

Originally posted by sepulchrave on 01-21-2002

Lady Despina's Virtue

I originally posted this on the old messageboards - not realizing that they were going to be frozen quite as abruptly as they were. It's still messy, and hasn't been organized properly.

The first post was posed as a question on the general forum some time back in November and,

unexpectedly, aroused a lot of interest. There was a follow-up post and, finally, a third post to explain the ongoing situation. I've also added the fourth (as yet, unposted) post at the end.

The saga still continues, although I am way behind in writing up my notes on it and there is a LOT to reproduce. I will post as often as possible to the story thread if interest is sustained: my main gauge on whether to continue will be the number in the "viewed" column - I realise that written feedback in story hour tends to be a little thin.

The style is rather odd - a story in places, game stats thrown in, some meta-stuff in other places. I suppose this reflects the hybrid nature of the original posts. Over time, I'm assuming that a more coherent style will emerge, although I kind of like the conversational approach: I'm not a novelist and have no pretensions in that direction. If it seems a bit dry in places then I guess that's just the academic in me.

[FIRST POST IN GENERAL DISCUSSION- SOMETIME IN NOVEMBER 2001]

I have an interesting moral dilemma currently occurring in my game, both from an in-character and a meta- perspective.

One of the PCs, a 14th level Paladin, the prized possession of its player for 10 years or so (he was converted from 2E), is currently attempting to CONVERT a succubus, and demonstrate to her the error of her ways.

The demoness, sent as an envoy from a certain fiend whom the Paladin had previously offended, was

charged with the mission of corrupting the character.

Now, the Paladin is your typical high-chivalry pageants-and-tourneys type, embodying the ideals of courtly life. He is fair-minded, just, merciful, chaste and so forth.

The Demoness, warded by an amulet of undetectable alignment, has insinuated herself into the retinue of a certain Duchess, posing as the daughter of a minor noble with a fine pedigree, with various letters of recommendation. She has been posing as a guileless, naïve and hugely compassionate handmaiden

who is strikingly beautiful. The Paladin was instantly smitten -in a chaste way, of course- and has been carrying her token while he jousts.

Having sought her out (and she proved very elusive), the Paladin has been recently courting her, and spending much time with her (reciting poetry, singing ballads etc.- he has a very fair perform skill). To his delight, he has found the lady to be highly intelligent, well-versed in metaphysics and deeply spiritual. They have spent many hours engaged in

wide-ranging philosophical debate and found that

they only differed in their opinions on a few minor points (heheheh...)

However, in the last session, following leads that our hero might be being duped, the deception was revealed. The Paladin drew his weapon and prepared to smite the evil thing.

The demoness sat demurely and began to weep, begging for his mercy and saying yes she had been

sent here to corrupt him and yes that was her original intention but that he'd begun to CHANGE her, and if only he'd give her a chance that she'd prove that she'd overcome her evil ways.

The Paladin, to his credit, didn't buy any of that and thought it was a crock. He raised his sword again, preparing to send her back to the Abyss, expecting her to retaliate. Still, she sat, motionless, and lowered her head.

Suddenly, the Player was overcome with doubt. What if she IS redeemable? Are demons forever

damned? Is there an ounce of potential for her to be anything other than Chaotic Evil - after all demons DEFINE what evil is. And now, another dilemma besets him: if he kills her, here, in cold blood with this doubt in his mind has she WON? Does the very act of slaying her WHILE HE HAS DOUBTS

mean that he has contravened his alignment, and is corrupted?

Opinions, please.

[FOLLOW-UP POST]

Sorry to keep you all waiting: loads of RL stuff to deal with, and the session was delayed. Furthermore, a bucket load more ethical questions are now confounding the Paladin: I think the player is starting to hate me...

I realise that this might be more appropriate to the storyboards forum, but I'm willing to risk the wrath of the moderators. Nothing has been finally resolved, but here is the gist of what happened last time.

We were scheduled to play on Saturday night, and the Paladin player (Marc) arrived an hour early to try and resolve it before the other two players showed up.

The Paladin stayed his blow (for which the Demoness was obviously grateful), although he kept his

blade poised to strike if necessary. He proceeded to explain that, naturally, he doubted her intentions and was very aware that this might be some kind of ploy which she was executing on him, and that he found himself in a very difficult no-win situation. He complimented her for the subtleties of her deceit in this matter - which elicited another outburst of tears from the maiden, as she explained that she was GENUINE in her desire to find a better way of being.

She spoke in apparent candor, saying that the intrigues and manipulations and seductions and

corruptions that she had perpetrated in the past - thousands and thousands of them across aeons of time

- left her feeling jaded and sullied and worthless and self-loathing. Her perversion and evil came not from her ORIGINAL NATURE - which was bright, and celestial, "like a star burning in the

firmament," as she poetically rendered it - but from the corrupting influence of those demons who far outranked her and whose evil was immeasurably deeper.

The Abyss itself, she protested, was a place of such infinite evil that, what hope did one of her minor stature have of redemption if she were forced to return to the place? Only by being sent to the mortal plane, and thus to a place from which all good had not been expunged, had she realized again the

possibility of another existence. She wanted only to live out an earthly existence in quiet penance, and then die. She had no desire to return to her formal celestial abodes, as she had "forfeited that right, eternally, countless aeons ago when I made an error of judgement in the cosmic war. I was new-formed, and guileless - remember this was BEFORE evil was. There was no taint on me, or on most of the

others, but subtle, provocative words were spoken quietly in our ears, and we succumbed. We were

naïve." Grazz't, her master in the hosts, was one of those closest to the source of the corruption and threw his lot wholeheartedly with the rebels. "What choice did I have?"

Note that this account is, from the Paladin's perspective, more-or-less cosmologically accurate,

although he hadn't heard an account first-hand from one of the Fallen Ones before. Rather sneakily, I

must admit, I was pandering to Marc's general sympathies towards the Miltonian Lucifer in Paradise lost. Quickly, the Paladin gestured in the air and cast the spell "discern lies."

Obviously, I rolled the D20 in secret.

The Paladin quizzed her for a while, received answers that were bafflingly plausible, and evinced no perturbations in the demoness's aura, and then shouted out to his squire, who was waiting in the

antechamber. He instructed him to fetch his friends, who were nearby in the quadrangle - he needed their advice.

We had a beer recess and waited for the other players to arrive.

It's worth mentioning at this point that the other two characters - a CG/N Half-Elven Fighter 5 / Thief 5 / Bard 6 and a NG Human Druid 13 also belong to players who've been around for a while. Ortwin,

the Bard, has seen various incarnations from 1e onwards. Neither of them are spring chickens and

they're both pretty aware of my general sneakiness as a DM. Note that both characters

also have

radically differing cosmological perspectives to the Paladin, which makes for interesting gaming...

The Bard and the Druid arrived presently, the Paladin apprised them of the situation (causing the Bard to laugh almost uncontrollably), and earnestly sought their advice.

They debated various possibilities, and the Paladin became anxious. Technically, although a holy

warrior, as one not ordained, he ought to seek the advice of the nearest clergyman (the Priest who services the Duchess' chapel, a lowly 3rd level traditionalist), but felt that he was unqualified to answer in the matter. This caused a momentary paradox, as the Paladin realized that failing to do this was a breach of correct forms. Nonetheless, he opted to see his own confessor instead, none other than the Archbishop of Morne, High Priest of Oronthon in the capitol, 70 miles distant. The Druid cynically asked him,

"And what if you don't like his solution?"

The Paladin answered, "We'll deal with that if and when it arises."

This caused a problem - what to do with the demoness? Obviously, assurances from her to her good

behavior were not sufficient, but they could hardly take her with them: she couldn't physically enter the Fane anyway, as it was hallowed ground. Ortwin, the Bard, offered to remain with her, whilst the Druid and Paladin wind-walked to the temple to succor advice from the priest.

In their absence, the Bard and the succubus talked genially about various subjects, including the

importance of the independence of the spirit. He was wary, but found her nonetheless beguiling.

Arriving in the capitol an hour later, outside of the orangery of the Archbishop's palace, the Paladin and his friend were greeted by a minor functionary who eyed the Druid suspiciously. Unfortunately, the

Archbishop was indisposed, having just gone on a meditation retreat.

"How long will it be?" the Paladin asked.

"We are not sure," the official answered. "He is communing with Oronthon. Apparently with some urgency. I am not sure why. He seemed concerned, as if some great event challenged the very structure of the church."

The Paladin groaned.

[THIRD POST]

Okay, after many requests...

The reason that I've put off elaborating any further is because the plot has got immensely convoluted with all kinds of Machiavellan intrigues being perpetrated (mainly by

demons), which has left the

Paladin rather flummoxed. The Druid has been making snide remarks about the inevitability of this

kind of thing when a religion becomes dogmatic, institutionalized and divorced from its “roots” (i.e.

Nature, from his perspective), and the Bard has, as usual, been viewing the entire proceeding with unconcealed humour. Further, another player has joined the group - a wizard(diviner)/alienist who is played with a frighteningly convincing display of insanity by a friend of mine called Danny.

It transpired that the Archbishop (on meditation retreat, if you recall) was to remain closeted for some time before the Paladin could speak with him: two weeks, in fact. I allowed the entire party (with the exception of the new character) to level up during this period: they were, in fact, long overdue, but I generally insist on an in-game period of down-time to be made available before I allow this to happen, to represent consolidation of skills etc. This was the first opportunity that they’d had for a while. During this period, the Paladin (who spent a LOT of time in prayer), took it under advice from the other

characters to make absolutely no contact with the demoness: they would keep an eye on her. He slept in the chapel, just to be on the safe side. At the point where the Paladin was to return to the Temple to seek advice from his confessor, the party consists of

1) Eadric (ee-AD-rik). A 15th level human paladin with a lot of stress in his life. He wears a flashy suit of magical full plate, has a big magical shield and has a big magical sword called “Lukarn” - an intelligent, lawful good, keen sunblade with the special purpose: slay chaotic evil creatures. Eadric

likes tournaments, acting in a chivalrous manner, and gallantly courting fair damsels. Often the vicissitudes and grim realities of the world prove to be a disappointment to him, but he marches on optimistically nonetheless. He’s kind of a stereotype, but he’s played so well by Marc that it enhances rather than detracts from the experience.

2) Nwm (NOOM). A 14th level human Druid whose prized item is his self- made “staff of the

woodlands” capped with an “orb of storms” rescued from a blue dragon’s possession. Nwm is apparently sardonic and skeptical, but secretly idealistic in a “peace, man” kind of way. A guy called Dave plays him as a cross between Timothy Leary and Oscar Wilde.

3) Ortwin. A Half-Elf Fighter/Rogue/Bard 5/5/7, with a mischievous sense of humour but a good heart -

usually. Not someone to cross, he’s been known to stray a few times from his announced CG alignment when vendetta is involved. Rob, his player, says that if he were a modern era character, then Iggy Pop would be his idol but he’d dress like David Bowie and sing like Freddy Mercury. Ortwin has an “Iron Horn of Valhalla,” a “Cloak of Displacement” and “Dread Githla”: a +4 Keen Scimitar with both the Throwing and Returning enchantments, which I have had cause to regret his ownership of more than

once. He also has a scroll with a number of powerful spells on it which he’s been afraid to

use because of the possibility of them misfiring.

4) Mostin the Metagnostic: A wizard (diviner) 6/ Alienist 9. Mostin is played by Danny, who has some interesting insights into the nature of psychosis. Mostin is CRAZEE. Not in a charming, eccentric, lovable way, but in a deeply disturbing, pathological way. He has strange, obsessive compulsive

behavioural traits, and makes bizarre rituals out of seemingly mundane activities. Danny returns to the group after an absence of nearly a year: his last character, a monk called Skaddius, was killed in a tussle with a Nalfeshnee demon and its cohorts, and declined to be resurrected. The in-game rationale was that such a step would be an impediment to the character's enlightenment, although in fact the player had too much RL stuff going on to commit to the game. Mostin is in possession of a "Portable Hole" full of all kinds of nick-nacks including the fabulous "Looking Glass of Urm-Nahat" - a Mirror of Mental Prowess, and by far the most powerful single magic item I've ever allowed in a game. I must be mellowing as I get older...

I will post again at some stage: please try to understand that to do this justice requires time, and that between other responsibilities, including a tabletop campaign and a PBEM game, as well as work and

family, ongoing revelations about this game may get pushed onto the backburner.

Sooo...

During the short sabbatical and training period, at the invitation of the Duchess of Trempa, Mostin the Metagnostic arrived at the castle where the events to date had been occurring. Mostin's reputation as someone who can simply "find things out" is almost unparalleled. Various strange happenings, apparently without explanation, had caused some alarm amongst the castle's inhabitants, and various minor diviners had been consulted but to no effect. Nwm, usually helpful in these matters, had proven mysteriously silent. Eadric was in prayer and could not be disturbed - looking for inspiration, from the Duchess's point of view

Trees withering. Food rotting on plates. Holy water boiling and candles flaring up in the chapel. That kind of thing.

Mostin, of course, through the use of his divinations, quickly determined the truth: a demonic influence was at work in the Duchess's court. Ortwin and Nwm discovered Mostin's arrival too late: they tried to corner the character before he made his discoveries known, but failed to do so in time. Stoking his repugnant, malformed hedgehog (a pseudonatural familiar), Mostin informed the Duchess of his

findings, and elicited cries of consternation from her and the courtiers gathered there. All of this was unknown to Eadric, who was still praying fervently in the chapel.

"There is a DEMON in your midst," he announced dramatically, enjoying the effects of his revelation on the crowd. Before the hubbub had subsided and the Alienist could point out the culprit, Ortwin, paramount master of BS, thinking on his feet, quickly invoked a "shatter" spell, causing all of the chandeliers to explode, and eliciting panic in the court. Next, a thick green mist with red eyes seemed to escape from his mouth, groaning and with a stench of sulphur (a major image). The hall was in

chaos, with maidservants screaming and old women fainting everywhere, retainers vainly drawing their swords. Ortwin collapsed to the ground, apparently insensible. In the frenzy, Nwm managed to whisk Mostin away and impress on him the complexity of the situation. Out of sheer perversity, Ortwin, lying prone with one eye open, caused the hideous manifestation to chase after the Duchess, and it flew

around above her head for a few moments before it evaporated harmlessly.

The succubus, posing as a handmaiden, pretended to be as shocked as the other courtiers and fled through the nearest exit.

Having briefed Mostin, the alienist reluctantly agreed to dissemble, and informed the Duchess that the threat had removed itself “for the time being, at least,” - he was covering his back - but that Ortwin must rest in the chapel until the effects of his “possession” wore off. Trilgar, the lowly castle minister and confessor, was dismissed despite his protestations, now that an “expert” was there. Mostin pointed out that even the rumour of his coming was enough to force the demon out and his reputation was

thereby increased.

Taking counsel with the eerie and discomfiting Mostin in the chapel, Eadric, Nwm and Ortwin

discussed their options. All three of the original characters knew Mostin by reputation, and so were quite glad of his input in matters. The crazed alienist began by immediately attempting to contact Eadric’s deity, Oronthon, by means of a “Contact Other Plane” spell. “Best we go straight to the top,”

he explained, “and cut out the intermediaries.” Eadric was uneasy about getting a mage to do this, as he knew that a priest’s information was generally more reliable. Still, he couldn’t wait for the Archbishop to come out of retreat. And that’s when the REAL trouble began.

Mostin, with a Will Save of +16, wasn’t afraid of going any crazier than he already was - not that that would have deterred him anyway. With an incandescent blue Ioun Stone buzzing around his head, he

bravely embarked on his psychic journey. Now, for those of you familiar with the “Contact Other Plane” spell, there are certain situations where it can be “blocked” by other entities. Unfortunately for Eadric and his friends, this was one of those situations. And I LOVE spells which have vague

descriptions like this, as it means that I can legitimately do what I like without feeling some guilt about

“Breaking the Rules” - or other such nonsense..

Anyway, the attempted conduit to Oronthon’s presence, mediated normally by a Planetar called

Urthoon, was intercepted by the Balor Rurunoth who had been observing events with interest from the astral plane at the behest of his overlord, the demon prince Graz’zt. Rurunoth’s impressive Bluff skill was sufficient to utterly confound the intuitively

impaired Mostin. His spell trace was redirected to the awesome, inspiring and terrible presence of Graz'zt, posing as the Paladin's deity.

"Er...Is the Succubus posing as Lady Despina (the handmaiden's name, btw) genuine in her desire to redeem herself," Mostin asked plaintively.

"YES!" The voice boomed in the alienist's head.

"Can her efforts be aided in some way by the Paladin Eadric?"

"YES!" The voice boomed again.

"Must he acquire some object to accomplish this?"

"MAYBE." The voice boomed.

"Is there another way, without acquiring an object?"

"NO!" The voice boomed again.

Mostin scratched his head and thought for a while. The answers weren't entirely consistent, but better than he'd hoped for.

"What is the name of this object?"

"VIRTUE." The voice boomed.

Figuring that the answer to the third question kind of made sense now, Mostin pressed on.

"Whose Virtue?" He asked.

"IRRELEVANT." The voice replied, and Mostin realized that he'd wasted a question.

"The virtue of the succubus posing as the Lady Despina?"

"CORRECT." The voice boomed, for the final time.

Emerging from his trance, Mostin proudly announced that he'd spoken to Oronthon - "a nice sort of fellow" (this made Eadric's hackles rise), and the answer was simple. They must find the Succubus's virtue, and restore it to her.

"And where would that be, exactly?" Nwm inquired archly.

"Er, he didn't say. Or I didn't get the chance to ask him. You should ask her - perhaps she'll know."

Eadric quizzed Mostin further. "I thought that you were supposed to be able to find out anything," he said. "Where is this virtue located?"

Mostin, bristling at his reputation being questioned, agreed to cast another spell in order to find out - he offered to contact "Oronthon" again but the Paladin declined, saying that he'd rather go through more

conventional (and reliable) channels.

"How about a quick 'Vision,'" Ortwin suggested, slyly. "We know it's her virtue that we're looking for now - I assume that this magic is available to you?"

"Of course it is," Mostin retorted, "and my thoughts exactly. Although you should understand, Eadric, that it takes a certain toll, and will increase our account."

“Our ...account?” The Paladin inquired incredulously.

“Precisely. Firstly, I have lied to the Duchess in order to protect your girlfriend; second I have just mediated between you and your deity and third I am about to subject my mind to great strain on your behalf. I’d say that you already owe me a fair reward.”

The fact that Mostin had told an outright lie - at the prompting of Nwm and Ortwin, of course, was news to Eadric, and his stomach dropped. It seemed whatever he did (or did not do) was quickly

“sour” somehow. He bemoaned the situation - not for the last time. Someone had lied on his behalf, and truth was always the first victim when the seeds of corruption took root. The fact that Mostin had called the demon his girlfriend simply made him mad.

A long argument ensued about whether he should immediately come clean with the Duchess - a lie was a lie, after all, and should be exposed. Quite different from merely keeping a secret. After a debate which degenerated into bickering and name-calling (mainly between Nwm and Eadric), the Paladin

eventually agreed to let the lie slip in the interests of the greater good - i.e. the possible redemption of the Lady Despina, although he felt seriously compromised in the process.

The intangible Rurunoth watched events gleefully through a color portal and, wreathing himself in

astral fire, took off like a thunderbolt toward the Abyss in order to relate events to his master.

Simultaneously, in the chapel, the lights flared and the font began to overflow with blood.

Eadric immediately became defensive again. “Alright. That’s it. We tell the Duchess. This is obviously an omen. Oronthon is displeased. How could I even contemplate letting this go any further?”

Despite their protestations, this time the Paladin was resolute. (Ortwin was in it up to his neck now, largely because it would expose him as the perpetrator of the ‘evil green mist’ - and he didn’t want the Duchess asking questions such as ‘and why did the manifestation appear to chase me?’) Eadric stormed off towards the Duchess’s chambers, prepared to wake her if necessary. Both Nwm and Ortwin knew that it was pointless to argue with him when he was in this mood.

“S**t, Nwm. DO something,” the Bard begged the Druid. After a moment’s thought, Nwm sighed and touched Ortwin on the shoulder, and both evaporated into mist. To get to the Duchess’s chambers, some 200 yards away, would take the armoured Eadric around two minutes.

Nwm and Ortwin “Wind Walked” there in six seconds.

[It’s worth noting that at this point, I placed my watch on the table and began counting down in real time before the Paladin reached them. It started at 90 seconds - it takes 5 rounds to assume the mist form]

The Duchess was asleep in her huge four-poster bed, and Nwm asked “What now?”

“That’s easy,” Ortwin replied quickly, “just touch her and we’ll take her for a spin - if she

wakes up she'll just think she's having a dream."

"We can't do that," Nwm explained, "it doesn't work like that. She'll just stay put on the bed unless she's awake."

[SEVENTY SECONDS]

"Well let's wake her up, then," Ortwin shouted. He was getting nervous. That woke her up.

The Duchess came to and looked terrified at the two misty apparitions hovering above her bed.

"Fear not," Ortwin said in his most soothing voice, before she could scream. "We are gentle spirits, come to show you wondrous sights. Simply close your eyes and relax. Today has been a hard day for you. You have nothing to worry about."

[FIFTY SECONDS]

[Another OOC Note: Ortwin has a huge Bluff Skill, +24 including bonuses, or something like that]

Astonishingly, the Duchess complied. Ortwin rematerialised, all the while speaking in a slow, hypnotic voice reminiscent of a guided meditation.

[TWENTY SECONDS. Eadric's armoured boots were now audible, stomping up the stone stairs and along the hallway.]



The Bard vacillated for a few seconds, drew his hood up over his face, and cast a "silence" spell. The spoken spell jarred the Duchess from her reverie, but her screams at the hooded intruder in her room went unheard, as did the knocking at her door.

originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 04-19-2002

Sorry for the slight delay

Unfortunately for some reason I can't retrieve my password - I have therefore elected to take the logical step of registering as "Sepulchrave II" - notice it's also capitalized this time.

I thought that a new thread was probably in order.

Many thanks to all of you for those "bumps"...

Eadric waited outside of the doorway for a few moments and, upon hearing no reply, assumed the

Duchess was still abroad and went to find her. Ortwin, still within the effect of the silence spell, now found himself staring at the Duchess in fascination: she merely sat up in bed, screaming voicelessly.

Fortunately it was dark and his hood was drawn up, so that she hadn't recognized him. Or

so he hoped.

He scuttled over to the window, outside of the range of his own magic, quickly pronounced a sleep

spell, and the woman fell into a cataleptic stupor [alas, she is a lowly 3rd level aristo]. Hopefully she'd wake up, and think the whole episode had been a bad dream. If questioned, the Bard made a note to

recount his own, horrific "night terrors," when he'd been under lots of stress. Ortwin opened the window, looked out, waited for a guard to pass, and clambered down the ivy into the quadrangle.

Still within the confines of the chapel, Mostin waited patiently, amazed at the sudden and dramatic disappearance of his three new companions. The blood in the font interested him, although he was

unsure as to its significance as an omen. Almost without thinking, he cast a detect magic spell to see if anything was untoward. The font radiated a faint aura of evocation, but a residue of divination

remained in the air nearby as well. Mostin's interest was piqued. Someone scrying perhaps? Surely not!

Who would dare scry on Mostin the Metagnostic? Unthinkable. And he surely would have noticed. He

brooded for a while, and then invoked detect scrying.

There it pulsed, high in the west transept of the chapel, around ten feet above the ground: a colour pool.

Mostin's stomach sank, and he groaned. Someone – or something – in astral form, had got the jump on him. He leaned against the font, stroked his hedgehog, and tried to put things together in his mind.

A few minutes later, Ortwin scuttled back into the chapel. "Where are the others?" he asked "Have they returned yet?"

Mostin gave a negative grunt.

Noting the alienist's discomfort, Ortwin pressed him. "What else have you divined?"

Feeling indignant at his own oversight, with his ego battered and his reputation on the line, Mostin erupted into a characteristic fit of screaming, which left the bard rather bewildered and demonstrating to Ortwin for the first time Mostin's precarious grasp on sanity. The bard waited patiently while the alienist vented. Mostin eventually calmed down, and related his latest findings.

"An astral gate? Here in the chapel? How splendid!" Ortwin's irony and mirth were barely concealed.

"Who do you think was looking at us? Perhaps you should inquire more closely. The vision dweomer might..."

"Yes, yes, yes." Mostin replied, and grudgingly invoked the vision spell.

The alienist's eyes glazed over and he drooled for a few moments.

"So what did you see?" Ortwin asked anxiously.

"Er...I'd rather not say, until I've had time to think about it."

"I'm sure the duchess would be eager to know about the colour portal."

Mostin looked venomously at the bard, and picked his words carefully. "I saw an... entity...observing us."

"Perhaps you could be a little more specific."

"The name Rurunoth springs to mind," Mostin added.

Ortwin, unschooled in demonology, looked blank. "Is that supposed to mean something to me?"

"He is a demon," Mostin explained.

"Ahhh! Small, medium or large type?"

"Er...VERY large," the alienist confessed.

"So he was responsible for the blood in the font?" Ortwin inquired.

"Most likely," Mostin replied.

"And the trees wilting, food rotting and such?"

"That would seem plausible."

"Well, that's good. At least its not a bad omen from Eadric's tedious god. We can relax on that count.

What do you know about this Rurunoth?"

"He is a servitor demon to one of the abyssal princes," said Mostin.

Ortwin twitched reflexively. "It's OK. You don't need to say his name. I can guess which one it is..."

After the others had been located and apprised of the situation, Eadric launched a barrage of questions towards Mostin, none of which, from the Paladin's perspective, proved to have satisfactory answers:

"...but this is holy ground, how could a demon...?"

"The astral plane is not holy ground," Mostin explained.

"So the omen..."

"Was not an omen," Mostin explained.

"And your communing with Lord Oronthon..."

"May or may not be entirely reliable," Mostin confessed grudgingly. "And technically I was inquiring, not communing."

"But you don't know its veracity for sure?"

“No, but the answers seem to fit plausibly if they were delivered from a deity of Oronthon’s type.”

“That doesn’t mean anything, does it?”

“No, not really,” Mostin admitted.

“And this ‘Rurunoth’ – he is a Type VI demon,” Eadric ventured.

“That phraseology is somewhat antiquated, but yes, more or less.”

“We should find Despina. We need to talk to her again, ” Eadric’s voice conveyed a mixture of longing and apprehension.

“Fool,” Ortwin muttered, shaking his head.

Eadric trooped off towards the south tower, where Despina and a number of other handmaidens were

quartered. Ortwin and Mostin followed the Paladin from the chapel and Nwm, reluctantly, tagged

along.

As they walked across the courtyard, the Druid observed Mostin carefully avoiding the cracks in the flagstones, and stroked his beard thoughtfully.

“Isn’t this rather suspect,” Ortwin mentioned archly, “you know – four men descending upon a bevy of maidens at two o’clock in the morning. Not that I’d usually have any complaints, mind you, but I think you at least ought to show some decorum, Eadric. Mud sticks, and we wouldn’t want your reputation

sullied for the sake of an abyssal wench would we?” Eadric ignored the obvious taunt, walked up to the gate of the tower and hammered loudly. A sleepy eunuch opened the door.

“This is Eadric, Baronet of Deorham,” the Paladin announced in a perfunctory manner. “I have Mostin the Metagnostic with me, and we are making inquiries regarding the events of the past few days. As an approved church inquisitor, I demand entry. Please inform the ladies to dress and make themselves

presentable.”

After waiting for thirty minutes outside, the group were finally admitted and entered the reception room, where a dozen or so handmaidens – including the Lady Despina - had gathered.

“These are routine inquiries,” Ortwin assured them glibly, and pulled a scroll and quill from his belt before anyone else could speak. “Please do not be alarmed. We are merely trying to reconcile the events of the past week or so, and form them into a coherent report.”

“At two in the morning?” Complained a woman called Silla.

“And to dispel the false rumours of diabolism which are currently circulating in the court,” Ortwin added dramatically, staring at Silla. She spoke no more.

“We will speak to three of you tonight,” Ortwin continued, “You Lady Silla, as you must be anxious to return to your beauty-sleep, you Lady Esme and...er...you Lady Despina.” The last words were spoken as if a random name had been plucked from the air.

“I’ll give you credit,” Eadric muttered to Ortwin, “you are a sneaky bugger.”

Only after Silla and Esme - subjected to a barrage of irrelevant questions by Ortwin – had been

discharged, was Lady Despina brought in. Under the steely glare of Mostin and Eadric, the lusty gaze of Ortwin and the ironic stare of Nwm, the succubus sat demurely on a small stool, her nightgown

covered by a thick cloak of peacock feathers.

“Lady Despina,” Mostin began, “You may dispense with the formalities.” The Mage raised his hand,

and uttered an incantation, dispelling the artificial form which she had assumed. In place of the demure handmaiden, another form appeared: horned, muscular, sexless, with eyes of fire and a pair of great leathern wings, which seemed to instinctively retract about the nude form, as if in modesty. Around the creature’s neck, hanging loosely, the group briefly glimpsed a pendant set with a single black opal, before the wings shrouded it.

“What is that token?” Mostin asked quickly. “May I please see it?”

“No!” The creature replied in an eerie voice, with a hint of something akin to anguish.

“Lady Despina,” said Eadric softly, “how can we trust you if you are unwilling to co-operate? Please render the item up to Mostin. It will be returned to you if it proves harmless.”

Reluctantly, the creature complied, and then resumed its previous form. Mostin inspected the amulet closely, and asked “What is this? And why do you insist on assuming a form which others would find more palatable?”

“I have grown to like it,” she replied.

“Well, I’ve made my point,” Mostin said haughtily, “it should at least dispel any infatuations about your...womanliness...that others here might feel.”

“What is the token?” Nwm asked insistently, half to Mostin and half to Despina. The Lady did not answer.

“It is magical, with some kind of abjuration dweomer. It will take me some time to procure the items necessary for the proper analysis of this object,” Mostin explained grumpily, “although I may make a cursory inspection tomorrow. In any case, it must wait. ‘Lady Despina’ – if that is your preferred name

– we are about to subject you to an arduous series of tests in order to gauge your motivations and your true nature. Do you comply?”

“No, please,” the maiden began.

“I should rephrase that,” Mostin interrupted. “If you wish to remain here, you WILL comply, do you understand?”

Despina nodded quietly.

“Furthermore, you will voluntarily relinquish your natural demonic resistance to such methods of enquiry.”

Despina gave an astonished look, but agreed nonetheless. “I don’t trust any one of you, except you, Eadric.” The handmaiden looked imploringly at the Paladin. “You must make assurances that no harm comes to me, or I will hold you and your God responsible.”

Eadric coughed, looked embarrassed, and dumbly nodded.

An hour later, tired and hungry, the group gathered in the empty great hall around the dying embers of one of its three large fires. Ortwin reclined on a soft chair of leather and sipped from an oversized goblet of firewine.

They had discerned lies, detected evil, chaos, thoughts and magic. Mostin had used true seeing to

determine whether any other influence was present.

He was mentally exhausted, but satisfied.

“She is less evil than one would have anticipated for a demon,” he remarked, “and it seems plausible that her reluctance to surrender the amulet was due to a fear that the taint was still wholly on her, and would be revealed.”

“I still don’t buy it,” Ortwin remarked. “It’s too convenient. We’ve probably missed something, or overlooked a niggling detail. Still, she revealed her knowledge of Rurunoth, and gave us some pointers in that direction. But we’re still in the dark about the accuracy of your communication with Oronthon.”

“Tomorrow,” Eadric sighed, “we’ll go to the temple, and seek advice from the archbishop. His retreat should be over by now. And Despina is secure, I believe. But I can’t hold her for ever under

ecclesiastical law, and the Duchess is bound to ask questions.”

“‘IT’,” said Mostin, “not ‘her’ – ‘it’”

In the uppermost room of the ramshackle tower of owls, the door to which was guarded by Eadric’s

squire, Tatterbrand, Lady Despina sat on a soft bed within the magic circle which had been inscribed on the floor by Mostin.

“Why not sit down, Tatterbrand?” She asked politely. “Perhaps you could tell me a story...”

originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 04-20-2002

So, this is the second half of the post that I would have made yesterday if I’d had time to check it for typos etc. Inevitably, there is some gloss on my part, but the melodrama/humour mix is pretty accurate

- remember this was a couple of months ago, and I don’t keep game records THAT accurately.

I clearly remember the terms “anally fixated” “apotheosis” and “toadies” being used by Danny (Mostin)

however...

IC:

In the balmy midday sun, Eadric stood next to his celestial steed and companion, Contundor. The

Paladin was arrayed in full battle gear and waited anxiously for the others to arrive, pacing restlessly to and fro. The Duchess of Trempa sat upon a bier surrounded by guards and attended by her maidens –

from whom the Lady Despina was notably absent. She mused about events of the previous night, and

Eadric was deliberately evasive when questioned about her strange nocturnal experiences.

“I’m sure that Mostin could uncover the truth,” he assured her, “although, regrettably I need him with me today. We are going to Morne. If all goes well, we will return within the day, and I can inform you of the developments which we have uncovered.”

“And the Lady Despina? Must you confine her so? Surely she cannot be involved in these strange goings-on. Her credentials are impeccable.”

Eadric grimaced.

Ortwin of Jiuhu arrived, dressed in his tattiest travelling clothes and wearing his studded jerkin – an item for which he had been roundly criticized for wearing around court in the past. “Peasant’s attire,” as the Duchess had kindly put it. No love was lost between the two, and now the Duchess eyed him

suspiciously, and tried to place him within the scheme of the last night’s “visions” – or whatever they had been. Ortwin nursed a hangover. As usual, the firewine of the previous night had not agreed with him. He shaded his eyes from the sun, located the Duchess in his view, and gave a dramatic and grossly exaggerated bow – an act which he knew would annoy her.

Nwm and, eventually, Mostin arrived. Nwm was still upset because he had been told that his bear,

Tostig, could not travel with them. He had argued that the bear would be more use than the Paladin’s horse in a pinch, although he had to concede that its effects on the archbishop’s orangery – disastrous when Tostig had last visited the Archiepiscopal Palace some months before – were better avoided given the sensitive nature of their mission.

Mostin was dressed in dapper, fashionable clothes with his hat tilted rakishly to one side. His swagger would have been more convincing had those present not noticed his tendency to count as he walked,





carefully avoiding the gaps between the flagstones of the courtyard. Somewhat surprised, Eadric

noticed the rapier hanging from Mostin's belt.

"I didn't know that you could use a rapier, Mostin," he inquired openly.

Mostin looked slightly sheepish, but didn't say anything.

The Duchess, Ortwin knew from long experience, was about to give a lengthy and tedious speech about quests and uncovering the truth. The bard swallowed hard and wondered why they couldn't have just

slipped away discreetly. Unfortunately, this was never the case with Eadric. Standing above the Paladin as he knelt on one knee, Trilgar, the aging and pompous chaplain, sprinkled Eadric with holy water and incanted various prayers and supplications. Eadric then kissed the ringed hand of the Duchess – his land-holding overlord - and received her blessing. So much feudal bull

, Ortwin muttered to

himself.

After the predictable oratory delivered by the Duchess, the group prepared to depart. They would be wind-walking again – much to the excitement of Mostin who had never before experienced that mode

of travel. The Alienist's own suggestion – that the others, including Eadric's horse – climb into his portable hole while he teleported, had been greeted sceptically by both the Paladin and the Bard. Nwm now quickly touched the others, and they dissolved into mist.

As they left, an incredulous look passed across the face of the Duchess, as she recalled the events of the previous night.

Waiting in the nave of the fane, Eadric looked around nervously. They had been kept waiting for two hours already. The temple guards – dour and unmoving - stood in silent vigil near the exits and around the high altar. Ortwin slouched across one of the pews in an irreverent posture, idly passing a silver coin between his fingers as he gazed around at the sumptuous trappings of organized churchdom.

Mostin, stroking his hedgehog, muttered inaudibly to himself. Nwm sat stiffly and uncomfortably, and wondered why they had not been received in the Orangery, which was much more to his liking.

Eventually, the High Prelate – Cynric of Morne - accompanied by six paladins dressed in white and

bearing ceremonial maces, and a collection of lesser priests and functionaries, took his place on the archiepiscopal throne beneath the vast emblem of Oronthon – an eagle rearing defiantly upon a golden solar orb. He was old – near eighty now – and his face betrayed a great strain. His usually benign

expression was instead stern and judgemental, a sign which made Eadric's stomach sink.

Ortwin coughed, and flicked the silver piece into the collection box, where it landed with a “plunk.”

After fixing each of the group members in turn with his clear, ice blue eyes, Cynric eventually spoke, his voice a hoarse whisper. Although age had taken its toll on his body, the archbishop’s spirit shone through like an incandescent beacon. Here was the vicar of Oronthon on Earth, one who had spent so long in the divine presence that he seemed a virtual demigod. Like those who had gone before him,

Cynric would not die, but undergo a divine assumption and be transported bodily to heaven where he would bask eternally in the light radiated from his deity. Or that was the popular conception, at least.

Nwm seemed unimpressed.

The Archbishop’s first words, therefore, came as something of a surprise – both to Eadric and the

assembled priests.

“Not everything has been revealed to me,” he said. He paused briefly, and then continued.

“Do you believe the creature?” He asked Eadric directly, his eyes burning into the Paladin.

“I’m not sure, holiness” Eadric replied honestly, “although I prefer to give her the benefit of the doubt.”

“Are you swayed by unchaste thoughts?”

“That is entirely possible, holiness,” Eadric admitted.

Cynric remained silent for a while before he spoke again. “You have committed a number of minor infractions already, in order to pursue this possibility. Am I correct?”

“Yes, holiness,” Eadric said guiltily, “I felt that circumstances warranted it. I felt that there must come a point where dogma must give way to an inner prompting.”

Ortwin grinned broadly.

Cynric suddenly became intense. “Be very careful, Eadric, that is the path to heresy. Do not think that your vision is deeper or clearer than mine: this is why we have the LAW. If you abide by it – both in letter and spirit - you are exonerated of personal responsibility, and the blame – if there is any – falls upon me. Do you understand?”

Nwm opened his mouth, about to point out the logical fallacy in that last statement, but thought better of it.

“Yes, holiness,” Eadric replied, “but you were not available. You were in retreat.”

Cynric gave an ironic smile. “Regrettably, that is so. As I say, not all things are revealed to me.”

There was a long, difficult silence before Eadric finally plucked up the courage to speak.



“Holiness, because you were not available, I acquiesced to Mostin the Metagnostic’s suggestion that he act as mediator between Lord Oronthon and myself.”

The admission brought mutterings and sharp intakes of breath from numerous members of the

assembled clergy. Mostin's head rose up at the mention of his name.

"I trust that Lord Oronthon gave you sound advice?" Cynric smiled humourlessly as he looked at Mostin.

Mostin bristled momentarily, and then erupted. [His gist of his diatribe, IIRC, went something roughly like this

"I admit to no superior anywhere within the cosmos - least of all your patriarchal, anally fixated god.

My apotheosis is assured. I will transcend all limits observed by petty religion, and expand until my consciousness embraces the totality of possible existences. However, I admit that my perfection is still some distance away, and I may have erred in my communication with the entity which you worship.

The truth is still unknown to me. In any case, I don't subscribe to your dogma, so I'd be grateful if you didn't use the same condescending tone with me that you do with your toadies."

"Right on, Mostin," Nwm chimed in.

Ortwin laughed uncontrollably.

After their forcible ejection from the fane by the temple guards, Mostin, Nwm and Ortwin stood in the courtyard. The Druid plucked an apple from a nearby tree and munched on it.

Mostin had calmed down. "Er, I didn't go too far did I?"

"Not at all," Nwm assured him, "the old fart needs taking down a peg or two from time to time. He should adopt a more ecumenical perspective."

Cynric, Archbishop of Morne, sat informally in a small cloistered room with Eadric. The lesser clerics had been discharged, and although Eadric was no less nervous than before, at least the gossiping of the temple functionaries was stayed. After apologizing for the conduct of his friends, Eadric earnestly beseeched the Archbishop for guidance.

Cynric shook his head. "The Curia is divided, Eadric. All of the Venerable Masters know of the current situation – I have not kept it secret from them. I hold the final say, but there are temporal as well as spiritual considerations. When I finally depart, I must assure the continuity of tradition."

"Lord Oronthon has been unforthcoming," the Archbishop continued. "Since the crisis began – revealed

to me in a visitation by Rintrah* - our God has been unresponsive. He simply refuses to reply to my questions, and all of my queries have been answered by Urthoon.** I suspect that I am being tested as much as you are."

"Er, what exactly are you saying, holiness?"

"That, in all conscience, I can neither approve nor condemn any course of action that you choose to take. I am not anathematizing you, but you must realize that my hands are tied.

Certainty is denied me, therefore I can give you no help in this matter. You are correct when you speak of inner promptings –

not that I'd say it in front of those others: after all, it IS the road to heresy, at least among the unenlightened."

Eadric's mind reeled in a succession of radical paradigm shifts as he tried to grasp the importance of what his confessor had told him.

"Holiness, Mostin spoke of virtue, and that it must be regained. What did he mean?" Eadric asked.

"Do not trust the alienist's certainty. He has spent too long in dealing with things that shouldn't be dealt with. He is quite mad."

"But can you think of a better place to start?"

Cynric shook his head and admitted that he couldn't.

As the Paladin turned to leave, Cynric spoke to him once more. "Eadric, you realize that you may not come here again until this is resolved, either one way or the other. You will return either victorious or humiliated."

Eadric nodded dumbly.

"So what did the old geezer say?" Ortwin asked as Eadric mounted Contundor.

"I'm on my own." The Paladin responded.

"Existential truth, man," said Nwm, grinning.

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*Rintrah is a Planetar in Oronthon's host. He is responsible for mortal revelations.

**Another Planetar...

originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 04-23-2002

Quote:

As that as far as the story has gone so far sepulchrave? How long ago did your party role play this?

No, indeed. One of the reasons that I was reluctant to begin posting again, was because things

were happening in-game much faster than I could post them on the boards. All of the events

recounted so far were in the first three or four sessions. I was making notes, intending at some

stage to compile them, but never seemed to have time.

This next post - a fairly crucial one in terms of the direction that the party decided to take - relates to two sessions early in the new year. The story arc wasn't completed until half

way

through March. At the END of this post, I guess that things are about one quarter resolved...

Soooo...

Before returning to the court of the Duchess, at Trempa, the group decided to pay a brief visit to Eadric's own fief.

Deorham – which consisted of around ten thousand acres of prime arable land centered on the

village of the same name – was some thirty miles from the Ducal seat, and abutted the main

highway from Trempa to Morne. Like most of eastern Wyre, Deorham was characterized by

rolling green hills and pastures, copses of oak, elm and beech trees, and numerous small, sandy

streams. When Nwm was present – which was frequently - the Druid generally ensured that the

weather was fine, and that it only rained at night. Hence, much to the envy of his aristocratic

neighbours, Eadric grew vines that bore huge grapes, and had produced several notable vintages.

A mile from the village of Deorham, perched upon an outcrop of granite, was the castle known as Kyrtil's Burgh. It was an odd, ramshackle collection of buildings half covered with ivy and

surrounded by a decrepit stone curtain wall which Eadric – spending much of his time adventuring – had never quite gotten around to repairing. Kyrtil's Burgh boasted a single tower

(known simply as "The Steeple") which rose from the precipitous northern flank of the hill. It teetered improbably above the cliff, but had successfully withstood assault from both the weather

and – only several years previously – a large gang of irate Hill Giants.

It was late evening by the time that Eadric, Mostin, Ortwin and Nwm arrived at the castle, ate a

relaxed meal, and retired to the roof of the Steeple to discuss their next move. Once, two ballistae had been mounted there, but Nwm had long since shaped them with his magic into a gazebo,

pointing out that whatever enemies Eadric made at this stage of his career, they were unlikely to

be cowed by a pair of large crossbows.

The conversation rapidly became very intense.

Mostin had had an idea.

“Have you ever heard of Goetic magic?” The alienist asked. He was greeted by blank stares from Eadric and Nwm. Ortwin raised an eyebrow as an obscure memory rose to the surface of his

mind, but said nothing.

“Okay,” Mostin went on. “Say, hypothetically, I killed a horde of ghouls by throwing a ‘Fireball’

at them, would you say that that is a good act?”

“I already don’t like where this is going,” Eadric replied.

“Well,” said Mostin, irritably, “would you or not?”

“I suppose so,” Eadric sighed.

“Say, then, Nwm killed the same horde of Ghouls by using a ‘Sunbeam’ – would you say that is a BETTER act?”

“That much is certain,” Eadric said. Ortwin snidely pointed out that Oronthon was a solar deity.

“How about,” said Mostin, “if I used the spell ‘Destruction’ to achieve the same end – not that I have a Necromantic repertoire, mind you – but just suppose that I did.”

“If this is designed to be a test to determine whether I support the principle of the end justifying the means, you’re wasting your time,” Eadric said rather stuffily.

“But you do admit that a spectrum of grey exists between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ acts,” Mostin continued.

“Of course,” snapped Eadric, “I’m not that naive.”

“You’re wasting your time, Mostin,” said Nwm, “we’ve covered this ground a thousand times before. Just give up now and accept the pompous ass for who he is.”

Mostin was undeterred. “Do you concede that the MOTIVATION behind the act is an important

factor in determining whether its good or bad?”

“ONE factor, yes,” Eadric agreed.

“But the difference now,” Mostin said, slyly, “is that you are on your own – as you yourself said.

You do not have the church to fall back on. They’ve washed their hands of you. They’ve said ‘Er,

we don’t know what to do. We don’t HAVE any rules for this. Bye-bye!’”

“It’s not quite that simple,” Eadric said, patiently, “but I don’t expect you to understand.”

“But the fact remains,” Mostin pushed further, “that it is you who have to make the

judgement call now. You cannot go to Cynric and ask ‘can I do this?’ or ‘should I do that?’ You are now your own moral and ethical centre.”

“Temporarily, at least,” the Paladin conceded, “but I also have centuries of writings by the Church’s theologians to fall back upon. The doctrines that I adhere to do not exist in a vacuum,

but are the product of many years of considered thought and prayer by holy men. I can turn to the

scriptures to find my inspiration.”

Ortwin laughed. “There is always dogma, Mostin. Don’t underestimate it. You should see his

library here. Hundreds of volumes written by the most tedious and exasperating philosophers,

mystics and venerable grandees you have ever seen.”

“I should very much like that,” Mostin said unexpectedly, “perhaps we could go now, and find what your Church has to say about Goetic magic.”

The library, which consisted mainly of religious discourses, occupied around half of the second

floor in the main bailey. Numerous scrolls, papers and dusty tomes cluttered the shelves or lay

piled upon tables and desks. The place smelled damp and musty. Like the rest of Kyrtil’s Burgh,

it was rather neglected. Mostin tutted condescendingly and, five minutes later, although the

clutter and confusion remained, the alienist had cleaned the room thoroughly by means of a

cantrip or two and gathered all of the dust into a neat pile in one corner.

After around an hour of searching through the more general theological works in the library,

Nwm eventually found a reference to a treatise called “The Ethical Use of Arcane Magic: an

Oronthonian’s Guide,” written two hundred years previously by a deacon called Rhodin of Iua.

Rhodin had been an obscure functionary during the time of the Archbishop Brord, and had displayed some talent as a wizard before his conversion.

Eadric was unsure as to whether he possessed the volume, but a surprisingly brief search produced it. Opening its cracked, leatherbound pages, Mostin seemed delighted to find

that it

contained a whole chapter on Goetic magic – although the tenor of Rhodin’s opinions left him

rather disappointed.

“Beware the temptations of Goetia,” it began, “for those who would use diabolism to achieve their foul ends, our Lord has no mercy. Pain and suffering immeasurable shall be their lot, as

their souls are condemned to the pit. There they will immersed in great lakes of boiling lead,

until the last days.”

Rhodin’s discourse continued in a similar flowery and rhetorical vein for several pages, admonishing the true Oronthonian against using dark magics and citing numerous (more reputable) theologians to back up his point. Further into the chapter, beneath a stylized plate of a wizard fleeing from a horned demon, Rhodin finally addressed the nature of Goetic magic.

“What is Goetia, you may ask? It is the greatest peril. It is dealing with fiends to achieve your ends, and claiming that your ends are good. Only the purest and most stalwart of souls may

endure such vileness without the taint falling upon them. Are you one of these? I doubt it.”

Several magical diagrams followed, accompanied by descriptions of summoning rituals.

“So what exactly is your point, Mostin?” Eadric asked apprehensively.

“Consider,” replied Mostin, “that we have a succubus – a demoness – confined within a thaumaturgical diagram, dimensionally anchored, and locked in a tower fifty miles from here.

Consider also that our ends are ostensibly good. Would you not say that we are
ALREADY

practicing Goetic magic?”

“Hmm,” grunted Eadric.

“He’s got a good point,” Ortwin agreed, “although I’m not sure what he’s getting at, either.”

“So you’re saying I’m going to boil in a lake of lead when my final Judgement is passed?” Eadric asked.

“Not at all,” Mostin replied. “Read the words: ‘...for those who would use diabolism to achieve

their foul ends...’ I would argue that our ends are not foul, and therefore the stipulation does not apply to us. Not that I’d give this crank much credence, anyway.”

Eadric banged his head with his fist. “Then why are we even reading this if you think that

this Rhodin is a crank,” he shouted.

“Because he is one of yours. An Oronthon worshipper. His opinions should matter to YOU, if not to me.”

Ortwin laughed loudly. “He’s got you there. Besides, if you’re ‘stalwart’ and ‘pure’ then it’s no problem. And, of all the people I know, you possess these two regrettable qualities in the largest measure.”

“Why thank-you, Ortwin,” Eadric said, drily, “that’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me.” He paused. “So what exactly IS your point, Mostin?”

The Alienist drew himself up dramatically to deliver his big idea. “As we are now fellow Goetians – those who deal with fiends to achieve honourable ends – my recommendation is simple. We summon Rurunoth, trap him in a pentacle, and force him to spill the beans.”

Eadric groaned. “You really are nuts, aren’t you?”

“Quite,” said Mostin, “but that’s not the issue here. Think about it: you have no support from your Church, and have no way of determining what the official line would be in this matter.”

“I know that they wouldn’t be too keen on THIS idea,” Eadric pointed out.

“Maybe,” said Mostin, “but here are the facts. One: we have a succubus, who may genuinely seek redemption, to consider. Two: her master (or former master) is Graz’zt, one of the most feared of

the Abyssal princes, and one whose designs you have slighted in the past. Three: the Balor Rurunoth is somehow involved in this plot, and acted as the go-between, conveying Graz’zt’s

orders to Despina, and maybe playing the role of enforcer. I believe we can coerce him to reveal

the larger machinations behind the current situation - I would guess that he is close in his Master’s counsels.” Mostin paused for a while before he continued.

“Four: Rurunoth is a powerful foe in his own right. He is responsible for causing blood to erupt from the font in the Duchess’s chapel, trees to wilt and people to fall ill. He deserves to be taught a lesson. And to entrap or foil him WOULD be a good act, and would give a few thousand

damned souls a brief respite from their allotment of eternal pain and suffering. Five: it is within my power to accomplish this act with the minimum of risk – after all, I am one of the most

renowned spellcasters of the northern world, and dealing with extraplanar creatures is my particular speciality. And, lastly, and most importantly, Six: if something DOES go wrong, we

can take him.”

“You think so?” Nwm asked, dubiously, “demons are tricky. Big fiery demons are very tricky.

I’m not so sure.”

“I certainly don’t like it,” Eadric said. “I’m no authority in these matters, but it doesn’t strike me as the best course of action.”

“I think it’s a great idea,” said Ortwin, “when can we start?”

“No time like the present,” replied Mostin.

“NOT IN MY HOUSE!” Eadric had demanded, so Mostin had erected his portable manse – a

charming, rustic villa - in a small glade in the woods, several furlongs from the castle walls. The Paladin’s eventual agreement to the summoning was due in large part to the fact that, whether

Eadric was present or not, Mostin and Ortwin had determined to go through with it. Somehow,

Mostin had touched Ortwin’s biggest weakness – a sense of absurd braggadocio – and the Bard

was instantly swayed by the potential kudos that such an act might bestow upon him. Eadric

already had visions of Ortwin, drunk and leaning on a bar, recounting his exploits to an enrapt audience.

While Mostin spent three hours inscribing a magical diagram in minute detail upon the floor of

his cellar, Eadric prayed fervently to Oronthon for guidance, and Nwm meditated beneath a

nearby birch tree. Ortwin decided to drink a glass of firewine, and then had a brief nap in one of Mostin’s six comfortable bedrooms.

It was past midnight before the diagram was complete. Mostin explained the procedure. Ortwin

noticed the deranged look in the Alienist’s eyes as he spoke, and felt somewhat uncomfortable.

Oh hell, he thought, its too late to back out now.

“First,” intoned Mostin, “we’ll need to invoke LOTS of spells upon ourselves – just as a precaution, of course – before I begin the summoning proper. So what do we have in our respective armamentaria?”

“Three ‘Barkskins,’ a ‘Death Ward’ and a ‘Protection from Elements,’” said Nwm. “I’ve got no

offensive spells that would even touch a Balor – if I'd known we were going to be doing anything like this, I'd have spared the Windwalking, gone with your Portable Hole suggestion,

and prepped a couple of 'Sunbeams.'”

Mostin sighed. “How about you, Eadric?”

“Er. ‘Bless,’ ‘Prayer,’ ‘Shield Other,’ ‘Magic Circle Against Evil’ and ‘Holy Sword’”

“Excellent,” said Mostin, “I trust that, as I requested, you brought another bastard sword from your armoury?”

“Yes,” replied Eadric, “although...”

“Good,” interrupted Mostin, “you see, I need your own sword – Lukarn – for the ritual. It will be the first and most effective line of defense if things go awry”

“This is getting worse by the minute,” said Eadric.

“Ortwin?” Mostin inquired.

“Oh, you know,” said the Bard. “This and that.”

Mostin stared hard.

“‘Cat’s Grace?’” Ortwin offered.

“I suppose every little helps,” said Mostin, condescendingly.

“Just get your ego under control,” complained Nwm, “you’re wearing me out.”

Mostin ignored the jibe.

Buffed as well as time and circumstances would allow, the alienist began incanting. Mostin

placed Lukarn, a vial of holy water and a small solar disc upon the ground next to him and gestured.

A ray of green light shot from his outstretched palm and infused the silver tracery upon the ground with an eerie glow. The trap was anchored. The alienist began to chant.

Time dilated for those present, as Mostin’s form seemed to pulse with arcane power. Here was

the certainty that the Archbishop had warned Eadric about, and Eadric mused in a half dream

state what “Metagnostic” meant. Was it “Meta-Gnostic,” or “Met-Agnostic?” Did such distinctions matter, the Paladin wondered as the pressure in his psyche grew. Mostin probably

didn’t care.

The Alienist moved his arm and spoke a series of loud syllables. Candles sputtered, and rising

from nowhere, an arcane wind seemed to tear at the very souls of those present.

Nwm nodded, and Eadric invoked a prayer. A circle of hope blossomed around him, emanating

from an old and unremarkable sword.

Mostin the Metagnostic spoke a single word which echoed across the worlds. It was a command which penetrated the deepest reaches of an alien realm, a place where no sanity had ever existed.

“RURUNOTH!”

In the Abyss, something stirred.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 04-24-2002

Here we go again.

Of course, the last scene in this post was unknown to the players. It's my own, vague interpretation of events in the Abyss. I thought I'd throw it in for fun.

A roar reminiscent of a cataract filled the cellar of Mostin's comfortable retreat. Within the diagram, black fire shot forth in columns, merely to dissipate against a barrier which was visible only in relief – it flickered like a void against the shadows beyond it.

Ortwin looked at Mostin, and saw fear in the Alienist's eyes. “What the...,” the Bard began.

“WAIT!” Mostin commanded. “He is trying to escape.”

The convulsions within the pentacle lasted only a few moments, before they abruptly ceased.

They were replaced by a perfect hemisphere of silent, impenetrable darkness.

Mostin was shaking, but tried to look relaxed. “We're safe,” he said.

“So where is he?” Eadric asked uncertainly. “In there?”

“Oh yes!” Mostin replied, recovering some of his cockiness. “He's in there all right. It would seem that he's reluctant to reveal himself, however.” The Alienist turned towards the blackness.

“Are you feeling shy, Rurunoth?”

Silence.

“He's not very talkative, is he?” Ortwin offered.

Silence.

“This is freaking me out,” moaned Nwm. “He's safe, right? Let's go upstairs for a while. I need a drink.”

“For once, I agree,” said Eadric.

Eadric threw off his armour, and the quartet sat silently for a while in Mostin's small but comfortable drawing room. Nwm was the first to speak.

"If I remember aright, we've got 24 hours to put an offer on the table. Correct, Mostin?"

The Alienist nodded. "If we choose to make an offer. And every day we hold him, we can renew

our offer, but he has a chance of breaking free."

"How big a chance?" Ortwin inquired.

"By my calculations, the odds are only very slightly in our favour."

