

# Under the Silent Skies

By Sudanna - Apr 17 2011

Thryn.

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In the darkness, there hangs a jewel. Pinned to velvet oblivion that stretches beyond imagining is a turning, spinning light, a glittering treasure that shines in uncaring defiance of the unending black. A dot of vibrant color, a beacon shining bravely into the emptiness, like the last lighthouse left alive.

It is not a matter given much thought. No man muses over the cosmos, for on Thryn, the skies lie silent. In the day, no sun burns, no star metes out daylight. From darkness comes light, fading in with the unknowable inevitability of life. At night, there are no moons to offer comfort, there are no stars to break the void. Out of the light twists the darkness, returning as if it was always there.

Thryn is a massive world, though much of it is sea. Landmasses that could dwarf entire planets whorl and wind across the surface, and clouds that could hide continents beneath them wreath the planet in their folds. One in particular, a great arc that sweeps from the frozen northern pole to beneath the boiling equator before dissolving into a thousand thousand islands, is our focus. Only the lowest tip of this world knows civilization, and it is civilization just beginning to stretch from the darkness into light. They know nothing beyond their small corner of this world, barred more by small-mindedness than the fjords and seas that hedge them. They call their small world-piece Thryn, for they know of nothing beyond it. This place knows many divisions, and they dominate the minds of men. Whether it be between rich and poor, nation and nation, man and woman, human and elf, lord and peasant, ruler and worker, or sorcerer, artificier, and common man, there are few that any man could call brother.

The lower classes are brutally dominated by those above them, broken time and again, and there are more than a few lords that murder for sport. Nation-states hold nothing beyond bitter hate for each other, for each has a thousand slights against them to draw upon, and is led by little more than greedy, foolish children. People are defined by their birth, as man or woman, and woe betide any who fail to obey that. There is not, in the entirety of the world, an elven lord or lady, king or queen, or even factory boss, and the elves know no other way than this. Social mobility is a concept that has never seen a realization - born a lord, or born a pauper, that is what you are to be. Technology, aided by artificery, has been on a constant, slow, destructive march, and factories now dot the cities, choking the air with poisons and choking the souls of man with further means of oppression. Perhaps the largest division in Thryn is that between sorcerers and common man. The potential for sorcery lies within every being, but to attain it, a mind must break and shape and know itself until it is something alien. The reward is powers that shatter reality, knowledge of things beyond knowing, and the jealous hate of every other creature to lay eyes upon you. Artificiers are lesser shadows of a sorcerer, crafting in the shadows wonders of material magic, but they are victims of the same jealous rage from those beneath them and of laughing scorn from those above.

Thryn has, as a result of these conflicts, a long, complex, and bloody history. Wars are constant, and it is a rare state that lasts beyond a century. Every few generations, a man rises above himself to become a sorcerer, or some nation uncovers some new secret of artificery, and their small world is changed forever. Violent, unending change is the inescapable norm. The coming of industry did little more than accelerate this. Wars are waged with ever greater frequency, fueled by new resources, weapons, and populations swelling beyond the means to sustain them. For the first time in millennia, there is more than one sorcerer alive. And destruction erupts from them all.

Thryn is a world that, despite constant change, lies stagnant. All of history is but variation upon a theme. Now, though, new powers and practices are being born. Will they bring about something new at last? Or will Thryn be plunged from the fledgling light back into the void of its birth?

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## A Dead Man

By Sylae - Apr 18 2011

The tide of humanity parted before Tehara as she approached the vaulted steps of the Bounty Hall, pushing a young man in front of her, his hands tied behind his back. His breathing was becoming more frantic, and he looked around wild-eyed. "You don't have to do this!" he cried, "I have a family, they'll kill me, you know that!"

She sighed and pushed him up the wide marble stairs, "You're worth more alive. Don't make me waste a bullet now, scumbag," she stated, tapping the Vyanat-issue pistol at her hip meaningfully, "Not to mention, some poor sap would have to clean your brains off the ground." she pushed him again and he slowly started up the stairs, then suddenly leaped to the side and ran into the street.

Tehara sighed, and pulled the pistol from it's holster "I'm going to shoot you!" she yelled. When he continued running, she sighed and took aim. A single shot, and the man collapsed.

She stepped out of the Hall, pocketing the coins the deserter had paid for. Although shooting out his kneecap had cost a gold's fine, it was still enough coinage to last a week. She walked down the wide stairs and headed south along the boulevard.

After a mile's walk, she turned down a side street and opened the door to one of the many dilapidated residential buildings. lining the streets in Third District.

After talking to the landlord and paying the week's board, she headed up to the third and uppermost floor, but stopped in the hall outside her room. The door to her room creaked open as a breeze blew through a nearby window. She looked around, and upon finding the hall vacant,

drew a dagger from her boot and stepped forward, pushing the ajar door open softly. "Mosla help me," she whispered as she looked inside.

There was a dead man on her bed.

A second later, she heard the sound of the Watch's gongs through the window in the hall. "Shit!" she yelled, and ran inside, pushing the man off the bed so she could grab the small purse under the thin pallet. She thought she saw a glint of gold on the man's hands but ignored it as she pulled a floorboard up and pulled a small pack out. Running to the hall window, she looked down to see several red-clad Watchmen enter the front door of the building. She swore and ran down the hall, jumping several stairs and landing on the second floor. "There!" she heard someone yell from down the stairs, and she ran to the nearest window, and leaped out, rolling as she landed in the alley behind the building. Behind her, she heard a thump, and she turned to see a Watchman with sword drawn. She hurriedly drew one of her two short swords from its shoulder harness.

"You are under arrest for the murder of Samyl d'Vyan. Put down your weapon," the guardsman said, advancing.

"Not gonna happen," Tehara said, and the guardsman swung his blade. She hurriedly parried the blow and backslashed him across the stomach. The guard fell, clutching his abdomen, and she took off down the alley. Entering the street, she saw a mounted Watchman at the entrance to the building and took off in the opposite direction, toward the ironway station. Behind her she heard hooves clattering on the rough cobblestones, so she pulled the goods of a nearby booth over as she ran, hoping to slow the rider down. "I'll shoot!" he yelled, and a second later a shot came whizzing over her shoulder. She pulled the pistol and blindly fired several shots behind her. Up ahead she could see the ironway, with a train idling in the station. She glanced back, and saw the rider gaining on her. She fired another shot and hit him in the shoulder, knocking him off the horse.

A whistle sounded from up ahead, and the engine on the train billowed steam. She continued to run until she reached the station, and pushed an ironway official out of the way to the platform, and leaped onto the rapidly accelerating train, collapsing onto the deck in relief as her muscles screamed out from the run she hadn't been expecting.

Behind her the station was lost to a turn in the ironway track. She was safe, for now. But who was the dead man, and why had she been framed for his death?

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# Revolution

By Sudanna - Apr 21 2011

Seven years.

For seven years, Astor had devoted himself to this day. In his entirety. For three years, he had been no more than a vehicle for this moment, a struggling servant bearing this day on his back. It was him, really - he could see it no other way. This day held too much of his soul to be anything else.

Gunfire cracked and rattled all around him and he strode down the cracked cobblestone street. Heavy rain pelted him and the small group of his followers around him. They did their best to be wary while keeping up with his brisk pace, clutching their weapons awkwardly and glancing at the dark buildings lining the street. A small bomb went off a few blocks away, and the noise made everyone start. The distant screams were soon lost in the din.

Astor was dressed in loose, ragged clothing, drab and worn, as were the men and women following him. Despite their obviously common purpose, there was no uniform - not even uniform weapons - beyond a pure white cloth tied or wrapped somewhere on their person. Astor's was wound around his right hand and forearm, while most of his followers wore them as head- or armbands. The rain made them translucent - they were the torn pieces of sheets or clothes, not anything made. Their weapons were stolen, and they were poorly trained in their use - these were not soldiers.

As they reached the next cross street, a shout echoed down the road. They all turned to the right to see a soldier, immaculately dressed, from tricorne to gleaming boots, shouldering his rifle. "Rebels! Rebels to the south!" He fired a shot, and one of Astor's companions, a middle-aged woman, screamed, clutched her stomach, and fired her pistol at the man. His other followers did the same, and he collapsed silently. As they hurried across the intersection, another soldier appeared, followed quickly by others. A few bullets nipped at their heels as they moved on, but nobody was hit. The wounded woman was being helped by her son, and as the first soldier rounded the corner, he fired his rifle awkwardly, one armed and with his torso twisted halfway round. Still, he ducked back and they kept moving. Astor had raised his wrapped hand at the soldier, but as he fell to bullets almost immediately, he hurried onwards.

As they came to the next street, which was much larger, Astor abruptly turned to the left. His companions lagged behind by several yards, nervous and watching for pursuers. The stones of the street were evening out as they went, and there were no smokestacks in sight - they would have been moving to a nicer neighborhood if much of the city wasn't in flames. The next cross street held a firefight as soldiers tried to hold out against the tide of rebels. The soldier's backs were to Astor's group as they passed, and his followers gunned them down as they followed. Astor himself simply watched. A ragged cheer sounded as that group of rebels ran to join them.

Three of them took the wounded woman and pulled her into a shattered nearby storefront, where they stood guard. Her son kept moving.

The next street that Astor turned down held a squad of soldiers behind a barricade. They began firing immediately, and at least some of them had automatic weapons. Bullets punched holes into his legs and left shoulder as he grunted and recoiled, swept his wrapped hand in a random arc, and stepped back behind the corner. Their barricade, made of cobblestones, sandbags, furniture, and debris, came alive. Amorphous piles of junk slopped forward and crunched into the soldiers, pulverizing and pulling apart their bodies. Any that stepped away were struck with flying stones that flew with enough force to rip off limbs. The entire squad was reduced to cracked bone, torn flesh, and pooling blood in moments. The mounds of debris shivered and dissolved as he stood still for a moment, his wounds spewing smoke and light as they healed.

His companions marveling at the devastation, their group continued. Rebels joined them from side streets or groups awaiting them, until nearly fifty revolutionaries armed with rifles and makeshift explosives followed the small, dark-haired elf as he swept onwards. In the distance, a massive explosion rocked the city. One of the artificery engines of the massive factories had been sabotaged. Not long afterwards, a small group of soldiers attacked them from the side. Astor sparked lightning from his hand as his fellow rebels fired wildly. They left behind nearly three times as many corpses as there had been soldiers, but didn't stop to mourn the loss. Some quickly exchanged weapons with the dead soldiers, though.

They moved onwards, dealing with constant attacks, blocked streets, and occasional explosions. Astor's sorcery kept them moving fast, but they lost people constantly. They ran into fewer allies and more enemies as time went on and the sprawling manors grew more opulent. Eventually, they reached their destination with barely fifteen people capable of firing a weapon.

It was a relatively small compound, built entirely from white stone and covered in swirling, wavy designs. Astor threw a spitting fireball that killed most of the soldiers clustered around the entrance, and a spattering of gunfire took care of the disoriented survivors. A spy had uncovered the King's location and activities today, and hopefully the fear of their King had kept his soldiers from disturbing him.

They stormed the stark white compound, which was filled with soldiers, and of labyrinthine design. Astor found himself alone before too long, working his way, from a memorized layout, towards the deepest chamber, which he had been assured would contain the King. Soldiers would, from time to time cross his path. He was shot several times, but took no wounds he couldn't recover from. An explosion rocked the building, booming over the shouting and gunfire that had just become background noise by this point. Dust billowed from somewhere behind him, but he was working from memory anyways.

The last door was made of solid iron. There was no information past this point. Nobody but the King had passed beyond it since the compound's construction. Another explosion made Astor

stumble, and as he reached out to catch himself on the door, it opened of its own accord, leaving him to fall flat on his face. He scrambled to his feet, hands up, but the only thing to meet him was a blank hallway. Ending in a bare stone wall.

Frowning, Astor stepped forwards. The walls and ceiling took themselves apart, spreading like a flower. The stones peeled back, and there waited the King, looking annoyed.

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## Eighteen

By Zoe - Apr 22 2011

*Smack.* Amethyst Lotus Rain falls to the ground beneath her father, Mr. Rain.

*What the fucking hell? I've been through basic military training...I should be able to beat his ass to the ground.* She thought. *I must be stronger than him at this point. He's in his sixties with brittle bones and a bad back for crying out loud!*

Though something deep down within her, something developed harshly from her very early childhood, froze her. She could do nothing as the blows continue. And in any case, what would happen to her if she were to strike down one of the most powerful men in the nation? She takes a glance at her personal rifle and another at her bayonet. Her father takes notice. He stops and walks over to grab the bayonet. Amethyst curses silently at her weakness. Then, footsteps are heard, and he stops. He roughly pulls Amethyst up and forces her to sit on her bed. Someone knocks on the door.

"Come in!" sounds a rough, harsh voice. The voice of a man responsible for the more recent weapons of murder. The voice of Mr. Rain.

The guard hesitates before speaking. "Sir. Our Leader wishes to have your presence in his estate ASAP. An emergency meeting of sorts. Sometime seems to be amiss."

Mr. Rain grumbles, gives one last death-giving glare at his daughter, and walks out, shutting the door.

Amethyst blinks a couple of times before remembering that she isn't breathing. She falls back onto her soft bed.

"Tomorrow I turn 18," she whispers to herself. "By law, no one can force even a low citizen, let alone a High citizen, to remain locked up at home."

Amethyst shudders. While the military training had got her out for nine months, out and away from her father, she still might have to face the front if Zanara gets into a war. *There, no one is a lower or a Higher.* She smiles at the thought. There is little that she hates more than the Higher life, the pamperedness, the attention, the looks of the lower. Of course, however, she could never abandon makeup. It's the only way to cover up the nasty marks.

Amethyst attends to any minor injuries and falls into a restless sleep.

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Amethyst awakes early as usual. She wastes no time in washing, getting dressed, and applying her makeup. She places her uniform carefully in her pack as well as the keys left to her by her mother, a few trinkets, and various other necessities. She attaches her rifle to her pack while making sure to place the bayonet in a little pocket. She takes her pistol, taking a quick glance at the various Artifice runes, and places it in a holster by her side. She then places her pocket knife in a pocket on her left sleeve. *I'm finally eighteen!* The thought sticks in her mind.

A guard glances at her in surprise when Amethyst walks out. Why would Mr. Rain's daughter be carrying a pack out as if she were heading for elsewhere? Another simply stopped to check her out, thinking that she wouldn't see. After all, Amethyst is rather lovely. Standing at five-foot two with bright blue eyes, light face despite the recent sun, healthy yet cute build, slightly thin lips with barely a hint of red, flowing dark brown hair, breasts just the right size for her height, quite lovely indeed. If you didn't know any better, you'd also think that she's only fifteen or sixteen.

Amethyst happened to take notice. A friendly smile appears on her face as she glances towards him. The man blushes a little. Amethyst giggles and walks on, glad that finally as an adult, she can go on without being questioned. As she turns a corner, she almost hits an officer head-on. She salutes to the man of higher rank.

"Oh, I've been looking for you." The officer said, handing her an envelope. He walks off. Amethyst opens to find a letter with a blanket instruction for all recruits freshly out of training to the North-East camp in two days upon receiving the message.

She sighs. *At least I have a set objective.* Amethyst walks on, determined to find an inn to stay at.

## Memories

By Sylae - Apr 22 2011

The gates to the military compound were open as Tehara walked towards them in the cool morning. Yesterday she had turned 17, and it was her time to serve in the military forces. Sighing, she glanced back at the city behind her for the last time. Barely visible behind the smoke from the factories was the small building on the outskirts that she had called her home for her entire life. She turned back and stepped through the gates.

Inside, a man in a military uniform stopped her. "No civilians in this compound," he stated briskly, with a High Vyan accent. Tehara recognized some form of officer's insignia on the man's shoulders. The man continued, "If you're here to see someone, you'll have to wait until an end-day."

