turin's entire dynasty is fracturing. The other nobles have been slicing away at his land. Duke Hexen's getting the largest share. Oh, and you know of Yitsograd?" The voice asked.

"Yeah. It is Turin's capital city." Griseham responded.

"Was. The news is spreading like wildfire, Yitsograd was almost completely leveled."

"What?! How?!?" Griseham asked, shocked.

"The mountains around Yitsograd melted, and the magma flowed into the city. The official story going around is that the new Lord Turin tried magic beyond his control."

"That's bullsh-!" Griseham was interrupted by one of his apprentices entering the room. Alarmed, the apprentice left, closing the door behind him. "There's no way Turin did this. If he had that kind of power, the nobles wouldn't be having nearly the success they've had taking his territory. Does the king buy this theory?"

"Looks like, judging from the lack of response on his part."

"Then he's an incompetent fool. No wonder the nobles have free reign, he's a figurehead!" Griseham said distastefully.

"Indeed. And it's causing stress elsewhere. The rebellions and insurrections in Turin's domain has resulted in rebels elsewhere getting more brazen." The crystal replied. "You know they'll find us shortly. It won't take Hexen long to put the pieces together, and then we'll have the entire Kingdom on our collective asses."

"No. Just Duke Hexen. An insurrection of this size is a personal insult to him. It'll look like he's so busy in other nobles' business that he's forgotten to tend to his own domain, especially for an insurrection to get as far along as we have. And the damage done at Crynath Port will look like a brazen rebel assault. He'll have no choice but to put it down personally at this point. Otherwise, he looks weak and incompetent." Griseham said vindictively.

"You have it all sorted out, don't you?" The voice in the crystal asked mockingly.

"Not really. I'm playing it as it comes." Griseham replied, amused. "Good luck."

"And to you, Griseham." The voice said. The crystal went dark.

Griseham sighed. It had been a long day.

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# The Hound (Of Despair and Souls)

By Azuma - Apr 6 2009

Perched upon a rock outcrop near the isle, he waited for him, a predator lurking for his prey. Esrever sensed him, a familiar alien. There is something inside or with the entity that is all too intimate with him. Should he disregard it? He did, for the while. Nothing troubles him. Nothing ever did, since he was made.

He stood unfazed on the outcrop, the entity started to move towards the isle. He was accompanied, as Esrever sensed, by a formidable wielder of magic, an archmage. He didn't mind. His soul is already drenched with thousands of them. Should this one be different? No, that wielder will fall too, soon, if it goes against him. He followed them, both of them, to a tower. Esrever's shadow was in clear dissonance, something was stirring it. Esrever silenced it. It did. He looked at the ruins, sensing a palpable magical force within it. Esrever went closer, and closer, and he sensed them. Behind the tower doors, laying in ambush. A force like him? Relying on sneak attacks? What blasphemy. Still, Esrever was interested. He continued on, knowing their ploy and going with it. He opened the door and with a swift motion from the entity, he...

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Shalos stood attentively. They were still in the room with the lady, he and Patrick. Patrick noticed him.

"What is the matter?" Patrick asked.

"Th- this is... no, it cannot be. B- but. It is t- true." Shalos stuttered.

"Shalos?" Patrick asked him again.

Shalos was stunned. He was dazed and his mind was elsewhere, as if some force is taking it. It was not late until Patrick noticed it too. Something was taking him away. Away from it all. But he was still there, standing beside the lady Josephine, who was tossing and turning in her sleep, as if feeling the force too. Patrick again asked Shalos his first question.

Shalos looked at him with cold, grim, but amused eyes. He answered. Patrick was taken aback by the reply. Esrever died.

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He was adrift, adrift in nothing. He was resting. Finally, he has attained quiescence. He was not existing anymore. He is now merely a speck of history. He treasured every moment of it. Blissful, paradisaical but it was meant to be abrupt. He was called back, his curse. The wretched curse called him back to existence. He was pulled, violently, turbulently, forcefully, out of the bliss and back to the chaos. He has returned, back to existence.

A being as he was, returning from death or an erasure of your existence does tend to leave the person disoriented. He may not have stumbled around but he was oblivious to his surroundings. Even so, he was successful in leaving the tower. His senses were mixed. He cannot feel, see,

hear, touch well. He thought the entity was near, then far, then to his right, no, to the north. His senses were clearly discombobulated. He lurched around but he was unknowingly guided. He continued to stumble around until he was near the edge of the cliff the tower is perched on. Unsurprisingly, he fell, headlong for the sea, and the mighty waves carried him.

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A standard routine geographical survey on the Hawk Isles. Such excitement. The captain of the Davos sighed surly on the thought. Nothing to see but rocks and moving water. Of course, someone had to it, and in more specifics, someone free, and that leads to him, captain Cimos, commander of the sloop, *Davos*, who had just made port. He was almost immediately greeted as he landed to the port shore by the ass Dulford to do the job and, indubitably, he had no choice. His skeleton crew of men was just about to enjoy a good sailor's night in the pub when they saw their captain coming back to the sheep and motioning them to return. The men boorishly sighed as their night of romping was denied.

The next day was a sure bore. Waves rocked their ship continuously. The seagulls fluttered above the masts, screeching at each other. There weren't even fish to see or to have a heart-to-heart conversation either. The men continued their daily ship labor. Cleaning this, raising that, throwing those, and eventually vomiting everything you ate for breakfast. The winds were apathetic, allowing the ship only a crawl. Oh how the captain and the men wished at least for some pirate action. Their dullness was broken when the crewman shouted. Everyone raced to the portside and looked. A body! A body overboard and not one of theirs. At last, something to excite them. A few of them already moved to rescue the man, as they noticed, and the ones that were left were betting (their work time and the slop they eat) to see if the man is alive or otherwise. The quiet tension is palpable as they contemplated on the man's state. The body moved then coughed out the seawater. A few moans and less cheers were heard amongst the scattered men. Cimos arrived on the scene, the men moving aside to let him through. He quickly noticed the black robes the man wore. A cultist? Nah, them buggers tend to be in groups. An aloof mage perhaps? Nv'r, them mages are likely to stick up their hands where the light don't shine in their towers. An unfortunate spy from enemy factions? He'll get his beating soon enough when they make port again. The captain nodded slightly at the men and motioned them to put the hitcher in the brig, with two of them guarding him.

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Oblivion. That was all in his mind, and in his heart. Neverending oblivion. Nothing can be purer than that or can possibly be more beautiful. Total discord executed. Reverberating, resonant, powerful. Would he want to ramify it to the world? YES! But not before, never before him. His death would be the first objective, nothing else must be. Only his paltry, "holy" blood can quench him. But not now. He sensed frail life, ready to be polluted. The present events needs attention.

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The Davos was quite near in finishing their mission. They have almost made full circle, starting from the port, around Hawk Isles. Their geographical survey went as mundanely successful as it can be. Only one thing bothered the captain, the stranger they picked up when they were at the west waters. He and the crewmen were sure that the man was alive, he was breathing and his

heart was beating though it was awkward, his heart's beat never did change tempo, it was the same, slow thumps. Cimos shook his

head and decided to check up on the man. He grabbed his coat and sheathed his cutlass, a precautionary in times of war. He was about to leave his cabin when someone knocked on the door. He opened it to see Kurtil, his first mate. He brought a message that sent the captain and him running towards the brig, the man has stirred awake.

They arrived in the dank and dark brig that is every part of a ship. Most of the sloop's supplies were stored here, food, fresh water, ale, rum, more ale, more rum. The captain motioned Kurtil to go out and continue his routines. Kurtil bowed and left. The two men assigned to guard saluted the captain as he passed through, walking towards the bounded man. Cimos asked them about the man.

They answered that he started murmuring syllables. Indeed, the captain heard it. Faint words echoed throughout soggy walls of the brig. The words were too inaudible to be heard, maybe because of the sea waves churning outside, but the effect of just perception of them was enough. All three of them felt despair, slowly creeping up from their feet upwards, choking slowly the will to live. The captain had the worse effect as he was near this epicenter of malice. The captain jumped agilely back, drawing out his cutlass with the men following his example. Thick tension filled the room. The men were sweating even when the cool sea breeze embraced them. They waited... and waited... and waited. The man did not move but he continued that damned smile. The whispers started to more audible, more distinct. Oh how the men wished that it didn't. The whisper sapped them of their will to defend themselves, to fight, they were quavering in their boots and shaking their weapons. He stood up, the men gulped, and all chaos was to break loose.

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Despair! He felt it. How was it refreshing. He bathed in it, he reveled in it. Their despair was his enjoyment. But... what is this? One of them is charging at him. In his mind he sighed. Despair very often leads into blind courage. Then he felt it. The blade piercing through his abdomen. Shall we let them see how futile it is to leave? Indeed we will, indeed we will.

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The man stumbled back, his attack has found its mark, no one can live when a blade as rusty and jagged as that passed through your body. He looked at the others behind him, to the other guard first then to the captain. He smirked, and snorted a chuckle. And it proved fatal. The man stood up, ominously behind the man. The captain and the other guard eyes widened. The one who attacked froze in fear. It was the last feeling he felt. Obsidian tendrils formed behind him, slowly changing into dark lances. The man looked behind one last time and saw... saw... he saw... enmity. Nothing but enmity. He has not even closed his eyes when he ravenously skewered repeatedly, almost leaving no trace of wholeness of body. Then the man looked at the remaining survivors. And laughed at them, as the his shadow consumed them.

The whole Davos was on alert. They heard the blood-gargled screams of the men below. They readied their weapons, hoping they can take care of whatever made the men wail. It was silent. Dead silent. Kurtil walked out from his office to see what the ruckus is, he wish he hadn't. Pure darkness crashed the ship's upper deck floor, it's tendrils seeked out the remaining alive members

of the ship's crew with atrocious ease. The ship was no exception, the darkness continued it's frenzy, lashing out on the masts, to the cabins, to the hull. Kurtil saw the core of this damnity. He was there, at the center of it all, gloating, as he saw the men die, one by one. A few managed to be successful in attacking him but it was a hollow hope. All men died, except Kurtil. He was hiding in his office, hopefully the beast will pass with him noticing but as he expected, he was wrong. He was pulled out by the darkness, towards the man. He stared at him, with his empty eyes. Kurtil stared back, full of despair and hopelessness. Kurtil saw it, a haze, almost a mist circling, embracing the man. Kurtil struggled to break free. He stopped when the man speak. Only two words came out of his mouth but it was enough break Kurtil's will to live.

Fear me.

The man threw him out the ship, fortunately, near a plank of wood. Kurtil grabbed on and looked up, towards the *Davos*. He saw the man still looking at him, then turning away from him but not before the darkness that caused the massacre flung a dagger, obsidian of color, beside the man's head that was resting on the plank. The waves carried Kurtil back to the isle but not before he witnessed the shadow completely enveloping the ship, and crushing it. Kurtil closed his eyes as he lay drifting in the ocean. Esrever watched as the waves fought over for the victim and he was gone.

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He was back at the tower, where he died and he looked for it, the weapon that killed him. He sensed a presence but it did not sense him. His shadow became agitated, wanting to kill the being but Esrever thought otherwise. The person, he feels, will play a much more... full role in the future occurrences. His shadow cloaked him, leaving him with none. He continued to search for it, lightly stepping on the granite floor. Room by room, searched for it, the remaining piece of the weapon that... Esrever snarled at the thought, his shadow blurred slightly agreeing with his emotions. He arrived at the last place he hadn't look, with that memory still intact in his thoughts, blinding his senses. He entered the room. The presence he felt when he entered the tower was there and she was looking at him, naked. She was agile for a woman and she quickly drew out a dagger hidden in her boots that were laying near her on the floor and shot it at him. Esrever let it stab him in the shoulder, unhurt. The woman was stunned. He moved towards her, not by walking, he diffused into an amethyst haze, leaving the recently pierced dagger on the floor, and materialized behind her, catching her off guard. He touched her and a feeling of supreme dread fell over the woman, she fainted. The man's shadow uncloaked itself from the man and proceeded to finish the deed. NO! Sharply, the shadow cloaked itself back onto Esrever. He walked out, disgusted at his failure to find the piece but he heard it. A cry. Not the female's but someone else's. He grinned. He walked back to the naked female's unconscious body and tossed her hair aside, revealing an onyx-centered necklace. And how he felt devious. He grabbed it and was gone.

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Shalos and Patrick saw him, standing in front of them, his shadow in full chaos and his right hand a necklace, bearing a soul, and his grin, that devil's smile, ominously giving reason for Shalos' worried eyes and Patrick's loss of hope, again.

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# Lost in Translation VI

Apr 14 2009

Raanil entered the Tower. Three other people were sitting in the room; a woman with a blue robe, an old man, and a man with a big trident. The old man addresses him. "Ah, you have come. Quickly, we must prepare!"

"Who is this?" Raanil asked eying the other two.

"The only other ally that I have in this trying time. You remember Adalia, the Priestess of the Deeps, and her guardian, and now this is the important matter..." The old man turned away for a moment then gave Adalia and Raanil a parchment of scroll.

"What is this?" Raanil asked unrolling it.

"This is a prophecy, that was written before the death of the Seer. It is our only hope against the Abomination that the Bloodmages and Shadowlords have created." said the old man. "You two must find someone in this prophecy and unlock their true power to defeat the Abomination."

"But why us? Surely there are more powerful mages." Adalia asked.

The old man placed a hand on each of their shoulders. "You two are my most trusted mages, I don't trust anyone else and He is searching for this prophecy, too." Suddenly the sound of an explosion echoed through the tower. "Now you two must go to your own realm! Quickly before the Shadowlords have reached this tower!" Raanil and Adalia nodded and teleported to a small grove on the surface.

Raanil addressed the woman. "I didn't expect to see you there, Adalia. I thought you had disappeared since you entered the Deep Caverns."

She answered with a smile, "Oh that test was easy but since we are being chased I must return there." A jet of water suddenly appeared from the ground and Adalia disappeared then Raanil teleported to his own tower and study the Prophecy.

Raanil arrived at his tower and immediately call Naish "Naish I want you to reawaken the guards and raise the protection level to it's highest."

"I would do it Master but there is someone calling on the scrying pool."

"Display it now." he commanded. An orb in a nearby wall glowed and a projection of Adalia appeared in the room and began to speak.

"I have detected the Abomination, you must quickly take that sword from her."

"Where is he now?"

"He is inside the tower where girl lives, you must take that sword now!"

Raanil nodded then teleported to the tower. The tower is ruined same as before but he feels something strange and know that is the Abomination. I must be careful, he thought then entered the bedroom and silently took the sword. He then muttered few words and the ring Adrasha wore

glowed red then faded away. Now I can track her and she will be protected at least from several attacks, he thought again and suddenly a strange feeling nears the room. In his mind eye he sees the Abomination. He quickly teleports.

He arrived on a beach with a cave in front of him. From the cave the Deep One appeared and said, "Mistress has been waiting." When they entered the cave, the Deep One give him an amulet. "Wear it," he said right before he submerged under the water.

Raanil put the amulet on and jumped into the water. He wasn't surprised to find he could now breath in the water. He quickly followed the Deep One.

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## Foul Omens

By Nioca - Apr 19 2009

"Here they come!" The lookout shouted. Griseham noted the lookout's exuberance with a smile. Indeed, having new ships would be a blessing. It'd allow them to protect Tantonian waters from any Kingdom incursion.

The first ships to come into sight were the original Tantonian ships. Then came the first new one, a large galleon entitled the *Brightstar*. Then a corvette named *Sapphire*, a Man-of-War christened *Nimaster*, and another Galleon called *Sea Tamer*. Griseham watched in awe as still five more ships pulled into Tantonian's harbor. Indeed, it was getting a bit crowded. *Vengeance*, a Man-of-War. *Eagle-eye*, a slim corvette. *Silkwind*, a galleon with sails that, for some reason, were purple. Then *Duelist* and *Imp*, the final two corvettes.

Griseham smiled. The Tantonian Exilarchy was now, at the very least, a formidable naval power. They had an advantage that rebellions on the Mainland did not: they did not have to fend off the Kingdom's considerable army. Merely fight off the Kingdom fleet, should they attack. And with the Exilarchy's shipwands, they could take on whatever ship the Kingdom decided to throw at them.

However, his smile faded at the appearance of a rather bedraggled Anaya. She escorted a man with her; he was soaking wet and shivering persistently. Something on the faces of the people that surrounded him, however, indicated that it wasn't with cold. Indeed, it was a pleasantly warm morning.

Griseham quickly headed to the town hall. Anaya was headed for it anyway. He entered, catching Mayor Gabthen's attention. He said nothing, but turned and faced the door.

Anaya entered with the man, and the atmosphere instantly changed. An indescribable feeling of dread fell over the room, and the man himself seemed to possess an aura of the otherworldly. Griseham looked at his surrounding comrades oddly; he didn't feel anything different. He then motioned Anaya forward. "What's wrong?"

"We found him floating along on a plank of wood off the coast. He's been like this the entire time. Whenever you ask him something, he just mumbles..." Anaya stated with a shiver. The aura of despair was definitely affecting her as well.

Griseham looked up as a mage entered. Then he looked closely at the man. "Why does he look familiar...?"

"That's Kurtil." Mayor Gabthen said sorrowfully. "He's my brother. He was serving aboard the *Davos*, and-"

Griseham and Anaya exchanged a glance of alarm. If he was serving aboard the *Davos*, but was found clinging to a piece of wreckage... "Mage!" Griseham yelled. He pointed at a small pool of clear water. "Scry the *Davos*, and fast!"

The mage nodded and went over to the pool. With a brief incantation, he stared intently into it. "I don't see anything..."

"Try scrying... Damn it, who was the captain of the *Davos*?" Griseham asked frantically. He marched over to a shelf of books and pulled one out. Flipping through it, he then found what he was looking for. "Scry Captain Potos."

The mage nodded again and started another incantation. A minute went by with the tension growing thicker. Then the mage gasped. "Sir! He's... He's dead!"

"How?" Griseham demanded.

"I don't know! He's just floating in the water... with wreckage..."

Everyone in the room let out a sigh, save for Kurtil. They had gained nine ships, but had also lost one as well. Griseham turned to face Kurtil. "Kurtil, what happened?"

Kurtil seemed to start mumbling. The others shivered, and Griseham gave them an odd look again. He persisted with the questioning. "Who did this?"

More mumbling. Anaya was fidgeting anxiously, and finally couldn't take it anymore. She crossed the room and stood opposite of the almost-mumbling Kurtil. Griseham tried again. "Is there anything you'd like to tell me?"

Kurtil still seemed unresponsive. Mayor Gabthen and the mage joined Anaya in staying as far away from the man as possible. "Anything at all? Did the captain give you an order, was there a message to convey?"

At this, the man stopped mumbling. He looked up and stared Griseham right in the eyes, and with a strong tone that belied his frail behavior, muttered two words. "Fear me."

Anaya, the mage, and the Mayor shrank against the wall. The words had hit like arrows. Griseham, while unable to feel the aura of dread they felt, did feel the dread of those words.

The man stared about momentarily, as if in a daze. Then, with a primal scream, he yanked a black dagger out of his shirt and slashed it against his throat. Blood sprayed everywhere as the man cut stroke after stroke. Griseham grabbed the man's hand, but the man named Kurtil seemed to possess unnatural strength. He shrugged Griseham off, stood straight for a moment, then



collapsed. Blood covered almost every surface and everyone in the room. The dagger clattered to the floor, mysteriously unstained with blood.

Anaya approached. The aura of dread could still be felt, though it was somewhat weaker now that Kurtil was dead. Griseham picked the dagger up and looked it over. Then he looked at Anaya and Mayor Gabthen. They all then looked at the corpse that was once Kurtil, and pondered what kind of foul omen now plagued them.