Eadric groaned. "I thought this would involve a 'minimum risk.' It's starting to sound even worse than I'd feared."

"There are other options." Mostin ventured.

"Go on," sighed the Paladin.

"We can kill him," said Mostin, flatly.

"Assuming we CAN, what good will that do?" Ortwin snapped. "We'll gain no information, and incur his undying enmity – although we've probably earned that already. He'll merely reform in the Abyss."

"I suggest this course of action only in extremis – for example, if the trap fails and no bargain has been struck. But you are wrong. Rurunoth has been CALLED, not summoned. The distinction is

subtle, but important. He is here, fully. If he is slain, he is destroyed. Forever."

"That would be cutting Graz'zt's right hand off," Eadric said. "It is tempting."

"Not really," Mostin smiled.

Eadric shot a quizzical look towards the Alienist.

"Prince Graz'zt is served by six Balors, of whom Rurunoth is one," Mostin explained.

"SIX?" Repeated Nwm. "Sh*t. Why didn't you mention that already?"

"I didn't think it was important," said Mostin blandly. "I could also tell you the military dispositions and allegiances of every Duke of Hell, and the names of a hundred Seraphs, Thrones

and Virtues in Oronthon's host – which is probably more than Eadric here could – but it's simply not relevant."

"Get back to the point, Mostin," Ortwin interrupted. "What other options do we have?"

"I can trap his soul permanently – or attempt to do so. The chances for this are fairly high, as we know his name. If I can get hold of a certain buffing spell which I don't currently possess (and

have been meaning to acquire for some time), the odds will increase further in our favour.”

“But we need information,” Ortwin reminded the Alienist. “Rurunoth is no good to us if we can’t communicate with him.”

“True,” Mostin admitted, “but the usual stipulation on the binding spell which now contains him, is one of a kind of ‘reciprocal exchange.’ Normally, the mage offers the bound creature

something that it desires, and requests a service in return. I’m not sure whether his simply divulging information deserves a particularly high price – at least from his point of view. Right

now, he is silently brooding, wondering what our next move will be. He knows who we are, what

motivates us, and how best to reach our innermost needs and desires. His silence is simply his

opening move in our negotiations. And he fears us – as much as or more than we fear him.

Demons are ruled by fear. He has much to lose in this matter, and risks the ire of his master if he acts prematurely and without thought of the consequences. The scales are delicately balanced.”

“So what exactly ARE you suggesting, Mostin?” Eadric asked.

“That we open a dialogue, and that our foremost communicator should attempt to sway him,”

replied the Alienist.

“SWAY him?” Nwm asked, incredulously.

Mostin was exasperated. “Get a grip! Rurunoth is not a god! Nor is he a foe beyond our combined resources. He is ancient, cunning and formidable, yes. A fiend of great power. But he

is flawed: a slave to greed, lust, and the desire for dominion. Trust me. It is why celestials are MUCH harder to deal with than demons.”

“Then Eadric should undertake the negotiations,” Nwm said. “He is the foremost diplomat amongst us, and less likely to be swayed by subtleties which the demon can offer.”

Eadric nodded, resigned to the task.

“No,” said Ortwin. “I’ll go, for precisely the opposite reason. Of all of us present, I’m closest to the daemonic in perspective. I’m vain, lustful, self-centered and arrogant.” The Bard grinned

broadly. “I am also the best liar in the world.”

“That,” agreed Eadric, “may very well be true.” The Paladin sighed. “Thank-you, Ortwin.”

None of the group slept easily that night, and Mostin lamented the fact that he hadn’t

prepared

‘Mordenkainen’s Magnificent Mansion.’ An extradimensional pocket would have given them all

the feeling of security which was sorely needed. He’d had a fiend or two in his cellar before, of

course, not to mention a number of other bizarre extraplanar creatures. But this was something of

a different order.

Before sleeping, poring over his books and looking unhappily at his repertoire, the Alienist knew

that it was time to get hold of some dweomers with some serious firepower, as well as some

utility spells. He knew a mage or two who might be open to a trade, although he had little to offer them in return. He needed a week, at least, to procure, copy and absorb the spells. There were

others, of course, but these struck the Alienist as the most pressing. Mostin made a list.

Fox’s Cunning

Permanency

Iron Body

Wall of Force

Disintegrate

Symbol

Mostin’s eyes glazed over, as a brief vision appeared in his mind of slinging mighty magicks at

powerful outsiders. Ahh, this was what it was about. Mostin stroked Mogus, and the hedgehog

made sympathetic crooning noises.

In measureless halls of iron, shaped aeons before from the primal stuff of cursed and violent

matter, and since sustained by the merest iota of his great, dark Will, Prince Graz’zt fumed.

Damned souls wailed in terror across the abysmal deeps as fires leapt up and acid poured in

unbroken sheets from the swaggering sky, driven by a wind of hate. The Prince’s own lieutenants

and captains feared to approach him, lest they suffer the same fate as the Marilith, Uzmi. She had been too eager to gain his favour, and had misread his mood. For her, death would

have been

kinder.

Not since his own incarceration had Graz'zt been so humiliated. The war with Orcus was quickly

forgotten, and his plots and strategies, which spanned half a thousand worlds, were driven from

his mind. A thirst for vengeance so profound overcame him that his visage contorted in violent

paroxysm.

The bitchling, Nehael, on the verge of some perverse atonement. Rurunoth ensnared. And now

this.

"WHEN?" The question thundered from the Prince.

The Balor called Ainhorr, vast and hoary beyond the measure of even his peers, moved forward

and then abased himself, pressing his pitted forehead to the ground.

"Three days hence, Sire. In a neutral place of your choosing."

Graz'zt's aspect changed dramatically, and his countenance became beatific and serene.

"Ainhorr, you will go to meet the embassy," the Prince spoke softly. "Who are they sending?"

"Enitharmon and Urthoon, Lord," Ainhorr replied.

"Aah," said the Prince. And the briefest look of melancholy passed over his face.

And then Graz'zt laughed lightly. "Take one whom you distrust the least, Ainhorr."

"Sire."

"And see that you observe the correct forms."

"Yes, Lord."

"Do not fail me." His mood was poison again.

Ainhorr bowed deeply, and departed in terror.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 04-28-2002

A post which may seem slightly surreal in places. It should be noticed that the 'Ortwin and the

Balor' exchange revolves around two critical skills: Bluff (Ortwin +24, Rurunoth +18) and Sense

Motive (Rurunoth +20, Ortwin +1). Ortwin just has to hope that the old blarney will prove sufficient.

Mostin's acquisition of the 'Great Shout' spell transpires to be very useful at a later time. Sonic attacks are nasty.

I should mention in passing that Mulissu, a major NPC, is an Evoker 9 / Cleric 1 / Elemental

Savant 10. She's pretty dangerous.

Finally, note that the magic item exchange is fairly typical of my campaign. I never allow such

things to be purchased on the open market, and generally insist that they are either made by the

characters (as time permits), or are exchanged for like items. It tends to effectively limit items in circulation.

Mulissu, as she now preferred to be called, was a witch of considerable power and resources. Her

outright contempt of temporal affairs meant that, excepting a handful of powerful spellcasters,

few denizens of the material world had even heard of her.

Mostin had met her in the guise of 'Theleen' during his peregrinations on the Elemental Plane of

Air, and, mistaking her for a sylph, had unsuccessfully attempted to seduce her. The witch had

casually demonstrated her magical superiority by transforming Mostin into a disembodied head,

which she then placed in a glass jar. Only when the Alienist agreed to perform a task for her – to retrieve a fabulous magical gem from the Xorn King – had Mulissu agreed to his release. The

quest complete, Mostin and Mulissu had parted on less than amicable terms.

Mulissu now abode in a pocket of airy matter, some thirty miles across, which drifted aimlessly

through the Ethereal Plane. Here she conducted her studies in relative seclusion, seeking to

uncover forgotten secrets, and to penetrate the mysteries of wind and lightning.

Mostin had determined to visit the witch in an attempt to procure a number of spells from her.

That she was the possessor of the 'Binding' spell, the Alienist knew: his own captivity at her

hands was testament to that fact. He also knew that her repertoire, although focussed on the

potent triune of evocation, conjuration and transmutation, was both eclectic and extensive. Over a hurried breakfast, during which Ortwin was mentally preparing for a day of intense duplicity, intrigue and temptation in his negotiations with the captive demon in the cellar, Mostin made an announcement.

“I will probably be leaving for a few hours,” the Alienist said, abruptly.

He was greeted by a stunned silence.

“I am going to – hopefully – secure the spell that I spoke of, and perhaps others that will aid us in our endeavours. I aim to be back by noon, although such things often take longer than expected.”

“Er, Mostin,” said Ortwin, “I’d kind of hoped you’d be on hand to help out if things got... messy.”

“There is no risk until after midnight tonight – when the sun is at the nadir, then Rurunoth may make another bid for freedom. Hopefully, you and he will have reached some kind of understanding by that time. In any case, I intend to be back long before then. We should plan on

discussing how to proceed over lunch.”

“Gods, Mostin,” said Nwm, “You make this sound like some kind of tea party. Where are you going, anyway?”

“The Deep Ethereal,” the Alienist replied, turning to leave. “And Ortwin,” he added, “I know that I probably don’t need to tell you this but, under no circumstances whatever, for any reason, break the circle or trespass into it.”

“Thanks for reminding me,” Ortwin replied sarcastically.

In his workroom, after locking the door and magically barring it, Mostin erected a tall mirror –

the fabled Looking Glass of Urm-Nahat – and stood before it, invoking its scrying magic. Mist

filled the mirror for a few moments until, under the force of Mostin’s will, a scene coalesced on

its surface. An island of rock, suspended in the air, upon which was built a castle with delicate

minarets of pearly white, topped with domes of gold and lapis. Mostin enviously wondered

where Mulissu had acquired the resources to build such an extravagant home.

The Alienist’s focus narrowed, scanning chambers separated by intricate wooden screens, courtyards with fountains and exquisite lifelike statues, and finally came to rest beneath a pomegranate tree. Here the witch Mulissu, beautiful, serene, and clad in a sky-blue dress, sat

munching on fruit and writing with a huge quill into a small leatherbound volume. She looked up

briefly with a look of irritation on her face, and gave a swift gesture.

The mirror went blank.

A predictable response, Mostin thought. In fact, the Alienist had been surprised that she was not

already warded. He refocused his mind, and the mists began to clear again. Mostin selected a

spot outside of the castle walls, on a narrow platform of rock in front of the (largely decorative) gate.

Steeling himself for what might be a difficult morning, Mostin stepped through the looking glass

and vanished.

**

Ortwin, fortified by a glass or two of wine from one of Eadric's better vintages, swallowed hard

and descended the steps into the cellar alone. Silently and irreverently praying to half a dozen

assorted deities for some kind of guidance, the Bard mustered as much of his legendary braggadocio as was possible, and blithely swaggered forward.

Rurunoth still had not manifested, but was cocooned within his hemispherical void. Ortwin

marched up, pulled a stool from near one of the wine racks, up-ended it, and sat as close to the

circle as he dared.

"Hello, Rurunoth," he said casually, "you can cut the darkness crap. We both know that things are delicately poised. Unless we can strike a deal pretty soon, I'm afraid that we're going to have to kill you. No big deal: we've fried bigger fish than you before."

Mere inches from the Bard's face, the Balor's head appeared: a huge, fanged, maw with bestial

features framed by a mane of fire. Behind, vast and hulking, wreathed in lurid purple flames, the

winged body, hunched as it was, still towered over Ortwin. The Bard looked into the creature's

eyes – pools of insatiable darkness – and, for the first time, knew that he apprehended true evil.

Rurunoth's whip, seeming to possess a life of its own, coiled and uncoiled within the

circle, fire kindling along its length. The Balor drew its great sword along the floor, causing sparks to jump

forth, before swiftly hefting it and stabbing violently at Ortwin.

The Bard reflexively startled, almost falling off of his stool. Rurunoth laughed – the most vicious sound that Ortwin had ever heard – as his sword failed to penetrate the invisible barrier which

surrounded him.

“Bring another,” the demon commanded in a hoarse whisper. “You are unworthy to deal with

me.”

The darkness returned.

Ortwin sat in silence for a moment, contemplating his next move. The great bluffer that he was,

he was not adept at gauging the purpose behind others’ actions and words. He had always relied

on his ability to force his point without giving his adversaries time to consider or react.

The

demon had seized the initiative back again. If Ortwin did not act swiftly, he knew that he would

lose the battle of wills.

Just keep talking, he told himself.

“If I looked like you, Rurunoth, I daresay that I’d be inclined to swathe myself in darkness as well. I suppose your appearance is an inevitable result of being on the losing side during that

embarrassing rebellion: I mean, what were you before all that nonsense broke out? A Deva? A

Planetary? I’d say that you’re rather diminished in stature now, wouldn’t you? Foul-looking, bad

tempered, no friends. Groveling to another master, who probably treats you a lot worse than your

old one. Perhaps if you atone, like the succubus, you can find your way back up to your former

heavenly abodes. You’ll get your harp back, nice new cloud to sit on. You’ll probably start off

low: you know, a glowing ball of fuzzy light, but after a few eras, you might get a job as a trumpet-blower or, even better, in a celestial choir. Do you like singing, Ruru? You don’t mind if I call you ‘Ruru’ do you? Shall we sing a song together? I’ll start. If you don’t

know the words,

just hum along: you'll pick up the tune in a while.

And Ortwin began to sing. Not a comic ballad or a timeless folksong, at which he excelled, and

which had caused kings to laugh out loud, or to weep with melancholy. Ortwin sang an annoying,

repetitive and facile drinking song, common to the least reputable establishments in his native

Jiuhu.

**

Mostin, after banging on the gate for several minutes, was eventually addressed through an iron

grate by an irritable mephit with a high pitched-voice and sharp, jerking movements of its numinous body.

"Begone," it commanded, shrilly. "You have no business here."

"I am Mostin the Metagnostic," the Alienist announced haughtily, "and I have travelled an immeasurable distance to discuss profound and far-reaching philosophies – far beyond your feeble comprehension – with your esteemed mistress. Kindly relay news of my arrival to her."

"She knows you're here," the mephit chirped, "and bids you farewell."

The grate closed.

Mostin raged silently for a few moments, before mastering himself and calming down. Mulissu

was magically potent and notoriously fickle, and it behooved the Alienist not to vex her.

Although he possessed a dozen different ways to enter the castle, she would utter some terrible

spell upon him if he did so without her permission.

"Kindly inform your mistress that I have items that may aid her in her magical research," Mostin shouted at the gate. "I wish to make exchange to our mutual benefit and satisfaction. I wish only for a few moments of her valuable time." The Alienist cursed silently as he uttered the last words.

An hour passed.

The mephit reappeared at the grate, a look of smug satisfaction upon its face. "You are fortunate," it piped to Mostin, "the Lady Mulissu is enjoying a brief rest from her arduous studies. She will receive you in the glass refectory for a period of seven minutes." At this, the mephit opened a smaller door in the large gate, and gestured for the Alienist to enter.

“Be sure to act with the utmost decorum and propriety,” the creature admonished Mostin as he walked in.

Mostin smiled venomously at the door-ward.

Mulissu reclined upon a long couch, covered in the luxuriant blue fur of some unknown creature,

her arm draped in a carefully considered pose of nonchalance above a large bowl of pomegranates. Above her, several mephits flew in small circles, chattering noisily as they argued

amongst themselves. A large djinni, arms folded across its chest, stood behind the witch in stern

appraisal of the Alienist as he approached and nearby, a distortion in the air marked the presence of an elemental. It was producing a light breeze which wafted through the refectory.

“Greetings, Mulissu,” Mostin said curtly. “Is it your custom to keep guests waiting for an hour at your gate?”

“Only when it is you, Mostin,” the witch replied humourlessly. “What do you want? And why

were you spying on me?”

“I was not spying – had I chosen to do so I would have employed a less conspicuous means. I

was merely finding an anchor for the Looking Glass of Urm-Nahat, prior to making my translation to your realm.” Mostin knew that both mentioning his possession of the mirror, and describing Mulissu’s elemental bubble as a ‘realm’ were likely to make a good impression on the

witch.

“Hmph,” she replied. “You have five minutes left. Get to the point.”

“I wish an exchange. You have an extensive collection of scrolls and devices which I would like to peruse and inspect. I feel my repertoire is in need of some revitalization. I have several unique objects which may be of interest to you, and may aid you in your research.”

“I doubt it,” Mulissu said, although Mostin could tell that her interest was piqued.

Negotiations continued for a further hour, and Mulissu proved a stickler for calculating the exact value of all items concerned. Mostin finally departed without several objects to which he had

more than a passing attachment. His pseudonatural helper – an animated mass of arms and other

appendages – he exchanged for a scroll which bore four potent spells: ‘Great Shout,’ ‘Sympathy,’

‘Mass Manifest’ and the much sought-after ‘Symbol.’ Unexpectedly, his rapier, the Cordwainer’s

Needle - due to its electrical dweomer - aroused the witch’s interest as something of a curio.

Mostin agreed to part with it for less than its technical worth. In its place, the Alienist left with a scarlet and blue Ioun Stone, and a scroll containing three more spells: ‘Permanency’ (about time,

thought Mostin), ‘Fiendform’ and ‘Disintegrate.’

Mulissu seemed wholly unimpressed by Mostin’s Metamorphic Apparatus. “So what?” She

asked. “Why have a gadget to do that? I can use a spell more effectively. It’s worth nothing to me.”

Mostin guessed correctly that the witch was bluffing.

“I will trade it for your Circlet of Blasting, and the ‘Spell Engine’ dweomer,” Mostin offered.

“How absurd, certainly not,” Mulissu insisted.

“In that case, our exchange is complete. I will waste no more of your valuable time.” The Alienist turned to leave.

Mostin left with the circlet, the spell, and a feeling of immense satisfaction.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 04-30-2002

Quote:

.. he traded his hedgehog? how Could he?

Naahhh...the Pseudonatural Helper was a magical gadget invented by Mostin. It had arms,

tentacles etc. and aided the Alienist in his work.

Quote:

flinch or not flinch?

Bluff vs Sense Motive, then Will Save.

Ho, hum. Here we go...

Predictably, the demon Rurunoth did not hum in unison with Ortwin’s songs. The bard’s plan – to

irk the Balor to such an extent that he might in a moment of frenzied anger divulge something of

value to the party – in fact proved to be an effective tactic. Unfortunately, the revelation was lost on Ortwin. He was enjoying baiting the fiend too much to pay proper attention.

“Come on Ruru, don’t be a party-pooper. Sing along! Perhaps you’ve got some old

favourites

that we can sing together?”

The darkness remained unbroken, but the voice of the Balor echoed in Ortwin’s mind.

I WILL STRIP AWAY YOUR BODY AND PEEL YOUR SOUL. YOUR ESSENCE
WILL

EXPERIENCE SUCH UNENDING PAIN THAT YOU WILL BEG FOR RELEASE. DO
YOU

KNOW HOW MANY LAYERS A SOUL POSSESSES, MORTAL?

“Ooh, I don’t think I know that one. Sing the first couple of lines, and I’m sure I’ll pick it
up,

though.” Ortwin retorted.

YOU, AND THE NATURE-PRIEST, AND THE FILTHY PALADIN, AND HIS
ACCURSED

TURNCOAT WHORE. THAT PRETENTIOUS SCOFFING LITTLE WIZARD. I
KNOW YOU

ALL. AND YOU HAVE OVERSTEPPED YOUR POWERS AND UNDERESTIMATED
MINE. SOON YOU WILL ALL BURN.

“You,” sang Ortwin, “and-the-nature-priest...hum...de...dum...”

**

Mostin made two more short journeys that same morning. The first was to visit a wizard
called

Idro, who dwelt deep within the forest of Nizkur which lay to the west of Ortwin’s home
town of

Jiuhu. Idro, an old mage of small powers, had a reputation for pettiness and pedantry. He
lived

comfortably in his secluded tower, where, attended by numerous enchanted creatures, he
still

dreamed of possessing a greater influence beyond bullying the local population of feys.
After his

admission by two charmed Ettins, Mostin struck a deal with the wizard which secured a
number

of minor spells including the “Fox’s Cunning” dweomer – two copies, in fact – as well as
several potions, and three Beads of Force.

Mostin reluctantly surrendered his Unsavoury Oracle – a diminutive magical statue which
cryptically answered questions put to it – in exchange for the items. Despite its flaws, the
Unsavoury Oracle, like the Pseudonatural Helper and the Metamorphic Apparatus, had

been

created by Mostin. The Alienist sadly stroked Mogus as he lamented the loss of his unique and

colourful inventions.

Ahh, well, he thought. There would always be time to make more.

Mostin's final journey – a mundane chore in comparison – was to Morne. There, the bulk of his

considerable monetary resources were exchanged for a single, huge, lusterless black pearl.

Mostin grinned wickedly at the sight of it.

Mogus gave a small, distraught squeak.

**

Lunch, for which Mostin had promised to return, proved to be at four o'clock as a result. The Alienist arrived to find Eadric, Ortwin and Nwm sitting on his terrace discussing the Bard's

experiences with the captive demon, and wondering how to proceed.

"What did you learn?" Mostin asked.

"Very little," Ortwin confessed. "I attempted to goad and rile him into some kind of disclosure, but it proved ineffective. He threatened me repeatedly, and then fell silent again. Even my most

annoying songs failed to elicit any further response from him." The Bard neglected to mention his nearly falling off of the stool.

"We should think about making an offer – if that's how we plan to proceed," said Nwm. "We need to decide what we want, and what he's likely to demand in return."

"We don't want anything, except information," Eadric sighed. "What is his plan? His master's plan? Where is Despina's virtue, if she has any? Is she genuine?"

"He says he's going to burn her, as well," said Ortwin. "We're all going to burn. He's going to peel my soul. You're filthy and Mostin's pretentious."

Eadric raised an eyebrow. "What exactly DID he say, Ortwin?"

So Ortwin repeated the conversation, word for word.

"You dummy," said Mostin. "If he called the succubus a 'Turncoat Whore' what does that suggest to you?"

"He might be bluffing," Nwm pointed out. "There's so much BS flying around these days, that I've really lost the plot."

"He was really mad," said Ortwin.

"He's also a very accomplished liar," Eadric groaned, "and he's had aeons to perfect his art. And you're hardly a paragon of insight, Ortwin, when it comes to reading others' motives."

“But you weren’t there,” the Bard complained. “I was really, really annoying. I could’ve pissed a Solar off. I think if he’d been trying to fool me, he’d have been more subtle about it.”

“Maybe he was being SO subtle, that you mistakenly thought he was being blatant,” Nwm suggested mysteriously.

Eadric put his head in his hands.

“I think it’s time I inquired of Oronthon again,” Mostin announced.

“Er...we still don’t know if it was reliable last time,” Nwm reminded the Alienist. “What makes

you think that another attempt will be any less fallible?”

“Well of course it’s fallible.” Mostin snapped. “I’m not a damn cleric am I? The point is we need some kind of direction. Also, I might point out that the main suspect in the previous casting’s

‘fallibility’ is currently contained in a pentacle in my cellar.”

“Mostin,” Nwm persisted calmly, “we don’t know if other agents of Graz’zt are lurking nearby, and even if they’re not, why should Oronthon be particularly disposed to talk to you? Your

actions so far are hardly likely to have endeared him to you – to any of us, in fact.” Nwm held Eadric in his gaze whilst he spoke.

No,” said the Paladin. “This time I agree with Mostin. I am denied the correct channels through my choices thus far, but I desperately need some kind of guidance. But how about contacting an

intermediary, rather than Lord Oronthon himself? An angel of the host - perhaps Urthoon, who

acts as conduit?”

Mostin sighed in an exasperated fashion. “Angels and demipowers are less reliable. They don’t know the full story, and are more apt to dissemble. Direct communication with the Godhead is

most likely to produce the truth, which, I assume, is what we are still looking for here?”

“Do it,” Eadric commanded.

Had Mostin attempted to reach Urthoon, his attempt would, in fact, have failed. The planetar,

along with his celestial superior and the greatest of Oronthon’s generals – the solar Enitharmon –

had been dispatched on a mission of utmost urgency. Surrounded by a phalanx of devas and

archons, the pair sped across the outer reaches towards their appointed meeting with the

agents of Prince Graz'zt. The rumour of their passing caused essences of less than perfect purity to flee in terror, whilst those few who were worthy were drawn towards the light and basked. In their

wake, the astral mists were suffused by a colourless radiance.

The celestials did not speak with their silver voices, or even converse in thought, one to another.

Their aspects serene and impassive, they moved and acted in consummate harmony. A single

organic Mind, driven by the purpose instilled by the beloved Lord whose spark dwelled in them.

Redemption.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 05-01-2002

Okay, maybe the last update for a while:

Mostin's second attempt to contact Oronthon was also unsuccessful. Unlike his previous effort,

which had been intercepted by Graz'zt, this time the spell did, in fact, reach the presence of the deity.

The Alienist was ignored.

Having temporarily withdrawn direct communication from even his earthly vessel, the Archbishop of Morne, the Shining God seemed disinclined to surreptitiously advise his champion, Eadric, through the dubious medium of Mostin.

As Cynric had pointed out, Eadric was on his own. Perhaps the deity waited patiently for events

to unfold as they would, guided by some prescience which no other possessed. If Eadric was to

experience any communion with Oronthon, either vicariously or directly, then the time was not

now.

Mostin pouted, and contemplated the difficulty involved in devising a spell which would
FORCE

powerful extraplanar creatures to divulge information. His own "Metagnostic Inquiry" came close to the mark, although the replies were couched in such obscure and riddling terms, that they were often worse than useless.

Eadric said little, and seemed to enter a mood of deep depression. It wasn't that events were

beyond his control, but quite the opposite: he had TOO MUCH responsibility, and felt ill-equipped to deal with it. His friends, Ortwin and Nwm, reliable in their own way,

possessed

wildly different perspectives. Mostin he did not completely trust, and still doubted his motives.

And then there was the demon in the cellar.

“I am at a loss,” Eadric sighed. “We cannot contain him in this way indefinitely, and I am loathe to strike a deal with him – in any case, I suspect that any price that he demands would be

unacceptable to us. We can banish him, or attempt to slay him, or – as Mostin suggests – trap him

permanently.” Eadric groaned. “Why did I ever agree to this?”

“You didn’t,” Nwm chimed in. “But Mostin and Ortwin were going to do it anyway. I think both you and I are blameless in this matter.”

“Perhaps your gods are more lenient than mine,” Eadric said.

Nwm nodded, knowing that this was certainly the case.

“This is the wisest course of action,” Mostin said, producing the huge pearl from his pouch. “The gem will contain his essence. And I’m speaking purely in terms of probability here: as soon as I

attempt to use a spell upon Rurunoth, he might force his way from the circle. A ‘Banishment’ is a

relatively high risk dweomer: even if the circle holds, the chance of it working is small. Besides, I haven’t prepared the spell and it would have to wait until tomorrow.”

“How convenient,” said Nwm sarcastically.

Eadric nodded in agreement with the Druid. “Mostin, I might be less suspicious of you if you

weren’t so enthusiastic about all of this.”

Mostin cackled. “Try to understand, that this is what I live for. It is what I’m best at – one of the best that there is, in fact. I’m not carrying all of this religious baggage around, which says ‘This is Permitted’ or, ‘This is Forbidden.’ But I think on balance, I’m quite principled.”

Ortwin nodded. “I don’t think he’s a bad fellow, Ed, just crazy.”

“Very well, Mostin,” said Eadric, his eyes burning into the Alienist. “I will trust you again – and hope you can deliver us from the mess that we’ve created with your help. But be warned, wizard,

if I find that I have been manipulated by you for your own purposes, I will have my vengeance.

Do you understand?”

“Perfectly,” said Mostin, smoothly.

**

Mostin held the great, black pearl in front of the sphere of darkness in the cellar. “Do you know what this is, Rurunoth?” He asked.

Fires leapt up within the void, and crashed against the invisible barrier which contained the demon.

YOU WOULD NOT DARE the voice thundered in the minds of those present. Rurunoth manifested and, drawing himself up to his full height, launched himself against the barrier. It held.

Mostin laughed maniacally. “Now, now Rurunoth,” he chided, “its not your appointed time yet.

You know that.”

Mostin pulled one of the scrolls from his portable hole, and read from it.

His consciousness expanded.

More spells followed. Wards, protections, augmentations. Eadric unsheathed his sunblade, closed

his visor and hefted his shield. He stood opposite Ortwin, with Rurunoth between them, in case

the circle should break and they were forced to engage the demon in combat. The Bard nonchalantly drew his scimitar.

Opposite Mostin, Nwm stood at the fourth cardinal point, anticipating the necessary use of multiple Flame Strikes. His weapons, he knew, were useless against the demon. Instead, the

Druid had summoned a Dire Bear, warded it from the flames, and enchanted its teeth to penetrate

the Balor’s defenses.

Mostin spoke a summoning spell of his own – his most potent – and was flanked by two vast,

cracked figures which seemed to grow from the bare stone of the cellar floor. At first, Nwm took

them for huge elementals, but closer inspection revealed them to be some bizarre parody, drawn

from the insane regions beyond the edge of the cosmos.

Throughout, Rurunoth threatened, and cajoled, and entreated, and pleaded, and finally begged.

YOU MUST MAKE AN OFFER, he screamed.

“Why?” Asked Eadric.

WHAT DO YOU WANT? Terror, now.

“Nothing from you.” The Paladin said. In a moment of clear certainty, the fear fell from Eadric as he looked at the forces arrayed against the demon. There was no way that Rurunoth could prevail

against them, even if the spell failed and the circle broke. The demon would flee, if he had the

chance, or be cut down in a matter of seconds otherwise.

“You are nothing,” said Eadric.

A cloud of Ioun stones buzzing around his head, Mostin spoke three short words in an unknown

language, made an arcane gesture, and held the black pearl aloft.

“Rurunoth,” he said.

There was a wail, and an incandescent light burst briefly from inside of the thaumaturgic diagram, as the demon’s physical form was reduced to ash.

Mostin sighed, and bowed his head for a moment, before dismissing the two pseudonatural

monstrosities that he had conjured.

The pearl bore the faintest trace of an inner glow.

Eadric walked up to Mostin and held out his palm.

“All right, all right,” said the Alienist. “I was going to give it to you anyway.”

**

Its worth noting that I simply overruled the effective use of “Contact Other Plane” - it would’ve been rather inconsistent if i’d allowed it to Mostin but denied it to Cynric.

When Mostin pronounced the “Trap the Soul” spell, his effective Intelligence was 26. The DC vs his spell was 28 (including the +2 DC increase for knowing the demon’s name) AND no SR

applies. Poor old Ruru.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 05-02-2002

Okay, so I can’t resist:

**

The Tower of Owls – the tallest of the nine spires of the Castle of Trempe – lay near the largely

neglected southern wing of the Ducal Palace. The topmost floors had long ago rotted and collapsed to form a single, ruined space, which, exposed to the elements and left

unattended for

three generations, had attracted a number of birds which lent the tower its name.

Below the upper wreck, the tower had eight stories in somewhat more serviceable condition. The

lowest five were used to store various oddments which had, over the years, been accumulated by the duchess and her forebears: old paintings, items of now-unfashionable furniture, rusting

weapons, carpets, faded tapestries and broken toys amongst them. Layers of dust covered everything. It was a standing joke amongst members of the ducal household that, whenever

something had outlived its usefulness, it would be “put in the tower.”

The irony was not lost on the succubus Nehael – otherwise known as Lady Despina – who,

sitting on her couch within the confines of a diagram inscribed by Mostin the Metagnostic, was

firmly anchored to the spot. She had been closeted upon the eighth floor, in a cold, round stone

room, barred from below by an iron door guarded by Eadric’s squire, Tatterbrand. Although

Tatterbrand had made an attempt to make the place comfortable, and constantly reassured Despina that she was confined for her own protection as much that of others, his efforts were

largely wasted on the succubus.

“I am a demoness, Tatterbrand. I am impervious to the elements.”

“Yes lady, of course,” said the squire, continuing to stoke a small fire in the hearth, which produced more smoke than heat.

“I could seduce you very easily, Tatterbrand,” Despina said softly.

“Yes, lady,” Tatterbrand replied, a look of total openness on his face, “I’m sure you could. But I’d really prefer if you didn’t. It would cause all sorts of problems, and I’m sure my master would be very upset.”

Despina sighed. What strange creatures mortals were.

“What would you do, Tatterbrand, if you were in their position?”

The squire laughed. “Lady, that is why I am content to remain a squire and not become a knight.

I have no interest in bearing responsibility or acquiring power. It makes life too complicated.”

“Do you have no goals? No aspirations? No dreams?” The succubus asked.

“No, not really,” Tatterbrand confessed. “To eat, to sleep. To act when appropriate. To do as my master bids.”

“But is there nothing that you desire to possess, to have?”

“Well,” Tatterbrand said, as if about to divulge a great secret, “between you and me, I’ve always wanted to keep bees.”

Despina arched an eyebrow. In terms of exercising dominion, it seemed a rather modest goal.

**

On top of another tower, fifty miles distant – the “Steeple” at Eadric’s Castle of Kyrtil’s Burgh-the Paladin, together with Ortwin, Mostin and Nwm, sat and relaxed, watching the sunset.

“What happens now?” Ortwin asked. “I mean, we have the pearl, but what do we do with it?”

“We should consider that it is still vulnerable to interference – magical or otherwise,” Mostin answered. “We must be cautious.”

“We lock it away, somewhere very safe,” Nwm said. “We ward it with powerful runes, and bury it deep.”

Mostin agreed. “Give me a day or two,” he said wearily. “I need to master the ‘Permanency’ spell, and one other.”

Nwm nodded.

Together, the Druid and the Alienist wrought a series of potent spells to ensure the safety and

security of the pearl which contained the Balor’s essence. With the looking glass of Urm-Nahat,

Mostin scried and located a suitable site: an isolated cyst in the continental bedrock, seismically stable, and sixty miles below even the deepest reaches of the Underdark.

The remote pocket was sealed by a seamless ‘Wall of Stone’ so that even the smallest fissures in

the rock were blocked.

Nwm Hallowed the chamber, and tied it to a Dimensional Anchor cast by Mostin. Now, only the

Alienist and the Druid could use extraplanar travel to access the cyst.

The pearl was placed in a small casket in the centre of the chamber, surrounded by a permanent

Wall of Force. Magic Mouths were placed on the walls, to warn those who might, by some strange fortune, discover the hidden pocket in the rock.

Finally, upon the casket itself, in phosphorous and mercury, Mostin inscribed a Symbol of Insanity.

“I’ve bled my finances dry, and even my life-essence for him now,” Mostin said to Nwm. “He owes me.” He was speaking of Eadric, of course.

The Druid nodded grimly. “He will not forget it,” he said.

“Nor will I,” Mostin replied.

And, even in the Abyss, after long eras, the name of Rurunoth faded into memory and was finally

forgotten.

Mostin decided it was payback time.

“So, technically,” mused Eadric, “if I did remunerate you for every spell that you had cast since your arrival, as well as your time, components and so forth, how much would I owe you

Mostin?”

Mostin produced a small notebook, and made a quick tally.

“Eighty-eight thousand two hundred gold crowns, give or take,” the Alienist announced.

“Holy sh*t,” exclaimed Ortwin, “I’m in the wrong business. Can you cover that, Ed?”

“No,” the Paladin replied, “not unless I sell my lands and castle, and even then, - given the Burgh’s condition - I’m not convinced that would be enough. Fortunately, this is church business

and they should foot some of the bill.”

“SOME of the bill?” Mostin inquired sarcastically.

“They will pay for direct monetary loss, recompense you if you have invested some of your

reservoir of permanent magical energy, and also make a small payment against your time and

efforts. Incidental expenses – for example the clause here,” Eadric pointed, “where you require one thousand eight hundred gold pieces for a ‘magical rapier, undervalued in exchange’ will not

be considered. They assume a degree of philanthropy.”

“Philanthropy,” Mostin repeated slowly, as if hearing the word for the first time.

The revised sum – thirty six thousand five hundred gold crowns – was less to Mostin’s liking,

although he agreed nonetheless. Nothing was more demeaning to a wizard than a bankruptcy

which forced the touting of magical items to all and sundry.

“So should we go to Morne, to arrange for approval?” Mostin asked brightly.

“Oh, no need for that, Mostin,” Eadric replied. “As an inquisitor, I am more than qualified to release the money to you. I’ll just write you a check to draw against the temple funds.”

The Alienist’s mouth dropped open in an expression of disbelief. Here was such an enormous

potential for financial abuse that his mind boggled.

Then again, thought Mostin, that’s probably why he’s the paladin and I’m not.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 05-05-2002

In which the sh*t hits the fan, and the DM muses: “so what would I do if I were a Demon Prince...” and proves that he’s a Rat-Bastard.

**

The same day that Eadric, Ortwin, Nwm and Mostin left the Paladin’s castle at Deorham to

return to Trempa, the celestials Enitharmon and Urthoon met with the Balor Ainhorr and his

nominated second, the Cambion, Feezuu.

Feezuu was a creature of uncertain loyalty – in which regard she differed little from any other

demon – who depended on the Balor for her position and acceptance at Graz’zt’s Abyssal court.

She was, however, regarded with a particular loathing by many of her compeers due to her mixed

parentage – a fact which enabled the half-fiend to move with impunity through regions from

which true demons were barred.* Ainhorr’s election of Feezuu as his co-ambassador was a shrewd move on behalf of the Balor, and sent the message that Graz’zt’s influence in the world

of men was not restricted to the more ‘conventional’ channels.

Enitharmon had been charged with both relaying information of Oronthon’s particular interest in

the plight of the succubus Nehael, and to warn Graz’zt that undue meddling would not be tolerated. If, through the Prince’s intervention, or through the medium of human mages and

demonologists, fiends were invoked onto the Prime plane in an effort to eliminate the demoness

or prevent her possible atonement, then the celestial host would retaliate ‘swiftly and decisively.’

Unfortunately, the presence of Feezuu – half mortal herself – took the sting out of the Solar's

threat, and caused a brief smile to play across the malign aspect of Ainhorr. The Balor did not

respond, save to emphasize the fact that he was there only to hear the embassy and relay news to

his master. He gave no warnings, issued no threats, and, most pointedly, did not mention the

ensnarement of Rurunoth by individuals implicated in the Nehael affair. The Balor's reticence in

this regard only strengthened his position, as Enitharmon had been prepared to counter any

accusations of perfidy and duplicity levelled at his own Lord.

The Solar accurately interpreted the Demon's silence as a bad portent but, uncomprehending of

evil and unable to fathom its reason, could only proceed to restate his appointed message. The

Celestial's eyes bore into Feezuu as he spoke in certain knowledge that, whatever was to transpire, the Half-Fiend would play a crucial role in Graz'zt's machinations.

The speed and ruthlessness of the Cambion's actions, however, may have come even as a surprise to Oronthon himself. Only moments after the embassy was finished, Feezuu contacted

the Prince, made a translation onto the Prime Plane, teleported to Morne, entered the Orangery of

the Palace, and slew the Archbishop Cynric as he was dozing in the afternoon sun.

Cynric did not ascend bodily to heaven, as his predecessors had, but was instead consumed in

necromantic fire.

Graz'zt had acted swiftly and decisively.

**

Upon returning to Trempa, Eadric immediately sought out the Duchess and apologized for the

delay. One day had become two, and then three, as the binding of Rurunoth had taken more time

than he had anticipated. After paying his respects, the quartet immediately repaired to the Tower

of Owls, and Despina was released from her magical bondage.

“I have decided to allow you the benefit of the doubt,” Eadric informed the demoness, “as the evidence – on balance – points towards your sincerity. I am still less than convinced, however. If you mean to follow this course of action, then you must adhere to a regimen of prayer, scriptural

study and earnest soul-searching which Nwm and I will both direct you in. You will avoid the

court, as many of the ladies are garrulous and whimsical – two characteristics which would not

benefit you at the moment. I will arrange lodging for you at the Abbey of Osfrith, half a day’s

ride from here. The nuns will see to your material needs.”

“I have none,” Despina replied.

“Nonetheless, the Abbey will provide a suitable environment for contemplation. You will follow the sisters’ direction in all matters whilst there: you will clean the floors, wash clothes, prepare food, chop wood and perform a variety of other mundane tasks. When you can step across the

threshold of the chapel in the Abbey, we will regard it as a token of your progress. From that

point, you will attend mass and your catechesis will begin in earnest. At no time, under any

circumstances, and for any reason, will you manifest further magical or supernatural powers. If evidence of this comes to light, I will regard it as a sign of your apostasy and my support for you will be withdrawn. Do you comply?”

Despina nodded.

“Good,” Eadric said. “We will depart in the morning.” And the Paladin retired to his chambers.

That same night, Eadric’s dreams were troubled and portentous. Fire raged in his mind as two

eagles soared and screamed at him, before turning on each other and locking claws, plummeting

downwards towards the ground. Black rain fell from lowering clouds, and the sun was obscured.

Pits and chasms opened in the earth. Eadric awoke in a cold sweat, and found that sleep eluded

him for the rest of the night, as he pondered the meaning of the dream.

Just after sunrise, Eadric, Tatterbrand and Despina left Trempa for the Abbey of Osfrith – a

pleasant morning’s ride on a late summer’s day, the dawn mists evaporating quickly under

a

warm sun. They spoke little on the journey: the Paladin was preoccupied with the nightmare that

had visited him, and was steeling himself for what might transpire to be a difficult encounter

with the Abbess.

**

“She is not to attend mass?” The old woman sitting behind a small table in a spartan office looked incredulous at Eadric’s request “Why ever not?”

“The taint lies heavily upon her,” Eadric replied.

“All the more reason that she should receive communion,” the Abbess retorted.

“No,” said the Paladin, “you don’t understand. The taint lies SO heavily upon her, that she cannot physically enter the chapel.”

“Are you possessed, child?” The old woman was aghast. “Perhaps we should call in the exorcist.”

“I don’t think that would be appropriate,” Eadric was about to continue, but decided that pulling rank was easier. “This is Inquisition business,” he said, “and I am afraid that I cannot divulge the particulars of this case. Please try to understand that this is for the best, and is only one part of a much larger picture. She will, in time, attend the chapel. But not for the moment. I am personally undertaking her rehabilitation, but she will live here if you have no objections: I think the

environment would benefit her. I, or my representative, will speak with her at least twice a week,

and we will also speak with you and the other sisters to gain impressions as to her progress and behaviour. Assign the usual tasks to her, as you would to any other lay sister, but excuse her from mass.”

“It is very irregular,” the Abbess sighed, “but very well. She looks like such a sweet thing.”

“Hmm,” Eadric replied.

**

In Morne, the Great Conclave of Venerable Masters was assembled to debate the events of the

previous day, and to decide upon a course of action. Accusations were flung back and forth

between leading Church magnates. What had been hoped by some to be an opportunity to resolve

petty differences in the face of an assault on the body politic of the Church, instead became a

forum through which the various factions attacked each other.

Cynric had elected no successor.

His unnatural death was taken by some as a sign that he had lost Oronthon's blessing.

Others

considered him a martyr to the cause and called for his immediate beatification.

The debate raged for eight hours, and focussed largely around Cynric's decision to allow the

Baronet of Deorham to proceed in his efforts to convert a fiend: a judgement which, at the time,

had been questioned by many but none had dared to refute. Divinations were made, and Oronthon's advice was earnestly sought.

The Bright God declined to answer.

Taking his silence as a sign of displeasure, bitter words were spoken by many present at the

conclave.

By four in the afternoon, a list of charges had been drafted against Eadric which ranged from

minor technical misdemeanors to blasphemy, diabolism and consorting with demons.

And they knew nothing of Rurunoth.

By six in the evening, the Curia passed a measure by seven votes to three that Eadric was to be

impeached as a heretic. There was one abstention: the Bishop of Tyndur failed to endorse the

vote, but fear of repercussions directed towards him meant that he refused to follow his own

convictions.

The next morning, sixteen Templars led by the Deputy Inquisitor General, Tahl the Incorruptible, left Morne for Trempa.

*Most fiends can only enter the Prime Material Plane under special circumstances. They can be

- 1) Invoked through magic or ritual, which allows a sojourn upon the Prime;
- 2) From the Astral Plane, possess certain individuals by means of a 'Magic Jar' or similar ability, or
- 3) They may, with the intervention of their overlord (a Demon Prince, Arch-Devil etc.), visit the

Prime for a particular purpose. This may be a fact-finding mission, an attempted

temptation of a

specified individual, or to create general mayhem. Such an intervention on the part of the fiendish overlord is extremely taxing and represents a large investment in terms of personal

energy, and is generally only undertaken if a modicum of success is assured. The succubus Nehael (Despina), who was appointed to seduce the Paladin Eadric, could only have made her

planar transit with the aid of Prince Graz'zt.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 05-07-2002

Outriders mounted on swift steeds bore the news of Cynric's assassination across Wyre, and it

was on the evening of the same day that the conclave was convening, that tidings reached the

Duchess and her court at Trempa. Eadric and Tatterbrand returned from the Abbey to find a mood

of indignance mixed with deep sadness. The chapel was thronging with mourners – some hysterical with grief.

Eadric said nothing, but retired alone to the Tower of Owls, climbing into the wreck of the uppermost floors, and barring the trapdoor. He wept long and hard, and feelings of guilt flooded

through him. Here, surely, was an attack by the Fiend whose schemes he had thwarted, and who

had sworn to ruin him. Cynric, although conservative and often overly doctrinaire in his approach, had been Eadric's mentor, his confessor and his friend.

Eadric prayed fervently for a sign or portent, or at least an acknowledgement that his supplications did not go unheard.

Oronthon remained characteristically silent. No angels appeared, no omens were shown, and no

quiet inner voice spoke to Eadric. Instead, the sky slowly became overcast, and then began to

drizzle with rain.

The next day was dull, and the air was heavy and oppressive. Mostin was closeted in a suite

within the castle, poring over his new scrolls and consolidating his collection of magicks. Eadric, burdened with grief and remorse, was summoned by the Duchess in order to illuminate her on

the sudden unexpected decision of Lady Despina to retire to the Abbey of Osfrith.

Eadric spent the whole morning with her. He came clean, and told her everything: even down to

Ortwin's illusion, which had caused so much consternation in court.

Her reaction surprised him.

"Eadric, dear, I do wish you'd told me all of this in the beginning. It would have saved a lot of trouble."

"You would have called for Inquisitors from Morne," he replied.

The Duchess sighed. "I most certainly would have not. I would have still called for that ghastly little wizard (she was speaking of Mostin): there are too many followers of the Old Faith* here,

and I have no wish for the eye of the Inquisition to be directed towards Trempa. They are less

tolerant than some."

"I am a deputed Inquisitor myself," Eadric said. "I know where the boundaries lie between ecclesiastical and mundane law. In any case, I needed to speak with Cynric before I made a

decision."

"And what did he tell you?" She asked.

"To use my own best judgement," the Paladin replied.

"In that case, you should regard yourself as absolved from blame in this matter."

"Unfortunately," Eadric replied, "I am less certain of the decisions that I made. The episode with Rurunoth should have been avoided: I suspect that it may have been directly responsible for

Cynric's murder. Lord Oronthon has withdrawn his support from me: he will not communicate

with me, either directly or through any medium available to me. At the last, he failed even to speak with Cynric."

The Duchess became irritable. "Look at my aura, Eadric," she snapped, "what do you see?"

The Paladin concentrated for a moment.

"I see no evidence of taint," he replied.

"But you would, if it were there?" She asked.

"Most assuredly," said Eadric.

"Where does this faculty stem from, Eadric?"

He laughed. She had a good point.

“Go,” she said, “and do whatever you have to do.”

Eadric turned to leave, but not before the Duchess made one final, biting remark.

“Self-pity does not become you, Eadric,” she said.

The Paladin bowed and departed.

**

Eadric and Nwm left Trempa immediately for the Abbey. The Paladin had determined that,

henceforth, not a moment was to be wasted in the instruction of Despina. His decision to involve

the Druid in the process had come only after deep deliberation – Nwm was to act as a moral and

ethical example only, and not attempt to foist any of his ‘weird beliefs’ onto her.

Nwm had happily complied, guessing that, at some stage, he’d have ample opportunity to turn

the demoness on to the trees.

Much to the Druid’s delight, Eadric had agreed to give the succubus her initial lessons in a secluded grove away from the Abbey, largely to avoid the possibility of one of the sisters overhearing their words. Under the bemused stares of nuns, who thronged to the windows of the

cloister in order to witness the spectacle, Eadric, his strange unkempt friend, and the new lay

sister tramped off down the hill and disappeared into the trees.

The Abbess stood in her office looking out. Very irregular, she thought.

Despina sat demurely on a moss-covered rock by a small stream, and Nwm took his boots off

and waded in the water.

“What’s he doing?” Despina asked Eadric in a half-whisper.

“Talking to the fish,” the Paladin sighed.

“Despina,” he began, “you understand the purpose of confession, don’t you?”

“Theoretically, yes,” the demoness replied. “Conscious articulation of past wrongdoings, and the feeling of genuine remorse, is believed to pave the way for Grace to remove their burden. I

understand the principle well.”

“Do you feel remorse for your past sins?” Eadric asked.

“Perhaps,” Despina replied. “I understand that many of my actions were futile.”

“You are well versed in religious philosophy,” Eadric said, “and you understand which actions in your past constitute sins – within the parameters defined by Orthodoxy.”

“Yes.”

“How many sins, at a rough guess, would you say that you have committed?” Eadric asked.

“Hundreds of thousands? Millions?”

“Millions of Billions,” the succubus replied, “if you include every falsehood I’ve ever uttered. I remember all of them.”

“All of them?” Eadric was staggered.

“Oh yes, and that’s only if you include YOUR definition of sin.”

“What do you mean?” The Paladin asked.

“Eadric,” she said sardonically, “this may come as a surprise to you, but the rules governing the behaviour of celestials are somewhat stricter than those to which mortals are expected to adhere.”

Eadric grunted. He looked around for Nwm, but the Druid had become a fish and swum off

downstream.

“So what was your very first sinful act?” He asked.

“Ahh, that would be doubt,” the demoness answered.

“In what?”

“The judgement of Oronthon.”

“Hmm, I see.” This was getting very abstract. “And why did you doubt?”

“I cannot tell you,” she replied.

He scowled. “Why not?”

She shook her head.

He pressed her, but she would not answer, save eventually to say:

“Because you are not ready. Because if you knew, you might fall, as I did.”

**

“Nah, it’s probably a crock,” Ortwin said. The party had reconvened at Trempe. “I still don’t trust her. Don’t get me wrong, I like her and everything, but you can’t expect her to suddenly become

all sweetness and light after aeons of depravity – assuming she is genuine, of course.”

“Doubt is good,” Mostin said unhelpfully. “Doubt everything. Always. Except that which is certain, obviously.”

“Your ‘certainties’ are scary,” Eadric said. “I suppose I’ll just have to try a different tack in

speaking with her. Presently, she seems to think that if I knew what she does, then I would be in

danger of falling from grace. She doesn't seem to understand that I do NOT doubt the judgement

of Oronthon simply because I understand that his perspective is infinitely larger than mine, and

he can foresee all possibilities."

"That is one advantage of being a deity," Nwm agreed laconically. "If you buy into the whole omniscience thing."

"Ha!" Mostin snorted.

Eadric was about to speak, but Ortwin held up his hand.

"Just don't, Ed, okay," the Bard said.

Despite a sadness at his mentor's death that was all too present for Eadric, a relatively relaxed

evening – given the group's recent activities – passed until around ten o'clock. At that time, a

somewhat unanticipated arrival sent things into flux again. A groom, by the name of Irron, who

had rendered Eadric long and faithful service at Kyrtil's Burgh, burst into the Paladin's chambers and breathlessly told his story.

"Your keep has been seized, Lord," he panted. "By the Inquisition. Some are ransacking the library and your personal effects, looking for 'evidence'. They are questioning the servants.

Others are riding hard for Trempa. They will be here by late tomorrow morning."

"Sh*t," said Eadric.

"What should we do?" Ortwin asked.

"It depends who is leading them," Eadric replied.

"Begging your pardon, Lord," Irron interrupted, "but his name is Tahl. Tahl the Incorruptible."

"Sh*t," Eadric said again.

"I assume it's not a routine inquiry," Ortwin said sarcastically. "Will you submit?"

"I must," Eadric replied, "it's the law."

"So I can't blast them, then?" Mostin was disappointed.

*I.e. Nwm's religion, Druidism.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 05-08-2002

So, things were about to get sticky.

This session may have been the best roleplaying experience of my life: Dave played Nwm with

an ingenuity and fervour that I didn't know he was capable of. I bow to you, Dave.

**

Just before noon on the next day, Tahl, together with his retinue of Templars, thundered through

the gates of the castle and into the inner bailey. Their bright armour, polished to a remarkable

sheen, peeked from beneath the unblazoned white surcoats of the Inquisition. Their cloaks were

white, their banner a plain white field, unadorned. Each bore a lance, a burnished shield, and the consecrated weapons of Oronthon: the greatsword, symbolic of cutting through deception, and

the scourge, representing the meting out of their deity's proper justice. Here were great knights

who, foreswearing their estates and taking vows of poverty, had entered the service of the Fane.

Some rode horses with celestial blood running through their veins.

Eadric stood and waited. He had surrendered his arms and armour to Nwm, and Contundor he

had bidden to ride free for a while. He was dressed in comfortable and well-worn travelling

clothes, and bore no weapon.

Ortwin, Mostin and Nwm stood on a balcony overlooking the courtyard.

"Er, they look kind of scary," remarked Ortwin.

"Pah!" Mostin scoffed. "I could take them all out in ten seconds. You ever seen a maximized

fireball? Drop two of those babies on them and they'd soon be toast."

"Better not," said Ortwin, "I think Ed might get mad if you did. He's in enough trouble as it is."

Tahl reigned in, dismounted and removed his great bascinet. He was a handsome man in his late

thirties - a year or two older than Eadric - with a serious expression, but a face that did not seem humourless. He strode up to Eadric, and the two embraced.

"What's going on?" Mostin asked.

"Tahl is Eadric's friend," Nwm replied.

“Then why did he seem so scared last night?”

“Because Tahl is Eadric’s friend,” Nwm sighed.

“Ah,” said Mostin, “that does make things rather awkward, doesn’t it?”

“Who replaced Cynric?” Eadric asked the Inquisitor.

“No successor was appointed,” Tahl replied. “And the conclave is waiting for a sign.”

“You are here to arrest me, I take it?”

“I’m sorry, Ed. You’ve been indicted,” Tahl said sheepishly.

“By whom? Eadric snapped. “I am responsible only to the Archbishop of Morne for my conduct.

I doubt your authority in this.”

“Please don’t make this any harder than it is,” Tahl pleaded. “The Curia voted by seven to three

for your arraignment.”

“How was the vote divided?” Eadric asked, sighing.

“Mord, Gibilrazen, Hethio, Tomur and Thahan voted against you; Kaurban and Jiuhu both backed you. The Inquisition and the Temple both voted for your impeachment, predictably. The

Marquis of Iald supported you. Tyndur abstained.*”

“Tyndur is a coward,” Eadric said.

Tahl merely nodded.

“What are the charges?”

“Four minor breaches of protocol; associating with the known diabolist, Mostin who styles himself ‘Metagnostic’; attempting to commune with Lord Oronthon through witchcraft; consorting with demons; fornicating with demons; secretly conspiring to undermine the One True

Faith; perversion of doctrine; failing to attempt to exorcise or destroy a known fiend; blasphemy; and acting as an accomplice in the murder of Cynric of Morne who, possessing the indwelling

spirit of Oronthon, should be considered God on Earth.”

“Deicide?” Eadric laughed at the absurdity.

“It’s a technicality, Ed,” Tahl grimaced. “I should also mention that, just before we departed

Morne, some financial irregularities came to light.”

Eadric looked bemused.

“A payment of thirty-six thousand five hundred gold pieces to the known diabolist, Mostin the

Metagnostic.” Obviously, Mostin had cashed his check pretty quickly.

Just as well, thought Eadric, as he wouldn’t get the money now.

“This is crap, Tahl,” the Paladin said. “You know that I’m authorized to make that payment.”

“Ed,” Tahl said quietly, so that the other Templars could not overhear, “I’ve seen the itemized

invoice for that payment. ‘Greater Planar Binding?’ ‘Trap the Soul?’ ‘Symbol of Insanity?’ A

pearl valued at 15,000 gold crowns?”

Eadric groaned.

“If I refuse to submit to ecclesiastical law?” The Paladin asked.

“You will be stripped of your rank, excommunicated, anathematized, your name will be stricken

from all church records, your estates will be confiscated and I am authorized to use a ‘Mark of

Justice’ upon you. You will be shunned by the faithful. In any case, you will be tried for the

‘accomplice to murder’ charge in a civil court.”

“If I refuse to recognize the authority of the church court?”

“Pretty much the same deal, I’m afraid,” Tahl said apologetically.

“Otherwise?”

“You will stand trial for Heresy. If found guilty...”

“...I will burn.” Eadric finished the sentence for him. “And what does Lord Oronthon have to say

on the matter?”