She stopped walking and glanced around at the facility. Several soldiers were outside doing maintenance, but other than that the courtyard was empty. She looked up at the officer. "I'm here to enlist, sir," She stated.

The officer frowned, confusion wrinkling his brow for a second, "Girl, you can't be of age. Conscription squads will pick you up when it's your time. Now move along...elf."

The man turned and started to walk away, but Tehara yelled after him, "I turned 17 yesterday, sir. And my family can't wait six months for the silvers." The man turned around, an angry expression on his face, and she continued, "My father is sick with the plague and hasn't worked in a month. We're three eighdays behind on the board. Without the enlistment silvers, my family will be on the streets, and me with them." There was a moment of silence as the man stared at her, expression unchanging.

Finally, the officer sighed, "Very well, I'll escort you to the headquarters building...first damn elfen volunteer I've ever seen."

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A peal of thunder sounded in the distance, a dull rain beginning to fall. The tired soldiers huddled down in the trenches, poor shelter from the weather. The earth was quickly saturated, and a small stream formed in the bottom of the trench, water tinted pink from old blood.

The soldiers around Tehara grumbled about the weather and their empty stomachs, and she said nothing. She could be living on the streets of Vyanat, but she had been drafted. But the military gave you a meal and a bed, and that was better than what she had had at home. She'd fared better than many of her comrades, in part thanks to her father's lessons since she was young.

She idly pulled the small Artificer's kit from her pack and glanced down at it. The previous owner had lost need of his belongings a week ago, and the squad had split his equipment to help make things go further. She'd been studying the kit, with its metallic inks and tiny carved runes, since she had obtained it. She'd seen Danyl use the kit once or twice before he'd been shot, mostly just drawing intricate symbols on the casing of a bullet, or on a man's helmet. Only once before had he used the intricate crystal runes, and that action had saved the squad from certain death.

Idly she pulled a handful of the crystalline chips from their bag, and spread them about across her hand. If they were put in the right combination--like words in a book--they could perform a task. But what? There were hundreds of different runes, of different types. She shook her hand slightly, causing some of the runes to move, then felt something click.

A hundred yards away, an explosion shattered the evening storm.

Tehara, startled, glanced over the lip of the trench to see a fireball looming up over the enemy trenches. Ducking back down, she was hit by a sudden wave of nausea. She glanced down and noticed a group of runes in her hand...glowing? Had the runes caused the explosion? Horrified, she dumped the runes back into the bag and grabbed her canteen, emptying the water into her suddenly dry throat.

"That was where one of their ammo stockpiles was, someone must've blown it!" the squad leader said excitedly, one hand holding his helmet onto his head as he ran down the narrow trench, "Get



ready, Captain's gonna make an assault..." he trailed off suddenly, and Tehara looked up to see the entire squad was staring at her. Then she realized. Tehara d'Vyan, a lowly half-elf soldier, had blown up an ammo cache from a hundred yards away. She was an Artificer.

At that thought, everything went black.

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Tehara stood at attention before the major. Behind her, the tent flaps shivered in the hot afternoon breeze. She looked straight forward as the major studied her intently. A droplet of sweat ran down her temple as the woman studied her intently in the sweltering tent.

"Lancer Tehara was responsible for the causes of the enemy depot explosion that sparked the assault by our forces," Captain Rysil stated. "Although the assault itself was a failure, she did successfully perform Artifice to an object on the other side of the trenches--"

"A fluke!" interrupted one of the Magi present, "She herself said, she was only idly studying the runes. Why did she even have an Artifice kit in her gear, Captain?"

"I allow my men to reclaim equipment that was used by their fallen comrades," The captain stated, "Instead of sending them back to be reassigned. It's why my company has the lowest resupply costs of any on the Front."

The Major cleared her throat. "We are not here to discuss logistics, gentlemen," she stated, "We are here to discuss what to do with Tehara d'Vyan." Another drop of sweat ran down Tehara's temple.

The captain sighed, "Apologies, sir. The point is, my men saw what Tehara did. Word has spread throughout my company and the others on the front. Troop morale has increased tenfold at the news. If she were to go back to being a mere footsoldier..." Rysil trailed off.

"Be that as it may, Captain," The same Magi stated, "no mere elf--even a half-elf--has been a part of the Artificers Corp in well over two hundred years." At his words, many of the people present in the tent stiffened, including the captain and major.

"Magus Bailen, you have never served in any front-line combat. You haven't been in the trenches. When the enemy is flooding over the lines, you don't care if the man next to you has pointed ears or not--you just care about surviving another night on the Front," the captain stated, anger coloring his voice, "The--"

"Enough, Captain. You've made your point very clear," the major interrupted, "I've made my decision." She took a small form off her desk and quickly filled it out. "I am transferring Tehara to the Aerial Support. Commander Berryl has complained of a lack of combat artificers lately." She stood and presented Tehara the papers. "I hope you don't get airsick easily, Lancer."

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Tehara slid down the ladder as the sounds of gunfire came from the turret above. "Watch the belt on it, Kernys, that won't hold for long!" she yelled up the ladder as she ran down the narrow corridor of the zeppelin. The smells of petrol, gunsmoke, and sweat filled her nostrils as she opened the hatch to the bombing chamber. "Corrin, are we in position yet?" she yelled over the blare of the engines.

"Almost, Artie!" he yelled, not looking up from the bombsight. She nodded and ran towards the bow of the ship, entering the cockpit and grabbing a bulkhead as the zeppelin hit a downdraft.

"How long until the drop site?" she asked, "Kernys and the rest of the gunners are pretty stressed out right now." Her words were punctuated by the loud shrieking of bullets flying past the cockpit.

"We'll be ready for drop in one minute," The pilot yelled, "Prep for drop!" Tehara nodded and ran back to the bombing chamber, grabbing a hanging chain and reeling it in to open the large bombing doors. The tan landscape of the Occupied Zone opened up below her, and she reached over and secured the chain to a bulkhead. Giving Corrin the thumbs-up, she climbed up the ladder to the empty upper-aft turret, clambering into the empty seat. Pulling the magnesium-grease pencil from her belt, she scrawled a series of runes on the barrel of the 14.5 mm rapid-fire cannon. The runes flashed green and she swiveled the turret into position. In the distance, an interceptor zeppelin was quickly closing in on the bomber. She sighted in, and opened fire. The artifice allowed the bullets to counteract gravity's pull to earth, as well as windage, making aiming a much simpler task. Flashes of light sparked from the enemy's Artifice-protected armor, but it was to no avail, as the ship suddenly exploded.

She swung the turret around to face the other side, but as she did a yell came from below: "Bomb Loose!" A second later, an explosion ripped from below, and Tehara felt an abrupt shake as the airship began losing altitude. "Corrin! You okay?" she yelled. There was no reply. She quickly clambered down the ladder, but grabbed hold as the ship listed to the side abruptly. "Shit!" she said to herself, and slid the rest of the way down, coughing as the harsh smoke of exploded bomb filled her lungs.

Below her, the ground was rapidly approaching.

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The train's rapid deceleration woke Tehara from the light sleep she had managed to fall into. Looking around from the top of one of the freight cars, she saw that the train had nearly arrived in Reflin, a town barely ten kays from the Front. She sighed, and grabbed the pack from its spot leaning against a roof hatch. The train had slowed down enough, so Tehara leaped off to the side of the car, rolling as she landed on the dirt track alongside the ironway. The feel of the area was just the same as it had been the last time she was here--coming back from the Front after her last mission. Sighing, she gazed at the low hills ahead past the town. She was crossing the Front for the last time, and she wouldn't be coming back a hero this time.

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# Unorthodox Behavior

By Nioca - Apr 22 2011

The peal of a brass bell rang out across a large skylit courtyard. In unison, the two hundred people milling about inside the courtyard looked up, staring at the Ionar High Court's large wooden doors.

One of those people was Oaeren Revlas. After his brief glance up, the slight-built man went back to cleaning his glasses with a small handkerchief. He looked as if he was attending a funeral; dressed entirely in black, save for a large crimson overcoat. A stray gust of wind ruffled his blond hair as he stowed the handkerchief and donned the glasses.

"Looks like court's adjourned." A stocky man behind him announced, polishing a runed broadsword.

"Think it went well?" A young elf piped up next to Oaeren.

Oaeren fixed his eyes on the doors again. "Probably too soon to say..." He trailed off as he caught sight of something. "Actually, I'm going to hazard a guess and say 'No'."

A stream of flamboyantly-dressed nobles poured from the Ionar High Court, each one looking as if they were caught in a dye factory explosion. Of note was one rather portly noble, bearing a large beard and an angry scowl. As he approached, the elf bowed, and Oaeren nodded. "Lord Carmaile."

"Let's just go." Lord Carmaile barked, marching past. "If we hurry, we might be able to catch a train to Tuarm before nightfall."

"I've got tickets!" The elf squeaked, showing several Ironway tickets.

Lord Carmaile stopped, staring at the elf. Oaeren stepped forward with a placating gesture. "I'll explain in private."

The group continued in silence, meeting up with a contingent of bodyguards. The large group made their way through the Ironway station with little incident, boarding a train bound for Lord Carmaile's city of Tuarm. Oaeren, Lord Carmaile, and the stocky broadswordsman got their own separate cabin, with the rest of the party seated in the next cabin over.

Lord Carmaile poured himself some wine as he sat down in one of the cabin's leather seats. "The Ionar Court was a disaster. All three of my proposals were shot down almost unanimously. The support I had three months ago... it seems like it just evaporated. Worse yet, the court passed measures that effectively stripped elves of what rights they had left. It's like we're all going backwards." Lord Carmaile downed his wine.

"It makes sense, if you know what's happening behind the curtain." Oaeren replied, sitting on a seat with his back against the wall. "While you were in court, I did some digging. The Orthodoxy has been doing its damndest to anathematize you in the past two months. Spreading dissent and rumors amongst the lower class, while applying pressure to the upper." Oaeren paused,

smoothing out a wrinkle on his coat. "They've even gone so far as to say that you've been negotiating with the anarchs, pointing out how Tuarm and your lordship has been relatively safe from attack, compared to the rest of Ionar. Rumor even has it that Lord Brom's heart attack was no accident. And considering that, behind you, he was the biggest supporter of your agenda, I'm inclined to believe it." Oaeren took a breath. "It's why I decided to get tickets on the first train out of here. Ionara is no longer safe for you."

Lord Carmaile sipped some more wine. "Myrae help us..." He muttered.

"Yeah, I think we'll need her help." Oaeren responded darkly. "The Church of Myrae has made their position clear. They're showing us the real power behind Ionar, and giving us an ultimatum. Submit, or die."

"And all the while, Ionar collapses around our ears." Lord Carmaile stated. With a heavy-hearted sigh, he continued, "This nation was built to be a monarchy. Until the court can finally decide on someone to elect to the position, we're effectively dead in the water. The court convenes once every three months, but that's not nearly enough to effectively moderate our country."

"But then, it was never intended to, either." Oaeren pointed out.

"True enough." Lord Carmaile watched his fair blond servant unholster and start cleaning a silver pistol. A Vulpin, one of Blackguard Weapons' newer models. "Did you know Blackguard Weapons has a representative on the council now? Other companies are starting to vie for positions on the council as well. Blackguard's supporting us, though."

"Really?" Oaeren peered over his glasses at Carmaile. "That's good. Suppose it's not surprising though, considering that this power vacuum's giving them more pull. That, and we control most of the native iron in Ionar."

The trio sat quietly, with only the sound of the train's wheels echoing through the cabin. Finally, Lord Carmaile said quietly, "How far would you go for me, Oaeren?"

Oaeren glanced up. "What do you mean, m'lord?"

"Your loyalty. Things are getting desperate, and I need to know there are people I can trust. We may have to take questionable measures to survive. How far would you go to serve me?"

The question gave Oaeren pause. No one had ever really questioned his loyalty before, including himself. He had spent most of his life in service of the Ionar Nobility, acting as protector and confidant. Indeed, he had even worked for the late King Bramson, before he was assassinated. He never questioned what he did; he just did it, sure that he was acting to serve his liege and country.

But now, with Ionar fracturing, liege and country were becoming separate, conflicting entities. Serving his liege could very well mean acting in treason against his country. Things were going to get bloody, anyone could see that. Lord Carmaile was a voice that advocated change in the status quo. Change for the elves, change for the lower classes. Change that tradition and religion looked down upon and sought to silence. To stand by Carmaile could very well be the death of him.

Finally, Oaeren made his decision. He stared Lord Carmaile in the eyes and spoke with cold determination. "To the very end, m'lord."

# Secarium

By Sylae - Apr 23 2011

The wreckage around Tehara was barely visible after the passage of years, but the evidence of the wreck was still there. Nothing grew in the immediate area, and bits of scrap too small to be useful lay around, everything larger hauled away by the Vyrins. She swore, she could still smell it--the odors of burning flesh, the putrid scent of fired powder. Kernys dying under the enemy's guns as his pistol ran dry...they were the only two survivors of the explosion and wreck, and she had barely survived the Vyrin attack on the downed airship, if help from the Front had come a minute later, she'd have been dead. She sighed. That was the past, and reminiscing was just wasting time.

She sighed and continued walking north.

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The streets of Bolta felt strange to Tehara, more chaotic than those of Vyanat. There almost seemed to be a rift between the people and the military...the entire city felt like a Zanara bomb--ready to explode at any time.

Down at the docks was the worst. While the city itself was covered in greenish-colored regalia, at the docks white was much more prevalent. Several people--young men mostly--even wore white headbands or strips of white around their arms, like some sort of symbol. Tehara had a feeling asking what it meant would be a bad idea.

Looking at the board in the dockmaster's office, Tehara frowned. It listed locations and the prices for passage to the locations. But except for the few islands near Vyanat, Tehara recognized none of the names.

Suddenly, one stuck out to her. At the bottom, "Port Zin, Zanara". Zanara, as in "Zanara bomb"? Such a place would surely have need for someone like her.

The fat clerk behind the counter looked up at her. "Well, where to?" Sighing, Tehara started pulling coins from her pockets.

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Lady Telarin d'Jor, Protector of the Realm, Defender of the Land, Supreme Servant to Mosla, Queen of the Holy Realm of Vyanat, scowled at her aide.

"You're saying that the entire force of the Watch, with help from the military, couldn't catch one murderer?" She stated angrily.

The aide cringed, "Well, my Lady, the murderer was a bounty hunter with considerable military experience....she was gone before we knew it."

The Queen sighed, "Well, do we know *anything* that'll help us? My brother is dead, and I want some answers."

"We think she might have headed across the Front into the occupied provinces. Whether or not she was acting as an agent of Vyrint is yet to be determined, my Lady."

"There's something about this that bothers me. If Tehara d'Vyan was a hardened killer, why would she leave a body on her bed, stripped of all valuable possessions? That's the stupidest thing you could do." the Queen shook her head, "Well, what did you learn from her family?"

The aide frowned, "There is none. Her younger brother was run over by a wagon when she was ten, and her parents died of the Red Fever when she was at the Front. No other kin, as far as we know."

The Queen glanced out the wide window of her study, and sighed. "I'm declaring Tehara d'Vyan *secarium*. Send some agents after her. Bring her back, alive or dead."

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## Uncertain Forces

By Sylae - Apr 24 2011

The roar of the ship's horn startled Tehara awake, and she rose from the small bunk tiredly. Looking out the small porthole, she saw that the normally-clear blue skies of the ocean had been replaced by a dingy grey reminiscent of the cities. Quickly dressing, she grabbed her pack, left the cabin, and headed up to the deck of the small steamship.