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## The Falling

By Azuma - Apr 23 2009

Patrick breathless was utterly breathless as he watched Esrever walk towards him. The madman seemed different. The palpable aura of dread remained but there was something else that quavered Patrick so. His uncertainty, however, was extinguished as Esrever laid a hand on his shoulders. And all presumptions were answered as Patrick lost himself in his eyes. It was beautiful. He saw the total discord within the beast and he was entranced by it, lured by it. He was beckoned and he answered. He was drawing near, he was to embrace it. He was. "No!" Patrick managed to pull himself out of the trance. He shoved Esrever away from him but the latter just grinned. Patrick fell to a nearby seat and was deeply contemplating what happened. Shalos, standing nearby, noted it all in his annotations. He turned to look at Esrever but he was already leaving, walking towards Josephine's quarters.

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"Oh, daughter of heaven." He whispered to her, kneeling beside. His tone had no malice. "Remember, remember dear. Remember it all. You will soon be awoken precious. Soon." A tendril from Esrever's shadow flung a hairstrand from the lady's forehead, as Esrever's hand itself was gliding on the lady's cheek. "The chains that holds you down will wither away." Esrever looked deeply into the closed eyes of the sleeper. "You shall be free again, the way you should be forever. Unconfined, unhampered, untamed." And Esrever neared, to whisper it, the lady's true self. "Love."

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She dreamt them. The gods. The aspects of existence. Was it only a dream? ...or was it more? A shattered mirror of an old past?

There was only Chaos at first. Nothing was when all things were. Only the perpetual uncertainty is... but there was something in uncertainty that sprang forth. Something elusive and yet, can be found anywhere, even within Chaos itself. The dreamer could not see it well but she felt it clearly. It was "was" was it" hope. Hope? A continuous longing for a new existence, a new horizon, a new dawn, a new" life. It was hope, and it conceived the world, and with it, the two aspects that governed it, Malice and Benevolence. they warred each other, as they had always. Malice wanted it all. Hope, the world, everything, all in his grasp, all in his power. He needed

just to remove Benevolence, and all he wanted will be, and he was successful. Malice felled Benevolence. He gloated and hope was shattered.

Out of this, he cannot stand by anymore, this entropy. He has to bring justice into this grievance. That is his nature, the absolution of rectitude. From the Chaos, Order appeared and he brought judgment. He took the felled one's blood and molded it to an image of him, with his own blood. Hope included hers, memoirs of her felled son. Malice, the envy that he is, added his own but not without the wary eyes of Order. Chaos, too, included his own, no reason why and no reason not to. The amalgam resulted in two beings: Man and Balance. The former was their own image, a reflection of the aspects. A being capable of thought and emotions. Benevolence's blood made them good innately but the blood of the other gods ran through him. He could be anything, something the gods cannot be. The being was different from the lumbering beasts whose only purpose is to exist, his reason, his essence, was why to exist. That was the premise. The latter was the spark of the amalgam. The force that brings to fruition the equality that is man. Balance, the ever stoic one.

The dream continued, events, happenings, they all forwarded quickly. The dreamer felt uneasy. It was like memories being drawn from the very reserves of her psyche. The visions slowed down, though, as a figure appeared. He was very familiar, familiar enough to sense the aura of abhorrence around him. And the dreamer neared to him, knowing what he is fully, she went closer and closer" and closer" and"

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Josephine woke up. Patrick was there beside him and grasping her hand. She responded by holding his tightly too. And she smiled at him, the most beautiful thing Patrick ever laid eyes on.

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Esrever stood beside a window overlooking the plane he controlled. He saw the horizon, the edge of where his eyes can view, and that it was. The edge. All ended there, the path continuing down to nothingness. He was just there, staring at the absolute end. Shalos awaited nearby. He knows Esrever enough to know he won't be irked by calling out his attention but he also knows Esrever enough to let him be at these moments. He was calm, a fact most rare for him, in a sense that he hasn't moved. But the fade faded instantaneously, revealing the concise chaos he personifies. He turned to Shalos, speaking in his always distant tone.

"He is scared, Shalos." Esrever walked away from the window, brushing against the puzzled scribe-shade. Shalos shrugged. "I highly doubt that." He held his chin in a peculiar manner, implying deep thinking. "I mean, you inexplicably killed their firstborn, even with no hidden, ulterior motive, then, you pro-" Shalos was cut off when a black tendril wrapped around his mouth. On the good side, it let go after attaining the desired effect; his silence.

"The paladin? Let him enjoy his moments with the lady. They are few." Esrever flung a necklace at Shalos, which he only caught barely. "Listen." Shalos held it against his insubstantial ear and concentrated. He heard sobbing, not with his ear, but with his immaterial mind. And it was a child's one. He was about to speak, clearly about how deviously low Esrever has become, trapping an innocent child's soul, maybe even just for the heck of it, but that wasn't so. The same tendril wrapped around, again letting go after Shalos quieted.

"I did not do it, if that was to be your query." Esrever took back the necklace, holding it up, perpendicular to his eyes. He gazed upon the onyx piece it has. Solid as it was, there was a sense of fluidity that can be seen if beheld steadily. He remembered the woman as he did, though it wasn't her nakedness he recalled her for. There was nothing to look at either but there was something, something he knows, something he kept deep in his mind, and possibly, something that he had past feared.

"Shalos, do you recall it?" The question surprised the recipient. Shalos replied with a shrug, totally clueless on what the madman stated.

"You do not?" Esrever gave out a dried out chuckle, almost not one at all. It was disturbing. "I am quite surprised that you do not remember it Shalos." Esrever let loose another round of his disturbing cackle. The shade, still, displayed another quizzical look and gestures. "It would help if you narrow it." Shalos replied, a tone of annoyance in his voice.

"Surely you jest, Shalos, and you are doing quite well! Come now, come now, do you not remember it? Even a fragment or a trace? It must impossible for a historian in a magnitude as you could forget such a ridicule such as it." Esrever put a hand on Shalos' shoulder, almost as if treating the shade as a friend.

"Fine! I forgot! I forgot" this thing you so think as a joke. Such a ridicule that I musn't Rrrrrriiiiiiggggghhhhtttt forget." Shalos exasperation was apparent.

"You jest, I laugh." Esrever laughed.

"Tell it, dammit!"

"The prophecy! The damn prophecy Shalos! The one that was supposed to claim my end. And it's wheels are starting to turn Shalos, slowly, and soon." Esrever gave out another course of laughter. His shadow complied with his mood. It was laughing, more darkly than Esrever.

"Oh, that. It must have slipped my mind." Shalos rolled his eyes.

"Oh how beautiful it will, how beautiful it will be." Esrever continued his maniacal laughter, holding the necklace up high and gazing at it, as if the keystone of an evil plot. He sensed the frightened child's soul and he savored the fear. Shalos stood unmoved, partly because he was irked, and partly because he doesn't have a cow's hide on what Esrever was jabbering about. Esrever stopped his malicious laughter though, when Patrick slammed the door close.

"Ah, paladin of Justicairne, what brings you here?" Esrever's gaze wasn't answered. Patrick was looking down. Esrever just grinned.

"A prophecy" for your" end"" Patrick whispered, but his roughened tone betrayed him. Both heard him clearly. Shalos' gaze followed Esrever as he tread lightly towards the depraved paladin. It was like before, Esrever placed a hand on Patrick's shoulder, his gaze now, met his. And Patrick, abandoned paladin, a lost lover, lost himself again, in the eyes of the fiend, a trace of amethyst haze flowing from them.

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# Histories

By Luca - May 2 2009

“ And he saith, "Break up the mountains where the hermit-folk can hide,  
And sift the red and silver sands lest bone of saint abide,

...

*Twenty-three years ago:*

---

"Officer Darnel," said acting High Mage Stalt. "This is Nebulan, he'll be, essentially, your superior for the duration of this mission." Darnel attempted to study this mysterious person sitting at the far corner of the room, but dust and darkness wouldn't allow but a glimmer of his hood. "There is a reason we're using two mages as infiltrators to the enemy, and that is that no one seems to care about the rebellion." Darnel turned her sight to Stalt.

"Oh? Is that what we're calling it now?" She said. Stalt sighed and took a seat at a nearby table, creating a loud creak as he sat at on a chair. Possibly attributed to his build being similar to that of a small whale.

"Yes. Like it or not this *is* a rebellion, it's just that people have so much fear over using that word. That they would rather call it what it is not. Perhaps you aren't putting the pieces together now, but seeing as how you are only twenty, and I have lived more than three of your life times...Oh yes, they aren't calling it a rebellion now...They will. But all the King wants to do about this is let the nobles deal with the problems in their own territory. He puts too much faith in them that they will do the right thing." He pulled out a map of the lower western section of Andaria and pointed to a desert that overlooked the great sea. "There's a camp here that has a large number of these rebels. We believe they are about to mass a full attack on that city," he said as his finger slowly drifted up the map.

"My home," Said Neb, breaking his silence.

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Their ship arrived about forty-five miles from their target. The barren desert's watery coast produced, out of seemingly nowhere, a city, whose lights rolled around the interior but stopped at the mystery of the darkness outside the city's gate; the light appearing to be scared of the dark. Such was the life here in the town of Holt. They slept inside that night, it would be the last time they would do so for a long time.

"Rise," said Nebulan softly. Dawn had touched their stone building and reflected its orange clay walls around the city like a warning light.

"What time is it?" Darnel said struggling to remember where she was.

"Morning," Nebulan replied as he walked outside. Camels greeted the mage with large flopping lips and breath that reminded her of dying animals. "Didn't think we would get these," Neb said. "But it seems the acting High Mage takes us to be lazier than most." His tone suggested an implied disappointment in Darnel's less than quick decent from the building. Darnel climbed to the top of the camel with ease and gave Neb a distasteful look.

Their journey began.

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"How did you know High Mage Tibas?" Darnel said now that the city had escaped view. A small amount of nausea was starting to creep up in her stomach from the sloshing of the camel.

"He was my trainer, he taught me from age of fifteen."

"How did he die?"

Neb turned he head to address the question. "A dagger was "carelessly" and "accidentally" lobbed at his spine," he finished coldly and turned his head back.

"Is it going to be like this the whole trip?"

"Hmm?"

"You being a jackass. I was put with you to learn, because you have experience doing this type of thing. You're supposed to be teaching me. But all you seem to want to do it ignore me and give pithy and laconic answers."

"I don't teach."

She stopped her camel.

Neb noticed and turned his camel to face her. "Alright, what would you like to know about riding a camel then?"

Darnel started moving again. "You can start by telling me the best way to throw up without dismounting this creature," she said passing him.

---

They made camp out in the sands that night, beneath a small group of palm trees, trees that in this land, were separated by miles of lifeless dust. Darnel lay flat on her back. Though it was night, the sand still warmed her looking up at the clear night sky. She was not accustomed to these conditions: the beating sun, the hot temperatures, the grainy sand assaulting any exposed skin, and all the other conditions that accompanied life in the desert. She had an inner laugh at the thought of people willingly living out here. She rolled her hear to see Nebulan sleeping a couple of feet away. She noticed a look on his face that was more at peace with the world when he slept with the feeling of sand on his skin. *This is where he lives, perhaps not anymore* , she thought, *But he is still living here right now, in his mind.*

---

"What...is your name." Nebulan said as he woke her for the morning. Darnel's eyes flew open and then shut as the intense desert light blinded her.

"Jenn," she replied wiping the sand out of her tired eyes.

"Alright then Jenn, are you ready to continue."

"If I say no?"

Nebulan smiled. "Then you will be left alone here in the desert sands to cook into scorpion food."

"Very good," she said getting up and on her camel.

---

The journey ended, Nebulan dismounted his camel and ducked down behind a sand dunes. Below him there laid the rebel camp, it lay in a valley carved out by dark orange rocks. The camp consisted of three large tents and two wooden tower-like structures.

"There's five patrolling the back," Neb said.

"No, there's another one...there." Darnel said pointing to a barrel beside the closest tent.

"Good Jenn, you're learning by watching.

They waited many moments for something to change. Eventually it did; the guards continued to move about their patrols, but they patterns were not fixed. At some point in time, they would only be left with one or two guards behind the tent. It wouldn't happen often, but it would happen, and it looked like it was happening right now.

Taking Nebulan's cue, Darnel carefully slid down the sandy dune down to the camp. Neb took the intuitive and grabbed a guard from behind, holding his mouth. He placed his free hand to the top of the guard's head and mumbled words softly as the guard fell to the ground. "Jenn!" Neb let out in a shrill whisper. Darnel flipped her head around to find the other guard coming up at her. Taken by surprise, she unconsciously let out a firebolt that hit the guard with a loud explosion.

Neb frowned at the charred body, "You haven't been a mage for very long have you?" Darnel shook her head.

"For future reference that was very bad," he said grabbing some barrels and making a defensive position.

"What are you doing?"

"In about seventeen seconds there will be about seventeen guards trying to kill us," he said without stopping. Darnel glanced back at the cliff she had just slid off of; it was too steep to attempt to climb back up. Dj'you check to see what was in those barrels? Neb turned his head. Darnel raced over to the barrels. One was standing up and had a hole in it. With a sniff she jerked her head away. Neb came over and sniffed it. "Is that...rum?" he asked.

"Boom," Darnel said calmly. A guard came out from far side of the tent.

"We need to leave," he told Darnel, who ran up, punched the guard in the face, and continued to move around the outside of the camp, followed by Neb. As another guard came up she did as before, punching him flat onto the ground. "It's alright Jenn, you can use fire, **they're already onto us now...** he said in an irritated tone.

---

As they ran by the third tent, bolts of fire tore through the wall at them.

"Mage!" Darnel shouted dropping to the ground to avoid the flaming projectiles. Neb blindly let loose several orbs of purple energy back into the tent as he ran by and grabbed Darnel's arm.

"Don't stop moving," he said. They ran into a narrow part of the valley, flanked by the hard orange rocks as guard continued to pelt them with any sort of throwing weapon as they were too far away for sword to be of any use. Darnel sprang up briefly from her defense position to send out three more firebolts, taking down another two guards, as Neb to her right did the same.

Guards that continued to approach lobbed whatever was nearby at the two and ducked back in behind boulders and crates, none wanted to run up with a sword to *that* death trap...

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## Histories II

By Ackrovan - May 4 2009

*Ackrovan leaned back at the sight of the carnage around him. Not a bird, nor a tree could be spared the blood bath that was unfolding before him. Turin and Ackrovan had completely surprised the enemy, leaving them little chance to live out the battle. Their entire forward army was completely separated from the city. They were surrounded now by Ackrovan's own troops, being killed off. A few had been already taken prisoner, but the many soldiers under the flag of Jellinta were too proud of their country to surrender to the Kingdom of Andaria. They still fought, under the hail of arrows, and blades that were arrayed around them. If they were Ackrovan's own troops, he would gladly die besides them.*

*But they were not. They were the enemy. War is grim business, but business still*

*Ackrovan looked up towards the sky. It had barely broke into midday. This wars end would last throughout the nights.*

---

*Lord Turin's troops had gotten well ahead of him. This Ackrovan knew. As he steps into the city of Kalkari, to say it was buried in fire and madness would be understatements. Turin had shown no mercy to the peoples of Jellinta. Already the massive market district of the once rich, proud city had been destroyed, its riches toiled away into Turin's pockets. The temple that laid just ahead was stripped of its idols and wealth, reduced of nothing more than broken bones of priests and the tears of desperate people who thought the gods would save them. People laid all around Ackrovan as he entered. Men and women, as they saw the approaching soldiers, ran in all*

*directions, crashing into either each other, or the Turin's spearman. The archers outside blindly fired upon the masses, hoping to catch as many people from retreating into their homes, becoming obstacles in the looting of the city. Armored horsemen charged into the crowds after the soldiers, killing both of the groups in several swift strikes. Battle Mages let lose their pets and beasts, curious at how they would fare against those without arms. Magical flame became mixed in with the fires of the peoples souls, burning away the life in them. The moans of the living was hidden in the bodies of the dead. Men and women. Children. Brothers and sisters. Old women with fruit baskets. Old men with memories of youth. Uncles and aunts, daughters and sons. Cousins, some twice removed, some thrice replaced. Friends and relatives. Husbands and wives. Sisters in law. Teachers, merchants, doctors, priests, guards, students, scholars, librarians, shipman, contractors, the noble, the rich, the poor, the sick. They were all dead.*

*The only advantage Ackrovan had over his soldiers was that he was on horseback, so he could not catch the smell.*

---

*If Turin was too stop at the palace, then he would be a fool beyond anyone could comprehend. The palace guards have nearly fallen, and the queen has barraged up herself in her personal keep. And soon enough, Turin will have taken it as another prize too add too his collection.*

---

## Dirty Rotten Thieves

By Jewels - May 7 2009

Adrasha awoke chilled, both physically and emotionally. Where was she? A residual dread and the cold stone floor beneath her frigid body brought back memories of a not-so-distant dungeon. *Was it all a dream?* Her escape, her island, reclaiming her son? Numb fingers flew to her neck finding it as bare as the rest of her body. *No! Oh, God no!* Shakily she picked herself up, stumbling as her limbs protested the movement. No it was not a dream. Here was her bed and there the fireplace. Mentally she reached out, desperate to feel the familiar pull of his mind... but there was nothing. The shock of the emptiness tore at her very soul, for always before had she felt *something*. No matter the distance of their separation, the pull had always been there. From the day of the accursed necklace's creation it had been there. But now there was absolutely nothing for her frantic mind to grab onto. Every single shred of hope was shattered. He was gone! Really gone! She had truly failed him, unable to free him from his prison, unable to save him. All reason to live drained from her. She had no purpose left. It was time to end it all.

Adrasha stepped towards where she had laid Atholasha... only to find it missing as well. Adrasha swore, throwing things about to try and find it when a new tug pulled at her mind. Though it was different, alien in a way, hope still flooded back into her. Was it Tyler? She couldn't tell. He had never felt like that before but still... there was a call for her and she *must* answer.



She opened the wardrobe, intent on finding some decent clothing to wear. Her anger boiled at the emptiness of it. *Those dirty rotten thieves!* All her shirts and trousers were gone and all that was left were two simple dresses that had hung there since day one. How Adrasha loathed dresses. She would have thrown them out but for the material she couldn't bring herself to waste. Now they were all she had left since the blouse and trousers she had arrived in were ragged beyond salvage. Maybe she could pull something off the pirate corpses outside. But not now. No. There was no time to lose. Despite her misgivings, she threw one on before jumping into her boots. It fit rather snug, but at least it fit.

Looking around, she spied and grabbed her dagger to take with her before breaking into a run. She burst out of the tower knowing only the pull, only the desire to be together again. It was difficult to sprint in the dress but Adrasha didn't stop running until she reached the edge of the island. Breathless she looked longingly to the southwest. What was she to do now? She had no boat. A thought formed in her mind as a whisper and rolled off her tongue as a shout. "Raani!"

---

## Change of Power

By Luca - May 10 2009

“

And chase the Giaours flying night and day, not giving any rest,

”

For that which was our trouble comes again out of the west.

---

*About five years ago...*

Castle Stalt was, indeed, a magnificent achievement of construction. Unknown were the number of rock quarries that had been driven lower and lower into the earth to bring up this construction of stone. At the center of the city was a monstrous keep with four small towers at its corners and on large one that rose up several stories over the highest floor of the battlements in the middle. It was in this tower, that all of the surrounding village could be seen.

“Sir, it's getting worse, the rebel army is expanding. They'll hit the walls in a few minutes,” reported Sharon. She was a small woman with black curling hair who frequently fret over small and insignificant errors in paperwork. Currently she was traveling briskly in and out of the room collecting new information about a small mob of rebel forces while casting worried glances out the window.

“Sharon,” said High Mage Stalt. “There is no army. They’re nothing more than a handful of angry villagers. I don’t have time for this! The king needs to see me for something relating to taxes.”