“That may very well prove to be your best defence,” Tahl said. “Until this point, he has said

absolutely nothing.”

Eadric smiled grimly, and held out his hands. As the manacles were fastened around his wrists,

Tahl spoke again.

“One last thing, Ed. The Demoness. Where is she?”

The Paladin shook his head.

“You know I’ll find her,” Tahl said.

Eadric held his hands up, and looked at Nwm. “The Abbey!” He yelled.

The Druid began incanting. Tahl looked up and swore, and began to cast a spell himself. Nwm

dissolved into mist, and vanished. Moments later, to Eadric’s astonishment, the same thing happened to Tahl.

“How splendid and dramatic,” Mostin said to Ortwin, stroking his hedgehog. “The Wind-Walkers’ Race! Will you write a ballad?”

“I think mime would be a more suitable medium,” Ortwin replied drily.

“How long will it take them to get there?” Mostin asked.

“It’s about fifteen miles away – a quarter of an hour.”

“Pah!” Mostin scoffed. “Come with me.”

The Alienist led Ortwin into his chambers, which, despite his brief time at Trempa, were already

full of strange devices, alchemical alembics and books, arranged neatly on shelves and tables.

Reaching into his portable hole, Mostin produced the Looking Glass of Urm-Nahat and erected it

on the floor. Holding the amulet which had been confiscated from Despina in one hand, he invoked the Mirror’s power, and Despina appeared on its surface. She was on her knees, scrubbing the floor of the cloister.

“Impressive,” Ortwin said. “And now you just walk through?”

“Yes,” Mostin said.

“Can I go?” Ortwin asked.

“By all means,” Mostin replied. “The gate is invisible from the other side, so mark its location.”

Ortwin nodded, and stepped through.

**

Nwm tore through the air at breakneck speed, and it was only after several minutes had passed

that the druid noticed that a mist like form was following him. He immediately headed for a bank

of cumulus clouds in an attempt to lose his pursuer, and then cursed his own stupidity as he

noticed that Tahl did not follow him, but headed directly southwards towards the Abbey.

The

Druid raced down, and now found himself in pursuit of the Inquisitor. He knew he had little time,

and wished he'd prepared 'Master Earth' instead of 'Wind Walk.'

Nwm plummeted to the ground, and resumed his physical form. The translucent shape of Tahl

had vanished from sight. Nwm swore again, looked around, selected a suitable oak tree, and

stepped into it.

Bump, from one tree to the next. Bump-bump-bump-bump-bump-bump-bump-bump-bump-
'sorry,' he

apologized to a dryad, bump-bump-bump-bump-bump and Nwm reappeared less than two minutes later, eight miles ahead.

"Hah!" he said, and resumed his vaporous state.

Nwm arrived at the Abbey to find Ortwin talking to Despina in the cloister.

"How the hell did you get here," he asked the Bard.

Ortwin just smiled.

"Flee," the Druid said to the demoness, "Eadric has been impeached and the Inquisition are

looking for you."

"I know," Despina replied, "Ortwin just told me."

"Well," said Nwm, "Vanish. Disappear. Teleport. Go ethereal or something."

Despina shook her head. "I am forbidden to manifest supernatural powers, remember?"

"Oh for heaven's sake," Nwm said in an exasperated fashion. "I think we can relax that stipulation."

But Despina would not comply.

The Druid was almost blue with desperation. He had three minutes left.

"On your knees," Nwm demanded.

Despina kneeled. Nwm groped into his pouch and produced a holly berry and some mistletoe. He

handed the berry to Despina.

"Eat this," he said.

Despina ate it.

Nwm waved the mistletoe around, mumbled through his beard, and struck the succubus on

both

cheeks with it.

“Congratulations,” Nwm said, “you are now an anointed follower of the Goddess Uedii. Choose

your totem.”

Despina looked blank.

“A TOTEM!” Nwm thundered.

“An animal,” Ortwin suggested helpfully.

“An Otter?” Despina asked.

Nwm relaxed and smiled. “Excellent choice,” he said, “I like otters. Now take my hand.”

The demoness reached up, and they both dissolved into mist.

**

Tahl arrived a minute later to find Ortwin trying to explain himself to two of the nuns in the cloister. He was also surprised at the Bard’s presence, but remained in vaporous form. He asked

where Despina was.

“The Elemental Plane of Fire,” Ortwin delivered one of his most convincing lies ever.

Tahl’s misty face stared hard at Ortwin. “You lie,” he said.

The Bard was shocked. He must be losing his touch.

“Was the Druid with her?” Tahl asked.

“No,” Ortwin lied again.

“That’s twice you’ve lied,” Tahl accused him. The Inquisitor began to rematerialize and, not

wanting further embarrassment, Ortwin dashed past him, passed through the invisible gate and

reappeared in Mostin’s chambers.

“Close it,” the Bard yelled.

Mostin waved his hand and the mirror went blank.

Tahl stormed through the Abbey, entered the chapel, made a quick supplication to Oronthon, and

spoke to the Abbess.

“I am Tahl, the Deputy Inquisitor General,” he said.

The Abbess looked staggered. “What can I do for you?”

“Lend me your font,” the Inquisitor said.

**

Nwm and Despina Wind-Walked for another thirty minutes, heading in the direction of Deorham

and over terrain that the Druid was intimately familiar with. The folds and wrinkles in the earth, heavily forested and cut by dozens of small streams, undulated below them. Nwm's eyes

constantly scanned the ground.

"Here," he eventually said, and the pair headed downwards.

They resumed their corporeal forms at the base of a small hill with a bare summit. A single

menhir of great age stood there.

Despina started towards it, but stopped abruptly and vomited.

"You cannot approach," Nwm informed her, "this is hallowed ground. Do you wish for redemption?"

The demoness nodded.

"Then kneel."

And Nwm began to chant.

Halfway through the ceremony, the Druid's concentration almost lapsed as he suddenly became

aware of a magical sensor nearby which was spying on him. He swallowed hard and continued to

chant his slow, rhythmic chant. The eye vanished, and Nwm knew that Tahl would soon be heading this way at his best speed. No matter, Nwm thought, it would be too late by the time the

Inquisitor arrived.

When Tahl the Incorruptible appeared beneath the dolmen, he found Despina and the Druid

standing quietly there.

"Hand her over, Nwm," he said. "This doesn't have to get messy."

But Nwm shook his head. "She has atoned, and the Earth has forgiven her. She is now under my

protection, and you are in my temple. If you try to touch her, I will obliterate you. Do not force me.**"

Tahl gazed hard, and perceived that the Druid spoke no falsehood. He nodded, and then vanished. His superiors weren't going to like this. Not one bit.

Tahl smiled.

*General note on church politics. The Curia is the main policy and doctrine-administering body

in the Church of Oronthon, and technically decides on actions if the Archbishop is absent (for

whatever reason). There are eleven seats: the Bishops of Gibilrazen, Hethio, Jiuhu, Kaurban,

Mord, Thahan, Tomur and Tyndur; the Inquisitor General and the Grand Master of the Temple

Knights; and “One Devout Layman” – a member of the laity selected for demonstrating particular holiness and faith. The last position is currently held by the Marquis of Iald.

The Great Conclave is comprised of the Curia, and around forty other priests of note.

**It’s worth pointing out that in my campaign, certain ancient sites have an energy associated

with them that automatically maximizes any Druidic spell cast there. Needless to say, this site

(‘Cambos du’la,’ the ‘Slope of the Leaf’), was one of them.

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DM Confessions: 1) For story purposes, I allowed Nwm to spontaneously cast “Atonement” in

place of a prepared “Commune with Nature” and, 2) Even though the spell description specifically bars outsiders, it does so on the grounds that they are “incapable of changing their

alignment.” As the entire plot revolves around this unlikely event, it seemed a bit stupid to disallow the spell.

And they really deserved a break.

(Not THAT much of a break: it still cost Nwm 500 xp)

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 05-14-2002

It got complicated.

From here on, I was making it up as I went along - we all were, in fact. It was impossible to

cover every contingency, and my head was beginning to hurt. I had no plot left, and the issues

were too big for me to deal with on my own. It was time for me to give up some responsibility -

temporarily, at least. So I asked all of the players:

“So where do YOU see this going?” After all, its their game.

This is what we came up with.

**

Three weeks passed.

Even though the demoness’s repentance was regarded as a partial vindication, as Tahl had pointed out to Eadric, it did not entirely mitigate the charges levelled against the Paladin, and

Inquisitor’s own orders were clear.

Eadric was contained in a small but comfortable cell beneath the Archiepiscopal palace, where he brooded about his condition and wondered how much weight Despina’s atonement would afford

his case. Nwm was not well liked by the upper echelons of the clergy, and the fact that the green

bosom of the Goddess Uedii had embraced the succubus only served to increase tensions between members of the Old Faith and Orthodoxy. Eadric himself almost regretted Nwm’s intercession, and felt that his own responsibilities had been usurped. She was safe, and that was

good. The fact that the Church had not been instrumental in her salvation, however, caused him

much lament. He wondered what kind of Tree-ish nonsense Nwm was filling her head with, and

unsuccessfully tried to suppress a smile at the thought.

Eadric was allowed to speak to no-one except his confessor, the Bishop of Hethio, as the case

against him was being prepared. This vexed him, as he knew that Hethio had voted for his arraignment at the conclave, but the Paladin had little choice but to accept it. The first question that the Bishop had asked was:

“Do you have any other sins that you need to confess, my son?”

And so, Eadric had felt compelled to speak of Rurunoth. The Bishop evinced no surprise, as

Mostin’s invoice already pointed to something extraordinary. Eadric guessed correctly that he

might as well come clean – the truth about the Balor was sure to come out sooner or later. Until

his trial, he’d just play the game.

Ortwin spent two weeks gaining a reputation as a rabble-rouser. The Bard deployed his

considerable communication skills in every tavern, bar and inn in Morne, singing ballads, reciting poetry and making defamatory remarks about the church. He sang of love, injustice, redemption and oppressive dogma. He spoke on street corners, he heckled worshippers outside of chapels, and drank huge quantities of firewine.

Within a fortnight the case was a sensation, and Ortwin had gathered to himself a group of malcontents, lapsed devotees and drunken romantics who hung on his every word. The Bard

enjoyed himself immensely. The Curia suddenly fell under scrutiny from every quarter, and after

the first few days, they made attempts to counter Ortwin's scandalous performances by sending

their most articulate and charismatic preachers to venues where the Half-Elf was scheduled to

play.

The Bard lapped it up: as far as he was concerned, the more controversy that he attracted, the

better.

Ortwin was arrested three times for causing a breach of the peace.

The first time, the city guards, reduced to tears at his words, released him.

On the second occasion, he successfully seduced his arresting officer: a young lieutenant of the

watch named Qino Sels. Within a day, the Bard had convinced her to distribute anti-temple

propaganda amongst the city guard and the militia.

His final arrest, which resulted in a hearing with an elderly and conservative magistrate of the

Royal Justice, was quashed when the Duchess of Trempa, a long-standing critic of Ortwin's

behaviour when he had frequented her court, intervened on his behalf. He was released on the

condition that he immediately cease his performances, to which he happily complied. Half of the

nobility of Wyre were now assembled in Morne in order to hear the case of Eadric, and Ortwin

applied himself to seeking audiences with various Barons, Counts, Marquises and Dukes

in an

effort to petition their favour.

Mostin leased a small house in the most fashionable district of Morne under an assumed name,

erected his looking-glass, and spent much of his time in divination. He made several extraplanar

sorties in an effort to determine the reasons behind Oronthon's apparent reluctance to make his

wishes known.

He consulted with Mulissu in her pocket paradise, although he found the savant ill-informed

about larger cosmic events, and uninterested by what transpired away from her own realm. She

suggested that he make a translation to the least rarefied of the heavens and seek guidance from

the celestials who abode there. Mostin said he'd think about it, and promptly failed to follow her recommendation*.

After petitioning various passers-by on the Inner Planes – both mortal and supernatural - the

Alienist made a perilous physical translation to the steaming fringes of Hell, where he posed a

“Metagnostic Inquiry**” to a Horned Devil. The Cornugon replied with a cryptic quatrain: The Eagle seeks an effective solution and is thereby satisfied.

If the vine bears too many bad grapes, then the wine will be poor,

And a ruthless vintner is preferred over a bitter draught.

When Rintrah roars, who will listen?

The Cornugon, Mostin rationalized, although a minor authority in the vast diabolic hierarchy,

might know something of use. The Alienist was in no doubt that the Dukes of Hell knew of

Oronthon's silence and were probably observing with interest: the network of infernal spies was

the most extensive in the cosmos.

Mostin returned through the looking-glass to his rented home and pondered on the meaning of

the words. The “Eagle” – the symbol associated with the god Oronthon - was a clear enough metaphor for the deity himself. Rintrah was the Planetar in the celestial host

responsible for

mortal revelation. The wine-making references, however, were obscure, and the Alienist could

not interpret their meaning. Mostin spent the day experiencing a series of semiotic paradoxes,

found that he made no progress, and went to meet Ortwin in a nearby inn.

Nwm and Despina were also there. The Druid, together with his new fiendish protégé, had been

visiting a variety of holy sites, places of natural beauty, and particularly venerable trees. Both were travelling dressed in the mottled brown and green robes of lay worshippers of the Goddess,

and Nwm had adopted the guise of an old woman in order to deflect attention from their true

identity. Morne at that time was a dangerous place, full of zealots and extremists, and the only

thing which frightened the Druid more than encountering a squadron of inquisitors or templars,

was a group of overly enthusiastic Uedii worshippers. They might view him as a means to end

what they viewed as Oronthonian oppression, and hail him as a liberator from excessive Temple

taxes. Nwm was apolitical, and although critical of the Temple, had no desire to irritate representatives of the established church beyond that which was absolutely necessary.

Heretic. Infidel. Apostate. Unbeliever. Schismatic. Dissident.

All of these words were currently being bandied about too readily by a variety of self-appointed

holy men and women in a climate of religious intolerance that made Nwm nervous. Ortwin was

adding fuel to the fire by his actions and, at the Druid's behest, the Bard ceased his one-man

campaign against the Orthodox Church. Aside from numbers of inflamed, disenfranchised Earth-

worshippers, various heretical Oronthonian groups – including the Irrenites, the Reconciliatory

Sophists and the Urgic Mystics had begun to attract more attention after years of languishing in obscurity. They began wooing the public in an attempt to increase flagging congregations and

dwindling coffers.

The trio discussed Mostin's exchange with the devil, but could not penetrate its crypticisms any

more than the Alienist already had. None were experts in Oronthonianism, but the references

might make more sense to an initiate.

"Can we find someone who might shed light on it?" Ortwin asked.

Despina coughed politely, but Mostin wasn't listening.

"Ooh, yes," the Alienist said sarcastically, "I'll go and find a priest – you know, someone well-versed in doctrinal matters. Maybe an inquisitor. I'll say, 'Hello. I'm Mostin – that diabolist you might have heard of. Don't listen to any of the gossip about me, none of it's true. I wondered if

you could help me. See, I was talking to this devil...'"

"Well, obviously I was thinking of a more indirect approach," Ortwin sighed.

"I'm not sure how reliable the words of a devil are in helping us penetrate the motive for Oronthon's silence," Nwm said drily. "Surely a member of the celestial host would make a better target for inquiry."

"Perhaps," Mostin said nervously, "although devils tend to be remarkably well-informed. In any case, I would guess that only the upper echelons of Oronthon's servitors would be privy to his

motives.”

“So you think that a moderate-ranking devil will be better informed than, say a deva or an archon? Your argument is inconsistent.” Nwm pressed. “Unless Oronthon is purposely leaking information to fiends.”

“If you have any theories about this,” Ortwin said to the Demoness, “now would be a good time to share them.”

“I don’t pretend to understand Oronthon’s motivation,” Despina said carefully, “but I am well-versed in theological matters – it pays if you’re in my line of work. Or my previous line of work, I should say. I think that Oronthon neatly sidestepped the issue of dealing with the dilemma that

my petition for forgiveness caused. I don’t think it was necessarily intentional on his part, but

Nwm’s intercession for me with the Goddess is to Oronthon’s benefit.”

“Explain,” said Mostin.

“Consider,” the Demoness said. “You are a deity with a number of portfolios. You represent, on

one hand, Love, Compassion, Mercy and Forgiveness. You are absolutely Good. On the other hand, you signify Justice, Order, Retribution and absolute Law. These two poles are not

necessarily identical in their needs.”

“Hah,” Mostin snorted. “If you’re telling me that Oronthon is schizophrenic, then he’s no different from any other deity. So what’s new?”

“The point I’m trying to make,” she continued, “is that the current crisis is a reflection of that dichotomy. A demoness approaches Oronthon’s champion, earnestly asking for redemption.

Good Oronthon says ‘sure, no problem,’ whereas Lawful Oronthon says ‘no chance. Your punishment was just.’ Of course, Oronthon understands this paradox, and that some kind of

dialectic has to be found in order to transcend it. If he acts, one way or the other, he favours Law over Good or vice versa. Two absolute truths have come into conflict with one another, and both

have to be satisfied.”

“Orthodoxy admits to this variation,” Nwm said, “hence its worshippers emphasise different aspects of the deity***. I don’t see this as relevant.”

“In practice they admit to it, yes,” Despina said “but doctrinally, Oronthon is ‘one, perfect, indivisible’ and so on. To speculate that Oronthon is, in fact, a moral relativist would not go

down terribly well with the public – hence such discourse is deemed ‘heretical.’”

Ortwin hooted with laughter. “So do I get to tell Ed? He’ll love this.”

“You must not,” Despina said. “Eadric is like most celestials. They have a simplistic view of reality which is couched in terms of black and white. It is their faith which sustains them, and an absolute trust in Oronthon’s perfection. As Mostin says, only those in the upper tiers of the

celestial hierarchy really understand Oronthon’s will – that the deity is constantly fraught with

moral and ethical dilemmas which he has to resolve. Yet they still trust his judgement, and do not doubt him.”

“And you doubted?” Mostin asked.

“I understood, I doubted, and I fell,” the demoness replied. “The same would happen to Eadric.”

“You underestimate him,” Nwm said, simply. “He is not afraid to confront difficult truths. If your theory is correct, that there are essentially two kinds of faith in question here – a blind faith and an informed faith, so to speak – then I would be prepared to gamble that Eadric falls into the

latter camp.”

“Maybe,” Ortwin said, “although in the past I’ve hardly kept my frustration with Ed’s stubbornness a secret from him. He has trouble dealing with new ideas. The revelation that his god is fallible might be more than he can handle. But I can’t believe this is the first time that this idea has been addressed.”

Despina shook her head. “Its not. Mystics and contemplatives have to get past this point and

develop a more fundamental relationship with the deity. But your standard Warrior-cleric, or

Templar, or Paladin has a relatively unenlightened view. They are agents of their deity’s will, but do not understand it. In this regard they resemble the celestial rank and file.”

“Interesting theory,” Nwm said sceptically, “but if it’s true then why did you approach Eadric for redemption in the first place? If you consider him to possess only a partial understanding of

Oronthon, then surely a contemplative who is more ‘tuned in’ would’ve made a better choice.

You must have known that it would cause a crisis in both his conscience and the larger body of

the church.”

“I had little choice,” Despina said. “If you remember, he was ready to strike me down until I begged him to reconsider. But we’d already spent so much time together that I

thought I

understood him enough to risk throwing myself on his mercy. From that point onwards, until you

acted on my behalf, then he basically called the shots. I trusted his ability to effectively act upon the will of Oronthon, even if he did not fully understand it.”

“You are forgetting Cynric,” Mostin reasoned. “Whoever Eadric was, when this began, he is not the same man now. The Archbishop pulled the rug from under his feet when he withdrew official

church support for his actions. Eadric’s own mentor initiated an existential crisis in his ward and told him that he was ‘on his own.’ Why would he do that unless he felt that Eadric was capable of

dealing with it? I am a wizard – I understand this principle well. Sometimes the lessons you give

need to be ruthless, otherwise they are ineffective.”

“I disliked Cynric,” Nwm said, “but I had no doubt about his sense of foresight, or his excellence as a teacher. I suspect that he may have had a presentiment about his own death.”

“And did nothing to stop it?” Ortwin asked, amazed. “He elected no successor, and the church is in crisis. I don’t believe he would willingly allow that to happen – the continuation of tradition was too important to him.”

Nwm raised an ironic eyebrow. “You forget the last exchange between Eadric and Cynric occurred in private. Neither you, nor I, nor the Curia were present. Eadric was vague about the

details.”

“You think the old bastard was grooming Eadric to take over?” Ortwin asked, aghast.

“Not necessarily,” Nwm said, “but I think he was sounding out possibilities, and Eadric may have been high on his list of candidates. He may have regarded the Despina affair as a test of Eadric’s mettle, thus he was disinclined to intervene. He saw it as a potential catalyst which would have

far-reaching consequences for every aspect of the faith. In the final analysis, however, I think

Cynric’s foresight failed him: he didn’t expect to die quite as soon as he did.”

“But why choose a warrior when there are so many contemplatives who are attuned more closely?” Despina asked.

“War,” Nwm said.

“In the church? Precipitated by me?” Despina asked. “I hope not. If that’s the case, then Graz’zt has won already.”

“Again,” repeated Nwm, “not necessarily. Oronthon may view it as an opportunity to root out corruption, instill a new direction in a stagnant organization, quiet the bickering factions and

revive morality. Remember: The Greatest Good for the Greatest Number. Sometimes you have to

crack a few eggs to bake a cake.”

“But the Inquisition and the Temple are Eadric’s primary antagonists,” Ortwin said. “And if this is the case, then why hasn’t Oronthon shown some sign to Eadric?”

“I believe its customarily called ‘the long dark night of the soul,’” Nwm replied. “It’s supposed to be difficult, or it has no value.”

“So what are we supposed to do?” Asked Ortwin. “The trial begins tomorrow.”

“Nothing,” said Mostin. “We wait until Rintrah roars.”

*Mostin is afraid of birds. Celestials with their big, feathery wings are more than the Alienist can bear.

**Potent Spell (8th level) devised by Mostin with several applications, but designed primarily to

extract information from extraplanar entities. Like “Otto’s Irresistible Dance,” the “Metagnostic Inquiry” allows no saving throw (although SR still applies), and the target is subjected to a mind-affecting compulsion which temporarily renders it docile and incapable of lying. The caster poses

a single question, which the target must answer faithfully (albeit usually obliquely). The question posed by Mostin to the Cornugon was “What is the meaning of Oronthon’s current silence

towards his worshippers?”

***Obviously, although Oronthon is a LG Deity, his worshippers can be NG or LN.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 05-15-2002

“Please state your full name and title before the panel,” the aged inquisitor directed.

“I am Eadric son of Moad, Baronet of Deorham and Lord of the Manor at Jaive and Sutting. I am a deputed inquisitor. I also bear the title of ‘Protector of the Nineteen Tenets.’” Eadric looked around the courtroom. It was empty except for himself and a council of five magnates: Melion,

the Inquisitor General and his Deputy, Tahl; The Bishops of Tyndur and Hethio; and the Grand

Master of the Temple, Lord Rede of Dramore. Inevitably, the Church elders had decided on a

private hearing, to avoid the inevitable gossip and speculation which would otherwise arise.

Eadric was not impressed.

“The last title was bestowed upon you for services rendered to Orthodoxy by the late Archbishop, Cynric of Morne,” Melion said rhetorically.

“That is correct.”

“Perhaps you could enlighten us as to the actions which prompted his holiness to grant that title?”

Melion asked.

“It was given to me after my actions in the defeat of the Demon Cerothumulos, who posed a

threat to the established church around the city of Tyndur.” Eadric looked pointedly at the Bishop of Tyndur: it was his diocese that had been saved by the Paladin’s actions. Tyndur averted his

gaze.

“Was this the first time that you had had dealings with demons?” Lord Rede asked.

“Naturally not,” Eadric replied smoothly. “I am expected to deal with any infernal or diabolic threat which presents itself.”

“What is the prescribed method of dealing with such threats?” Hethio asked.

“Their annihilation,” Eadric answered.

“How old were you when you first encountered a fiend?” Melion asked.

“I was fifteen,” Eadric replied.

“Perhaps you could explain the circumstances,” Melion pressed the Paladin.

“A sorcerer who bore a grudge against my father invoked three minor demons to assail him

whilst he slept. They are commonly known as Dretch. I picked up my father’s sword and slew one. My father wrestled one to the ground and grappled with it. Shortly afterwards the two

remaining demons dissolved – the spell must have ended and they were no longer beholden.’

“And your father was wounded?” Hethio asked.

“We both were,” Eadric replied.

“Did you immediately seek a priest of Oronthon?” Melion asked.

“No, but...” Eadric answered.

“You know that this is the recommended course of action for the faithful,” Melion interrupted,

“although we can hardly blame you for your father’s oversight – after all, you were merely a

boy.” The condescension dripped from the inquisitor’s lips. “Where did you go?”

“We went to see the local nature priest,” Eadric sighed.

“A pagan?” Melion raised his eyebrows in false surprise. The story was well known.

“A pagan.” Eadric confirmed.

“His name?”

“Nwm,” Eadric said.

**

“Shortly after your first demonic encounter, you entered the service of the Temple. To ‘fight the good fight,’” the Bishop of Hethio said. His benign expression did not hide from Eadric the fact that this man bore him no great love. “You demonstrated certain gifts.”

Eadric nodded.

“Why?” Hethio asked.

“I felt that Lord Oronthon had called me to such a task,” Eadric answered.

“Did he speak to you?” Melion asked.

“No,” the Paladin replied.

“Has he ever spoken to you?” Hethio asked. “Either directly, or through one of his intermediaries?”

“No,” Eadric said.

“Oh?” Rede asked. “Then you do not view the established church as a valid medium for conveying Oronthon’s will?”

Sh*t, thought Eadric, wrong answer: the bastards. “Forgive me, Lord. I had assumed that you

referred to a celestial messenger. The church has efficiently conveyed Lord Oronthon’s will to

me in the past.”

“Do you think it continues to do so?” Melion asked cannily.

Eadric did not answer.

“Baronet Deorham?” Hethio pressed.

“No,” Eadric admitted. “I don’t think it does.”

**

Ortwin groaned and placed his head in his hands. “Oh gods, Ed, just lie to them and tell them what they want to hear.” He, Mostin, Nwm and Despina were gathered around the Alienist’s

looking glass, spying on the proceedings in the inquisitorial court.

“Unfortunately, lying doesn’t come as easily to Eadric as it does to some,” Nwm jibed.

“Besides,” Mostin said, “the court is under a Zone of Truth, so there’s no point anyway. And you see those huge gaudy amulets that Melion and Tahl are wearing? The ‘Eyes of Palamabron,’

they’re called. Gems of Seeing with all kinds of other powers. Artifacts.” Mostin’s eyes glazed over and he drooled.

“Who’s Palamabron?” Ortwin asked.

“A dead Solar,” Despina replied.

“So they know we’re watching?” Nwm asked, astonished. “Why don’t they do something about it?”

“Heh,” Mostin laughed, “they tried.”

**

“Why did you participate in the summoning of the Balor Rurunoth?” Melion asked Eadric.

“I did not do so willingly,” the Paladin replied, “I felt it was an ill-advised course of action.”

“But you took part nonetheless,” Hethio said. “Why?”

“It was in an attempt to discover the machinations of the Demon Graz’zt, and to sever the link between him and Despina.”

“The succubus Nehael?”

“Yes,” Eadric answered.

“Because, at this point, you still did not trust her?” Melion asked.

“That is correct.”

“Where is Rurunoth now?” Melion inquired.

“I don’t exactly know,” Eadric answered.

“You don’t know?” Rede asked, astonished.

“Nwm and Mostin entombed him beneath the earth. He is protected with powerful wards.”

Melion raised an eyebrow. “You allowed a pagan and a known diabolist to deal with this threat?

After acceding to an illegal summoning in the first place?”

“Mostin is not a diabolist,” Eadric insisted.

“But he does routinely deal with demons and devils?” Hethio asked archly.

“I wouldn’t say routinely,” Eadric replied.

“Infrequently, then, shall we say?” Hethio smiled. “I think the distinction is inconsequential, don’t you?”

Eadric said nothing.

“Where is the demoness now?” Melion asked.

“I don’t know,” the Paladin answered. “I believe that she is still under the protection of Nwm the Preceptor.”

“So her announced desire for redemption was, ultimately, a falsehood,” Melion said.

“I don’t think she would agree,” Eadric retorted.

“But she is now a pagan,” Rede laughed, “that’s not much of an improvement, is it?”

“The Goddess was willing to forgive her,” Eadric said.

“But she’d committed no crime against any pagan god, had she?” Melion taunted. “It is reasonable to assume that your god – our god – Lord Oronthon - still judges her accursed.”

“Has he told you as much?” Eadric asked defiantly.

“It is the duty of the Curia to interpret the will of Oronthon,” Melion hissed.

“In the absence of an Archbishop.” Eadric snapped. He was getting tired of this. “Why is Oronthon silent?” He asked.

“Such weighty matters are not for you,” Melion answered. “You are merely a warrior.”

**

“Did the succubus seduce you?” Hethio asked.

“No,” Eadric replied.

“But you bore her token while you jousted, and you courted her. You spent a good deal of time in conversation with her. What did you talk about?”

“Mainly philosophy and religion,” the Paladin said.

“Did you find her an articulate conversationalist?” Hethio inquired.

“Yes. She is most erudite.”

“Did she sway your opinions on any theological matters?” The Bishop continued.

“Not that I remember,” Eadric sighed.

“And you were...how should I put this...romantically attracted to her?”

“Yes,” Eadric groaned.

“Would it seem entirely unreasonable,” the Bishop asked slyly, “if I suggested that your urge to fornicate with a demon is responsible for your current predicament?”

“It is not an unreasonable suggestion,” Eadric agreed. “However, neither is it true.”

“Have you ever had dealings with a necromancer called Feezuu?” Melion asked the Paladin.

Eadric looked surprised. “I’ve never heard of her. Why?”

“Information leads us to believe it was she who slew Cynric,” Hethio explained. “Do you bear any guilt, or have you felt responsible for Cynric’s death?” He asked.

Eadric grimaced. The question hit the core of his doubts. “I am not sure,” he replied. “Perhaps.”

**

In his chambers, Mostin went pale as the blood drained from his face. “This is very bad news,”

he said.

“Feezuu?” Nwm asked. “Never heard of her.”

“She is a Cambion,” Despina explained, “a half-demon. She is the attaché of the Balor Ainhorr –

who, incidentally, is significantly more powerful than Rurunoth.”

“Who is? Feezuu or Ainhorr?” the Bard asked.

“I was speaking of Ainhorr, but both of them, actually,” replied Despina.

“Great,” said Ortwin, sarcastically. “Could we take her?”

“Not without Eadric,” Mostin replied.

“And with him?”

“Maybe,” said the Alienist.

“Hmm,” grunted Ortwin.

**

“You have, in your possession, certain heretical texts,” Melion said. “They were discovered at your castle. Have you anything to say about them?”

“I did not realize that they were forbidden,” Eadric answered.

“How did you come by them?”

“Many of my books are the legacy of my father’s estate.”

“Ah,” said Melion, “we come back to your father again. Would you say that your father was a devout man?”

“Yes,” Eadric replied.

“Although he consulted banned treatises and consorted with local pagan priests?”

“I do not view tolerance as an obstacle to devotion,” Eadric said.

“Really? You have a brother, do you not?” Melion asked.

Eadric nodded. He knew where this was going.

“What does your brother do, Baronet Deorham?”

“He is an ascetic. He has renounced the world.” Eadric answered.

“He is an Urgic Mystic, am I correct?” Melion pressed.

“That is true,” Eadric admitted.

“Do you share his opinions to any extent?” Hethio asked.

“No,” said Eadric forcefully.

“Please, Baronet Deorham, try to understand that we are only looking for the truth here.”

“Of course,” Eadric said, smiling. He looked at Tahl, and the Deputy Inquisitor could only swallow and return his gaze with regret. Tyndur would not even meet his eyes.

The others wanted to burn him. Badly.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 05-16-2002

After the preliminary hearing in the trial, Mostin used the mirror again to access Mulissu’s demi-

plane.

“This is becoming tedious, Mostin,” the Elemental Savant said to him. “This is the third time you have interrupted my contemplation. I resent your nagging. And now you ask me to work magic

for you?’

“You have met her, and I have not,” Mostin said. “I cannot use the spell.”

“And I do not have the spell,” Mulissu replied.

“Then we may make fair exchange,” said Mostin, smugly.

“That will involve taking a full day from my studies,” Mulissu complained. “Time is precious to me.”

“It is crucial to me,” Mostin said. “Please?”

“Very well,” she sighed. “Leave your book here. I will look after dinner.”

“Are you insane?” Mostin asked. “Leave my book with you? My most potent dweomers are in that book!”

Mulissu raised a single eyebrow, and her hair crackled with electricity. Mostin left his book and

fled back through the gate.

**

The next day of the trial was little better for Eadric.

“Let us return to the matter of the demon Cerothumulos,” Melion said.

The Bishop of Tyndur looked uncomfortable.

“This demon was potent,” Melion continued. “A Nalfeshnee who had assumed the guise of a stone giant.”

“That is correct,” Eadric replied, “the Bishop had engaged him in the construction of the new fane at Tyndur.”

“He was attended by several succubi, who infiltrated the church,” Melion said. “You demonstrated no reluctance in destroying these creatures. Why did the succubus Nehael strike

you as any different?”

“I felt that her case was the exception, not the rule,” Eadric replied.

“Did it occur to you that it is utterly beyond your remit to make a judgement about the desire of a fiend to seek repentance? Beyond any mortal intervention, in fact. Did you consider that this is a matter for celestials and Oronthon himself?”

“I sought the advice of Cynric,” Eadric said.

“Eventually,” Rede of Dramore laughed. “After using witchcraft in an attempt to contact Oronthon. Would you consider this to be the correct procedure?”

“I felt that it was justified.”

“Nehael was dispatched because of the offense you gave the demon Graz’zt after the defeat of

Cerothumulos,” Melion continued.

“Yes,” Eadric said.

“In an attempt to drag you from grace, to offend the church, to cause a crisis of faith, to scandalize the Temple and to cause as much mayhem as possible. Would you say that her efforts

have been successful?”

“With your help, they might be,” Eadric said acidly.

Melion seethed, but it was Hethio who spoke. The bishop produced a small locket, with the

miniature of a beautiful woman inside of it.

“Do you know who this is, Baronet Deorham?” he asked.

“That is Despina – the succubus Nehael, if you prefer.”

“No,” said the Bishop of Hethio, “this IS Lady Despina of Harcourt. Her father is the Thane of Harcourt. She has two sisters. Where do you suppose she is now?”

Eadric’s stomach sank. He hadn’t even considered this possibility, that the demoness had replaced a genuine noblewoman. He’d never thought to ask. He wondered what the real Despina

had been like. “I would guess that she was murdered,” he said grimly.

“Fortunately not,” Hethio replied, with mock brightness. “She is still alive and well, and living in Harcourt – such a remote fief, that posing as one from there is unlikely to draw attention. You

might have met her one day.”

The bastards, thought Eadric, they’re f*cking with my brain.

**

“Well, at least you didn’t kill her,” Ortwin said to Despina.

“I was tempted,” the demoness replied, “she is a vain, empty-headed trollop.”

**

“Yesterday,” Rede said, “you admitted that you no longer believed that the church was a legitimate channel for Oronthon’s will. I have no interest in trying to fathom your motives for

such an assertion, but you must know that this statement alone is sufficient grounds to convict

you of heresy.”

Eadric sighed. “Heresy is a politically expedient crime.”

“No,” Melion snapped. “Heresy is holding an opinion which is contrary to the truth.”

“That is one interpretation,” Eadric retorted. “Another is that heresy is maintaining a viewpoint

which defies dogma.”

“They are one and the same,” Melion asserted.

“Not since Cynric’s death,” Eadric replied smoothly.

“I will not tolerate this insubordination!” Melion spat. “You will answer the questions put to you.

I am not interested in your uninformed theories. You are a layman.”

Eadric said nothing.

“Would you concur that your brother is a heretic?” Hethio asked calmly.

“His opinions defy Orthodox dogma. Yes, he is a heretic.”

“And his opinions are contrary to the truth,” Melion said.

Eadric said nothing.

“What transpired in your final meeting with his holiness?” Hethio asked.

Eadric laughed. “The Curia were not present for a reason.”

“Remember: the Curia are now the voice of Oronthon on Earth,” Rede said slowly.

“Whatever doubts you may have possessed in the past, you may now put aside. You may reveal the

conversation.”

“Cynric told me that I was on my own,” Eadric replied.

“But he did not sanction any particular course of action,” Melion probed.

“No,” said Eadric, “but nor did he forbid any.”

“Would you say that Cynric was in full possession of his faculties?” Hethio inquired.

“Yes,” replied Eadric.

“But I remember him saying ‘Not everything is revealed to me’ – I was present at the initial

hearing, if you recall. Do you believe that Oronthon’s grace was withdrawn from him?”

“No.” Eadric was adamant.

“Despite the fact that he was not assumed?* That he perished under sorcery?”

“No.”

“What else did he say?” Melion asked.

Eadric smiled. “He said ‘I can give you no help in this matter. You are correct when you speak of inner promptings – not that I’d say it in front of those others. After all, it IS the road to heresy - at least among the unenlightened.’”

Melion swallowed hard, and called for an immediate recess.

**

An emergency meeting of the Curia was convened, and Eadric was not called into the court for

another two days. In his cell, he prayed.

During this time, Mostin made yet another journey to confer with Mulissu. She was, on this

occasion, surprisingly affable.

“What is this ‘Metagnostic Inquiry?’” The Savant asked, holding his book.

“It is most rude to consult another mage’s books without their permission,” Mostin fumed.

“Would you not have done the same?” Mulissu asked.

Mostin had to admit that he would. “Did you transcribe and master the ‘Discern Location’ dweomer?” he asked.

“Naturally,” she replied. “But I did not realise that you possessed so many originals.

‘Metempsychotic Reversal?’ ‘Paroxysm of Fire?’ Please understand that I was merely browsing.

I have gained a new respect for you, Mostin.”

The Alienist puffed proudly. He knew she was buttering him up, but compliments were always

appreciated.

“Perhaps more exchanges would be possible,” Mulissu suggested.

“Yes,” said Mostin, snatching his spellbook and dropping it into his portable hole.

The Witch sighed. “Feezuu is on the plane of Limbo,” she said. “I took the liberty of casting the spell. She is at these coordinates.”

Mulissu invoked Rary's Telepathic Bond, and a stream of numbers and formulae flooded into

Mostin's brain.

"Notice this variable, here," Mulissu pointed to a complex equation. "This represents the probability of Feezuu's domain being in a certain area. If you translate, you need to consider that location itself is not a constant on Limbo."

"Domain?" Mostin asked.

"She has a retreat there," Mulissu replied. "Perhaps, as a Cambion, she is not always welcome in the Abyss."

Mostin thought hard for a moment. "What are her relations with the Slaadi?" He asked.

The Witch shrugged. "I have no idea," she said.

"Did you scry her?" Mostin asked.

"She is warded," Mulissu said, "but her fortress looks like THIS."

An image appeared in Mostin's mind.

"Gods," he said, "what's it made of?"

"Blood, I think," Mulissu replied.

Charming, thought Mostin.

"What are you planning to do, Mostin?" Mulissu asked.

"I'm not sure yet," the Alienist answered.

"She is dangerous," the witch cautioned him.

"And beyond me," Mostin nodded.

Mulissu laughed. "Maybe, in a straight fight. But I'm assuming you'd cheat. What's the biggest evocation you can deliver?"

"Against a Cambion? Sonically Substituted Maximized Empowered Lightning Bolt."

"Not bad," Mulissu said. "Sonics, eh?"

"It pays when you're dealing with outsiders," Mostin said.

"How many of those can you get off?"

"One," said Mostin.

"Hmm, it'll take more than that," Mulissu said.

"I know," Mostin sighed.

**

"No frikkin' way," Ortwin said.

"I've got it all planned," Mostin explained. "We buff up, and assume the forms of Barbazu devils."

We use the mirror to get to Limbo. We ‘Teleport without Error’ into the castle. I whack her with

some spells, and if she’s still standing, you chop her up. We ‘Teleport’ out and use the gate to get back, quick smart, before her lackeys are onto us.”

“Why the devil part?” Nwm asked.

“Barbazu have great spell resistance, and it preserves anonymity,” Mostin said. “They can also teleport perfectly without my having to use spells.”

“What spells did you have in mind to ‘whack her’ with,” Nwm inquired.

“Quickened ‘Magic Missile’, ‘Disintegrate’, and ‘Great Shout’. If we’re hasted, and we get the jump, I can get them all off before she can react. Ortwin zaps her with my ‘Circlet of Blasting.’ If she’s still standing, she’ll probably be stunned from the sonic – as will at least some of her

cronies. That’s when Ortwin finishes her off. If he takes longer than five seconds then, a) I’ll be disappointed in him and, b) I’ll whack her with two sonically substituted maximized ‘Lightning

Bolts’ and another quickened ‘Magic Missile’. If that doesn’t finish her off, then I’m changing

my vocation.”

“Sounds reasonable,” said Nwm.

Ortwin groaned. “You cannot be serious,” he said.

“You must admit, given the method of Cynric’s death, this does have a certain symmetry to it,”

Despina said.

“I thought you said we couldn’t take her without Ed,” Ortwin said.

“I reconsidered,” said Mostin.

*Cynric was the first Archbishop not to undergo a bodily assumption into heaven at his death.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 05-25-2002

Nothing New Here...

Mostin and Ortwin buffed.

Nwm cast “Death Ward” and “Energy Immunity” on both of them. Mostin had gleaned from Mulissu that Feezuu favoured acid evocations, so the Druid rendered Mostin immune to acid and

Ortwin immune to both acid and Sonics – the latter was in order to allow Mostin to use area

sonic attacks without fear of harming the bard. Nwm also cast “Freedom of Movement” on both

of them, as well as multiple “Protection from Elements.” Ortwin would ignore the first
168

points of damage from all energy sources, except Sonics and acid, to which he was
entirely

immune. Mostin himself was also warded against Sonics, in the event that any of his area
spells

needed to be discharged at point-blank range. Finally, Nwm cast “Attune Form” on both of
them

to protect them from any unforeseen adverse effects from the Plane of Limbo.

Mostin cast “Haste” and “Fiendform” on both himself and Ortwin, and they transformed
into

Barbazu.

Ortwin bore Melimpor’s Girdle and Shield – items which Eadric and entrusted to Nwm, as
well

as his own scimitar, Githla. An empowered “Cat’s Grace” restored his Dexterity to close
to its

original level - Bearded Devils were not renowned for their agility.

Mostin had thought long and hard about how best to deploy his spell resources and how
best to

retain their anonymity – or at least deflect attention away from themselves. He was sure
that

Feezuu had many enemies, although he didn’t know who they were.

The duo had agreed that they would enter under the guise of an Infernal strike team. The
Alienist

summoned devils before they translated – 3 more Barbazu and an Osyluth. Mostin hoped
that the

Bone Devil would be considered the de facto leader of the troupe and draw attention away
from

himself and Ortwin. He had prepared “Great Shout,” two “Disintegrates,” three quickened
“Magic Missiles,” a double empowered sonically substituted “Fireball,” two singly
empowered

sonically substituted “Fireballs,” three regular sonically substituted “Fireballs,” three
“Dispel

Magics” and a variety of divinations. Mostin had also prepared “Plane Shift” in case
something

went awry with the gate opened by the Looking-Glass of Urm-Nahat, and they needed to
beat a

hasty exit from Limbo.

Ortwin had been turned into a veritable killing machine. Mostin felt invulnerable.

After their diabolic allies had been summoned, Mostin telepathically communicated his instructions to them, opened the gate to Limbo, and they entered the miasma. Raw chaos engulfed them.

“We have around one minute,” the Alienist thought to Ortwin. “Make every second count.”

They teleported into the centre of Feezuu’s keep, an island of semi-permanent matter sustained

by the Cambion’s will, and appeared in her audience hall. The smell was overpowering – Mulissu had been correct when she’d guessed that the place was constructed from blood. Being somewhat disoriented, Mostin hadn’t got quite the “jump” that he’d hoped for.

Aside from Feezuu, there were only around a dozen Slaadi of minor rank present, which wasn’t

too bad.

Except that the Balor, Ainhorr, was also there.

Oh F*ck, thought Mostin, he’s big.

The Alienist glanced to see Ortwin, but the Bard had reacted with uncanny prescience. A conspicuous, shield-bearing Barbazu had already teleported behind Feezuu and was slashing

violently with his scimitar at the Necromancer.

The Bone Devil, who had sought to engage a Blue Slaad in melee combat, instead crumpled

under the gaze of Ainhorr into an infinitesimally small point in space.

Mostin swallowed and knew that if he attracted attention, would probably be next. Oh, well, he

thought. He let loose his “Great Shout” and flung a quickened “Magic Missile” followed by

“Disintegrate” at the Balor. The sonic blew a hole in the magically sustained blood walls, and

several Slaadi stopped in their tracks. Feezuu was staggered. Ainhorr brushed off all of the spells, his concentration unaffected.

Two Red Slaadi and a Blue Slaad began tearing at Mostin with their claws, but they could not

effectively overcome his infernal protection.

Despite her disorientation, Feezuu managed to deliver a quickened acid bolt at Ortwin,

followed

by invoking “Destruction” upon the Bard. Fortunately, his wards protected him from both attacks.

Ortwin slashed again and again and again and again at Feezuu, viciously prosecuting a frenzied attack.

Ainhorr’s gaze turned to Mostin, and the Alienist felt the weight of the Balor’s will pressing

down upon him. It was titanic, and smashed through his infernal resistances.

But it did not penetrate the core that was Mostin, beneath.

Mostin smiled and let loose two more potent Sonics at point-blank range and hurled another

quickened packet of “Magic Missiles” at the Balor. Summoned Devils and Slaadi alike exploded

under the force of sound. Feezuu reeled: she was in trouble. The Alienist telepathically instructed the last remaining Barbazu to interpose itself between himself and Ainhorr.

Ainhorr looked moderately irritated.

Feezuu reacted swiftly.

The Cambion cast a quickened haste upon herself. Mostin was unaffected by the first of two

potent, rapid magical assaults, although the second almost overwhelmed him. But Ortwin screamed as the water was wilted from his body twice in succession.

GET OUT! AWAY FROM THE BALOR! BACK TO THE PORTAL! Mostin screamed telepathically to the Bard. Ortwin must get out of range of the Implosions. The Half-Elf didn’t

need telling twice. He slashed at Feezuu again, and teleported away to a safe distance.

Ainhorr held up his flaming hand and invoked a “Symbol of Death” which caused the intervening Barbazu to die in a spectacular fashion. But Mostin, warded from death magic, was

unharmmed.

Ainhorr fumed in disbelief, and drew his sword.

Sh*t, thought Mostin, and fired off his last sonic attack and quickened “Magic Missile” at Feezuu. The Necromancer finally crumpled under Mostin’s power. The Alienist teleported away promptly.

Mostin wanted to go back for her spellbooks. He changed his mind when Ortwin threatened to kill him.

**

“So is she dead, then?” Nwm asked.

“I’m pretty sure,” Mostin replied.

“But not entirely.”

“No.” Mostin said.

“And the Balor?” Asked the Druid.

“I think we managed to annoy him, but little more,” the Alienist said. “My magic barely touched

him. The question which will be vexing him most is ‘who are we?’ I guess he will return to the Abyss and seek direction from his master.”

“Will they discern the truth?” Nwm asked.

“I hope not,” Mostin earnestly replied. “Although with the Cambion out of the picture I am less

worried about reprisals. Graz’zt would exhaust himself if he were to facilitate the translation of a major demon like Ainhorr onto the Prime, and would attract all kinds of unwelcome attention.”

“But he has other agents,” Ortwin said. “We are not safe.”

“We never were,” Despina replied.

“Can you invoke the ‘Magnificent Mansion?’” Nwm asked Mostin.

The Alienist shook his head. “I have not prepared it. My spells are exhausted.”

Nwm looked concerned. “As are mine! And I am now worried about interplanar guerilla tactics

being deployed against me. What spells do you have left?”

“Mainly divinations,” Mostin answered. “But we should be safe for the nonce. It will take Ainhorr a day or two to return to the Abyss.”

Ortwin groaned. “And then? If Graz’zt determines that we are responsible, then he will surely seek vengeance.”

“I will construct a permanent version of the ‘Mansion,’” Mostin said grandly.

“Are you capable of such a feat?” Nwm seemed sceptical.

“I believe so,” Mostin replied. “And it is high time that I thought about rendering myself immune

to the kind of assault made against Cynric, and which we ourselves made today. I cannot afford

to be lax any longer.”

“You seem depressed at the prospect,” Despina observed.

“My transcendence is near*,” Mostin sighed. “An investment of this magnitude – in terms of

both time and personal energy – will delay it.”

“How long would it take to achieve?” Nwm asked.

“It is an unconventional application of the ‘Permanency’ dweomer,” Mostin said. He made a

quick calculation. “Assuming that it’s possible, around two months,” he said.

“Argh!” Ortwin beat his forehead.

“I was thinking long-term,” Mostin sniffed.

But the more he thought about it, the more the idea seemed to have merit. A permanent extraplanar retreat which was utterly inviolable. Perhaps he would buy some land, erect his

comfortable manse in the woods, and open the portal to his own, private dimensional pocket.

With the Looking-Glass of Urm-Nahat, the multiverse would become his oyster.

**

Eadric’s third appearance before the inquisitorial panel came as something of a surprise to the

Paladin.

Firstly, both Tahl and the Bishop of Tyndur were absent. They had been replaced by two more

Church Magnates – the Bishops of Mord and Tomur.

Secondly, the tone of the proceedings had changed. All of those present seemed preoccupied with

other matters.

Thirdly, Melion offered to cut him a deal.

“You will admit your heresy, and atone in all earnestness. If you assume culpability for the charges of diabolism, consorting with demons, breaches of protocol and pursuing actions contrary to doctrine, the court is prepared to be lenient. We will not press the further charges laid against you. You will not burn, but will enter a cloister for a period of one year. If your confessor, the Bishop of Hethio, deems you sufficiently repentant, you may enter the service of the Temple

after this time. Your rank will be much reduced, of course. You will no longer use the epithet

“Protector of the Nineteen Tenets” – in time, you will be glad that you no longer bear that title.”

“Why the sudden reversal?” Eadric asked. “And where are Tahl and Tyndur?”

“Other weighty matters detain them,” Hethio said smoothly. “Come, Eadric, this is a chance to

cleanse yourself and regain your perspective. A year is not a long time, and I am not a bad confessor.”

“Your grace,” Eadric said to the Bishop, “Kindly address me as ‘Baronet Deorham.’ I am not on

first name terms with you.”

Hethio bristled for a second under the barbed insistence on correct forms, before regaining his

characteristic appearance of calm.

“Well, Deorham,” Melion barked, “what is your decision? Will you accept a year in a cloister, or

be condemned to the stake as an unrepentant blasphemer?”

“May I pray on this matter?” Eadric asked in all earnestness. “I must make sure that my conscience is clear.”

“Take as long as you need,” Melion said venomously. They could hardly refuse such a request.

**

Eadric was praying, when four knights burst into his cell. They were arrayed in full armour and

bore the scourges and greatswords of the Templars. Their visors were closed, and the Paladin

could not tell their faces.

He swallowed. Hard.

Tahl entered, likewise dressed.

“We are leaving,” the Deputy Inquisitor informed him.

“What is happening, Tahl?” Eadric asked.

“There is no time to explain. Do you trust me?”

Eadric sighed. “I suppose so. Where are we going?”

“Trempe,” Tahl replied. “Your Duchess has just announced her decision to secede from the

Church. She has denounced the Curia in no uncertain terms. We must hasten.”

Eadric blinked. “And you are supporting her?”

Tahl nodded.

“Are you the leader in this, Tahl?”

The Deputy Inquisitor smiled. “No,” he said. “You are.”

**

As Tahl, Eadric and the other knights ‘Wind-Walked’ back to Trempea, the Inquisitor explained

events to the Paladin.

“An emergency meeting of the Curia yesterday passed the motion that Cynric was remiss in his

decisions. They stopped short of branding him a heretic, but not by much. The official position

was that grace was withdrawn from the Archbishop. The motion was not universally accepted.

Kaurban and Jiuhu voted against it. So did Tyndur – the old bugger finally followed his convictions. The Marquis of Iald was not present, although had he voted against the measure, it

still would have passed.”

“Hethio, Melion and the others are not entirely insincere,” Tahl continued. “They see the preservation of the Law as vital. The fact that you asserted, under the scrutiny of the Eyes of Palamabron, that Cynric confided his doubts about them to you, means that they must consider

the Archbishop’s judgement impaired. They have a strong case. The Silence of Oronthon, Cynric’s death by sorcery, and his allowing you to follow your own judgement all point to his

fallibility.”

“But you do not concur,” Eadric said.

“Apparently not,” Tahl grinned. “But with both wings of the Magistratum** set firmly against

you this will be difficult. Those who doubt the decision of the Curia will be quickly marginalized.”

“And the King?” Eadric asked.

“He will tow the Orthodox line,” Tahl replied.

“So what am I supposed to do?” The Paladin asked. “Oronthon has revealed no plan to

me.”

“Do you still feel guilt around Cynric’s death?” Tahl asked.

“Certainly.” Eadric replied.

“Then you must atone.” Tahl said.

Eadric laughed. “And where do you suggest I find an intercessor?” He asked.

“Why, me, of course,” Tahl replied with mock gravity

The fact that Tahl was a clergyman had somehow escaped Eadric’s notice. The Paladin nodded.

“I tend to forget that you far outrank me,” he said to the Inquisitor.

“Only for the moment,” Tahl replied. Seeing the confusion upon Eadric’s face, he continued.

“Last night, I had a revelation. The Messenger spoke to me.”

Eadric’s jaw dropped.

Rintrah had quietly roared.

**

The next day, Morne was awash with rumours. Cynric’s reputation in grave doubt. The public

denunciation of the Curia by the Duchess of Trempa. The defection of Tahl to the Duchess’s

camp. The sensational escape of Eadric of Deorham prior to facing Inquisitorial justice, abetted

by the Deputy Inquisitor himself.

“How exciting,” Mostin clapped.

Nwm did not share his enthusiasm. Blood would be shed over this.

“I suppose we should return to Trempa,” Ortwin said. “That’s where they are, now, I take it.?”

Mostin nodded.

There was a thunderous knock at the door of the Alienist’s rented house. Mostin walked over to

the window and looked down upon his porch. Inquisitors, Templars and various men-at-arms

stood there.

“What do you want?” Mostin yelled down.

“We are looking for Eadric of Deorham.” A knight yelled. “Are you Mostin the Diabolist?”

Mostin fumed. “I am NOT a diabolist,” he shouted.

Ortwin stood close to the window and sighed. A simple ‘No’ would have been better.

“But you are Mostin?”

Mostin nodded, it would be futile to deny it now. “Now piss off,” the Alienist said. “You have no

authority here. I am not subject to ecclesiastical law.”

The knight grinned smugly. “No,” he said, “but you are under civil arrest for using magic to aid a heretic – who HAD submitted to ecclesiastical law – to escape.”

“I did no such thing,” Mostin replied.

“You will have an opportunity to prove that at your trial,” the knight retorted.

“Piss off, or I’ll blast you all,” the Alienist shouted.

There was an intake of breath from those assembled below, a pause, and then a voice declared:

“Come on, men! Our faith will sustain us!”

They proceeded to bash at the door.

The Alienist prepared to cast a spell, but Nwm stopped him. “Will you draw first blood in this,

Mostin?”

“I was going to burn them, actually,” he replied.

“Mostin?”

“Oh, very well,” he said, and cast another spell.

Four imps appeared.

Mostin addressed them in Infernal. “Do nothing until I utter the word ‘execute.’ There is a crowd

gathered at the door below us. Without killing, maiming or otherwise permanently harming any

of them, you may use your pitchforks to encourage them to disperse. Do not harm anyone else,

or, through your actions or lack thereof, allow anyone else to come to harm. Execute.”

The imps flew down and gleefully began prodding people.

“That should give us ample time,” Mostin sighed.

“Devils?” Ortwin asked.

“I couldn’t resist,” the Alienist replied.

*Mostin was on the verge of becoming a 10th level Alienist.

**** i.e. both the Temple and the Inquisition.**

Originally posted by Lombard on 05-26-2002

Sepulchrave asked me to post something - he's kind of tied up because his Mom is visiting from

England. I didn't know what to write, so I thought I'd share some background info.

The Church of Oronthon

This is designed as a background note to Sepulchrave's "Lady Despina's Virtue" thread in the

Story Hour forum. As I don't really have anything to contribute to the ongoing saga, I thought I'd provide some information about the Church that my character (Eadric) belongs to.

If you've been following the story, you'll know that things are changing – a schism has occurred

which may render all of this obsolete. This, then, is the structure of the Church in its original

form. Sep was a doctoral student of comparative religion, so he's well informed about the way

religions develop historically. Surprisingly, the high fantasy element doesn't play that much of a role in the way things are set up.