Her legs carried her quickly up top. She had become accustomed to the rolling of the ship quite quickly, it was not unlike that of a zeppelin in slight turbulence. Grinning at the group of passengers at the rail emptying their stomachs, she looked out at the approaching city.

It was the largest mass of building she had ever seen. The harbor's edge was filled with them. Gigantic warehouses and docks the size of buildings lined the shore. She estimated that the city could hold all of Vyanat easily. And in the center of it all, two buildings rose into the sky. Like two giant steel shafts, they gleamed, gigantic structures. "Amazing," she gasped. Each had to be at least fifteen stories tall.

Footsteps behind her made her turn around. The captain of the ship, a portly man missing an eye, grinned, "You islanders are all alike. One look at a skyscraper and you piss yer pants. But those are nothin' compared to the beauties they have inland. Two hundred yards high, I swear by my own eyes!" the man chuckled and returned to his duties as the steamship rapidly approached the docks.

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A uniformed man stood at the head of the docks, and as Tehara approached he reached out a hand to stop her. "Excuse me, miss, but you must be new to the port." He gestured to the pistol

hanging at Tehara's side. "You won't need to show that around here. Streets are safe in Zanara." The man nodded self-assuredly.

"Thanks," Tehara said, "but better safe than sorry, right?"

The official paused for a second. "You look like you've been living out of that pack for awhile, miss."

Tehara frowned, "Your point?"

"My point is, I'm supposed to tell any bounty-hunter types that come in that there's good money in signin' on with the Zanara Army. And there really ain't much else a foreigner with a gun'll get hired to do" The man nodded, "Sign on up at the recruitin' station, couple blocks up the way." he pointed down a street and walked past her, "Sir, you look like you've got a history with that blade there."

Tehara sighed. The man had a point, nobody in their right mind trusted a foreigner, especially one with pointed ears. She headed toward the street the man had pointed at.

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"Next!" the harsh-voiced lady yelled, and Tehara stepped forward. "Name and nationality," the woman stated without looking up from the blank form.

"Tehara d'Vyan, Vyanat."

That caused the lady to look up, startled, "Vyanat?"

"Yes..?"

The lady nodded and looked back at the form. "Any prior military experience?"

"Five years in the Vyan military." Tehara pulled the tags from under her shirt. "See?"

The lady glanced at the tags, then ticked a box on the form. "Where did you serve?"

"In the trenches for a year, then four as a combat artificer assigned to the zeppelin force. Gunner, mechanic, and in one case, pilot." Tehara winced. She'd piloted it straight into the ground, but enough to keep the gas chamber from sparking.

The woman finished writing, then signed it at the bottom. "Welcome to the Zanara military."

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Tehara looked around at the temporary camp set up outside the city of Zanara. Neat rows of tents were lined up across a large field. It was obvious the nation was assembling for a war; a war she feared the nation wasn't prepared for. She'd seen some of the new recruits with their advanced rune-engraved carbines, but they held their weapons like they were unsure of them. She strongly doubted anyone in the camp had served before, and that meant this force was in a rude awakening.

Sighing, she stepped into the tent she had been assigned to until she was given a squad. Tents were something else she hadn't dealt with before, but she supposed they were needed. In Vyanat it rained maybe once a year, but here, on the mainland, they said it even snowed in the cold season. She had yet to experience snow.

Inside were several local Zainian recruits. She dropped her pack on the nearest open cot and sat, looking over at the green soldiers.

"I didn't realize they were shipping us out with old ladies," one of the recruits said.

Tehara frowned, "I didn't realize I was assigned to the nursery detail, sorry."

The recruit who had made the remark grinned, "Nice to know you don't lose your sense of humor with age. Name's Jade Cloud." he offered his hand, and Tehara shook it.

"Tehara. Can't say I've ever heard a name like that."

One of the other recruits piped up, "It's an upper-class thing. They all have weird names like that." Jade rolled his eyes, and punched the guy lightly in the arm.

"That's Jasy! Odelson. He's from the farmland outside the city," Jade explained, laughing, "So why'd you sign up, Tehara?"

She shrugged. "Nowhere else to go."

"Oh, come on, that's not a real answer. The glory? Pay? I signed up for the glory of being in battle."

Tehara snorted, she couldn't help it. "Jade, you aren't going to find glory on a battlefield. You'll learn real quick, you don't fight for glory. You fight for the guy next to you in the trenches, because you know he's fighting for you."

"And you know this...how?" Jade asked in disbelief.

"I didn't get this scar on my face from sitting around," she stated.

"So...why did you sign up the first time, then?" Jasy! asked quietly.

She looked over at him and shrugged. "Family needed the enlistment silvers, so I signed up six months before the conscription."

"Wait, you needed the..." He trailed off as he noticed her slightly-pointed ears. "Oh. Sorry."

"It's okay," she stated, laying on the cot and closing her eyes. "Word of advice, sleep now, you never know when you're next chance to rest your eyes will be."

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When Tehara woke up early the next morning, everyone else in the tent was, unsurprisingly, fast asleep. Yawning quietly, she donned her boots and stepped out of the tent, jogging over to where she had been told the mess line was. After a quick meal of what was certainly the best food she'd eaten in any camp, she began to jog through the camp, a morning ritual she had begun upon being released from the Vyanat forces several years ago.

After about half an hour of jogging, a high-pitched whistle sounded from outside the camp. Soldiers began to file out of their tents slowly and head to the muster. Tehara jogged over, and upon seeing all the troops falling into squads, stood off to the side, until one of the officers standing before the assembling forces walked over to her. She didn't recognize the insignia on his uniform. "Soldier! Why are you not in uniform?"

Tehara straightened. "I haven't been assigned a uniform or squad yet, sir."



The officer frowned, "Everyone in this camp was assigned a uniform during their basic training. You were told your squad assignment upon arrival."

"Sir, I just arrived here last night. I haven't even been assigned a weapon beyond what I brought."

Suddenly the officer nodded, "Oh, you're that mercenary they sent in. Just stay here, we'll assign you to a squad soon enough." The man walked back over to the other officers and began calling names off a list.

As he was calling out names, Tehara studied several zeppilins hovering in formation over a nearby aerodrome. Several fast-attack interceptors, it looked like, armed with many belly-mounted turrets. Above them, several bomberlike craft floated. They were too bulky to be bombers, though, their rudder pylons too small for any amount of combat maneuvering. Troop transports, perhaps?

After the muster was all done, Tehara nodded, impressed. Only one person gone out of a batch of fresh recruits, and that was due to illness. Maybe there was hope yet for this bunch. As she was thinking, a female officer, appearing to be a lower rank than the man who had performed the muster, came forward. "Sir?" Tehara inquired.

"Tehara d'Vyan? We've assigned you to a squad. Come with me."

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## Off to Ionar

By Zoe and Sylae – Apr 24 2011

*Riiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!*

Amethyst leaped up, hitting her head on the bunk above. She saw a small spark and lays back down, holding her now hurting head.

"Still not used to that damn whistle", she whispered to herself.

"Heh. You alright over there? That looks like it hurt!" said a cute male soldier.

"Yeah, I'm fine, " Amethyst replied.

A couple others simply chuckled. Amethyst ignored them.

After just a few minutes, everyone was ready and in uniform, and was marching off for morning muster. Everyone formed in a large line. An odd looking lady not in uniform stood off to the side. A couple officers studied them for a few seconds. Then one of them starts calling out names.

A few minutes passed of this.

"Ior Rheth!"

No one answered.

"Ior Rheth!?"

Again, no one answered.

"IOR RHETH?!"

A man, the cute one from earlier, leaned forward. "Sir, Ior was taken to a hospital earlier this morning. He was violently puking."

The officer sighed. "Very well."

Roll call continued.

Eventually, it was finished, and they were divided up into squads. Amethyst, the cute man from before, two men, and their female non-commissioned officer stood together. The NCO was holding a small piece of paper.

She spoke, "Ior Rheth was the one whom was sick, wasn't he?"

The rest of the squad, including Amethyst, nodded.

The NCO walked off to talk to a gray-haired man. After a couple minutes, she walked off elsewhere. When she returned, there was a female following her. She was scarred, seemingly in her mid-20s, and of average height. She also wasn't in proper uniform.

"Here is our replacement member of our squad. A mercenary, " said the NCO. "If you wish to introduce yourself?"

Before the mercenary had a chance to say anything, a roaring sound was heard from above. Everyone looked up to see a few Zanarian Zeppelins flying above. The mercenary waited until they passed.

"Tehara d'Vyan. Served for five years in the Vyanat military."

Tehara reached out a hand. Half of the squad simply gulped. Only Amethyst, smiling, and one of the males shook it.

After a few minutes, all the different squads marched to their respective platoon leaders. Amethyst recognized their platoon leader as the gray haired man that her NCO talked to. The gray haired lieutenant glanced at Tehara before speaking.

"Attention squads! I am your platoon leader. You will address me as Lieutenant. Do you understand!?"

"Yes, sir!" said everyone.

"DID YOU NOT HEAR ME? I DID NOT SAY SIR!"

"Yes, Lieutenant!"

"Now you see," said the Lieutenant again. "Up in the Front, it is a war-zone. And I don't think I need to tell you that it's dangerous out there. Now, you need to know how to follow orders, and follow orders EXACTLY as they are given to you. Don't assume ANYTHING. Now, normally you will be organized by your squad leaders, but if I order something of you, you better do

EXACTLY as I say. Non-compliance very well may result in your death, as non-compilers are nothing but a detriment to our mighty cause. YOU HEAR ME?"

"YES, LIEUTENANT!"

"Good. I have faith in each and every one of you. I expect nothing less than your full compliance. Oh, and one more thing. All that formal stuff that you learned while in training? You'll want to forget every last bit of it in the front. It doesn't matter how you look if you're dead on the ground. Just make sure you remember coming back."

The Lieutenant, besides Tehara, seemed to be the only veteran in the entire camp. Why people with much less experience held higher rank didn't make much sense to Amethyst. It also seemed as though everyone is only officially organized up to Regiments. After that, the Regiments just responded to anyone of higher rank, which could be anyone of them at any time. Neither the Major nor the Colonel had anything noteworthy to say like the Lieutenant.

It was noon by the time the entire camp was packed up and the small army moved. Fifteen divisions, it appeared to be. Give or take one. Zanara really seemed to be preparing quite the assault, considering how many more camps there were. Amethyst noticed that in that time, Tehara had acquired a uniform.

The column marched up the dusty road, two abreast. Amethyst's squad was about halfway down the northward-marching column. Next to Amethyst, the mercenary walked along, her eyes scanning the nearby hills intently. Amethyst shook her head and said, "You do realize we're still safe in Zanara, right?"

Tehara glanced over at her, "Yeah, but that doesn't mean there's no enemy hiding. Trust me, I've seen it happen, and these grasslands can hide far more than a desert," she stated matter-of-factly.

Amethyst nodded, "I see." After a few minutes, Tehara spoke up. "Hey, your rifle."

"What about it?" Amethyst asked, checking to make sure it was still securely resting from its sling.

"Can I see it?"

"Erm...m..." Amethyst looked around uncertainly.

"Here." Tehara pulled her pistol from its holster and handed it to Amethyst, "Now you won't be unarmed." Amethyst sighed and unslung the rifle, handing it to Tehara, then glanced down at the semi-automatic pistol.

The gun was devoid of all markings except for a small handwritten string of runes on the barrel, and a small engraved set of runes on the action mechanism. Releasing the magazine, she removed one of the oversized cartridges from it and held it up. It was surprisingly heavy, about the same size as her rifle ammo, but with a slightly shorter cartridge length, and lacking the bottleneck her cartridges had in them. "Good luck finding ammo for that," she said to herself.

"Yeah..." Tehara said disinterestedly, and Amethyst looked over to see her staring intently at the rune patterns on her rifle. Suddenly she snorted, handed the rifle back, and took her pistol, holstering it. "Well, at least they're sending you out with good weaponry."

"Oh?" Amethyst said, glancing at the rifle she now held.

"It's well-made, better than the carbines we used back in Vyanat. It's got some good general-purpose runes on it, but I personally prefer a blank rune plate over engraved, so I can adapt to different fights. But whoever was in charge of designing that, hats off to them."

"Yeah," Amethyst said halfheartedly, thinking back to the house she had left. After a few minutes of silence, Tehara pointed to the skyline. "Zeppelins. Bombers. Look like ours." Off to the side, several airships were quickly surpassing the slow-moving army, northward to Ionar.

They silently watched the airships fade into the distance, then Tehara spoke, "So, why'd you sign on? I was under the impression that Zanara didn't have conscription."

"I wasn't...conscripted," she replied, "I signed up, volunteered."

Tehara rolled her eyes. "Don't tell me you're one of those fools fighting for 'glory' and 'honor', you seem smarter than that."

"No, that's not it," Amethyst said quickly. "I...I have my reasons."

Tehara shrugged. "Don't we all."

Suddenly their division and five others changed direction, leaning more towards the north-west.

Amethyst then barely heard some people whispering around. "Hey did you hear? Targus just got bombed by a whole squadron of Zeppelins!"

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## The King is Dead

By Sudanna - Apr 24 2011

Astor watched the hallway blossom with little reaction. He saw the tiny children of the King's sorcery spring to life in each block as they uncurled and strained against reality. Astor had seen tiny pieces of sorcery scattered, seemingly at random, throughout the city, and once when he met revolutionary leaders from other cities in Yegeptas. The empty relics of small spells - to change the color of a flower, or open a door, or ignite a hovel. Small, castoff ghosts marked everything that the King's magic touched. Astor had feared these marks when he first began to see them, thinking them spies or traps, but they were nothing more than they seemed. A signature that only sorcerers could perceive, marks of vanity or history, or some motivation that Astor could not fathom. Hundreds or thousands of these marks crowded into each stone of this hallway, whispering that, upon these stones, magic was done. When the exact same magic proceeded to be done, Astor failed to be startled or impressed.

The King was likewise taken in stride. He was dressed in elaborate and sumptuous robes, but Astor felt only contempt for this. He was a King personified - tall and strong, with a face carved from granite. All that was missing was a sceptre and crown. Even his annoyance was stately.

Astor readied himself, and ropes of glowing power sprang from his hands, twining around his body and twisting off into space, writhing at random. The King had no reaction, merely stood

and looked dourly at the small elf before him. Astor, awash in power, tentatively struck out with a brightly burning tendril. The King's robes smoked, burned, and crumbled where it touched them, leaving a black gash in the rich cloth. Blood leaked out slowly. Nothing else happened. Astor, magic still emanating from him in blinding waves, awkwardly stepped back and, with one or two faltering, unsure movements, dismissed the powers he had summoned. The King stood exactly where he had been standing thus far.

Astor walked forward warily and waved a hand before the King as if the monarch might bite him. He didn't, which was somehow disappointing. Astor stepped away from the motionless, leaking personification of everything he hated, more confused than anything. He brought lightning to his hands, and made to cast it at the King, but couldn't bring himself to destroy what he had imagined as his rival so. . . anticlimactically. The lightning dissipated in a shower of sparks, and Astor numbly turned away, to examine the room.

It was, just like the hallway, completely bare. Simple stone walls, floor, and ceiling, though these bore no marks of sorcery. The unfolded hallway blocks hovered, pointlessly, in midair.

Astor had no idea what to do.

He wandered around a bit, inspecting without result the empty room.

He walked back down the half of a hallway that remained, before shaking his head and returning. Something had to happen eventually, right?

Astor managed to awkwardly sit on a floating cobblestone for a while before deciding to do *something*. He'd never even thought of this before, but at this point he just wanted something to happen.

He walked to the King, placed his hand on his temple, and recoiled when the man started, clutched his wounded side, and fell over moaning softly. Astor jumped back and set his hands on fire as the King shuddered, coughed, and apparently died. Astor caught himself looking to see if anyone had noticed. What had just happened?