“High Mage, this is hardly a couple of drunken villagers, there are more than fifty of them and more keep coming out of the village, they’re armed and dangerous and you don’t even want the castle gate locked? She replied in exasperation. The man stopped and shot her with a look to make perfectly clear how much he was not in the mood to have talks of his profits delayed.

“What would you like, *my assistant?*” He said with a painful amount of a condescending tone.

“Get someone on it, if you’re too busy,” she piped back in a panic.

Stalt stood in the doorway for a few seconds before reminding himself how little he cared. “Find Darnel... anybody. You’re just overreacting anyway. I’ll be in my quarters for about another hour before my transport leaves,” he finished and casually walked out. Sharon cast another worried glance at the crowd of people slowly walking from the nearby village to Castle Stalt as the sun began to go down below the horizon.

---

Darnel walked through the large bronze doors with a confidence that could shield her from the explosion of a super nova. Over a decade with Nebulan hunting people that started these rebellions had taught them both powerful tactics that made them great adversaries in battle. Though what she was doing now was not a direct attack on her enemy, her clear focus and professional attitude swept doubt and fear out of the room like a warm summer wind. Her short orange hair overlooking the sunset that was illuminating Stalt’s transport seemed to share colors and make it glow with heavenly light. But soon the slow and steady heart rhythm of focus and determination skipped a beat when a loud explosion was heard.

Sharon nearly knocked herself over to turn to see what it was. Stalt’s transport spontaneously exploded and men jumped out from nearby building rushing what was left of the carriage. Darnel slowly turned her head to find that the “small handful” of rebels that Stalt previously saw had multiplied into over two hundred, adding to an unknown number that had been hiding out inside the castle walls.

“Get Nebulan, and alert the guards. We’re at war,” said Darnel

---

She stood now above large wooden table that held a map of the castle and surrounding city. As advisors and guards exchanged the best places to set up defensive positions. Among these advisors was Nebulan, who looked out the windows of the central tower of this castle. These “exchanges” the guards were making started growing louder and louder. Panic was setting in these people who had only swung their swords a handful of times. Castle Stalt wasn’t geographically in any area that was commonly under territorial debate by warring nations. The Kingdom conquered this area long before the castle was even built, but now guards had risen up just as if they were under siege. Darnel’s expression still held confidence, but if you watched her long enough, you would see a smile occasionally find its way to the surface of her stern lips. The bickering from the highest ranks of guards started to bore her. She walked calmly over to where Nebulan stood silently at the window unnoticed.

“They’ve pushed them back,” he said, “to the western quarter. They’re scared. The guards are scared of the rebels and the rebels are scared of them. The rebels however, have just enough courage to keep going.”

“Or maybe it’s fear that drives them to do what they do” Darnel added. Nebulan turned to her, who was looking out over the western quarter. Then, as if not seeing what he was looking for, turned back to the village. Darnel giggled quietly.

“You never could tell what I was thinking, Nebulan.”

“Not so,” he said in a voice little louder than a whisper.

“Really...What, then, am I thinking now.”

Nebulan didn’t speak for many seconds. But he had to say something, and he took aim at her compassionate side. When he did speak, he did so quickly now, but still in a whisper. “You are afraid for them, not of them. And you fear for yourself. You fear death.”

“Fear denies faith,” she said quickly and in a low voice back to him. Her phrase 'fear denies faith' had been a value she had for a long time.

“Yeah Jenn, but that doesn’t mean you still aren’t afraid.”

“No Nebulan, no it doesn’t.” Her voice returned to normal and she walked back to the map. “Are you four done yet?” She was now projecting the appearance of irritation even though she had none. But in the eye of people who don’t know you that well, irritation can easily cover up fear. The guards looked at her but said nothing.

“Foolish me, letting a few 'high ranking' guards in on this strategy. It’s obvious you four can’t pick out your own cloths in the morning.” One of the guards started to say something.

“Charles, I know your mother,” she interrupted in an even stronger voice, “and you three are just lucky that yours are dead.” And then she was calm again. With a look of disgust she turned back to the map and pointed. “It looks like they’ve been pushed back to the western quarter...”

“That’s a residential area!” Interrupted one of the guards.

“That’s a good job Wilson” she said sarcastically without looking at him. Looking at him wouldn’t have done any good anyway, he was obviously blind if he couldn’t tell he had already pissed her off.

“You get your people here, and your people here, to corner them in. Charles, you put your people at the gate, and Wilson...Since you know so much about the western quarter, kindly guide Nebulan to the enemy for... pacification.” Without another word that could embarrass them further, they exited to collect the guards under their control. Nebulan exited last. “Nebulan,” Darnel called. He turned around.

“I’ll be careful,” he replied and they both turned.

---

He walked with the same focused attitude that Darnel held at the tower. Two guards followed in his wake to join the others just ahead of them. One of the two was the idiot Wilson, the other was

new and expendable as far as he was concerned. “You ever intend on being anything greater than a guard, Sergeant Wilson?”

“I suppose.” Nebulan stopped and turned to face him.

“I mean diffidently, sir.”

Nebulan resumed walking to the western quarter. “What would you do if you were in control?”

Wilson thought about this question for a painful amount of time. “I...Uhh...would probably...get my guards to....enter from the...” Nebulan sighed, pondering over the last two minutes of his life he would never get back. “Next time just say ‘no, I have no idea, I just look good in the uniform’.”

“Yes sir.” Two barely audible cracking sounds came from either side of them. It was the sign that the other groups of guards were in the appropriate positions. Upon reaching the entrance to the western quarter Nebulan prepared to send back a similar signal. The entrances to the subdivisions of the city were always marked by large stone arches with iron gates that spanned twenty feet long and wide that could be sealed in cases just like this one. Nebulan pulled a small, brown oval package out of one of the hidden pockets of his robe and threw it against the stone gate. The explosives inside the package made a loud cracking sound to signal the other groups of guards to enter the quarter. Wilson walked up to unlock the gate. It made a high pitch squeal as its massive iron pins rubbed against the rusty hinges as it opened.

“Watch the rooftops and windows,” Nebulan warned as he entered followed by Wilson’s team. The buildings in this quarter were far from structurally flawless. As a mostly residential area, many manor owners had the ability to pick empty spots and place buildings anywhere it was convenient when the castle was new. It was a policy that was still held today, although there was not any room to place any new buildings now. The lack of a uniform building style, or even general shape had caused this quarter to have many buildings clumped up in a tight and untidy group. A corner of a building would occasionally dart out into the road. Yet still it held some sort of style to it. The cobblestone walkway, supplied by transport ships to keep them steady on light loads, made up the road. In this higher class town, the stones were carved precisely and delicate fit with the net stone. Large trees were also found randomly beside the road and wherever else there was room. Though it rarely met up to the standards of a capitol city, this quarter was a testament to the fact that even out of the lack of mandates for architectural design, there can be art that rivals those who choose follow that course.

The road they were now traveling on was one of the oldest within the castle’s walls. The buildings on either side of the party were made by the original builders of the keep itself. These civilian houses were made of stone and lined with iron at the bottom, long rusted by now. These houses stacked together neatly like a jigsaw puzzle, leaving no room in between. They rounded another corner of a building and found their target. At the end of this road there lay a small cul-de-sac with about twenty rebels standing upright, waiting for them. Even Wilson turned around to look behind him in realization of this trap...Or maybe he was just scared... But even instant reaction couldn’t allow them to get into a better position now. The rebels had clearly planned for guards to roam down this road, and they were clearly prepared for it. Behind them, the only exit, was blocked by twenty more rebels with a higher average class of weapon in hand (now that this quarter had been sufficiently pillaged).

Only a few seconds for realization was all that was allowed before the rebels charged at them. The fifteen guards in Wilson's group may have found themselves outnumbered but it would take more than rebels to break their moral. Their lack of experience helped them in that it made them cocky when facing rebels with little more than leather separating them from a sword's cut. The first wave of men hit the guards. The rebels kept their distance, obviously their main plan was to frighten the guards with their numbers when they ran at them. Since the guards didn't cower in fear as planned, the rebels weren't entirely sure what to do. A few of them blindly swung their swords at them. A few, almost appearing intentional, flung themselves on the guards swords in some sort of attempted leap attack.

Fire harmlessly danced along Nebulan's fist. He punched on of the rebels in the head with a quick snapping motion. The fire upon making contact with his enemy transferred to him and anyone he bumped into as he flailed around the area. Nebulan refrained from using anymore spells in this close combat to prevent any sort of backfire from killing them all. He instead grabbed a dead rebel's sword and started swinging. The fire eventually went out, but not before taking down six rebels with it and filling the air with smells of burnt hair, flesh, and dirty cloths.

The guards, being cocky and wearing a significantly higher class of armor were a bit more daring in the skirmish. Stabbing without the fear of getting stabbed back. Should a guard feel that his enemy was about to strike back, he would unconsciously grab the guard next to him and use him as a human shield. This was how many of the guards didn't make it back. Now the rebel's moral was starting to crack. One, then two, then four started to run past the knights and down the road, probably to lure them into another trap. A few of the guards failed to think, if they ever did, started to chase them. In this group was Wilson. His presence only made more knights want to chase the surviving rebels.

"Wilson!" The mage called, but Wilson's head was too high up in the clouds to look back. A knight did come running up to him. He was from Charles's team.

"Nebulan! They've broken through the gate, the keep has been attacked!"

---

The large bronze doors burst open with a rage that could move mountains. "Where is she!" Nebulan roared into the empty room. He moved with the same demonic speed that carried him up the many floors of the tower. The rebels had attacked and broken through the castle gate. That was the hard part. It was a simple matter to reach the keep and clear it since the other guards were all personally being commanded by the four Sergeants. The keep at the time of the attack may have only been guarded by twenty knights.

"I think they might have escaped..." said the knight quietly.

"You think?!" Nebulan yelled. His patience and apparently sanity were beginning to wear thin. There was blood coming out of several cuts on his leg, hand, and face. He was exhausted by the fight and the run here and the thought of losing his old friend almost made him vomit.

"Well, her body isn't he..."

"I figured that out on my own, private," he said and ran out of the room.

---

“Ma’am?” said Sharon, who was strangely holding up quite well with the thought of possible death. Darnel stood overlooking a table in one of the keep’s secret rooms. It was a dark and musty room, accessed by a hidden door disguised as a wall. It was known to only three people, and Sharon was the only one still alive. Darnel had been looking at the overview of the town inside the castle walls as the latest report came in of where the rebels had gotten into. They seemed to be pouring in from everywhere, it was like the entire castle’s village was rebelling. Finally she began giving orders again. But she seemed to have temporarily misplaced her confidence for the time. Her solemn expression foreshadowed the regret she would keep with her for possibly the rest of her life.

“Sharon, get the knights, all of them. to get them back in to that western quarter. It...it seems to be where they are centered.”

“And then?”

“Lock the gates...And burn the quarter.” Sharon stood before her for a long moment before speaking again. Her face held only a look of shock. But her position forbid her do anything but say,

“Yes ma’am.”

---

## The Prophecy

By Bloodmoon - May 16 2009

Raanil emerged from the water and found himself still in a room with pools on each side. A deep one came out from the nearby door and waved his hand for Raanil to follow him. He stepped out from the pool and followed the deep one. They arrived at a door with a sign marking it as the library. The deep one stopped and said "The Priestess waits you inside," then the deep one left him.

He entered the library and was stunned by the view. Every wall was full of books. Adalia approached him. "Come we must discuss the prophecy now."

"Sure," Raanil answered. They walked to a nearby table and Raanil took out a glass tube from his backpack while Adalia took a book from the rack. The rack slid open revealing a glass box with a scroll inside. "Isn't that a little bit too easy?" he asked. Adalia smiled and waved her hand. The glass box suddenly glowed and Raanil spotted that invisible runes that were etched in each inch of the box. Raanil raised one of his eyebrow then opened the scroll on the table and Adalia used her scroll and merged it with Raanil's. The scrolls suddenly became one as if they had never been separated.

They started to translate it:

*Ender, Ender Justicairne awake!*

*When time is dark and all is despair,  
When death reigns free and shadow fills the air,  
When life submits to chaos, mankind beware.  
The Abomination seeks to kill and ensnare.*

*Ender, Ender, Justicairne keep watch!*

*Scent of terror, essence of nightmare,  
Thief of innocence, none does he spare.  
"Fear me!" does the immortal blackness declare.  
Cancerous debauchery of hexen lair.*

*Ender, Ender, Justicairne speak!*

*Observant enchanter, seek out with prayer  
The accursed Amazon, widow of warfare.  
It follows, peruses her, chains does she wear.  
Yet heart never crushed, the Free Spirit prepare.*

*Ender, Ender, Justicairne decide!*

*Daughter of ignorance and arrogance, take care.  
Mother of innocence and timidity, be aware.  
Before the Abomination, will you be laid bare.  
From your very heart, the soul shall he tear.*

*Ender, Ender, Justicairne rule!*

*Free spirit shall wield that blade most rare.  
Ender will seek out and find her there.  
It's chains of bondage she cannot forebear.  
Into the eyes of her destiny she stares.*

*Ender, Ender, Justicairne command!*

*The injustice and balance we must repair,  
Or a dire fate, all mankind will share.*

*Ender must meet Abomination to impair*

*Forever and always existing nowhere.*

*Ender, Ender, Justicairne avenge!*

It was the same as before but the scroll was humming a little and half the words were glowing. "Then its her," Adalia said to him.

Raanil nodded and watched his ring starting to glow, "I think she is awake now."

"Teleport her to my realm," Adalia answered.

"Yes but you need take this and plunge it to the Pool of Balance." Raanil took out Atholasha from under his robe.

Adalia asked, "Why I must do that?"

Instead of answering her directly, Raanil responded with a question of his own. "The prophecy stated only the Ender would appear but then what is the use of Pool of Balance?"

After pondering for a few moments she answered, "To balance the wielder so the Ender doesn't consume the wielder." Understandingly she nodded and took the sword while Raanil teleported to Adrasha.

He found himself on the southern beach of the isle. Adrasha yelled to him, 'What took you so long?'

---

## The Key and the Trigger

By Azuma - May 21 2009

The trinket glistened before his eyes, a black star crying for help. What shall he do with it? What shall he use it for? The child spirit within will never know but one thing. Fear.

---

Patrick pounded the table as he stared intently at Shalos. "Tell it." His exclamation quickly took the shade's attention.

"Tell what?"



"It. The- the tale. Legend! Prophecy- whatever it is."

"It's too late for you to be free."

The reply froze the paladin's excitement but the will to have hope to be free from his clutches thawed it back.

"No! There is a way! There must be a way!" Patrick tried to choke back the tears swelling in his eyes. He succeeded but only because of Shalos' reply.

"I'm doing you a favor Patrick. It's the least I could d-"

"Favor? What favor Shalos?" Denying me and Josephine hope for freedom from him? Is that a favor to you?!"

"There is no hope Patrick! No, hope to given, no hope to be denied! Forever there is no freedom for you, the lady, me! " and for him"" The last three words Shalos murmured almost sounded like a sad whisper.

Patrick was silenced by the shade scribe's reply. No hope for freedom for them? Truly disheartening, but the last part struck him the most. No freedom for"

"Him?" Patrick's intonation conveyed that he mused over the thought.

"Esrever." Shalos; sad voice seemed to show a trace of care for the maniacal, chaotic, murderous, damned madman.

"How is he a prisoner here?"

"A long story best not conveyed at this time."

"Well, I've got all damned eternity here, so?" Shalos sighed at the paladin's snark. He turned away from him, to try to ignore, but even in his insubstantiality, he felt Patrick's overbearing gaze.

"Fine. But do not blame me for any doubt or backslide you **will** have."

"What?"

"Ssh. The beginning for this was-"

"Eternity." A third voice interrupted the fateful tale. "The beginning was eternity, and on that premise, it shall end there too."

"Esrever." Patrick hissed.

He stood ominously between the two. Esrever felt different. The aura of uncertain despair he conveyed was there but it was stronger, darker, more primal, more" shattering. Patrick noticed a faint, amethyst haze flowing from the beast's eyes. No, it wasn't faint. It was clear to him but it" it" "Ugh." Patrick reeled back into a chair, his head in his hand.

Esrever grinned at the paladin's reaction. He put up a hand and leveled it with his eyes. He flicked his wrist around and saw it, the beautiful, beautiful haze. He half-chuckled as he rested down the arm. A piece of his robe, from the chest part, squirmed upwards towards his head and wrapped around his eyes, leaving a slit.

It was another enigma from the madman, Patrick thought, as he observed Esrever. He was still unexplainably disoriented but he did manage a question that so interested the abomination.

"What are we to you?"

"My, my" I should keep no secrets from you. After all, chaos has nothing laid hidden." Esrever's voice was still the dark, unnerving overtone but it was also calm, but reassuringly kind, but the one where the speaker never has to worry anything, even an imminent end. "You are my keyspark, Patrick. The final play in a game of infinity."

"Then, what of Josephine?! Is she just another tool to your ploy?"

Esrever crowed at the remark. He faced Patrick and even with his obsidian blindfold, the paladin felt his unnatural gaze. Esrever grinned, a contortion made by pure malice. The last, foul words Esrever mouthed struck the paladin deeply.

"She is your trigger."

---

"What is it, Shalos?" Esrever noted the shade's entry even without looking.

"Is the prophecy really coming into fruition?"

"You are the only to know me this long Shalos. And by that time, you know I never lie."

"Then, who is it? The Free Spirit? Have you seen her?"

Esrever grinned and held up the necklace he found on the woman and let out an evil cackle, shaking up the child spirit inside. "Shalos, scry the haemomancer you've found earlier."

Shalos nodded without muttering a word. In a moment, he was in a trance, a shade of amethyst hanged from his eyelids. It wasn't long when woke up from the daze. "He's underwater, near the isle you visited." He delayed for a while before speaking again "What are you planning Esrever?"

Esrever hid the necklace back into his shadow, ignoring the child spirit's plea not to be. He turned and faced the shade behind him and crafted a disarming grin. "A visit."

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## The Death of Griseham

By Nioca - May 22 2009

"I presume you're satisfied?" The shipwright asked. Griseham stared over the railing of the *Hurricane*, the Exilarchy's newest ship, at the waters below. The ship was swift, and looked utterly bizarre compared to the standard vessel. Two masts were suspended over the side of the ship, providing extra surface area for the wind to catch. Armed with several shipwands, and a number of ballistae and stonethowers, the *Hurricane* looked ready to wage war on whatever had the misfortune to look at it wrong.

"It's brilliant. Large. Fast. Heavily armed. And the shielding crystal I crafted should protect it from harm well." Griseham smiled widely. "I think we have the makings of a flagship here."

"Excellent! I'll send the design of the vessel to Horizon. With their shipyard, they should be able to start manufacturing these post-haste!" The shipwright exclaimed.

"It relies on Etyan timber, though, remember that." Griseham reminded him.

"True. But with our new ships, supplies shouldn't be an issue."

"Indeed." Griseham stated. "I see Tanton. It appears our gentle voyage is over."

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Griseham laid in bed, turning the black dagger over and over again in his hands. Anaya, in annoyance, had left, unable to stand the aura of dread around it. Griseham was equally baffled. He had thought his pendant was protecting him. But the pendant was laying on a nightstand, and was not bestowing any sort of effect. Yet he still could feel nothing but apathy toward the dark weapon.

Yet it felt... odd. Malleable. A distant part of him was yearning to do... something. But what it was exactly... escaped him.

A gentle thump carried itself to Griseham's ears. Pulling Tyinomatas from the nightstand and donning the pendant, he carefully stood. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. Something was wrong.