Oronthonianism is loosely based on late medieval Catholicism, and the cosmology itself is influenced by Dante and Milton. The names of many celestials (Palamabron, Enitharmon, Rintrah) are borrowed from William Blake's poems – especially "The Marriage of Heaven and

Hell." The Urgic Mystics, a heretical sect of Oronthon worshippers (to whom Eadric's brother,

Orm, belongs) hold views which most closely resemble those of Blake and Emmanuel Swedenborg.

Some General Thoughts

The Church of Oronthon, from Eadric's perspective, consists of two movements

(1) Orthodoxy. This is by far the largest grouping, and the one to which Eadric belongs.

(2) Heterodoxy. This consists of all of the alternative interpretations of Oronthonianism. It is a catch-all phrase, and includes the Urgic Mystics, Reconciliatory Sophists and other more obscure

denominations. From the Orthodox perspective, all of these groups are heretical. They do not

concern us.

Traditionally, Orthodoxy is led by the Archbishop of Morne, who possesses the indwelling

spirit

of the deity. He is served by the Magistratum who enforce the codes, and the Pastorate who

provide spiritual guidance to the masses. The Curia, who advise on matters of doctrine, are drawn from both groups. The Great Conclave consists of the Curia, plus other holy men drawn

mostly from the Pastorate.

One of the things in “Defenders of the Faith” which impressed Sepulchrave was the Contemplative PrC. He saw it as a means to bypass the idea that church priests needed to be

members of the Cleric class in order to demonstrate divine favor. Now the scholar and introvert

could realistically be portrayed, and mysticism could regain a central role in the religion – something which was otherwise hard to accomplish within the class limits of D&D.

In short, this is the way it works:

1) The vast majority of clergymen, from local village priests, through deacons, abbots and Bishops are members of the Expert class. Their specialty is Knowledge (Religion), and they

possess other skills such as Profession (Counselor), Sense Motive, Diplomacy etc. which support

this. They spend time advising people on religious matters, presiding at ceremonies and rites of

passage, and doing other humdrum and mundane duties. They comprise the Pastorate.

2) A small minority of Church members demonstrate certain “Gifts.” These people do not get

involved in the day-to-day organization of the Church, but are trained to fulfill special tasks.

These people are members of the Cleric and Paladin classes, or of PrCs which evolve from them.

They are supported by a huge staff of Experts. They are the Magistratum.

3) Members of the Contemplative Prestige class – those who are considered most holy – do not

tend to come from the Cleric or Paladin classes. Because the only prerequisite of the Contemplative is ‘Knowledge (Religion): 13 Ranks,’ it actually makes sense to have the sedentary, meditative ‘Expert’ types grow into this role. The Archbishops are always Contemplatives.

The Magistratum

The Magistratum – the body which enforces correct behaviour and dogma – consists of two

wings, both of which are politically active.

(1) The Temple. A member of the Temple is called a Templar – this is something of a misnomer,

because it includes other classes as well as the Templar PrC. The Temple is both the physical

building of the Great Fane in Morne, as well as the institution of those sworn to preserve it.

Lawful Fighters, Paladins and Clerics form the backbone of the Temple. Often, the members of

the highest echelons of the Temple are represented by Prestige Classes: notably the Warpriest and

Templar PrC proper. The Templars guard relics, protect the Archbishop, and prosecute holy wars.

The Mission, originally a separate wing, is now a subdivision of the Temple. It is concerned with

proselytizing, but because most of its members are off converting heathens, it has little political clout.

(2) The Inquisition is responsible for rooting out corruption and demonic and/or diabolic influences. Paladins tend to be under represented in the Inquisition and Clerics are more common, although most deputed Inquisitors are, in fact, members of the Expert class. Again, the

highest tiers of this wing of the Magistratum is where the PrCs tend to be found. As well as the

Church Inquisitor, the Sacred Exorcist and Consecrated Harrier PrCs are suitable templates for

modelling some of these specialist characters.

Monotheism

Sepulchrave's world is close to monotheistic, and Oronthonianism is by far the most common

religion in the North. The 'Old Faith,' practiced by Nwm, still has adherants, but its popularity

has been gradually declining for centuries. Orthodoxy uses the words 'Pagan' and 'Heathen'

liberally to describe anyone who is not a follower of Oronthon.

One of the ideas touched on earlier in the thread is that Oronthon is, in fact, 'schizophrenic.' This may or may not be true, but with dozens of different groups all emphasizing different aspects of

the deity, both within Orthodoxy and beyond it, it is hard to discover who the 'real' Oronthon is, behind all of his facets.

The deity's possible multiple personalities become most obvious when you consider members of

the Cleric class. The domains of Good, Healing, Law, Protection, Retribution, Sun, Strength,

Creation, Exorcism, Glory, Inquisition and Mysticism can all be related to Oronthon. A Cleric

who emphasizes Good and Healing is going to have a different perspective than one who focuses

on Law and Retribution.

Although Oronthon is ostensibly Lawful Good, obviously his clerics can legitimately be LN or

NG. Clerical domain selections reflect these different emphases. One of Eadric's main complaints against the system is that the Magistratum has become too doctrinaire – emphasising

Law above Good. Many Templars and Inquisitors are, in game terms, Lawful Neutral. Cynric's

distrust of certain members of the Curia also reflected this. As a Contemplative – one who has

spent the time and energy to truly come to grips with what his god represents – Cynric was aware

of the imbalance and the tension and difficulty that it caused.

The hierarchical nature of the church exacerbates the problem, because a respect for the Law is

important. Consider someone in Tahl's position. His immediate superior is the Inquisitor General,

Melion. Tahl is LG but Melion is LN. Tahl will follow orders to a point, but when his

"Goodness" is compromised too much, he is faced with a difficult dilemma. Does he defy the

Law or not? If he places the Good above the Law, does he, by default, actually take a step towards becoming NG?

Poor Eadric is constantly bombarded with alignment paradoxes which make his head hurt. Serves

you right for choosing a Paladin, you might say. You're probably right. Some hard choices lie ahead.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 05-29-2002

This is the last post of the "Lady Despina's Virtue" thread. Don't panic - I'm beginning another one soon. This just seems like an appropriate place to end it, as the title is no longer really relevant.

**

The leaves were turning on the trees, and a cold wind which presaged winter was blowing from the northeast when Mostin, Nwm, Despina, Ortwin and Eadric met again on the terrace at Trempa.

Eadric was still digesting the news of the assassination attempt upon Feezuu. He wasn't entirely sure whether he approved of Mostin's tactics.

"She is certainly still alive," Mostin lamented. "I have determined her location, and she remains on Limbo. Another similar attempt on our part is unrealistic – she will be prepared to counter it, and will doubtless have invoked powerful wards. One thing is likely: she herself does not possess

the 'Discern Location' dweomer, else I'd probably be dead by now – as would you, Ortwin."

"What will she do now?" Eadric asked.

Mostin sighed and shrugged. "It really depends on the extent to which revenge rules her actions,"

the Alienist said.

"As opposed to lust and greed?" Ortwin asked.

"Quite so," Mostin agreed. "I suspect that Graz'zt is more than capable of applying himself to find out who attacked Feezuu and where they are. The question is 'will he bother?' I'm sure that

he doesn't follow up every assault made against every fiend in his service: he has more important

plans to consider. And Abyssal politics tend to be very momentary."

"Er, what would YOU do in her position, Mostin?" The Bard asked worriedly.

"If I were vengeful, I'd seek out the 'Discern Location' dweomer, determine our whereabouts,

and then attack us individually," Mostin said.

“Great,” Ortwin said drily. “Something nice to look forward to.”

“If she can cast the spell at all,” Nwm remarked cannily. “She is a Necromancer. Divination may be prohibited to her.”

Mostin was cheered by Nwm’s words. The Druid had a good point.

“But she could still engage a proxy to cast the spell for her, or even petition the Prince,” Ortwin said gloomily.

“Like I said,” Mostin sighed, “it depends on the extent to which revenge rules her actions. I doubt that she would wish to be so beholden to Graz’zt – assuming he wouldn’t simply blast her for

presuming to ask a favour. But how far out of her way is she prepared to go?”

Eadric related Tahl’s revelation to the others.

“Rintrah commanded him to leave the Fane in no uncertain terms,” the Paladin said. “The celestial also instructed Tahl to free me and lead me to safety, and in a subsequent exchange with Urthoon, Tahl confirmed that my life was in danger. Apparently one person at least in the Curia

feels that I would be better off dead.”

“Assassins?” Ortwin asked.

Eadric shrugged. “I have become a rather high-profile thorn in the side of the establishment,” he sighed, “it’s possible. Rintrah spoke of a coming conflict, and indicated that I would be pivotal in it.”

“Is the revelation reliable?” Mostin asked. “Not that I doubt Tahl’s sincerity, but is it possible that he was deceived?”

Eadric shook his head. “He was wearing the Eye of Palamabron: no illusion or counterfeit – not even that of the Adversary – can withstand it. He, er, has it with him now.”

“He stole the Eye?” Mostin was incredulous.

“Not at all,” Eadric replied. “Rintrah instructed him to take it. He was told that he would need it.

Nonetheless, I agree that the Inquisition might hold a pretty dim view of it.”

“Why can’t Tahl simply appear before the Curia and relate his vision?” Nwm asked.

“Under magical scrutiny, they will know he is not lying and will be forced to acknowledge his

legitimacy? And what is this talk of Assassins? Since when did Oronthon’s clergy sink that low?”

“I don’t KNOW that Assassins are involved. But it wouldn’t be the first time that they’ve been engaged by individuals within the Church. The establishment itself has been known to condone it

in the past.”

Ortwin looked surprised. “How? It is a patently evil act.”

“Don’t be naïve, Ortwin,” Eadric said. “It is a political act. And it can be justified by service to the greater good. I agree – it is not a tactic that I would endorse. I also refer you to your own

assault upon Feezuu.”

Ortwin grunted. “She is a fiend. It’s different.”

Eadric sighed and shook his head. “As to Tahl appearing before the Curia, I suppose it’s possible.

If he wasn’t immediately arrested and if they even let him speak, then perhaps he could convince

them of the validity of his experiences. But the dogmatic, conservative element is so entrenched

– so committed to maintaining the law at all costs – that I’m dubious that he’d be heard. But the

same argument applies to a testament made by Tahl as it does to revelation from Oronthon himself: why has the Bright God remained silent? Why not simply send an avatar to address

those who doubt?”

“Damn good question,” said Ortwin, “why doesn’t he?”

“I am starting to think that it’s a faith versus proof scenario,” Eadric said.

“How tedious,” Mostin said.

Nwm shook his head. “Your god is either brutal or confused, Eadric. I foresee that rivers of blood will be shed over this, and to what end? For a deity who embodies healing and good, he seems

remarkably receptive to the idea of conflict and pain.”

Eadric grimaced. “It is complex,” he agreed. “Tahl has prescribed a penance for me, to allay the lingering guilt I might feel over Cynric’s death, and to purge me of any remaining doubts. I will

withdraw to the mountains alone.”

“Ed, this is really bad timing,” Ortwin said. “Morne is only a few days away, and now that the Duchess has thrown her lot in with you, it’s only a matter of waiting until the banners of the

Temple appear along the road. You would be more use here.”

“Nothing will happen before spring,” Eadric said calmly. “By the time that the Curia have settled their differences, made a decision, freed their finances, gained Royal assent and mobilized an

army, winter will be here. They will not initiate a campaign until the snows have melted.

**

Eadric and Despina remained alone on the terrace after the others had departed: Mostin to his

chambers, Nwm to find his bear and owls (ugh, birds, thought the Alienist), and Ortwin to find

some firewine and the company of someone less reputable than the Paladin.

“So the Goddess accepted your petition,” Eadric said rhetorically, evidencing some regret.

“Apparently,” Despina concurred. She smiled. “Am I now thrice-fallen?*

Eadric shrugged. “I am beginning to realise that things are more complicated than I once thought they were.”

“Or much simpler,” Despina said.

Eadric let the comment pass. He was in no mood for a philosophical debate.

“What will you do now?” He asked.

“I will eat, sleep and act when appropriate.” Despina replied.

“Nwm’s really gotten to you, hasn’t he?”

“Actually, that’s one of Tatterbrand’s,” she laughed.

Eadric raised an eyebrow.

“At my trial,” he said, “I learned that your name is Nehael. Do you prefer it?”

“I think I do,” said Nehael.

Eadric nodded.

“In the morning,” he began, “I will be gone – say my good-byes to the others. I need solitude – I learned that from my time in the dungeons of the Inquisition. I will return when I am ready.

Hopefully before Midwinter. Are you planning on staying?”

“Oh, yes,” the Demoness replied.

Eadric seemed relieved. “Goodnight Nehael,” he said.

She stopped him before he left. “You need to let go of it all, Eadric or you will fail,” she said.

“Guilt and doubt?” He replied. “Yes, I know.”

“No,” she shook her head. “EVERYTHING, Eadric. Do you understand?”

He swallowed hard, and departed.

Nehael did not retire, but climbed the steps to the broken space atop the Tower of Owls.

Sprouting wings from her back, she flew up and perched upon the tallest battlement, her knees

tucked beneath her arms, and waited.

Somewhat later, Rintrah appeared.

“Is he ready?” The Planetar asked.

“Let’s wait and see, shall we?” Nehael replied.

The Celestial and the Demoness sat together in silence for an hour, until a single figure, walking quickly and purposefully in the moonlight, strode across the courtyard below. He wore no

armour, rode no horse, and bore no weapons except for a roughly hewn staff.

“Good,” said Rintrah. “I will reveal myself to him in six weeks or so.”

Nehael sighed. Celestials were so traditional.

“If you wish, you may return with me,” Rintrah offered.

“Thanks, but no thanks,” said Nehael. “I like it here.”

Rintrah nodded. “I understand. The offer remains open – provided that you don’t stir up the

archons.”

Nehael smiled. “Goodbye, Rintrah,” she said.

The Planetar vanished, but the Demoness sat and watched the figure walking along the road

diminish, and finally disappear.

She sat for a long time. Demons have good eyesight.

* Demons are known theologically as “Twice-Fallen”: first, from Oronthon’s grace into Hell; and second, after rejecting the leadership of the Adversary in their exodus to the Abyss.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 05-30-2002

Before the next phase of the campaign got underway, a few loose ends had to be tied up. The characters basically had six months of in-game down-time to play with, to come up with rationales for their

munchkin ideas (just kidding, fellas).

Eadric had decided that he’d had enough of being a Paladin, and was heading for a Divine Disciple. He already met the prerequisites, and felt that it would reflect his Messianic status in opposition to his own church. He also figured he could wait another level for his fourth iterative attack, and instead wanted to pick up a bunch of domain spells and the ability to communicate telepathically with Celestials.

Mostin wanted to research some spells, and build a gadget or two. Otherwise he was headed for a

Diviner 6 / Alienist 10. He desperately wanted to get his Intelligence up to the magic number of 26, as that would get him an extra 8th level slot.

Ortwin, in an act of pure, unadulterated munchkinism, for which there is absolutely no excuse, had decided to take a level of Ranger. He wanted a cool new off-hand weapon, and had already decided to blow his 18th level feat on Improved TWF. After the encounter with Feezuu, Ortwin decided that he

liked melee more than anything else, and henceforth was going to concentrate on becoming a death

machine. Rob can already smell those Epic levels.

Nwm was perfectly happy to remain a Druid (Good for you, Dave. Stick with it!) He also had oodles of XP left over, even after he'd levelled, so I agreed to let him make some magic items. As the lowest level member of the party (now 15th), I was prepared to cut him some slack.

Nehael took a level of Druid, and then a level of Contemplative PrC. Demons don't normally advance by character class, but she's hardly typical of the crowd. Besides, as Lombard pointed out in the

previous thread, I like Contemplatives.

With these ideas in mind, I present the first part of the continuing story.

**

Ortwin Alone

The evening after Eadric's departure, Ortwin of Jiuhu brought a set of drawings to show Mostin the Metagnost in his chambers.

"I'm having this commissioned," he informed the Alienist. "It's a pick – similar to those used by knights. You know, light, one-handed, good penetration and all that. Can you enchant it for me?"

Mostin scowled. "No," he said.

"You can't or you won't?" Ortwin asked.

The Alienist sighed. "I always found the construction of enchanted weapons to be a rather vulgar art, and even the finest examples invariably end up in the hands of unappreciative hooligans. I never

applied myself to the technique."

"Hmph," said Ortwin. "Do you know anyone who would do this? You've mentioned the witch Mulissu.

Would she be willing?"

Mostin laughed uncontrollably for a few moments, before regaining his composure and shaking his

head. "Even were she capable – something I doubt – Mulissu's most precious asset is time itself. That is the one thing she is most reluctant to sacrifice. This is true of most wizards to some extent: there is so much to do, to discover. A mountain of gold would not persuade Mulissu to undertake this project,

when she could instead be unearthing the secrets of flachenblitz or plasma vortices. What enchantments did you have in mind?”

“Speed and Thunder,” Ortwin said, “And enough punch to hit a Balor.”

Mostin’s eyes goggled. “Are you fabulously rich or something? Have you any idea how much

something like that is worth?”

“Two tons of gold, give or take,” Ortwin said calmly.

“Pah,” said Mostin. “Gold is simply a convenient measure. It has no real value when compared to magic. Take your sword, your cloak and your armour. That is how much such a weapon is worth.”

“I am willing to surrender my Iron Horn and my Winged Boots,” Ortwin said. “I haven’t used them for a year at least. They would cover some of the value.”

“A third at most,” Mostin sighed. “The mage Idro, who dwells near Jiuhu, would be capable of enchanting this pick to your specifications, but he will demand a higher price than you are able to pay.

Anyway, why have another weapon? Your scimitar is sufficient.”

“It’s a style thing,” Ortwin said.

“Ahh,” said Mostin. He genuinely understood the Bard.

“This is important, Mostin,” Ortwin said.

After liquidating his assets, Ortwin was taken by Mostin to see Idro in his tower, deep in the forest of Nizkur. After negotiating with several charmed servitors, the duo were shown to the topmost room in the tower - cluttered but comfortable, with a variety of odd items including homunculi in jars scattered around. Immediately, the Bard disliked the reclusive wizard, but hid his distaste beneath a veneer of glib charm.

“An Iron Horn, Winged Boots and a bag of emeralds to the value of twenty-eight thousand gold

crowns,” Ortwin said in a matter-of-fact way.

Idro swallowed in reflexive greed.

“What do you want from me?” Idro asked drily. “I have nothing to match these items in terms of value

– and understand that the Horn, although potent, is nothing more than a curio from my perspective. I have no use for it.”

“I wish to engage your services. Mostin informs me that you are accomplished in the art of enchanting weapons. This project will be your magnum opus in the field. You will leave an indelible mark on the history of the craft.” Ortwin spoke smoothly and confidently.

“These are the specifications.” The Bard handed his draft to the aging wizard.

“Hah!” Idro exclaimed after glancing at the paper. “You’ll need more than these baubles to cover the cost of this.”

“I am open to suggestions,” Ortwin grinned.

Idro thought for a moment, and then smiled wickedly.

“I have a rival in these parts, an enchanter named Troap,” he said slowly. “He lives in a castle on a bluff within the forest, maybe two days from here. He has certain items which may offset the cost of this endeavour.”

“Offset, or entirely cover the cost?” Ortwin asked.

“If Troap were to meet with an accident, AND you delivered both his crystal ball and his staff to me, together with the items that you have already shown me, I would consider the debt paid. I would begin work on your weapon forthwith.”

Ortwin considered the offer.

“If Mostin is willing to act as arbiter in the worth of the items involved, I might be willing,” Ortwin said. “After all, I wouldn’t like to think that you are cheating me, Idro.” The Bard smiled innocently.

Idro grunted. Although a stickler for value, he knew that Mostin’s reputation as a haggler was almost unparalleled. He glanced at the Alienist.

“Sounds fair to me,” Mostin said. “Of course, I too will require a fee if my services are to be engaged in a professional capacity.”

“Which Ortwin will pay,” Idro said. “I have no need for such advice.”

“Very well,” the Bard sighed. He would rather be exploited by Mostin than Idro.

“Five percent,” Mostin said.

“Two percent, and only of the value of the staff and ball,” Ortwin countered.

“Done,” said Mostin, “provided that I get first refusal on Troap’s spellbooks. I will, of course, provide the full market value for any new dweomers contained in them.”

Idro fumed. He had hoped for an oversight on the part of the Bard.

“Know also,” Ortwin said blithely, “that my fee for assassinating powerful wizards is twenty-five thousand gold crowns. In the interests of mutual trust, I am willing to waive this cost, provided that, if the values are otherwise met, you concentrate on enchanting my weapon to the exclusion of other

projects that would otherwise detain you. I don’t want to wait ten years to acquire it, only to find that you went senile or died of old age before completing it.”

“Agreed,” Idro said.

“I thought that you felt assassination was evil,” Mostin sniped.

“Nonsense,” said Ortwin. “It is a political act. So, Idro - tell me of Troap...”

**

Troap was a goblin. No more vicious or unpleasant than others of his kin – which is to say very vicious and unpleasant – who dwelled even deeper in the forest than Idro. He wove powerful enchantments and illusions from his castle and, aside from a retinue of Ogre

Magi, shunned contact with the outside world.

Mostin had flatly refused to aid Ortwin for three reasons. Firstly, the Alienist did not want to gain a reputation as one who bullied and stole from fellow arcanists, whatever their faults – it paid to have an open mind when dealing with most students of magic. Second, to ‘engage his services in a professional capacity’ would have cost Ortwin a good deal of money – and Mostin did not feel that it would be

responsible to undertake such a task for free. Finally, the Alienist really didn’t care that much – he had far better things to do than chase after obscure goblin wizards.

Ortwin saw that Mostin could not be persuaded, and the Alienist returned to Trempa in order to begin

research into his permanent ‘Magnificent Mansion.’ The Bard commanded his winged boots to bear him aloft and flew westwards, into the skies above the deepest reaches of the forest of Nizkur.

Ironically, he thought, he might also need to use his Horn as well.

Ortwin’s boots carried him at a good speed, and after two hours the Bard had made nearly twenty miles without incident. He set down in a glade of elm trees and prepared to make camp for the night. This was something he’d missed for several years now – roughing it on his own with the minimum of

magical support and bolstering. With Eadric gone for an indefinite period of time – seeking solace in the mountains - Ortwin also felt the need to reconnect with his own roots. He had determined to seek out the Elven community of Hithin, and enter a period of study there. A spell with the Elves – if he could find them* – would be recuperative, and he would master the twin-weapon style they were famed for. His music would be an adequate payment for them – in any case they cared little for material

goods.

After stalking a young deer, which the Bard slew with a single, swift throw of his scimitar, Ortwin made a fire. He quickly but inexpertly butchered the carcass, dressed the meat, and spit-roast a haunch.

The choicest portions of the remainder, he salted, wrapped and stowed in his pack. Unused parts of the carcass were left at a safe distance – a mile from his camp. The evening meal of venison, accompanied by wild cloudberry, dried cake and wine, left him feeling bloated but happy. He drew his cloak around himself, intoned an ‘Alarm’ spell, and fell into a deep sleep.

His reverie was disturbed several hours later by a Satyr, who had smelled the roasting meat and waited patiently to pilfer any items that might be present. Ortwin’s simple ward alerted him to the presence of the Fey, and the Bard swore vociferously in Elven before chasing it off. The Satyr slipped into the woods, but Ortwin did not pursue it – he probably would have done the same thing himself had he been in its position.

“Go and find a Nymph to frolic with or something,” he yelled after it.

Late next morning, his eyes bleary, Ortwin, flying out of the east, espied the castle of the

Wizard Troap.

It was a squat, ugly building, built of large blocks of brown stone, which grew from the crest of a rocky knoll. It seemed to be Hermetically sealed. Confident in his own abilities, the Bard drew his weapon and decided to set down upon the roof of one of the four towers. Just before he reached it, however, he was beset by invisible assailants.

A whistling noise passing by his head, followed by the sudden appearance of a huge, blue-skinned Ogre wielding an enormous sword, alerted Ortwin to the fact that he was being attacked. No problem, the Bard thought, until three more appeared around him. One of them drew blood with its weapon, foiling his cloak's displacement effects.

Ortwin pirouetted gracefully in the air, closed with one of the Ogres, narrowly avoided another swipe from its weapon, and with three swift strokes, dispatched it. It tumbled from the sky, fell fifty feet, and landed with a heavy thud upon the roof of the tower.

"One!" Ortwin announced in his best witty voice.

One of the Ogre Magi grunted something, and the two others backed off. Suddenly Ortwin was plunged into darkness – obviously they felt that his displacement advantage needed countering. A fraction of a second later, the Bard was assailed by blasts of ice from two directions. Through some miracle of

foresight, Ortwin found a gap between the two cones in the blackness, and avoided the ill effects of both. The Bard plunged downwards back into daylight, avoiding the stroke of a greatsword, and

arrested his descent an inch above the roof. Above him, a sphere of darkness floated. The corpse of the felled Ogre twitched upon the flagstones, and Ortwin quickly hacked at the neck with his scimitar. The severed head looked indignant, and tried to protest, but the Bard flung it over the battlements.

"HEEelp..." the yell faded away.

It was followed by the sphere of darkness – obviously whatever object that the spell had been cast upon had been thrown aside. But the three Ogres were invisible again.

Ortwin mused for a second and steeled himself, as two of the Ogres charged down from above. They

appeared at the same time as their greatswords did. One missed, but the other hit solidly and painfully.

Ortwin leapt forward, ducking under wild blows, and unleashed a frenzied attack upon one of the

creatures. His scimitar bit into bone and sinew, but the Ogre still stood. As he wondered where the third Ogre had disappeared to, Ortwin was hit full force by another 'Cone of Cold' from one of those in front of him. He reeled backwards, as the other tried to lop his head off with its greatsword.

Ortwin regained his senses, and calmly and methodically pressed an attack against the uninjured Ogre Mage, his scimitar flicking out rapidly and precisely. As it collapsed, Ortwin grinned, only to watch the other, wounded creature assume the form of a gaseous

cloud and begin to move away. Ortwin hurled

Githla, which spun through the air and passed through the cloud, drawing ichor as if from nowhere in

its flight. The Ogre rematerialized and crashed to the ground.

“Two and Three, hah!” Ortwin declared, catching his scimitar, although his enthusiasm was somewhat diminished. He quickly doused the bodies of the three Ogres in oil and set a flame in them, all the while looking around suspiciously for the remaining creature. It did not reappear.

After tending to his wounds, Ortwin surveyed the roof of the keep, and looked over the battlements down at the walls. Odd. No doors and no windows anywhere in sight.

Guessing that it was an illusion, the Bard mustered his will in an attempt to disbelieve.

Nothing changed.

Ortwin sighed, and began to systematically search the tower upon which he stood, tapping lightly with a dagger in concentric circles from the inside outwards. With no results.

He moved to a second tower and vainly repeated the process, and then a third. After a few minutes, the Bard located a loose flagstone, around a foot square.

Hmm, he thought.

Ortwin gingerly pried the flagstone up until it was ajar, keeping his face averted. He shot a glance towards the gap beneath the stone: there seemed to be a shallow depression. Ortwin grinned happily, lifted the flagstone out of the way, and looked in. Two levers, and between them, on a tile, some graven writing.

BANG!

Sh*t, thought Ortwin, brushing soot and debris from his face. I should’ve seen that one coming.

Each lever, he noticed, was set to the central point of three positions. That made nine possibilities.

Obviously, this was the “off” position of whatever they determined. But jointly or singly?

Hmm.

Oh well, the Bard thought, and pulled the left-hand lever towards himself.

There was a faint ‘clunk,’ like a well oiled gear moving, but nothing else happened.

Hmm. Definitely jointly.

Ortwin looped a rope around the second lever, and flew twenty feet away beyond the battlements

before he yanked it in the opposite direction of the first. There was a grinding noise, and a doorway appeared at the base of the tower, revealing a dark space beyond.

That wasn’t so bad, Ortwin thought, and cast a ‘Light’ spell on his scimitar. He swallowed, and

cautiously entered.

*Elves are itinerant forest-dwellers and make no permanent homes.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 05-31-2002

The town of Trempa, three miles from the castle-cum-palace where the Duchess lived, was a small,

walled settlement of great age with quaint chapels and narrow cobbled streets. Its five thousand

inhabitants were, for the most part, law-abiding and sedate. They paid their taxes, observed their duties, attended mass, and behaved in a generally responsible fashion.

It therefore came as a surprise to most of them that their well-regarded and philanthropic feudal

mistress, Soraine, nineteenth Duchess of Trempa, had overnight become public enemy number two –

the top position being taken of one of her bannermen, the Baronet of Deorham. The townsfolk – led by the influential Clockmakers' Guild – had a succession of meetings in order to determine the best course of action. The Duchess had made it clear that no-one who felt that her actions had been wrong was

obligated to stay – she would recompense them for their property, and guarantee their safe passage from Trempa.

The Duchess, in her address to the Curia, had been careful to emphasise her abiding loyalty to the crown. Her secession, she maintained, was not a political or territorial act, but a religious one. She was, and would remain, a loyal vassal of the King. She deeply regretted the current situation, but could no longer identify with the label 'Orthodox' as long as the current Curia remained in control.

Assuming the styles of "Post-Dogmatist" and "Transaxiomatic Oronthonian," the first thing that the Duchess did upon her return to her fief was to disestablish the Church and eliminate the Temple's tax-gathering perquisites. She would not confiscate any wealth or property currently held by the Temple, but, henceforth, all donations were to be made on a strictly voluntary basis. Not only were the

disproportionate levies exacted upon the Uedii worshippers – around a third of her subjects – to be abolished, but the Oronthonians were also to be exempted if they so chose.

Most of the Goddess devotees lived in the most marginal rural areas, and were delighted at the turn of events.

Her richest subjects, urban Oronthonians, also found that they had ten percent more money than

previously. Suddenly, heresy didn't seem like such a bad idea. Besides, "Transaxiomatic" had a good

ring to it.

The Duchess dismissed the aging chaplain Trilgar from her service, and sent him back to Morne with a comfortable pension. Trempa was too small to boast a Bishop, but its Abbot and his staff were politely given the opportunity to join the fledgeling sect. Most decided to leave.

Of the twenty Templars stationed there, nine, after speaking with Tahl, elected to stay. All were Paladins.

Tahl was enjoined to assume the leadership of the Fane at Trempa, a responsibility which he grudgingly accepted on a temporary basis. One of his first duties, he decided, was to ride to the Abbey of Osfrith –

where Nehael had briefly stayed – in order to speak with the Abbess. He felt that he owed her an explanation.

To his astonishment, Tahl discovered that both the Abbess and the nuns were almost completely

ignorant of events in the outside world. In a private audience with the Reverend Mother, the former Deputy Inquisitor tried to give as impartial an account as possible of what had transpired, leaving out mention of his personal revelations.

The Abbess sighed. “I suppose that I should tell the sisters, although I try not to worry them needlessly.

But with winter approaching, and no funds reaching us from Trempa, it will be difficult.”

“I will ensure that you receive adequate monies from the Fane’s coffers,” Tahl offered.

“That’s sweet of you dear,” the Abbess said, “but you are a heretic now – no offense intended. It would look terribly bad.”

“But you accept private donations?” Tahl asked.

“Of course,” the Abbess replied.

Tahl removed a gold ring bearing a large ruby from his finger, and placed it on the table.

“There you go,” he said. “That should keep you going for a year or two. Don’t worry – it doesn’t belong to the Church.”

The Abbess smiled and picked up the ring. “It does now,” she said.

On the ride back to Trempa, Tahl brooded. This was only the beginning. Things were going to get much more complicated.

Ortwin Alone - Part 2

The corridor at the base of the tower was narrow and claustrophobic, and Ortwin gained the impression that it hadn’t been used for some time. Whatever method of entry and egress that Troap and his

servitors employed to and from the castle, this wasn’t it.

Ortwin’s mind raced with possibilities as he cautiously moved forwards, and he was in a

state of high alert. Were Troap's defenses primarily magical or mechanical? It occurred to the Bard that his

perceptions might be fooled at any time – Idro had indicated that Troap was an enchanter and illusionist of no mean ability.

Where had the remaining Ogre Mage disappeared to? Was Troap already alerted to his presence? It

seemed likely. Ortwin perceived no magical scrutiny, but he was aware that his own faculties for

detecting such observation were limited.

If Mostin were here, this would be over in five minutes, he considered.

He reached the end of the corridor – a small, circular, iron-bound door which bore no handle or lock. A meticulous inspection of the surrounding area revealed no visible mechanism by which it could be

opened.

This is ridiculous, the Bard thought. To be foiled by so simple an obstacle.

He suddenly realized his overdependence on his friends' magic.

After due consideration, Ortwin decided that brute force was the only way past the door, and he slashed at it violently. His magic scimitar bit easily through the metal bars and wood.

It also made a huge amount of noise. By the time that the door gave in, Ortwin felt like a rank novice.

Beyond the ruined door, there was nothing but a small alcove, empty except for another lever, set in an

'up' position.

Hmm, the Bard thought. He increasingly disliked this place.

Ortwin looped his rope around the lever, and followed his footsteps back along the corridor, paying out the cord behind him. He exited the tower, stood in the sun to the side of the entranceway, and yanked.

There was a grinding noise, and the stone doorway to the tower promptly closed.

Although thankful that he was on the right side of the door, Ortwin cursed. He flew back up to the roof of the castle to see that the levers there had reset themselves. After repeating the entire process, and

retrieving his rope, the Bard found himself in exactly the same dilemma that he faced an hour before.

How exactly did one get into the castle?

Ortwin mused for a while, and decided that the obvious thing to do was to quiz one of Troap's servants.

He lamented the fact that he'd been so ready to kill the Ogres, and wished he'd spared one for

questioning. He'd forgotten his most basic lessons, and become complacent and lazy.

And too dependant on magic, he thought again.

The Bard wondered how thick the walls were, and whether sound would penetrate into the interior of the castle. Perhaps some taunts were in order.

So Ortwin flew down to the base of the wall, alighted, and began to walk around the circumference of the castle, looking up and singing. His ditties ranged from subtle satirical jibes at goblins, to vulgar insults directed at Troap, which suggested that the Wizard had Elven blood, and that his pox-covered face ensured that he would never mate with the pigs that he was so attracted to.

On his third circumambulation, whilst passing the north wall of the keep, Ortwin noticed a purple pellet streaking towards him. He quickly ducked aside as a ball of violet fire exploded on the ground next to him, singeing his hair but causing no great discomfort.

The Bard looked up to see a small block of stone slide back into place and merge seamlessly with one of the larger sections of the wall.

Ha! He thought, and flew towards the source of the attack at top speed. He struck it with his scimitar as hard as he could, holding the weapon in both hands. A stone brick two feet square cracked slightly, its outline against the larger block revealed. He slashed at it repeatedly, and it slowly began to crumble.

There was a click, more gears moving, a grinding sound below him, and Ortwin glanced down to see a wide section of the wall had opened up. The largest Wyvern that Ortwin had ever seen burst out and took to the air.

Ortwin headed straight towards it. As it lumbered through the air in attempt to orient itself, Ortwin darted past it and into the chamber from which it had issued, even as the section of wall was closing behind it. Its sting, six feet long at least, flicked out and missed the Bard by inches.

Ortwin tumbled in, pulled himself erect, and inspected the chamber – illuminated by his glowing

sword. It was heaped with rotting carcasses, offal and faeces, and the Bard suppressed the urge to

vomit. Aside from the false wall, there was also an iron door with a barred window. Ortwin dashed over and looked through. Beyond, was a torchlit corridor.

Yes! He thought.

He reached through the bars, groped down and felt for the lock. It felt pretty standard.

The section of the outer wall was opening again, and as he pulled a pick from his belt, Ortwin could hear the thunder of wings approaching from outside. With his right hand frantically and blindly

working the lock, the Bard held his scimitar in his left as the huge maw of the Wyvern

appeared and lurched towards him, rank and foul. Due to his cloak, it mistook his position and snapped around empty space.

The lock clicked, and Ortwin yanked the handle, rolling through to the opposite side of the corridor.

The Wyvern's tail lashed through the doorway, and struck the wall, knocking a torch from its sconce.

The Bard quickly moved out of the way.

Regaining his composure, Ortwin grinned cockily before he was struck full force by an empowered

'Lightning Bolt' which made his teeth shudder.

Fifty feet along the corridor, six goblins stood, weaving in and out of each other.

Ortwin sighed. "Not that old chestnut," he said, leaping forwards. He struck one of the images and it promptly disappeared.

PUT DOWN YOUR WEAPON a voice boomed in the Bard's mind.

Ngahh! Ortwin shook off the attempted spell. "Not bloody likely," he said.

Five 'Magic Missiles' appeared instantly from the interweaving illusion and pummeled Ortwin.

Undaunted, he struck out again three times. Two more images vanished, but now the remainder all

seemed to be bleeding from a cut on their respective left arms.

The Balor Ainhorr appeared behind Ortwin, filling the corridor with flame and darkness. The Demon

brought its terrible Will to bear upon the Bard.

Gods, thought Ortwin, that has to be an illusion. But Ainhorr remained, and blood ran from the Bard's temples and he trembled, before the vision disappeared.

"GET OUT OF MY MIND!" He screamed, lashing out at the cluster of goblins in front of him. Two more figments evaporated under his attack. Now only two remained. Each held up a glass prism.

Motes of light appeared in the air around Ortwin, flashing in brilliant hues and patterns.

Mmm, pretty colours, the Bard thought.

They started to move back down the corridor towards the door through which he'd come.

Mmm, they're so pretty. I must follow them.

Ortwin shambled off, and then vaguely remembered that there was a Wyvern on the other side of the

door.

Ngahh! He shook off the spell.

As Ortwin turned back to face Troap and his illusory twin, another 'Lightning Bolt' crackled towards him. This time he ducked in time, and it fizzled past his head.

Ortwin hurled his scimitar and charged down the corridor in pursuit of it. It whistled ahead of him, striking the remaining illusory goblin and causing it to vanish. As the Bard closed on Troap – the real Troap, he thought – the Wizard waved his hand at Ortwin, grinned, and disappeared with a 'pop.'

Ortwin caught Githla, and seethed.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 06-02-2002

**

Mostin's chambers at Trempa became cluttered and untidy – a situation which the Alienist, pedantic in the extreme in his desire for cleanliness and organization – found increasingly irritating.

At his request, the Duchess permitted Mostin to erect his portable manse in a seldom visited corner of her pheasant forest, alerting her gamekeepers to the presence of the Alienist and warning them to stay away from him. This situation proved to be to the liking of both the Aristocrat and the Wizard – Mostin could work in relative seclusion, and the Duchess did not have to tolerate his eerie and discomfiting presence at court. Several cartloads of items – oddments accumulated by the Alienist during his stay –

were transported along a narrow track into the woods by nervous but well-paid teamsters.

Mostin had engaged the services of a number of the best craftsmen in Trempa to provide him with

alembics, crucibles, lenses, strange clockwork devices and a host of other more mysterious items

constructed to his specifications. He confined himself to research in his library, and, in time, was all but forgotten by the court. The much anticipated retribution which Mostin feared Feezuu would exact,

diminished from a threat upon which he continually brooded, into an ever-present knot in his stomach, and finally subsided. Nonetheless, the Alienist spent much of his time within warded areas, and always had a quickened 'Dimension Door' on hand in case things went awry. Sometimes it paid to be paranoid.

Nwm returned to Eadric's castle of Kyrtil's Burgh at Deorham, and gently persuaded the Inquisitorial deputy and his staff who had taken up residence there to depart – not a difficult task, as the company were preparing to return to Morne in any case. Nwm's presence did, however, spare the keep from the Inquisition's wrath – they had been instructed to burn the castle of the Heretic prior to their departure.

The Druid reassembled the former staff, reinstated them at the keep, and recompensed them and their families for their troubles. Nwm then 'Awakened' two oak trees of enormous age and girth, and

instructed them to guard the keep.

Next, the Druid completed a number of much-needed repairs upon the place. Over six

days, and with

the judicious use of several ‘Walls of Stone,’ the Druid repaired the curtain wall and underpinned the foundations of The Steeple. Using ‘Transmute Rock to Mud’ and its reverse in carefully selected

places, and with the aid of his animated trees, Nwm made the keep unassailable from three directions, and reached by only a narrow bridge of sculpted stone from the fourth.

Multiple applications of ‘Stone Shape’ and ‘Wood Shape’ finished most of the detail work on the keep, including a new gate, wooden hoardings on the battlements and a number of much-needed new doors.

Finally, Nwm engaged the services of a team of twenty industrious Rock Gnomes to complete any

minor repairs that he might have overlooked. By the time that they had finished, Kyrtil’s Burgh looked as though it had been built yesterday.

Nwm sighed. He missed the ivy. A few spells saw to that.

News from Morne still reached Trempea on a regular basis, and although some tension existed between the more zealous and partisan adherents of Orthodoxy and the Duchess’s nominally heretical subjects, things for the most part proceeded as normal. The movement of people from Trempea to Morne in order

to distance themselves from association with the Duchess, was more than matched by an influx of new people eager to enjoy the new tax breaks which life in Trempea offered. Mobile members of the middle classes with no particular religious affiliation looked towards the liberal regime as an enlightened

model of rulership, and within the town new faces opened new businesses and injected fresh vigour into a flagging economy.

The Temple was not impressed.

They sent a number of envoys, demanding the reinstatement of their tax benefits, to confer with the Duchess. She entertained them grandly, saw to their every need, and then sent them back to Morne with the answer “No.” Veiled threats were issued, but the Duchess was still unmoved.

After her anathematization was officially ratified, the Curia found itself in the difficult position of having banned itself from further discourse with Trempea – consorting with heretics was, after all, a heretical act in itself. No more envoys were dispatched – something which the Duchess regretted. As long as the lines of communication had remained open, the Temple was not pursuing a military solution to the problem. Now, however, it had backed itself into a corner. Whatever liberal elements remained within the Curia, it seemed that their voices had been lost or drowned out.

Until the Marquis of Iald seceded.

The news did not entirely surprise anyone, although its timing did. Iald, the “One Devout Layman”

who was represented on the Curia – renowned for his holiness and piety – had voted

against the initial impeachment of Eadric. He had failed to appear at the motion which was passed criticizing Cynric, as his carriage-driver had mysteriously disappeared on the journey from Iald to Morne, only to be found in a roadside inn enjoying a selection of expensive wines.

Iald's snub to the Curia arrived during the inauguration of Lord Rede of Dramore – the Grand Master of the Temple – as the interim protector of the Orthodox Church in the absence of an Archbishop.

Motions had been pushed through, supported by Melion, Hethio and a number of others, to allow Rede executive powers, allowing the Temple to act independently of Curial sanction. There were historical precedents for this, although they had not been invoked for several centuries.

Iald, of course, had voted against the motion but, apparently in the interests of unity, had attended the inaugural ceremony in any case. Although a layman, as a member of the Curia he was afforded a

conspicuous position during the inauguration, and looked splendid in his white velvet and ermine

robes. In an act which was quickly afterwards attributed to an outburst of madness, Iald grabbed the ceremonial greatsword from the altar and attacked Rede with it. Iald was an old man, and was easily divested of the weapon by the Temple Guards. He was escorted forthwith from the premises to

confinement whilst he yelled:

“Rintrah commanded me to do this.”

The Marquis never reached his cell, however, as his henchmen intercepted his escort, rendered them unconscious, and sped the aging nobleman back to his fief. Apparently his outburst had been better planned than was initially assumed.

Upon his return to Iald, the Marquis promptly denounced the Curia and declared his support for the Duchess of Trempa.

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Ortwin had been hacked at, frozen, blown up, blasted with lightning, and had ruptured blood vessels in his scalp shaking off the ‘Phantasmal Killer’ invoked by Troap. He patched himself up as best he could with his remaining curative magic, and proceeded into the Goblin's castle. The Bard considered that Troap was now, in all likelihood, depleted of his major spells, and this cheered him somewhat. He

wondered what the staff that Idro had requested was capable of, however.

Ortwin inspected the corridor where Troap had ambushed him. It was well-illuminated by torches, and besides the iron portal which led into the wyvern's den, boasted several other doors. The Bard carefully searched for other hidden mechanical devices as he progressed systematically, from chamber to

chamber. A storeroom, an armory, a pantry in which the freezing temperature ensured the freshness of meats, a room full of broken and disused alchemical equipment. The final

door, at the end of the

corridor upon the left, was graced by a 'Magic Mouth' which spoke to Ortwin as he carefully checked it for booby-traps.

CONGRATULATIONS ON SUCCESSFULLY PENETRATING THE OUTER DEFENSE, it intoned.

IF YOU'RE PHYSICALLY CAPABLE, IT'S RECOMMENDED THAT YOU NOW RETREAT,

BEFORE YOU DIE PAINFULLY. YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED.

Quite civil, really, Ortwin thought as he picked the lock. The well-oiled door opened noiselessly, to reveal a short corridor with seamless walls, which terminated in single, square, doorway which was open, and led to a space beyond. Sitting on a cushion, in clear view, was Troap. The Wizard waved in an annoying fashion.

Ortwin ducked back behind the doorway, and considered his options for a moment. This was obviously a trap, but how best to proceed? The bard rummaged at his belt, found a vial, opened it and drank the contents. He quickly became invisible.

Commanding his boots into flight, Ortwin charged through the door at top speed, only to be stopped by an invisible barrier which he struck with considerable momentum. Troap smiled, muttered something

from a scroll, and walked calmly over to where the invisible Ortwin hovered. His purple robes and

neatly trimmed beard looked somehow out of place on a Goblin. The Bard backed off, but found that

his exit from the short corridor had been neatly sealed by another 'Wall of Force.'

"Before I decide how best to deal with you," Troap said calmly, "perhaps you could enlighten me as to your presence here. What do you want? Who told you of this place? What, exactly, have I done to you that warrants this burglary and the murder of my servants?"

"I have come seeking the fabulous Talisman of Sill," Ortwin lied quickly. "I was told that the Goblin Necromancer Troap, and his wicked giants dwelt here and perpetrated all kinds of vile acts on the

surrounding countryside. The Cleric Godfrith, a holy man, told me to rescue the Talisman and put an end to this tyranny – I assume you are Troap, although I have yet to witness any of your necromancy."

Troap considered for a while. "You are either an accomplished liar or very naïve," he said. "I have little time for either. For your information, I am neither vile nor a necromancer. I possess no such talisman, as you may or may not already know. I have never heard of this Godfrith, and, if he exists – which I am sceptical of – I am afraid you have been misinformed. My whereabouts are unknown to most, and I

have my suspicions as to who may have sent you here. Have you, perchance, heard of the mage called Idro?"

“The name is unfamiliar,” Ortwin lied.

“Hmm,” Troap grunted, and waddled out of sight for a moment.

He returned bearing a long staff, more than twice his height.

Sh*t, Ortwin thought. Whatever he plans to do with that, its going to be bad for me.

The Bard pulled his Iron Horn from his belt, and winded it. The Bard became visible again. On the

other side of the wall, the outlines of two large, hairy men appeared, bearing swords.

Troap struck the end of his staff upon the ground, and spoke a single word.

Ortwin, who had been prepared to command the shadowy barbarians into battle with Troap, suddenly

and inexplicably had a change of heart. Troap was a nice little fellow, after all. He had such a pleasant smile, and Ortwin wondered why he had threatened his friend, old Troap, in such a mean way.

“Be nice to Troap,” he instructed the summoned warriors. “Get him a cushion or something.”

One of the grizzled barbarians raised an eyebrow, and complied.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 06-03-2002

Another alignment crisis looms. Ah, the poor players...

**

Eadric’s assertion that the Temple would not prosecute a military expedition into Trempa before spring proved to be only partially correct.

The first snows already lightly dusted the ground, and the air was chill, when a group of sixty knights and men-at-arms – led by the Templar Brey of Methelhar – entered the bounds of the Duchy, passing

along the main road from Trempa to Morne.

They bypassed Deorham which, although guarded by only a small retinue, had been rendered

invulnerable by Nwm to anything less than a protracted siege or magical assault. Brey’s entourage

lacked both the numbers and expertise to initiate either – they were more of a posse than an army – but they bore a collection of impressive seals and warrants which, they hoped, would cow the townsfolk of Trempa and give the Duchess pause for thought.

The first indication that something was awry was not revealed by magical scrutiny, but by frantic

guards who had comprised the border watch at the gatehouse of Hartha Keep – two small towers which guarded a bridge over the River Nund, which marked the borders of the Duchy of Trempa – bearing

news back to the Duchess. Brey had dismounted from his destrier and, invoking some divine strength, had grown to a prodigious size and physically ripped the postern gate from its hinges, causing the small border garrison to flee in terror.

Fearing that the wrath of Oronthon had been loosed upon them, the guardsmen consoled themselves in a variety of ways. Some rode hard for Trempa, some fled to be with their families in case they needed to evacuate their steadings, some earnestly prayed in the closest chapels, and some headed for nearby inns in order to forget the disquieting scene that they had just witnessed. At Brey's command, the lightly armed outriders who supported his knights did not pursue the levies – he preferred to have rumours circulate which would instill a righteous fear into the seething hotbed of heretics and apostates which, in his mind at least, comprised Trempa.

When the exhausted messengers reached the castle of the Duchess, having ridden hard all night, they bore news of Brey's passage into Trempa. The Aristocrat immediately summoned her council, as well

as Nwm, Tahl, Mostin and Nehael. Mostin's response to the crisis was not well received.

"I can do nothing," the Alienist insisted calmly.

The Duchess was livid. "What do you mean?"

"This has passed into the realm of politics. I am forbidden."

She looked perplexed.

"The Great Injunction applies," Mostin explained regretfully. "I may be one of the most potent spellcasters in the world, but I will not risk the wrath of the Council.*"

"Bah!" The Duchess exclaimed. "I suppose this means that you will not use your power at all in the coming months?"

"Not necessarily," Mostin replied, "but I must be able to reasonably cite self-defense. I may also use auxiliary magics and act in an advisory capacity."

She was flabbergasted. "No blasting?"

"Believe me," Mostin said, sadly, "no-one regrets it more than I."

"We must formulate a plan quickly," Nwm mused. "Who is this Brey?"

"One of Rede's deputies," Tahl replied. "He is dangerous. The messengers indicate that he is already sending the message of 'Righteous Wrath' across the countryside. Retribution is his specialty."

"We should engage him in full public view," Nwm said. "He must not win the propaganda war. If Eadric were here, a debate of Oratory might be possible."

Tahl shook his head. "It is neither necessary nor desirable to debate with heretics," he said.

"But he cannot storm the castle," Nwm said. "What is his purpose?"

"Fear," said Tahl.

Brey sounded his horns outside of the castle. The drawbridge had been raised and the walls thronged with onlookers – guards, knights, courtiers, handmaidens and servants.

Nwm stood discreetly to one side of the Duchess, able to watch the proceedings but inconspicuous.

Brey unrolled a long scroll, and his voice carried clearly and forcefully up to those upon the

battlements. The announcement was received with horror.

“To Soraine, Duchess of Trempa; Eadric of Deorham and Tahl, formerly of the Inquisition, and to those heretics and blasphemers who have been seduced by their lies; from Rede, Grand Master of the

Temple, acting for the Curia of the One True Orthodox Church, a warning.

“Let it be known that in their infallible wisdom, the Curia have passed motions roundly condemning the actions taken by the heretofore mentioned heretics, as well as their followers, servants and subjects.

In their merciful and enlightened bounty, the Curia have decreed that they are willing to extend their leniency to those, both great and small, who forthwith depart from Trempa and its adjoining lands, and seek immediate confession and penance with representatives of the True Faith in Morne. If the

ringleaders in this affair submit themselves to ecclesiastical law, they will be dealt with in Oronthon’s justice and the misguided masses will be spared.”

Mostin made an arcane gesture, and a noise like a loud fart issued across the field. Several people on the walls tittered. Brey fumed before continuing.

“If the Duchess Soraine, Eadric of Deorham and Tahl fail to surrender themselves, those who remain, by their actions will have placed themselves irrevocably beyond the salvation of the Church. As

unrepentant apostates, heretics, idolaters and blasphemers, and by the sanction of Royal Decree...”

At this point, Brey held up an impressive sheet of vellum bearing the King’s seal before continuing.

“...I am authorized to inform you that the entire adult population of Trempa will be condemned to burn.** The sentence takes effect one week from today. At that point, the borders will be closed and access to Trempa will be sealed until the righteous fury of the Temple descends upon it, and the rule of law is reestablished.”

Even Mostin was staggered. Nwm was furious.

“What of the Uedii worshippers?” The Druid asked. “They are not part of this.”

Brey smiled. “The pagan element within Trempa has long been a source of concern to the Temple,” he said. “Like lapsed Oronthonians, they may atone and convert. Their catechesis into the True Faith will be warmly received.”

“Is this true across Wyre?” Nwm was incredulous.

“It soon will be,” replied Brey.

“Then f*ck you!” Shouted the Druid.

And Nwm unleashed a Fire Storm.

Those few who survived the initial fury of the Druid were consumed in further pillars of green flame which rose from the ground to meet them. All, with the exception of Brey, were immolated. Nwm

spared the great Templar.

“Give him a horse,” Nwm barked at Tatterbrand, who stood nearby. Brey’s own steed had perished in the flames. Eadric’s squire quickly complied.

“You may return to Morne,” Nwm’s voice cut like a whip. “Inform the Curia that I will not tolerate

this.”

Shaking, Brey mounted and fled. Nwm turned and left, and people moved quickly out of his way. The

Druid felt sick. He had drawn the first blood in the war that he had longed to avoid.

*Some explanation may be required. The Great Injunction is a time-honoured convention which is

defied by mages at their peril. Excepting acts of self-defense, a Wizard may not use his power for political or temporal ends, particularly on the battlefield during war. This prevents the escalation of magical warfare, and the casual employment of wizards to fling ‘fireballs’ around upon the battlefield.

The Great Injunction is a magical détente which transcends all considerations of race, gender, power and alignment. It is inviolable. “Grey Areas” – for example, if Mostin were to scry on behalf of the Duchess – certainly exist, but Mages must be cautious lest they push the limits too far.

The “Council” which Mostin refers to, is nothing more (or less) than the sum total of all of the Wizards in Wyre and its dependencies. In fact, no formal body of mages exists.

The Great Injunction is based upon “Murgen’s Edict” – a similar idea appearing in certain novels by Jack Vance.

**Note that there is a real-world precedent for this: during the Renaissance, the entire population of Holland was sentenced to death by the Spanish Inquisition. The Historical Inquisition were far less lenient than the Oronthonians are.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 06-04-2002

**

The Duchess was not happy.

“What the hell did you think you were doing?” She asked Nwm. “This does NOT aid our cause –

especially as I now suspect that those knights you just butchered will be regarded as martyrs to the cause. A peaceable solution now seems impossible.”

Nwm spoke coldly. “When I require your advice on how best to protect my religion, I will ask for it.

For what it’s worth, I think that the likelihood of a peaceful solution decreased sharply when the Curia sentenced everyone in Trempa to death.”

“But a slim chance is better than no chance,” she retorted.

Unexpectedly, Tahl came to Nwm’s defense. “They will not parley with us – we are anathema. Nwm’s actions sadden me – there were knights among that group who I knew to be just and honourable. But

they made their choice when they closed their eyes and ears to the corruption in the Temple. Many

more hard choices lie before us, and we must not waver.”

The Duchess groaned. “All of this religious zeal is making me feel queasy,” she said. “Did it occur to either of you that Brey and his followers deemed themselves equally justified. That, from their

perspective, they were acting in the greater Good?”

“Philosophical sophistry is irrelevant!” Nwm snapped. “They threaten my faith, which I know to be un-dogmatic, peaceful and non-proselytizing. I don’t give a damn what their reasons are for their actions.

And the same goes for you, Tahl. Frankly, right now, your whole stinking religion with its schizoid, patriarchal God just makes me puke. The only reason that I regret my actions is because I just killed sixty human beings – whether they are considered ‘just’ or ‘honourable’ in your f*cked-up perspective has no bearing on the matter. The fact that you don’t see it that way only makes it clearer to me just how far off the point you are. This conversation is over. If you need me, I’ll be in the grove at

Deorham. Nehael, are you coming?”

“Will you show me the trees?” The Demoness asked gently.

Nwm smiled sadly and nodded. Her question bought him back to the moment. Without judging, it

simultaneously comforted him, reminded him of his duty as a teacher, grounded him in his beliefs, and instructed him in the best way to proceed.

Ah, she was wise, this one. Skillful.

After they had departed, the Duchess turned to Mostin. “Where the hell is Ortwin?” She asked.

The Alienist shrugged. “He was dealing with a mage called Idro. Afterwards, he said something about visiting the Elves.”

Mostin realized that he hadn’t thought about the Bard for some time. He wondered what Ortwin was doing.

**

After scrying Ortwin's location, and with a broad smile on his face, Mostin made additional inquiries regarding the wizard Troap. He conferred with a skittish and irascible centaur who dwelt within the forest of Nizkur, and then with a group of sprites who lived nearby. It appeared that Troap was quite well regarded by the local population of Feys, and that Idro's account of the Goblin was rather biased.