There was, he found, quite a lot of blood on the floor. The King looked very pale, as well. Was it that simple? Had he just died of blood loss while pretending to be statuary? Astor was at a loss.

The iron door at the end of the half-hallway was still open. A smallish woman wearing the white cloth of the Revolution over her nose and mouth entered, carrying a bloody sword.

"Hah! Astor, magnificent! Told you you wouldn't need our help!" She walked up to the still King and prodded him with her sword, stabbing him a little bit in the process. She pulled her cloth down to reveal a vicious smile. The sword was pulled back and whipped across the King's face and neck in two violent passes. All of the hovering stones of the unfolded hallway collapsed almost immediately afterwards, but she didn't seem to notice, she was laughing too hard.

"Finally that pig bastard is dead, eh? Let's get his head on a pike to wave at these damn soldiers. Can't fight for King and Country anymore, can they? Hah!" She set to hacking at his neck with her sword. Astor simply watched, trying to regain the emotion that revolution was supposed to have. The King seemed much less like the indomitable villain they had struggled against for these many years.

When her work was done, she stood up, still smiling fiercely, and hugged Astor briefly. "Let's get you back upstairs, magic man. We need you to tear down a few sties. Pigs are hiding." Grabbing the King's severed head by the hair, she ran back out of the room, greeted by cheers from fellow revolutionaries as they saw her prize.

Astor was still very confused.

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## The Dead of Night

By Nioca - Apr 27 2011

Lord Carmaile had returned without much fanfare. An unfortunate consequence of his early arrival back in his own city of Tuarm. And with the arrivals from Ionara bringing news from the capital, this meant that rumors started spreading like wildfire. That Lord Carmaile had been kicked off the council. That civil war was looming. That he had been brainwashed by the Orthodoxy. That distant bodysnatchers had made Carmaile their host.

These rumors were further intensified by Lord Carmaile's actions. The day after arriving home, he had ordered the Ionar military forces in Tuarm to augment Enforcer patrols. Navy and air forces were doing training drills. Like the other lords, Carmaile was pulling all of the military might the city had inward, to protect only Tuarm. The whole city was placed on high alert, ready for an eventuality that Carmaile wouldn't speak of. For that morning, a telegraph had arrived, bearing foul tidings; that Targus, the home of some of Ionar's wealthier citizens, was coming under attack by Zanian forces.

None of this was of concern to Oaeren at the moment. Right now, he was working his way to the town docks. A contact within the Orthodoxy had tipped him off that something was going down. A meeting between the Tuarm church's high priests and a potential hit squad. If his contact was correct, the target was Lord Carmaile himself.

With midnight nigh, the sky was pitch-black. The perfect time for a covert rendezvous, with only the dull glow of the streetlamps providing any illumination. The docks were the perfect place, what with the sound of the waves splashing against the shore concealing any noise, and the large warehouses concealing covert meetings from prying eyes. Oaeren quietly drew his Vulpin pistol as he quickened his pace, chambering a round and pulling a small section underneath the barrel back. Unfortunately for them, the docks at midnight was one of the worst places to be when someone was hunting you. Carefully working his way through the warehouses, he found his target; a large warehouse with a single man patrolling in front of it, toting a machine gun.

Oaeren carefully watched the man from the shadows, waiting to strike. When the man turned away, Oaeren stepped forward, leveling his pistol and squeezing the trigger twice. Two small pops, far too quiet to be natural, heralded two new holes in the poor soul's back. The gunner collapsed, the clatter of his falling gun lost to the sound of the waves. Sweeping forward, Oaeren put one final round in the man's skull before snatching up the machine gun. Then, very cautiously, Oaeren nudged open the door a mere hair's breadth to peer inside.

The inside of the warehouse was illuminated by a single flickering lantern, with voices emanating from within. Mercifully, crates blocked the participants view of the door, enabling Oaeren to slip in without incident; he really didn't fancy trying to get in through the skyport. He carefully closed the door behind him and crouched down behind the crates, listening in on the conspirators.

"...till his defenses are down?" A rough voice growled.

"We don't have time to wait," A clear voice responded. Oaeren recognized it as a high priest of Myrae, though the name escaped him. "Tuarm needs a righteous leader to prepare for the invasion. We have concerns that if Carmaile remains in power, he may turn traitor and sell out Ionar." Oaeren took off his glasses and peered around his cover of crates. He could make out five conspirators. Two wore the customary grab of orthodox high priests, complete with quartz bracelets around their wrists. Looked unarmed, but Oaeren knew better; there were likely Blackguard Wolfens concealed underneath, and from experience he knew the robes themselves were loaded with enough Artificery to deflect anything short of high-power or armor-piercing rounds.

"Fine. But your price? Double it. Otherwise, this ain't happening." The leader of the other three growled again. The hit squad was wielding two machine guns and, alarmingly, a Blackguard Vizsla Rifle. But this was not what alarmed Oaeren most; it was that he recognized the leader as "Ovora", a high-ranking member of the Anarchs, a group of rebels trying to destroy the council. But it didn't make sense. The Anarchs were strictly opposed to the Orthodoxy, and vice versa; why was the church reaching out to them, of all people, for a hit?

"This better be worth it. You'll get half now, half on completion. Do we have an accord?" The priest asked. Oaeren donned his glasses again, and leveled his pistol carefully at the lead priest's head. He had heard enough, and intended to bring an end to this plot. As the priest reached out to shake the Anarch's hand, Oaeren squeezed the trigger.

A quiet pop was followed by the priest collapsing in a crumpled heap. In the brief moments of confusion, a second silenced bullet caught the other priest in the temple, dropping him as well. With shouts of anger and surprise, the Anarchs scattered. The machine-gunners sprayed fire wildly in Oaeren's general direction, filling the room with light and the echoing roar of the guns. Oaeren ducked behind the crates as the bullets tore through the air, punching holes in the nearby

wall. Dropping the Vulpin in favor of the machine gun, he let off a burst of retaliatory fire. The two Anarchs with machine guns ran for cover, but Ovora was nowhere to be seen.

Realizing, Oaeren turned and spotted Ovora slipping around behind him just in time to catch the Anarch with a burst of lead. Perforated, the Anarch leader fired one wild shot over Oaeren's head with his rifle before collapsing in a crimson puddle. As the other two Anarchs started peppering the crates around Oaeren with bullets, he retrieved his pistol and let off a wild, one-handed burst with the machine gun. As the Anarchs took cover again, Oaeren bolted for the door and opened it.

"He's running! We've got him running!" One of the Anarchs cried, making a run for the door. The other Anarch quickly followed. As the first reached the door, there was one quiet pop and a grunt from his comrade. He whirled, just in time to see Oaeren, still crouched behind the crates, fire two more shots into the Anarch's chest.

As both crumpled, Oaeren stood up, reloading his pistol and heading for the far wall of the bullet-ridden warehouse. "Idiots." He muttered to himself as he grabbed ahold of a small ladder leading up to a small catwalk, machinery, and skyport high above. He quickly started ascending, knowing he couldn't stay long. Indeed, he could hear the sound of boots on cobblestone outside, increasing in volume. Ionite Enforcers were on their way, drawn by the sound of machinegun fire.

Oaeren clambered up onto the catwalk and, from there, up into a small trapdoor in the ceiling. Closing it after him, he quickly scanned his surroundings from the roof of the warehouse. It was almost pitch-black up on top of the warehouses; no one bothered lighting the lanterns up here anymore, since civilian air traffic was almost non-existent. It was so dark that, without the aid of his glasses, Oaeren wouldn't even be able to see the neighboring rooftops.

He heard the sound of cocking weapons below, and glanced down. Enforcers were preparing to storm the warehouse. Deciding he needed to leave quickly, he leapt across to the neighboring rooftop, fleeing into the night.

Oaeren made it back to Lord Carmaille's mansion, somewhat out of breath. He was somewhat taken aback when he found Lord Carmaille waiting for him. "There you are!" He called. "I was wondering. I've got a job for you and you're not going to like it."

Oaeren, taking measured breaths, responded calmly, "M'lord, I think I need to brief you on an assassination attempt fir-"

Lord Carmaille cut him off with a wave of his hand. "I'm sorry, Oaeren, but this takes precedence. We've only got thirty minutes before you have to leave."

"Leave, m'lord?" Oaeren raised an eyebrow.



"Targus has been requesting support from the other lords. Their air fleet has been crippled, and ironway bombed beyond repair." Oaeren tried not to betray his feelings, but he was certain he went somewhat pale. "They're unable to evacuate the city and, worse yet, Lord Avery has gone completely silent. That's why I'm sending the 22nd Air and 45th Battalion south, to Targus. The city's a lost cause, but we might be able to evacuate Lord Avery and a good chunk of the civilian population, along with some supplies."

"And you're sending me with them... why, m'lord?" Oaeren asked.

"Because I need someone on the ground who knows places in Targus where Avery might have taken shelter. He's an ass, but he doesn't deserve to be captured by the enemy. Besides, having someone who has such a thorough knowledge of Ionar government being held by Zanian forces could be... catastrophic. No one else is offering assistance, and since we're not in the immediate line-of-fire, I figure the least we can do is step up where no one else will."

Oaeren sighed. "Very well. I'll get re-armed and ready."

Carmaile nodded. "Good. Just make sure to come back in one piece."

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## The Revolution Continues Revolting

By Sudanna - May 2 2011

Astor spent the rest of the day running from place to place, obliterating the few, isolated pockets of loyalist soldiers that hadn't surrendered. He had been doing so in a preoccupied manner until he got shot in the chest while trying to puzzle out the King's inexplicable behavior. The pain was excellent motivation for him to ascribe it to the unknowable ways of sorcerers and focus on not dying.

The rain was still pouring torrentially when the last major resistance within the city was wiped out. A gunshot would still pierce the growing night from time to time, but Munilintas was effectively under Revolution control.

However, it also had the smallest garrison and the largest concentration of revolutionaries and rebel firepower, in the form of Astor. Communication with the other major cities by parallel slates revealed that Tuneltas and Yegeptas were both in flames, and the chaotic battles there left both cities up for grabs. In Maarantas, the early arrival of several warships carrying a battalion of soldiers had forced most of the revolutionaries there to postpone the uprising and flee to Munilintas on several hijacked trains once the nobility and military leaders got news of the spreading revolution in the other cities of Vyrint. They had apparently taken as many civilians as they could, as well, and conditions on the trains were unhealthy. They would be arriving early

the next morning. Accounts from those that stayed the longest indicated that the loyalist leaders were preparing to massacre the city.

Astor and the other revolutionary leaders decided, around midnight and after hours of hectic organization and heated argument, that Astor and almost all of the revolutionaries in Munilintas would depart for Yegeptas immediately. The refugees from Maarantas would be used to keep order in the city when they arrived. The parallel slates were used to send orders to the Yegeptas branch to secure the railway and the train station at all costs, as reinforcements were coming. They also told the incoming Maarantas branch that they would have to be ready to enforce order on Munilintas before rioting and looting got out of hand.

There were substantial problems in getting revolutionary soldiers to actually do these things, though. Yegeptas wrote back that taking the train station was an impossibility, as the loyalists had somehow received word that Munilintas had fallen. Astor assured the assembled Provisionary Governance Committee that he could protect the trains through sorcery until they reached the station, but this still left them with little information as to what actually needed doing in Yegeptas. Their communication was unreliable. The Yegeptas end of the parallel slates changed hands several times, and had delayed, erratic responses. Apparently, the revolution stronghold had been stormed, the slate evacuated, and they were attempting to find the main body of their forces.

Not to mention the unreliability of their own troops. Celebrations were still going on, most soldiers were asleep, and nobody knew where they were supposed to be or where anybody else was. What passed for officers in the revolution were doing their best, but it was an impossible battle. Eventually, plans changed out of necessity, and the Maarantas branch would be shuttled directly on to Yegeptas, after evacuating the refugees. They left an hour or so after sunrise, rain still drowning the city, with as many of the Munilintas revolutionaries as they could coerce into going. The train was cramped, smelly, and very loud, and everyone was exhausted to begin with, so when they arrived at Yegeptas with bullets and explosives shattering over the shield of force Astor had put in place, nobody was fit to fight. Still, they lined up and fired from the windows, and though Astor's shield failed after loyalists rammed another train into it, it lasted long enough for them to clear most of the platforms. As the other trains arrived with their own splatters of bullets and blood, the revolutionaries began to exit the train and set up a defense of the station. It was a large complex, meant mostly for industrial traffic, and very exposed. Their first orders would be to take control of the adjacent warehouse district before the enemy set up snipers or mounted a counterattack. After that, they would find the scattered rebels and consolidate their forces while sweeping the loyalists from the city as systematically as possible. Astor was directed to the areas where they met the heaviest resistance, but the outcome of the battle was a foregone conclusion as soon as the reinforcements had arrived. Yegeptas was in the hands of the revolution by nightfall. Continuing on was woefully impractical at this point, as the weariness of the rebel soldiers had shown itself in the high casualties of this battle. Word was sent to Tuneltas that reinforcements would be delayed until the next day, and that they should find a defensible position near the trainyard. The response was hopelessly garbled - apparently, their slate had been damaged.

Astor collapsed after his second straight day of warfare and government creation. He didn't even notice that he slept on the body of a man he had blown the head off of.

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# Unbidden Reunion

By Azuma - May 18 2011

Iren trudged forward, ignoring the godless beating he was taking from the raging blizzard. Wind and hail furiously slammed against his adamant figure as he made his way through the sleet. He saw flickering lights across the mountain range. He reckoned he had no better place to go.

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"By an elf's ass, how'd you survive the blizzard boy?" Iren just shrugged and asked "Do you have cold beer?" The barkeep laughed at question. "You're a funneh lad. Everything's cold here! Harharhar!" he replied heartily while he gave a friendly smack on Iren's back, to which the latter just nodded off. Iren went to the least lit spot on the floor for it was the farthest one from the more boisterous patrons while he watched the portly barkeep wobble his way through the crowd back to the bar. A few minutes and a statuesque, and well-endowed was walking to him and served the drink he ordered. "It's on the house." The waitress added with a wink as she placed the beverage in front of him. "Thanks." Iren muttered. He held the cup with a hand in deep contemplation, making the place silent for him, regardless of however loud the people were getting.

Two gruff and greased elves sat down on a table near him, breaking his daze. They looked like labormen, probably from one of the many factories around. He overheard one saying that "Everyone's looking for work wherever it is." To which the other replied "Of course. Factories have all the heat. Power grid's been on the fritz last I heard from my cousin who works at the plant. Frost getting to the tubes and shit he said. Can't even get my toast the way I like it." Their drinks came, and the two took a quick guzzle in unison. The first one to speak brought a dialogue the man was interested a bit. "Ionar is in a war, and it seems that Gildea is conscripting to support them." *War in Ionar and Gildea to help it. Trouble for everyone involved.*

Iren took a contemplating swig and managed to get back to the trance he was in before. As he placed down the mug though, four conspicuous, armed men had barged in to the building, garnering everyone's stare and attention. Two of them started scanning the floor as the remaining asked, or rather shouted, that they were looking for someone. One snarled and the other growled but no one seemed to have an idea of where is the who they were looking for. Iren noticed a peculiar insignia on one of the men's derum<sup>[1]</sup>. *That's...* "Blackhands." One of the elves from before whispered to his friend. "They're looking for someone too. And you know how they get when they're looking for someone." the other one added. The man took another gulp from his drink, almost chugging it down all the way before; "There he is!"