It came through the door like a blast of lightning. One moment, the room was devoid of any being save Griseham. Then it wasn't. A hellish creature stood before him, growling throatily. It stood on its back legs, revealing an ashen form that seemed to be... nothing of this world. Paralyzed with shock, Griseham could only watch as the creature's paws changed into blackened hands, with claws at the end of its twenty-eight fingers. And it seemed to laugh. Laugh at Griseham with a deep voice straight from the maw of an abyss.

Griseham regained his senses and pointed Tyinomatas at the creature. A white bolt flew, but with an extended hand, the creature projected a barrier. Griseham fired futilely into the shield. As he did, the creature launched its own attack. Tendrils of what could only be described as malice extended out to him. Then, like arrows, they flung themselves at Griseham's heart. However, they dissipated before they hit, leaving Griseham unharmed.

The hellspawn was undaunted. With a growl, it started what could only be an incantation. In desperation, Griseham flung the black dagger at the creature. It merely provoked the creature into using its spell. An odd aura seemed to fill the air. And to his horror, Griseham could feel his protection fading away. More energy poured into the demonic spell, feeding off of Griseham's protective energies. Leaving him bare and defenseless.

The creature then channeled the energy siphoned from Griseham's wards into an unholy fire. Fire that seemed to darken the room instead of illuminating it. A deep, blood red flame.

Channeled into a thousand lances, the flames launched themselves at Griseham. Griseham closed his eyes. This was his death. This creature was going to kill him.

Illumination. Freedom. He was dead, he knew it. It had been painless, and now he felt free, like all of his worries had melted away. He smiled, wondering what afterlife awaited him.

He opened his eyes, ready to embrace heaven.

No.

Ready to unleash hell.

This illumination was not the freeing experience of death. It was the freeing of... power. He watched as the lances of flame yet approached. But it was as if the world had slowed to a trickle. The flames approached as if struggling through half-frozen molasses.

Unbidden, power came to him. The fire stopped, changing. Into pure, raw energy. And they started back. Back on the insolent, mewling insect who had cast it.

The world hit full speed again. The beams of energy tore through the creature. It screeched in agony as its own energy came back on it. And then some, for new beams of energy were firing from Griseham's spread hands. In seconds, the creature disintegrated. And it was no more.

Griseham smiled and laughed. In the creature's finest attempt to kill him, it had instead released him. Whatever block had held him in check before was now gone. Knowledge and power from eons past came back to him, as if it had never left.

Quietly, Griseham retrieved his wand and his pendant. Trinkets as they were, they might still be useful. But now... he needed sleep. He had a lot to do tomorrow.

And he dreamed. Of things he must do. Of knowledge once lost. But most of all, of the affirmation. It was not coincidence that the creature had attacked. It was fate. Whatever had tried to keep him from his purpose, its power had been dispelled. He was free.

He was ready. To face his fate.

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## Chaos Comes Knocking

By Jewels and Bloodmoon - May 25 2009

Adrasha stood still, astonished at the room she was in. The giant cavern was lit with burning orbs that lined the walls. Beautiful mosaics made of pebbles, shells, and pearls lined the walls and floors. Hundreds of thousands if not millions of tiny bits of color were embedded into the cavernous stone in mind boggling patterns that almost made her dizzy to look at. As she stared at them, she could almost swear that the patterns were moving. Like the ebb and flow of a wave on the sea, they seemed to shift back and forth in the flicker of the orbs. An enchantment or a trick of the light, she was not sure, but the overall effect was mesmerizing.

Raanil stepped forward to follow two deep ones motioning her to follow as well. Adrasha hesitated. Every instinct in her body told her to be wary, to be on alert. No one was to just be

trusted. She felt naked in her dress, especially without a weapon. Vulnerable in the impracticality of its flowing cloth, ready to trip her at the first misstep. Raanil urged her again to follow, and the pull... the new force urged her on as well, so against her better judgment she did. In the next room, she saw again the woman that had met them on the underwater ship. Adalia she thought she remembered Raanil calling her.

Adalia smiled as she watched them come forward. In her hands was a sword... *her* sword. Adrasha hesitated again. She had been stolen from so many times that the urge to grab it from her and run her thorough with it was almost overwhelming. Indeed, if Adalia had been wearing it instead of holding it out in offer towards Adrasha she was sure that would have been her next course of action. As it was, it took all her willpower to wait for Atholasha to be handed back, though she could tell by the disappearance of Adalia's smile that the disdain on her own face could be read loud and clear.

The pull she had felt was satisfied. Atholasha was where it belonged. Adrasha buckled the scabbard around her waist feeling much more comfortable in her own skin than her appearance should have allowed. Adalia and Raanil began talking to her apologetically but the words were lost on her as Adrasha freed Atholasha from its sheath slowly. She stepped back thinking only of the sword, admiring its blade, tightening on the grip. She felt... completed, invincible, almost euphoric. Turning away from everyone and their questioning eyes, Adrasha gave a few half-hearted practice swings before going into a full out battle exercise. To the watching eye and ear, she fought, uninhibited, an invisible foe or rather many foes. The folds of her dress fluttered in the air as she spun, flipped, and tumbled with skill, agility, and even grace.

Though the voices of Adalia and Raanil began to raise and seem more urgent, only the sound of her sword ripping through the air and the beat of her own heart rang clear in Adrasha's ears.

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"What is she doing?" Adalia looked perplexed though intrigued, unable to take her eyes off of Adrasha's quickly moving form.

"I would say she is... enjoying herself," came Raanil's flat reply. He, too, seemed at least curious for the meaning behind Adrasha's impromptu practice. "You did dunk the sword in the Pool of Balance, did you not?"

"Of course, the moment you left." Adalia hesitated before adding her question, "Do you think it didn't work?"

"Impossible to tell... though perhaps it has just worked contrary to our expectations."

Adalia nodded before suddenly looking down in concern. Raanil noticed and looked at her expectantly. With chilling trepidation, she whispered, "He is here!"

"Adrasha!" Raanil called out. "Adrasha, there is danger! You must stop!" but his shouts fell on deaf ears.

Adalia was already running towards her signaling to her guards to converge at Adrasha's position. "She is not ready!" she called back to Raanil. "We have to get her out of here!"

But it was too late.

---

He watched her, as if in slow motion. She danced for him and him alone. With bated breath he watched her twirl. Mesmerized, he watched her leap. With ecstasy, he watched her lunge, the beautiful blade shining in her hand.

Free Spirit...

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Adrasha stopped with Atholasha raised over her head, bent in an attack stance she faced her opponent. His sudden dark appearance was not what stopped her, though. No. It was something much more terrible, much more gut-wrenching... The frightened cry of Tyler's soul pierced straight to her heart and she was ashamed that for a moment she had forgotten him. The apparition's movement was barely visible as a purple haze shrouded around him, but the amulet appeared in his hand and he swung it back and forth tauntingly.

There was only one thing to do. Adrasha let out a battle cry and charged. He didn't move or at least it seemed he didn't move. And yet, he deflected every blow and evaded every hit. Adalia and her men were thrown back the moment they got close. Raanil ran to catch Adalia but the force only carried him to the wall as well.

The amulet hung just out of her reach. His pleas rang ever louder in her ears. His fear was only outmatched by her own as she soon realized that she could not get to him. All her effort, all her strength, it wasn't enough to reach her son. The apparition before her laughed as the dread of it overwhelmed her. With one sweeping movement he launched her backwards a full thirty yards. She impacted the cavern wall and broke through it to a separate chamber. She lay stunned as he walked towards her, seemingly floating. Atholasha was still in her hand but he stepped on the blade when she tried to raise it towards him. Tyler still screamed for her as he lifted his other hand.

Adrasha watched helplessly as the shadow of death arose about him in daggers and his ghastly voice echoed in the chamber. "He will be tortured *forever!*"

Worse than her failure, worse than Tyler's destruction, worse than the gruesome nightmare of enduring hell herself, was the knowledge that this man, this... thing not only could, but would stay true to his word. As the shadows rushed towards her defenseless form, the gift of unconsciousness took her first.

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Raanil sprinted into the room, spell prepared, but the Abomination was gone. Adrasha lay in a rumpled heap with a pool of thick liquid surrounding her. Adalia arrived breathless. There was no hope in her eyes when she asked, "Is she..."

With raised brow Raanil answered. "She is not dead, if that's what you were asking, but the Pool of Balance has been destroyed." He indicated the expanding puddle that Adrasha's form rested in. "There is no way to make another without the intervention of the gods."

Adalia approached in shock. "I don't understand. Why would he come all this way to defeat her and yet leave her alive?"

Raanil looked from Adalia to Adrasha and back. "Your guess is as good as mine."

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When Adrasha awoke, she had grilled the pair for answers, though they had few they were willing to give her. They only told her that her attacker was called 'the Abomination' and that he resided in the Hexen dimension. She was then told that there were few men alive who knew enough about magic to even attempt to travel there. Adrasha was adamant that she go after her son. After hours of arguing with them of the futility of it she still held to her resolve. With great hesitation, did they agree to take her to the mainland. They had said that High Mage Snite might be able to help, but they told her not to hold out hope that he would.

Back aboard the *Undine* and cruising beneath the waves, Adrasha had approached the captain's door, stopping just close enough to overhear their hushed discussions.

"He will know we are coming. If he found us in my lair, he will no doubt be able to track us as we go towards his."

"No doubt."

"This may be exactly what he wants us to do!"

"That is very possible."

"We cannot allow this, Raanil! It'd be like handing the world to the Abomination on a silver platter!"

"He could have taken the world already."

*"She is not ready!"*

Adalia's voice carried far enough for the crew to turn their heads in her direction. Adrasha felt very self-conscious knowing that they were talking about her. *Ready for what?* she wanted to ask. She wanted to scream it at them even though she already knew they wouldn't tell her. Two deep ones came towards her to escort her away from the doors but not before she heard one last thing from Raanil.

"We must trust, Adalia. Trust fate. Trust Justicairne. Trust Free Spirit."

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## Making Port

By Luca - Jun 6 2009

“ We have set the seal of Solomon on all things under the sun;  
Of knowledge and of sorrow and endurance of things done.

”

"Plot those points onto the map," Nebulan said over the creaking of the wood in the cabin. The red headed woman on the opposite side of the table glanced at him over her reading glasses.

"Already done."

"That"s what I like about you, always anticipating," he said as he picked up the map.

"I like to be doing two things at once, that way I can move slower, said Darnel as she took off her reading glasses and started to rub her forehead. Then she got up and started to search the cabin. Nebulan looked at her questioningly.

"My red ink...I thought I brought some with me""

"These sailors have many fine possessions below deck. One might wonder how they can afford such things...Deep pockets perhaps?" Nebulan began to insinuate.

"And perhaps sticky fingers to put items there, I'll get it," Darnel finished and walked out of the cabin, but she did not go below deck. She stopped outside the door and looked off the bow, staring into the sunrise they were sailing into. Darnel walked towards the front of the ship in a semi-trance-like state. The ripples in the clouds were moving...slowly they were waving at her. They were reminding her of that night she ordered the burning of that quarter. She felt like someone had just driven a steak-knife through her back every time she thought about an innocent person that burned in those fires. Her mind would eventually replace that innocent person with an image of herself. That, she thought, was who deserved to burn for making that order. Darnel looked down at her chest. The rippling reflections from the ocean and the sunrise almost made it look like flames. Then she started getting warmer...and warmer and warmer. Her arms and legs started getting painfully warm... *I need water!* she thought, *I need to jump!!!*

"Ah!" She said, startled, as Neb touched the back of her shoulder.

"You alright, Jenn?" He asked.

She chuckled "I must have been daydreaming," she replied as a cloud moved over the sunrise.

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Clouds would continue to roll over the horizon that morning, but even those simple shade-casting clouds would be replaced by more clouds that grew darker and darker. Indeed, as one would watch it, one cloud almost feel a sort of tension in the air. The clouds had a demeanor, it was aggression personified. The hands of the clouds would reach down into the warm bath waters they circled and would turn them. Against them.

The light ship was in no way capable for this sort of punishment. The *Jaunt* was a light and speedy modified transport vessel. It was made for quick trips in good weather. The creator of the design was obviously living in some fictional paradise where they didn't have storms. Such was obvious when observing how poorly the ship was handling these waves. Nebulan made several attempts to use the scrying pool, but the violent tossing of the ship wouldn't allow success. The sky became as dark as his skin; no one could determine which direction they were traveling in now.

No one really thought about the lightning. Its bright glow in this storm stayed nearly constant as bolts flew from one bitter cloud to another in a deadly game of electric ping-pong. But just as in



every game, someone will eventually miss and so the gods did. One of the bolts of lightning fell astray from the clouds and landed at the top of the mast and rolled down the gangway. Two crewman wouldn't even hear its whip-like crack. No, they would be dead by then. The surviving ones would have their senses of sight and hearing lost for about an hour after that. But no one could afford to loose their help. They continued working, blindly and daftly fumbling around the deck.

But the storm would break, just like they all do. The ship looked like hell, especially with one large black spot in the middle of it. Cosmetic damage as far as Nebulan was concerned. Darnel, however, was concerned with a different matter. Small beams of light worked their way through the breaking clouds and tried to cut through the fog. It illuminated a corner of an island.

"Pull it around," she said. The ship limped around the tip of the island and into a bay. Signs of civilization were slowly becoming apparent. Keen eyes could spot small wooden walls out into the distance. They were not big enough to be used for defense; they were probably just used for keeping deer or something out. A dock was clearly comming into view, if it was friendly or not was yet to be determined.

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## The High Tower of the Arts

By Jewels - Sep 21 2009

Adrasha felt claustrophobic. Every time she looked, it seemed that the bubble of air on the deck of the ship seemed to be getting smaller, and who knew? Perhaps it was. With every breath she took, perhaps the air around her was being used up. Soon they'd all be out of oxygen and anyone who couldn't breath underwater would be unconscious or dead. Surely they didn't want to kill her, but neither did they want her to get to her destination. They thought she wasn't ready after all...

It had been hours since she had taken this perch on the bow. If the bubble had extended further, she would have been balancing on the jib boom thinking she might make the ship go faster that way. Once again Adrasha tried to peer through the murky waves for any sign of the direction they were going in but couldn't see a thing. What was to keep them from just going around in circles under the water. Waiting until she fell asleep, until she was vulnerable? Then they would drug her and drag her back to those accursed caverns.

She longed to see the sun or the moon or the stars. Anything to confirm which way they were headed, anything to lend to trust these two... Adrasha didn't know what to call them other than strangers. For, indeed, she barely knew them at all. All she really wanted was her son back and then to be left alone. She doubted this pair cared one way or another about her son or her peace of mind. Kidnappers... thieves... not to be trusted at all...

"Adrasha?" No sooner had the hand touched her shoulder, than she leapt into action drawing Atholasha and bringing it to within inches of the assailant's face. Raanil stared back at her devoid of fear. "I can assure you, you are among friends here. You may put your sword away." She didn't believe him, but still, she lowered it all the same.

She deigned not to apologize and instead went back to staring at the water and rocking back and forth on her feet. "How much longer?" she asked abruptly, the impatience plain as day in her voice.

"Within the hour," Raanil responded. "We are starting our ascent now." Indeed, as he spoke, the waves were getting bluer. Light beyond them starting to come through. "I am supposed to inform you to hold on."

Adrasha just nodded, not ready to hope yet. She watched and waited with Raanil silently beside her. Soon the light of the sun was unmistakable and the beauty of the waves shimmering above her almost made her forget all her previous trepidations. The *Undine* slid effortlessly up out of the water and made a tremendous splash as the bow came down to even the ship out. She took in a deep breath of the fresh air and smiled for the first time since... well since she had forgotten what was important.

The rest of the ship exposed, Adrasha scrambled up on the bowsprit, climbing as far out as she dared while holding the rigging for balance. Raanil protested loudly about her risking her safety but she didn't care. All that mattered at this moment was that she could see land.

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At the docks, more than one seadog turned their glance her way as she disembarked. Once again she felt all too uncomfortable in her dress and wished she had the coin to buy a decent pair of slacks. A skirt would be no end of trouble in a fight, and it only screamed 'ignorant and inexperienced' to any who were looking for one. It was practically an invitation for trouble. Adrasha put on her best warrior scowl for anyone who seemed too interested in her arrival.

As she stepped off the gangplank, she turned to see Raanil at the railings with Adalia and two of the deep ones pulling it up after her. "Aren't you coming with me?" she asked incredulously, all too aware of how her solitude was being noted by various onlookers.

Adalia merely looked from Adrasha to Raanil before leaving the side of the ship while shaking her head. "Something very important has come up. I have pressing matters I must attend to. We should be back within the week."

Adrasha's hand, which had been resting on the hilt of her sword, now gripped it in anger. He couldn't have informed her sooner? Or had the decency not to broadcast it to the entire dockside that she was stranded here for a week. And without a single coin to her name! She could feel them. The eyes resting on her. Leering... sizing her up... plotting how best to take advantage of the situation... Raanil would have done better to throw her into the sea and drown her.

But she wouldn't let it show, no. She wouldn't let them know how vulnerable she felt. Fear... once they sensed it, they would pounce. So Adrasha turned on her heel without so much as a goodbye and marched towards town at a steady clip. At least she had had the forethought to ask

where this High Mage Snite was before they had left her. The building she needed to go to towered over all the other buildings like a giant tree over mushrooms.

*Don't run...* she told herself. No she wouldn't run. But so aware of everything around her. Merchants lined the street selling wares. They brazenly yelled above the crowds, enticing customers to look their way. Seafaring folk meandered about a little wobbly, still not having their land legs back, while mainlanders made crude comments with one another about them being drunk. She stopped next to a cart selling bread though she wasn't interested in buying any, even if she had had the money for it. Were those heavy footsteps dogging her? She moved on further down the road straining to filter out the noise. There were the footsteps again. Stopping at a jewelry cart this time, she took her time looking the various beaded wares over. They were rather beautiful in their own way, if one liked that kind of thing. The footsteps had gone past her and stopped.

She didn't dare to look up, didn't dare to give them any indication that she was aware of them. A good ten minutes later, the other footsteps hadn't started again, and Adrasha had already engaged the cart owner in a haggling match that was never intended to result in a sale. She must move on... Loudly she thanked the merchant for her time and said she may come back later.

She passed the next few stands looking out of the corners of her eyes for possible suspects, but the commonfolk pressed in on all sides making it difficult to see anything without making it obvious she was looking. A few yards down the way she heard those heavy foot falls again. She was being followed, she was sure of it. She cursed under her breath once again at Raanil's brilliance in stranding her here. At least the road was crowded. Hopefully it would remain that way and keep her stalker at bay.

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Adrasha stopped where the market carts did. The roads branched off right and left as well as going straight and the foot traffic dwindled significantly. She needed to lose this guy, and fast. She went straight for one block hearing the footfalls echo steadily behind her. The houses were close to the road and to each other. Quickly she turned right putting a house between her and anyone behind her then, agile as a cat, silently leapt the five foot stone wall that fenced in their yard and stopped. She crouched down pressing herself in the corner of the house and wall barely daring to breathe.

The footsteps came to the corner and turned but stopped abruptly. She heard a low muffled curse as the man turned in a circle. A couple steps closer to her position and Adrasha slowly put her hand on her hilt. More cursing, louder this time, and the sound of a fist hitting the stone wall, before the footsteps turned and tromped back off towards the docks. Adrasha waited to breathe her sigh of relief until five minutes later. She easily hopped back over the wall and headed for the tower with a purposeful gait.

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The massive tower rose up above her and everyone else, front double doors open to allow easier flow of those coming and going. Adrasha hesitated before going in. Asking for help was not one of her strong suits and this guy was one of the most important people in the whole kingdom. She didn't know how she was going to convince him to help her go to the Hexen plane. She suddenly

wished that Raanil had stayed with her for a reason other than 'safety in numbers'. He knew so much more about the situation than she did.