Mostin sighed. He should have made more of an effort to discern the truth before leaving Ortwin to his own devices.

The Alienist stepped through the Looking Glass of Urm-Nahat and appeared in front of Ortwin and

Troap.

"Hello, Mostin," Ortwin said.

"You must be Mostin the Metagnostic," Troap said brightly. "Ortwin has mentioned you. It is an honour to meet you. Will you take tea with me?" The Goblin seemed quite unfazed.

"Certainly," Mostin replied.

"More tea please, Ortwin, there's a good fellow," Troap instructed the Bard.

"That is a potent dweomer that you have laid upon Ortwin," Mostin observed. "He has been missing for three weeks."

"It is a triply extended 'Charm Monster,'" Troap explained. "One of my staff's higher powers."

Mostin nodded. "No wonder Idro desired it so much."

"You knew of this treachery?" Troap was aghast.

"I regret that I did," Mostin confessed. "Ortwin required services from Idro, who insisted on the staff and a crystal ball in payment. I put them in contact with each other. But if you have charmed Ortwin, you will have found that out already."

Troap grinned sheepishly, and dropped his expression of faux offense.

"I am thinking of retaining Ortwin's services indefinitely," he said. "He killed three of my servants, each of whom was tenured for a year. He is a useful fellow to have around, and sings excellently."

"I regret that is not possible," Mostin said. "Ortwin is a good friend of mine, and I am obligated to

ensure his release."

Troap bristled. "But I have been assaulted and offended by him. I demand recompense."

"And I agree that you are owed it," Mostin said. "Please, Troap. It is a pleasure to meet you, and I hope that we can do business in the future. I also notice that you have not deprived him of his own

possessions."

“I asked him, but he was reluctant to render them up. I didn’t press the point as I didn’t wish to risk disrupting the spell. His scimitar is sharp.”

“I will convince him to give you adequate payment,” Mostin said. “Besides,” the Alienist added cunningly, “I don’t think that you want Ortwin around. Have you heard of the Necromancer Feezuu?”

Troap swallowed. “Rumours only,” he said.

“You don’t want to be near Ortwin when she finds him,” Mostin said.

The Goblin nodded.

Or me, thought Mostin.

**

“You did WHAT?” Ortwin asked Mostin in disbelief.

“Ten thousand gold crowns is a trifling consideration when weighed against indefinite servitude,”

Mostin replied.

“The spell would have failed soon enough,” Ortwin countered. “And then I would have had his staff and ball. Now I’m back to square one. I thought you wanted Troap’s spellbooks. What of Idro? What of my magic pick?”

“You can stuff your pick up your a**,” said Mostin. “Troap turns out to be an intriguing little fellow, and I’m glad I met him. Allies of any hue are hard to come by these days, and besides Idro, I don’t know any half-decent enchanters.”

“I can’t believe how selfish you are,” Ortwin complained.

“We both are, Ortwin,” said Mostin. “That’s why we get along so well. But, having rescued you from an embarrassing situation, I think you owe me. And we don’t want this little story to get out, do we?

Your reputation would suffer terribly.”

Ortwin raged for a while, and then passed a handful of emeralds to Mostin. Sometimes he really hated wizards. They were only ever interested in themselves and each other. There was a lesson here

somewhere, but the Bard couldn’t work out what it was for the life of him.

**

“Your revised proposal is rather more modest,” Idro scoffed. “I assume that you failed in your attempts to secure the staff and ball, and that Troap still terrorizes the forest?”

“Can you enchant it, or not?” Ortwin spat.

“Of course,” Idro said smoothly. “I will consider only fifty percent of the nominal value of the horn, however. As I said, to me, it is little more than a curio, although it may have later use as a trade item.”

“Eighty percent,” Ortwin haggled.

“Sixty.”

“Seventy.”

“Sixty-five, and not a copper penny more,” insisted Idro.

Ortwin handed over his horn and most of his remaining money.

“I have decided to keep the boots,” Ortwin said, sniffing the air. “I am now going to find the Elves. I will return in three months.”

And Ortwin flew off.

**

The snows fell early that year, barely a month after the Equinox had passed. Nwm maintained a pocket of more clement weather in the area of Deorham where, with Nehael’s help, he pursued a project which consumed him in his grief and guilt after his actions outside of the gates of the castle at Trempe. He had, and never had had, any confessor or arbiter of his morality to whom he could turn, besides his own conscience and the Green Reality which he conveniently labeled ‘Goddess.’ He decided that keeping a low profile was probably the best course of action.

Nonetheless, news of Nwm’s defiance of the Temple, and his merciless encounter with Brey and his

knights spread rapidly amongst the farming communities of the Duchy. Many sought him out, asking

for apprenticeship or tutelage, pleading with him to defend them against the threat which would, sooner or later, issue from Morne.

“Teach me to wield the Green Fire,” they begged.

“Ask the trees,” he snapped.

Midwinter came and passed, and still no sign of Eadric had been seen or heard. Neither Ortwin nor

Nwm appeared at the court of the Duchess for the Yule feast, and the affair was lackluster and uninspiring. Mostin contented himself with his researches and, despite his urge to scry and spy,

refrained from locating the Paladin. Nehael had warned him in no uncertain terms to leave Eadric

alone.

“Or celestials will visit, and remonstrate with you,” she had said.

Mostin shuddered at the thought of their feathery wings and decided that the Demoness probably knew best.

Tahl organized the defenses of the castle, instructed his paladins, oversaw the Fane, and made several journeys to visit the Marquis of Iald, five hundred miles distant, on the other side of Wyre. Similar threats had been delivered to Iald, and although, as yet, no action had been taken against either fief, tensions ran high. Both Tahl and the Duchess were

determined to keep the lines of communication

open, and the Marquis was the only declared ally that they had.

As the days lengthened after midwinter, the cold intensified and the snows piled deeper and deeper.

Even at Deorham, a frosty rime settled on the land. Nwm incanted feverishly, day after day, focussed solely upon a thin torc of serpentine which consumed his time and his power. Nehael saw to his needs, and dealt with zealous Goddess worshippers who would otherwise disturb his work.

Ortwin returned to the castle after his spell with the Elves in the forest, bearing the pick that Idro had wrought for him.

Mostin finished one project and moved onto the next, and the next. His Blue and Scarlet Ioun Stone, and his Circlet of Blasting, won only after hard bargaining, he traded away without a second thought to his new friend, Troap for mundane gold and items to pursue his research. He contrived what he felt would be the ultimate defense against the Cambion who haunted his dreams: the permanent

‘Magnificent Mansion’ and an amulet capable of spell absorption. His final project, his ‘Headband of Intellect,’ was finished even as the thaw began. When he placed it upon his head, his consciousness expanded dramatically, and new valences of spell energy were revealed to him.*

Only a few days later, Nwm finally finished his own great work. He was tired beyond any exhaustion he had previously known. Now, at last, he could relax.

After sleeping, bathing and eating, he gingerly placed the torc around his neck, and fastened its golden

clasp. He spoke a single word of power.

The Green Embraced him. For miles around, every fold in the landscape, every great tree, every

animal, every fey, every human heartbeat, every nuance that he desired to focus upon, was revealed to him.

**

Two weeks passed before Eadric walked into the castle at Trempa. He was filthy, haggard and had

grown a long beard.

“Nice beard,” said Ortwin.

“Thanks,” Eadric replied.

“You’re two months late,” said Nehael.

“Er, yes. Sorry about that.”

*Someone on these boards, long ago, proposed a quantum theory of magic in order to address the

‘Vancian’ problem. Spell levels are analogous to the quantum shells occupied by electrons orbiting the nucleus of an atom, in that they can only have discrete numbers (1,2, etc.). This is a simple, elegant, wonderful idea. Whoever you are, I am indebted to you.

Note: Nwm’s Torc reproduces a ‘Commune with Nature’ spell when activated.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 06-06-2002

Unfortunately, my notes on Wyre are about as organized as the rest of my life - which is to say not very.

I think publication is unlikely.

Honestly, its a pretty standard campaign world in a lot of ways.

Thanks for the kudos, though

**

“What did Rintrah say to you?” Nehael asked.

The Succubus sat with the Duchess, Tahl, Ortwin, Mostin and Eadric in a small reception room near the great hall. Nwm was absent.

Eadric looked surprised.

“Have you consulted with him?” The Paladin asked.

Nehael smiled. “What did you learn?” she inquired.

“That things are very simple,” Eadric said. “I was alone in the mountains for ninety-nine days. I found an abandoned cottage, near a small stream, and decided that it would be sufficient to my needs. I

prayed, undertook the repair of the building and erected a small shrine. I ate fish and, for the first few weeks, berries. Later, I gathered nuts. As the snows deepened, I became colder and more tired. Finding dry wood for a fire was difficult, but I did not invoke the protective aspect of the deity.”

“He required that you suffer?” Ortwin asked. Typical, he thought.

Eadric shook his head. “I was gathering my strength,” he said.

“After six weeks,” the Paladin continued, “an old man joined me. He said nothing. He stayed with me for only one day. But during that time, he ate all of the fish that I’d frozen in the ice, consumed all of the nuts that I’d gathered, and burned all of my wood in a large fire. I did not complain – although I was tempted. He smiled, and left me. He had not spoken a word. I guessed that he was a Celestial.

“I went to gather the few remaining nuts that still clung to the trees, although by this time most were rotten. When I returned, the old man had reappeared. He was pulling the stones from the wall of the house. He pulled the whole cottage apart, brick by brick, until there was nothing left except a pile of rubble. Then he departed again.”

I’d have smacked him, Ortwin thought, Celestial or no.

“I took the remaining stone that I could, and built a modest shelter,” Eadric said. “The few

timbers that were left, I laid across the top of the walls. There were still some cracked clay shingles, and I tied these with twine across the timbers to form a rude roof. I made a door of deerskin. There was barely enough room to sit up inside.

“I went to try and catch another fish, but with no success. When I came back, the old man was sleeping in the shelter. He looked well-fed and content. When I tried to enter, he kicked me and rolled over to the door. He wouldn’t let me in. That night I slept in a chimney between two rock faces. I nearly froze.

“The next morning, I returned to the hut. The old man was sitting outside. He had built a fire, and was roasting a suckling boar. I was famished. I sat down and said nothing, but waited patiently. After the meat was cooked, he consumed it all. I was left with skin and bones. I sucked the marrow out, and

chewed on the burned hide. He watched me eat in silence.”

Mostin thankfully considered the fact that he was not religious.

“Finally,” Eadric went on, “the old man spoke to me.

“‘Do you know who I am?’ He asked.

“‘I believe that you are a Celestial,’ I replied.

“‘Is that significant?’ He asked.

“‘I do not understand,’ I said.

“‘Meditate upon the question,’ he instructed, and left.

“He returned a day later, and asked me again.

“‘It is not significant,’ I replied.

“‘Why not?’ He asked.

“‘Because, whoever you were, I should still have given everything to you without complaint,’ I replied.

“‘Why?’ He asked. More questions followed. Day, after day, after day he returned. ‘Why this?’ and

‘Why that?’ and ‘What if?’ Midwinter came and passed. The questions gave way to instruction and

tutelage. Finally, one morning, as the days were lengthening, he said to me,

“‘Taking the life of another human being is never, under any circumstances whatever, a justifiable act.

It is the ultimate sin. You must take the lives of many, and some of them will be wholly innocent. Do you understand the paradox?’

“‘No,’ I cried.

“‘Nor do I,’ he smiled. ‘Not all things are revealed to me.’ His visage changed, and his form grew tall and statuesque. His pinions unfolded, and his light almost overwhelmed me. It was certainly Rintrah.

When he spoke again, it was from his mind to mine.

DEFEND TREMPA, he commanded. DO NOT ALLOW IT TO FALL. BUT INITIATE YET NO WAR

BEYOND ITS BORDERS. THIS IS YOUR FIRST TASK. I WILL CONTACT YOU AGAIN. And

then he vanished.”

Mostin twitched reflexively. Nobody spoke for a moment, until Ortwin piped up.

“That’s all very nice,” the Bard said flippantly. “If you’re religious and all. Speaking of which, Ed, I suppose someone ought to tell you about Nwm...”

**

“Sixty?” The Paladin asked Nwm.

“Sixty,” Nwm groaned. “The poor bastards never had a chance. Only a handful survived the first few seconds.”

The pair sat at Deorham in the newly-refurbished reception room. A gnome, covered in stone dust,

sauntered past whistling.

“Are you nearly done?” Nwm asked the diminutive mason.

“All but,” the gnome replied.

“What’s the damage?” Nwm asked.

“To you, Nwm, a flat five thousand,” the gnome replied.

“That’s a damn good deal,” Eadric gasped.

“I did a lot of the big stuff with magic,” Nwm explained. “I also agreed to help them out if exorcists from the Temple descended on their warren.”

“I hardly think that’s likely,” Eadric scoffed.

Nwm shrugged. “Times are changing. People are getting zealous or paranoid, or both. The feys are

becoming jittery – they don’t like organized religion. Anything is possible.”

“I will protect the rights of the Goddess worshippers in Trempa, Nwm,” Eadric said.

“It’s those in the rest of Wyre that concern me,” Nwm sighed.

“No persecution has occurred yet, though?”

“Not unless you include another thirty percent tax-hike,” Nwm grunted.

“Increasing the incentive to convert?” Eadric asked.

Nwm nodded.

“You need to decide how you’re going to deal with this,” Eadric said.

“Yep,” the Druid replied., “I know.”

**

A vision long before imagined by Eadric came to pass.

Ortwin was drunk.

The Bard leaned heavily on the bar of the “Three Ploughs”, the largest inn in the town of Trempa, and recounted his exploits to a rapt audience. The plan had been to have a quiet drink with Nwm, in an attempt to bring a smile back to the Druid’s face. Ortwin had conveniently overlooked Nwm’s tolerance of alcohol, and matched him drink for drink.* Nwm didn’t mind. He had adopted his preferred alter ego

– that of a toothless crone – and was content in his anonymity. Besides, watching Ortwin make a fool of himself was usually a cheering distraction.

Mostin sat stiffly next to the Druid – he wasn’t generally one for inns, much less rowdy, semi-rustic ones. He, too was disguised – since his transcendence, his eyelids had fallen away, leaving pupil-less, emerald orbs which unsettled those who looked at him. He sipped daintily at a glass of wine with a sour expression upon his face.

Ortwin was delighted at his reception, and played the crowd like the professional that he was, pausing to sip his firewine at critical moments which made the onlookers wait with baited breath until he

resumed his account. His audience was varied and, for Trempa, cosmopolitan. Locals, merchants,

entrepreneurs, travelers from the South who defied the ban. The initial hysteria which had followed Brey’s appearance and proclamation had subsided, three months had passed and, although the borders of the Duchy had been sealed, no act of war had been launched by the Temple. Either complacently or,

perhaps, realising that the good times would soon end, the townsfolk of Trempa – swelled by many who had entered the fief soon after the Duchess had rebelled – were determined to enjoy themselves while they could.

Ortwin recounted the summoning and imprisonment of Rurunoth, his stirring the citizens from their

apathy in Morne before the trial of Eadric, and the assault upon the Necromancer Feezuu (called

‘Glissin’ by Ortwin). In all cases, he effortlessly placed himself in the central role, whilst downplaying or altogether failing to acknowledge the ‘help’ that his companions had given him.

Mostin sighed. At least the Bard had had the good sense to use a pseudonym for the Cambion – not that those gathered here would have ever heard the name anyway. The old hag – Nwm – sitting at the table cracked a toothless smile, more out of pity than amusement, as Ortwin’s stories became more and more improbable and his voice more and more slurred. How could anyone thrive on this, the Druid

wondered.

“Tell us another, Ortwin,” they said.

“Yes! More! More!” They yelled.

“What would you like to hear?” Ortwin asked in response. “I have a thousand stories at least.” He bragged.

“Have you never been outsmarted, Ortwin?” Someone asked.

“Certainly not,” Ortwin lied. The crowd laughed approvingly.

“Tell us about your encounter with the wizard, Troap,” a single voice carried above the din in the bar room. The inquiry had issued from a young woman with olive skin and clothes which testified to her foreign origins – most likely from the Thalassine far south of Wyre, an area of many islands surrounded by warm, shallow seas.

Ortwin shot an accusing glance towards Mostin, but the Alienist shook his head in denial. He hadn’t told anyone.

“Alas, I know no Troap,” he lied, “although I have met many wizards. The conjurer Ephrael, for example...”

“That’s not what I heard,” the woman persisted. “I heard that he bound you as his sex-toy, and you had

to wear a skirt and make tea for him.”

The crowd, including Nwm, laughed uproariously. Mostin cackled despite himself: the part about

making tea was true, at least, but how did she know?

Ortwin laughed along with the others, giving the impression of genuine amusement.

“I fear that you must have mistaken me for someone else,” the Bard said convincingly.

“Sadly, there are many ortwins in the world although, of course, only one Ortwin...”

“For that, at least, let us be thankful,” the woman smiled, holding her glass up.

“I do not know your name, madam,” Ortwin said smoothly. “You have me at a disadvantage.”

“I fear that your knowing my name would not remedy that,” she replied with equal ease.

The crowd laughed again.

Ortwin nodded with mock gravity, and looked deeply into his own glass.

“I am afraid that firewine, in fact, renders me insensible,” he said. The audience laughed appreciatively, but the simultaneous innuendo which accompanied the statement was:

DESIST NOW, OR I WILL

KNOCK YOU OUT.

“Firewine has little or no effect on me,” she said, “but I will gladly share some tea if you care to make some. Lemon, but no sugar, please.”

The crowd went wild, but completely missed the counter-entendre veiled by the biting satire: YOU

COULD NOT, IF YOU TRIED. MY BLADE IS SHARP.

Ortwin held out his palm. "Shall we?" He said.

The woman smiled, stood up, and drew her rapier.

As the less brave hearted amongst the audience hastily exited the inn, and others moved back to the walls and placed bets, Mostin looked at Nwm.

"Did I just miss something?" the Alienist asked the Druid.

"It's a game," Nwm sighed. "Ortwin just upped the stakes. I should have known that he was itching for a fight. He wants to try out his new pick"

"Should I disintegrate her?" Mostin asked.

"No. That's against the rules."

"Ahh," Mostin nodded. It all seemed very esoteric to him.

Nwm, retaining his crone form, stood up, hobbled over to Ortwin and cast 'Neutralize Poison' on the Bard. His drunkenness evaporated immediately, to be replaced with a mild hangover.

The woman held up her hand. "Hey," she said, "what do you think you're doing? You know the forms,

Ortwin."

"I am eliminating the alcohol from his system," Nwm said.

"So you claim," she complained. "How do I know that its not a ward or magical protection."

"You don't," said Nwm. "But bear in mind that I just dissuaded that man, there," Nwm pointed to Mostin, "from disintegrating you."

The young woman nodded. It seemed like a fair point.

As Nwm sat down, Mostin spoke again.

"It hardly seems reasonable," the Alienist pointed out, "that wards are disallowed. Ortwin bears two potent enchanted weapons – surely that alone constitutes an unfair advantage."

"I agree," Nwm nodded, "but the rules are the rules. Rules are seldom sensible – although I suppose that a 'Stoneskin' or 'Ironguard' would unfairly tip the scales. These are among the few rules that Ortwin observes."

"Has he done this before, then?" Mostin asked.

Nwm's expression said everything.

"Either of us can yield and forfeit the match at any time." Ortwin said to his opponent.

"Nwm will be second to us both, as death is not a desirable outcome for either of us. If we are rendered unconscious he will use his powers to resuscitate us. You don't mind, do you Nwm?"

The Druid sighed.

“Nwm?” People in the crowd whispered. “Nwm the Preceptor? Here?”

Oh Sh*t, thought Nwm.

The woman hopped onto a bar stool and, with a slight shift in her weight, effortlessly moved it onto one leg whilst maintaining perfect balance.

Hmm, thought Ortwin.

“Are you ready?” She asked.

Ortwin nodded.

Her speed was breathtaking.

*Druids of sufficiently high level are, of course, immune to all organic toxins.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 06-11-2002

As his opponent rapidly closed with him, Ortwin felt the strange sensation of a light breeze which seemingly issued from her. It wafted coolly over him, simultaneously agreeable and disquieting. She had an exotic quality which he could not place.

Ortwin, who rightly considered himself one of the most accomplished swordsmen in Wyre,

immediately found himself on the defensive against his opponent’s slender blade. She launched into a series of maneuvers which Ortwin had only read about in the most advanced theoretical textbooks,

penetrating his guard three times in her opening flurry and striking with deadly accuracy. Where the point of the rapier penetrated his flesh, a numb feeling remained in his body, as though nerve endings were deadened. The Bard’s acute instinct, honed by years of practice, was shamed by her perfection of form and technique. From the outset, he knew he was outclassed..

Those who observed saw only a flurry of steel, which raced faster than their own thoughts. Mostin, who had indulged himself in learning to use the rapier from an early age – more through whimsy than due to any natural talent – was speechless. He invoked a spell in order to ascertain the extent of her magical armamentarium, in an effort to distinguish her natural ability from any augmentations that she might carry: casual observation was impossible due to the speed of the exchange.

After her initial onslaught, Ortwin recovered somewhat and adopted a defensive stance with his

scimitar and pick flashing through the air in a complex dance of warding actions whilst he considered his options. His sword flicked out once during the period and struck her, drawing a long but shallow welt on her forearm, but failed to elicit even a grimace of discomfort.

Noticing his posture, Ortwin’s opponent smiled and assumed a counter-screening position whilst her rapier flicked out in rapid succession – tap-tap-tap-tap-tap – oh Gods, thought Ortwin, that’s too fast she’s trying to – SH*T.

His pick dropped from his left hand and fell to the floor.

“Aaargh!” Ortwin screamed, lurching forwards.

Her weapon flashed, penetrating his shoulder. Holding his scimitar in both hands, the Bard smashed it

into her rapier with all of his force. And again. And again. Each time she turned the assault, and sparks flew. But now a look of horror mixed with disgust crossed her face.

“That’s a cheap trick, you bastard,” she said, “now I’m going to fill you full of holes.” But she eyed the scimitar with a look of renewed caution. It had a reputation almost as notorious as the Bard himself.*

Lunge-thrust-stab-stab-jab. Her rapier was everywhere, stabbing at his hand, his neck, his shoulder, his leg, his face. And it was leeching him, somehow. Ortwin noticed that the wound on his adversary’s

forearm had almost closed up. He looked at his own body. He WAS full of holes. Ugh. But he could

break that cursed rapier – he knew it. Just one, solid contact – that’s all it would take. Githla could cut through damn near anything.

But she was right. It was a cheap trick, and proved nothing.

Ortwin lowered his weapon and yielded. He bowed with a flourish.

“My gratitude for the instruction,” he said smoothly.

“You’re welcome,” she said, and walked straight past him towards Mostin.

“Mostin the Metagnostic, I presume?” She asked. Her breeze floated over him.

“Aargh!” Cried Mostin from underneath the floppy, wide-brimmed hat which covered his face. He cast a quickened ‘Dimension Door’ and vanished.

**

“My name is Iua,” she explained after the now heavily-buffed Alienist had been located by Nwm and a partially healed Ortwin, and brought back to the Inn. “You have met my mother.”

“Ngarrgh!” cried Mostin, and began to cast ‘Disintegrate.’

“Mulissu...” the woman said quickly.

“Aah,” said Mostin, interrupting his spell and relaxing a little.

“My mother sends greetings, and congratulates you on your transcendence. She hopes you are well.”

“Perfectly fine, thank-you,” Mostin said, tightly. He was still nervous.

“I also suspect that she would approve of your caution, although it is rather disturbing to me. She wonders if you have heard of the mages Kothchori and Qiseze?”

“By reputation, although not personally,” Mostin replied. Kothchori dwelt on an island three thousand miles to the south, and Qisesze had long since retired to her elemental hideaway.

“Regrettably Qiseze is now deceased,” Iua informed him, “desiccated and burned with acid. Kothchori is deranged, and suffers from the effects of a powerful enchantment. He had been due to meet with

Mulissu, but never showed. Kothchori had a reputation for excruciating punctiliousness and my

mother, who was suspicious after he was five minutes late, made a rare translation to the prime to investigate. She found his stronghold infested with demons who were roasting one of his servants.

“Mulissu drove off the fiends and rescued the servant – an unfortunate sprite by the name of Orolde. He informed her that Feezuu – with whom I believe you are acquainted – had stormed the castle. She stole Kothchori’s spellbooks. The mage himself was finally located in the Western Ocean swimming with a

pod of whales – he makes little sense when spoken with. Orolde said that Feezuu first attempted to barter with his master before laying waste to the stronghold. Apparently Kothchori demanded that she leave in no uncertain terms, and this angered the Cambion.”

“When did this happen?” Mostin asked.

“Three days ago,” Iua replied. “My mother visited me in Fumaril and instructed me to warn you. She procured a number of items in the city before making a translation to the Plane of Air. I have ridden hard to reach you.”

“Very hard, apparently,” the Bard remarked drily.**

Iua ignored the comment.

“Did Kothchori possess the ‘Discern Location’ dweomer?” Mostin asked, aghast.

“I have no idea,” Iua replied. “He was a powerful Transmuter, but I don’t know the details of his auxiliary powers. Mulissu has also speculated that Feezuu may be in pursuit of the spell.”

Mostin considered for a while. “I must confer with your mother,” the Alienist said.

Iua grimaced. “She will not admit it, but I suspect that she is feeling nervous herself. She has no way to ward herself from sustained magical sight and, although her location is known to only a few, it must have crossed her mind that Feezuu may try to pinpoint her as a candidate for possession of the spell.”

A spell which I gave her, Mostin mused. The irony was not lost on him.

“What do you mean, she cannot ward herself?” He asked.

“Neither abjurations nor illusions are within Mulissu’s capabilities,” Iua said hesitantly. “I think she herself regrets some of the hastiness of her youth when she made choices about the path she would

take.”

Mostin shook his head. Something didn’t add up. “When I scried your mother some time ago, she dispelled my sensor – although I admit that I was surprised to find that she was not already warded.

How is this possible if abjuration is proscribed to her?”

“At great personal cost,” Iua replied. “She can still alter reality to suit her whim. I suspect that she would rather do that than admit to weakness in any area.”

A ‘Limited Wish’, probably, Mostin thought. No wonder she had been annoyed with him. “Why was she travelling to the Elemental Plane of Air?” The Alienist asked.

“She was attempting to petition my father, in the hope that he prove less evasive and unforthcoming than usual.”

“Er,” said Ortwin, “who is your father, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“A djinn, called Ulao,” she sighed.

Nwm stroked his beard. Mostin had some rather peculiar acquaintances.

After the Druid and Alienist departed, Ortwin purchased another flagon of firewine and nursed his

battered ego.

“You are a most capable swordsman, Ortwin,” Iua said condescendingly.

Ortwin grinned venomously.

“I have been keeping abreast of events here in Wyre,” she continued. “Tell me, are you committed to the Transaxiomatic cause?”

“Why?” He asked. She was digging, and he didn’t like it.

“I’m merely curious,” she said. “I find all restrictive regimes tedious, and although I have no particular vested interest in the way things turn out here, it would be a shame to see this opportunity for

libertarianism fail.”

The Bard sighed. She was still young, and probably idealistic.

“No,” she replied to his thoughts. “I am a thrill-seeking opportunist, like you.”

“That is very rude,” Ortwin said. “Please get out of my mind.”

“Look around, Ortwin. Trempa is normally a sedate, respectable town. Look at all of the other thrill-seeking opportunists who are here. All of these disreputable people, descending on the place. Have you forgotten what it’s like to be in the thick of it?”

Ortwin tried to suppress a grin. If only she knew.

“But of course, I do know,” Iua said, causing the Bard to scowl again. “How would you like to strike a blow for the rebel movement which you half-heartedly support, and make a fabulous amount of money

at the same time?”

Ortwin raised an eyebrow. “You’ve piqued my interest,” he admitted. Denying it would be futile.

“We need a mage. A very powerful one, like Mostin. Can you persuade him?”

Ortwin groaned. This sounded irresistibly dangerous.

“Good,” Iua said, raising her glass. Ortwin raised his own, and, for a second wondered why he just couldn’t help himself.

Before grinning and resigning himself to his basic nature. He looked at Iua.

“No,” she said, “you may not.”

Ortwin shrugged. It was always worth a try.

**

Mostin and Nwm sat in Mulissu’s glass refectory.

“Nice pad,” the Druid had remarked.

“She had no right to disclose that kind of information to you,” the Witch snapped at Mostin. Minute sparks flew from her head, ionizing the air and causing the two mephits who fluttered nearby to clap their hands gleefully.

“Ooh, she’s angry Mostin,” one said.

“Yes, Mostin,” the other chimed in. “Be careful.”

Mostin ignored them. “How could you be so short-sighted as to eschew abjuration?” He asked her.

Mulissu shrugged. “One cannot master everything,” she sighed, her characteristic languor quickly returning, “and I have no interest in making enemies. I just want to be left alone.”

“Your daughter is intriguing,” Mostin tactfully changed the subject. “When I saw her fight, it was the finest example of swordsmanship that I have ever witnessed. Her elemental heritage sits well with her.”

Mulissu smiled sadly, and shook her head. “If she’d studied magic, her powers would have surpassed mine by far. But she is too fickle and undisciplined.”

Mostin said nothing. Fickleness came in many forms.

Nwm coughed, and looked at the Alienist. Mostin winced, and gritted his teeth. “I haven’t been entirely forthcoming with you, Mulissu,” he said.

The Witch stared at him impassively.

“When I made the translation to Limbo in an attempt to eliminate Feezuu, I encountered her master – a demon named Ainhorr.”

Mulissu raised an eyebrow.

“I may have angered him. I should remind you that your pocket paradise is not the Prime. It is not forbidden to him.”

“My evocations are primarily electrical, Mostin...” she said.

“Yes,” he replied. “That may prove unfortunate, under the circumstances.”

Mulissu seethed, and for a moment, Mostin thought that she was about to cast a spell on him. He

readied himself for what might be an overwhelming magical assault, but did not flee. Although

changeable, as a potential ally Mulissu was without peer. He must not show any sign of weakness.

The Witch did not blast Mostin. Instead, she shouted at him.

“You have been selfish and irresponsible, Mostin,” she yelled, “and have lacked all foresight in this matter. You capture Rurunoth, and imprison him, thus demonstrating your potency. The point is made.

Well done. But you do not stop there. Feezuu. Ainhorr? Even I have heard of this Balor, Mostin, and I am no demonologist. This must cease, or you will be dragged screaming to the Abyss. My own security is now jeopardized, and you make flippant remarks. The time for wit is long past, Mostin.”

Even the Mephits ceased their careening to watch their mistress. Mostin spoke carefully.

“I apologize, Mulissu, if my actions have precipitated this series of events. But if circumstances had been kinder, then I would have eliminated Feezuu permanently, curbed her fiendish influence across several worlds, and removed a painful thorn from the collective ass of the magical community. You told me yourself that it was within my power to accomplish this.”

“Had I known the byzantine intricacies of your own situation then I might have been more cautious.”

She snapped.

“What’s done is done,” Nwm said softly. “I, too encouraged Mostin to assault Feezuu, and I feel some responsibility in the matter. The question now is ‘how do we proceed?’”

“I think that there is no ‘we’ in this, Druid,” Mulissu said sardonically. “I am not being drawn into the political mess that you are in. I certainly have no interest in demons. Or celestials for that matter. I am surprised that you do.”

“Then why did you contact me?” Mostin hissed.

“To give you fair warning,” Mulissu said. “If Feezuu approaches me for the spell, I may be inclined to trade with her.”

“You cannot be serious!” Mostin exclaimed. “You despise her.”

“I am wary of her also,” Mulissu said. “Ulao will not aid me. Feezuu’s acid evocations combined with a fiendish resistance to my spells make me nervous. If she conjures demons, or is accompanied by them, my power is effectively curtailed. And I cannot resort to Sonics in the same way that you can. In terms of raw power, I am virtually unmatched, but I have few wards.”

“A pre-emptive strike by the two of us...” the Alienist began.

“No!” Mulissu exclaimed. “Have you been listening to a word that I’ve been saying, Mostin? I am NOT being drawn into this.”

The Alienist thought for a moment. “If you insist on the quiet life, Mulissu, I may be able

to help you,”

he said.

The Witch looked quizzically at Mostin.

“I have not been idle since the failed assault upon Feezuu,” he explained. “I have found a means to render ‘Mordenkainen’s Magnificent Mansion’ permanent.”

Mulissu’s jaw dropped.

“Are you willing to trade the formula?” The Witch asked.

“I will give it to you,” Mostin replied. “I owe you that much, at least.”

The Alienist thought of Qiseze and Kothchori, mages whom he had never met, yet the loss of whose

unique intellects he nonetheless lamented. In his abstract, cerebral way, he felt something akin to remorse.

**

The Great Hall of the Ducal Palace thronged with armoured warriors, their retainers and servants as the Duchess, Eadric, Tahl, Nwm, Nehael and Mostin took counsel together with the knights, captains and bannermen of Trempa. Foremost amongst them – the handful of Templars who had deserted with Tahl,

and the Paladins who had elected to remain when the Fane was taken over – crowded Eadric with a look of religious awe on their faces that made him feel uneasy. Their fervour was not shared by many of those present.

“We must resign ourselves to the inevitability of war, but we may not, ourselves, initiate any action...”

the Duchess began. She was immediately interrupted by Ryth, the Thane of Har Kumil.

“Bullsh*t!” He exclaimed. “We should catch them while their pants are down. Tomur is within range and I can lead a mounted sortie to storm the Bishop’s Palace.”

Several voices were raised in support.

“Shut up, Ryth,” said Nwm. The Thane, an avowed pagan, although loyal to the Duchess, was not renowned for his subtlety. Although Nwm liked the middle-aged nobleman, he found his bloodlust

somewhat depressing. As a Uediian, Nwm felt that he should have at least some respect for the Druid’s opinion. Ryth was an iconoclast in all respects, however.

“If you got off of your priestly arse and did something to help us,” Ryth retorted, “then we’d have no problem. You could burn them up for us, and we could finish them off.”

“Aargh!” Nwm yelled. “Will you SHUT UP. All possibilities will be discussed, but the agenda of this meeting is not going to be dictated by you.”

The Duchess waited for the clamour to subside before continuing.

“We must not initiate any act of war beyond Trempa’s borders. That much has been

revealed to Eadric in his visitation.”

The statement was greeted by assenting murmurs from the Oronthonian knights, scepticism from

amongst the more agnostic members of the nobility, and by open disdain from Ryth and others in the Uediian party.

Eadric sighed. It was going to be a long day.

*Ortwin’s blade, Githla, was forged by the Azer smith Jodrumu at the behest of Druhmo of Borchia, one of the precursor states of modern Wyre. Jodrumu was considered one of the greatest smiths of his age, prior to his enslavement by the Fire Giants. When he refused to capitulate to their demands, he was maimed before being released. Unable to create more of his masterpieces, Jodrumu wandered for

years before finally going mad and taking his own life.

**Fumaril, also the original home of Mulissu herself, is eight hundred miles from Trempa in the

Thalassine.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 06-13-2002

**

The debate raged all morning, and the Duchess, Soraine, called for a recess for an hour after noon. Her head jostled with half a hundred different views, and scenarios which she had not previously

considered made her feel ill and depressed.

“The Temple alone can field a thousand knights. If they can convince the king to fully support them, he will muster all of Wyre against us.”

“What if they march on Iald first? Are you saying that we may not act?”

“Will Tyndur remain neutral? Will Jiuhu declare for us? Ecclesiastical influence is less entrenched there, but their nobility are notoriously conservative.”

“Whatever you decide, as a Uediian I assert my right to protect my people by whatever means I deem necessary. You can stick your Bright God up your arse. It is my feudal duty, and may not be denied by you or anyone else, Soraine.”

“We need more men.”

“This is a Holy War. We will prevail.”

“We need more weapons and armour. We need Thalassine engineers, artillerymen and light cavalry.”

“We need more money.”

“The hand of Oronthon guides our actions. We must have faith.”

“We need to restore the tax burden.”

“Nwm needs to take a lead, and unite the Uediian priesthood.”

“We should have had this meeting six months ago, but the ‘Instrument of God’ here decided that he’d have visions in the wilderness instead.”

And so on, and so forth. The poisoning of wells, guerilla tactics, the likely powers of the Templars on the battlefield, siege warfare, the disorganized and cellular nature of Uediian priests, grain supplies, finances, mercenaries, levies and fyrdsmen, conscription, training regimens. Money. Money. Money.

Eadric and the Duchess spoke privately during the two hour long recess.

“Ryth is right about Nwm,” she said. “If he took a lead, persuaded the other priests to unite, they could make a formidable contribution to the effort.”

Eadric merely shook his head. “It’s not going to happen,” he said. “Nwm despises organized religion with every atom in his body. And he recognizes the potential for disaster: Uedii worshippers are less bound by political allegiance than by ties of kinship and culture. Any movement that he started in Trempa would soon spill over into the rest of Wyre. He must follow the dictates of his own conscience.

But he will act when he decides to act, and when he DOES act, then he will not pull his punches.”

The Duchess nodded, and recalled the scene outside of her own gates when Brey had been defeated –

seemingly quite casually – by the Druid. And Nwm had been largely unprepared for violent conflict.

“Soraine,” Eadric said, “our camp is eclectic, to say the least. Not everyone is interested in the religious agenda. You need to unite them, because I cannot – at least not yet. I am most effective on the

battlefield, and when that time comes, Tahl tells me that they will rally to me. Until then, this remains in the realm of politics, at which I have little skill.”

“When will the Temple act?” Soraine asked. “You must have some idea.”

“The pressure is already building,” Eadric replied. “Mostin has scried the precincts of the Great Fane on several occasions. Their debates are now over, even as ours are only beginning, and they are arming.

We will know soon enough when they march. And I know where the first blow will fall: it is

symbolically apt, from their perspective, and is closer to Morne than Trempa itself.”

“Deorham,” the Duchess sighed. “I’m sorry, Ed.”

**

Mostin, who had said little during the morning’s discourse – simultaneously finding the proceedings boring, and lamenting the fact that he was forbidden to blast people by the Injunction – retired to his manse for luncheon.

His walk through the Duchess’ pheasant woods, agreeable at any time of day, was unusually pleasant.

The snows had melted, croci and daffodils were beginning to peek through, and the air was warm – at least in the sun. His reverie was not to last long. As he approached his porch, his magical sight*

revealed an invisible quasit sitting on the step pulling the feathers from the wings of a bird that it had captured. The quasit, sitting in plain view but confident in its magical screen, looked at Mostin, quickly twisted the bird’s neck, and vanished.

Mostin’s heart pounded. Where was she? She must be here somewhere. He quickly ‘Dimension

Doored’ into his cellar and walked through the magical portal into his extradimensional retreat, sealing it behind him. Removing the Looking Glass of Urm-Nahat from his portable hole, he invoked its

power, and began to scry the interior of his own home.

Nothing had been disturbed. No evidence of any intruder. He widened his search.

The quasit was no doubt compacted**, he mused, as his magical sensor roamed. Were there other

demons nearby? He grunted. The thought was not appealing. Several minutes passed.

There, on his porch. Feezuu. How beautiful she is, Mostin noticed for the first time. Skin like alabaster, her hair deep indigo, and large, almond eyes. And more eyes. And more. Her robe was covered in them.

She bore a compound bow of exquisite design across her back, and a longsword hung from her hip.

Feezuu smiled and looked straight into the sensor.

“I know you’re watching, Mostin.” She spoke in Abyssal. “I mean you no harm. I have come to trade with you – I have much to offer. I seek a certain spell. I am generous. Will you speak with me?”

Mostin’s mind boggled. Was this a genuine offer, or some duplicity? She was, after all, looking for two creatures posing as devils, and had no reason to suspect him if she did not already possess the

dweomer. He waited.

“I must have the ‘Discern Location’ spell, Mostin. You are a powerful diviner. Do you possess it?”

Mostin swallowed. He had no means of communicating with her, unless he left the extradimensional

space. He made a mental note of acquiring the ‘message’ spell as soon as possible.

“I am growing impatient, Mostin,” she said. “I know little about you, but have already discovered that you are rather timid. I have no quarrel with you.”

Mostin let the mirror go blank, and cast an empowered ‘cat’s grace,’ a ‘stoneskin’ and ‘haste,’ and wished that he’d prepared more wards. He grasped his amulet, prayed that its absorptive abilities would work, and exited the ‘Magnificent Mansion.’ Stepping into his cellar, he could already hear crashing sounds upstairs – demons, most likely, rifling through his possessions. Several sets of explosive runes detonated. The Alienist smiled. This time he had the advantage of being on his home turf.

Mostin teleported himself onto the porch. Feezuu stood in the doorway. Behind her, an uridezu rat-demon, several dretch and a dozen quasits were running and flying around inside causing mayhem.

But this time, the Alienist had the jump

Mostin flung an empowered sonically substituted burst of ‘Chain Lightning’ which almost blew the

Cambion off of her feet. Inside the house, quasits dropped like flies from the secondary arcs.

Incanting, the Alienist summoned three bearded devils.

“Kill the woman, then the demons,” he instructed. “Try not to smash the house up.”

As Feezuu turned to see the devils rushing at her, her face suddenly revealed an expression of

understanding. She gaped.

With the merest gesture, Mostin hurled another quickened sonic bolt before she could react. Her

resistance held, and Mostin grasped his amulet and braced himself.

Feezuu cast a quickened haste, hit Mostin and the devils with an empowered, maximized

acid

substituted 'Fireball' and then aimed a 'Finger of Death' at the Alienist. One of the devils vanished, consumed in acid. The necromantic spell was absorbed harmlessly by the amulet, and Mostin thanked

several random deities. He looked down to notice that his skin was dripping off of his arms.

The two bearded devils ploughed into the Cambion in a frenzy with their glaives slashing violently at her, causing her to stagger backwards. Mostin cast a quickened 'magic missile' and another sonic.

He arrested his 'Disintegrate' when he noticed that Feezuu was already lying on the ground.

The uridezu dashed past one of the barbazu in an attempt to escape, but, already suffering from the effects of 'Explosive Runes' and the first Sonic, was felled by the devil's glaive.

The Alienist walked cautiously over to the Necromancer's body as the devils chased the one remaining quasit around inside his hallway. She was not dead, but teetered on the edge of unconsciousness.

"You?" She laughed. The Sonics had ruptured her internally, and she coughed blood and bile.

Mostin drew his rapier.

Feezuu smiled. "'Cloned,'" she said.

He plunged it through her neck.

After he had dismissed the devils, the Alienist limped back down the steps into his cellar, selected a bottle of thirty-year old firewine, took a large crystal goblet from his glassware cabinet, and sat on his porch for a minute to gather his thoughts. He glanced inside: his unseen servants were already tidying up the mess, neatly arranging his papers and sweeping up broken glass and porcelain.

He looked at Feezuu's body. Even if she had already made a simulacrum of herself, he didn't care. She probably wouldn't remember any of what had happened, and would be diminished in both personal

potency, and influence amongst the fiends of Graz'zt's Abyssal court. And without her magical items, it would take years for her to regain her power, if she managed it at all.

Mostin downed a glass of firewine, and hobbled over to the corpse. He stood over it like a vulture, before bending down and pulling the longbow free and unfastening the sword belt. A 'Robe of Eyes.'

Mostin could barely contain his excitement. She bore a ring on each hand, and wore a belt which

sported many pockets. He opened one, and was delighted to see that it was an extradimensional storage space of modest size. Rifling through them systematically, he located her books – 3 slender tomes, with neatly written spells filling them.

Mostin spent the rest of the afternoon sat on his porch, absorbed in the books, locating dweomers

which he could add to his collection. Two volumes contained only Necromantic spells – of no use to Mostin, but of immense trade value. The third was filled with her auxiliary spells, including many that Mostin did not possess. He flicked to the back, where the more potent dweomers were scribed: ‘Gate

Seal,’ ‘Hardening,’ ‘Contingency,’ ‘Acid Storm,’ ‘Eyebite,’ ‘Energy Immunity,’ ‘Vipergout,’ ‘Delayed Blast Fireball.’

Mostin stroked Mogus, and the hedgehog crooned appreciatively.

When Eadric and Nehael rode up at four o’clock in the afternoon to investigate his absence from the council, they were shocked to find Mostin with several layers of skin burned off, sitting and drinking firewine next to a corpse. The Demoness looked at the body.

“Feezuu?” She asked, aghast.

Mostin raised his glass. “Yes, indeed,” he said.

*Mostin has a permanent ‘See Invisibility’ cast upon his person.

**Compacting is a way of getting around the restrictions on the various ‘planar binding’ spells. The Demonist or Diabolist makes peaceful contact with the outsider prior to casting the spell, and they strike an agreement. Payment is usually made in Larvae, the universal currency of the Lower Planes.

When the ‘planar binding’ is cast, the conjurer purposely breaks the ‘magic circle’ and allows the outsider to gain its freedom. The demon or devil is now secure upon the Prime Plane and, unlike the various ‘Summon Monster’ spells, can remain for an indefinite period.

Needless to say, compacting is very hazardous, and only very powerful spellcasters employ compacts with the higher demons and devils. Not only does it involve an implicit degree of trust between the fiend and the summoner (a rare thing), but also, if overused, has the danger of attracting the attention of celestials – obviously, something which most diabolists would rather avoid.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 06-13-2002

In which Nwm’s player, Dave, again demonstrates his ability to create new story arcs out of thin air.

Thanks Dave.

**

Ortwin scratched his head. “So, this time, she really is dead, then. Right? I mean, Nehael and Ed saw the body. There is no risk of her coming back?”

Mostin smiled. “She said ‘Cloned’ to me. By this, I assumed she meant that she had a simulacrum prepared for her spirit to inhabit. ‘Discern Location’ revealed this to be the truth.”

Ortwin banged his head. Necromancers seemed difficult to kill.

“The question most pertinent to us,” Mostin continued “is ‘when was the simulacrum prepared?’ If it was made before we launched our first assault upon her, it will retain no memory of our attack: she has, effectively, never met us. It may also retain no memory of the murder of Cynric – effectively meaning that the Feezuu who now exists is not guilty of it.”

Eadric sighed. “Is this likely?” he asked.

Mostin shrugged. “It is possible that the clone was grown during the intervening months, but I feel it is unlikely.”

“How do we know,” Ortwin asked “that we didn’t, in fact, kill Feezuu the first time we met her, and that you just killed another clone.”

Mostin shook his head. “That is impossible. If the Feezuu which I just killed was a clone, it would have retained no memory of our original attack. Thus, it would have never met us. Thus, it would not have recognized my Sonics and the devils which I summoned. Nor would acquiring the ‘Discern Location’

dweomer have benefited it, as it can only be used with regard to things which the caster has

encountered. We may therefore concur that we simply failed to kill her during our initial encounter.”

The Alienist smiled at his own tortuous logic.

“In any case,” Mostin continued, “it is likely that ‘Feezuu II,’ if we can call her that, has a duplicate set of spellbooks stashed away somewhere in her hideaway in Limbo. It is also likely that her most potent dweomers are no longer available to her. Unfortunately, the location of the spellbooks she stole from Qiseze and Kothchori may never be revealed – she did not have them on her person, and ‘Feezuu II’

will have no recollection of where the original Feezuu secreted them.”

“Unless she hid them on Limbo,” Ortwin remarked, “in which case the clone has awakened happily to a cache of spells that it could not previously cast, and wonder where they came from.”

The Alienist nodded. He hadn’t considered that possibility.

Mostin drew the attention of the others to the items which he had pilfered from Feezuu’s body.

“This,” he gloated, “is a ‘Robe of Eyes.’”

“Really?” Nwm remarked sarcastically. “I’d never have guessed.”

Mostin sniffed. “I’m keeping it,” he said. “It’s mine now. These other items are also interesting, and I will discern their full abilities in due course. The sword is called ‘Melancholy.’ It is an Anarchic weapon of great potency.”

“It is a Slaadi blade,” Ortwin said, unexpectedly. “May I?”

The Bard picked up the scabbard, and closed his hand around the slender hilt of the sword. Insane visions and scenes of entropy filled his mind.

“Ngraahhh!” Ortwin forced his hand to uncurl from around the quillons. “It is sapient. It wants to kill you, Eadric. It quite likes me, though.”

“Oh, joy,” said the Paladin, “that’s all we need. What do you plan to do with it, Mostin?”

The Alienist lifted his hands in an expression of confusion. “I honestly don’t know. No wizard will

want it – most can barely wave a stick in self-defense, much less a longsword. If I trade it, I won’t get anything like its full value. I assume you don’t want it, Ortwin, even at a bargain price?”

The Bard shook his head. “Githla is my blade.”

“In which case, I suppose I will just hang onto it until an idea springs to mind. It’s a shame it’s not a rapier, else I could use it myself.”

Eadric thanked Oronthon that it wasn’t a rapier.

“The bow is likewise a conundrum,” Mostin said. “It possesses a Necromantic aura, although it is not evil.”

“I can shoot a bow passably well,” Ortwin said. “Furthermore, I won’t give you anything for it –

consider it ample payment for putting my neck on the line during that abortive Limbo fiasco. Feezuu was our target, after all. Not to mention all of the other trouble that you’ve gotten us all into.” He smiled charmingly.

Mostin started to bluster, but thought better of it.

“Speaking of which,” Ortwin continued, “I seem to remember Nwm casting a dozen wards or so on us before we translated to Limbo. Don’t you think you owe him something as well?”

“Don’t push it,” said Mostin.

“Don’t worry about it,” said Nwm.

“Don’t be so damn selfless, Nwm,” said Ortwin. “Come on, Mostin. What’s fair is fair. What will you have, Nwm, of all the things here?”

Mostin looked aghast.

Nwm considered for a while. “The Sword,” he said, finally.

Everyone looked at him as though he were mad.

“Not for me,” the Druid explained. “But for someone who has the conviction and the strength of will to wield it. A Champion. A Uediian. I would use it against the Temple.”

Mostin nodded. “Then let it be noted that all accounts are hereby settled.” He handed the weapon to Nwm, and breathed a sigh of relief.

But Eadric swallowed. Hard.

**

Over the next two weeks, Nwm travelled the length and breadth of Wyre, disguised as a crone, or a boy, or a young man, making inquiries without attracting suspicion to himself. He 'Wind Walked' over three thousand miles, and 'Tree Strode' a hundred more.

The Druid spoke to farmers and cotters in rural Trempa, Tomur, Hethio and Iald. He talked to

woodsmen deep within the forest of Nizkur and to mountain-men in the uplands and foothills of the

Thrumohars, the nigh-impenetrable range which marched on Northern Wyre. He spoke to trees, and to

rocks, and to animals. In the process, he gathered a huge amount of information about the widespread and diverse pagan community. Goddess worshippers, but also those who revered local gods and deities.

Animists, pantheists and heathens of every shade. He discovered their needs, their concerns, their fears and their expectations.

His inquiries were subtle. As a crone, he would say:

"Would that we had heroes again, like in the days before the rise of the Temple. My grandmother's grandmother remembered the time before the taxes. When your beliefs were not threatened."

Or as a boy, appearing wide-eyed and naïve, he would ask:

"Are you a great warrior? Is there a great warrior in this village?"

And whilst his questions were usually met with mirth, occasionally he would be pointed in the

direction of one who could wield a sword but, finding them, discovered that they were old, or drunk, or that their reputation was based on hearsay rather than fact.

Until, in the foothills of the mountains, he met a shamaness. She joined him as he was 'Wind-Walking.'

"I am Mesikämmi, the Honey-Eater," she said in broken common.

"I am called Nwm the Preceptor," he replied. "I am looking for a hero."

"Good luck!" She said, and flew away.

Nwm chased after her. "Wait," he shouted, "you must know of someone, or at least of someone who might know someone."

She laughed. "Over the mountains, onto the plateau," she shouted. "Speak to the Tunthi.*"

So Nwm flew over the Thrumohars, past their vast, ice-covered crags, and passed onto the plain of Tun Hartha.

**

Iua, Mostin and Ortwin sat closeted within the Alienist's drawing room.

Iua had a large schematic with intricate diagrams, runes and designs written upon it. Her own scrawled notes covered the remaining blank spaces, and sometimes overlapped with the more meticulous writing beneath.

“The Temple vault was designed by the mage Tersimion...” she began.

*Nomadic hunter-gatherers who dwell at an altitude of over 8000 feet, the Tunthi are widely regarded as being crazy.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 06-15-2002

**

Enitharmon, tomorrow is the meeting with Enitharmon, was the first thing that she thought.

Before slipping back into unconsciousness.

Only a moment seemed to pass before her eyes opened. She was surrounded by a living, viscous fluid which seemed to penetrate her mouth, and stomach and lungs. She panicked, and struggled wildly

before sitting bolt upright, gasping for air. She coughed and vomited for what seemed like an aeon, breathing desperately, trying to empty herself of the foul tasting lavage.

When she finally gained her equilibrium and opened her eyes, a nightmarish scene greeted her. Gross, contorted body parts hung around her, and blood dripped incessantly from a sagging ceiling above her head. A dull, red glow filled the place, and the walls rippled as though they were made of liquid.

Feezuu relaxed. She was home.

As she pulled herself out of the ghoulish bath, she wondered how long she had been dead. She stood for a moment, naked and covered in fetid slime, before walking across the pulsing floor to a tall

cabinet, carved from the femur of some terrible beast. Upon it was engraved a rune of death. She spoke a single word.

The door opened. The space beyond was empty.

Feezuu cursed silently. Her robe, gone. Her weapons also. And her belt. The fact that she was not

surprised made her no less angry.

Taking a moment to reflect upon her own consciousness, she observed that her highest valences were diminished, and her psyche was empty of magic.

She seethed insanely before finally regaining her composure.

Mustering her will, the Cambion reached down and sank her hands into the floor at the base of the

cabinet. Blood, warm and vital, embraced her forearms. She smiled grimly and groped for a moment

before her fist closed around a handle. Tugging hard, she pulled a small iron case up through the liquid floor, dragging blood with it which splashed over her. The surface ebbed strangely for a while, before resuming its pseudo-solid state.

Feezuu opened the case, and gazed inside. She pulled a neatly folded robe out, woven from a material that was darker than black, and drew it around herself. At the bottom of the case were several scroll tubes, vials, and a single spellbook which contained her most useful dweomers. Also, there was a glass tube of curious design. Inside it, within tiny cells, motes flickered about restlessly. Larvae that had been morphed for easy transportation.

As she placed the contents within the hidden pockets of her robe, a shadow fell upon her from behind.

She turned to see her cohort, the slaad called Khrgz standing there. His vast, bluish form obscured the doorway. He was flanked by a group of eight of his lesser kin.

Feezuu snarled. "How dare you! Depart at once."

Khrgz smiled, displaying a maw full of sharp teeth. "You are weak, Feezuu," he said.

Not that weak, she thought. Her innate nature still counted for something.

A wave of Necromantic power emanated from her, desiccating three of the red slaadi, but failing to overcome Khrgz.

Another blue slaad materialized. And then two more reds.

As they closed upon her, the Cambion swore. Even if she summoned a demon, she could not stop them from ripping her to shreds. She quickly pulled a scroll from her robe, even as their claws rent her and their teeth sank into her. She spoke four words and vanished.

She aimed for the city of Jashat in the Thalassine, but instead arrived four hundred miles to the south in the deserts of Shûth. The Prime Plane was dull, but safe, she thought. She began to walk northwards across the arid erg.

She stopped before dusk on a platform of rock, in the lee of a tall pinnacle of desert stone, worn into strange shapes by the passage of wind and sand over countless years. She sat, and meditated.

When she emerged from her reverie, the stars had kindled in the sky and the moon was rising in the east. The air was windless. Taking her book from its velvet sheath, Feezuu pored over it, and the

moonlight illuminated the dweomers on the pages. So few, so few. And even some of these were denied to her. Word would soon spread of her ousting from her stronghold, and no doubt a Death Slaad would seize its opportunity and take control. They resented her as much as she despised them.

She silently cursed whoever was responsible for her current predicament, and vowed revenge.

Feezuu cleared the area of debris, until a circle perhaps eight feet across was made on the rock shelf, sweeping it with a sprig of gorse pulled from a desert shrub. She carefully inscribed a diagram, and with a spell, anchored it. She began to pace around the periphery,

incanting fiercely, until her voice reached a screaming climax.

Fire erupted in the diagram as an equine shape manifested itself. Its hooves and mane kindled, and smoke billowed from its nostrils. It thrashed wildly in an attempt to escape. The Cambion smiled.

“I am Feezuu,” she said. “You will serve me. I will show you more death and madness than you dreamed was possible.”

**

The next morning, riding the nightmare, she descended on a desert caravan. Before slaying the

merchants, she learned that nearly nine months had passed. She loaded a bag full of gold, silks and

spices, and continued northwards.

Nine months!

She wondered if Ainhorr had betrayed her after the embassy with the Celestials. Why were they due to parley, she wondered. The Balor had told her little, but had instructed her to prepare to translate to the Prime after the meeting.