Events happened fast. It seemed like there were more outside, just waiting for confirmation of their target, and once they heard the shouts, all came storming in. The more intoxicated of the members started to get in their way and not soon after, all were participating in a brawl with the

group. The man let a soft sigh of relief that he was able to finish his drink before he started slugging with the men that got a bit close. He blocked a blow from his left side, slammed his fist on the face of one on his right, then went back to take down the previous one. The fight continued on, with him taking some blows and giving back in return but things weren't getting better. Most of the patrons were getting killed if not being seriously hurt. He cursed as he knew that he had to stop this quickly.

One of the thugs tried to sneak attack him but a blinding flash of white sent him across the floor, eventually crashing out of the building itself. The thunder and the sound of breaking wood immediately drew the attention and arms of the miscreants to him. The remaining patrons scuttled out and dragged the wounded and dead out of the encounter. The thugs shuffled across the room from him, and where whispering uncertainty amongst each other. They weren't expecting a sorcerer to be their quarry apparently. Their acting commander was clueless on what to do, but nevertheless, locked stares with Iren.

"Just leave and this'll end well for the both of us." Iren calmly suggested.

The offer was strongly tempting. Some of the men started shuffle slowly to the exit but their more dedicated comrades pulled them back. Their leader dwelled on the offer. He came to a dire conclusion minutes after. He cocked his Shevram-standard rifle and aimed for Iren's head. ---

Iren stepped on the grisly remains of what was once the leader of the group that was searching for him as he reached for a bottle of sharly<sup>[2]</sup> across the bar. The owner left, knowing better to just let him sit in peace for a while and urged the waitresses and other remaining staff to do the same. His now perforated coat rests on the floor. The place was silent for real now. Just the way he liked it. He flicked open the bottle with a thumb and started basking in the quiet. He hasn't even touched lips with the bottle when he heard a familiar voice coming from the entrance.

"This is macabre, even by your standards Iren."

Iren didn't bother to see whose voice that was and continued to drink the fine sample of alcoholic beverage he has on hand. He half-emptied it before addressing the man. "Breda Relire. Give me a good reason on why I shouldn't do to you what I did to these Blackhands bastards."

"Because you care about me and you don't want my mommeh get her panties in a bunch." the man called Breda jokingly said as he found a seat beside Iren.

Iren downed the remaining contents of his drink and sighed. "Was it you who tipped me off?" he said with a disappointed tone.

"I needed you back on edge. If I hurt your feelings, I'm sorry for that. Forgiven?" Breda clasped his hands together, almost like a prayer, feigning apology. "Also, we have a job." he quipped after.

"Why am I not surprised? The military needing some extra fire?"

"Not exactly. We're not going to the front lines. Gildea doesn't want to get known that it's directly helping Ionar. I would have called it conscription too but we're paid. Upfront even!"

"Now isn't that just dandy." Iren said in a surly tone. He threw his bottle at the floor for amusement. Unsurprisingly, it shattered. Motes of light trickled and hovered over the pieces and drew them back together, making it back to almost how it was as the many cracks on it were

apparent. Iren sighed at his little parlor trick. He turned his head towards Breda who was already looking at him intently, as if only expecting one answer. Cringingly, Iren stood up, cursed under his breath and said in his broody tone "You owe me a coat."

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## Chasing Phantoms

By Nioca - May 21 2011

Oaeren stared at the floor of an interceptor's loading bay, wobbling slightly with the turbulence the fast-attack airship was plowing through. The interceptor's cabin was abnormally cramped; aside from a full compliment of gunners, there was Oaeren and a four-member fireteam of Lord Carmaile's 45th Armored Infantry battalion. This was further complicated by a large round basket near the loading bay door. Ionar had perpetrated a rather simple ruse; the big airships of the Ionite 22nd Air Fleet had made a slow, obvious approach from the northeast. Meanwhile, the majority of the 22nd's interceptors had cut west, flying fast and low in the early morning's shadows to catch Zanara's air forces from behind and by surprise. The majority of the 45th battalion was arriving with the gunships; the elite infantry of Ionar's military, wearing the maroon-and-silver brigandines that earned the armored infantry their name. But Oaeren, along with a small fireteam, had the honor of taking an interceptor behind enemy lines, and getting the nauseating experience of a ride in a drop basket.

The fireteam's Sergeant, a bearded bear of a man, approached Oaeren. "You ready?"

"Yeah," he lied, "I was just thinking about the last time I was here. What's our ETA, Sergeant Bremen?"

Sergeant Bremen started checking over the drop basket. "One minute. This your first time in a drop basket?"

"Sergeant, this is my first time in a warzone," Oaeren stated blandly, lying down inside the rather spacious basket. "Not having been in a drop basket is a bit of a given."

"Well, you don't seem like the type to get airsick, so just relax and try not to retch. These drops are stressful enough without getting someone else's lunch in my face." Sergeant Bremen remarked. "Everyone in! Airmen, prepare for drop!"

After the fireteam climbed into the basket, an airman quickly pulled a lid over it. The sergeant locked it in place from the inside. Simultaneously, Oaeren felt the interceptor pitch up abruptly. They were almost there... "Drop in five!" He heard an airman call, with the loading door rattling open. "Four! Three! Two! One! Drop!"

The basket was given a hard shove out of the interceptor. A rope affixed to the interceptor pulled a small cable on the basket loose right as it cleared the airship, and a billowing parachute opened up. The basket pitched wildly for a few seconds, then stabilized as it floated down to ground, maroon-and-gold interceptors whizzing past. It floated amongst the disturbed and riled air,

finally drifting down onto a bullet-marked street next to a bombed out factory. After a couple seconds of profuse vulgarity, the lid was kicked off the basket, and the fireteam staggered out. Sergeant Bremen, along with two other armored soldiers, brought submachine guns to bear on the nearby streets. Another hefted a Blackguard rifle, whilst idly looking into a pack at his side. Sergeant Bremen lowered his gun. "We're clear. Where-to, Revlas?"

Oaeren, the last to his feet, drew his Vulpin pistol and chambered a round, scanning his surroundings. "We're a little off-mark," He stated, re-seating his glasses, "but we're close. Our target's a small sewerage access house which should be due east."

"We're going into the sewers?" Sergeant Bremen asked, attempting to keep the disgust out of his voice.

"Yes," Oaeren replied as Bremen and his team took the lead. "Our first destination's underground, and in any case, it's safer to navigate underground than in the open streets." The group moved at a brisk jog, kept on alert by the pops and bangs of gunfire echoing through the streets. The city felt surreal; the bombed-out buildings of Targus clawed at the sky, their silhouettes barely illuminated by the flickering flames and flashes of gunfire. Phantoms danced at their feet as a flaming Zanian interceptor spiraled past while an Ionite interceptor raked it with its machine guns, and echoing screams and moans formed a chorus of the damned, waiting for Oaeren to join them. More than once, the group worked their way around a smattering of pallid bodies, either charred by bomb or perforated by bullets, and despite logic and sanity dictating otherwise, they saw nary a living soul.

The fireteam moved into a relatively undamaged neighborhood, composed primarily of cramped elfenhomes. The large, worn-brick buildings showed no signs of life, and the streets were devoid of anything save small piles of rags and stray pieces of garbage. It was here that Oaeren spotted their goal. "There's our target... but it looks like we've been beaten to it." Oaeren whispered to the team. Indeed, a small metallic house was visible, its door broken off its hinges. Around it, he could see lights flickering and jumpy Zanara infantryman on watch around it, shouldering fancy rifles or carbines and adorned in puce uniforms.

Sergeant Bremen led the group around a street corner, two blocks down. "Looks like they've got some troops in back after all."

"Indeed, but our time's too limited to try another access house." Oaeren whispered back. "We'll have to fight our way through."

Sergeant Bremen, meanwhile, was looking through binoculars. "No worries. I count 7 hostiles, and probably a few more inside, but it looks like they're watching for someone to try to come out through the sewer, rather than someone trying to go in. If we hit 'em from two sides, we'd probably overwhelm 'em." He lowered the binoculars. "Corporals Anderson and Kizon, head left two blocks and get a good position. Once you've got good shots, open fire. Private Derm, Revlas, you're with me."

The fireteam split, with Oaeren's group moving closer to the access house. Taking cover behind a dumpster, Sergeant Bremen started checking over his submachine gun, while Private Derm sighted down his rifle. As they did so, a minute glint caught Oaeren's eye; at first, he thought it a reflection off his glasses, but when he looked up at one of the elfenhomes, he caught the same

metallic glint, along with an alarming shape. "Oh, damnation." Oaeren murmured. "Sergeant, any way to call this off?"

"No, why?" The sergeant whispered back, concerned.

"Because there's a machine gun on the fourth floor, meaning this is about to get really ugly." Oaeren peered over the dumpster for a moment, watching the puce infantry. Then, before the sergeant could ask him to elaborate, he bolted, flitting like a shadow across the street and into one of the elfenhomes.

The inside was almost pitch-black, making Oaeren thankful for his glasses. Pulling the underslide on his Vulpin to suppressed fire, he leveled the pistol in front of him. The hall was dirty and unkempt, dotted with numerous doors off to both sides, but in addition to the normal filth, there were dark sprays of what could only be blood. On the floor, a pair of elves laid unmoving, their bodies riddled with bullet holes. Ignoring the grisly sight, Oaeren drifted forward, heading toward a rickety spiral staircase at the end of the hall. Once or twice, he caught a glimpse of a door opening a sliver, just enough for someone to peek out of their abysmally tiny apartment.

Moving as swiftly as stealth would allow, Oaeren started up the stairs. On the second floor, he spotted another elven body, gunned down with a knife in her hand. The third was eerily empty. But as he ascended to the fourth, he spotted a Zanara man in uniform, leaning against a wall and idly fidgeting with a rifle. The Zanian noticed Oaeren and lazily hefted his rifle. "Get back in-"

Two quiet pops caused the man's sentence to die along with him. As he collapsed, the sound of automatic gunfire suddenly echoed to life from the street below. Shouts of surprise and pain nudged Oaeren forward as he hustled down the hall, coming to an open door. Hearing voices within, Oaeren deactivated his gun's suppression and peered around the corner. Two puce-clad men were working with a Zanian machine gun propped on the apartment's window, aiming it at the street below. Wasting no time, Oaeren whirled around the corner and put two high-power rounds in one infantryman's back, knocking him out the window. The other soldier swore, whirling and leveling a carbine, but was no match for Oaeren; in under a second, he aimed and squeezed off a trio of shots, sending the man crumpling to the floor.

Oaeren swept across the room to the window, loading a new magazine. Relieving the soldier of his carbine and side-arm, he peered down into the street. The two Ionar teams were pressing fire on the pinned-down Zanians with their automatic weapons. The Zanians, in turn, were getting slaughtered; the element of surprise, minimal experience, and a lack of cover was resulting in a bloody rout. The battle was over in a matter of seconds, ending with a final burst of submachine fire.

The fireteam regrouped below, Oaeren joining them with a Zanian carbine slung over his shoulder. Sergeant Bremen entered the sewerage access house, checking over the bodies. "Tell me we're not losing ground to these amateurs."

"That's Zanara's military for you." Oaeren followed the fireteam, which was picking over the bodies for supplies. The inside of the access house was a bullet-ridden mess, with a few lockers off to the side for storage. The main feature of the room was a large stone staircase heading down into darkness, from which a rotten scent was wafting up. "Seventy years of no military

activity whatsoever means that most of their command chain is composed of either mercenaries or officers with little-to-no real combat experience, and the bulk of their infantry is completely green. It's the only reason Targus has held out as long as it has; any competent army with their resources and firepower would have taken the city by now."

"Yeah, well, their guns hurt like hell. These brigandines can usually deflect a few rifle rounds before they start collapsing." Sergeant Bremen pointed at a bullet lodged in his artificed brigandine. "This one almost punched through a fresh brigandine on its first try."

"Well, I'm sure Miyoal will be interested," Oaeren stated as he descended down the stairs, pulling a cylindrical silver rod from his pack. With a click, a flame flicked to life inside a small glass chamber at the end of the rod, causing a beam of firelight to spread out in front of Oaeren. He leveled both it and his pistol in front of him as four other torchlights flickered to life behind him. At the bottom of the staircase was a small metal door, left hanging open.

Oaeren entered first, stepping out onto a narrow catwalk on the side of a surprisingly large tunnel. It extended in both directions, the catwalk swallowed by darkness. Motioning to the others, he quickly turned left and proceeded down the tunnel. Keeping in tight formation, they started working their way through the sewers.

After several minutes, Oaeren came to a stop at an intersection. "What I'm about to show you is protected under Ionar Order 4. What you see is to be taken to your grave. If you utter a word about this to anyone unauthorized to know, you are guilty of high treason and will suffer penalties of the same. Understood?" The fireteam glanced amongst themselves for a moment, before quietly murmuring their assent. "Good. This way."

Oaeren led them down yet another tunnel, this time coming to a dead end. Oaeren flicked his torchlight up, shining it on a storm drain pipe. Hoisting himself up partway into the pipe, he reached in and pulled on something concealed inside. There was a grating sound, followed by a portion of the tunnel wall swinging inward. "How did you know that was there?" Bremen asked, stunned, as Oaeren hopped down from the pipe and approached the concealed door.

"Sergeant, if you knew half the things about Ionar I knew, I would have to execute you for treason." Oaeren led the way into a large, bare stone chamber, with the fireteam close behind. "To an outsider or your average Ionar citizen, Targus seems like a prime example of Ionar decadence and culture. Its founding lord, for which the city was named, was renowned for his ego and eccentricities. A byzantine sewer system, locking away one of Ionar's greatest artificers for petty crimes, things like that." There was a sound of scraping stone again, and the secret door closed behind them. "In truth, however, there's a reason for everything Targus did. He knew when he built this city that there was a risk that someday, Zanara might attack. Which is why he took precautions."

Oaeren held up his torchlight, revealing a faded inscription on the wall. 'Ldv vhd bhpudo pf Myrae vakd uhdldvt hdt dftn vhav zhibh zpwlc etiog vhdn auwocdt. ' Underneath, the symbol of the goddess Myrae was visible, a symbol that simultaneously resembled both a bird in flight and a pair of outstretched hands. Sergeant Bremen approached, baffled, as the rest of the unit exchanged glances with each other. Oaeren wasn't paying attention; he instead closed his eyes, pushing his right hand against the holy symbol.



The room suddenly brightened three-fold, the symbol and Oaeren's hand instantly flaring up like a beacon. The fireteam shielded their eyes as a gentle rumble echoed through the room. It lasted for only a second; the light faded just as quickly as it had come. As the fireteam's vision cleared, they saw that the wall Oaeren had leaned against had slid into the floor; beyond was a massive, concealed room. Inside, every wall, floor, and ceiling was covered with intricate artificery. There was no dust; the room smelt clean and fresh, despite having clearly been abandoned for some time. In the corner, a pile of unused rations, water, munitions, and medical supplies, enough to last a small group for weeks, sat next to an empty bookshelf. The center of the room was dominated by a large table, and two doors led off into what were presumably a bathroom and quarters.

Then the fireteam noticed that Oaeren had his pistol leveled at something. There was a man behind the table, holding a massive pistol on Oaeren. "Identify yourself!" The man barked.

"My name's Oaeren Revlas, Adjuvant to Lord Carmaile. I'm accompanied by the 2-45th Armored, Fireteam 1. I'm here to evacuate Lord Avery to Ionara." Oaeren said calmly. He held up the back of his right hand, a symbol of Myrae glowing faintly on it.

The man hesitated for a moment, then slowly stood up, lowering his gun. "Alem Iucif, Adjuvant to Lord Avery. I'm afraid you've come a long way for nothing; it's just me and my family here in the Sanctum."

Oaeren stepped into the sanctum. "Avery's dead?" He asked.

"I don't know." Alem stated.

"What do you mean, you don't know? You're supposed to protect him, as per your oath. And where are the other Adjuvants?" Oaeren replied, a growing edge in his voice.