Having nothing left to do but try, Adrasha pressed forward into the lobby. It was massive, just like the rest of the tower, she was sure. Benches and desks lined the walls and many people milled about ranging from peasant to lord. At the other end of the room was another set of double doors where a massive staircase could be seen beyond. Guarding the doors, stood ten Imperial soldiers.

Adrasha froze in her tracks, swearing at herself silently. What had she been thinking? She had been running from the Imperial guard for months, and now she was just going to walk straight up to them? How could she have been so stupid?! Of course a High Mage would have such protection. The emperor wouldn't want to lose one of their enchanters to petty adventurers. There were, no doubt, countless more in the upper hallways. How many of them already knew her face? How many of them had she once commanded?

She screamed at herself to turn around. To go back to the docks, kill a few thugs for a few coins till she had enough for passage on a ship. Any ship! Just to get out of here. But her boots remained rooted to the floor. She had come so far. This was the only way. She must try... she willed herself forward. Further into the great hall. The guards wore open faced helmets and she was relieved that she didn't recognize any of them.

She inched forward step by step, calling upon all her training to look as if she were so intimidated because of the atmosphere, and not because her freedom hung in the balance. She was welcomed by a smiling soldier who was obviously a rookie... or a captain's son. You never did demand perfection from a captain's son unless you wanted to be demoted yourself. She ventured a shy smile as well noting that she was probably twice his age but he had given her the once over anyway.

"A sword and a flowing skirt? Well now I've seen everything." His buoyant expression caused the neighboring soldiers to roll their eyes. Maybe he was even a Sergeant Major's son, put on fluff duty. But for once, Adrasha was glad for her dress and the seeming cover it gave her.

"It's just for show, really," she tried to sound nonchalant though she feared the waver in her voice. "The merchant said it would scare off any would be attackers." The guard she was talking to burst out laughing and a couple others even deigned to snicker as well.

One of them muttered under their breath. "Or, you know, just give them a bigger weapon to run you through with."

Adrasha pretended she didn't hear it and pressed on. "I need to see High Mage Snite, today, would you let me through?"

"Sure thing, all I need to see is your appointment card." He looked at her expectantly.

Crap... of course she'd need an appointment to get in. Busy men didn't take requests from the commoners without lots of money or an appointment. "Um... I don't think I've made an appointment yet, do you think he can still fit me in today?" This got another bout of laughter, more staring eyes, and more guards' attention.

"I'm sorry, madam," one of the neighboring guards managed between snickers, "but I doubt you'll be seeing High Mage Snite today, or tomorrow... or for at least a month. He's usually booked solid for weeks in advance."

Adrasha's countenance fell. A whole month? How could she wait here for a whole month? How could her son wait for a whole month? She started stuttering and desperation crept in as the gravity started to hit her. "No... but... I need to see him... Now! I *must* see him. Please? He's the only one who can help me. He... He's the only one who knows how!" She started to step forward trying to pass the guards anyway. "I only need a minute of his time, surely he can spare a minute of his time..."

The two guards closest to the door stepped to block her way. "Whoa, wait a minute. You're not going anywhere without an appointment."

"But I *can't wait that long!*" She hadn't meant to say it so loud but the vision of her son's amulet in that... monster's hand was at the forefront of her mind. "*Please?!*" she begged. "I only need him to hear me out." She started to push through again. "It's a matter of life and death! My son's!!"

Rough hands grabbed her and pulled her back and instinct took over. She snapped her forehead into the nose of the guard in front of her and jammed her elbow into the face of the one behind her. As they staggered she threw her shoulder into the one still holding onto her and drew her sword whirling on the closest one. The tip of Atholasha pressed into the nape of the neck of the supposed captain's son who pressed his back up against the door frame and whimpered. But Adrasha stopped her attack as four other sword points jabbed at her back.

One of the unharmed soldiers stepped to look her in the face, speaking calmly. "As much as I would enjoy seeing you shut this one up for good, I'm afraid you'll have to leave."

Adrasha felt defeated. There was no way they'd let her in to see Snite now. Slowly she lowered her sword and had it roughly yanked out of her hand. Two guards grabbed her arms on either side and two more followed as they half-carried, half-drag her out of the lobby. She couldn't help it, she cried out in grief. "*But he has my son! He took MY SON!!*" Her voice echoed eerily in the hall which had gotten rather quiet over the excitement of her tussle.

The guards roughly pushed her out the door, all but one turning to go back to their post. Adrasha grabbed onto his arm pleading with a cracking voice. "Please... I *have* to go to the Hexen plane to get back my son!" He shoved her off and harshly thrust the hilt of her sword into her stomach.

"I don't think so." He went off nursing a bloody nose and left her there distraught.

It was then that she heard them... heavy footfalls coming her way.

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# Momentum

By Luca - Sep 23 2009

The guard had started to return to his post on the other side of the room as Adrasha stood there, recovering from the blow. Behind her, the two double doors swung open and several people bowed. Three guards ran up to greet the two people that stepped through.

"You'll want to avoid this one, Madam High Mage," said a guard holding his face with one hand and essentially trying to hide Adrasha with the other. He must have seen her as an embarrassment. The two large wooden doors swung closed from gravity.

"Is that so, Stanley?" Darnel responded as she half-mindfully turned her head to see the woman. "Any reason why?" she asked, instantly recognizing the woman. The guard removed his hand, showing her his bloody nose. Darnel turned her head, "Well, I'm sure you had that coming to you." She said, uninterested in him.

"Please, if you will just give me five min--"

"She's been asking to see Snite," The guard interrupted.

"Please!" Adrasha stressed, "Hear me out!" Darnel's mouth calmly hung open, just slightly, showing her intrigue. She had a hint of a smile on her lips while her eyes were sizing the woman up.

"She doesn't look threatening, High Mage," said Nebulan, finally catching up to the conversation. The use of Darnel's title wasn't something that came easy to Neb, he preferred the informal; however, this was something she forced him to do in public.

"Alright...It's all right Stan. Bring her up," she said slowly.

"If you like I could post a pair of guards""

"No please, just bring her up and return to your station."

"Yes, High Mage."

---

The room Adrasha had been brought into had clearly been set up for meetings between High Mages and other officials from all over the kingdom. The room was in the form of a semi-circle, with several rectangular tables scattered randomly throughout. The walls looked nearly like tapestries were hung on every square inch of the wall. Further inspection would reveal the walls were made of oak, and the designs were actually painstakingly chiseled into the wood. These possibly magical inscriptions worked their way up and into the ceiling creating a spiral crescent from thousands of words in unknown languages. There was one large closed window in the wall shaped like a circle, but the glass that made it up wasn't perfect, there were horizontal ripples running through it. Maybe Adrasha was just seeing things, but it looked like there was water running down it, or the glass itself was moving.

"The High Mage will be with you in a minute," said the guard as he began closing the door. The disdain was evident in his voice. He probably thought that it was completely idiotic to leave a

potentially unstable person alone and unguarded in a room with one of the Kingdom's most influential figures. Guards of the Kingdom are also frequently of the belief that they are exponentially tougher than the most threatening opponent, not to mention those whom they guard. Seldom are they correct in that belief. The door opened again and Darnel stepped through. She had changed out of her dirtier robes, but hadn't gotten into anything formal. She seated herself at the opposite side of the table at which Adrasha sat. Her mouth was opened with a grin and she paused to think for a second.

"I find it interesting," she said finally, "That someone who clearly had nothing to say to me before in *her* tower has now come to *mine* begging for five minutes of my time." Now that Adrasha saw this woman in the full light clearly she saw they were both about the same age and most of those years had struck them with permanent marks of stress. Darnel had a scar on her forehead, just below her hairline, that she was neither trying to hide nor show off. It just simply existed like the table they were meeting at. She wasn't sure why she was studying this aspect of the woman, but it made her wonder if they were really that different.

"Some things have come up," she responded with her voice almost faltering.

"Well, I can see that. What is your name?" Adrasha looked at Darnel for a second. She still wasn't sure whether to trust her or not. This woman worked for the Kingdom, the same force she had been avoiding these last few months because of their backwards ways.

"Susan Werning." She said simply. This was the answer she gave to Griseham when he asked the same question. Darnel tilted her head slightly; the woman was nervous, and sometimes it can be hard to tell whether it's nerves she senses or lies.

"If I may be so bold, I don't think that's your real name."

Adrasha was taken by surprise a little by this. Griseham didn't put even a second thought into it when she told that name to him. Maybe that's just because Darnel cared more.

"Relax," she said earnestly, "If you've done something wrong, I'm not going to punish you. But remember that you are seeking *my* help. I need you to be honest with me if I ask questions."

"Two days ago, it was late in the day and I was attacked," said Adrasha. Darnel noticed that Adrasha never said who she was, but she didn't push the issue.

"Could you identify your attacker?"

"Not exactly, it wasn't a man, at least, I don't think it was..."

"Can you describe it at all?"

"Tall...dark...It had a purple haze around it. Like that man you were with...It didn't look like he was moving when I defended myself, but he was moving faster than I ever could."

The High Mage lost her light and upbeat mood and began to look more concerned with every word. She stood up and looked out the circular window. She frequently did this when she didn't want her audience to see her reaction. "Could...could you make out any details of its face?"

"No, no all of it was, almost black, really."

Darnel became lost in thought, it seemed like she forgot that Adrasha was even there.

"I came to you because, he...it...took something from me," Adrasha said after the High Mage didn't speak to her for several minutes. Darnel whipped around from the window, appearing her normal self again.

"I'm sorry, please continue."

"I had this amulet"

"It was enchanted, no doubt."

"More than that," Adrasha paused and dropped her eyes to the table, "It contains the soul of my son. I think it has taken him to the Hex plane. I need to go there."

Darnel was at a loss for words. "I...Need to take a minute, please excuse me. I'll tell Stanley to send up some refreshments."

"If you wouldn't mind, High Mage, I would prefer to not see that boy again."

"I say that to myself every day," Darnel said as she moved to the door. She tried to smile, but looked too distracted.

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Nebulan was standing looking out one of the windows of Darnel's private chamber when the small, yet thick, wooden door opened and the High Mage stepped through. Neb was watching the High Tower's dock, which was interesting because the dock was on the opposite side of the tower that the window was on. "You know, *my* tower never got these," said Nebulan sensing Darnel at his side.

"I can't help it you don't want to spend the time it takes to make one," she replied.

"It takes a month, Jenn. That's a lot of time."

"Which is currently something we don't have..."

"What did the woman want?"

"She was attacked by an agent of the Shadow."

"That's not unexpected. We knew that there were still some in existence, but what did it want with her?"

"When she was attacked, it took from her a soul locket."

Nebulan turned to her. "The making of soul lockets has been banned my entire life, and there are only a few people who still know how..."

"Who do you think, Neb?" She asked sarcastically.

"Why did the agent take it?"

"Soul lockets are magical items, and since they've been banned we don't really know much about them. Maybe their magic is needed for some sort of ritual."

"Or maybe they've discovered that they really don't need the shards of Dark Glass."



"Pray that isn't the case." They didn't speak for another minute or so, both looking out the window.

"You should have brought coffee," said Darnel.

"The shipment is tomorrow." The High Mage nodded.

"What are you going to do with the woman?" Neb asked.

"I suppose we'll have to take her with us."

"Then it'll be just like old times?"

"Who else would you charge with the assignment?"

"Good point. I'll tell Duran to pick up another ship." Darnel smiled at the irony. "Well, I think you should tell him to requisition the *Unrest*. It's fitting,"

"Oh gods""

---

The meeting chamber door opened once again. Adrasha looked up to the woman expectantly as she sat down. Darnel hinted a look of disappointment; she didn't like people being able to guess what she was about to say. But the look she gave before she left must have been obvious enough. "We're going to help you." Adrasha's eyes lifted up and she gave an open-mouthed smile. "And you're coming with us, now you've met Nebulan, he's coming" she said, counting on her hand. "So is Lieutenant Duran, and a small contingent of imperial soldiers..." On that last sentence, Adrasha slammed her mouth shut. Darnel looked away from her hand when she did, but was only mildly interested by the action and continued. "I don't know about the Hex plane, but we'll find your son. I will get Sta...Um, a different guard to show you to your quarters for the night," she said, getting up.

"Thank you, High Mage." She smiled, bowed her head, and continued out.

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## The Chase Begins

By Nioca - Sep 29 2009

"Agent Yatforth. About time you showed up." A man stated, addressing a well-dressed and wealthy-looking man.

Yatforth, striking a perfect balance between respectful and indignant, spoke up. "If I may, I'd like to inquire as to why I was pulled off the Gralesí assignment."

The man standing above Yatforth on a pedestal looked over a pair of glasses with reddish lenses. "You are needed elsewhere. You're being reassigned to world A-N-W-O-1-2-9, effective within six hours."

"You mean... Andaria?! That cesspit?!?" Agent Yatforth was truly alarmed, and abandoned all pretenses of formality.

"The very same. We got a report yesterday from our Deep Cover Agent on that world. His cover was blown, and he requires immediate extraction." The man with rose glasses stated casually, completely unperturbed by Yatforth's outburst.

"Why would we have a DCA on Andaria? What was the agent-"

Rose glasses put his hand in the air. "I do not wish to make a second briefing. Your senior agent was already briefed with all the details needed, and will bring you up to speed."

"Senior agent? Sir, I've got 27 years experience of undercover work and martial training. I don't need a babysitter." Yatforth responded.

"I have a report on my desk, several in fact, that state otherwise." He raised a hand again. "I am fully aware that you're competent, but this isn't just a matter of minor espionage. This mission cannot fail. Otherwise, our enemy could gain the weapon it needs to win this war. Again, your senior agent will inform you of the particulars."

Yatforth shuffled slightly. "Fine. What's the Op procedure and equipment here?"

The rose-glassed man coughed. "You are to keep a low profile. Do what needs to be done, and otherwise try to avoid conflict. You are fully licensed to fight hand-to-hand and use a Mark II Garotis should the need arise. However, you need to keep your powers concealed. Only in the strictest emergency are you allowed to use them. You and your senior agent are also receiving a Bartho-Class Scout Vessel, but you *must not be seen in it*. Got it?"

Agent Simon Yatforth nodded. "Yes sir. But... one thing."

"Yes?" The man in rose glasses sighed, as if he knew what was coming.

"You normally don't have a problem telling me who I'm working with. So why do you keep calling my SA 'Senior Agent'?"

"No reason." The man smiled for the briefest moment. "You will receive a file on your SA as you leave. You will also receive information on another mission you need to perform while you are there. Dismissed."

Yatforth's curiosity was peaked. As he stepped out the door, a small group of guards shut it behind him and proceeded to stand in front of it. A kind-looking secretary handed him a folder, which Yatforth quickly opened.

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!" Yatforth yowled.

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"Come on, you could perk up a little. How often do we get free access to a Bartho?" A delicate-looking, pale woman stated.

"We're currently on one of the most depraved worlds in the cosmos. Handling a mission that could doom Ero if we fail. With Teroth-knows how many people gunning for us. And to top it all off, I'm having to take orders *from my sister*." Agent Simon Yatforth replied sullenly. "Cara, are you sure this is the place?"

"Positive. It's exactly as it was described. Derelict pirate fort on the east side of an island." Agent Caraline Yatforth stated. She wore a flowing black dress that more-or-less resembled a ball gown. It corresponded with her dark shoulder-length hair, and sharply contrasted her pale skin.

Simon, by comparison, was wearing a black tunic and pants, with a dark cloak folded around him. Dark leather boots completed the outfit. He too had pale skin, but his hair was gray and short.

A sharp crack caught their attention. Both drew what looked to be wands from within hidden folds of their clothing. Each consisting of a 9-inch metal rod with an orange gemstone at the end, they looked both bizarre and deadly. Pointing the wands toward the noise, the two agent retreated to find cover.

Two people stepped out into the open. The first was an oldish man keeping a wand aloft and approaching cautiously. The other, a slightly younger-looking woman keeping a hand near a sword, stayed behind the man. She looked terrified.

Caraline stepped out from behind a damaged wall. "Councilor." She stated respectfully.

The man lowered his wand. "I was wondering when help would arrive. You'd think what I sent them would have spurred an entire army here."

Simon stood up as well. "Councilor...? You're Councilor Av-"

"We can't discuss this here. The Karo already know I'm out-of-cover, though they don't know why I'm here. We need to go someplace safer. There's an island to the north that should do perfectly. I presume we have a ship?"

"Yes. Right this way, councilor." Agent Caraline stated. They trekked to the shore. Neither the older man nor his apparent wife could see anything. However, the two agents could see a bizarre-looking craft nestled down near a ruined dock. Its shape wavered slightly, as if not really there.

Impatient, Agent Simon opened a small, hardened wood door in the side and hopped into the vehicle. Putting his hands on a crystal in the center of the cabin, he willed the craft to life. There was a low whir as the ship decloaked. Its hull seemed to be made of some red, stone-like timber. Two wings protruded from the back of a rounded hull large enough to hold five people. There was a large protrusion of some unusual green gemstone on top of the vessel, seemingly pointed skyward, and a large sheet of crystal sat across the front. Otherwise, it looked like an oddly-shaped red rock bobbing in the water.

The other three present climbed onboard as well. Agent Simon willed the ship away from the shore. A low and quiet whine filling the air as the vessel, seemingly of its own accord, quickly drifted from the shore and out into the ocean. Then it disappeared again, taking the sound with it. However, small waves could be seen on the surface of the ocean as the craft rushed past.

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"So you've been living on this world under the guise of... 'Griseham'... for some 80-odd years?" Caraline asked. They were standing in the ruins of a tower on Rouen Isle.

"Yes. For years, we've been searching for it. We were convinced that Deftinfox would have left it somewhere protected within Ero's borders. But apparently, he was too paranoid of the Karo

getting ahold of it. He needed to hide it somewhere they wouldn't look. It was a lucky hunch that sent me here." Griseham looked at the sun. "Deftinfox's weapon cannot fall into the wrong hands. Nor can the Karo's dark influence continue to corrupt this world."

"We know." Caraline stated.

There were five people in the room. Six, if you counted the cat. Another agent was standing at the doorway. "Councilor, we need to get you out of here. Now that the Karo know you're here, they're going to start throwing everything they've got at you."

"I am aware." Griseham said irritably. "Listen. I didn't just discover evidence that Deftinfox's weapon was here. *I saw it*. Was within *inches* of it. That's what woke me out of my cover. It goes by the name *Atholasha* now... Carried by a woman named Susan Werning." He paused. "You find that woman, you find Deftinfox's weapon."

"That's what we intend to do." Simon said. "Additionally, we received word that Rokahks was here."

"You mean... *Lord* Rokahks?" Griseham said, mortified. "They must know, too... You must find that weapon. If Rokahks is here as well, then I can guarantee you that the Karo are searching for the weapon too. And..." He paused. "You need to get the humans out of the influence of the Karo, if at all possible."

"And why should we help humans?" Simon snorted. "They're the most violent, depraved, lustful species we've come across, aside from the Karo. I'm still baffled as to why the Eros Councilate didn't purge them."

"No. I discovered that, when humans were removed from the Kingdom's influence, that they reverted to a far more peaceful and compassionate state. They are a good, or at least neutral, species at heart." Griseham put an arm around his wife. The dazed look on her face gave the appearance of her recently being whacked with a very large stick, and not yet having recovered. "I strongly suspect that the Andarian Kingdom is not a natural development of this species culture. I also..."

"What?" Caraline asked.

Griseham sighed. "I suspect this may be Garhak Fahl."

"You mean..." Simon started, his eyes wide.

"Yes. The very same place you're thinking of." Griseham said. "Now, before I go, I have some gifts." He pulled a satchel close. He then reached in and pulled out a wand. "This is Tyinomatas. One of the most powerful wands on this world. It should be able to punch through almost any magical protection you come across." He handed it to Caraline.