Graz’zt had been angry. She shivered. Rurunoth had disappeared – the rumour was that he was slain or ensnared.

Nehael. It all had something to do with Nehael. She had been commanded to seduce a paladin.

Something had gone wrong.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 06-18-2002

Last update for a week or so - I’m off into the mountains hiking with my wife.

**

Tersimion, a mage of extraordinary genius, had been an enigma.

Unlike the vast majority of his peers, whose religious sentiments ran the gamut from indifference to disdain, Tersimion had possessed faith in the judgement of a single deity. What had further

distinguished him from the other members of the magical community – most of whom regarded him as

sadly misguided – was that his conversion and catechesis arrived late in life, well after he had

established a reputation as a spellcaster of prodigious power.

His contributions to the Oronthonian cause had been numerous and diverse, but his final gift, the vault beneath the Temple at Morne, was the one for which he was rightly best remembered.

The vault was, in fact, a series of miniature nested demi-planes, impervious to magical

travel of any kind and warded against scrying with the most potent of spells. It was known to possess areas of

antimagic, it was roamed by golems and axiomatic manticores, and boasted sophisticated mechanical traps to boot. Its single entrance was guarded by four paladins whose sole duty was to prevent

unauthorized access – more to protect the innocent, than through any fear that those who did somehow pass them would penetrate the vault’s mysteries. The knights took shifts – two of them guarded the portal for twelve hours at a stretch, whilst the other pair rested and prayed. The Temple Exchequer had maintained this tradition for two hundred years.

Mostin was reticent. “Although I have no objection to larceny,” he told Iua, “and I am also intrigued by the intellectual challenge that this poses, I am wary that any involvement by me – especially given Ortwin’s history with the Temple – might be construed as an overtly political act. I do not wish the ire of the council to descend upon me for violating the Injunction.”

“I agree,” she said cautiously, “that we must tread carefully. But the rewards are staggering. As well as the sheer volume of coinage – over one hundred thousand gold crowns are maintained as a floating

balance – every promissory note and record of transaction is kept there. It would send the Temple

finances into utter chaos if ...”

“Wait!” Ortwin said. “I thought that you said this was about opportunism, not striking some political blow for an abstract cause that I’m not sure I have any time for.”

Iua shrugged. “We may as well sound the trumpet for liberty and freedom while we’re there – it’s not as if it’ll be much extra effort. A gallon of oil and a tindertwig will do it. Assuming that Mostin isn’t willing to cast a ‘Fireball.’”

Ortwin eyed the girl suspiciously. “I’d rather not burn the Fane down. I don’t think Ed would be all that impressed.” He had the sneaking suspicion that Iua was a closet idealist after all.

Mostin snorted. “If we managed that, it would be the first interplanar conflagration in history. My main problem is that I don’t feel that the reward is ample to the risk involved – money is merely money. Are there magical devices stored in the vault? Artifacts?” His eyes gleamed greedily.

“Not to my knowledge,” Iua confessed. She reached into a pocket and produced an ivory tube. “But if you are willing to forego a percentage of your cut, then another kind of remuneration might be agreed

upon.” Iua uncorked the tube and pulled a bundle of papers out. Unrolling them, she handed the top one to Mostin. It was a spell, which read:

‘Mulissu’s Passage of Lightning.’

The Alienist was about to say something, but Iua handed him another scroll. It read:

‘Mulissu’s Rhapsody of the Clouds.’

Mostin swallowed reflexively. She handed him another scroll:

‘Mulissu’s Quasi-Elemental Transformation.’

And another:

‘Mulissu’s Instantaneous Elemental Tempest.’

And finally:

‘Mulissu’s Ultimate Plasma Evocation.’

Mostin looked at them and hyperventilated for a few moments before he regained his ability to speak.

“You stole these from your own mother?” Apparently the young lady was quite unscrupulous.

“They are copies,” Iua explained. “Made by her, of course. And I am not entirely unscrupulous.”

Mostin was still shaking. The last two dweomers were beyond even his ability to manifest, but he

understood the principles. And the Plasma Evocation could be modified into a sonic...

But if Mulissu ever found out...

He couldn’t help himself.

“We have a deal,” the Alienist said. “And Iua...”

She looked at him.

“A mage’s mind is his private domain. If you ever try to read my thoughts again, you will suffer the consequences. Do you understand?”

“Noted,” she said.

**

Nwm and a young Tunthi shaman sat together near a fire. As neither could speak the language of the other, and neither possessed any spell with which they could be made intelligible to each other, Nwm had taken the logical step of using an eagle to translate. After all, both present COULD speak with animals. And eagles were relatively articulate as far as avians went.

They were waiting for the older shaman, Tietäjä, to return from a dream-quest, in which he was

speaking with his deceased ancestors and looking for guidance. The other members of the Tuern – a

type of extended family group numbering sixty souls – had retired to their rude skin huts, leaving the Druid alone with the initiate, Sarajoa. He was young, Nwm mused, but already possessed more wisdom than most of the clergy in Oronthon’s church. His closeness to the land was manifested in his speech and mannerisms, and he felt no pressing need to make small talk, or muse on the meaning of life, or engage in pointless philosophical banter. For

most of the time, the eagle stood silent.

These people can teach me, Nwm thought.

When Tietäjä finally emerged from his hut, he looked tired but satisfied. He hobbled over to the fire and drew his cloak around himself, before pouring mead into a cup carved from birchwood and

drinking deeply.

“I ascended to the fires,” he said.* “I spoke with my grandfather. I asked him if my Green was your Green, or whether they were different.”

“What did he say?” Nwm asked.

“He said that they are neither the same, nor different, nor both, nor neither,” Tietäjä smiled ironically.

“Which is another way of telling me not to think with my head, but with my stomach.”

“What does your stomach tell you?” Nwm asked.

Tietäjä laughed loudly. “It tells me that I am getting too old to eat this much meat, and I should change my diet. I like you Nwm, but this struggle that you speak of is a long way from here. I cannot FEEL it, it does not move me. Only rarely do my people leave the Linna.** But when they do, they take

something of it with them.”

Nwm said nothing, but listened.

“There is another Tuern, whose territory lies three days from here towards the sunrise,” the Shaman said. “They are not our enemies, nor are they our friends. Five years ago, several of their men – great warriors – left their family to travel to the warm lands. My grandfather told me that you seek one of these men. His name is Hullu.”

Nwm nodded. “Where can I find this Hullu?” he asked.

“You must speak to the people in the other Tuern,” Tietäjä said. “They will answer your questions. You will need to find a token that belonged to Hullu, and then use your magic to locate him.”

Nwm stood and bowed, preparing to leave.

“Beware of their shaman. She is dangerous.”

Nwm nodded, and dissolved into mist.

**

“How many?” Eadric asked.

“Eight hundred Templars and around four thousand auxiliaries,” Mostin replied. “They left at dawn.”

Eadric groaned.

“There’s more. Two smaller forces also marched this morning – one from Tomur and another from Thahan. They are also heading for Trempe, although from the north.”

Eadric nodded grimly. "I'll speak to Soraine. We'll need to act quickly."

*The Tunthi believe that the polar aurora is the seat of all wisdom.

** Lit., "Enclosure." The Tunthi name for the desolate plateau on which they live, Tun Hartha.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 06-22-2002

On a warm spring morning, a day before the Equinox, Eadric of Deorham rode from the gates of the

Duchess's castle with his paladins. A quarter of Trempa's knights, thanes and bannermen, as well as five hundred or so mounted man-at-arms, accompanied them. The cavalry was protected by a screen of Ardanese mercenaries – horsed archers whose fierceness in battle was matched only by their capacity for mead – and foreshadowed by hand-picked scouts from the fiefs of thanes Ekkert and Streek. Eadric had led out the army post haste – his main objective being to hold the crossings over the River Nund –

until Tahl arrived with Soraine and the bulk of Trempa's armoured aristocracy.

Most of the Uediians – including the skirmishers and longbowmen – had been dispatched northwards

under the command of Ryth of Har Kumil. The Thane, although bloodthirsty and itching for war, was

no fool. He was to conduct a guerilla campaign of attrition against the forces advancing from Tomur – a task for which he was amply qualified. His orders had been clear: Do NOT cross the Nund. Do NOT

invest Tomur.

Eadric sighed. He doubted whether Ryth would remain within his remit. He also wondered whether

Rintrah's instructions* applied to him personally, the troops under his command, or everyone in Trempa involved in the war.

In the rearguard, aside from Togull, the Laird of Rauth Sutting, to whom nominal command fell, rode a motley rag-tag of soldiers-for-hire, libertarian idealists, religious zealots of uncertain persuasion, romantics, poets, artists, and Ortwin of Jiuhu. Next to him, sullen and uncommunicative, Iua sulked.

She sat upon a remarkable horse whose feet did not seem to touch the ground, but rather the legs of which ended in cloudlike wisps of vapour.

Mostin the Metagnostic rode nearby, his uncanny green eyes peering out from underneath the most

outrageous hat that he possessed, made from purple velvet and topped with a wing-feather from a

lillend. The brim was a full three feet in diameter. The robe of eyes which he wore dispelled any

remaining doubt in the minds of those who saw him that this was someone of arcane power, and to be carefully avoided.

Despite her protestations, Iua had not been able to dissuade Ortwin from riding. She had pointed out that now – with virtually every Templar absent from the Fane – was the ideal time to raid the vault. The Bard had half surprised himself when Eadric had asked:

“We leave in the morning. Are you coming?”

And Ortwin had replied “Yes.”

No doubts, no equivocations, no procrastinations. Iua’s scheme could wait – after all, the vault would still be there in a week. Here was a chance for songs, glorious deeds, bloodshed, and a boost to his recently battered ego. His reputation demanded that he be in full prominence, inspiring people with exaggerated braggadocio and tales of daring. In the final analysis, being in the limelight was the most important thing in the world to him. And, after all, he couldn’t let Ed down, he added as an afterthought.

Iua had commended the Bard, but pointed out that there were other ways of striking a blow to the

Temple – that a financial crisis would cause pandemonium quickly and effectively. She missed the crux of the Bard’s motivation, however – the unchecked desire for self-aggrandizement – and by the time

she had realized it, Ortwin had made up his mind and could not be deterred. Iua had pouted, and decided that she’d continue to pester him until he acquiesced.

Mostin’s reasons for being there – in an ‘advisory capacity,’ of course – were more straightforward.

He’d never seen a battle before. He hoped that someone would overlook the fact that he was a wizard and assault him, thus provoking ‘reasonable self-defense.’ And he wasn’t letting Iua and those scrolls out of his sight for one damn minute.

After a nine-hour march, the army halted on the meadows near the village of Hernath, halfway between the town of Trempa and Deorham. As tents were pitched, guards were posted and horses were picketed, Eadric visited Mostin. The Alienist - excited by the prospect of battle but rejecting the inconveniences that campaigning brought – had erected his portable manse some distance from the camp, and was scrying for enemy movements.

“What exactly are you permitted to do, Mostin, and what does the Injunction forbid?”

“I have been musing upon the same question myself,” the Alienist replied. “As no mage has ever violated it, it is difficult to answer.”

“Never?” Eadric was amazed that here, apparently, was a law that had never been broken.

Mostin smiled. “Despite my urge to fling magic around on the battlefield, I am in general accord with the premise of the Injunction. Wizards have far better things to do with their time than demean

themselves with temporal politics, and I think everyone would agree that the prospect of mages being used as artillery is a terrifying one.”

“But you spoke of using ‘auxiliary’ magics. What do you mean by this?”

“Divinations are permitted,” Mostin replied. “And whilst auxiliary to most mages, they are, in fact, my specialty. Which is good for you.”

“And ‘reasonable self-defense?’” The Paladin further queried him.

“That is equally vague,” Mostin sighed. “I think that placing myself in the centre of a battle would probably constitute some kind of provocation, and I doubt that I could use it as a defense for evoking a

‘fireball’ for example. I intend to remain on the margins of the fight, acting for the most part as a passive observer. If anyone is foolish enough to target me with their lance or sword, then I will

retaliate, and my role will become that of a ‘participant-observer.’ At that point, I am treading on very thin ice as far as the Great Injunction goes but not, I think, in open violation.”

“And exactly what would happen, if you were to flagrantly violate the Injunction?”

The Alienist shrugged. “As I say, in five hundred years, no-one has ever done it to my knowledge. I suspect that, after news got out, then divinations would be made and I would be revealed as the culprit.

I would, at the very least, be shunned by the magical community. If my behaviour continued, I guess that a cadre of mages would form in order to arrest my deviancy. The technical penalty is

‘Imprisonment.’”

Eadric gave a quizzical look. That didn’t sound too bad. But he didn’t understand that Mostin was

referring to a spell, or what that spell involved.

“Why the sudden interest?” Mostin asked. “I hope that you aren’t trying to persuade me to summon pseudonatural entities to aid you.”

Eadric was aghast, and held his hand up. “No! Certainly not. I’m curious, that’s all. I know little of the world that you move in, or the rules by which it operates. Why exactly are you here, Mostin?”

The Alienist sighed. “Intellectual curiosity? Ennui? Maybe even loyalty and camaraderie. Who knows?

I try not to question my motivation – it tends to be unproductive, and leads to irresolvable paradox.

Especially when one possesses a logical faculty as titanic as mine. Incandescent genius brings its own worries, you know.”

Eadric rubbed his cheek. Mostin seemed quite serious.

**

Nwm flew south over the hilly uplands of Iald. He was exhausted, and needed to recuperate his magic.

The contest with the shamaness Mesikämmi had proven almost beyond his abilities. Why hadn't she

told him, when he'd first encountered her in the foothills of the Thrumohars? Why send him into the wastes of Tun Hartha, only to have another shaman redirect him back to her? Her reasoning was

mysterious, and Nwm wondered whether she was somehow testing him, making time to gather her own

strength, or merely teasing him for her own perverse entertainment. The Tunthi! Their customs and

motivations seemed impenetrable.

"Our allies will contest with one another," she had said. "If yours prevail, then I will render an item of Hullu's to you, and you may scry him. If mine are triumphant, then I will take your torc, Nwm, and you will depart forever. Will you rise to the challenge?"

The Druid had wondered what she meant until, showing forth her power, she summoned a fire

elemental of prodigious size. If he'd had time to prepare, Nwm knew that he could have conjured a

larger one, and the contest would have been over before it began. As it was, he was pressed to match the elemental in terms of power, and instead elected to summon three salamanders. Mesikämmi had

thrown another elemental into the fray, and Nwm had invoked the powers of his staff in order to bring yet more salamanders into being. Pillars of interweaving fire scorched the frozen tundra, causing great plumes of steam to erupt as the magical allies fought each other fiercely.

When Nwm finally prevailed, the shamaness had returned to her hut, and reluctantly given the Druid a carved aurochs horn, which he gratefully accepted.

"Perhaps I should have required your staff as payment, had I won," Mesikämmi had ruefully remarked.

But, in the end, the contest had cost her little and she had had much to gain.

Nwm had flown on and, passing again through the mountains, had found a cold, still pool and scried Hullu.

There. In a small cabin in the woods, in Iald. Nwm had set out immediately.

**

The Druid rematerialized next to a great boulder, deposited ages before by a glacier, and walked towards the simple house. Smoke, issuing from the chimney, alerted Nwm to the

fact that Hullu was
home.

Swallowing, the Druid strode up to the door and rapped loudly upon it with the base of his staff. There was no reply. Nwm knocked again. Still nothing. He gingerly pushed the door inwards, and glanced to see a rudely furnished interior, before someone sprang at him from the shadows and grappled him to the ground.

The face, with its narrow eyes and beardless chin, was certainly Tunthi. He was small, but wiry, and immensely strong.

“Peace, Hullu,” Nwm said quickly.

The grip did not relax. “Who are you?” Hullu barked with a thick accent.

“I am Nwm, a Uediian. I seek your aid.”

“I am no longer for hire.” Hullu snapped, standing up. “You may leave, now.”

“I offer no money,” Nwm said, pulling himself to his feet, brushing off his cloak, and smiling benignly.

“I merely require your aid. I want you to offer it freely and willingly, with no thought of gain for yourself, and to risk death if necessary.”

Hullu looked incredulous. “Are you mad?”

Nwm grinned. “I have spoken to the shamans Tietäjä and Mesikämmi. Your name was suggested to me.”

Hullu hissed. “Why were you in the Linna? And what does the Honey-Paw have to do with this?”

“I am tired and hungry, Hullu, and I smell something agreeable roasting inside. This would be better discussed with a full stomach.”

“You are unbelievable! You have never met me before.”

“No,” agreed Nwm, nodding. “Do you have any mead?”

**

“It is simple,” Nwm said, relaxing in the smoky interior of the cabin and holding a full belly. Hullu eyed him suspiciously – the Druid had proven to have a healthy appetite. “The Uediians are scattered, disorganized, leaderless and need a figure around whom they can rally.”

Hullu snorted. “Then do it yourself. I am not even Wyrish. And I don’t buy into this Goddess nonsense either.”

“Nor do half or more of those who are labelled ‘pagan,’” Nwm explained. “Tell me Hullu, you revere the spirits of lake and tree and mountain, don’t you?”

“Yes, but...”

“In fact,” Nwm continued, “you are Tunthi. You live it and breathe it. It runs through your

veins naturally and effortlessly, a memory of a world which we in Wyre have forgotten.”

“If you mean to suggest that I am more primitive, just come out and say it,” Hullu snarled.

“No,” Nwm abruptly snapped. “I have much to learn from your people. They are not decadent. They are focussed, in tune with nature. They are in the NOW to an extent which a settled, agrarian lifestyle crushes. Few amongst us now can evoke that momentless moment, when Nature is gloriously unified.”

“And you are one of them?” Hullu asked archly.

“Yes,” the Druid replied honestly.

“Then lead your people,” Hullu said simply. “This is not my fight.”

“When the Inquisition arrives and demands your conversion, will you accede? Will you bow down before their god – or, more likely, the aspect of their god which demands blind obedience and

unthinking acceptance of dogma? Or will you flee into the forest?”

“The last is more likely,” Hullu replied.

“Then you will live like a fugitive until they find you, and then you will convert, or burn.”

“You will not cow me into any course of action,” Hullu rose to his feet. “These words are meant for the ears of the ignorant. I have served as a mercenary from Morne to Bedesh. This is not the way of the Temple, and as oppressive as they might be, there has never been any forced conversion.”

“As an unrepentant subject of Iald, you are already under a death sentence for heresy,” Nwm told him.

“That is absurd,” Hullu said. “I don’t believe you.”

“You have been alone in the woods for too long, Hullu,” the Druid said.

And Nwm told him the whole story, from beginning to end, leaving out no detail.

**

“So this is the sword?” Hullu asked, brandishing it.

“It is called ‘Melancholy,’” Nwm replied. “It was forged by the slaadi and belongs to a half-demon called Feezuu. She will likely wish it back at some stage.”

“I don’t like the name. And what do you suggest I do with it?” Hullu asked.

“Head for Hethio, and rally the Uediians there,” Nwm replied. “It is the heart of the Temple’s power, and the place where they least expect resistance to arise. Organize the cells of pagans into a coherent

body. Show them a direction.”

“And why can’t you do this?”

“Because I will not subject my faith to theocratic despotism, however well-intentioned it might be.

There needs to be a groundswell of opinion, not the mindless observance of commands that I might give.”

Hullu smiled ironically. “But you are willing to manipulate them using other means? Using me?”

“That is the only choice remaining,” Nwm confessed.

“What makes you think that they will trust me? That they will follow a barbarian from the north?”

“It is two days until the Equinox,” Nwm replied. “We will make a suitably dramatic appearance.”

**

The dolmens at Groba had, for centuries, been a place of worship for the pagans of Hethio. Even with the rapidly growing stigma attached to the Old Religion, the stone temple, interspersed with oaks of enormous size, was thronging with worshippers. Because most of the Inquisitors and Templars were in the East, mustering for the war with Trempa, many of those who would have otherwise been reluctant to attend did, in fact, show their faces. A number of druids led them in prayers and supplications to assorted woodland spirits, deities of rocks and streams, and the great fertility Goddess, Uedii.

Nwm arrived at dawn, the climax of the ceremony, in the form of an eagle with a fifty-foot wingspan, bearing Hullu between his huge talons. It was a carefully orchestrated piece of showmanship, designed to evoke a complex reaction – the eagle was, after all, the symbol of Oronthon. Regarding it as a

portent, some of those present tried to flee, others fell to their knees. The druids, uncertain of the meaning, stood and waited.

Nwm’s pinions beat mightily, causing a great downrush of air which made those below shield their

eyes and hold onto their cloaks. He deposited Hullu atop the highest of the menhirs, and then alighted on the ground next to him. His head was level with the Tunthi warrior, twenty feet above the earth.

Nwm screamed out a spell, and suddenly the air around was full of spirits, whispering encouragement to those gathered there and dispelling their fears.

The Druid resumed his human form.

“I am Nwm, the Preceptor,” he announced in a clear voice. “I am not here to lead you, but I bring someone who can and will. He is a warrior from the North. His name is Hullu. If you won’t accept him on my recommendation, then that is all well and good: in time, he will prove himself capable and you will follow him. His names are not our names, but he believes as we do. He knows much that we have forgotten, and he can teach us. He can show us how to remember. He can give us direction in the war against oppression and persecution. I leave the choice as to how you deal with him to you.”

“I am now active in this fight,” Nwm continued. “Not as a leader of men, but as myself. I

have no desire to command, and I will reject any attempts to persuade me to do so. I will act according to my own conscience, wherever I decide the need is greatest. I am beholden only to the Goddess: do not

succour me for aid, lest I reject you and you resent me for it. I ask you to remember one thing only: it is the Temple that oppresses you, not the Eagle.” The last words were in a hope that peaceful

Oronthonians would not be targeted.

One of the druids stepped forwards. “You are arrogant beyond belief, Nwm. You are acting outside of your remit.”

“I act according to my conscience, as should you,” Nwm replied, simply. He resumed his aquiline form and took off, flying eastwards.

Late on the morning of the Spring Equinox, the eagle was sighted over Morne, and people stopped in the streets to wonder what it might portend.

Nwm followed the road from Morne to Trempa, and saw that it was churned up by the passage of

numerous horses and wagons. The army had already left.

On the evening of the same day, fifteen miles from the border with Trempa, Nwm spied from a great height the smoldering remains of a dozen bodies by the roadside. He descended and stood grimly,

before pulling down the corpses. He summoned a Xorn, instructed it to dig a grave, and buried them.

It had already started, he sighed to himself.

He took to the air again and before long saw, far in the distance, a thousand tiny campfires glowing on the meadows on the western side of the Nund. Engineers were building pontoons by torchlight,

working to find ways of moving the troops as quickly as possible in the event that the Templars could not win the main bridges: at Hartha Keep and Moath Gairdan. Nwm screeched a spell as he flew, and

clouds began to gather.

When he descended again, he brought thunder and death.

**

Deorham was only half a day’s ride from the crossings of the river, and Eadric had garrisoned Kyrtil’s Burgh with thirty knights and a hundred men-at-arms before moving swiftly onwards. The keep, which had not seen war for a century, echoed to armoured footsteps - something which the Paladin found

somehow disagreeable.

Reports brought back by scouts and the Ardanese outriders indicated that skirmishers had already

crossed the river, and were setting ambushes and burning crofts along the eastern banks of the Nund.

Eadric cursed, and dispatched contingents of light cavalry to seek out and engage them, before splitting his remaining forces to secure the crossings. He himself rode to the southern bridge at Hartha Keep. He instructed Togull to remain to the rear on the Blackwater Meadow, and to use his own best judgement as to how to deploy the reserves – “Throw them at whichever bridge looks like it will fall first,” he said ironically.

When evening came, Eadric paced to and fro restlessly in his armour, on the top of one of the two small towers of the shell keep. Plumes of smoke rose from the enemy camp, less than two miles away.

“It’s getting humid,” Ortwin remarked casually whilst practicing complicated maneuvers with his scimitar. “It’s going to rain.”

*The Planetar had instructed Eadric to “initiate no war” beyond Trempa’s borders until commanded to do so.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 06-24-2002

Quote:

Any chance of this wonderful story being made available in a single downloadable format??

Eventually.

I will try and answer other questions that I’ve been ignoring ASAP.

**

Brey gazed skywards and observed the quickening clouds. They were moving at an unnatural

speed and, seemingly, converging from all directions simultaneously. A huge thunderhead was

forming directly above the camp.

The Druid, he thought, cursing. Apparently, the rumours that the Nature-Priest had no stomach

for the fight were wrong.

The Templar ran towards Melion’s tent, barking orders as he moved. “Go to ground. Get everyone back from the waterfront.”

Brey burst in to the command tent where Melion sat stiffly, his age apparent, unaccustomed to

the armour that he was wearing for the first time in twenty years. The Inquisitor General was in

conference with the Templar Lords Irian and Hembur, Rede’s deputies and ascendant stars in the

new administration.

Melion growled. “Lord Brey, might I remind you that your probationary period is not yet over. A little more decorum would be appreciated.”

“Nwm is here,” Brey said simply.

Melion swallowed and, anticipating a firestorm, warded himself against the possible ill effects..

The Temple knights and soldiers looked up and saw the eagle descending upon them, and as it

swooped, the clouds parted from the gale which issued from it. Many of the more ignorant cowered, thinking that Oronthon’s wrath had descended upon them. Rumbles of thunder echoed

across the field, and lightning flickered across the cloudtops.

Melion shouted across the meadows. “It is a pagan trick – do not be dismayed. We are favoured!”

His voice, thin and reedy although it was, carried conviction and confidence.

Nwm circled at an altitude of fifteen hundred feet, his pinioned form naked against the clouds

except for a sprig of mistletoe which hung from one huge talon. He screeched a spell, and giant

eagles appeared around him. They plummeted downwards.

Melion cursed. The Druid fully understood the use of appropriate symbolism and propaganda, it

appeared. And he was currently out of range. The Inquisitor summoned four celestial griffons

and dispatched them to intercept the eagles.

Nwm resumed his human form – a speck against the grey clouds. He began to drop rapidly, but

was unperturbed. Many of the more quick-witted amongst those on the ground drew bows, and

scores of quarrels and arrows were shot towards him, only to be deflected harmlessly away by

the tornado-force winds which emanated from the Druid.

There. Melion. Nwm concentrated as the air rushed around him, and evoked the effects of a spell

already cast. The sky crackled, and a single stroke of lightning, fed by the living storm and immensely potent, arced downwards and struck the Inquisitor, dropping him instantly.

As Templars crowded around Melion in an effort to revive him, lesser clerics began to cast spells

at Nwm. He shook off the effects of three attempts to silence him, and no trace of concern crossed his face as a dozen celestial hawks and eagles, two celestial pegasi and several minor

elementals began to manifest across the field. At a height of forty fathoms, feathery wings sprouted from the Druid's back and he arrested his fall.

No pity, he thought to himself. I must show no pity.

Nwm began to fly upwards again, and invoked another spell. Vines sprang up, covering over an

acre at the centre of the camp, in an area where the tents were most densely crowded. They

wrapped around arms and legs, pinning many of those within a one-hundred yard circle, and

impeding all of them in their efforts to move. Across the infested area, dozens of soldiers began

to sicken and fall from the poison in the toxic vines.

The Druid looked downwards and observed that the celestial birds and elementals were closing

on him slowly and beginning to converge. He smiled grimly – he knew that they could not penetrate the winds around him. He spoke a potent summoning, and the sky nearby began to

move and distort: the vague outline of something huge and nebulous appeared next to him. It

began to move towards the ground effortlessly and with great speed.

No mercy, he reminded himself.

The Druid drew his staff from across his back and clasped it tightly in his fist. He spoke a word

of power, and continued his ascent. The orb on the staff crackled darkly as its ultimate power

manifested.

Below the thunderhead, an area of blackness formed, shot through by purple lightning and moving with wisps of dark vapour. A huge shadow appeared above the camp, and peals of thunder broke out, deafening those below. On the ground, the elemental conjured by Nwm was

ripping a swathe through those who tried to resist it. It had begun to spin on its axis, flinging

tents on the periphery of the camp in all directions. It moved slowly, deliberately and systematically eliminating those who did not flee.

But the most brutal effects were yet to come. Nwm flew on, maintaining concentration upon the

unnatural cloud, and acid began to rain down. The Druid glanced down to see Brey and two other

Templar Lords standing impotently over the body of Melion. He didn't know their names. He

didn't care. Irian perished, obliterated by three bolts of lightning which simultaneously struck

him from above, Hembur almost died, struck by three more.

In the hail which followed, Lord Hembur did die. So did eight hundred others, many entangled in

the poisoned vines, and unable to move.

As the minor elementals closed on him, Nwm swerved down to meet them. They, and then the

celestial animals were blown out of the Druid's path.

Nwm banked around and flew back towards the camp. He circled around the periphery, looking

for those who might still be standing. Many were fleeing north and south, parallel to the river's

course, whilst others were routed to the west. A few brave souls dared the river itself. Still, the huge elemental moved unchecked through the camp.

No mercy, Nwm swallowed.

The Druid, from a safe height, blocked off the egress from the north of the field, where many

were attempting to escape, with a vast cloud of swarming insects. Over a period of half a minute,

in a four-hundred foot arc which spread west and then south, pockets of grasses and weeds sprang up, entangling many and causing others to flee in panic away from them, lest they were

poisonous. Nwm began to descend, but before he could cast another spell, he was enveloped in

silence. Swearing wordlessly, he began to climb again, reached a height of a thousand feet, and

circled slowly, waiting for the spell to wear off. The Druid waited patiently – the clouds were

already pregnant with energy again. Two minutes passed. Three. Four. Five.

Suddenly, the noise of the wind and storm flooded again into Nwm's ears as the magical silence evaporated. He concentrated on his torc, seeking mentally for powerful spellcasters. Their

whereabouts were determined in an instant. Two of significant ability.

Leading Templars were attempting to rally their knights and auxiliaries and order the retreat from the field. Nwm ignored them, his gaze shifting to a lone figure. A cleric in shining plate was

performing a ritual desperately, beside of the wreck of a tent. Nwm spoke a word, and another

streak of lightning flashed down, targeting the cleric. It dissipated harmlessly around him, and he continued to intone.

Warded, Nwm thought, and powerfully. The Druid ignored him and began to beat his way downwards.

Hundreds were fleeing southwards and westwards now, as all other ways were effectively blocked. Nwm intoned yet another spell as he closed, and a curtain of green fire, three hundred

feet long, sprang up. Intense heat blistered skin and caused people to shy away again – most of

those few foolish enough to try and pass through were immolated.

Chaos reigned upon the ground, and had they stopped to think amid their panic, the fleeing troops would have recognized that the Druid, with his spells, had created an immense funnel

upon the ground, and that they were being herded into it.

Nwm flew down, and prepared to invoke a succession of flame strikes and flaming spheres,

emptying his magical arsenal.

Abruptly, in the eye of calm air at the centre of his personal hurricane, Eadric and Mostin materialized. Mostin floated easily, and Eadric was supported by a pair of winged boots, borrowed from Ortwin.

The Paladin looked grim. "Please stop, Nwm. You've made your point."

**

Brey, now nominally in command of the whole force, was trying to establish a modicum of order.

He cursed the Druid, and wondered again why he himself had not been killed. He glanced

upwards, only to see three small figures flying east over the river.

**

Tramst was a devout man. A good man. As he knelt in his armour, his hands clasped to his chest

and feverishly intoned, he knew that his prayers would be answered. Amid the wreck of the

camp, he tightly gripped his eagle-and-sun, the symbol of his faith.

Oronthon heard his supplication, and answered. A light appeared, emanating from a deva armed

with a flaming sword. Tramst bathed in it.

“What would you have of me?” The celestial inquired, “and I will appoint a task for you in return.”

“That you invoke just retribution upon the Heretic and his pagan friend. That you punish them for their misdeeds, and slay them as they deserve.”

The deva nodded. “If I do this, then here is your task in payment: you will willingly endure the torments of the lowest hell for eternity, secure in the knowledge that your perfect faith will

sustain you, because you have never done an impure deed or thought an impure thought.”

Tramst looked astounded.

“A different task, perhaps?” The deva asked.

DM Note:

The spells cast by Nwm that day were, in this order:

Wind Walk (in effect from previous day)

Big Sky (at the dolmens)

Summon Nature's Ally IV (Xorn burial)

Control Weather

Greater Call Lightning

Control Winds (spherical emanation type)

Summon Nature's Ally VI (5 giant eagles)

Master Air

Poison Vines

Summon Nature's Ally VIII (Greater Air Elemental)

Storm of Vengeance (From the orb)

Insect Plague

Entangle (x5)

Wall of Fire

Nwm also had 3 flame strikes prepared which, unfortunately, he didn't get a chance to use. He

was maxed out for offensive spells.

'How could you have let that happen?' You might ask. Aside from story considerations (it makes

good drama, after all), it is not that improbable: consider 5000+ people and a thousand horses

contained in an area a quarter mile wide and half a mile long with little or no means to defend

themselves against sustained magical attack: when the panic begins, it's going to get messy.

As you can imagine, running this was extremely difficult, and involved several arbitrary decisions about reactions – especially wrt. Melion's use of his Protection from Elements: a fire

ward did, in fact, seem reasonable given Nwm's previous attack. Note that the 'Greater Call

Lightning' bolt summoned by Nwm – 15d10 – was devastating to Melion, an old man with very

poor constitution. He failed his save and suffered around 80 points of damage. He would have hit

Nwm with a 'Sunburst' had he had the opportunity, the only long-range spell available to him.

I asked Dave what he would have done had he been blinded – he thought for a second and said

"Wildshape to bat."

Clerical divine magic is all but useless at long range – take a look through the PHB. Druidic firepower is excellent at long range, however.

The total area affected by a "Storm of Vengeance" is around 10 acres – the entire camp was only 80 acres or so. As everyone in the storm takes 6d6 damage with no save (acid and hailstones),

and it was evoked above the centre of the camp, your average 1st-3rd level warrior or cleric and

1st-2nd level fighter or paladin is going to die outright. 800 casualties seemed a little conservative, if anything.

And buggered if I was going to roll that many dice.

The Temple forces consisted of

1) 4000 auxillaries (mainly War 1-2, with some War 3+)

2) Around 300 engineers, armourers, weaponsmiths etc. (mainly exp 1-3)

3) Nearly a thousand 'camp followers,' including hangers-on, drovers, merchants, food vendors,

etc. etc. etc., mainly on the periphery. Mostly low-level commoners hoping to make a few \$\$ out

of the dirty business of war.

4) 800 Templars split thusly:

500 fighters, 120 paladins and 80 clerics of levels 1-3,

60 "Specials" – mainly fighters and paladins of higher level, but including some PrC Templars and Warpriests, 4 x 5th level clerics, 1 x 11th, 1 x 9th level clerics and 1 16th level clerical

spellcaster equivalent (Melion). I had only the higher level clerics' spells prepared ahead of time.

40 Priests (Experts) – mostly support staff for the Temple and/or Inquisition

But Nwm can deliver just too many spells from a distance of 1000 feet.

My arbitrarily determined death total for the whole sordid episode was around a thousand – more than twenty percent of the army. In a pitched battle, this kind of loss would have been deemed

utterly catastrophic.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 07-09-2002

Sometimes I hate my players.

I mean, the DAY AFTER I make the announcement on these boards that we're taking a break

from the game, they arrive at my house (and I'm thinking that we're going to play the alternative

campaign), and say that they're all suffering from withdrawal symptoms.

I was going to hold off this post (there is a lot of background info that they didn't know about), but now there is no need.

I am only 2 sessions behind now in the updates. We're slated to play again tonight. It will not run away with me, this time.

Feezuu brooded in the shadows of the ancient necropolis of Khu, near the cursed city of Siir

Traag. Dead things surrounded her.

Over a period of two weeks, she had been far from idle. Her raids upon the caravans, owned

mainly by affluent silk merchants, had provided her with a considerable sum of disposable wealth, and already given rise to stories of a demoness riding a hell-horse who plundered and

slew without mercy in the desert.

She had seduced a Necromancer named Chorze – a mage of moderate power — and taken up

residence with him in a mausoleum, where she experimented with blood and entrails.

After

quickly growing bored of their ghastly couplings, the Cambion slew Chorze and inherited his paltry collection of spellbooks, a few minor dweomered items, and a square mile of sand-worn

buildings above vaults, crypts and sepulchers.

It was better than nothing, she'd reflected.

How to proceed, she had mused. She had considered Ainhorr and other powerful Demons at

Graz'zt's court with suspicion – had one of the Balors or Mariliths slain her in order to further its own aims? Had Ainhorr or even Graz'zt himself been instrumental in her death? Had celestials or

some other force intervened? Whoever or whatever had killed her must have been either very

potent, or very lucky, or both.

She must locate her books and items, but how? Now that her highest valences were denied to her,

the 'Discern Location' dweomer was beyond her abilities – and she would have to acquire the

spell in any case..

A vague deja-vu had flitted through her consciousness.

She needed allies. Her thoughts had drifted idly from Limbo, through the Abyss, across unnamed

regions to Hell, and back again. The slaadi were unreliable, and hated her. Devils would be

disinclined to do her bidding, and were too well organized and dangerous in any case. Yugoloths,

demodands, and other creatures for whom Feezue knew the names but few others did.

Demons. It would have to be demons. They might be fickle, perverse and depraved, but at

least

the Cambion knew what she was dealing with. But nothing too powerful, nothing that would

threaten her own ascendancy – at least, not yet.

She had taken out her glass tube, and looked at the one hundred and nineteen motes of light

which danced in it. One hundred and nineteen souls. Larvae in miniaturized form.

They wouldn't buy her much – all were of a poor quality. She had sighed wistfully. The essence

of a single paladin or virgin would fetch her so much more.

Feezuu had buffed herself, mounted her nightmare, and 'Plane Shifted' to the Plain of Infinite Portals. She had compacted with a goristro, two bar-lgura, fourteen dretch, two quasits and a

succubus named Kalkja. None were minions of Graz'zt – at least to Feezuu's knowledge – and

that was the way she was going to keep things, until she gained a clearer perspective on matters.

After, over a period of three days, she had conjured them to the Prime, the Cambion instructed

the dretch to bring her fresh body parts from the outlying encampments of nomads, which she

needed for her work. The quasits were detailed with gathering information, both about her immediate vicinity and the world at large – she was woefully out of touch with recent events.

The bar-lgura she kept close to her, and the goristro was appointed the task of guarding the entrance to the mausoleum – not that Feezuu really expected anyone to come within ten miles of

the place. The necropolis had an evil reputation long before she had taken up residence.

Kalkja, whom Feezuu naturally distrusted, was appointed counsellor to the Cambion. From her,

Feezuu learned much of the current state of Abyssal politics, and in an atmosphere of mutual

need, greed and suspicion, they plotted. As part of their compact, Kalkja was given leave to

pursue her own devices every ninth day.

**

Eadric was still deathly pale, although his fury had abated. Nwm was exhausted from his

long

flight, the battle, and the near-total emptying of his powers. He leaned heavily on his staff. Its orb was black, lusterless and dead.

They had been arguing for an hour. Dusk had passed into night. Outside the sparsely furnished

chamber in the keep, a storm still raged – Nwm had thought to dismiss it, but decided to let it run its course. It reflected his own, dark mood.

“Many of them were innocent, Nwm.”

“Innocence or guilt is YOUR construct, from YOUR religion. Do not sully mine with those

ideas.”

“Most were merely following orders...”

“Then they should open their eyes,” Nwm snapped. “I am not responsible for the fact that people who attack my faith do so because they are ill-informed. Ignorance is no excuse.”

“And the camp followers? The vendors and tradesmen? What of them?”

“Ah, yes,” Nwm said sarcastically. “Because making a living from war is such a noble enterprise.”

“I would have tried to spare the innocent,” Eadric said. “And those who sought to flee. You butchered them.”

“So others would not die in their place,” Nwm retorted. “Might I remind you that your celestial mentor informed you that many who were ‘innocent’ would perish? Although none of those who

died today were peace-loving farmers, were they? The persecutions have already begun, Eadric. I

buried twelve Uediians on my journey from Morne. How many more have to die?”

“Twelve is less than a thousand,” Eadric observed.

“Twelve is the beginning. I mean to ensure that it never gets much past that.”

“You cannot make that kind of judgement,” Eadric sighed. “You cannot foresee all eventualities.”

“I accept full responsibility for my own actions,” Nwm replied. “Which is more than you do, Eadric. You are a pawn in the hand of a deity with a personality disorder. You understand only

one facet of his warped sense of morality, and you are playing out one of his psychotic episodes

in the world of men, drawing the ‘innocent’ into the fray.”

“Do you believe that?” The Paladin asked.

“No,” Nwm confessed. “But none of this makes sense to me.”

“What will you do now?”

Nwm collapsed into a hard wooden chair. “I don’t know,” he said. “Wait and see what happens, I suppose. This should send a pretty unequivocal message to the Temple. But then again, I thought

that my attack on Brey when he first issued the threat would do the same.”

“Mostin?” Eadric asked. The Alienist had been silent, waiting for the exchange between the Druid and the Paladin to run its course.

“I am no tactician,” Mostin replied. “But a demonstration of magical power of the magnitude that Nwm evinced would give me pause for thought. They cannot use arcanists in retaliation – no

wizard would defy the Injunction, no matter what the incentive, and few are sympathetic to

Orthodoxy in any case. Also note that by taking you to stop Nwm, I may have been technically in

breach, so I must tread carefully from now on.

“Their most potent spellcaster was slain in the first few seconds of the combat,” he continued,

“although he was old, he had enormous powers at his command, but no time to actualize them.

As we left, my robe of eyes revealed another cleric who had called a celestial – a deva, I think,

although it was hard to be sure from that distance.” Mostin shuddered.

“That would be either Tramst or Asser,” Eadric said. “Both are high in the Temple hierarchy.

Both are also relatively young and healthy, and fit enough to bear arms. Both are good men.” The last words were spoken sadly.

Mostin shrugged. “They cannot match a Druid of Nwm’s power in the open without calling

supernatural allies. How many are capable of ‘Planar Callings?’”

“In the whole Temple, half a dozen at most,” Eadric replied, “but I am not perturbed. Tahl tells me that no celestial will raise a weapon against us.”

“There are other things besides celestials whom they may call upon,” Mostin said.

Eadric shook his head. “Doing so would be an implicit admission that they had lost Oronthon’s grace. If a celestial has been called, and it refused to act, then this will send shockwaves through the Temple. They will be hard-pressed to explain it.”

The Druid snorted. “I’m sure there is a perfectly plausible doctrinal explanation, if you interpret certain words a certain way. Zeal blinds people to the truth.”

In the event, both Eadric and Nwm were only partially incorrect. Mostin was closer to the mark.

**

Lord Brey ordered that the Temple troops withdraw from the river front, and disperse into the

countryside west of the Nund but still within its watershed. Under no circumstances were so

many soldiers again to be concentrated in a single encampment. He formed them into cadres of

between two and three hundred, each under the command of a seasoned knight or Templar, and

scattered them over an area of around fifty square miles. All were well-provisioned, and Brey

knew that they could stay in the field for at least two weeks before he needed to think about

reprovisioning them. He pitched his own tents six miles northwest of the crossings, near the

village of Langdair.

Brey summoned Tramst – who had become sullen and uncommunicative – and detailed him to

act as a messenger as soon as morning came and the storm broke. Most of the minor clerics

remained in the vicinity of the stricken camp, tending to the wounded and performing rites on

those hundreds who were less fortunate. All through the night, as the storm raged, engineers and

soldiers hewed trees and dragged them into a great pyre. Kegs of oil were set in it, and the corpses – except for Melion – were drenched with it. The Inquisitor General's body was sent in

state back to Morne.

When the rains finally abated, an hour before dawn, the fire was lit. It burned for days, carrying the stench of death eastwards over the river towards Eadric's camp.

Although none were privy to the exchange between Tramst and the Deva, Mostin had not been

the only one to witness the celestial. Rumours circulated wildly amongst the Temple troops as to its meaning: whether it was a favourable or inauspicious omen, a promise of victory or defeat, a

warning, a punishment or some other sign. When Brey finally heard of it, he ordered Tramst to appear before him.

“Why was this information withheld?” The Templar fumed.

Tramst considered carefully before answering. “It is sensitive. I will speak only to the Curia of it.”

“I would remind you that I am now in command of this mission,” Brey replied. “You will relate what happened.”

“I will not,” Tramst said simply. “Feel free to arrest me if you feel the need. You will need to elect another messenger.”

Brey was livid, but had no choice but to concede. After dawn broke, Tramst wind-walked northwards to speak with Eisarn, the commander of the smaller force advancing from Tomur. He

was instructed to halt his march and disperse into the countryside until orders were received to

the contrary.

Tramst then sped to Morne, and related events to the Curia. An emergency audience was called,

and the cleric described what had transpired in great detail. Although he mourned the death of

Melion, and the loss of so many devout Oronthonians, it was the exchange with the celestial

which caused him greatest concern.

The Curial meeting which followed afterwards was held behind closed doors, and Tramst was

not present to hear their counsels.

**

Within three days Tahl, Soraine, Nehael and the assembled thanes and knights of Trempa arrived at the Crossings of the Nund. The Duchess rode in a large bier, borne by warhorses, from which

she barked orders at her captains, and terrified her troops. Retinues of squires, menservants,

provisioners, smiths, tailors and members of a dozen other professions accompanied the armoured aristocracy, and gaudy pavillions jostled for space and preeminence on the Blackwater

meadow.

Inevitable bickering followed.

Many of Soraine's subjects – powerful landed gentry in their own right – were eager to press

onwards across the river, and rout the pockets of Temple soldiers who were entrenched in and

around the villages there. The Ardanese mercenaries – always happy to wage war – were sympathetic to the demands of the secular knights. Eadric's paladins were insistent that divine

authorization be issued before any further steps were taken. The few Uediians amongst those

gathered there (most were in the north of Trempea with Ryth), although anxious to engage the

enemy, were so awestruck by Nwm's actions that they refused to act without his consent, a fact

which irritated the Druid to the extent that he refused to speak with any of them. His reticence

did nothing to dispel their adoration, however, and merely added to the aura of mystery which

surrounded him.

The exact strengths and dispositions of the Temple troops were known to Eadric and his allies,

not through Mostin's scrying – in fact the Alienist had kept to himself since the "Night of the Storm," as it soon became known – but through the medium of Nwm's torc. All the Druid had to

do was concentrate for a brief moment, the Green communion would absorb him, and, like blotches on his consciousness, the enemy appeared to his inner sight. Where permanent buildings

appeared as voids, tents and temporary shelters manifested as a localized diminishment of the

Green. Or he could shift the focus of his perception, and apprehend spellcasters, concentrations

of iron, or whatever else struck him as pertinent. The information gleaned was pieced into a very

coherent picture of Temple strength and deployment.

Eadric persuaded Nwm not to travel north. The Druid's original intent had been to succour Ryth

and eliminate the army from Tomur. But news of their arrested advance and redeployment of

forces spoke volumes to Eadric.

“The Curia will be in debate. Give them the chance of making a move towards ending this,” the Paladin said.

“They will not take it,” Nwm replied.

“Probably not,” Eadric sighed, “but at least give them a chance, Nwm.”

Nwm nodded. Inwardly, he was relieved.

**

No weighty doctrinal explanation was required to explain the celestial’s reluctance to pursue

Eadric and Nwm.

It was obvious. Oronthon, perfect in his understanding, was still served by entities who only

partially represented his will. Although the godhead possessed a facet which was stern and judgmental, he also embodied compassion and forgiveness.

Clearly, Tramst had erred when he had required a celestial to pursue what was, in effect, an act of righteous vengeance against a mortal. Celestials were concerned primarily with countering the

infernal threat, guiding mortals through revelation, and cultivating the nobler faculties of the

human mind. For the deva, the task of just retribution was beyond its purview.

If there was any feeling within the Curia that these words, devised by the Bishop of Hethio, were

a sophistry designed to extricate the Temple from an unjustifiable position, then none voiced a

concern.

Eadric the Heretic. Eadric the Blasphemer. Eadric the Oathbreaker. And his chief accomplice in

his attempt to disgrace the Temple, Nwm the Pagan. The conspiracy between the heretics and the

heathens was all too clear and, no doubt, the hand of the Adversary manipulated everything from

below.

A thousand brave Oronthonians dead, martyrs to the cause, selflessly sacrificing themselves to

save the One True Faith from the corruption and seductive lies perpetrated by the Heretic. Melion

slain by the Pagan.

The Interim Protector and Grand Master of the Temple, Lord Rede of Dramore, immediately

petitioned the King for aid against the threat which he had, previously, grossly underestimated.

He requested the assistance of the royal army, and advised that a motion be passed immediately,

banning Uedii worship outright, on pain of death. It was an insidious, ungodly cult which had no

place in a civilized Wyre. An atavism, through which the Adversary worked his evil.

Entering the vault below the great Fane, bearing their seals, and speaking the correct passwords,

Lord Rede and the Bishops of Hethio, Gibilrazen and Mord negotiated the tortuous passageways

patrolled by golems, and proceeded to the inner chamber. The quartet held their seals aloft and a

door appeared in the north wall. Unbeknownst to Iua - and Amachel the Damned from whom she

had received the stolen plans to the vault - there was an eighth demiplane nested within. But Tahl would have known.

The Church Magnates entered a small, dusty room with shelves lined with scrolls. The work of

centuries.

“The callings are here, powerful evocations and conjurations here, and so on,” Hethio informed the others. He smiled grimly. “There is more than one Storm here. We should begin distributing them. We should give particular thought to the Callings.”

“But not celestials?” Gibilrazen queried. “We have decided that it is not their place.”

Hethio shook his head.

“Inevitables,” he said.

**

Mostin scried. Carefully.

He was already treading a thin line with regards to the Great Injunction, and did not wish to

incriminate himself further – hence he restricted his magical eavesdropping largely to minor

functionaries within the Temple hierarchy. Many of the great magnates were too aware, too

capable of penetrating his sensors.

Nonetheless, a fair amount of information filtered back to the Alienist. The emergency convening

of the Curia, the descent of Rede and the three bishops into the Temple vault for an unknown

reason, rumours of further anti-Uediiian legislation in the pipelines, a general downplaying of the incident with the Deva, brushed aside as a 'bad judgement call' by Tramst.

Tramst intrigued Mostin. A man who was unafraid to invoke supernatural allies of the most

potent kind, and who had defied Nwm's storm. In the aftermath of the battle, he had administered

aid to stricken soldiers on the field, selflessly exhausting his reservoir of magical energy, had

wind-walked to Morne the next day and was now, apparently, in a meditation retreat.

"Do you think he can be persuaded to join us?" He asked Eadric.

The Paladin scratched his head. "If I could speak with him, I might be able to persuade him." He smiled grimly. "But I somehow doubt that he would be open to discussion."

"He is in retreat," Mostin said. "The exchange with the Deva may have given him pause for thought – assuming that he requested aid and was denied it."

"I'll mull it over," Eadric said. "Keep a tag on him. Let me know when his meditation is done."

Before retiring, Mostin idly wondered about Feezuu. Almost on a whim, he invoked the 'Discern

Location' spell, expecting to find her in Limbo, Pandaemonium, the Abyss or some equally

unpleasant locale.

She was here, on the Prime.

Mostin cursed his own complacency. He had been very, very sloppy.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 07-11-2002

Things are very, very nearly up to date...

**

In the morning, four days after the equinox, Mostin assumed the guise of a Thalassine mercenary

swordsman and, using the looking-glass of Urm-Nahat, travelled with Ortwin to the city of Siir

Traag. The Alienist selected a quiet alleyway and opened the portal ten feet above the ground, in

order to avoid the possibility of casual passers-by suddenly finding themselves transported fifteen hundred miles north. It was sweltering, and the wind which blew in from the erg was hot

and brought no relief from the blazing sun.

It was the Bard's first time in the city, and he was eager for new experience. Mostin had visited

Siir Traag on a number of occasions in order to procure rare items for his work, but found the

place little to his liking. Besides the heat, the people were universally reserved and uncommunicative, and viewed anyone from further away than Bedesh with open suspicion.

Mostin had no friends there, nor even any acquaintances who would remember him, even had he

been travelling in his true shape. Still, a Thalassine sellsword was a plausible enough disguise,

and would attract little or no attention – mercenaries from the city states were found in every

corner of the world.

Feezuu, he knew, was only thirty miles distant, but the Alienist was reluctant to scry her – she

would almost certainly detect him. He had decided that, in order to ascertain her reason for being there, a more indirect approach was required. He had briefly considered teleporting directly to

her location and opening fire but, recalling the previous attempt to eliminate her that way, opted

for caution.

And, he reminded himself, diminished or not, she was still very, very dangerous.

Siir Traag, and Shûth in general, had an evil reputation in Wyre and the north. This was partly out of envy (Shûth boasted a continuity of tradition which predated Wyre by millennia), partly out of

ignorance about the cultural differences between the two civilizations, partly out of their ungodliness (the name of Oronthon elicited blank expressions or raised eyebrows), and partly out

of the regrettable practice of blood-magic that was still commonplace there.

Attempts by the Mission – the proselytizing arm of the Temple – to gain a foothold in Shûth had

been almost universally unsuccessful. The few coastal cities where chapters had been

established

saw little traffic, and those worshippers who attended Oronthonian ceremonies did so as an

adjunct to their older religious practices, rather than in place of them. The gods and goddesses of Shûth were ancient, potent and subtle. Oronthon was an upstart deity with a naïve and simplistic

philosophy, and little or no place there, thank-you very much.

Siir Traag, deep in the desert, surrounded by the ruins and graveyards of a hundred dynasties,

was perhaps the most traditional of all the cities in Shûth. Its inhabitants displayed the classical virtues of dourness, an obsession with pedigree and lineage, and nihilism. Legend stated that

when the First Empire was elevated above the Earth, and received wholesale into the Realm of

the Gods, only Siir Traag was left upon the mortal plane. Dozens of theories existed as to why

that might be the case, but most of the inhabitants agreed that, whatever the reason, it was a bad thing.

The duo entered a number of establishments – including a number of particularly seedy drug

dens – in an effort to garner information that might prove relevant. Ortwin's easy charm succeeded in loosening the tongues of several locals who, immersed in narcotic reverie, related a

number of rumours and stories which were current. The Bard and Alienist retired to a quiet booth

in order to discuss how best to proceed. Mostin warned Ortwin against trying the local kschiff,

unless he wanted to be incapable of effectively defending himself for several days.

Raids on desert caravans by an all-too familiar sounding demoness, children dragged from tents

by bow-legged monsters, and some new foulness – the latest in a long line – taking residence in Khu.

“Why has she left Limbo?” Ortwin asked.

“Who knows?” Mostin replied. “Maybe a political thing. Maybe she's had some information suggesting that her items are on the Prime, and she's come to find them. Perhaps we should

translate and find out.”

Ortwin looked dubious.

“In any case,” Mostin said, “the raids on the caravans began three weeks ago. Apparently she came here shortly after I killed her.”

“And you didn’t think to look,” Ortwin chided.

“Immediately afterwards, yes. Then I kind of, um, let things slip.”

“So what now? Do we assail her, or wait until she tracks us down? I’ve grown rather fond of her bow. I’d hate to see it ripped from my dead hands, so to speak.”

“I’d really prefer to find out if she has any allies first,” Mostin answered. “I don’t want to ‘port in and find another Balor waiting for us. I’d rather not risk that again.”

“Here, on the Prime?” Ortwin asked.

“I brought one in, didn’t I? And, let’s face it, she’s more likely to strike an appealing deal than I am. Even my substandard morals bar me from child sacrifice. I would never compact with

demons.”

“Devils, then?” Ortwin asked wickedly.

“They are more reliable, its true, but the answer is still ‘no.’”

“That’s good,” Ortwin said. “Devils are far worse.”

“Celestials are scarier,” the Alienist replied.

**

Whilst the less serious members of Trempa’s aristocracy held grand feasts in their pavillions and

bards sang their praises, mounted archers from Ardan brawled with each other, and the rapidly

growing army of camp followers touted their wares, Eadric drilled his knights tirelessly.

The Paladin sighed. He wondered how long he and Soraine could maintain the cohesion of their

forces – armies needed to fight, or at the very least move, in order to stay focussed.

Nwm, the hero of the hour, kept himself aloof. He was still digesting the events of the previous

few days, and pondering his next move. Periodically, he would allow the Green rapture to overcome him, as he maintained scrutiny on the enemy camps on the far side of the Nund.

The cadres of Temple troops had already dug themselves in to prevent assault from units of

skirmishers. There was little they could do against magical assault – or so Nwm guessed – but, at

Eadric’s behest, held off from harassing them. Eadric had instructed Tahl to issue sendings

to the Curia and to Brey, demanding that they recognize Trempa's religious autonomy, and had

requested that the king reconsider his former proclamation in light of recent events.

Predictably, no-one had responded. It seemed as though they were still formulating policy.

Eadric waited for a sign. The sign that he received, however, was not the one that he expected.