"I don't know. Avery's gone missing, and I haven't been able to contact the other Adjuvants." Alem snapped back.

"He went missing during the attack?" Oaeren asked.

"No," Alem replied, "he went missing 3 hours before the first bombs fell."

There was a silence. The fireteam glanced at each other nervously, while Oaeren stared at the other Adjuvant. Finally, Oaeren sighed. "You have a slate, correct? I need to report in to Carmaile. This mission just got more complicated."

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## Assault

By Zoe and Sylae - Jun 6 2011

A couple days of hard marching later, and the sea was starting to become visible. A welcoming sight, as the column of troops had seen nothing but rolling hills and random villages scattered around on their trek through the Zanaran countryside.

Up ahead, a small fishing village lay next to the placid sea. A squadron of massive, bulky transport Zeppelins was moored just outside of town.

Amethyst and Tehara's squad were among the ones selected to go by air. Most of the other recruits were assigned to go by sea. "We must be heading for Artus," Amethyst said, mostly to herself.

As she was boarding the large airship assigned to her platoon, a loud bang erupted from above, and upon looking up, Amethyst saw a large plume of smoke begin pouring out of one of the idling engines above her. Seconds later, a woman wearing an aviator's uniform appeared at the top of the boarding ramp.

"Anybody here experienced in engine repairs?" she shouted above the din of the boarding army. Several soldiers, including Tehara, raised their hands. The woman glanced around, then pointed at Tehara. "You'll do. Come with me." The mercenary grinned and walked past Amethyst, shouting "See you in a bit!" over the buzzing of the engines.

Amethyst and the rest of the squad slowly continued into the confines of the zeppelin.

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Shortly after takeoff, Amethyst was approached by their NCO squad leader. She was holding an unfamiliar weapon with a letter attached to it. It was a tad bit long, as long as her rifle, though wider. Not too much, though. Depending on the weight, it looked as though it wouldn't be too much of a burden at all. And even from a distance, Amethyst could see the various runes of artifice. A quick glance noted how some of them were used for stability. Before she could look at them more, the NCO handed it to her, saying, "Here. I was ordered to give this to you." Amethyst took off the letter, silently reading it to herself:

“ Amethyst--I figure if you're going out there to probably get yourself killed, you might as well test out this weapon we've been working on. It might even prove useful. Though your artifice skill may be tested, as some knowledge is necessary to use it. Still very experimental, so try not to blow yourself up with it. I call this the Experimental Zanara Long Range Rocket Propelled Grenade, or RPG. It'll use the same rounds as some of the rocket artillery Zanara military uses, though I'm working on developing it's own unique rounds. Anyways, that's practically what it is. Destruction similar to artillery with the accuracy of a rifle. If you survive, please do let me know how well it works in the field. By the way, look at the back of the letter. ”

---Obsidian Rain

Tehara glanced over at the weapon in interest. Amethyst noted her interest and said, "Oh, it's an experimental weapon given to me by my, umm, my father to test out. It fires modified artillery rounds and is supposedly pretty powerful and accurate. A rocket propelled grenade..."

"Sweet weapon. Where's mine?" Tehara said, laughing. Amethyst simply smiled at the comment and focused her attention back to the letter.

Amethyst flipped it over to find some instructions on modifying the artillery rounds to suit the RPG. The NCO suddenly shot up from her seat, making a quick "Oh!" in the process. She took a

bag, and handed it off to Amethyst, speeding back to her seat in embarrassment for forgetting. In the bag were some already modified artillery rounds suited for use by the RPG.

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Tehara grabbed onto a bulkhead as the transport's cabin shook violently, sliding across the rough ground outside. *Not the best landing in the world, but it'll do*, she thought to herself, and pulled the Vyan pistol from its holster, checking the magazine one last time. Around her, her squad-mates similarly checked their weapons as the ramp at the aft of the ship dropped. The squads in front began to pour out of the ship, and soon Tehara's squad ran crouching down the ramp, led by their NCO squad leader.

The street was eerily quiet, gunfire sounding in the distance. Debris littered the streets, civilian's possessions left behind in a hasty evacuation, and several uniform-wearing corpses. Their squad ran to the side, crouching down beside a toppled wagon. Looking at the squad, the NCO said calmly, "Once the LZ is secured, we're going to head north down this street. Most of their forces should be to the west of us, but be careful." Her words were punctuated with the sharp staccato bursts of gunfire nearby.

The transport's engines jumped in volume, and the ship slowly lifted off the ground, quickly rising. Suddenly, a trail of smoke arced towards the ship, impacting the cabin. A large explosion sounded, and the transport fell to the ground, burning. Tehara's eyes followed the smoke trail back to its source, a tower to the north, then pointed this out to the NCO. The officer nodded, "Guess we'll have to do something about that. Move out!" she yelled, lifting her rifle and running along the edge of the street north. The squad followed, eyes studying the rooftops intently.

A block later, they came across a small group of soldiers. Both groups ducked behind cover, the Zanarans behind a small walled portico and the Ionites behind a wagon. Tehara glanced around the wall, then ducked back as a bullet slammed into the wall next to her, shattered brick pieces flying all over. "They're paying attention," she said to the squad, then spun around the corner and fired off two quick shots, dropping the shooter. As she ducked back, the other three enemies leaped up and attempted to retreat, however the Zanaran squad jumped out from behind cover and gunned them down.

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Half of the six-man squad had perished by the time they sighted the base of the tower. The squad leader had been the first to fall, shot by a sniper not five minutes after the first firefight. There had been no signs of other Zanaran forces, and the sounds of gunfire had been becoming more and more intermittent as they traveled north. Now, only Tehara, Amethyst, and one of their squad-mates, Tammaz, survived.

Two men lounged at the base of the building, drinking some sort of beverage. Two rifles leaned against the wall, some distance away. Clearly these men weren't expecting an attack. Tehara ducked back around the corner, and glanced over at Amethyst and Tammaz. "Okay, they've got two guys just sitting there at the entrance. I didn't see anyone at the windows, but I'm sure they'll appear as soon as we start shooting. You two, hit those two and run for the door. I'll lay down covering fire, and be right behind you. Allright?" Her two squadmates nodded. Tehara grinned, "Let's do this, then."

Amethyst and Tammaz rushed forward out of hiding and gunned down the surprised men and ran for the door as planned. A couple guys appeared at the window to see what the noise was, but they were shot by Tehara before they could so much as look down. As Amethyst and Tammaz were merely a couple feet from the door, Tehara followed, seeing no one else appear. Halfway to the door, a guy suddenly appeared at the window and started shooting, lodging a bullet in Tehara's front vest, but Tehara silenced him before he could do more. Silently thanking Zanara's amazing ability in making uniforms, she made it to the door right as Amethyst creaked it open enough to throw in a grenade.

An explosion and a cry later, the squad rushed in and gunned down a surviving woman attempting to defend the first floor. Tehara motioned them to silently wait by the wall behind the stairs. A man started to cautiously walk down the stairs. When he was halfway down, she rushed out of hiding and shot him. She moved to the side a bit as his body started to off the stairs. Heading back to the wall, she along with Amethyst and Tammaz silently listened for more activity. Hearing nothing, they cautiously walked up the set of stairs.

The squad didn't meet any resistance on the second, third, fourth, or fifth floor. However, upon walking towards the stairs to the sixth floor, gunshots flew from above. The three jumped back and took cover behind the stairs. Tammaz pulled out a grenade and quickly chucked it up the stairs, hiding back from the gunfire. A small metal bang sounded as the grenade was apparently kicked back down the stairs. Luckily, it didn't even come close to the squad.

"How are we going to get through this?" Tammaz whispered. The three thought for a few. "I have an idea," Amethyst whispered. She motioned the other two to follow her back to the stairs leading back to the fifth floor. "I hope this doesn't cause *too* much structural damage for our sake," she said as she pulled out the RPG and aimed it towards where the Ionites were positioned above. She fired. The explosion blew a chunk of the floor above as a surprised three Ionites fell down and were gunned just in case. Cautiously moving around the rubble and up to the sixth floor, the squad met no additional resistance. A man, idiotically not at all cautious, ran down from the seventh floor to see what the explosion was about only to meet bullets. The squad jumped over the hole and ran up to the seventh floor and from there to the top of the tower where they gunned down the remaining Ionite.

"Tammaz, you take position on the floor right below us to watch out for anyone coming up. Amethyst, you go to to watch from the windows. I'll stay up here with this handy machine gun they've been nice enough to provide us with," Tehara ordered, hefting a large belt-fed Ionite weapon. The three then waited in position for the inevitable appearance of Ionites who surely would want their tower back to wait for Zanarians to push through.

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The last member of the most recent squad sent to retake the tower fell to the combined gunfire of the three Zanaran troops. Tehara stepped back and glanced out the window. Below, the streets were silent and empty. "We can't hold out forever like this," she said mostly to herself, staring out at the Zeppelins floating outside the city, then turned "I don't think we'll be getting help anytime soon, guys."

Her two squadmates looked up from looting the Ionite bodies scattered on the stairwell. "What makes you think so?" Amethyst asked as she tied a piece of uniform over a wound on her forearm.

"Our air support. It's floating just out of enemy AA fire outside the city. That, combined with the fact that the only gunfire I've heard is at this tower..." She trailed off.

"We're all that's left in the city." Amethyst finished. "But not the island. If we've got birds still then we have to control at least some of the countryside."

"That's what I'm thinking too. I don't think we should spent much longer in this tower though, these Ionites might start bringing in heavier guns," Tehara said, lightly kicking a corpse for emphasis. "Personally, I'd suggest we get out of this city as soon as possible."

"That's nice," Tammaz said softly, "But we can't exactly walk there. We'd get shot before we got a hundred yards."

The three were silent for some time, then Amethyst suddenly jumped up, "Tehara, you were an aviator...is there some way to contact the fleet from here? Some sort of signal? Maybe they'll be able to give us some info."

Tehara paused, then nodded. "Actually, there is. Well, it's one of the first things you learn in Vyanat when you're assigned to a Zeppelin, but I don't know if you guys use the same code..."

"It's worth a try though, right?"

Tehara opened her pack and pulled out a small artificer's kit. "It can't hurt, I guess. As long as they're looking," she said as she opened the case and walked to the large open window. She grabbed a bullet from her ammo belt and opened the kit, quickly scrawling runes on the side of the cartridge. With a grunt, she pulled the lead bullet out of the casing and tossed it aside. She stuffed a small bit of paper in the gap and loaded the modified shell into her pistol.

"This shell will now give off a flash of air whenever it's hit with a concussive force, in this case the firing pin of my pistol," Tehara explained to her squadmates. She silently aimed at the fleet a distance away and pulled the trigger at seemingly-random intervals. After a while, flashes of light began to appear from one of the Zeppelins. She quickly grabbed a piece of paper and began to write down words as the light flashed.

After several minutes of translating, she showed the paper to the other two. "Some signals were different, but I tried to fill in the blanks the best I could. Those are our orders, courtesy General Cloud."

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# As You Are

By Nioca - Jun 13 2011

A man worked a small lever inside the lamplit Sanctum of Targus, causing part of the wall to slide away. Adjuvant Lucif looked up at the party entering the Sanctum, grimacing as he noticed the large number of unknown faces dressed in Ionar uniform. "Any luck?"

Sergeant Bremen, leading the group, responded in the affirmative, but Oaeren, who was near the back, responded with a dejected, "no."

"Ah, well, Carmaile sen-"

"That's *Lord* Carmaile to you, Adjuvant. The orthodoxy hasn't deposed of him yet." Oaeren snarled.

"...right," Adjuvant Lucif said, his voice quavering slightly, "I meant no disrespect, sir." Oaeren fixed Adjuvant in his gaze as he continued. "Lord Carmaile sent a message for you with instructions... I think. His slate might be damaged, the message came in garbled." Lucif waved a hand at the parallel slate.

Oaeren quickly looked it over. "No it's not. It's in Myrscript." He stated, running a hand over the slate as he furrowed his brow in thought.

"Myrscript?" Lucif asked, baffled.

"It's the holy language of Myrae, or so the Orthodox Church claims," Sergeant Bremen interjected, speaking between mouthfuls of some sort of bread he had produced from his pack.

"Same as on the door. Quite clever really, I think only 3% of Ionar's population can actually even read it."

Lucif responded, but Oaeren wasn't listening. Decoding the Myrscript was slow-going; he was a bit rusty. Still, he could read well enough to get the gist, and the gist was a mixed bag of good and bad news. Artus was under seige by Zanian forces, though thanks to forewarning and Ionite naval forces, they managed to repel the initial assault. Carmaile was already working on a plan to assist Artus. The expedition into Targus had been only a mild success; both Ionite Battlezepplins in Targus had been caught on the ground and destroyed during the attack. On the bright side, the squad had managed to recover a Blackguard artificer engine, evacuate several noble families, and recover some ammunition stockpiles before the Zanarans got to them.

Which left him with his orders. Find Lord Avery; pretty much what Oaeren expected. Locate and rally the remaining Adjuvants of Avery, also what he expected. Acquire samples of Zanaran weapon technology... It seemed Blackguard Weapons was leaning on Carmaile again. "Alright. Adjuvant Lucif, you know the protocol. Unless I can locate other adjuvants, you're in charge. Now, I need to know about the other Adjuvants and where they may have located themselves."

Lucif sighed. "Not much to tell. Used to be four of us. One died a week ago, and hasn't been replaced yet. Then you have me, but I was never really in Lord Avery's good graces. There's Adjuvant Berum, who was off sick that day. Haven't heard from him since the bombing... I'm getting worried 'bout him. And finally, Adjuvant Soren was the last to see Lord Avery before the bombs fell. Well, along with some blonde girl that was tagging along with them."

Oaeren paused. "Blonde girl?"

"Yeah," Lucif nodded, "She was hanging around the manor the past few days. Departed with Lord Avery just prior to the bombs falling. Thin, gold-colored clothing and a dark cloak. Armed, too; I saw a sword under her cloak, and there was an outline from a holstered Wolfen as well."

"Any idea where she is now?" Oaeren asked. Lucif merely shook his head. "Great. Alright, I know where to start. Adjuvant Lucif, if I may, I'd suggest making this Sanctum a fallback position rather than your primary point of operations, and I'd also suggest getting traps set up and these tunnels mapped out. Preferably before the Zanarans get organized and get things under control." Oaeren gathered up a few stray magazines and, without another word, turned and exited the Sanctum.

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Walking through Targus's streets was no longer as easy as it once was. It used to be, a person in expensive clothing could walk the city without once being stopped or harassed.

"Not that this matters to any of you uncultured heathens." Oaeren muttered to himself, standing over the bodies of two dead and stripped Zanian soldiers. "But this was a pinnacle of culture," He grunted, forcing his foot into an undersized boot, "built for the sole purpose of trying to foster trade relations with what we thought was an admirable and honorable nation. Not to mention my home." Oaeren hefted the Zanaran rifle and holstered a sidearm, glancing at himself in a piece of shattered window glass. Puce was really not his color, but the uniform would do. "Well, looks like we found out how that turned out."

He set off across the street in his new uniform meeting no other resistance. In the noble district, there wasn't much of a Zanian presence yet. Busy elsewhere, wiping out what was left of Ionar's military presence, Oaeren supposed. The few puce-clad soldiers Oaeren did see weren't inclined to bother him. He made his way through the scorched and bullet-scarred manors toward a subdued one, located between a rather colorful and tasteful pile of rubble and a damaged manor with its stained glass windows blown out.

Oaeren shouldered his rifle and marched up to the manor, sighing, "Not the homecoming I had in mind."