However, she passed it on to Simon. "You'll need it more than I. My ESQ is better than yours."

Griseham smiled, then pulled a pendant from his neck. "Also, a magical boon. Protects you from whatever magics they'll try to destroy you with. Seeing as there's two of you, only one will be able to wear it..."

Caraline took it. "I'll wear it."

"You'll also need to drink this." He held a vial of reddish-orange liquid. Caraline hesitantly took it and downed it with one gulp. She then started retching. Griseham paid no heed. "And finally, for both of you, a map." He opened up a scroll tube and poured a map onto his palm. "This is one of the most accurate maps available. Treat it well, agents." He handed it toward Caraline, but she was too busy gagging.

Simon stepped forward. "I'll take it, since my sister seems... occupied at the moment." The end of his sentence was punctuated by an angry sputter from his sister.

"Very well. I wish you luck. And if you could... please keep an eye out for the Tantonians, would you?" The agent at the door stepped forward and produced a crystal. There was a bright flash.

Then the room held only the two siblings. And the cat.

Pulling herself together, Agent Caraline brushed the hair away from her face. Simon unrolled the map. "So... on a world with roughly 600 million humans, all we have to do is find... one."

"Look, we need cover names. I've got a list," Caraline said, flourishing a large, long sheet of paper.

"John Fitzgerald." Simon stated, a bored tone in his voice.

"...I put two hours of thought into this list. The least you could do is look it over." Caraline said, annoyed.

"I did. I thought it was long and-" Simon started.

"Oh, would you two knock it off?!?" The cat yowled. "It's bad enough I've been assigned to work on this backwards world, I don't need to hear you two bicker about it!"

"Sorry." The agents intoned.

"Look, clearly, you two need to get your acts together. Additionally," The cat leaped onto the table where Simon had unrolled the map. "You won't make any headway finding this 'Susan' without some idea of where to look." The cat glanced over the map. "Now, there seems to be some sort of primitive magocracy here. Maybe... Maybe you could get one of them to scry for you." The cat's claw rested on a piece of the map labeled, "High Tower of the Arts. Seems like a good of stop as any."

Simon was looking elsewhere on the map. "Ereton Rock..." He mumbled. A marking, designating it as Turin's elite conclave, had caught his eye. "Actually, I think I need to head here."

"Why?" Caraline stated.

"Can't say. Orders from the top." Simon replied with a cocky grin.

"You too?" Caraline asked.

"What's going on?" The cat asked.

"It seems..." Caraline began. "That we each have our own separate mission as well."

"Well, right now, I suggest you two focus on finding Atholasha. That's your top priority." The cat stated.

"The oran's right-"

"My name is Hathar." The cat hissed.

"-Hathar's right." Caraline continued. "We'll both head to this Tower of Arts and see what they have to offer. Hathar, memorize this map, and organize the Tantonians Griseham landed outside. Get this place cleaned up and scavenge the equipment off all the dead bodies. We'll keep in touch, Hathar, in case you learn anything."

Simon glared at his sister, displeased at being ordered around. "Yes, *ma'am*."

"Well?" Caraline asked, heading for the door. "What are you waiting for?"

Simon growled something and slowly followed.

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## Call

By Azuma - Oct 2 2009

Patrick glanced around lazily. He was tired. And bored. More on the latter. Esrever was gone, casually causing terror, havoc, and chaos while Shaylos just sat there, or something, he didn't really seem to be seated, but not the point. He was in a trance with his phantom pen and scrolls. He couldn't stand it. The inaction would literally eat him.

"Be patient." Shaylos' words took his attention. Apparently, even though absorbed in his work, Shaylos was still empathic to his apparent dilemma. "Esrever has his reasons on why you're being kept inactive."

Patrick just sighed and sulked in his corner. If he was a vital part to his ploy, then why wasn't Esrever guiding him. This was ridiculous! He was moaning, he was shaking his fist in the air, he was stomping, in hopes to get more information from the shade. He gave up eventually. Shaylos was trained enough to ignore fits like his. He sighed again, and walked away, towards Josephine's room. She was out of bed. Patrick searched the room for her. He saw her in a niche, gloomily gazing out a window.

"There is no scenery here Patrick." Her tone was melancholic mellow. "I can only see distortion, chaos, misdirection..."

Patrick was quiet. He didn't know how to respond. He went beside her and gently stroked her face. "I'm sorry." He said in a defeated tone.

"Why? You haven't done anything..." Her supportive tone, coupled with her holding Patrick's face with her maiden hands caused a small smile to streak across his face. Patrick embraced her in return.

"I'm so... powerless... I couldn't defend our baby, you... even myself... we just... I... just waited for what happend..."

"You didn't leave us... despite seeing him, you didn't run... you stayed... with us."

Patrick again was speechless. Even in his failure, she still valued him with all her heart. Her sincerity almost seemed to have no bounds. He embraced her tighter, tears dropping. She was caressing him back, stroking it mildly. He felt comfortable, for the first time since they came here. It was a perfect moment.

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He saw her, frantic, helpless. Desperate. They were blocking her way, she had to go through. She was held back, she fought them. She was despairing. Nothing could stand in her way. Nothing must. She missed him, the soul of her son, locked in trinket, stolen by a demon. It was a mother's nightmare.

Then he sensed him. A power. The one he sensed before in that tower. The one who killed him.

"Guardian..."

His voice was sly. His shadow echoed it, dancing erratically on the ground. It was hungry for him.

"Soon." he comforted it. "Soon." He stalked them, both, antagonists to his ploy, but nevertheless important. He was accompanied. A lesser power only, ignored mostly. Should he attack now? No... wait... they are going inside the tower. Perfect. Fewer mortals means a delay to bloodshed. He gashed a deviled grimace across his face as he faded out in an amethyst haze.

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She was resting. It has been a stressful day. Being left out on the docks with only a dress as clothes was enough but almost not being allowed help was worse. Eventually though, it turned out well. She has been given help, though from the Empire. *Nothing's ever perfect*, she thought, *Must bear with what you have*. She stood up from the soft cushion she was lying on. She had a question to ask the High Mage, Darnel was her name if she remembered correctly. She was still wearing the flowing skirt but there were no more encumbering eyes, except for the odd look from a soldier or two. She walked quietly to the hallway. She didn't have to but it was a habit. A mannerism she may never be rid of. She found the door to the meeting hall. She heard them still talking. She was about to open the door when it opened towards her.

"Oh. Sorry." It was Nebulan, the silent acquaintance of the High Mage. "What business do you have here?" His tone was... it wasn't cold. He wasn't insensitive. It was as if he was speaking in another dimension, stating that he was no normal being, that he was a higher species than her.

"I just wanted to ask the High Mage a question." She said meekly.

"I could answer it for you. What is it?" His voice was so stern and abrupt, she had no choice but to ask him instead.

"I... I was just wondering. When are we going?"

"A quaint question answered quaintly. When we are prepared."

"I... see. If that is the case, I'll be returni-" Nebulan held her mouth, cutting her off. He seemed disturbed, something was bothering him.

*Hehehehe... HAHAAHAHA!*

Adrasha was perplexed. She gazed at the sudden change in mood of the man. The High Mage Darnel hurriedly appeared beside him.

"Have you..?" Nebulan cut her off with a nod. "Then he is here."

Adrasha was still confused but she sensed him. It was her son! He is here! But there was another presence with him. She felt a pulse. A maledict pulse.

The three of them braced for his initiative. Adrasha grabbed hold of her blade, Darnel muttered incantations while Nebulan, he was doing nothing, but Adrasha felt unbridled force from within him, waiting to be unleashed. His hood was ruffled enough to let her have her first good look at him. He wasn't human, at least, his skin wasn't. It was obsidian black, like a starless night.

"My complexion is something for another day to wonder about." Nebulan chided Adrasha. She shook her head at the comment and returned to be vigilantly defensive. "Don't let your guard down. I feel him. He's coming."

---

Pitiful. In truth, he did not want a fight. Maybe he could still avoid a hostile encounter, but that wouldn't be his nature. He'll try nonetheless.

"Sad. I was expecting a non-hostile welcome. Especially from you Gutaraie. I even waited up until now to separate you from your so-called guards." His voice preempted his entry. Strands of amethyst haze coalesced to his form. He stood there in front of them, ominous, malefic, haunting.

His mention of the name Gutaraie immediately riled up the black-skinned of them. "What do you know of him!?" His rage just triggered Esrever's taunting laughter.

"Nebulan! Control yourself!" The woman beside her restricted him. It was the lesser power he sensed from before. She will be omitted but Esrever noted on how the man called Nebulan listened and heeded her call. The other lady, instead, was more engaging. It was her.

"Free Spirit." He voiced darkly.

The brave woman seemed immune to his eerie aura. "Give me back my son you, you you-"

"What? This trinket?" He pulled it from the darkness within him. The amulet. The spirit within screamed out for her, wanting to go back in her possession. Esrever let it go, to the woman's surprise. Expectedly, she dashed for it.

"Susan!" Both of her companions shouted in alarm at her sudden action. Esrever just smirked. It was about to hit the floor. If it was to break or not, the woman did not care, as long as she'd be able to hold it again in her palm. Her hand was inches from it. It went closer, and closer, and closer, then... the amulet disappeared.

"NOOOO!" She muttered in defeat as her hand only caught the traces of haze from where the trinket should be. She flipped though. It was sudden. A deft maneuver with one arm serving as the balance and her other hand grasping the drawn blade, about to hit the monster. But it didn't.



"Too soon. It is not my time yet. There are still preparations." Esrever's voice resounded over the hallway. He was gone from sight. As with the trinket, only splitting haze remained from his position.

The two others with Adrasha were still braced and ready, unlike her. She was sobbing, her weapon dropped from her, and her tears drenched the wooden floor boards. They weren't sure if Esrever was about to attack them or if would he still continue his taunts. It was initiative which they needed. Maybe a taunt from themselves would warrant his attention. A risky gamble, but more important than just letting him around.

"Come out coward! Do not be like your master who hides in the shadows letting his pathetic minions do his bidding!" Nebulan's voice rang through, getting Esrever to appear again. In front of him.

"Master?" Esrever sounded amused.

"Aren't you a pawn of Gilver?! A lackey to do his dirty work?" Darnel's voice wasn't as bold as Nebulan's, as she was feeling the effect of Esrever's aura. Esrever stared at her blankly, and all of a sudden, she was shivering, her heart was racing. It was like the very essence of despair was writhing through her soul. She couldn't take it anymore. She wanted death. But it was brief as Esrever again dispersed. She fell on the floor. She was soaked with sweat. Her breathing was heavy and she almost seemed to twitch. Nebulan neared to her in aid.

"Are you ok?" He asked in care.

"N-no..." She distressed. "It was like all my will to live was sucked out and only one thought was on my mind... Death." She stood up with Nebulan's help. She regained composure swiftly. Seeing her well, Nebulan started to come up to Adrasha, who was still dazed by her failure.

He was near to her when he sensed Esrever again. It was from behind him, from behind...

"Darnel!" He roared, bolting towards her.

"Never was I a slave to him, and I never will." He muttered to her, an indubitable quiet rage simmering in his tone. Amethyst rippers from Esrever's shadow loomed over Darnel. She felt them, not as spikes to pierce her flesh, but as lances that would bore to her soul. She was mortified, unsure of what to do. Would she cry? Beg? She couldn't do both. The sight of Nebulan dashing to her wouldn't allow it. She smiled at his futile heroism. She was not going to accept this death but there were no other choice. She closed her eyes. Ready for it. Surprisingly, it wasn't a pierce she felt but blunt force. She was thrown on the floor, causing her head to hit hard but it wasn't fatal. The hit though, was rendering her unconscious. Before she was entirely knocked out, she saw Nebulan, his hands were alight with energy, and roaring, bounded to land on Esrever. The she turned to him, the demon, and he was... smiling. No. A smile couldn't be so twisted, so demented, so perverted, then, she felt cold.

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Nebulan's attack connected, causing Esrever to be flung forcefully away from Darnel. Continuously. He rushed to Darnel's side once again and tried to figure out if she was alright.

"Jen! Speak to me! Jen!" His tone was slightly frantic. Adrasha caught his attention as she assessed her.

"Don't worry." She reassured Nebulan. "She'll be fine. She was hit hard and knocked unconscious. It's normal."

Nebulan just nodded at her statement. He gazed out towards the gaping hole Esrever created while being catapulted. And he was dazed by something he just noticed now. Adrasha noticed his expression and asked what was wrong.

"He was... cackling... all the way."

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## What You Bargain For

By Jewels - Oct 19 2009

Why was she trying to go to *him* when he obviously knew exactly where she was and enjoyed taunting her with the futility of her quest? Even if Tyleraywa had been in her hands, he could have made it disappear again she was sure. No, the only way to get her son back would be to kill whatever it was that had him... but she had already tried, twice, and failed. She hadn't even come close to harming him. Her companions didn't seem to have much more luck but... the one called Nebulan had managed to hit him where she had always been evaded. That was significant. At least she seemed to have found someone that *might* be able to help her. All this Adrasha thought while she had been ushered to a small room with a cot as their departure had been delayed from Darnel's injury.

As soon as the door had closed behind her, though, she fell to her knees again sobbing at the events of her forsaken life. From burying her own dead mother to watching the only man who had never used and abused her be cut down before his time to all the imprisonments and tortures... Her life was cursed... no her soul. Eternally cursed by the gods that must hate her so. "*Where is your justice?!*" She screamed it into the darkness at the gods she had never been taught to revere yet did instinctively anyway. She stood defiantly against the unseen fates. Against those who were supposed to be in control. "*Where is the balance in this, oh mighty Scale?!*" Her voice took on a mocking tone though she had yelled it with all sincerity. All her life this passionate question had burned on the tip of her tongue yet never escaped her lips till now. She felt empowered in her spirit to say it out loud, to challenge the god who had allowed so much misery into her life. She almost didn't notice that *Atholasha* had begun to glow at her side.

She raised a shaking fist in accusation as the brightness around her grew. "*Your Strong Hammer is NOT Infallible! He has swung wide and smashed The Glass Chalice so that only evil remains!*" It was now impossible for her not to notice *Atholasha* and Adrasha smiled that it also attempted to invoke a reaction from the ever silent gods. Without even thinking, she rested a hand on it's hilt, feeling an almost painful warmth radiate up her arm then through the rest of her body...

...and Thalatos spoke.

***"Ender, Ender, Justicairne awake!"***

Adrasha wasn't sure if the voice had been just in her head or not but the thunderous sound still seemed to echo in her ears. She felt a tiny bit of awe at the privilege of the experience, but it soon faded as she struggled to understand the meaning. "Awake?" She talked quietly now but in disbelief, chiding her maker for his perceived incompetence. "You mean to tell me he's been asleep till now? Since when does goodness take a nap and let evil wreak havoc as he pleases? Since when does balance even let that happen?!" The glow had left her sword as she stopped talking into the darkness. At least she had learned one thing from this encounter. The gods were undependable at best, impotent at worst. Counting on the fates to provide a miraculous turn of events was fool-hearty. She'd have to take care of this without divine intervention. Luckily, she had a good sword and a couple of less impotent mages who seemed willing to help.

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Too many hours later for Adrasha's taste, they were finally en route to the hexen plane. Only one known location for the creation of a stable portal existed in a place that had been aptly named, *The Devil's Canyon*. At least that was as much as the High Mage was willing to tell her. "Where exactly?" she had inquired before they had set out, only to be answered with "200 miles south, 70 miles west." Adrasha plotted it out and noted that there would be far to travel on foot. She had kept a careful and approving eye on the provisions as they were loaded onto the boat. Horses, camels, and some livestock were added to the complement of the crew and easily assembled carts were stacked at the stern next to the dingys to await when they'd be needed.

All seemed fine, all seemed well. The time on the waves passed relatively quickly as they followed the heavily forested shores of lower Andaria. There wasn't really a break in the trees large enough to land a gang plank let alone a cart until they reached the port town of Bardeth. Located in the Fistow Inlet at the mouth of the Lackley River, Bardeth was a quaint little town that seemed to buzz with unnatural happiness.

Adrasha had heard stories of the farmers getting rich further inland past the coastal forests. Very few people stayed to live at Bardeth itself because the real money was in the working of the land elsewhere where the corn grew to ten feet tall, and the melons to two feet around. That and the fact that Castle Hexen was the major trade area for these goods, yet even the couple thousand of people who decided to make this forested town their home, seemed prosperous and well... too happy.

The jealous gaze on her face must have been apparent because Nebulan approached her after they were well on their way to unloading. "Coin for your thoughts?" Instinctively, Adrasha held out her hand for the coin expectantly, for it had been a common game between her, Richard, and Tyler to pass a coin around amongst themselves while asking that exact phrase. They'd pass hour after hour telling each other what they were thinking. Sometimes it was silly, sometimes serious, and with Tyler, often incomprehensible, but it was one of her best memories of her family. The moment of confusion was fleeting, but the moment of awkwardness after she realized her slip continued when she decided not to put her hand down.

"Don't say it unless you mean it," she quipped while beckoning with her fingers for the promised coin. It was hard to really tell what he thought of it with the hood over his face, although she doubted she'd be able to discern his expression if she could see it anyway.

Eventually, Nebulan held up a finger indicating for her to wait then came back placing a golden coin in her hand. Adrasha's mouth opened in astonishment. It was a dramir. Almost the highest form of currency in the Kingdom. She was about to give it back and say it was too much when she remembered that she had no other coin. So instead she closed her mouth and her hand giving him a nod.

"I fear what I'm thinking my not be worthwhile but I was wishing that my family had settled here instead of the western quarter..." She let her voice trail off as she pondered exactly how much to tell him. He HAD paid well but she didn't want to give away too much information. "Perhaps then I might have escaped this wretched curse on my life."

In her minds eye, she pictured him raising an eyebrow in interest as he pressed further. "Curse?"

Adrasha tried to remain vague but let her emotion show through. "I have had perhaps eight years out of forty to live a 'normal' happy life. The rest I would consider pure torture. Everything I gained in that eight years has been taken from me in the following four..." A lump in her throat brought tears to her eyes and she searched under that hood for any sign of understanding or compassion. With a shaky and seething voice she fought herself against telling him more but lost. "No, worse than taken from me... They murdered my husband and tortured my son, right in front of me. He was only six years old crying out for me to stop the pain and all I could do was sit there helplessly! When his little body had been pushed past it's edge and lapsed into blessed unconsciousness, the bastards would heal him with their magic spells and start all over again. All for information I never had!" She paused in her raging, actually feeling a tiny wave of relief at sharing. "There is only one thing that is ever on my mind now-"

"Revenge?" Nebulan had interrupted her to finish her sentence but his presumption startled her. Mostly because she knew that he *should* be right. She *should* want to pay back for all the harm she and her family had received, but she didn't.

"No." The perplexity in her voice was clear. "No, that's not it. I want peace. To free my son from the grips of the entity that has him and from his prison, then to be left alone in peace. It's... It's all I've ever wanted."

The silence between them stretched on for over a minute and Adrasha felt uncomfortable with the lack of reaction so she did as she liked to do and extracted herself. She raised up the coin he had given her, now seeming to be more worth his while than she had intended. "If you'll excuse me, I've got a pair of pants to buy. We've a lot of riding ahead of us and I'd rather not have to do it side saddle."

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# Origins

By Luca and Jewels - Nov 3 2009

“ It is he that saith not "Kismet"; it is he, who knows not fate,

It is Richard, it is Raymond, it is Godfrey at the gate" ”

...

Early evening was setting in. A crimson aura was beginning to manifest into the afternoon's sky. The crew of sailors and the imperial guardsmen began unloading off the *Unrest*. Some of them had been tasked with traveling with the mages; others were just left to stand guard by the dock. Darnel and Neb prepared to disembark from the ship when Neb noticed a look in Darnel's eye that troubled him. "Jenn" he said gently grabbing her arm and pulling her aside. She looked back patiently.