An hour after noon, sixteen knights and thirty men-at-arms rode into the camp from the east: the

remnant of the garrison that had been assigned to protect Kyrtil's Burh. Most were wounded,

and all were exhausted. The armour of several knights was blackened and scorched, and their

skin blistered. One, called Lome, who had been deputy to Sugis - the warden appointed by

Eadric - immediately presented himself to the Duchess, the Paladin and their captains.

"Deorham is fallen," he gasped.

Eadric was dumbstruck. "How?" He asked.

"Templars. Wind-walked in. Seized the Steeple. Flame strikes. Took over the keep in a matter of minutes."

"How many?" Eadric asked, aghast.

"Thirty, maybe. It was difficult to tell."

"Thirty people wind-walked? That is absurd. And only a handful in the Temple can invoke flame strikes. Tahl?"

But the expression of the Ex-Inquisitor indicated that he guessed what had happened.

"Were they bearing scrolls, Lome?"

The knight nodded, and Tahl explained.

"Why did you say nothing of this...cache?" Eadric asked Tahl.

"I did not even consider it," Tahl replied. "I have only seen the scroll-room once, after Melion appointed me. It is a repository, and the resources are to be used only in great need. The idea of them being used in this manner is abhorrent to me - most of the clerics will be invoking powers

far beyond their ability to comfortably control."

"That should make for some interesting accidents," Nwm said sarcastically. "Come on, we'd better go."

"I have not prepared a 'wind walk,'" Tahl said.

"I have," Nwm replied. "Eadric?"

"Very well," the Paladin replied. "Although I wonder if the whole episode is a deception

in order to draw us away. Tahl, can you send word to Ortwin?"

"It will take a while," Tahl replied.

"Proceed. Nwm, what is the current disposition of the Temple army?"

"Unchanged," the Druid replied.

"And spellcasting clerics?"

Nwm concentrated briefly. "Unchanged," he said again.

Eadric nodded. "Tahl should remain here in any case, in the event of an assault. I will take Iua, if she is willing. How many besides yourself can you accommodate, Nwm?"

"Five."

**

Mostin and Ortwin hovered above the ground in the intense heat of the afternoon sun on the

outskirts of the necropolis of Khu. They had, briefly, returned to Wyre through the portal. Mostin had realigned the mirror, and selected a destination less than a mile from where he knew Feezuu

to be.

Both were invisible, to protect them from casual observation – although Mostin was under no

illusions that he was imperceptible to magical sight.

"What a dreary place," Ortwin remarked.

"Appropriately enough," Mostin replied. "Just a quick reconnoitre. Get the lay of the land, and all that. See what's out there."

The Bard looked perplexed as a message suddenly impinged on his consciousness from a great distance.

ORTWIN. URGENT ASSISTANCE REQUIRED. TEMPLARS IN DEORHAM.
RETURN TO

HARTHA KEEP. EADRIC AWAITS YOU. ASK MOSTIN ALSO. –TAHL.

Okay, Ortwin replied. He related the message to Mostin.

"How inopportune," the Alienist said. "I will remain here, and sniff around a little. Can you find the portal?"

Ortwin nodded, and after a few moments, his invisible form vanished from Mostin's perception.

The Alienist grumbled to himself, and became incorporeal as an added precaution.

Mostin spent only another fifteen minutes there, but his 'Prying Eyes' relayed a wealth of interesting – and rather disturbing – information.

**

Nwm, Eadric, Ortwin, Tatterbrand, Iua and Nehael 'Wind-Walked' to Deorham. Although the

Paladin had been reluctant for the demoness to accompany them – although he wasn't sure for

what reason – she would act as the relay between them, staying within telepathic communication

and coordinating their efforts if necessary. Her ability to effortlessly teleport would also prove useful – she could be anywhere she needed to be within a matter of seconds. It was a ten minute

journey, during which Eadric apprised those who didn't already know of the situation.

"How many scrolls?" Ortwin asked the Paladin.

"Hundreds, according to Tahl."

"And you knew nothing of it?"

"I've never entered the vault," Eadric replied. "Generally, only the Lord Exchequer and his deputies go in. I've no idea what's down there."

"How do we know that there aren't other, more powerful objects in circulation now?" Ortwin asked worriedly. "Relics of Saints, that kind of thing."

"Tahl said that he knows of none – he is one of only a handful who've entered the scroll room. I suspect even the Exchequer don't know about it."

"I don't like this one bit, Ed. It puts a whole different slant on things."

Iua shot Ortwin a meaningful glance which nobody but the Bard saw.

"We are being scried," Nwm said. "They know we're coming." He concentrated again briefly.

"There are thirty-nine people in the keep but...no wait. There are thirty-three loci of steel that correspond to heavy armour, and sixteen much larger loci...wait...no...wait... automata of some

kind...wait...wait...unnatural...wait...constructs-outsiders." Nwm's perceptions rapidly cascaded, as a dozen facets of the Green presented themselves to him.

"On, sh*t, not inevitables," Ortwin said gloomily. "Unless the Temple is going in for retrievers these days."

"There are six people in the cells beneath the main building," Nwm said.

Only six? Eadric thought.

As they approached, the party saw a plume of smoke rising from the keep – not from the buildings, but from the courtyard. Nwm suspended the spell upon himself and his material body

gradually reformed. The Druid immediately shifted into the form of a small eagle. His eyes

looked into the courtyard, and saw the charred remains of soldiers and servants smoldering at

stakes.

“What do you see?” Eadric yelled over the rush of wind.

Nwm screeched incomprehensibly.

“Most of your servants and the remainder of the garrison are dead,” Nehael said. “They were burned – presumably for heresy.”

They didn’t waste much time, Eadric thought grimly. He remembered his librarian, his stablehands, his groundskeepers, his cooks. Anger rose swiftly in him.

“We cannot afford to rematerialize in the keep – we will be too vulnerable during the process.”

Eadric yelled.

Nwm screeched again.

“He says that he can end the spell instantly,” Nehael said “but we will not be able to resume this form.”

“That’s fine by me,” Eadric said. “We’ll start on the Steeple and cut our way down if necessary.

Nwm should provide covering fire – I suggest we make for that copse, rematerialize, buff, dematerialize, wind-walk to the tower and start chopping up whatever is in there.”

“That’s not very imaginative,” Iua said sardonically.

**

As they closed on the Steeple, Templars were standing on the curtain wall and tower in readiness.

A number of things happened in quick succession:

A cleric, standing on the Steeple suddenly spontaneously combusted as he read from a scroll, a

backsurge of energy overwhelming him.

Eight Zelekhuts – winged, metallic, centauroid inevitables – launched themselves into the air from the battlements.

Two Templars, bearing greatswords, ‘air-walked’ towards the party at an uncanny speed – winds

were blowing them onwards from behind.

A celestial with a greatsword appeared on the curtain wall. When the Templar who summoned it

pointed it towards the group in the air, it wept.*

Even as Nwm was closing to within range of casting a 'Fire Storm,' a globe of coruscating colour

enveloped the top of the Steeple, and flashed brilliantly: a 'Prismatic Sphere.'

Finally, Ortwin exclaimed, "Holy sh*t! End the Wind-Walk on Nehael and me, Nwm, we can

both fly."

Nwm complied.

"No, dammit, break away," Eadric shouted. "Disperse. Rendezvous at Nwm's glade. We need to reconsider our tactics." A fraction of a second after he spoke, the eladrin materialized directly in front of him.

Nwm kept flying onwards, but changed his course towards the inevitables. He invoked a 'Fire

Storm,' which blazed green for a moment, dropping one from the sky, injuring two others, but

failing to even blacken two more who were caught within the conflagration. As he banked away,

he was struck by three rays of enervation which sprang from the walltops – simultaneously, four

more inevitables appeared as the invisibility evaporated from them. Another black bolt crackled

past him.**

The celestial's sword ripped into Eadric's semi-corporeal form before he could turn away and

flee. It bit hard. Three times. There was nothing he could do in retaliation, except see the look of anguish in the Eladrin's face.

"I forgive you," Eadric spoke wordlessly into its mind.

Ortwin, supported by his winged boots, appeared suddenly to its flank, his scimitar and pick

whistling with magically enhanced speed. The pick was ineffectual but Githla, as Ortwin knew,

would penetrate anything. Celestial ichor, bright and warm, sprayed over the Bard and Paladin.

Eadric moved away.

The eladrin, despite its wounds, maneuvered effortlessly backwards in the air and Ortwin was

struck by an intense bolt of electricity. His preternatural reflexes failed him, and secondary

bolts arced out, striking both Nwm and Nehael – now winged – and the only other two targets still in

range. Nehael, immune to electricity, was unfazed. Nwm, already weakened, was almost killed.

But the ‘wind-walk’ was still active upon him. As he flew, he slowly began to resume his vaporous form.

Ortwin urged his boots to top speed and charged at the eladrin, his blade slicing through angelic

flesh and sinew. A look of profound release crossed its face as its brief tenure on the mortal plane ended.

He looked behind him, and saw that the winged inevitables were closing fast. Four were doggedly pursuing Eadric, despite the fact that he was moving away from them at incredible

speed. Three were pacing Nwm, and that worried the Bard. Both of the ‘Air-Walking’ Templars

were making for Nehael, but Ortwin guessed that she could look after herself.

But, before she could ‘Teleport,’ she was struck by a ‘Banishment’ spell.

‘No!’ she screamed. She vanished.

The Templars shifted course and rapidly began to close on Nwm.

**

Mostin had been observing events through the looking-glass of Urm-Nahat.

What a c*ck-up, he thought.

“Dammit,” the Alienist said. He cast ‘fly’ upon himself, stepped through the mirror, and acted in contempt of the Great Injunction.

*As a summoned (rather than called) creature, the eladrin was forced to comply. Note that any

celestials can be LG in the Wyre campaign.

**Nwm (in small, eagle form) was particularly unfortunate to be struck by three out of four of

these. He suffered 8 negative levels

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 07-15-2002

Quote:

Any chance you can start a new thred, Sep?

Just for you, GK, to save your ailing mouse finger. This will be the last post on this thread.

Mostin appeared directly in front of the wounded Nwm, still in his eagle form, although appearing increasingly insubstantial. The Druid screeched in surprise – Mostin was still in his

guise of a Thalassine sellsword.

“It’s me you idiot, relax,” his condescension was unmistakable, but Mostin was shaking – Nwm was in the form of... a bird.

The Alienist touched him with an expression of revulsion on his face, and Nwm was instantly

‘teleported’ to his glade, three miles distant.*

Ortwin grinned when he saw Mostin appear and launched himself in pursuit of the four Zelekhuts who were flying southeast, but staying out of range of their spell-like abilities: he did not relish the prospect of being magically ‘held’ whilst flying..

One of the ‘air-walking’ Templars read from a scroll, and a puff of smoke appeared in the air near Mostin. The Alienist raised an eyebrow.

“Very impressive,” he said, and blew both of them out of the sky with an empowered, maximized sonic fireball. Mostin backed off and cast ‘Haste’ upon himself before the Zelekhuts came into

range. Two of them targeted him with ‘Hold Monster’ spells, one of them with a ‘Dimensional

Anchor.’

Mostin’s amulet absorbed all three attacks, and he retaliated with three rapid sonic bursts which

echoed across the sky, exploding two of the inevitables in a shower of components, and causing

the third to lurch wildly in the air.

The Alienist quickly took the situation in. On top of the Steeple, a ‘Prismatic Sphere’ – he wondered what was inside it; one inevitable flying towards him – no problem, he could easily

outpace it; four Zelekhuts pursued by Ortwin, flying after Eadric on a ‘seek and destroy’ mission; four more – Kolyaruts – on the wall: that could be useful. Half a dozen Templars on the curtain

wall, presumably waiting for him to come in range so they could blast him. Oh, what’s this? His

sight revealed four more invisible Kolyaruts exiting the front gate and moving across the bridge.

Probably assigned to terminate Eadric, he thought. They were so damned dogged. It would be

twenty minutes before they plodded to Nwm's glade.

Mostin outmaneuvered the Zelekhut, and moved towards the keep. Two of the Kolyaruts had

'altered self,' sprouted wings from their back, and were moving to intercept him, lumbering

inexpertly through the air.

Bring on those enervations, Mostin thought. Charge me up.

As he gazed at the curtain wall, Mostin drew on the power stored in his amulet and invoked two

bursts of empowered, sonically substituted 'Chain Lightning,' targeting each of the inevitables on the ramparts with both primary and secondary arcs. Through some perverse twist of fate, one of

them was totally overwhelmed by the attack whilst the second was completely unaffected. The

Templars, caught in a cacophonous volley of secondary detonations, were warded against fire

and electricity, but, unfortunately, not against sound. Four of them died instantly. The two remaining were obliterated a fraction of a second later by another quickened sonic.

The Alienist hovered, waiting for the Kolyaruts to come within range. Mostin did a quick mental

tally of his remaining offensive spells: he had already used his prepared empowered sonic 'Chain

Lightning,' but still had a couple of other sonics and a few quickened 'Magic Missiles' up his

sleeve. As well as a 'Limited Wish,' a 'Disintegrate,' a calling – if he had time to perform it - and a big summoning.

Predictably, the Inevitables targeted the Alienist with 'Enervation' rays – one missed (typical,

Mostin thought), and he soaked the second one up greedily.

What the...? Two enormous oak trees were attacking the four Kolyaruts who were on the bridge.

Mostin laughed – apparently Nwm had left some surprises.** He banked away, and flew down

towards the Steeple – he was considering undermining its foundations with a 'Limited Wish' and

collapsing it..

A powerful 'Flame Strike' hit him, charring his clothes and skin and causing him to

scream in

pain.

At this range? He thought. Who the hell had written those scrolls? It must have come from within

the Prismatic Sphere. Sh*t. He quickly backtracked, and flew out to over a hundred yards distance. Packets of mist were shooting from the windows of the tower, and launching into the

air from the courtyard. There were fifteen of them, speeding after his friends.

‘Wind-Walking’ Templars, the Alienist thought. Dammit.

He all but emptied his amulet of its stored power, and cast his summoning three times. Seven

Erinyes devils and a horned Cornugon appeared.

“Do nothing until I utter the word ‘execute,’” Mostin said in Infernal. “Follow and eliminate those ‘Wind-Walking’ Templars, using your abilities to the maximum. Use ‘Charm Monster’ to

sow discord amongst them, overwhelm them with ‘Unholy Blights.’ Be as coordinated, inventive

and effective as you can. Do not harm the ‘Wind-Walking’ Paladin with the sunblade – he is an

ally and is not to be assaulted. You, Cornugon, do the same, but hold off using your fire and

lightning attacks. As soon as the Templars are slain, intercept those Zelekhuts. Attack them with

magic. Cornugon, you may use your ‘Fireballs’ and ‘Lightning Bolts’ on the Zelekhuts. Do not

maliciously harm, or through your inaction, allow harm to come to anything else. And you Erinyes should change your wings to bat wings – I find your feathery forms distasteful. Execute.”

The Devils took off in hot pursuit, making good use of their innate ‘Teleportation’ abilities.

Mostin turned around, flew back towards the portal, passed through, and reappeared in his interdimensional study. He was banking on the Devils effectively dealing with the Templars – in

vaporous form, they were particularly vulnerable, he grinned to himself.

The Alienist scried Tahl through the mirror, and walked through. The Ex-Inquisitor was in conference with Soraine in his tent.

“Follow me,” Mostin said. “Bring a couple of your heavies with you.” The Alienist was referring to the Templars who had initially defected with the Inquisitor.

A blank expression crossed Tahl’s face. He was looking at a Thalassine mercenary with a comically blackened face and clothing.

“It’s me, Mostin. Come on. Hurry up.”

“Eadric commanded me to stay here.” Tahl said.

“Screw that. He’s in trouble. Follow.”

Tahl summoned two armour-clad ‘heavies,’ – called Jorde and Hyne - and followed the Alienist

back through the portal.

“Er, where exactly are we Mostin?” Tahl asked, as he and his cohorts appeared in a room full of strange and disturbing devices.

“There is a mathematical solution to that question,” Mostin mumbled, as he focussed on the mirror again.

Nwm appeared on the surface of the looking-glass, having resumed his human form. He had

patched himself up as best he could, but still looked rather the worse for wear.

“Walk through the mirror,” Mostin instructed. “You will appear in Nwm’s glade. Do not, under any circumstances, ‘Wind-walk,’ or devils will attack you.”

Tahl nodded. He didn’t have a clue what Mostin was talking about, but he seemed earnest enough.

As soon as Tahl and the Templars had passed through, Mostin rifled through his portable hole

and produced the amulet confiscated from Nehael so many months before. He grasped it tightly,

and bent his will in search of the demoness.

After a few moments, she appeared on the surface of the looking-glass. She was on the Astral

Plane. Mostin wondered if she was officially ‘homeless’ in the cosmic scheme of things – an

equally valid case could be made for Oronthon’s Heaven, the Abyss or the Prime being her native

abode.

Mostin stepped through, grabbed her, and returned to his study again. Even cosmic distances

were a meaningless concept to the Alienist.

By the time that Eadric, Iua and Tatterbrand reached Nwm's glade, the Druid, Tahl, Nehael, two

ex-Templars and Mostin were waiting for him.

The Alienist looked insufferably smug.

"I am hoping that the devils I summoned will deal effectively with the 'Wind-walking' Templars..." Mostin began.

"Devils?" Eadric groaned.

"Yes," the Alienist said peremptorily. "Any surviving Zelekhuts will be here in five minutes. The Templars may well end the effects of the 'Wind-walk,' in order to retaliate against the infernal

threat: in which case survivors will arrive in 10 minutes or so. There are still seven kolyaruts on the loose."

"I sensed thirty-three Templars before we arrived at the keep," Nwm said. "Wait," he said, and focussed on his torc. "I sense six in the keep still, five are advancing from the northwest on the ground with the Kolyaruts – seven of them seem to be intact. Five Zelekhuts in the air. The devils are gone."

"But they took ten Templars out, by the sound of it." Mostin said. "Good. I killed eight."

"One spontaneously combusted," Eadric offered. "That leaves three unaccounted for."

"I cannot penetrate the 'Prismatic Sphere,'" Nwm said. "They're probably in there."

"And performing callings," Mostin grumbled. "The trees were a nice touch, Nwm, but I'm afraid ultimately ineffective."

"I wasn't expecting Inevitables," the Druid mumbled through his beard. "Most of my spells are currently unavailable to me: although the damage I sustained from the celestial's lightning has

been healed, I feel feeble."

"Then we need to recoup," Eadric said. "I have an idea."

The entire group passed back through Mostin's portal. The Alienist scried Ortwin – in careful

pursuit of the Temple forces – stepped through, and grabbed him from the sky.

"Mostin," Eadric asked archly. "A while ago you mentioned the fact that you knew the names of many members of the celestial host."

Mostin looked suspicious.

**

"You will," said Eadric.

"I won't," said Mostin.

"Yes."

“No.”

“There is no danger involved, I assure you,” the Paladin assured him.

“You have no idea what you’re asking.”

“This is an irrational phobia, Mostin,” Eadric persisted.

“Of course it’s irrational. It wouldn’t be a phobia, otherwise, would it?” The Alienist retorted.

“It’s not as if they are actually birds,” Eadric said. “You don’t even have to look. Just cast the spell, and I’ll deal with the rest.”

“I don’t have time to inscribe a proper diagram,” Mostin complained.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s not going to be an issue. Just do a quick one.”

“I’ll have to ‘Anchor’ it.”

“Don’t bother,” the Paladin replied.

“Are you crazy? Besides, I don’t have my most powerful calling prepared,” Mostin groaned.

“Do what you can. But hurry. I can’t stand here arguing all day with you.”

So Mostin did it.

**

Form, in the traditional sense of the word, was not a characteristic that could be meaningfully

ascribed to him. It was not that he possessed or did not possess it, more that the quality of ‘Form-ness’ was an inadequate paradigm through which he could be understood.

His shadow, they often sang, was brighter than the Sun. It was metaphorical, of course, because

there was no source of light brighter than him. Nothing could cause him to cast a shadow.

Amongst the millions who basked in his presence, one, called Eniin, felt an impulse akin to a

tugging. In less than an instant, he related the information to his master who, naturally, already knew.

GO

The Bright God commanded.

Eniin bowed and vanished.

**

Mostin, Ortwin, Nwm, Tahl, Nehael, Tatterbrand, Iua, Jorde and Hyne stood around the thaumaturgic diagram with Eadric. As the shape began to slowly coalesce within it, the Bard

wrily compared it to Rurunoth's fiery entrance. Even before the form had fully materialized,

Eadric stepped forward and scrubbed out a portion of the chalk line which marked the border of

the circle.

Really, that's just too much, Mostin thought. He closed his eyes three-quarters of the way, and

covered his face with his hands. He couldn't help himself from peeking – despite the fact that his legs were shaking.

Eniin stepped forwards from the diagram, and towered above them all. His perfect form radiated

peace, power, and profound certainty. He knelt in front of Eadric.

"Instruct me," the Planetar said.

Mostin gaped at Eadric despite himself. Here was power, he thought. In this self-effacing man

who constantly doubted his own decisions – characteristics which Mostin would not have automatically ascribed to a Paladin. Why him? Not in what he did physically – in fact, the Alienist mused, he had never seen Eadric actually strike anything in anger, ever since he'd known him. How strange. Events simply revolved around him. But to command these resources

– that was something else entirely. Maybe it was the fact that he didn't abuse them, that made

him so unique.

"Nwm needs healing," Eadric said simply. "We need some help dealing with some Inevitables. I would appreciate it if you spoke with some Templars and demonstrated the error of their ways to them."

"The latter is Rintrah's purview," Eniin said. "I am not permitted to intervene in the course of events that Lord Oronthon has prescribed."

"I understand that," Eadric said. "I do not require you to go to Morne, but to speak with those who are in or near my castle at Deorham. I would spare them if I could."

The Planetar 'communed' briefly.

"Very well," he said. He turned to look at Mostin. "I would advise you against the further summoning of devils," he said. "It will eventually corrupt you."

Mostin quaked.

*Mean DM that I am, I insisted that Mostin make a Will save in order to touch Nwm.

****Nwm had 'Awakened' the trees some months before.**

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 07-18-2002

Nice, clean thread...

First, Eniin 'Restored' Nwm.

Once the group was back in the Druid's glade, the Planetar invoked a 'Righteous Might' and grew to a height of twenty feet. He beat his wings powerfully, causing a downdraft as he took off.

Mostin almost passed out.

Nwm attuned himself to his torc, and perceived that both the remaining ground-borne Templars and the Inevitables were still approaching the glade. He wondered why – surely the innate location ability of the Inevitables would have revealed Eadric's presence as ten miles to the west, or just registered

'absent' during the time spent in Mostin's extradimensional space.

The Druid caught a whiff of smoke on the air. Sh*t, he thought. He quickly changed his perception and located his bear, Tostig, who seldom strayed far from the glade. He was two miles away. Nwm

immediately whistled, and summoned a small sparrow, which alighted on his arm. He twittered a few

times, and the bird flew off. He hoped that Tostig had not forgotten the routine.

Mostin looked the other way. Too many birds today, he thought. Too many.

Nwm invoked a storm through his orb, apologized to the Alienist, changed into the form of a giant

eagle, and took to the sky. As he flew upwards, the voice of Eadric – somehow superimposed upon that of Eniin – echoed in his mind.

PLEASE EXERCISE RESTRAINT

The Druid looked westwards. Less than a mile distant, in a semicircle half a mile wide, fire was eating through the forest and advancing towards the glade.

Restraint was going to be difficult, he fumed.

"Can you cause me to fly?" Eadric asked Mostin.

"No," the Alienist replied. "I'm all out of those."

"I can do this." Tahl said.

Two Celestial Pegasi appeared.

"Very appropriate. That will do nicely," Eadric said. He and Tahl mounted the shimmering winged horses.

Yet more feathers.

“They travel very fast,” Mostin warned him. “If you engage the Kolyaruts, beware of their ‘Enervations.’”

“What else do they have?” Eadric asked.

“‘Fear,’” said the Alienist. “‘Hold Monster.’”

Tahl invoked a ‘Negative Energy Protection’ upon himself, and Eadric a ‘Spell Immunity’ to

Enervations and Holding, and both took to the air.

“I want one,” said Iua, pointing to the Pegasi.

Mostin looked apologetic, and flew off, followed by Ortwin and Nehael. Iua grumbled and drew on her elemental heritage, invoking an ‘Air Walk.’ It would have been painfully slow progress, but she bent her mind to the airs around her, and the wind began to blow powerfully at her back.

Within ten seconds, she overtook Mostin and Ortwin, smiling condescendingly as she flew, and leaving a gale in her wake. Having a Djinn as a father had certain perquisites.

“So, er, we’ll just stay here then,” Tatterbrand explained to the Templars.

**

Eadric outpaced even Eniin, driving the Pegasus to its limit. As he flew, he drew Lukarn and invoked a

‘Holy Sword.’

As they approached the enemy, the Paladin observed the Zelekhuts moving out of a rolling cloud of

smoke to his left. The Planetar moved to intercept them. On the ground below, the Kolyaruts were

targeting him with ‘Enervations’ and ‘Hold’ spells before they took to the air. They had dispensed with the ‘Fear’ effects, given his paladinhood. Eadric glanced behind him, to see that Tahl had drawn his flaming greatsword. Further back, flew Iua, and yet further, the Demoness, Ortwin and Mostin.

Nwm had banked off towards the Templars and Eadric hoped that he didn’t do anything too drastic.

Mostin’s voice, carried on a ‘Whispering Wind’ reached his ears.

“Oh, and ‘Suggestion,’” the Alienist said. “And ‘Vampiric Touch,’ too.”

Eadric sighed, urged his mount downwards, invoked the power of the Strength domain, and

immediately cut the first Kolyarut from the sky.* The speed and momentum of his assault carried him onwards – safely, he thought – until his mount was simultaneously struck by three ‘Enervations’ and evaporated.

Tahl wheeled down after the plummeting Eadric, and Nwm invoked a mine of ‘Poison

Vines' on the

five Templars, paralyzing one of them and entangling two others. He was exercising restraint, but

expected some kind of retaliation. The Templars, however, made no resistance. All were watching the celestial spectacle in the sky above them.

As the Inevitables consulted their programming – unsure if the huge form of Eniin presented a threat or not – the Planetar spoke a 'Holy Word,' instantly banishing three of the five Zelekhuts from the Mortal Plane. The two remaining gyred and targeted the celestial with spells, which failed to overcome his resistance. Eniin struck rapidly with his greatsword – grown to a full three-fathom length – and reduced one of the flying Inevitables to its component parts.

Ortwin winced as he saw Eadric fall eighty feet, bounce off a conifer, and crash through the branches of an oak tree before he struck the ground with a 'thud.' Tahl followed rapidly and dismounted next to him. The Bard quickly unstopped a bottle and consumed a potion of 'Haste'

Mostin cackled madly and detonated a sonic and a quickened 'Magic Missile', as he approached, and

Iua realigned the winds around her into a spherical configuration. She began to tread downwards

towards the ground. All of the remaining Kolyaruts were now descending upon Eadric and Tahl –two of their three designated primary targets, conveniently located next to each other. Abruptly, they winked out, invisible to all save Mostin and the Planetar. Tahl concentrated upon the Eye of Palamabron, which hung around his neck, and a 'Zone of Revelation' instantly brought the Inevitables back into sharp focus.

The six Kolyaruts crashed into Eadric and Tahl, and a brutal melee followed. Tahl evaded, and cast a

'Greater Magic Weapon' upon his flaming sword, even as they were pummeling him with vampiric

attacks. Eadric hewed at them as they tried to overwhelm him, each successive attack draining more of his strength.

Iua leapt in from the rear and rapidly struck a Kolyarut five times with her rapier. Wholly ineffectively.

Sh*t, she thought, and backed off. They paid her no heed, and continued their assault upon the Paladin and Inquisitor. Eadric dropped one.

Mostin arrived and 'Disintegrated' another, and let yet another quickened 'Magic Missile' off. Ortwin flew down and made quick work of a third. Still, undeterred, the three remaining Kolyaruts focussed their attention on Eadric and Tahl. Mostin threw another 'Magic Missile' – this time, not quickened. He was almost out of offensive spells, and his last sonic would have hit too many allies.

Iua summoned a burst of 'Chain Lightning,' and Eadric, Ortwin and Tahl hacked and

slashed. By the

time that Nwm arrived, it was over. Strange components lay strewn around, and Mostin eyed them with interest.

“Where is Eniin?” Eadric asked.

“I believe he is remonstrating with the Templars,” the Druid replied.

**

At the celestial’s command, the Templars presented themselves to Eadric.

“What is on the other side of the ‘Prismatic Sphere?’” The Paladin asked.

“Urqual, a warrior-priest, was performing another calling,” one replied. “He was opening a ‘Gate’ to Oronthon’s Heaven. He planned to bring Enitharmon through, to punish you, although Lord Rede

expressly forbade the calling of celestials.”

“Did he now?” Eadric said, half-amused. “Why do you suppose that was?”

He was answered with silence.

It began to rain – hard – as Nwm’s ‘Control Weather’ finally manifested itself. The fire in the wood was gradually quenched as the group – except Nwm, Mostin and Eniin- proceeded on foot to Kyrtil’s

Burgh.

Nwm returned to his glade, and spoke with Tatterbrand, Jorde and Hyne. As he stood there, Tostig –

rather late – lumbered out of the trees, pushed him to the ground and licked his face. Tatterbrand was used to the scene, but Tahl’s cohorts found it somewhat disturbing. Tostig was as large as an elephant.

The Planetar went immediately to the keep, and persuaded the remaining Templars to submit

themselves to Eadric’s justice before he departed.

Mostin remained in the vicinity of the battle, looking over the remains of the Inevitables. He picked up a severed arm, and inspected its complex mechanisms.

Fascinating, he thought.

**

The hour which followed was grim and depressing. The charred remains of Eadric’s servants, and the members of the garrison who had been captured, were pulled down from their pyres, and the

smoldering logs were dowsed. Beneath the Steeple, those six who were incarcerated were released –

apparently the Temple had stopped short of condemning the minors to death. All of the eleven

remaining Templars were stripped of their possessions, and shown into the cells in their place. None lifted their voices in protestation.

Three hours later, the 'Prismatic Sphere' finally collapsed, the power of its magic exhausted. Eadric, Ortwin and Tahl ascended the Steeple, and stood on top of the Tower.

Three Templars – one of them Urqual, whom Eadric knew from his days in the Inquisition – sat

motionless upon the roof. All were breathing, but none registered the presence of the Paladin or his friends. Stricken by some form of catatonia they rocked, and drooled, and babbled.

Their eyes were blackened pits, as if some terrible light had burned them from their heads.

**

**

The most powerful known wizards in Wyre and its dependencies at the end of the Seventh Century

were, in no particular order of precedence, Jovol the Grey, Hlioth the Green Witch, Waide of Hethio, Mostin the Metagnostic, Shomei the Infernal and Tozinak.

They were, compared to those great names of history such as Tersimion and Fillein, a group of only moderate power. Nonetheless, they commanded considerable resources and, had they so chosen, could

have exercised great influence in the temporal affairs of Wyre.

Jovol was never seen. An Ogre-Mage of enormous talent and power, he lived in a tower built upon an inaccessible aerie high in the Thrumohar mountains where he, presumably, performed some kind of

research. No-one knew what kind. No-one had spoken to him for twenty years, and his only means of

communication with his peers – who at other times doubted his existence – was through the medium of dreams.

Hlioth the Green Witch, who enjoyed appearing in the form of a wood-nymph, was the oldest of the

group, and may have been immortal. She had abandoned the pursuit of arcanism years before and taken up the practice of druidry – something which most of the wizards in Wyre regarded as an insane

departure from the pursuit of truth. She maintained no permanent home, but would occasionally be

encountered by unsuspecting travellers in the deep forests of western Wyre, where her perverse sense of humour would manifest itself on those unfortunate enough to arouse her interest. Once every year, at midsummer, Hlioth would hold a revel which, occasionally, other wizards were invited to. The location and nature of the gathering was always a

closely-kept secret until the day before, and her choice of guests apparently random.

In comparison, Waide, Shomei, Tozinek and, to a lesser extent, Mostin the Metagnostic, were more

conventional in their outlook.

Waide was a Transmuter of high credentials, although criticized for his conservatism and lack of

inventiveness. Through diligence, organization and the systematic pursuit of his art, he achieved

notable results. Inspiration was a faculty he did not possess in great measure, but his sheer perseverance and bull-headedness ensured his inexorable rise to the ranks of the mighty. Every day, without fail, Waide would rise at dawn and enter his study. His laborious and time consuming methods of

investigation slowly, little by little, gave results. Waide would retire, sleep for two hours, and repeat the same process day after day, year after year.

Shomei the Infernal, unsurprisingly, liked devils. She admired their organized nature, their ability to get things done, and had romantic notions about how badly they had been treated in the great revolt.

Shomei, although not evil – at least in the conventional understanding of the word – had taken various diabolic lovers, produced a number of half-fiend offspring, and subsequently abandoned them. They

were miserable creatures from whom Shomei constantly expected some kind of vengeful attack.

Despite the protestations of the Church of Oronthon – who found her understandably suspicious –

Shomei lived in a manse near the city of Morne. The Temple was in no way assuaged by the fact that the architectural style of the building was in many ways influenced by the palace of the Adversary in Nessus. Shomei possessed a second dwelling – an abandoned fortress on the Astral Plane – in which she spent an increasing amount of time. Devils could visit her there without going through the tedious procedure of compacting and calling. These included her latest infernal suitor, Titivilus, a Duke of Hell in service to the Arch-Fiend Dispater.

Tozinak never appeared the same way twice, whether through his own fancy or perhaps because of

some magical experiment that had gone terribly wrong, the effects of which he had never bothered to correct. He dwelt in a modest house on an island in the still waters of Lake Thahan, and despite his constantly changing aspect was, in fact, a very affable and personable man. Illusion was his specialty but he did, at times, work magic for the local fishermen who regarded him as something of a demigod.

His estranged sister, Qiseze, had been slain on the Elemental Plane of Fire by the Cambion Feezuu –

Qiseze having retired from the Prime some ten years before. Saddened by the loss of a sister from

whom he had grown apart, Tozinak was first gratified by the death of Feezuee at the hands of Mostin the Metagnostic, and then depressed again when he learned of her new incarnation. He brooded but did

nothing because, despite his genuine good-nature, Tozinak was something of a coward at heart.

*

Mostin the Metagnostic was regarded with mixed feelings by the other great wizards of Wyre. Jovol

paid him little or no heed – although in this regard Mostin differed little from the other powerful mages

– and the Alienist had long since given up trying to contact the Ogre-Mage for the exchange of useful news, spells or items. Mostin had only once been invited to one of Hlioth's gatherings, and had found the Green Witch to be rather difficult company. Although her magical resources were extensive, her interest in arcana was not, and Hlioth's pursuit of druidry involved a definite evangelical side.

Cavorting with nymphs and dryads was all very well, Mostin had thought, and made for an amusing distraction, but it hardly constituted a worthwhile investment of time and energy.

Waide was a stuffy pedant, and hence closest to Mostin in disposition, although the Alienist cared little for him. He was moved by transmutation only – nothing else was of the remotest interest to him, and Mostin found this narrow-mindedness intolerable. After all, there was room for a good deal of

eclecticism in magic, and a sound knowledge of other schools often informed theories in the field of specialization.

Shomei, on the other hand, was one with whom Mostin at once possessed a natural rapport. She shared his Goetic inclinations – although in her case, she had gone somewhat further than the Alienist deemed advisable – and was attractive to boot. Mostin was disturbed by her misalliances with a number of

Infernal dukes, however, and had not paid her a visit in several years. His own mentor, the Alienist Vhorzhe, had been a frequent visitor to Shomei's manse until his unfortunate death**. It was from

Vhorzhe that Mostin also developed a passing interest in diablerie.

Tozinak and Mostin were on polite, if not amicable terms. They shared little in the way of mutual

interest, and the Alienist found the Illusionist's constant shape-shifting rather baffling. Nonetheless, it was difficult not to like Tozinak – he was agreeable and threw fine parties, at which wizards of varying ability and persuasion would hob-nob, boast of their accomplishments, and attempt to humiliate their rivals. Mostin would occasionally visit

these congregations, although his eeriness and precise logic often left those with weaker wills feeling disturbed.

Aside from those six already mentioned, a number of other mages of noteworthy, if lesser, power

existed. The Enchanter Idro, who dwelt deep within the forest of Nizkur, was an erstwhile acquaintance of Mostin, although the Alienist had not visited him since his attempted manipulation of Ortwin of Jiuhu to slay his rival, Troap. Idro was mean-spirited and grabbing, and exercised dominion over a number of creatures – mainly feys – in his locale. To be so old, yet to have grown so little in terms of aspirations and accomplishment, spoke of both a limited ability to master magic and a lack of diligence.

Troap, on the other hand, enjoyed a reputation for benign – if erratic – intervention in the affairs of the great forest. The Feys considered him kindly and, despite his goblin blood, even the Elves paid him little heed. Troap's existence was unknown to Mostin for many years, and the Alienist often wondered

how many other wizards pursued their art in utmost secrecy, preferring a wholly solitary lifestyle to even the most infrequent of contact with their brethren.

Idro and Troap, and others of their ilk – including Griel (an evoker), Dauntun of Gibilrazen (a diviner), Rimilin of the Skin and the Hag Jalael – represented the 'second tier' of mages in Wyre. There were, perhaps, a dozen in all and in a few cases (notably Rimilin and Jalael), they approached the great mages in terms of their power and resources. They possessed a range of specialities, and their characters – as viewed by the general populace - ran the gamut from benign and well-liked (like Dauntun) to ruthless and despised (like Rimilin). As a group, they demonstrated little cohesion, but most were known to each other and, barring vendettas traceable to real or imagined wrongs between them, they co-existed in relative peace.

Mostin brooded, and wondered if they would find out that he had broken the Great Injunction. He had been disguised – albeit in a minor way – and the captured Templars had, along with Tahl, Hyne, Jorde and Tatterbrand, been sworn to secrecy. Would any of them – maliciously or inadvertantly – let the news slip? Would divinations cast by other Temple clerics reveal him as the culprit? Would news of

'sonics and devils,' get out? Did any of the mages possess some kind of magic which alerted them to a violation of the Injunction? Did any of them care anyway? His paranoia, never far absent, reasserted itself as he considered an even more frightful possibility:

Would Ortwin get drunk, and spill the beans?

*This was one of those depressingly 'Heroic' moments. Spirited Charge + Holy Sword + Temporary

Strength of 40 + Critical Hit = 104 points of damage.

**The circumstances of Vhorzhe's death are still uncertain, but are known to have involved a

pseudonatural Yuguloth. All corporeal creatures have pseudonatural analogues, even outsiders. I have

house-ruled that Alienists may summon either the ‘standard’ or pseudonatural version of creatures at their discretion, and Mostin’s summonings tend to be split around 50/50. There is generally no reason not to summon the pseudonatural version, except for purposes of flavour - they are always at least as potent as their standard counterparts.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 07-19-2002

**

“What happened?” The Bishop of Hethio asked Lord Rede of Dramore.

“We are still unsure,” Rede confessed. “I detailed Asser with scrying the events as they unfolded at Deorham. It appears that a powerful mage intervened and, later, a Celestial of great potency.”

“Mostin the Diabolist?”

“That seems likely,” Rede concurred. “Devils were present. But why the Celestial? This is a terrible omen.”

“It is conceivable that it was bound to Mostin’s service unwillingly...” Hethio began.

“It was a Planetar for Heaven’s sake,” Rede responded. “That hardly seems possible.”

“He has uncanny powers,” Hethio said, “but I agree. More likely is that the scrying was somehow foiled. Powerful wizards can cause any image they desire to appear to an observer. Hence, we may

never know the true course of events as they unfolded, or even if our sensor is revealing accurate information now.”

“In which case,” Rede said, “Mostin – if it was him – would have kept his own presence secret. This hardly seems consistent.”

“Was he positively identified?”

“No. The wizard appeared in the guise of a Thalassine swordsman.”

Hethio thought for a moment. “No matter. In any case, we should begin circulating the rumour that Mostin the Diabolist has violated their precious Injunction. If nothing else, it will serve to smoke the real culprit out if it is not Mostin – which I doubt.”

“There is something else,” Rede said slowly. “Tramst is gone.”

“He is on retreat,” Hethio explained.

“No, he is gone.” The knot of doubt in Rede’s stomach was quickly growing.

**

The next morning, Eadric sat in judgement at Deorham. Eleven Templars stood before him. Three more sat upon the floor, mumbling incomprehensibly in their madness.

“It’s hard to know exactly what to do,” he said with disarming honesty. “I suppose I could return you to Morne, to tell the others at the Temple what happened. I somehow doubt that any of you would be

given the chance to speak, however. You would be considered ‘enchanted’ or ‘seduced’ at

best, or

maybe branded as heretics and anathematized - or worse.

“I had considered having you put to death: as feudal master of Deorham, let alone in light of my religious authority – which, hopefully, you now acknowledge – it would be well within my rights. You have committed murder. You illegally seized my estate. You have willingly closed your ears and eyes because it is the most expedient, convenient and easiest thing to do. Worst, you lack the courage to question your own convictions – which I don’t expect you to understand.

“If I show leniency and mercy, there is a danger that it will be considered a political act, designed to elicit popular support, and you will be regarded with suspicion. If I am stern, you will become martyrs

to the cause.”

The Paladin sighed.

“I have decided that Urqual and the others who were rendered insensible in their efforts to open a

‘Gate’ will be taken to the Abbey of Osfrith – with the consent of the sisters, of course. They will be well cared for, and may, hopefully, come to peace with themselves in time. Whatever judgement was

exacted upon them is beyond my remit, and I will not interfere.

“The rest of you are free to do exactly as you please. There are no constraints upon you. You may return to Morne, enter monasteries, become farmers, leave Wyre, or remain in my service. I leave the choice to you. If you choose the last, then Tahl will intercede for you, and you may atone. How you expiate your sins is a matter for him, yourselves and Oronthon.”

The Eleven Penants, who from that day dressed in unblazoned sable, became Eadric’s fiercest

proponents.

**

Nwm, who had no stomach for the judgement – whichever course Eadric chose to follow – wandered

with Nehael and Tostig in the trees near his glade. Three hundred acres were burned – although not all irretrievably. The largest oaks near his own sanctum were untouched, but he grieved the loss of many old friends as much or more than the Paladin’s servants.

Determining through the medium of his torc exactly which trees were beyond his help, and would die despite any efforts he might make to save them, Nwm used ‘Plant Growth’ to cause saplings to shoot forth in their vicinity, and then enriched them with seeds of fertility.

“Now we just have to wait for two hundred years,” he said to the Demoness.

“That’s not long,” she smiled.

“The Planetar laid its hands on me when it ‘Restored’ me,” Nwm said.

“Yes. I hope it doesn’t cause some kind of religious experience, and preempt your conversion to Oronthonianism. That would leave me looking rather stupid.”

“That will not happen,” Nwm grinned. “Did you speak with Eniin?”

“There was no need.” Nehael said.

“What exactly is your relationship with the Celestials, Nehael?” Nwm asked archly.

“We are on amicable enough terms,” she replied. “Rintrah invited me to return to Oronthon’s Heaven, but I declined the offer.”

“You have spoken with the messenger?” Nwm asked.

“Several times, since this began.”

“Are you a double agent?” Nwm asked, half humourously.

“I am a free agent, Nwm. I am a contemplative, remember? Mysticism is mysticism at the end of the day. I care little for form.”

“Then why Uedii?”

“She is kind,” Nehael answered. “And gentle, and forgiving. And ruthless and violent and uncompromising. I appreciate the paradox – it leads to realization. It is interesting to me that you find the same dichotomy in Oronthon difficult to accept.”

“I know Uedii. I do not know Oronthon.”

“Mostin would say that ‘gnosis’ is not enough.”

“Mostin is insane,” Nwm said.

“Mostly,” Nehael agreed. “But he is beyond all religious concerns. In that respect he is completely liberated.”

“And you?” Nwm inquired.

“I am the voice of moderation,” she replied. “I represent the ‘Middle Way.’”

“And if there is no ‘Middle Way?’”

“Then you make one,” she answered.

**

“She has conjured demons,” Mostin said. “A goristro, a succubus, dretch, quasits, maybe others.”

“And what, exactly, do you propose we do about it Mostin?” Eadric asked. “She is nearly two thousand miles away. If I were to hunt down every diabolist and demon summoner within two thousand miles,

I’d have a very busy – and probably brief – life.”

“Might I remind you that this particular demonist is the one responsible for Cynric’s dea...” Mostin began.

“We don’t know that,” Eadric interrupted. “She may have no recollection of the events. I can hardly pass judgement on her for something that she would have done, had events transpired differently.”

“In any case,” Mostin continued, “she is afflicting the local populace with necromancy, child sacrifice and other unspeakable rites. Do you feel no compunction to help?”

“I cannot be everywhere, and do everything. I’m sure that there are agencies in Shûth which can deal with her, if they choose to mobilize themselves.”

Mostin snorted. “I thought that you were supposed to fight wherever ‘evil presents itself.’ Two thousand miles is no excuse – with the mirror, distance is irrelevant.”

Eadric sighed. “Perhaps you should open a gate to the Abyss, and I should go through and start a campaign. After all, there is plenty of evil there, and distance is irrelevant.”

“Don’t be absurd. There is a difference,” Mostin said. “We cannot conquer the Abyss, and we can end Feezûu’s threat. It would be doing a lot of people a big favour. The local community would appreciate it. The wider magical community would benefit from it.”

“And you would get to keep your ‘Robe of Eyes’ without fear of reprisals,” Eadric said sardonically.

Mostin fumed. “I’ve just violated...”

“...the Great Injunction to save my sorry ass,” Eadric finished for him. “I know, Mostin, and I really appreciate it. And I appreciate the way that you dealt with Eniin, as well. But it doesn’t change

anything. I cannot simply drop my responsibilities here and go romping off to some necropolis in

pursuit of someone who may or may not pose a threat at some point in the future. At least give me time until things have quietened down a little – we are in the middle of a war, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

Ortwin sighed. Times had certainly changed.

**

Feezûu wondered who had sent the ‘Prying Eyes’ into her abode, and fear almost overcame her. Her

assassin? An agent of Graz’zt? One of a hundred others that she had, at some time in the past, affronted or enraged? Or, perhaps, merely a curious local mage of some ability. Her divinations had come too late

– whoever the culprit was, they were undetectable, or had vanished.

The Succubus Kalkja, who had spied one of the eyes, had continued to act as if she was unaware, and for that Feezûu was grateful. Hopefully, whoever sent them didn’t know that she knew she had been

observed.

The Cambion had waited for an hour, during which time she prepared a number of minor

divinations,

and then exited the mausoleum. She had paced around the sand-worn tombs in the blazing heat of the afternoon sun, her magical sight inspecting the area for any lingering auras.

She soon found a melange of every conceivable variety of magic, lingering signatures in the air which marked the passage of a number of powerful dweomered items. There were two 'streaks' of residual

energy, each testifying to potent magic, both of which ended abruptly at the same point in space.

Not a 'Teleport,' she thought to herself. The residual signature appeared as some kind of conjuration, not a transmutation. A 'Gate' or portal? But from where?

Feezuu returned to her crypt and waited six hours, before venturing forth again. All of the signatures had disappeared.

Whoever they were – and the dispersion of residual magic had indicated at least two of them – they possessed powerful magical adjuncts (but of less than artifact status). Their means of arrival and departure had utilized an unconventional kind of magic.

The Cambion considered her options. She could relocate – either to another portion of the Prime, or to another Plane entirely. This was drastic, but might be warranted. She could fortify her position as best she could, and use what wards she had available to her. She could compact with a creature who could determine the source of the threat – maybe even the identity of her assassin. She could attempt to engage more allies – although she was rapidly running out of ways to pay them. She loathed the

prospect of moving, especially as her higher spell valences were within sight again.

In the end, she decided to take a risk. Feezuu summoned one of her Quasits.

"You will 'Commune' for me," she said.

"'Communing,' is not covered in our compact," the tiny Demon said slyly. "Do you wish to renegotiate?"

"No. This is a one-time exercise. I will give you one larva."

"I require five," the Quasit demanded greedily. It was an outrageous sum, but Demons are seldom slow to seize a perceived advantage.

Feezuu hissed. "You would do well to remember that your kind are easily come by. I will give you one larva, or I will engage the services of another who is more tractable."

"Very well," it agreed grudgingly. "Which Lord do you wish me to contact?"

"Not a Lord or Prince," Feezuu smiled. "Demogorgon."

The Quasit shuddered.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 07-24-2002

Another update.

There is a significant amount of backstory in this which will prove necessary to

understanding

subsequent posts. We played twice last week, and there is a lot to relate. I will attempt to post again tomorrow or the day after. Things are happening fast.

A nodality, as Graz'zt would say...

**

The peninsula of Ardan, which thrust eastwards into the Ocean of Iarn was, for the most part, a wild and inhospitable country. Its central uplands – at first sight, deceptively green and welcoming – were in fact riven with many steep-sided valleys, prone to flooding in the spring thaw. The grass, although covering the hillsides abundantly, was of the short, springy variety and bespoke a poor soil, unsuitable for little besides goat-farming. Westwards, the slopes gradually became less severe, the loams more fertile, and the woodlands more abundant until, finally, they gave way to the rolling hills of Trempa and Tomur in eastern Wyre.

Ardan itself was one of Wyre's 'satellites.' Never fully subdued, it technically owed tribute to its larger neighbour, although its numerous kings, lairds and chieftains – even those whose lands marched on

Wyre proper – tended to be neglectful of their feudal duties. Ardan's inhabitants were fierce,

independent, conservative in their customs and immensely jealous of their traditions. The fact that they were regarded as uncouth, mead-swilling bandits did not dissuade successive Wyrish magnates from

hiring contingents of Ardanese cavalry: they were generally regarded as producing the best mounted archers anywhere north of the Thalassine.

Orthodoxy was, and never had been, popular in Ardan. Oronthon was worshipped, certainly, but he was an older, less developed aspect of the divinity who had been influenced by six hundred years of Wyrish dogma and sophistry. He presided over a small pantheon of saints and quasi-deities, each of whom

embodied ideals germane to the Ardanese way of life. In generations past, the Archbishops had

attempted to bring Ardanese practice more in line with that in Morne, and, in the period when the

Mission's influence had outweighed that of both the Temple and Inquisition, proselytes had entered Ardan.

The fact that the Orthodox missions had accompanied punitive raids from the kings of Wyre for

nonpayment of tribute, was viewed with natural cynicism by the Ardanese, who simply moved further

into the hills and began protracted guerilla campaigns against their occupiers. The pattern continued for generations until, at long last, the Orthodox church gave up. The 'Ardanese Question' was left

unresolved, and was eventually forgotten.

Ardan was, therefore, a natural choice for the communally oriented Urgic Mystics. The Urgics

maintained that they represented an alternative interpretation of Oronthonianism. They made no truth claims, because part of their creed was that truth is subjective. Small groups had, with the blessing of

various Ardanese chieftains (many of whom viewed them sympathetically), established peaceful communities in the hills of central Ardan, where the land was poor and space was plentiful. They

coexisted amicably enough with the natives, although they maintained a certain distance. Intermarriage was rare, due to the fact that most of the Urgic Mystics were celibate. Every once in a while, those worshippers dissatisfied with Orthodoxy in Wyre would find their way into Ardan and join a group of cave-dwelling heretics, and retire from the troubles of the world.

One particular cleric, having experienced some kind of revelation, made his way there. He wasn't

entirely sure why.

"I had not expected it to be quite as easy to speak with you," Tramst said. He sat, dressed in his armour, on the floor of small cave. It was sparsely furnished and resembled a cloister in its austerity.

The cave's occupant - a man of forty years or so - was unwashed, sported a large, matted beard, long tangled hair and wore only a simple garment, made from a single piece of coarse linen.

"We are a community, not a hierarchy. Why should speaking to me be difficult?" The man asked.

Tramst grunted. "Rintrah has informed me..." he began.

"Why do you trust a celestial's message rather than your own insight?" The man interrupted.

"Lord Oronthon sent..." Tramst began again.

"Why do you trust a deity's words rather than your own insight?" The man smiled.

Tramst sighed. Why had the Messenger sent him here? What could it possibly accomplish?

"Important events are occurring in Wyre which..." Tramst tried again.

"I am well aware of the events you speak of," the man interrupted again.

Tramst closed his mouth abruptly. This made no sense. Rintrah had sent him to seek advice from those

who denied the ultimacy of the Celestial's - even Oronthon's - own words. His mind reeled.

“Good,” Orm said. “That is the beginning. Paradox must precede understanding.”

Tramst thought briefly. “Why am I here?” He asked.

“Why must there be a ‘Why?’” Orm retorted.

“I am here,” Tramst said decisively.

Orm shook his head.

“I am.”

Orm said nothing.

“I?” Tramst ventured.

Orm slapped him.

(Silence).

Orm smiled.

**

At Tahl’s behest – on advice from the Planetar Urthoon, with whom the cleric communed - Eadric

consented to the calling of more celestials. The same morning that the Paladin passed judgement upon the Templars, the ex-Inquisitor performed a series of rites which brought four Movanic Devas with

flaming swords onto the Prime plane. They were charged with remaining in the vicinity of Kyrtil’s Burgh, to dissuade further efforts by the Temple to capture the keep. Remaining in invisible form, they

flew silently and tirelessly in the air around the castle: a warning to all those who had eyes to see.

“There is something else,” Tahl informed Eadric. “I have appointed an Archon to guard you. It will remain ethereal, manifesting where required.”

“Is that entirely necessary?” Eadric asked.

“It is a precautionary measure,” Tahl said.

“Were you advised to do this also?”

“Explicitly,” Tahl admitted. “Your life must be safeguarded.”

Eadric sighed. The weight of responsibility and expectation was beginning to make itself felt.

“The Archon is called Zhuel,” Tahl continued. “He has already revealed something rather disturbing, and communicated it to me.”

Eadric looked quizzical.

“There are residual traces of taint in the ether nearby.”

“Demons?” Eadric asked, swallowing.

“It is likely,” Tahl said. He looked nervous. “Ed, they may have been there for some time. I hadn’t thought to regularly scan the ethereal around you.”

The Paladin groaned. He had a good idea who might have sent them to spy on him. “We have to tell the others – especially Mostin,” he said. “He is not going to like it.”

**

Mostin, of course perceived the Devas around Kyrtil’s Burgh. What was felt as a stirring of the air by others present, was revealed to the Alienist as a statuesque winged form which gyred gracefully in the nearby sky, its wingtips often coming within a few feet of those standing on the battlements. They regarded Mostin with impassive, expressionless faces which nonetheless seemed to convey a

judgemental quality.

“I am returning to my manse,” he informed Eadric, Nwm and Ortwin, “where there are no birds. If you wish to...”

“We need to talk,” Eadric said grimly.

**

Mostin sat silently and said nothing. Ortwin regarded him curiously, unsure whether the Alienist would cry, scream or explode a random object with a sonic.

“I think that it’s a safe bet that whatever it was, it was sent to spy on me,” Eadric said.

Mostin did not speak.

“Well?” The Bard finally asked.

“I’m thinking,” Mostin replied.

Ortwin waited.

“I am trying to recall the times during which you and I were present together,” Mostin said to the Paladin, “and I can’t see that this adds any particular danger to my situation – aside from being scrutinized by the lackey of a Demon Prince. Assuming it was dispatched by Graz’zt, of course. If it –

or they – were in the service of Feezuu, this might prove awkward for me.”

“Zhuel said that the trace of evil was faint, and no Demons were at hand,” Eadric said optimistically.

“Unfortunately, that means nothing,” Mostin said. He gritted his teeth. “I will need to sniff around a little. I need to know which areas of the Prime are coterminous with the tainted ethereal. And I need to prepare several spells.”

With the aid of Tahl and the Eye of Palamabron, who communicated with the ethereal Zhuel using

gestures and body movements, Mostin located the residue of evil in the airs above Kyrtil’s Burgh. Tahl gestured for Eadric – and, more importantly, the celestial who watched over him – to retire to a safe distance. The Alienist made an Ethereal Jaunt and invoked a Vision.

Upon his return to the Prime, Mostin looked exhausted. “The names of Chr’ri and Chomele were

revealed to me – I am unfamiliar with either of them.”

“They are Succubi in the service of Graz’zt,” Nehael said gloomily. “They must have Plane Shifted with the help of a spell or device. Normally demons such as they – or I – cannot remain Ethereal for long periods of time.”

Mostin sighed. Too many possibilities, he thought. He was beginning to feel like a straw blown about on the wind, and he didn’t like it. Feezuu. Celestials. The violation of the Injunction. Now this.

“I am going to take counsel with Mulissu, as she is one of the few people I know who is wholly dispassionate,” he said. “What are your plans?”

“To return to the marshalling grounds on the Blackwater Meadow,” Eadric replied. “I feel that Deorham is secure. And Tahl needs time to inspect the scrolls confiscated from the Templars.”

**

Tahl wind-walked back to the encampment with Ortwin, Iua and Nwm: this time the bear, Tostig,

accompanied the Druid. Eadric led the penitent Templars and the others on horseback, and arrived two hours later.