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# Arrival in Tuneltas

By Sudanna - Jun 18 2011

When the Revolutionary Army arrived in Tuneltas, they found the city almost completely in ruins. The Revolution had, at the end of the fighting, won, but there wasn't much left to win. Tamner Phiton, one of the pre-ordained members of the Provisionary Government, was waiting for Astor when their train arrived. He had been an artificier and a factory owner, but from the looks of the city, he would have had nothing left even if he hadn't sworn it all into the stewardship of the new state years ago. He was covered in ash and grime, and using a rifle as a cane. He was also smiling broadly, though clearly exhausted.

"Astor!" he cried, hobbling around piles of rubble on the train platform. His left pantleg was tattered and a tight, fresh bandage was wound around his thigh. A squad of soldiers followed him carefully, sighing as he batted away offers of help.

"Tam? Ha, figures you'd be one of the survivors, you old coward!" Astor bore a large smile as he picked his way towards the large, aging man. They embraced, briefly, clapping each other on the back as well as they could, with the huge differences in height. The revolutionaries from the train were getting out and stretching their legs.

"Ah, one of the only ones, in fact. I might be the only member of the Provisionary Council left. They blew the others out the windows of our own headquarters. Please tell me the other cities weren't hit this bad?"

"Into business that quick? You are worried. No, Muni and 'Eg are still mostly intact. We haven't touched Mara, though." Astor studied Tamner more closely. He was absolutely exhausted - his left arm was shaking noticeably on top of his makeshift cane, and underneath the grime, he was as pale as snow. "You wanna sit down? I'd hate to lose the only remaining representative from this place. It's going to need him."

Tamner shook his head. "Nah. There's work to be done, or we'll never bring back order. I was just worried that we'd ruined the nation rather than saved it." He glanced out at the crumbling train station. It was littered with bodies.

"We paid the price for Tuneltas, I can see that. Have you got any numbers yet?"

Another shake of the larger man's head. "We didn't have very good ones beforehand. But there's thousands dead out there. Tens of thousands. Lord Arvoit leapt at the chance to begin a massacre." He was looking increasingly troubled.

"Tamner, it's been brutal. But we knew it would be. This is worth it, alright? Tuneltas will have an endless future free of tyranny. Free of lords and massacres." Astor sought Tamner's eyes.

"The dead have won a priceless victory for the living."



"It's easier for you to see the bigger picture, Astor. Shut up in your head. But I know it. Just leaves me a little emptier."

They stood there for a few moments, Astor concerned for his friend and Tamner mourning the dead. Eventually, the former factory boss shook it off. "I hope you didn't bring this whole train of revolutionaries just to talk with me."

"We brought them to help win the city, actually. Your slate didn't send us anything in Vintish."

"Well, I'm not surprised." Tamner smiled ruefully, drawing a small shard of glass covered in elaborate inlays. "Damn thing broke into a thousand pieces. I tried telling them that it wasn't like a puzzle, but they wouldn't listen. It's just as well, anyways, we're going to need as many as you can spare just to keep order."

"That's not many. But I've got a slate, we can talk with the Committee. Work something out. We still have to take Maarantas."

"I understand. But I don't want to lose what little we have left. Tell me you brought supplies too? We're going to need a lot of food and water."

"We don't, but most of the stores in Muni and I think 'Eg are fine. We can send another train. Somehow, the lumberyard in Yegeptas avoided the flames. You'll need everything they've got once we start rebuilding."

They talked logistics for a while, the two of them and the committee. In the end, they would leave a few hundred-odd armed revolutionaries in the city and send a train with emergency supplies and more administrators and workers. The volunteer army was also a formidable force of volunteer craftsmen. Astor and the bulk of the army that came with him would return to Munilintas to prepare for the assault on Maarantas. There was word that the city had descended into chaos already - the nobles, the wealthy, and the military leaders fighting for power. Astor hoped so. The power of their fledgling government would be stretched thin enough without a costly assault on a fortified city, and they couldn't afford to leave any remnant of the old Vyrint alive.

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## Fall of Artus

By Zoe - Jul 7 2011

"It seems as though they are having some issues taking the city. Must've underestimated them. They want us to blow up a storage facility where the Ionites are stashing some of their gunpowder and ammo. Approximately a kya east from our position--easily viewable from here," Tehara explained.

With a short scan of the area east, a medium sized building stood among a few shorter buildings. After quickly dispatching an Ionite attempting to be sneaky, they looked more to spot a couple Ionite soldiers exiting from the larger building. Amethyst shrugged, grabbed her RPG, aimed,

and fired straight at the building. Annoyingly enough, however, the round arched and instead exploded in the area right in front of where the soldiers were running, sending shrapnel into various parts of their body, causing them to shout in pain and fall down, continuing to moan. Amethyst cursed, aimed up a bit more, and fired again. This time she hit true.

The round collapsed a large part of the roof, being the cause of many more shouts than there were previous. Amethyst, remembering the part about gunpowder, aimed exactly as she did again. The round fell into the opening of the roof. A small explosion, followed by a series of explosions increasing in intensity, left the building in little more than charred rubble. The smoke from the explosion must have been spotted by Ionite forces from other parts of the city, due to the increasing number of alarms that sounded after.

To the south, even more shouts were heard, followed by gunfire and explosions. The distraction from the commotion inside the city must have given Zanarian forces enough of an edge to smash through the defense.

A few desperate Ionites tried getting into the tower again in a hopeless attempt to gain some edge against the approaching Zanarian mass. While they were unsuccessful, an Ionite managed to rush up and gun down Tammaz before Amethyst finished her. Tammaz cried out in agony as blood trickled down from his various wounds. A few minutes later, he stopped breathing.

As Amethyst looked sadly, Tehara poked her head down to check the situation. "Guess it's just us now, huh?" She noted Amethyst's expression. "Aww, don't look so glum. Tammaz knew what he was getting into when he signed...and we've been pushing our luck since we got here. Hell, I'm surprised we've made it as far as we have." Amethyst looked up, smiled, and said, "Well, I'd be long dead if it weren't for you."

About a minute later, the two noticed a platoon of Ionites approaching the tower, running from the nearest cover in two lines. "Shit! We'll never survive this many," Amethyst said. The two aimed at the approaching Ionites helplessly, knocking down only a small percentage of them. Tehara replied, "I'm surprised they didn't do this earlier."

Suddenly, though, a company of Zanians charged from the south, gunning down the platoon of Ionites with only minor losses. Amethyst and Tehara waited on the top floor as a squad of Zanarian troops entered the tower. The tired girls sighed in relief as their fellow soldiers escorted them down the tower, one of them making sure to pick up the Ionite machine gun.

Another squad then broke away from the company to give them extra cover as Amethyst and Tehara were escorted south to relative safety. While Amethyst was still on full alert mainly for more Ionites, she couldn't help but notice the odd scene they were walking through. She figured Tehara might be used to it, but the array of perfectly intact buildings--as if there was not a war going on to them--mixed with buildings with collapsed walls, walls peppered with bullet holes, walls sprayed with blood with the bodies laid out near by. It was just an alien sight to her. Of all the odd landscapes she had heard of, never did she imagine such a gruesome display.

Though things had quieted down a bit, the occasional bursts of gunfire still rang out from a distance as the two girls and the escorting squads met up with the main force outside the city. The two were walked up to one of the large tents and told to wait there as a squad leader entered it. A moment later, the NCO walked out and motioned them in.

Inside, a man sat near a cluster of papers, including a large map of Zanara and Ionar. He wore a puce uniform much like the rest, but had an intricate design marked along and wore a specific hat and badge showing him to be a General. He had an air of confidence, but, as Tehara especially noted, he still lacked complete competence and experience. Though seeing greenness even among Zanian leadership was about as common as a rifle. After an exchange of salutes, the General motioned the two to sit down.

"Now I understand that you two ladies were the ones to contact us via signals?" Amethyst and Tehara nodded. "That would be me who shot them," said Tehara. The General nodded. "Do tell me all about what happened while you two were in the city."

Tehara and Amethyst described everything that happened between dropping off from the Zeppelin and being escorted to the camp with the occasional question or nod from the General, who also made note that it was he who sent them the orders.

General Cloud smiled when the two girls finished and said, "Excellent. While I'm sure you two had a lot of dumb luck on your side, your bravery and skill are unquestioned. I'm sure everyone can learn from your example. Your efforts helped us capture the city far faster than we would have. Thanks to you, we're right on schedule." He looked towards Tehara. "I understand you're one of the mercenaries that we hired?" Tehara nodded. General Cloud continued, "Then congratulations on becoming the first foreigner to receive a promotion in the Zanarian military. You'll receive your squad shortly, Corporal." He nodded and gave her a set of insignia.

Tehara nodded and saluted solemnly. "It's an honor, sir. Thank you," she said, pinning the insignia to her uniform.

He then turned towards Amethyst. "As for you--" Amethyst interrupted, "Excuse my interruption, sir, but if I may make a request, whatever you may do, I'd like to stay with Tehara, please." "Very well," General Cloud replied. "I'll honor your request seeing the circumstances. You're Rain's daughter, aren't you? You've certainly turned out to be a fine lady," Amethyst blushed at the comment. "I'll be sure to let your father know about your bravery. Now if you two would excuse me, I have some work to do. Get some rest now. You'll need it for when we head for the mainland."

Amethyst and Tehara exited the tent, only to be approached by an officer shortly thereafter. "I'm guessin' you two need some shut-eye? Well, tent #72 is currently unoccupied. I'll assign you to there." The two girls walked over to their tent. Amethyst sighed. "That was...I can't believe so much has happened in such little time, " she said. "Well rest up, cuz this ain't even the last of it, " Tehara replied. Amethyst let the thought of it sit in her thoughts for a second before laying her head down to rest.

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# Uneasy News

By Sudanna - Jul 21 2011

Astor remained in Tuneltas for two more days as the revolutionaries he had come with aided the taming of the chaotic, wounded city. He was not of much use, beyond being a symbol. Tamner knew better than he what needed to be done, and his sorcery was not well suited to such a task. He mostly shut himself in the portions of their headquarters that had not been destroyed by the loyalist's bomb, and made his voice known at the Committee back in Munilintas. New representatives from Tuneltas needed to be chosen, and as the highest-ranking member of the Revolution present, Astor was expected to have a hand in that, but the elf had to defer judgment to those more familiar with the structure of the Revolution in the city. He spoke with those that Tamner and others had chosen, found no objections, and passed the recommendations on to the Committee. He also discussed the support from the larger government that Tuneltas' relief efforts would require. The Committee was largely ignorant, but cooperative. Astor was a powerful and valued figure of the Revolution.

The casualties from Tuneltas' brutal fighting were horrifying. Mounds of bodies littered the streets, and had to be cleared away. The entire city, and miles of its surroundings, smelled of rotting corpses and death. The bodies were lined up several hundred yards outside of the city walls as they were found and recovered, to allow their relations to claim them. The bodies would be burned a week after being laid out. Many would go unclaimed - collapsing buildings or bad luck had often left entire families dead, and many were too wounded to venture out to the morgue lines. Distressingly few bore any sign of the Revolution - thousands of civilians had been caught in the crossfire or the rage of Tuneltas' former lord.

Even Astor felt the regret and sorrow that plagued the survivors.

On the other hand, this meant that a smaller garrison needed to be left behind. Astor left the city with the soldiers he had brought and more. They left a wounded, smoldering city, but one that had begun to heal itself. Tamner, despite being asked to sit with the rest of the Committee in Munilintas, remained behind to coordinate the rebuilding efforts and help acclimate the replacement Committee members to their new positions. Astor left him his slate.

Passing through Yegeptas, Astor was delighted with the bustle and industriousness of the city. A steady stream of trains swept the station, and men and animals crowded the streets, bearing supplies to the damaged areas of the city. It was heartening to see the city recovering.

When they arrived in Munilintas several hours later, the sight was similar. Astor hoped that Tuneltas would follow soon.

There was a notable addition, though - Astor saw several chain-gangs of captured loyalists on his way to the Governance Committee's headquarters. The garrison had begun to clear the countryside of loyalists outposts and forts, most of which were already abandoned, or

surrendered when faced with the newly swollen ranks of the Revolutionary Army. Many had been drafted, in order to prepare for the brooding threat of Maarantas, a decision which had passed the Committee unanimously. There was still no official uniform, though plans for one were supposedly in one of the stacks of papers that were being frantically and confusingly shuttled about.

Astor entered the large but nondescript building that was the vibrantly beating, if temporary, heart of their new government. Aides and secretaries and officials bustled from everywhere to anywhere, carrying countless sheaves and bundles of paper. It was a busy time to be a bureaucrat. The Committee members did not postpone those duties when they convened to welcome Astor back and plan the attack on Maarantas - many working on stacks of unknown forms or reports or proposals while planning the tactics of a siege assault. Everyone looked haggard or ill - few of the Revolution's leaders or prominent members were young anymore, or until recently able to lead healthy lives. Coupled with the unending torrent of business to be handled, this left the Committee looking like a cadre of zombies.

The layout of Maarantas and the old disposition of its defenses were well-known. The current state of the city was not. The stated goal was not to produce a detailed plan of attack or siege, but to review what they knew of the city and decide who and what to send. Astor, most of the Committee members from the occupied city, a defected loyalist general, and five thousand poorly, or not at all trained, but decently-equipped soldiers of the Revolution would pack onto a train the next morning, bearing the materiel needed to breach Maarantas' walls. The rapid expansion of Vyrint's cities had been mostly upwards, and the seat of government or the army was always behind the walls. They would have abandoned anything outside.

They had lost all contact with the agents that had remained behind. Whether the rumored chaos of the city had consumed them or the loyalists had rooted them out was unknown. It left Astor uneasy, but there was nothing to be done. Further decisions would have to be made when they reached Maarantas and learned what they would be facing.

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## To the Skies

By Sylae - Sep 26 2011

It had been a week since the assault on Artus. After Tehara's promotion, she'd been placed in command of the squad she and Amethyst had been in. Four new recruits were pulled in, and she had been spending all of her time training the squad. The Zanian forces had finally secured the city, and the forces were preparing to assault the mainland.

Tehara was busy demonstrating some hand-to-hand combat when she saw the lieutenant staring at her a short distance away. After telling the squad to practice, she walked over. "Sir?"

"Corporal, the General himself passed down these orders for your squad," The lieutenant pulled an envelope out of his coat and handed it to her, "Apparently you're shipping out on a special

mission. Good luck." He nodded and walked away, and Tehara broke the seal on the envelope, scanning the contents quickly as she walked back to the squad.

"Well, we've got orders, guys. The squad'll be flying over to the mainland, we're going to be hitting their logistical lines, starting with the ironways. Everyone is to report to the aerodrome tomorrow morning, pack light. Amethyst, I need you to stop by the quartermaster, they should have supplies set aside for us. Any questions?"

"Sir?" One of the new squadmates piped up, "Do you know how long we'll be gone?"

Tehara shook her head, "This is a top-secret mission, nobody else besides us and the general knows where we are going; all they know is that we've been assigned elsewhere. That being said, we come back when the job's done or we don't come back at all."

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The drone of zeppelin engines filled the air around the hastily-erected aerodrome. The invaders had originally planned to use the existing Ionaran facilities, however they had been inadvertently bombed to rubble during the assault. Tehara jogged up to the already-assembled squad standing next to a smaller interceptor. As she was inspecting the craft and her squad, a groundsman ran up to her, "Corporal!" He yelled shrilly.

She sighed softly, "Yes?"

"Sir, I'm afraid your pilot is ill. We're trying to get another, but it could take a few hours..."

"You're joking, right? We have orders from the general, and I don't think he'll appreciate us being late."

The man shrugged, "We're tryi--"

Tehara cut him off. "No, apparently not hard enough. You're telling me that if the Ionarans were to attack right now, it would take *hours* to get our air support up?"

"Well, no, but--"

"They're all busy?" She glanced around at all the airships sitting on the ground, "I'm sure."