"You're going into the heart of what we have been fighting most of our lives"

She gave a half-smile. "As long as we're stating the obvious, do you want me to remind you why?"

"No...No, I just need to know if you can do this"and stay focused."

All of the thoughts running in the back of her head seemed to stop for a moment to recall if she had heard correctly. "I," she said with a pause "Expected better from you after twenty years. I expected you to have at least a little more faith," She waited for a moment for a reply. When one was not forthcoming she frowned, but continued to look into him. "I really wish I could see your face."

"You expect to see someone different? Or something?"

"I expect to see an agent of the kingdom, though aging along with myself, getting excited about doing what we used to do best," she said with a smile returning to her face and talking with her hands.

"And what is that, traipsing through the mud or getting assaulted by demons? You're supposed to be content with being an administrator and getting other people to do your dirty work."

"Maybe I never wanted to stop...Maybe I *wanted* to do the hard work just to make sure it was done right and, if nothing else, for the adventure. You know, I can't help but notice that *you're* here "Administrator of fallen towers." She cocked her head, letting the sun reflect off of her red hair.

Neb thought for a moment. "Well then picture this: An old friend coming to help do something that, by description, is completely ludicrous and suicidal under the most literal definitions of the words."

"That would be a picture I would like to keep with me," she said and walked away.

She hadn't walked far though before hearing the sounds of a heated confrontation. Was that Susan's voice she heard yelling? Darnel strained to understand the words as she hurried towards the sound.

"...off of me! Let me go!" Yes, it was definitely Susan, a very agitated Susan at that. Darnel started jogging and rounded a corner in time to see five Imperial guards try to get Susan up off the ground without letting her go. While two guards each held one of her wrists twisted behind her back and a third held her sword a few paces away, they lifted her roughly to her feet. She wasn't up for more than a few seconds before she used the leverage of the soldiers holding her arms to deftly kick one of the soldiers standing in front of her in the nose. He stumbled back cursing while the two soldiers holding her wrenched her arms so hard Darnel was afraid they would be dislocated and the other soldier in front of her spared no moment in clubbing Susan across the face with a gauntlet covered hand.

"STOP!" Darnel was beside herself in disbelief. "What is the meaning of this?!" The guards quickly stood at attention as best they could without letting go of their still struggling captive. The soldier with her confiscated sword stepped forward and gave a slight bow.

"So sorry for the disturbance, High Mage, but we've just discovered the true identity of this... *traitor*... and are taking her into custody."

Darnel opened her mouth to protest but Susan broke in first full of venom. "Traitor? *Traitor!* For refusing to destroy my hometown? For refusing to murder my neighbors? For trying to protect my own family?"

Her outburst was met with another clubbing to the other side of her head. "I said *stop!*" Darnel shouted in anger as she watched Susan spit out blood on the ground. She lifted a hand and magically drew the offending guard to her stumbling over his own feet until she had a hand gripping the front of his armor. "You will not strike her again," she uttered harshly. "Is that understood?"

The soldier stared at her wide-eyed, obviously shaken at being bodily moved by her power. "Y-y-yes, High Mage," he stuttered. "I u-underst-stand." Darnel caught Susan's eye which seemed to rage with mixed emotion, one of which being gratitude. Darnel addressed the remaining men sternly.

"Now without any more violence, can one of you please tell me what her crime was?"

The soldier Susan had kicked raised one hand while the other stemmed the flow of blood from his nose. "If I may, High Mage..." He waited for Darnel to nod before continuing. "I had my suspicions from the start, since she looked so familiar, but it wasn't until she came back today in greaves and chain mail that I actually recognized her." Susan's eyes dropped to the ground almost defeated. She stopped her struggling as he continued. "She is Adrasha Vaux, a former Commander in the kingdom's army, currently an escaped prisoner from ward 26. Her crime was

defecting to the rebellion five years ago. I remember the day it happened quite clearly though I had only been assigned under her command for a few months. It was all quite scandalous, because she was one of the best. Everyone in the camp was kind-of shocked that she had turned, but she is indeed a traitor."

Darnel remained silent as she tried to take it all in. An uneasiness starting to creep into her demeanor, while surprisingly, Susan... or rather Adrasha, started chuckling. But it was a pained laugh. One of inevitability that said, 'Why did I get my hopes up? I should have known better.' Her laughter petered out to a whisper that Darnel strained to hear. "I quit my commission. I didn't defect. I tried to return to my family before my homeland was razed in the name of quashing the rebellion... but I was too late." Her voice rose, as did her head as she stared defiantly into Darnel's eyes. "I never betrayed the kingdom... the *kingdom* betrayed me! The kingdom became the real traitor here... When they ordered the burning of the Western quarter!"

Darnel's breath caught in her throat as the realization pierced to her very core. This situation, this woman's plight, all her suffering and what happened to her son... it was all her fault. Tears forming in her eyes, she attempted to retain her air of authority. "Release her," she commanded in a voice that threatened to crack. "Do you honestly think we didn't know her origin? That we'd allow this expenditure of time and resources without being fully aware of every aspect of the mission?" The guards shifted restlessly on their feet as they looked at each other uneasily. "You are on a need to know basis only, and the only thing you need to know is that Adrasha has been granted a full pardon and all of you are to follow her instructions as if they were my own."

Formerly rough hands let go of Adrasha's wrists gently as her unbelieving eyes lingered on Darnel's past the time when she had dismissed the rest and the two women stood alone together. Adrasha finally broke the silence a tear rolling down her cheek. "Thank you." A tear of her own breaking free, Darnel answered. "Your welcome."

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The next morning, they assembled in an inn on the far side of town to discuss their next heading. The inn was old, even by Kingdom standards. This may have been one reason why it was so sparsely occupied. The guards were ordered to keep watch outside, mostly to keep them from the more exact details of where they were headed. Only one knight was allowed in: Lieutenant Duran, who sat adjacent from Darnel's table keeping quiet as best he could.

Nebulan was overlooking a map of southern Andaria that he had acquired from the innkeeper. Apparently, no one had bothered to think about brining one of the region and all the maps on the boat concerned islands and northern coastlines. The map was slightly inaccurate and didn't feature as many of the points as he would have liked. He sat grumbling in one of the tables, drawing on labels of towns and natural features that he already knew the locations of.

"It would have been nice if you remembered your own map," said the High Mage, "You remember, the good one?"

"Well, the waves of marauding invaders were a little distracting," he replied without obviously looking up. "Once we break through the forest, a thick swamp will welcome us," he continued in a sarcastically chipper voice. Returning to normal he said "after that, seldom will we find dry land until we reach our destination."

"And when will that be?" Adrasha poked.

"Well, that directly depends, I think, on how fast you intend to move," Neb replied.

"Very," Darnel cut in. "Considering that we'll have to travel through the greater portion of southern Andaria."

"Hmm, well, we'll be walking through swamps and forests. So even moving fast, it'll be slow. Given the distance, somewhere between three to four days walking," he turned to Darnel, "Very, fast."

"I would rather it be shorter," Adrasha said quietly.

"I probably will too, once I get to the swamp." He continued to pour over the map "Personally, I think three to four days is a generously quick time-frame for transporting eighteen people and a little over a week's worth of supplies for everyone."

"A week, my lord?"

"Yes lieutenant, I plan on eating in the Hex as well."

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The forest ahead of them was mostly composed of pines, young pines to be specific. These tree's limbs, which were slow to be lost, formed a nearly impassible barrier before the field on the open outskirts of town. It isn't unusual for The Kingdom to occasionally designate sections of previously timbered land to be isolated and grown back naturally to be timbered again later. This must be one of those places. By the looks of it, it was last forested twenty or so years ago, making it about the most difficult for an extended expedition.

Bardeth was the farthest town towards The Devil's Canyon. Thus, there were no roads that exited the town in the direction needed. Nebulan spoke to the guards with somewhat less then reassuring words: "We shall eventually be moving through the heart of a marsh, we had better get used to taking routes we'd rather not," he finished and pushed into the wall if low-lying tree limbs.

Understandably, this portion of Andaria was not even sparsely populated; it was after all a forest. There were however, occasionally some large organizations of brush in more open areas of the wood. "Maybe there're some old hags hiding in them," said one of the more expendable guards, who promptly tripped over his own feet, and fell in the bramble. No one seemed to notice. At this point in the trip, there were twelve guards, including Duran, who was becoming more reclusive yet continued to eagerly protect them from the dangerous woodland-hags. Fifteen were scheduled to be there, yet three of them presented a very convincing story of how dangerous the townsfolk of the dock looked after being told their next assignment.

Adrasha seemed to be returning to a more solid emotional state. The feeling that they were actively doing something about what troubled her most was the best comfort she had received in some time. Though Darnel lead the group, she made certain that Adrasha was right next to her getting jabbed in the eye with branches instead of merely being a follower. This also allowed the High Mage to occasionally trade questions with the woman, who was opening up a *very* small amount more each day.



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The first night they made camp was quiet. There were neither sounds of birds, nor any other wildlife. Breaking the silence was the occasional rumble of thunder far to the East. It probably wasn't headed towards them, but it turned the sentry's head every time the rumble sounded. The guards, used to some of the larger cities of the realm, felt more uncomfortable with the stillness and tried making awkward conversation with one another to break the silence.

The almost unnaturally large opening in the heavy forest allowed for a fire and a decent camping space for everyone. Half of the soldiers were sleeping while the others were exploring the parameter. Darnel sat no more than three feet away from the blazing fire. Her head was turned, the midpoint of her nose separating the light and dark with the reflection of the tendrils of fire reflecting in her eye. A fist held up a heavy head that focused on some dark point in the wood. She clearly wasn't looking at anything in particular, but her eyes needed a resting place if her mind was to wander.

She flashed back to days before. Even the memory of Adrasha fighting off the guards on the ship and in her tower made her ill. All of it was coming together and what the guard hadn't told her about the woman need not be said. It was almost as if the story had told itself about how she had come to live in the ruined Tower of the Arts, why she had nothing to say to her then, and why she was so desperate now.

These realizations did more than give her a feeling of regret, they produced a sharp needle that shot through her trachea, looped through both lungs, and finished by bending back, stabbing her heart. The only thoughts running through her mind that night the quarter burned was strategy.

*What will happen if they take control of the city? How many lives will be lost with this strategy? What about this one?* She knew the western quarter was a residential area. She also knew that it was a miracle that the city hadn't been overrun with rebels considering their numbers and aggression, but a decision made in haste and driven by worry is not a decision that's a prelude to a good outcome.

She started thinking of the number of deaths she prevented by eliminating radical and rebellious leaders in camps across the kingdom and how that was pointless considering how many other innocent people died. *At least*, she thought, *I don't know the family members that survived them.* Yet still they existed and still one question remained. She turned to Adrasha's tent.

*How do I proceed with this woman now?*

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## Thirsty

By Jewels - Dec 22 2009

Adrasha was exhausted from the day's trek. It had been a while since she had endured a double time march and her out of practice muscles all ached in protest. She lay back, looking up at the

stars, her blanket rolled up behind her head. She had been allotted a tent but it was too confining for her taste. Too much like one of the many prison cells she'd been stuffed into over the years.

Her eyes traced the constellations in the stars as she tried to think about the good years, those oh so few, oh so fleeting, yet gloriously good years. A glimpse of her husband's smiling face, a glimmer of Tyler holding up his arms to be held. Her tears rolled as she realized how hard it was becoming to conjure these up, at how hazy their faces were in her mind, how blurred the memories were clumping together. As if they were but one moment, one moment in an eternity of hardship.

Like her memories the stars started to blur through her tears until there were no points of light at all but instead a purple haze. A low rumbling voice echoed through the darkness, "Ender, Ender, Justicairne keep watch!"

And then, *He* was there.

She couldn't hear him, she couldn't see him, but she could feel that he was there. His essence seemed to pour over her skin like a bank of fog pours over a hill. Adrasha couldn't move. She could barely breathe, his unseen weight pushing down on her chest. To her surprise, though, she realized she didn't want to move. The despair that washed over every inch of her being was so deep, so pure, and so...familiar.

Hadn't she been despairing almost all of her life? Hadn't she already lived through almost every terror known to man...or woman? This was old hat. This was where she belonged. Dare she think it? She liked it. It felt like... home.

"Fear me!" His icy voice pierced through her skull as he demanded her compliance. It seemed oddly desperate, as if begging.

Her body shuddered as the intensity of her despair surged but she didn't resist. Instead, she drank it in, gasping as her will to live drained away. Death, she wanted death. A violent one, an excruciating one, long and drawn out. She couldn't explain why but the thought of it made her smile. A death to do justice to her life and the complete failure it was, She welcomed it, she embraced it and found herself fighting to hold on to the despair.

He was trying to leave her, trying to retreat, as if realizing that he was fueling her desire instead of her fear and unwilling to let her have what she wanted. She could sense his confusion to her reaction, that it was unexpected. She clung to his tendrils with her senses, lips parting to forcefully whisper. "Stay!" But he had always been so much more powerful than her and he ripped away to disappear as suddenly as he'd come.

Adrasha opened her eyes and jolted upright screaming his name. "Esrever!" In a flash Nebulan was at her side with Jennifer following soon after. Their silhouettes clear against the starry sky. Already the feeling of him being there seemed all but a memory. It had to have been a dream.

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# Death's Release

By Azuma - Dec 26 2009

"Interesting... interesting... what must have fate brought you to be desperate for death's release." Esrever's cold eyes looked down upon the stirring camp. The woman's shriek woke the lot up. All were nervous.

"Is it safe to be here?" Shalos coalesced beside him. "He *is* there, isn't he?"

"Mmmm..." and Esrever cackled wildly as he and the shade was enveloped by the amethyst haze, disappearing into nothing.

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"You have returned." Patrick's bitter tone resounded in the empty castle.

Esrever did not meet his greeting, He rushed towards Josephine's chamber and found the lady staring idly outside. Patrick hurried towards the two, anxious on what the madman will do next. Esrever grabbed the lady by the throat, immediately making Patrick dart towards him. But he cannot. He stopped in his place for no reason prevalent to him. Then he remembered the curse.

"Damn you, Esrever!" his tone laden by anger and choked by sobs of despair. "DAMN YOU!"

Esrever did not heed Patrick's curses. He was fixed in Josephine's lifeless gaze towards him. "Soon, Ezra... you will be released from his grasp." His grip tightened around the lady's neck.

## *FEED HER TO ME.*

Patrick stared in horror as Esrever's shadow wrapped around the lady's frail body. He can't believe this. He wont believe this. Why now? Why not then? WHY NOT ME?!

"No... no... NOOOO!" Patrick mustered all his strength, but it was futile, his body didn't respond. His mind, his heart, both were screaming wildly for him to stop the bastard from what he's doing to his love. "S- shalos, are you just going to stand there?!"

The shade was as unresponsive to his calls as well but, "I'm... sorry..." the two words from him hung heavy in the air and Shalos bowed his head, trying not to glance at the murder.

He shouted. Patrick shouted his soul out. He was so powerless. He was so weak. He cannot do anything. His faith didn't do anything for him. His god didn't do anything for him. First, his brothers, then his child, then this. From the start of his madness, he was unable to stop the monster from doing what it wants with him, Josephine, their child. He quited down as Esrever approached him. Josephine was nowhere to be seen. He took his gaze up to the man, if he were at all, filled with rage. He silently watched as Esrever reached towards him, to his face. "End it." his tone was quiet, but Esrever can feel the powerful loathing coming from it. He didn't reply. He was silenced out. He was looking at him. Piercingly. He was searching. Searching something inside him. And he found it. Damn him, the devil's smile.

"Who are you blaming?"

Esrever question struck the catatonic paladin.

"Who are you blaming?" he asked again.

Patrick still didn't reply.

"Who are you blaming?" Esrever's monotonous tone was ringing in his mind. Who should he be blaming?

HIM OF COURSE! THE MADMAN! WHO ELSE!? HE WAS THE START OF ALL THIS.

NO, NO, NO. FATE! FATE HAS DEPRAVED HIM.

ARE YOU DAFT?! OF COURSE THERE'S NO ONE TO BLAME BUT HIMSELF!

*Silence them out and listen to me.*

*Huh. I don't know you. Who are you?*

*Silence them out, listen only to me.*

*I am. Who are you?*

*Listen, depraved. Harken my words.*

*But I don't know who you are...*

*Believe in me. I will give you solace.*

*Believe... there is nothing to believe anymore.*

*I am here. Believe in me.*

*Why?*

*Accept me, and see.*

*See what?*

*Her.*

*...*

*Patrick, hear her, see her, feel her.*

*I...*

*Be with her again, Patrick.*

*I...*

*And take revenge Patrick. To those who have wronged you.*

*And to your god who failed you. Sever him limb from limb, rip him to shreds, revel in his death.*

*"... accept."*

As Patrick woke up from his daze, he saw the world differently. The anguish, the strife, the sorrow. He felt them, was this his? No.

*THIS IS THE WORLD'S. TAKE JOY FROM IT.*

Patrick held up his hands and saw the haze coming from it. The same one he sees in... Esrever!  
He looked up to see the madman and there he was, grinning at his transformation.

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## Another Day, Another Dawn

By Luca - Feb 2 2010

“ It is he who knows not laughter when he counts the wager worth;

Put down your feet upon him that our peace be on the Earth. ”

The morning arrived with orange tendrils of light protruding through puffy cumulous clouds off in the distance. Today the camp was bustling with activity. Following Duran's lead, the imperial guardsmen began a rigorous series of exercises, in one of the few dry fields in the area, to preparing them for their upcoming march. Off in a quiet corner of camp Darnel studied their highly modified map, no doubt searching for the least bit of swamp to cover without compromising time.

Walking stick in hand, Nebulan approached Adrasha's tent and opened one of the flaps with the butt of his staff. "Rise," he said simply, followed by a quick laugh at the cliché irony. A semiconscious Adrasha was stirring beneath the woolen blankets followed by a short stillness. "Are you dead?" Neb poked.

"No, I just smell like it," Adrasha replied. Remembering where she was, Adrasha started getting up decidedly faster, nearly falling into the wooden tent support. As blood started to circulate into her head, she was hit by grogginess and confusion. *What day is it?* The answer didn't really matter. Now, it seemed that time was not measured in the names of days, but in the expanse they had left to travel.

Without the need to impart more motivation, Nebulan turned back to the brown field in the distance. "Lieutenant, you're making the men tired. Get everybody to grab their gear, we're leaving in five minutes," he shouted and wandered to Darnel.

"I see...swamps in our future...Which is also what lies in our past," she said continuing to eye the map as several soldiers brushed by to grab their satchels.

"I don't really care for swamps today, try another prediction."

"Well, you usually want straight facts""

"In this case, you can lie to me."

"The Nobles lie to the King, the King lies to us, and we lie to the Nobles. We're a very deceitful government...but, lies don't change reality do they? I suggest we move on."

"Probably right, there is no sense in delaying the inevitable. Alright," Neb said loudly "Let's head on."

"That was a quick five minutes," said expendable guard #4. "I haven't had breakfast yet."

"Private, one of the prerequisites for your job was walking and breathing, try to modify that with walking and eating. If you can't manage to fit breathing in while you do those two...well, just prioritize."

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The day rolled on and the amber sunrise that merrily greeted them that morning had not only vanished, but the sun had seemingly disappeared behind a blanket of thick, gray matter. A subtle white fog had descended into the marsh accompanied by a noted fall in temperatures. Visibility was not so much immobilizing, as it was irritating. The low-lying swamp plant life was the only other ingredient necessary to make the city-dwelling guards send out false alarms while wading through their shallow liquid environment.