"Sir, I'm sorry, but all the other pilots have furlough today. I'll see what I can do." The man turned indignantly and walked away.

Tehara turned back to the squad. "That guy was an incompetent moron..." She was getting sick and tired of the untrained, unknowledgeable idiots that seemed to be around every corner. "Let's load up, I don't want to wait around for some vomit-bomber pilot with no combat experience."

"Are you sure we shouldn't just wait?" Amethyst asked.

"No, it'll be noon by the time that guy finds someone. The first thing I learned when I was transferred to the Air Corps was that you don't stick around for the papers to be filed." Tehara stated, "And besides, one less person means we get there faster."

Five minutes later, the interceptor lifted off the ground and was on its way.

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Tehara scrawled a quick line of runes across the master artifice control and stood up from the pilot's seat, popping her back tiredly. The controls were different than she had been trained, but that was to be expected--the interceptor appeared to have been designed entirely by Zanian engineers, a big difference from the aging machines Vyanat used. She shrugged and opened the door into the main cabin, glancing around at the design. The interceptor had four turrets, compared to six on most models. The space where the aft turrets went was replaced by a small cargo space, which they had filled with food, explosives, and other supplies. Two of her squad were stationed on the midships turrets, scanning the countryside of the small isle, and other was resting in the aft. She climbed the ladder up to a small loft deck to find Amethyst and the last squad member chatting. Amethyst jumped up, startled, when she saw Tehara. "Sir! Aren't you piloting?"

"Yeah, I just used some artifice to keep it on the right bearing. As long as someone's half-paying attention, we'll be fine. Don't get to the fuel depot for another couple hours." Due to short supplies in Artus, the ship had only been given enough fuel to make it to the eastern point of the island. There, they would stock up at a Zanian naval vessel docked just offshore, then make the crossing. "Speaking of, remind me to show you the basics of piloting this thing, you'll need to know in case I get killed or something."

"You think that'll happen?" Amethyst asked, "I thought we were just blowing up ironways in the hills."

"We are, but that doesn't mean it'll be easy. Those ironways are Ionar's quickest way south, they're bound to have troops patrolling them. And even barring that, some adventurous farmboy could get a lucky shot off. Doesn't hurt to be cautious."

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It was early dawn two days later when Tehara set the zeppelin down in a small gully. The squad piled out, with one troop staying behind. Tehara shouldered the bag containing some of the explosives and set out towards the ironway a quarter-kay away. They were silent the entire trip through the low rolling hills, until they came to their target. A small stream, about ten feet wide, wound through the hills. A small wooden bridge spanned it. "Just what the map said," Tehara stated happily, and they proceeded to rig the bridge with explosives. In short time the squad pulled back behind the bend and Tehara scrawled a rune on the detonator. A huge explosion sounded and the ironway bridge collapsed loudly. The squad shared some grins and began the walk back to the airship.

Tehara had been in the pilot's seat for barely half an hour before one of the men yelled out, "Ionite zeppelin! To the south, coming in fast!"

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# Discovery

By Sylae - Mar 29 2012

Tehara swore loudly and ran back into the main cabin, climbing the ladder through the canopy into the loft. "To the south, sir," the lookout said, offering a small spyglass. Tehara snatched it from his hands and followed his finger, focusing in with the glass on a dot in the distant south. After a minute, she nodded and handed the glass back. "Looks like some sort of converted courier ship...no loft, four guns, tops," she said, "Alright, lets get everyone together down on the bomb deck." They both headed down the ladder to the cabin.

Tehara gazed at her assembled troops. Four were practically fresh recruits, with barely any training and no combat experience. There was her, and then there was Amethyst. Although she was little-better trained than the others, at least she had been in the field and had proven herself levelheaded under pressure. Tehara leaned against the outer wall of the cabin thinking, ignoring the nervous boot scuffing of one of the recruits. After a minute, she nodded. "Okay. Here's what we're going to do. Amethyst, you still have ammo for that launcher?" she asked, continuing at the young woman's nod, "Good. I want you in the canopy. Malsian? We didn't do much rifle practice, but your file said you were a good shot. That true?"

"Yessir."

"Okay, you take the rifle and go up in the canopy with her. Pick off any targets or at least keep their gunners distracted. Um, take someone with you to snipe as well. You other two, take the starboard turrets and unload on their canopy. I know your airship experience has only been as far as a hop across the ocean in a vomit-bomber, but you'll have to do. Now, these guys are headed straight toward us, they have no backup, and they're in a converted civilian mail-carrier. That means they're either morons or they know we are here already. I'd guess they have reinforcements to the north they're trying to run us off in to. I for one don't want to be shot down today. So lets get 'em." With that, she nodded and walked over to the aft turret, pulling out her artifice kit as she sat down. Some quick scrawls optimized the dual-turreted weapon for short-range combat, and within five minutes all two turrets were ready.

Once all two gunners were in position, Tehara nodded to herself, "They have an enclosed cabin like ours, but theirs is a converted civilian model. That means little to no armor, and probably fairly slipshod modifications. We're going to pull up alongside them, I want you two to break a hole open for Amethyst up there with the launcher. We don't have the time to shoot her down with gunfire, so clear their gun positions as much as possible and try to shoot a hole open. Try not to get shot while you're at it, we don't have a medic with us so...shoot well," she said, checking their turrets one last time and walking to the cockpit. She sat down in the seat and ran her hands over the still-unfamiliar controls, thinking about the last time she'd flown in a battle. *Hopefully this time I can land it in one piece*, she thought to herself as she turned the craft to bear south. Only about five kays away, the Ionite ship was coming in fast. Tehara gunned the



rotational-prop engines to full, lining up the nose of the craft to just off their starboard side. The distance rapidly closed, but it seemed like an eternity passed before a shot rang out from the balcony, and a chunk of wood splintered away near one of the forward-facing portholes of the enemy ship. Tehara wiped the sweat off her brow and threw the engines into reverse.

The sudden deceleration was jarring, but they began to slow as the enemy ship approached. One of their gun turrets flashed for a second, and bullets arced across the artifice-reinforced hull of the Zanian ship. Then the ships were next to each other, and the sound of gunfire filled the skies. Tehara stared out the starboard cockpit, watching sparks fly from the artifice-reinforced hulls of the ships, feeling the steady thud of the two turrets behind her. The courier ship rocked back and forth from the power of the shells striking against it, and the sparks became smaller and fewer, more often than not wood crumpled and shattered under the onslaught of the Zanian broadside. Suddenly there was a scream behind her, and one of the men flopped back, blood streaming from his shoulder. Tehara scrawled a quick rune message on a panel to keep the ship in line and ran back to him, pulling the man away from the turret. "Stay still!" she yelled as she quickly patched the wound as best as she could. She glanced at the enemy ship through the open turret area and ran over, pulling the guns back around and opening up on the enemy ship. The heavy recoil shook the steel beams holding the twin weapons in place as lead sprayed across the small gap between the two ships. A line of fire shot from above them as Amethyst fired one of her launcher shells at the ship. A cloud of fire and shrapnel appeared, leaving behind a charred patch of hull that Tehara and the two others promptly began firing on. Blackened, smoking fragments of Ionite hull shattered away as the four Zanian artifice-augmented guns tore into it, tearing a gash open into which Amethyst promptly fired another projectile.

The entire cabin of the Ionite airship exploded, spraying fire, wood, and metal everywhere as its fuel tanks ruptured and caught fire. The Zanian ship was thrown back and forth as chunks of wood and metal were flung against its hull. Tehara stepped back from the turret and returned to the cabin, cycling the engines down. An eerie silence filled the surviving airship. She looked around at the others, her muscles tense from the energy of the battle, short as it may have been. She turned and gestured to the injured man. "We'll have to put down somewhere and clean that. With no medical training onboard I'd rather not do that in the air," she said as she walked back toward the cabin. As she throttled the engines up out of idle, a crashing sound came from below them as the enemy hull hit the ground far below.

Tehara and Amethyst were out the cabin hatch mere seconds after the airship touched ground. Even as she grabbed a mooring rope, she reached into her pocket and tossed a small wadded-up at the next man out the hatch. "Clean his wound and then tie that around it as a bandage. The artifice will speed the healing. Just be certain it's clean, no shrapnel or anything. We don't have the supplies to deal with an infection," she ordered as she wrapped the rope around the trunk of a nearby tree. "Malsian, stay in the canopy and watch the skies. We only have a few hours before they get here, tops. Amethyst and I are going to go look at the wreckage for any usable remains." Securing the knot, she walked over to Amethyst and gestured toward the smoky pile a hundred yards away.

Shards of wood and steel crunched lightly as their booted feet strode across toward the broken hull. Smoke still poured from inside, but for the most part the flame-artificed wooden hull had resisted catching on fire. Tehara stepped in through the hole their guns had bored, glancing

around inside. After gesturing for Amethyst to check out what the rear compartment, she quickly stripped the four bodies lying about of their weapons and valuables, tossing them out the hole for later retrieval. She then wandered to the cockpit, glass crunching under the heels of her boots. After relieving the dead pilot of his possessions, she began to look around the cracked instrument panel, searching for anything interesting of note.

"Tehara," Amethyst called.

"Just a second," Tehara yelled back as she glanced under the panel, feeling around blindly.

"Tehara," Amethyst repeated, appearing in the cockpit hatch, "You should come see this."

"All right, all right," Tehara said, standing back up and following Amethyst back to the rear compartment. The first thing she noticed was the large and ornate desk leaning on its side against the starboard bulkhead. Bits and pieces of paper were strewn about all over, and in one place a small patch of wood burned where the anti-fire artifice had failed. "Not a courier ship after all," Tehara said to herself, laughing, "Some nobleman's private ship."

"Not just that," Amethyst said, pointing at the crest carved into the desk. "Church of Myrae. Someone pulled some strings to get an airship from the Orthodoxy, sir."

"Indeed they did, I wouldn't want an airship like this turned to sawdust by machine-gun fire either," Tehara stated flatly, running her fingers over one of the brass lion's head-shaped lanterns mounted on the bulkhead wall, "Wonder how it got here."

"That's not all, sir." Amethyst said, "This floorboard here, I think there's stuff underneath it." She pointed at a section of the floor, and Tehara nodded. Amongst the battered and charred sections of deck, one small section, maybe a half-yard on a side, was completely char-free.

"New or better artifice than the rest of the ship. Well, only one way to go about this," Tehara said, and knelled down and began rapping softly against the deck. After hitting the "clean" section of floor, she glanced at Amethyst. "Say, let me borrow that carbine?" Amethyst unslung her weapon and tossed it to Tehara, who promptly used the butt to smash in the deck. "Artifice-bonded panel," she explained. "You'd need the correct rune sequence to open it. Lucky for us, there's a simple method to unlock it." She handed the carbine back and pulled splintered chunks of wood away, revealing a small depression, barely a hand wide. Inside was a small fortune of weaponry, coins, and artificing equipment. Tehara grinned at Amethyst, and gestured to the pile, grabbing a mundane-looking pistol and holstering it, along with a box of ammo. "Amethyst, load up," She said, and the younger soldier grabbed a drawer from the overturned desk, tossing its contents across the floor and filling it with handfuls of loot. Tehara joined in, tossing purses of coins into the drawer. After putting an Ionite artificer's kit into her pack, she reached back in, feeling around for any more ammo for her newfound pistol. Rooting around, she suddenly came upon a larger rough-feeling object. Pulling it out of the pile of coils, she discovered it was a thick leather folder wrapped in a burlap-like cloth.

Pulling away the burlap, she saw the folder was embossed with the same emblem on the desk. She glanced at Amethyst, still filling the desk drawer, then shrugged and opened the folder. Inside was a drawing of a familiar-looking man, labeled "Samyl d'Vyan, Prince of Vyanat" at the bottom in a thin hand. Tehara frowned at the label, then shrugged and set it aside. Another drawing, this one Tehara recognized as the Queen, and was labeled as such. She turned to the

next page, then stopped abruptly. It was a drawing of an half-elf woman, a scar running down her face, with tanned skin and a streak of white hair. At the bottom, in the same thin hand, was written "Tehara d'Vyan, bounty hunter".

Frantically she began to rush through the rest of the pages, her heart pounding. Maps, diagrams, drawings, plans, all written in that thin scrawl, meticulously detailed. Suddenly the drawing of the prince made more sense. It was the man she had found laying on her bed. *Why? Why me? What am I doing in the floor of an Ionite airship?* Amethyst must've sensed something was amiss, she looked up at Tehara. "What's wrong?" Wordlessly, she handed over the drawing of her face, staring blankly at the open folder before her. She knew she'd been set up to take the fall for something, but this? A church she'd never heard of before, assassinating the prince of Vyanat and using her as a scapegoat? Why? She looked up to see Amethyst staring at her. "You never did tell me just why you signed up," she said softly, her eyes falling upon a pistol lying in the cubby.

Tehara sighed, "You think I'm a mole or something, don't you?" Amethyst nodded slowly. "Well, I'm not. That'd explain a lot, but honestly I know about as much as you do." She grabbed the drawing of the prince and held it up, "This man is the Queen's brother. I came home and found him lying dead on my bed. Needless to say, the Watch wasn't about to talk to me about it. So I left town as fast as possible." She picked up a map from the pile. "And this looks like a map of Vyanat City. That marked spot was where I lived." She held up another drawing. "This is a deserter I brought in to the Bounty Hall a week before then." Another drawing. "This was my landlord."

Amethyst nodded at the rest of the folder. "And all that?"

"That's what I'd like to find out. This is part of something bigger, bigger than me, bigger than the prince or the Queen or this Orthodoxy," she said, glancing at the sheets. "Mosla save me, I've been thrust into this mess and I don't even know what it is."

Amethyst opened her mouth to say something, but before she could, a shout rang out from outside, "Sir! Ionite Zeppelins, to the north!" Tehara leaped up, shoving all the papers into the folder, then pointing at the cubby and frantically throwing coins and weapons into the drawer. When it was empty, the pair ran out of the wreck into the cool air of the Ionite countryside, Tehara carrying a newfound Ionite rifle and the leather folder, hastily re-wrapped in the burlap. Tehara's footsteps trailed off and she slowed down, glancing back at the smoking hull behind them. Thoughts raced across her mind and she stopped her pace entirely, staring back at the hull.

"Sir?" Amethyst asked, having also stopped. Tehara turned to face her. Behind the young soldier, the squad stood ready to depart.

"Amethyst, do you remember what I showed you, on flying the airship?" She asked quietly.

"Sir?"

"Answer the question, can you fly that?"

"Ummm...yessir. Why?" Amethyst asked. Tehara just stared at her. Suddenly realization dawned on her face. "No, you can't...you're our commander!"

Tehara shook her head. "No, you are. My priorities just changed drastically," she said, lifting the folder. "I have to figure this out, I have to know why me..."

"No, sir!" Amethyst yelled. "What happened to fighting for the guy next to you in the trenches? What about that, huh?"

Tehara shook her head, and softly stated, "There's a time for duty to others and a time to take care of yourself. Remember that." Ignoring Amethyst's protests, she reached up and tore one of the insignia off her uniform, tossing it to Amethyst, whose mouth clamped shut as she caught the insignia. "Amethyst Rain, I hereby promote you to rank of corporal in the Zanian Army and place you in command of my squad. And no, I don't care if I technically can't do this."

"Sir, you--"

"Take the ship and head west as fast as you can. Lose them over the ocean. Then finish the mission."

"Tehara--"

"That's an order, Corporal."

"Yes...yessir," Amethyst said quietly.

"We'll meet again, I promise it. After all, I never did collect the pay for my two weeks of service. Now go, your squad is waiting," she said, turning with a smile and calmly striding back toward the ruined hull. Shards of wood crunched underfoot as the engines whirled to life behind her.