The guards kept a keen eye out for "something: swamp hags, killer raves, or moss giants and such. Neb and Darnel were, in sharp contrast, having a completely trivial conversation. They knew full well that the odds of getting attacked by something was null. An attack would also be interesting and swamps were not known for interesting things. Trying to ignore the dark slush of slit and algae making their way into Neb's boot, he continued to make conversation with the High Mage. "No, that's when you-" But something stopped him. Off in the distance seemed to be, yes it was, something interesting! A rather steep section of land had been pushed up out of the gooey swampland by ancient tectonic plates. Neb stopped and tilted his hood sideways. The guards also stopped, but none of them chose to comment on this image. Mostly because they knew that they had been traveling through the marshes for the last few days and this rise could be a hallucination. "The phrase "land ho" comes to mind, captain," Nebulan said to Adrasha.

She spoke like she was distant and distracted, "Actually, it's 'commander'." and plunged her feet deep into the waters, going after the landmass.

The green-blue land rose out of the swampy waters in the shape of a cul-de-sac. Its long cylindrical appearance contrasted so sharply with the rest of the land that it seemed artificial. The group took their first steps out of the water to find ruins of a civilization long lost to this world. The buildings were made out of a strange smooth-black brick. These ruins, however, were becoming lost in the thick grasses in the area. Water-loving trees had, long ago, settled in at the tops and sides of the protective hills that kept the water at bay. The walls appeared to close in towards the back of the "island". Whatever they hoped to find here would probably be there.

The numbers of building ruins in this area were not great, but one feature that did stick out was their lack of decomposition. "You know," said Darnel, "It would undoubtedly behoove us to collect a sample building piece for study."

A reluctant Neb looked at her as he walked. "Duran," he regarded as he made a slashing motion with his pitch-black hands.

"Right," he replied. The warrior turned to face the soldier behind him and removed the soldier's sword. Then, he calmly walked to the remains of what looked like an old monastery. His hands firmly grasped the weapon, lifted it high in the air, and then brought it down with a debilitating crack. The recoil rolled from his sword to his arms and clanked his heavy armor about his chest. Oddly, this mighty blow neither produced a sample, nor so much as chipped or dented the

building. Coming to notice, none of the buildings were "damaged", they were just sinking into the water-soaked land.

Duran blinked for several moments, just to recall if he had blacked out and skipped the last thirty seconds, or if that actually happened. He brought the center of sword to his eye for inspection and turned on his heel back to Darnel. "Your sample, lord," he said, submitting the sword for review with a severely dented mid-section.

After a pause, Darnel spoke. "Very well, lieutenant. You may hand that back to Jeremy now".

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The end of the wall of Andarian soil was fast approaching. As they moved forward, even from quite a distance away, something rather large was up there. The item in question was a large rectangular stone block that pulsed with magical energies. It was nine feet high, four feet wide, and about three - or so feet thick. Basically, it was a perfectly rectangular black brick. The texture was of the same solid and smooth black rock that made up all the other buildings in this area with only one abnormality. Near the bottom, on the right side, was a hexagonal socket.

"Would you like to go so far as to say our suspicions were correct?" Darnel asked Neb.

"I believe that directly depends on it fitting," he replied and started to close in on the device with Adrasha not far behind. As if being fabricated from pure thought, a voice sounded behind him.

"I wouldn't touch that if I were you," an old, but clear voice said. Nebulan slowly turned with increasing pulse increments. The second High Mage of the Kingdom stood behind them. At this time, the twelve guards ripped out their swords, just like they're supposed to do with potentially dangerous entities present; however, what they were not supposed to do was point their blades at the people they were supposed to be protecting.

A white-hot look of fire boiled onto Darnel's face. There were subtle changes in her expression, but an intimidating aura of anger flooded her as the surrounding guards were openly betraying her. A moment of silence passed, during which she seemed to subdue her rage. She boldly walked through the field of sharpened metal to approach Snite while idly spinning her crystal staff with her left hand.

The two stood locked in death glares as a circle of soldiers fully encompassed them. Darnel stood only slightly shorter than Snite, who was placed slightly downhill to her. The two leaders of the magical arts in the kingdom held equal ranks, but that certainly didn't help group them in appearances. Indeed, the two couldn't be more different. Darnel had been wearing a deep-purple cotton robe with black runic inscriptions. It wasn't *terribly* high-class, but that certainly wasn't the thought when picking it out. For the last two days, it had been saturated with swamp water, mud, silt, and sweat just getting here. The thought of appearances were left back at the docks, if she ever cared for them in the first place. Her arms and face were similarly marked with scrapes from the forest and dried mud from a slip or two during the march.

In pale comparison, High Mage Snite wore a very green robe with deep blue trim. Along the seemingly velvet shoulder cushions was a subtle war-rune. His face was bright and freshly washed, as was his hair, and any other bit of skin protruding from his robe. His eye color, an

orange-brown around the iris, was overshadowed by a notable skin bag under his left eye only. "Jennifer, you're looking...well," he said eyeing her mud-stained robe.

She looked down, "Well, I do what I can to get the job done," She ended by brushing some of the mud off her robe with the back of her hand and, oh well, it looked like some globs of dirt had "accidentally" landed on Snite's robe.

"It was thoughtless of you to come here, really. Now, how am I supposed to tell the King that a High Mage of his ran off with an imperial warship to go find a gate to Hex?"

"With a smile, I imagine."

"Those *are*, after all, the facts as they stand now. And there's no telling how those reports could get skewed by word of mouth to paint a worse picture than it already is. How hard is it for a guard to conclude that you work for the Shadow and report that approximation as fact?"

"So naturally you would want to give the report yourself," Neb commented sarcastically.

"Administrators who have failed their country are beneath the level of my recognition," Snite fired back without removing his resentful glance at his counterpart.

"Apparently not..." Neb replied. Snite now flashed his eyes at him.

"You want to be addressed by me, the *one* High Mage who is *worthy* of his title? Fine. Jennifer Darnel and Nebulan Gutaraie, you are hereby charged with heresy and sedition. If you resist, you will die. If you flee, you will die. And if you come willingly, you will be tried and then most probably be killed. I advise you to come peacefully; on the other hand, I am perfectly willing to dish out some rough justice right here."

Darnel wanted to yawn, for effect, when one was not forthcoming she started to speak. As she did Neb covertly reached into his cloak to open the wooden box that contained the shard of Dark Glass. "To be honest, Darius, I'm tired and I could be thinking of a whole host of things I'd rather be doing than traveling with you." On her last word, she grasped her staff with both hands and brought it up a good two feet. She then forced all her bodyweight to bring down the staff, driving its butt deep into the damp ground. The result was a bright white shockwave extending ten feet out and knocking Snite and the guardsmen down.

In sync with the High Mage, Nebulan forced the shard of Dark Glass into the hexagonal slot in the monolith. The black stone shimmered like the ripple formed by a rock thrown into a large still pond. Though he was uncertain if the device was sufficiently prepared, he bowed his head into stone, vanishing as he went. Running back from the now expanded circle of stunned guardsmen, Darnel pushed Adrasha through the portal with one hand, grabbed the Glass with the other, and disappeared through the portal herself. The portal closed after a short delay, leaving Snite in a sea of guards slowly regaining their senses.

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With a shimmering flash, the portal closed. A fascinating device, Neb thought. He stood on a black square-tiled floor extending approximately five feet from the device. Mages had created about three transportation devices to date. Such a device required extreme amounts of energy and the exact location of the destination. One had to step back and wonder how that was possible here. Even now, the land itself seemed to move with its own life. A heartbeat would ripple



through, mocking the direction of the wind as it passed. Was this an illusion, or was it possible that the very laws of magic were constantly in shift in this realm?

Adrasha took note of their present location. A dark blue haze mixed with abysmal black glided like unending clouds over the realm. Ruinous energies spawned from clouds to the ground at random, annihilated anything but the barren wasteland. Indeed, other than these bolts of discolored lightning and the intimidating aura of hostility in the air, little else was notable. The orange-brown hills around her bent gently like the waves of the sea. From the vantage point she was in, the only features she could find were three dead trees and a cracked boulder.

Alone and once again an outlaw, the reality of her situation flooded back to her like the mist in the air. *Of course I wanted to enter the Hex, but was a map too damn much to ask for?* She thought. This was nothing short of being dropped randomly in a desert and being told to find her way out. Which direction was she going to go in now? Each looked equally as improbable as the next for getting her towards her son.

She knelt down and brought heavy hands to her face. Her trek here had been eating away at her body; her skin was dry and cracking, her hair was getting frayed and split, and her mind didn't feel much better. As Adrasha exhaled heavily, a thick and purple cotton robe forced her to reevaluate her despair.

The very essence of this place nearly made her forget about how she even got here. The High Mage and Nebulan had apparently made a great sacrifice to arrive here. Adrasha now experienced a very strange feeling of companionship as she stood up. These were secondary leaders of the Kingdom, notable people who would never blend into a crowd. Yet their devotion to this mission had now placed them in the same class as her: Rebels.

Nebulan stood, back facing the women, studying the monolith through which they had arrived, as Darnel examined Adrasha's constantly changing expression. "First trip to Hex?" she asked "the equivalent to the saying: First time to Hell? Adrasha nodded, seemingly not fully hearing her. She continued staring off into the distance. "Me too," Darnel replied quietly looking into the direction Adrasha was.

Nebulan turned around, seemingly less amused by his new surroundings. "Operations within the Order of the Arts are sort of like jumping off a cliff; no matter how exciting it is at first, eventually you'll wind up regretting it." Adrasha replied with dubious look.

"Well I haven't hit that point yet," Darnel said happily.

"We need to get moving. What's the best way to decide our heading?" Adrasha poked. Neb and Darnel exchanged a glance.

Neb broke in first: "I'd suggest licking one's finger and sticking in the air."

"Nonsense!" Darnel returned, "With this lightning, it'll get zapped off. We're supposed to follow the cliché legend of approximating the direction in which the air smells cleaner."

"If we're going where the air smells cleaner, they we are certainly not going to find an agent of the Shadow. We have to follow whatever direction smells like our beloved King, and we will find the creature standing next to an overturned privy."

There was a short pause as the two turned to Adrasha as if waiting for her to insert her own "opinion". Adrasha, however, was caught off-guard by sudden lack of professionalism.

"Believe it or not, I was actually a person before I jammed an administrative stick up my ass. If you take things too seriously then you're just going to go insane quicker and well, I'm just not going to have *any* fun at all on this trip...and we can't have that."

"Given my personal connection to this "trip", you'll have to excuse me. It's difficult," she replied with a slight resentment, "but I'll try."

The High Mage squinted her eyes a little and nodded. "We're going to start by going east," she said. Nebulan dug into his robe and produced a small, slate-green compass. "Wash tub," he said.

"Okay, no compass." She looked up and gave a solid examination of the sky for an idea of direction. Unfortunately, the sky's dark blue color showed no indication of a celestial body. "Of course not, why would there be a sun here? The last reports we had from Hex said that there was a structure to the East of this portal. Come to think of it, however, they gave no indication of how they got their bearing on direction. We could ask them, of course, if they weren't all dead by n-"

"Umm," Neb said as Adrasha started to head off into the brown-orange hills.

"This looks like east to me," she replied.

After a pause, "My, what a keen sense of direction, it surely does," and began to follow.

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## A Good Plan

By Jewels - Mar 1 2010

In truth, she had not started off towards the hills because it looked like the East; rather, Adrasha just needed to feel like she was doing something. The hopelessness of it all had not yet begun to sink in, but she could see it coming clear as day. With all the soldiers turning against them, they were down to three people. They had no wagons. They had no horses. Every single provision they'd had the forethought to bring was now on the other side of the portal where death and imprisonment waited.

This side of the portal did not seem much better. Chaotic energy swirled everywhere just waiting for an unfortunate to walk through it. Unknown creatures of varying strength and lethal intent potentially lurked in every shadow. There was nothing that even resembled food. There was no water. There was no sign of civilization as far as her eyes could see. Not that that was a particularly bad thing. No civilization meant no one was trying to kill them...yet.

As they reached the top of the orange hills, Adrasha looked out scanning the barren land for any clue to where they were in relation to where they wanted to be and saw none. Surely death was all that waited for them here as well. It waited in the hazy fog that covered the ground off to

the left. It waited in the shimmering sand of the dunes off to the right. Death waited straight forward in the crags and crannies of the sheer cliff that rose up before them.

She heard the rustling of the grass as Nebulan and Darnel walked up behind her. Each took a place on either side of her and stood motionless, taking it in. Out of the blue, Adrasha broke the silence. "I don't think I've ever seen a death quite so beautiful." The out of place comment hung in the air unanswered which was just as well since she had only been talking to herself. "If we make it to the top of the cliff, we might be able see some semblance of...something." Darnel turned towards Nebulan with the suggestion and he nodded his approval at it.

"Indeed. It is as good a plan as any in this forsaken place."

Darnel shook her head at him. "I very much doubt that the land of the god of chaos is left forsaken by him. It's exactly the way he wants it, I'm sure."

"I've never liked chaos much," he threw back, "and less the more I see of it."

"When you're in the land of chaos, is it chaotic to have order?" Adrasha mused.

Both Nebulan and Darnel paused in thought at her question. "Perhaps, but I think if one thought about it too hard they should go mad. Shall we?" Nebulan waved a hand towards the cliffs and the trio set out again.

Their trek to the base of the cliffs was rather uneventful which made Adrasha uneasy. Surely there should be something chaotic happening to them any minute now. Some form of death wrapped in a creature, or the elements, or" something. All this nothing was almost worse than what she had expected.

Just as they started to get close to the base of the cliff, though, they saw movement. A group of" animals were pacing back and forth just ten feet from the cliff. Adrasha was surprised at how cute they were. Big puppy dog eyes, grey fluffy fur, small tails that hung down between their legs. They looked much too docile for the piles of bones that stacked up behind them, and they made whining sounds as the trio cautiously came closer. None ventured further than the line they paced. In fact, the land underneath their paws was hardened and bare of vegetation.

Nebulan and Darnel held up a hand of warning and Adrasha drew her sword just in case, though she couldn't imagine these creatures really being a danger to them.

The other two started deliberating amongst themselves with how to proceed but Adrasha wasn't paying attention. Weary from the walk, Adrasha took out her canteen for one of the few swigs of water left in it. Suddenly, without warning, a large bird swooped out of the sky and snatched it out of her hands. She hadn't seen where it had come from or heard it until it was too late. It banked left with the canteen secure in it's talons and let out an ear piercing screech while flying higher towards the top of the cliff. The dog like animals started and fled at the sound, squeezing themselves into a small cave a few feet to the right.

Adrasha was furious. "Hey!" she called out in frustration, but the bird was already halfway up the cliff already. "That"s the only water I have." Neb raised a hand and the bird squaked again. Whatever he had done caused it to drop her canteen which fell just a foot inside the line the "wolves" had been walking. "Thanks Nebulan. I'll get it." Adrasha started to jog forward with her sword still out in case the creatures came out of the cave.

"No, wait," Darnel yelled but the canteen was only five feet away now. Still no sign of the dogs" She could get it. "Adrasha, wait!" she called again more urgently.

Adrasha looked back just two feet away from the canteen and closing fast. "Don't worry, I got it." But in the middle of her sentence, right before her eyes, Nebulan and Darnel vanished from her sight. Startled, Adrasha turned back around just in time to see herself jogging towards the edge of the cliff where her companions waited below. "Oh, craaaaaaaaap!" There was no time to slow down, no time to stop herself" Her momentum carried her over the edge and she began to fall. She didn't have time to process what had just happened to her but in her minds eye she saw herself as a pile of bones at the bottom of the cliff being chewed on by those cute, unassuming animals.

She was not ready to die yet, though. Years of training kicked in and the sword in her hand shot out as she angled her body towards the cliff. It's point jarringly drove into the rock face leaving her to smash into it as well. The wind was knocked out of her on impact and she almost let go of the hilt. As it was, though, she knew that she couldn't hold on for long. A quick glance down revealed another couple hundred feet to the ground. She still wouldn't survive the fall, at least not for long. She tried to take in a ragged breath and call out for help but she could barely get in a gulp big enough to keep her conscious. Her fingers were slipping, and they hurt like something had at least been sprained. Struggling to hold on for just a few more seconds, she reached up to hold on with her other hand but the hilt wasn't big enough. Her fingers had nothing to cling to except the sharp blade which instantly cut into her skin leaving the blade too slippery with blood to hold onto anyway. Is this how it would end? As dinner for a family of cute little dogs?

Adrasha heard another screech coming up quickly from behind her and a surprising amount of brute force rammed into her. Looked like the bird wanted dinner too" Her grip on the sword was knocked loose. Her consciousness started to slip away. There was nothing more she could do. Adrasha plummeted to her death still pondering the beauty of it all. The orange hills, the purple skys, the open plains" It was all so beautiful. Adrasha closed her eyes and waited for the impact.

When it came, it felt a lot softer than she had expected" a lot more like she had fallen into a warm bed and had been wrapped in a cocoon of comforters and pillows. Was this death? There were so many people who had different ideas of the afterlife, she had not known which to believe but if this was death than she didn't suppose she would mind it.

Someone called her name softly, urged her to come out of the warmth. Who was it? She couldn't focus. Who would be calling for her here? It sounded urgent. Faces started running through her mind her father, her superiors, Richard" Was it Richard calling for her? Calling her to come meet him? Adrasha struggled to open her eyes, struggled to move her limbs, but she could do neither. She could only rest in this blissful warmth. She would have been content to do just that if it weren't for the voice. It called for her, it cried for her, it *screamed* for her. The voice ripped through her very soul leaving no sense of comfort, no hint of peace" and then she saw him. For the first time in five years she saw him. Tyler held out his arms to her screaming out her name"

Adrasha started awake and struggled against the bonds that held her only to have them squeeze her tighter the more she moved. "Hold still." Nebulan's commanding voice resonated in her ear as she realized he was carrying her.

Darnel's face hovered close to hers as well inspecting Adrasha for damage from her fall. "The next time I say wait" wait." Even though her voice was quiet, but severe. Adrasha could only nod.

She turned her head to look up at Nebulan. From this vantage point the folds of his hood allowed her a clear view of where his face should have been. The dark mist there just didn't seem to fit. She couldn't even tell if he was looking at her or not. Not really even thinking about it, Adrasha raised her free hand to try to touch it but Darnel caught it on it's way up. "Let's get you to your feet, shall we?" Her head spun when her feet found purchase but Adrasha managed to stand. "What just happened, anyway?"

"Well," Neb started, "You just walked into, what seems to be, one of the natural traps of Hex. Basically there's a portal at the bottom of the cliff that transports you only a few feet away from the edge of the top."

Darnel picked up when Neb stopped. "When you fell, we stepped through a little more cautiously and levitated you back to the top, which is where we are now."

"Right where we wanted to be?" Adrasha asked weakly."

"Right where we wanted to be," Jennifer confirmed.

"The only question is," Neb interjected, "where to now?"

For the first time Adrasha really looked around at the great expanse of land around them. Everything looked different and yet nothing stood out" *Pick a direction. Any direction.* There was only one direction she needed to go, the one that took her straight to Tyler. She turned slowly, looking not with her eyes but her heart. It seemed she turned in three full circles before she stopped and pointed. She wasn't even sure if her gut feeling was correct but it was all they had to go on.

Unfortunately, the direction she pointed in looked like the gloomiest bit of gloom in this world. Giant storm clouds billowed up in that direction and dead trees littered the landscape. "Uh" Are you sure?" Darnel didn't seem very enthusiastic about her choice. "No. Not really," Adrasha admitted. "But something is pulling me that way. It could be Tyler, it could be nothing, or it could be something sinister. The only way to really find out, though, is to go."

Darnel looked beseechingly towards Neb who only shrugged. "It's still as good a plan as any."