Mostin walked to Nwm’s glade, passed through the portal to his retreat, and scried Mulissu’s abode

with the looking-glass of Urm-Nahat. He walked through the mirror, and was immediately confronted with the Mephit doorward.

“You must wait,” it chirped. “The Lady Mulissu is occupied.”

Mostin grumbled. Did he have to endure this farce every time he wished to speak with her?

Mostin sat twiddling his thumbs for three hours before he was finally admitted.

“My apologies,” Mulissu said with surprising earnestness. “I gave instructions some time ago that, should you arrive, you should be admitted promptly. Evidently, Shrix forgot this.”

Mostin scowled at the Mephit, who smiled smugly back.

“I have violated the Great Injunction of Wyre, have determined that a clone of the demoness Feezuu has migrated to the Prime, and I may have been subject to scrutiny from agents of Prince Graz’zt.”

Mostin announced theatrically.

“Really?” Mulissu asked, half-smiling. “I never understood that tedious Injunction. What will the other wizards do? Would you like some wine?”

“I don’t know if they know yet,” Mostin said. “Or even if they’ll find out. I’ll have a glass

of that green stuff that you keep.”

“Do you have any legal arguments prepared, in the event that they pursue you?” The Witch asked.

“I am under a death sentence from the Oronthonian Church for failing to leave Trempa – I acted in self-defense. I can cite my haranguement by zealous Oronthonians in Morne as testament to this.”

“And if this fails?” The Witch asked.

“I am no longer a resident of Wyre, or even the Prime Plane. I spend more than fifty percent of my time in my extradimensional retreat, and am therefore no longer subject to the Injunction. This is a

technicality, but it may be pertinent.”

“And if this fails?” The Witch asked.

“I am a transcended being, and no longer subject to the Injunction. I may act with Impunity. If the council fails to recognize this, I will demand that they pursue Feezuu forthwith or brand them all as hypocrites. The assassination of Cynric was a blatantly political act.”

“And if this fails?” The Witch asked.

“My actions were against an overbearing, monotheistic regime which is implementing a virtual

theocracy. Oronthonian dogma threatens the ability of mages to pursue their research peacefully, and my actions were in the interests of Wyrish wizards everywhere! I will encourage them to do the same, in order to protect their rights against an increasingly oppressive church.”

“And if this fails?” The Witch asked.

“Even if found guilty, I will argue that the breach I made was a minor one, and does not merit the technical maximum penalty. I will appear contrite, and will try to bribe some of those who would

condemn me. Well, what do you think?”

“I have no idea,” Mulissu confessed. “I think a more relevant question might be: ‘Do I have lots of magical gadgets that the other wizards want, and would they throw the book at me in order to get their dirty paws on them?’”

“Hmm,” Mostin said. “You may be right. I hadn’t considered that.”

“What of Feezuu?” Mulissu asked. “Does she pose a real threat to you, or are you merely being paranoid?”

“I don’t know that either,” Mostin admitted. “I have no way of knowing how much of her former existence she recalls, and whether she has managed to fill the gaps in, so to speak. Which brings me to another question: how extensive is your Necromantic repertoire?”

“Somewhat underdeveloped,” the Witch said. “One cannot pursue everything, and

Necromancy has always struck me as a rather vulgar art.”

“I concur,” Mostin said. “But I assume that you would not turn down the opportunity of expanding it?”

“New dweomers are always pleasant,” Mulissu confessed.

Mostin reached into his portable hole, and retrieved two slim volumes that he had pilfered from the body of the first Feezuu. The Witch inspected them carefully.

After some while, she spoke. “The value of these books is staggering,” she said. “And I must admit that my greed outweighs any concerns that I might have about their owner pursuing me. Especially now

that I have a permanent Magnificent Mansion – for which, incidentally, I am indebted. What do you

wish in return?”

“Her permanent elimination. We could easily do it together, Mulissu.”

“Mostin,” she groaned, “We’ve already had this conversation. I am beginning to think that you are more than a little obsessed with her.”

“Mulissu?”

“Oh, very well,” the Witch sighed.

**

Prince Graz’zt rested in morbid meditation, absorbed in the dark abyss of his own thoughts.

Although aware of Feezuu’s movements, he had allowed her to act as she would, secure in the

knowledge that eventually, inevitably, she would succour either Ainhorr or himself directly for aid.

Ensconced on the Prime, she might yet prove of value in any plots that he had devised.

The bitch had felt that she had shaken off his yoke. He smiled coldly at the absurdity of it. As if anyone could. Ever.

Nehael, the Prince thought, bitterly. No longer under a celestial interdict – her atonement having taken a different route than initially expected – she was vulnerable again. She had precipitated a crisis in the church of the Enemy, at which Graz’zt had been perversely pleased, but now the tide was turning. His prognostications had revealed that the tide would inexorably shift in favour of the Paladin and his allies, even before Celestials had been brought into the equation. Oronthon was playing games with his followers, cleaning things up for some kind of renewal or revival. He must be thwarted.

A Planetar, Graz’zt seethed. On the Prime. His Foul ‘Brightness’ had gone too far, this time.

His own spies, lurking nearby in ethereal form as they had for months now, had retreated at Eniin’s arrival – even as they had at Rintrah’s - waiting for the Planetar to leave. Now they could no longer safely return: avoiding the penetrating Eye which the cleric wore around his neck was one thing – they merely had to stay out of range, and he was not always present in any case. But an Archon?

Graz’zt cursed. Just one ethereal jaunt from Nehael – that’s all it would have taken – and she’d have been fair game for the other succubi who lurked nearby. Damned Trumpet-Blower. His spies, who had

reported to him instantly upon their return, had been dismissed, and they fled and left him in a mood of black contemplation.

But Graz’zt’s foresight had already detected a nodality, a point in time when a number of unresolved events would begin to fall together and a pattern – which he must shape – would emerge.

Somewhat later, he summoned Ainhorr. The Balor bowed his forehead to the ground.

“What has happened?” The Prince asked.

“Sire, moments ago, the Cambion Feezuu contacted me,” Ainhorr replied. “She banished one of the demons that she had compacted – a Bar-Lgura – and instructed him to bring a message to me. She

intends to call him back to the Prime. She sends greetings to her Dreadful Lord, and relays news that

she is building a base of power for his glorification. She awaits your orders.”

“Doubtless,” Graz’zt sneered. “And Kalkja?”

“She is continuing to make reports regularly. Feezuu used one of her Quasits to commune with the Ancient.* Kalkja extracted this information from the Quasit, under threat of annihilation. The Cambion now knows that neither you nor I were instrumental in her assassination.”

“Bring the Bar-Lgura,” Graz’zt commanded.

Ainhorr bowed, vanished and reappeared moments later with the hairy, ape-like Demon. It quailed in the presence of the Balor and his master.

“When your mistress recalls you to the Prime,” the Prince instructed smoothly, “you will relate our fondest greetings, and thank her for the efforts that she has made in our cause. You will tell her that we have not forgotten her. We will send another message – and messenger - shortly.”

Graz’zt waved his hand, and the minor Demon vanished. “Bring me Uzmi,**” he ordered Ainhorr. “She has endured for a year, and I am feeling benign.”

Graz’zt stepped down from his throne and entered his sanctum – a void of unhallowed despair where

his most potent magicks were wrought. At his merest thought, a dark pile of snow and ice appeared.

With his own bare, six-fingered hands, the Prince began to shape it into an effigy of himself.

*Demogorgon is not Tanar’ri, and his presence predates their occupation of the Abyss. His name is

never spoken, even by the most potent of Demons.

**A Marilith punished for a minor slight that Graz’zt perceived. Uzmi was chained with adamantite dimensional shackles beneath a permanent symbol of pain.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 07-25-2002

**

“Well, what do you think?” Ortwin asked Mostin.

“I must admit, it is so deliciously simple that it just might work,” the Alienist replied.

“Has Eadric agreed to it?”

“He has already signed it,” the Bard grinned. He handed over a single piece of parchment to Mostin.

It was a lease – for the use of the Steeple at Kyrtil's Burgh by Mostin the Metagnostic for private research purposes - signed by Eadric of Deorham. It was backdated around six months.

“Temple Clerics trespassed on your lawfully rented property and performed conjurations. You were perfectly within your rights to protect it. The Injunction was not infringed.”

“Quite so,” Mostin said. The perverse twistings of Ortwin's mind were a constant source of amazement.

“You should be aware that Eadric will not actually lie for you,” Ortwin said. “But he understands that this document could be misinterpreted, if you were to choose to be less than honest about when the lease changed hands. And you owe him three hundred gold crowns for back rent.”

Mostin raised a single eyebrow.

“How was your meeting with the Storm-Witch?” Ortwin asked. “Did she furnish you with sound advice?”

“Mulissu seldom gives advice of any kind,” Mostin replied. “But she has agreed to help me finish Feezuu off. Would you care to participate in a raid?”

“Naturally,” the Bard replied. “I am on her hit list as well, if you recall. Exactly when did you have in mind?”

“In three or four days. Lacking Sonics, Mulissu has opted for Necromantic assault. She is cramming some new spells, from Feezuu's own books, ironically enough.”

“Her lightning?” Ortwin asked.

“Will be ineffective against demons,” Mostin said, as though instructing a child. “But she has other tricks up her sleeve. Enchantments, Transmutations, Conjurations. We will need death wards and acid immunities again. I was rather hoping that Nwm would join us, even if Eadric does not. Where is he?”

Ortwin shrugged.

**

Lord Rede of Dramore sat alone on his stool, beneath the empty Archiepiscopal throne in the Great

Fane of Oronthon in Morne. Even before the failure of the latest of the schemes devised by himself, Hethio and the other powerful members of the Curia, the Grand Master of the Temple had begun to feel a niggling doubt in the pit of his stomach.

His efforts to suppress it had been unsuccessful.

As he sat and mused on events of the past year or so, he regarded the corpse of Melion – still lying in sombre state beneath the northern altar in the temple. The Inquisition was leaderless – its Grand Master slain by a pagan, and its Deputy, an avowed heretic, defected to the Enemy. The Curia was in tatters, with the Marquis of Iald gone – a target for future Temple reprisals, if things continued the way that

they were going. The Bishop of Tyndur continually voted against any measures which he

tried to pass, irrespective of their nature, simply in an attempt to sow as much discord as possible.

The old bastard had finally shown some teeth, Rede thought ironically.

And, latest in a catalogue of annoyances, raids by Uediian bandits in Hethio – the most dependable and Orthodox of all of the Wyrish provinces. Yesterday, a Temple caravan ambushed, the guards slain and its goods seized. This morning, a chapel burned – after its valuables had been ransacked, of course.

Rede had dispatched a dozen Templars and twenty men-at-arms to deal with the threat, but was finding that he had fewer and fewer resources to draw upon. The Temple Precinct was all but empty, most of its fighting members either entrenched near Trempa or guarding access to Iald.

The Grand Master of the Temple did not notice the magical sensor which observed him.

Abruptly, disturbing his reverie, Rede saw a shadow enter the Fane through the Orangery door. Odd, he thought, no-one used that door at night.

Nwm the Preceptor walked calmly along the aisle.

“You!” Rede yelled, and with a speed which belied the weight of his armour, launched himself forward and drew the greatsword from his back in a single, fluid motion.

“Peace, Rede,” the Druid said, holding his palm outwards. “This is hallowed ground. I will commit no act of violence here. Will you?”

“Guards!” The Templar roared – unnecessarily as, already alerted by his first yell, they were entering through the cloister doors.

Nwm cast a spell and both he and Rede were surrounded by a wall of thorns of great height and thickness.

“Deceiver!” Rede yelled, and charged towards the Druid. Before he reached him, however, creepers

had shot forth from the briar wall and pinned the Templar.

Nehael suddenly materialized.

“The Demoness! The Demoness is in the Fane!” Rede was yelling madly.

“Listen!” Nwm shouted.

But Rede, drawing on the immense Strength granted to him, burst through the entangling vines and

clawed his way forwards.

Oh, for the Goddess’ sake, Nwm thought. But he was prepared for this. Rede groped wildly for a vine to hold onto, failed, and flew upwards under the effects of a reverse gravity. He landed on the arched ceiling of the nave eighty feet above with a ‘thud.’

“Now shut up, and listen,” Nwm said.

**

Feezuu considered her position.

Her Bar-Lgura, called again back to the Prime, had delivered its short message from Graz'zt.

We have not forgotten you. We will send another message – and messenger – shortly.

The Cambion pondered on the meaning of the words. A thinly veiled threat, to be sure, and henceforth she should watch her step carefully. Of course, Graz'zt did not trust her, any more than she did him.

Both of them knew it. This was the nature of Abyssal politics, and was hardly unusual. It was the

messenger that concerned her.

Feezuu summoned Kalkja, and asked for counsel from the demoness.

“The Prince is attempting to exercise dominion over you, Lady. Will you allow this outrage?”

Feezuu did not reply, unsure of the Succubus' motives.

“What of your Assassin?” Kalkja asked, smoothly turning the attention away from the unanswered question. “Have you made further progress?” In fact, the Succubus already knew the answer to this, although she had heard no such admission from the Cambion's own lips.

“A mortal wizard,” Feezuu answered bitterly.

“How did you determine this, Lady?” Kalkja asked slyly. But she was playing a dangerous game –

Feezuu was no fool.

“Both of the Quasits communed for me. Some questions I directed them to ask Demogorgon

concerning my assailant, some regarding Graz'zt and his plots, others about the loyalty of my

compactee demons.” Feezuu's face was expressionless, her eyes penetrating.

“Contacting the Ancient is a perilous enterprise,” Kalkja effortlessly replied.

“I intend to have the Quasits commune on a regular basis,” Feezuu lied. “Over time, a coherent picture will doubtless begin to emerge.”

“They will demand high recompense,” the Succubus reminded Feezuu.

“I will renegotiate their contracts with them,” the Cambion said. “I find that I am no longer in the mood for counsel, Kalkja. You may depart.”

The demoness bowed, and left. Feezuu watched her carefully.

Somewhat later, a Quasit appeared directly in front of Feezuu. It bore a seal made from the horn of some Abyssal creature in its hand.

Feezuu relaxed a little. Evidently, the Prince had not wished to send anything of great status through –

it would have overtaxed him.

The tiny Demon grinned wickedly. “I have been instructed to inform you that you will call the Marilith Lady Uzmi to this location within one hour. You will not attempt to constrain her with magic. She bears important information which concerns you, regarding your assailants, an Oronthonian plot, and the

whereabouts of at least some of your missing items. She is currently being briefed.”

Feezuu’s inwardly heaved. Was there nothing that she had kept secret, or was not already known to

Graz’zt? She suspected a mole in her midst, and there was one obvious suspect. And the Prince had

carefully placed the burden of expending magical power on her: he could have shunted Uzmi to the

Prime by himself, although the diminishment in his strength might be of an unacceptable level.

Uzmi better not try anything funny, or the Cambion would blast her to pieces. Or die trying.

**

Nwm had rather more than a minute to get his argument across: not before the Templars had hacked

their way through the wall of thorns – that would take them far longer. But until Rede fell back to the floor again.

“How is it possible that a demoness stands on hallowed ground?” he said calmly to Rede.

“Tainter! Corrupter!” Rede screamed back at him.

“Examine her for taint yourself,” Nwm said.

Rede struggled with his sword.

“You are a coward,” Nwm said scornfully. “Look at her. LOOK AT HER!”

“Why have you come here?” Rede shouted down.

“Unlike Eadric of Deorham, I am not bound by the dictates of your God. I may intercede where I wish, and need no celestial fiat to act. I have come to show you the Truth, Lord Rede. Look at the Succubus.”

Rede closed his eyes and prayed fervently for Oronthon’s intervention.

Nwm sighed, and Nehael flew upwards towards where the Templar was suspended – taking care not to

fall within the gravity well. She smiled benignly at him.

“Temptress! Begone!”

“Your faith is weak, if you will not examine me for taint,” Nehael said reasonably.

Rede continued to mumble prayers through his lips.

“Please look at me Rede,” she spoke softly.

“Bah!” Nwm shouted. “This is useless. He is blind and arrogant beyond belief. We should go.” He touched a wooden pew, and it transformed immediately into a wooden ladder which grew up towards the ceiling.

The Druid began to dissolve into mist. “I will not warn you again, Dramore,” he said. “You will desist from your persecutions, or I will level this building to the ground, and it will become a hallowed pile of rubble. We are currently in a state of enforced peace. You would be wise not to jeopardize it. If any more anti-Uediiian legislation is passed, and you fail to repeal that enacted already, I promise that you will answer for it in Hell.”

Nwm drifted away like smoke.

Nehael remained somewhat longer, and tried once again, even as the Templar was clambering down the wooden ladder to the floor of the Fane.

“You have lost His grace,” she said sadly to him, and vanished.

By the time that the other Templars had cut through the wall, they found Rede in a somber and introspective mood.

“Remove the pews,” Rede commanded dourly. “Flush everything in holy water. Fetch Asser – the Fane must be resanctified. The taint must be washed away.” But his words sounded hollow even to himself.

It helped little, when a young Paladin said brightly:

“There is no taint here, Lord Rede.”

The Grand Master of the Temple and Interim Protector of the Church of Oronthon turned away, and vomited.

**

The Bishop of Hethio brushed it off. “Don’t let it concern you. It was probably the Diabolist – or one of his mortal allies - in disguise. That would explain the lack of significant residual evil.”

Rede ignored him. “I am resigning from the Curia,” he said. “I have already sent out an order that it should convene tomorrow, where I will announce it. I am also leaving the Temple.”

“You cannot be serious!” Hethio was aghast. “The Temple needs strong leadership now more than ever.

You cannot let the Heretic intimidate you with his wiles.”

“I have decided. Good night Hethio.”

“Rede...”

“YOU ARE DISMISSED!” Lord Rede thundered.

The Bishop nodded and left. His mind raced with possibilities and, had he had time to consider

carefully, he may have chosen a course of action other than that which he did. But panic drove him, and desperation guided his deeds.

He must act quickly! He passed through the doors of the exchequer, descended a flight of stone steps, and entered an arched chamber lit with sconces.

Two paladins stood guard there.

“Greetings, Lord Bishop,” one said. “This is a late hour to be visiting the vault.”

Hethio nodded, and held up his seal in a perfunctory manner. He passed into the guarded maze,

negotiated its hazards, entered the treasure room, and stuffed his purse full of fire opals. He grabbed a random piece of parchment and, exiting the vault, waved the scroll and raised his eyebrows at the two guards as though he had absent-mindedly forgotten it. They smiled sympathetically.

Returning to his chambers, the Bishop drew a hooded cloak about himself and pressed a panel in the wall. A doorway appeared. Lighting the lantern inside the opening, he closed the door behind him, and proceeded down a seldom-used tunnel which exited the Temple grounds to the west, within a quiet

cemetery reserved for the city nobility.

He knew where to go, who to speak to, and what to say. He hoped that they had some people good

enough to do the job quickly and effectively.

For the sake of the Church, he lied to himself.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 07-30-2002

**

Feezuu reflected upon the news brought to her by Uzmi.

Mostin the Metagnost, responsible for her death? It hardly seemed possible. He was, from reputation at least, a prudish book-worm. Apparently, he was somehow embroiled in the Rurunoth affair as well –

he may have imprisoned the Demon, or perhaps slain him.

Even Graz’zt’s divinations had been unable to locate the Balor.*

Mostin, by Uzmi’s account, was an associate of the Paladin toward whom Graz’zt bore a particular

vendetta. The one responsible for the death of Cerothumulos. The one who had turned Nehael. Eadric was now the leader of a revivalist faction within the Church of Oronthon, and had acquired some kind of Messianic status.

She had heard rumour of the troubles in Wyre, of course, but they hardly seemed relevant to her situation.

“Why now?” The Cambion had demanded of the Marilith.

“It is not your place to ask such questions, half-demon,” Uzmi had hissed venomously.

Feezuu had almost lost her temper, and blasted the demoness.

Uzmi had sensed the antagonism, and smiled. “You would be well advised to keep your loathing for me under control. I am the Prince’s ambassador, and if you assail me you will have more than me to deal with. You will not engage Mostin until Graz’zt’s appointed time. Your opportunity for revenge will come soon, however.”

“We seem to have a problem of authority,” Feezuu spat. “I will not yield to yours.”

“Nor I to yours,” Uzmi replied. “It is not an issue. Graz’zt will shortly be sending another who will assume command.”

Feezuu goggled. It would have to be a Balor, but which one?

“He risks celestial retaliation,” the Cambion said. “And why shunt a Demon through, when he could have me call one?”

Uzmi sneered. “He is a brinksman. He will push it to the limit, and beyond. What does he care if a thousand of his generals perish in a war with heaven? But he has not revealed all of his plans to me.

Perhaps the one he plans to send is beyond your ability to conjure, little witch.”

He would not dare send Ainhorr, Feezuu thought to herself. But she had to concede the Marilith’s point.

There were always more demons, as they said in the Abyss. She suddenly felt very expendable.

**

Mostin had an unexpected visitor.

She was a young woman, probably no more than thirty, although her exact age was rather difficult to gauge. She wore a hooded cloak of an indigo so deep that it was almost black. Her dark hair, cropped at the shoulder, framed a face with pointed features which bespoke a fey or elven heritage. In her hand she carried a rod of black iron that hid an unknown potency. She waited patiently on the doorstep of the Alienist’s manse, until Mostin had exited his extradimensional retreat.

He scried her, and wondered what she was doing there. Thoughts about the Injunction raced through his mind. He buffed, straightened his collar, and opened the door.

“Shomei. This is an unexpected pleasure,” he said.

The woman strode in. “Firewine,” she said. Mostin was unsure whether she addressed him, or one of the numerous unseen servants who waited in attendance. She walked into his drawing room and sat in his favourite leather armchair, resting her chin upon her hands, her rod upright beneath them. She was, as usual, intense and preoccupied.

“Well. Did you or didn’t you?” She asked. Shomei always spoke a little too quickly for comfort.

Mostin tried to look blank and uncomprehending.

“There are rumours abroad in Morne that you stand in contempt of the Great Injunction,” she said, peering at him.

“I would argue that I did not,” Mostin replied smoothly, opening a cabinet and retrieving a dusty bottle and two glasses.

“Your continued association with this Oronthonian faction does little to enhance your reputation,”

Shomei observed. “I hope that you haven’t been drawn into the world of mundane politics, Mostin. It would be most unbecoming.”

“Eadric is my landlord,” Mostin answered. “And Soraine has been, also. One has to live somewhere, when one is on the Prime.”

“Do not put too much store in your Transcendence, Mostin,” Shomei said archly. “There are wizards who covet your mirror.”

Mostin swallowed. “What is the purpose of your visit?” He asked.

“A routine inquiry,” Shomei replied. “Your actions have aroused interest in certain quarters.”

Mmm, Mostin thought, unsure what Shomei was referring to.

“Where is the Balor, Rurunoth?” She asked abruptly.

“Is he missing?” Mostin asked. “Perhaps he got lost.”

“Mostin,” Shomei said more slowly, “you are a loose cannon. Your actions are unpredictable and, in the extreme, perverse. As such, you are a worry to wizards and may cause concern in other quarters.” The last words were spoken with exaggerated emphasis. “Powerful extraplanar entities take an interest

when one casually disposes of a Demon of Rurunoth’s status. When one summons Barbazu on a regular basis. When one calls Planetars to the Prime. Are you following my drift, Mostin?”

“I am unaligned,” Mostin said carefully. Ahh, those quarters, he thought.

“That is the problem that I am referring to,” Shomei replied. “If you continue in this vein, sooner or later you will require patronage, Mostin. If you try to do it alone, without reliable help, you will come unstuck. I have acquaintances...”

“I am well aware of your ‘acquaintances,’ Shomei,” Mostin said.

“But you understand that my dealing with them is in full consciousness – I am not easily duped or mislead. I have a certain sympathy with the diabolic, it’s true, but I’m hardly green or naïve. We – and they – simply have an understanding with one another. Their access to information is staggering,

beyond even your conception.”

“I doubt that,” Mostin said.

“Perhaps I could demonstrate. A token of goodwill, shall we say?”

“Go on,” the Alienist said suspiciously.

“Your defeat of Feezuu is well known in the higher echelons of the magical community in Wyre. It has gained you a certain degree of respect – which is no bad thing. But how long do you think will pass before the Cambion herself finds out that you were the one responsible. Her network is expanding.”

“I have already given this much thought,” Mostin said.

“She knows already, Mostin,” Shomei said earnestly.

“How do you know?” Mostin asked, aghast.

“Not all of the Yugoloths in Graz’zt’s employ are effectively monitored by his own loyal vassals,”

Shomei explained. “Information passes quickly between the Abyss and the Hells.”

“How long has she known?”

Shomei drew a pocket watch from her jerkin. “As we speak, around an hour. I knew that she would find out before the message was sent to her. Have you heard of Uzmi?”

Mostin wracked his brains. “A Marilith?”

“A Marilith,” Shomei confirmed. “Formerly in the retinue of Lord Baphomet, but now engaged by Graz’zt. She is currently on probation. She is on the Prime with Feezuu.”

Mostin raised his eyebrows. “And a wayward Daemon discerned this?”

“Yes, an Arcanaloth, named Xerulko. He leads sixteen companies of Yagnoloths in a mercenary

agreement with Graz’zt. But the Prince does not trust him, so he has him watched.

Xerulko is a potent sorcerer, however, and Graz’zt’s grip is not as strong as he likes to think. Demons are, ultimately, disorganized.” Shomei spoke with unconcealed disdain.

“And Xerulko informed one of your ‘acquaintances?’” Mostin asked.

“He sold the news to Titivilus.”

“And Titivilus is your lover?”

Shomei laughed openly. Mostin was surprised – it was a genuine, heartfelt mirth that was difficult to associate with one who had such dangerous connections. “I don’t really think ‘love’ entered the equation, Mostin.”

The Alienist frowned “What do you mean, entered? Why past tense?”

“I don’t expect you to keep abreast of my Infernal dalliances, Mostin. Sometimes I hardly can myself. I allowed him to become bored with me.”

Mostin looked quizzical.

Shomei smiled. “One does not ‘dump’ a Duke of Hell, Mostin. It is impolitic. The initiative could hardly have come from me, could it?”

“I suppose not,” Mostin agreed. “Then how did you find out?”

“One of his messengers informed me. The Duke and I are still on amicable terms, and he owes me a few favours – his compact is not yet expired.”

“You compacted a Duke of Hell?” Mostin was incredulous.

“Yes,” she said, nodding. “It is not as hard as you might think.”

“I won’t ask you what his price was,” the Alienist said.

“No, it’s probably better if you don’t know,” Shomei agreed. “The point is this, Mostin. Feezuu has powerful allies. You do not. You are vulnerable. I know that you find diablerie seductive and exciting –

I certainly do. You have the strength of will and the wherewithal to tread that path, Mostin. Devils are powerful tools.”

“A plough is a tool, Shomei. A Devil is an evil extraplanar monster.”

“In any case,” Shomei said. “Graz’zt has less interest in you than he does in the Paladin and the Succubus called Nehael.”

The Alienist thought for a moment. “Hmm. I don’t suppose that you could be a little more specific about his plans?”

“Not really,” she said. “But Graz’zt is not well-liked in the Hells – he is considered something of an upstart with ambitions far beyond his station. His actions are too wayward. He is not methodical. He is not efficient.”

“He is a Demon, Shomei. What do you expect? And he is effective for all of his quirks. He has consolidated power quickly since his release.”

She shrugged and stood up. “Consider this an offer,” she said. “If you wish for patronage, the Lord of the Fourth extends his hand in friendship.”

“Belial?” Mostin asked, confused. “I thought that Dispaten was your patron.”

“I am merely a message-bearer, Mostin. I said nothing about my patronage, and my own inclinations are not open for discussion.”

“Before you leave, Shomei. Your rod – what is its function?”

“You have your mirror, Mostin. I have my rod.” She smiled, and abruptly vanished.

Sh*t, thought Mostin. That was a quickened teleport.

**

“We must strike now!” Mostin said to Eadric, Ortwin, Nwm and Tahl. They were standing

on the field beneath Hartha Keep. “We cannot allow her to seize the initiative. You must see the need for this, Eadric. She has called a demoness of great power – greater than Cerothumulos. Than Rurunoth, maybe.

And they are holding back until they are fully prepared.”

“Mostin, I...”

“NOW dammit. If they ‘port in and catch us singly, then we’re all dead.”

“Is this Shomei reliable?” Ortwin said. “She is an Infernalist.”

“I believe so,” Mostin replied, exasperated. “I don’t doubt that she has other motives. But we go back a

long way.”

“What was her price, Mostin?” Eadric asked.

“None,” Mostin replied flatly. “Although she suggested that I might benefit from a diabolic patron.”

“Mostin!” Eadric gasped.

“Don’t worry. I’m not about to take her up on it. But one must grab allies when they present

themselves. I suggest that all of us retire to my Magnificent Mansion and make the necessary

preparations. Nehael should remain within it – she is particularly vulnerable. Feezuu has met her, and she may be scried.”

Eadric sighed. “Mostin, this is extremely bad timing. I have just received news that Lord Rede of Dramore was murdered in his bed last night. Naturally, I am the prime suspect. The fact that Nwm paid a visit to the Temple yesterday evening hardly helps matters.” Eadric stared stonily at the Druid, who smiled apologetically back.

“Ngaaaaarh!” Mostin screamed. “I don’t give a sh*t. I’m going anyway. Eadric, if I have to compact Pit Fiends to do this, then I will. Do you read me?”

“You won’t,” Eadric groaned. “I never said that I wasn’t coming. Just that it’s bad timing.” Mostin shook, and tried to calm himself. “Let’s just get things ready shall we?”

“And Mostin,” Eadric said remonstratively, “No Devils. Do you understand?”

“Eadric, be assured that if I summon them, they will be of the strictly Pseudonatural variety.”

“Is that good or bad?” Ortwin asked.

**

“I thought it was supposed to be the day after tomorrow,” Mulissu complained. “I am not ready.”

She stood in Mostin’s study, resplendent in a gown of blue samite interwoven with hundreds of

precious stones. Around her neck, she wore a collar which bore a single sapphire of enormous

proportions, which Mostin recognized as that which had once belonged to the Xorn Krygnasz. The

mirror of Urm-Nahat showed the scene of the courtyard in her own castle.

“Who are these people, Mostin?” She asked.

“Nwm, you have met,” Mostin said. “This is Ortwin of Jiuhu, who considers himself to be the greatest liar in the world. This is the Succubus, Nehael, of whom I informed you. This is Tahl the Incorruptible, lately of the Oronthonian Inquisition. This is Eadric of Deorham, who is the anointed proxy of the aforementioned deity. This is your own daughter, Iua, whom I trust you remember.”

“Aah, yes,” Mulissu smiled vaguely. She stepped forwards and arranged Iua’s hair, causing the girl to pout. “You should be careful of the company you keep, Iua,” Mulissu said laconically.

“Well?” The Witch asked.

“The schedule has been moved forwards a little. I hope you don’t mind too much.”

“If we could get this over with, then I can return to my work,” Mulissu sighed. “What is the plan?”

“We have a Marilith to contend with, in addition to those foes that I had previously determined.”

“Mostin...”

“We are more than adequately equipped to deal with any threat which presents itself,” Mostin said. “We have more firepower than I have seen gathered together since...well, for a long time, anyway. What can you prepare, Mulissu?”

“I was thinking along the lines of Reality Maelstrom, Finger of Death, Great Shout, Horrid Wilting and

Disintegrate - obviously. I also have the spell of Skeletal Deliquescence which is rather amusing. And the excellent, if unpredictable, Prismatic Spray.”

“What about the ‘Big Ones?***’” Mostin asked tentatively.

“Power Word, Kill, Dominate Monster and Gate,” she replied nonchalantly.

Great Goddess, thought Nwm. Who is this woman?

“Before I do anything, Mostin, I absolutely insist on being rendered invulnerable to Acid, to be warded against Death effects and to be Mind Blanked. There’s no point in saying that you don’t have the last spell – I’ve seen your books, remember?”

Mostin grumbled. That was one less big sonic that he’d have.

“Where would you open a Gate?” Ortwin asked Mulissu.

“Obviously, Heaven,” Eadric replied.

“Hell,” Mostin said. “Oops. Did I just say that?” He smiled innocently at the Paladin, who shook his head and sighed. Mostin grinned. Sometimes, Eadric was an easy mark.

The discussion on exactly how they deployed their combined spell potential took two hours.

All of them rested.

**

“The Marilith may be able to summon more Demons,” Mostin cautioned them. “The Bar-Lgura also may be able to bring in others of their kind. There is an outside chance that the Succubus may be able to drag a Balor into the fray - it is unlikely, but we should be prepared for the contingency. Even the Dretch can pull others of their ilk in – en masse, they can be annoying. Furthermore, it is possible that

Feezuu herself has Bound more demons – she will not have had time to compact with them, however, so she may be unwilling to meet their demands for service.”

Eadric groaned. He knew that this had to be done, but took no joy in it.

Tahl was stoical. He had agreed to act primarily in an auxiliary capacity – at least as far as his own spells were concerned. But he was a capable combatant, and his scourge would be deployed against the creatures it was designed to destroy. He already knew everything that Mostin was saying – for twelve years he had served in the Inquisition.

Iua sat methodically absorbing the information.

Ortwin shifted restlessly – eager to be underway and unconcerned with the details. Whatever happened, happened.

Nwm was prepared, and would be the mainstay in terms of support. He had several powerful

summonings prepared in addition.

Mulissu sat and worried about her untended experiments.

“As soon as I scry her with the mirror,” Mostin said, “she will become aware of the observation. We must act instantly, at that point. Each of us knows what to do. We have primary and secondary targets.

We should begin the buffing procedures now.”

Ortwin shook his head in desperation. Mostin was in militaristic mode – the Bard envisioned the

Alienist with a map and a pointer, explaining tactics in detail.

**

Feezuu sat, aware of the sensor which had kept her under observation for several hours. Uzmi had

warned her not to attempt to dispel it. The Prince had said that he would be observing her, for his own,

inscrutable reasons.

Feezuu did not like it.

Suddenly, another sensor appeared to her inner sight. Within a second or two, all hell seemed to break loose.

Graz'zt smiled. The proffered bait had been accepted, and now the trap could be sprung. Xerulko

would be well-rewarded – he had enjoyed the challenge of posing as a Cornugon.

But Graz'zt had not counted on Mulissu.

*I ruled that Rurunoth's essence, imprisoned in a gem, was not subject to the discern location spell when the Balor himself was its target. This may seem arbitrary, but the tendency for discern location to be a game-breaker is well-known.

If discern location was directed toward "the pearl containing the essence of Rurunoth," that would be a different matter. Of course, only those who had actually seen the gem would be capable of such a spell.

**i.e. 9th level spells.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 07-31-2002

It was a gambit, but moving everybody through the portal opened by Mostin's mirror would have taken too long, and would have left them vulnerable during the period that it remained open. Instead, they appeared in three teams, organized for mutual support, triangulated around the crypt in which Feezuu and her allies were located.

Mulissu teleported into the northwest of the chamber with her own daughter, whilst Mostin appeared in

the northeast with Ortwin and Tahl. Eadric and Nwm charged through the portal from the south.

They appeared simultaneously. All were acting with uncanny speed.

Iua immediately leapt forwards and began an earnest assault upon Uzmi, caught off-guard by the

duelist's awesome precision and reflexes. Ortwin and Eadric, from opposite directions, both sprang at Feezuu. Nwm, in the form of an enormous bear, leapt at the ape-like Bar-Lgura.

The first thing that Mostin did, after Eadric and Nwm were clear, was to erect a wall of force around the extradimensional opening. The idea of Feezuu – or any other fiend present – escaping back through it (and into his study) without effort would have been too much. He looked around quickly: neither the Succubus nor the Goristro appeared to be present. All of the others were..

Mulissu, desiring to return to her work as quickly as possible, decided that the easiest thing to do would be to Gate in a Solar. A Prismatic Spray issued from her hand, striking several Dretch down quickly. To target anything else with the spell would risk affecting allies.

Light flooded into the sepulchre as the Celestial manifested.

“Holy sh*t,” said Ortwin, hewing at Feezuu.

Eadric smiled. “Good choice,” he shouted, and hewed at Feezuu. White light erupted from his blade.

Oh, no, thought Mostin.

“Eliminate nearby fiends,” Mulissu commanded the Solar. “Big ones first.”

The Solar nodded, and suddenly vanished, which was, initially, somewhat confusing.

Tahl invoked a Righteous Might and grew to a height of twelve feet. He drew upon the power of the

Eye of Palamabron and invoked a Zone of Revelation – his intention being to reveal any invisible

fiends which were present. The sight that it unveiled was terrifying: the ether around them was alive with demons, their misty shapes hewing at the Archon, Zhuel, who had Teleported to the area of the

Ethereal Plane coterminous with Eadric. The Solar was suddenly revealed engaging with them.

Iua had adopted a screening position, and was thrusting repeatedly at the Marilith, her enhanced blade easily penetrating the demoness’s natural defenses. Uzmi had still not reacted.

Feezuu herself, however, had mastered her confusion quickly. Reeling from the initial assault by Eadric and Ortwin, and perceiving that her death was imminent unless she acted quickly, she cast a Dimension Door and vanished.

“Naaaargh!” Mostin screamed.

Ortwin span around, brandishing Githla and his pick, leapt forwards, and ripped with devastating

power into Uzmi’s flank. His scimitar whirled and an enormous BOOM echoed through the crypt as his pick plunged deep into the torso of the Demoness. She collapsed.

Eadric turned and, with three great strokes, cut one of the Bar-Lgura down. Nwm, his jaws and claws enhanced, shredded the other ape-demon and ripped its head off with his teeth.

A voice whispered in Mostin’s ear. “Protect me, Alienist. Save me from the Paladin.” The succubus, Kalkja, had appeared behind him.

“Not bloody likely,” Mostin said, shaking off the enchantment. He struck her with the primary Sonic from his enhanced chain lightning, with secondary arcs crashing down and eliminating all of the

remaining Dretch. Kalkja was badly mangled, but Mostin ignored her. He cast a Discern Location

followed by a quickened Dimension Door and vanished.

“What the...?” Ortwin grumbled. “Nice one Mostin! Just piss off and leave us, why don’t you?” But there was nothing left standing in the crypt except the Succubus and two quasits – at least on the Prime Plane.

Within the Zone of Revelation, Nalfeshnee demons bore down upon the Solar, and the shape of a Balor of enormous size appeared, its phantom outline as terrifying as its real presence, as Ortwin remembered it from their brief encounter on Limbo.

“Ainhorr,” he whispered, and recalled the visions that Troap had evoked in his mind.

Without warning, another Gate opened. A statuesque demon, perhaps nine feet tall, with eyes that

glowed an even brighter green than Mostin’s, stepped through. His skin was as black as midnight, and in his hand he held a huge, wavy-bladed bastard sword. He, also, was acting with great speed.

Looks of amazement crossed the faces of those present. Each of them, including Kalkja, thinking: That is not possible. It is against the rules. He cannot be here.

He smiled viciously, but did not attack. Instead, he spoke a spell. Mass Manifest.

Ainhorr, and four Nalfeshnees appeared on the Prime Plane. The immense presence of the ancient

Balor filled the chamber. Terrible heat radiated from him.

Mulissu’s eyes almost popped out of her head. Mostin hadn’t mentioned Demon Princes and huge

Balors. She targeted Ainhorr with two Disintegrations and a cluster of Magic Missiles. He grunted.

The Solar and Zhuel reappeared upon the Prime, even as Ainhorr’s whip lashed out and wrapped itself around Tahl, dragging him against his body. His immense flaming sword crashed down upon Eadric,

biting into him with Unholy power. Fire issued from the Balor’s nostrils.

The voice of the great celestial echoed through the minds of those present: That is not Graz’zt.

Could’ve fooled me, Ortwin thought.

The Nalfeshnee sprang into action. A nimbus of rainbow light began to kindle around one of them, and an Unholy Aura erupted from another, bathing the fiends in protective blackness. More fiends

materialized, as the remaining Nalfeshnees invoked summonings. Three Vrocks appeared, and

immediately leapt at Eadric, attempting to rend him with their claws.

The two Quasits were flapping around Mulissu, trying to sting her and break her concentration.

Tahl called on the power of the Strength domain and, with difficulty, broke free of the

Balor's whip.

His own scourge cracked in his hand, and bit into Ainhorr. Iua threw herself into the fray, reeled from a passing strike from the Balor, and began fencing with the black-skinned demon who, apparently, was not Graz'zt. Ortwin joined her.

Seeing his chance, and drawing on the power of his God, Eadric yelled, hefted Lukarn, and brought it full force down upon Ainhorr's flaming sword. The Balor turned it with contemptuous ease. Eadric

struck again, and a splintering sound was heard, sparks flying as the blades crashed together. He struck again, and Ainhorr's ten-foot greatsword shattered, hewn at the hilt.* Shards flew across the chamber.

Eadric smote the demon, and he screamed.

Nwm spoke two summonings in fast order. A large salamander with a long spear materialized, and a

huge Earth Elemental grew from the floor. He threw them both immediately against the Nalfeshnee

with the nimbus around it.

Kalkja unsuccessfully attempted to persuade Mulissu to disintegrate Eadric.

The demon who was not Graz'zt slashed at Iua, the force and speed of its strokes too great for her to avoid or parry. Gaping wounds appeared all over her, and she staggered backwards and collapsed.

Mulissu screamed, targeted the monster with two Disintegrations and the Simulacrum's diminished

resistance failed it. It vanished. One of the Quasits who was buzzing her succumbed to a burst of Magic Missiles. The Solar dramatically decapitated one of the Nalfeshnees with its greatsword, and cut another one down with three swift strokes, in an attempt to close with Ainhorr. Zhuel engaged the third.

The Great Demon spoke a single word of power, and another Balor appeared.

"Oh, for heaven's sake," Ortwin moaned, before he imploded.

Unable to physically engage with Eadric – Ainhorr and the Vrocks now fully surrounding the Paladin –

both Nalfeshnees targeted the Paladin with Feebleminds. Simultaneously, the rainbow coloured nimbus around one of them erupted in a burst of energy, causing Nwm to reel. Eadric's mind collapsed under

the pressure, and he sat down and began to drool.

**

Feezuu had not gone far – into a chamber only a hundred yards or so away. When Mostin appeared

nearby, she was already mounting her Nightmare.

“I don’t think so,” the Alienist said, and launched two doubly empowered sonically substituted lightning bolts and another quickened sonic at her.

“Almost,” she said. And died.

But Mostin had exhausted his transportation spells. Rather unconventionally – for him at least – he had to actually run back to the chamber where the others were gathered. He crashed through a door, straight into the Goristro.

“Oops,” he said. Fortunately, the Demon was even more surprised than he was. Mostin quickly summoned a trio of Pseudonatural Dire Bears.

“Kill,” he pointed, and waited for a chance to sneak past.

**

Tahl, clawed and buffeted by attacks from the Vrocks, pushed through and interposed himself between Eadric and the Balor. Ainhorr slammed him with an immense, fiery fist, but Tahl’s spirit did not waver.

He spoke to Eadric’s sword, which sat limply in the Paladin’s grip, and closed his hand tightly around it.

“Lukarn. Heal him.” The Cleric commanded.

Nearby, on the ground, Nwm – still in the shape of a huge bear – hallucinated wildly. The Salamander was stabbing at one of the Nalfeshnees, whilst the Earth elemental pummeled it.

Kalkja grabbed at Tahl, and he lashed out at her. She pulled his head back, and kissed him. His knees became weak.

Mulissu darted over to Iua and, touching her neck, determined that her daughter was still alive. She was still livid. She opened another Gate, and a second Solar stepped through.

“What is your command?” It asked.

“I have none. Do as you wish.” She cradled Iua’s head in her lap.

The Solar smiled, and opened yet another Gate. A cascade of white light began.

The Demons fled, as the Celestial host descended upon the ancient Necropolis of Khu, and hallowed it.

**

As the power coursed into him from Lukarn, Eadric looked around himself to see dozens of perfect

winged forms standing in silent vigil. He wondered if he was dead, until he glanced across to see the crumpled form of Ortwin lying nearby. Tahl was tending to Iua, and Nwm stood pensively stroking his beard.

Mostin burst in, ready to fling sonics. He looked around, and fainted.

Eadric stood, walked up to a Planetar, and pointed at Ortwin.

“I don’t suppose that you’d...”

“Not even were he one of the faithful,” the Celestial replied.

“He died fighting demons,” Eadric pointed out.

“As have many others,” the Celestial replied sympathetically. “Except in unusual circumstances, death tends to be final.”

Bugger that, thought Nwm.

**

“Mmm,” Ortwin looked in the mirror. He was a satyr.

“It could have been a lot worse,” Nwm said. “A badger, or an owl, for example. Mulissu is willing to return you to your original form – for a hefty price, no doubt. I think you look quite dashing, and you must admit – it has a certain appropriateness.”

“Yes, yes,” Ortwin agreed enthusiastically. Mmm. Nymphs, he thought.

*Crit.

In answer to the ‘buffs’ question: all were hasted and death warded, and had protection from acid on them. Ortwin, Eadric, Iua and Tahl were also under protection from sonics in the event that Mosin

needed to drop area spells on the melee fighters. Ortwin and Tahl were both under an enhanced bull’s strength, Iua under an enhanced fox’s cunning - useful for a duelist. Mulissu was Mind Blanked.

Greater Magic Weapon was on Iua’s rapier, both of Ortwin’s weapons and Tahl’s whip. Eadric had a

holy sword cast upon his own sunblade, and was also warded with a stonesskin.

Nwm had Greater Magic Fang upon both sets of claws, and his teeth.

There may have been others.

It’s worth pointing out that as soon as the second Solar appeared (actually, maybe even the first), that it was a foregone conclusion.

My wife was running Mulissu during the session. She does, from time to time.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 08-07-2002

**

“I think that some kind of disguise might be in order,” Ortwin said, scratching one of his hairy haunches with his left hoof. “Don’t get me wrong – I like it and everything – it’s just, well, conspicuous isn’t it? Being a Half-Elf was bad enough if I want to be – er – incognito, if you catch my drift, but this is rather harder to hide.”

“I could make you a Hat of Disguise,” Mostin offered. Since the death of the Cambion, he had visibly relaxed.

“Mmm, yes,” Ortwin said. “Of course, it wouldn’t look like one of your hats, would it Mostin?”

The Alienist sniffed. “Obviously, you lack the panache to carry off something as

distinguished as one of my hats. But such a hat would appear however you wished it to, as would you – within generally

bipedal constraints, of course.”

“That sounds splendid,” Ortwin said. “How long would it take you to enchant such a hat? How much would you charge me for it?”

“Well, Change Self...” Mostin began.

“Alter Self would be nicer,” Ortwin smiled disarmingly.

“So would Shapechange,” Mostin said sarcastically. “I had planned to give it to you, as a favour, but because you’ve been so rude...”

“Change Self will be just fine, Mostin,” Ortwin interrupted. “And thank-you, that’s very decent of you.”

“Yes, it is,” the Alienist agreed haughtily.

**

Unfortunately for Ortwin, none of Feezoo’s considerable wealth found its way into his purse. Upon

discovering her cache of gold and silk, Eadric had asked a squad of devas to distribute it equitably amongst the outlying encampments nearest Khu, prior to the Celestials’ departure.

Paladins, the Bard had sighed.

Groups of nomads were surprised – and, after their initial terror, delighted – to find winged messengers depositing bags of precious goods outside of their skin tents. Most had suffered losses from Feezoo.

Mostin had inspected the glass tube he had taken from Feezoo’s corpse. It still contained fifteen motes

– soul currency with which transactions on the Lower Planes were made. He had slipped it into his

pocket, but a look of stern reproof from a Planetar, whose true seeing had immediately recognized the morphed larvae for what they were, had persuaded him to render it to the Celestial.

“Er, here are some souls,” Mostin had said, looking away and holding out his hand.

The cells beneath the vaulted chambers of the mausoleum and crypt had contained a grizzly collection

of body parts, live subjects being drained of blood, and an uncompleted flesh golem. When subjected to the Eye of Palamabron, other secrets had been revealed. The lowest chamber, warded against the most powerful of divinations, revealed an incomplete phylactery which Feezoo had been attempting to construct.

Mostin swallowed. As a lich, there was no doubting who would have finally prevailed in their feud.

After the prisoners had been tended and released, Nwm used his power to open the roof of the

mausoleum, and light flooded in. Celestials descended into the lowest catacombs, and purified them.

The Ancient Gods of Shûth dreamed more easily.

**

In the days which followed the assassination of Lord Rede of Dramore, the Grand Master of the

Temple and Interim Lord Protector of Orthodoxy, the remnant of the Curia met to discuss the ongoing situation. A variety of proposals were made, although rulings upon their truth were postponed until the current hubbub subsided. Neither the Bishops of Kaurban or Jiuhu attended, leaving the five

episcopacies to mull over policy. Unexpectedly, Hethio did not attend either, apparently succumbing to a bout of sickness. Delighted at the absence of one who had become his arch-nemesis, the Bishop of Tyndur – who had ‘found his teeth,’ as Rede had put it – sowed as much discord as possible amongst the remaining Bishops. The consensus was still against him, but the zeal which had characterized

earlier meetings was absent.

Rede cannot have fallen from grace, else the Curia would have been incorrect in its initial backing of him – which was patently absurd, because the Curia determined what the truth was. Rede must,

therefore, have been a martyr to the truth and, like Melion, deserved beatification.

The Temple and the Inquisition – both arms of the Church Magistratum – were now leaderless. Brey

was the logical successor to the Temple, although arguments were made that the Magistratum should

now be consolidated into a single body, and Brey was not the man for the job.

The presence of the pagan, Nwm, and the demoness, were generally agreed to be connected with Rede’s murder, although in what capacity none could guess. The Templars who had been present

related events as they remembered them, although no full picture had emerged – the wall of thorns had blocked many details of the exchange between the Druid and Rede. But no Taint had been detected by the three Paladins amongst them.

Should the Curia authorize the further use of the scroll cache amongst the warrior-clerics again? They were rapidly running out of casters of sufficient power to even attempt their safe use.

Since the disappearance of Tramst, no clergy of adequate ability existed to use appropriate

divinations with regard to the murder of Rede.* And with Oronthon's continued silence, communion with the Deity was impossible.

How long would that last? Many wondered.

More mundane issues were discussed. The deployment and provisioning of the Temple troops in

Tomur, those in the Nund valley near Trempa, and the continued blockade of Iald.

Finances were not inexhaustible, and the king was still delaying in committing royal resources. Wars and sieges were expensive.

Meanwhile, whilst the four Bishops spoke candidly about the dilemmas which beset them, Hethio was

dealing with his own remorse. His sickness was feigned, and he spent a good deal of time in acts of self-mortification in order to expunge his guilt at the murder of Rede.

Because, when the Bishop of Hethio had attempted to approach the hallowed altar of the Fane in

Morne, he found that he could not. Centuries earlier, Tersimion had placed potent wards upon the dais, and, suddenly, Hethio found himself subject to them.**

Hethio knew what it meant, and should the gaze of even the lowliest Paladin be directed towards him, he knew what it would reveal.

Still, he rationalized whilst striking himself across the back with his scourge, the Taint was surely of a

temporary variety. He had, after all, acted in the best interests of the Temple.

**

Mostin made the hat for Ortwin in two days, became bored, vacillated, and decided to visit Shomei.

He thought that, rather than simply arriving on her doorstep and waiting, issuing a sending would be politic. He had not had a chance to use the spell since his acquisition of it from Feezuu's books.

Greetings Shomei. Your information useful, if flawed. I suspect you were duped. I would like to confer.

I will scry, then teleport to your location.

Within seconds, the return message arrived.

No. Resolving other matters. Meet me at my manse in one hour.

Hmm, Mostin thought. He wondered what the 'other matters' were. Still, it behooved him not to pry too much. He waited impatiently for an hour, and stepped through the mirror of Urm-Nahat.

He appeared outside of the huge, wrought iron gates of her estate, three miles from Morne. Moments later, they swung open noisily, and Mostin began to trudge down the gravel driveway, flanked by

enormous, brooding trees of a species not native to Wyre. Or the Prime, for that matter, he thought. A whispering wind reached his ears.

Do not leave the pathway

Not likely, he thought.

Shomei's mansion was vast, of a size comparable to the ducal castle at Trempla. It boasted six hundred rooms, and was squarely situated within a thousand acres of land, at the centre of a great bowl in the hills. Devils had, purportedly, been employed in its construction, and the great, sweeping balustrades

and buttresses, of an infinitely complex design which seemed to defy gravity, lent credence to the theory. The doors, fashioned from black iron and carved in intricate relief, opened noiselessly as the Alienist approached.

A spined devil waited for him, its wings flapping as it hovered in the air. It gestured, and Mostin followed it through a winding maze of corridors, hallways and antechambers, into a large but

comfortable drawing room. A purple fire burned in the hearth. Mostin sat and poured himself a large glass of brandywine from a crystal decanter, threw his boots off, sank into a couch made from fiendish leather, and waited.

Shomei appeared only a minute later, through a door that Mostin had not noticed in the east wall. She moved, even here, as though she was in a hurry.

"My apologies," she said immediately. "I discovered that I had been subjected to a ruse only yesterday.

The devil who brought me tidings turned out not to be a devil after all, but, in fact, the duplicitous Xerulko."

"Graz'zt is cunning, as I said," Mostin reminded her. "And bolder since his freedom."***

"Thank-you for the lesson," she said ironically. "But the daemon will be causing no more trouble.

Impersonating a diabolic herald is a risky enterprise."

"Devils have punished him?" Mostin asked, amazed.

"Not exactly," Shomei explained. "I have trapped him within a thaumaturgic diagram. Perhaps you would like to come and inspect him?"

Mostin raised his eyebrows. "Shomei, I appreciate the gesture, but the business with Feezuu is resolved permanently. I have no need of your 'help.'"

She scowled. "I have not entrapped Xerulko for your benefit, but for mine. Such a deception cannot go unpunished, or I would lose all respect. He has slighted me, and I must exact revenge.

"Mostin, listen very carefully to me. There comes a point in a mage's career when, willing or no, he or she begins to attract the attention of those who may perceive in him or her a prospective ally, or a potential threat. This is doubly true of those who specialize in summonings, and bindings and callings.

You are at that point. You are on the verge of mastering the most potent of dweomers. You need

dependable allies. If not devils, have you considered celestials?"

Mostin laughed uneasily.

"Exactly," Shomei said. "Mostin, you are a natural Goetic Magician. You do not need an external locus of morality to tell you which acts are 'Good' and which are 'Evil.' Devils are wicked, but very, very efficient. If you bind them to your Will, you can achieve a great deal. They are tools. They can aid you in your quest for apotheosis. Vhorzhe understood as much."

Mostin shook his head. "But Vhorzhe did not rely solely upon any one kind of outsider. And I have surpassed him now. You are right: I do not need to be told the difference between good and evil. But I will not be subject to any other's agenda – including yours, Shomei. You are shackled, whether you admit it or not, and you cannot move without considering the reaction it will evince in the court of Dispater, or Belial, or whoever else is granting you favours. Your independence is compromised. I

could not abide that. I must determine my own fate."

"Perhaps you underestimate my resourcefulness," Shomei said slyly. But she seemed troubled. Mostin felt that he had touched a raw nerve.

"Perhaps I do," Mostin admitted. "But I would no sooner be indebted to a Devil than a Celestial.

Although I freely admit that Celestials are scarier."

"On that much we agree, at least," she nodded. "Who will you look to for help, Mostin?"

"The Pseudonaturals," the Alienist replied. "As always. Shomei, I am only just beginning to apprehend them. Beyond those that I have dealt with already, there are those of truly awesome power."

"They are monstrous, Mostin. And those others that you speak of cannot be summoned."

"No," he replied. "But they can be called. And bound."

"Vhorzhe tried, and failed," the Infernalist said.

"I am not Vhorzhe," the Alienist replied. "I am Mostin, the Metagnostic."

**

Whilst Mostin spent a week with Shomei, discussing esoteric matters and renewing a friendship that had been allowed to drift apart, Eadric drilled his troops and prepared for the message from Rintrah that he knew must soon come.

Tahl and those who had defected with the Inquisitor from Morne, as well as the penitent Templars and the Paladins who had remained in Trempa, now formed the steel core of his supporters. At every

available opportunity, Eadric spoke with the more agnostic members of Trempa's aristocracy,

impressing upon them the need for unity, and the holiness of his mission. He diplomatically addressed their frippery, and their laxity, and enjoined them to commit themselves fully to purging the Temple of the corruption which beset it.

His persuasive arguments, combined with his force of personality, slowly began to bear fruit amongst the nobility. Still, Tahl reminded him that until he was tested upon the battlefield, the overarching unity of purpose that the Paladin sought would not be realized.

Ryth had ridden in haste from the north, where his archers were engaged in what seemed like would

turn into a dirty, protracted guerilla conflict with Temple troops in Tomur. The enemy were sending raiding parties across the Nund and continually testing the resolve of the Uediian militias there. Eadric

– in Soraine’s name - immediately summoned the aristocracy for conference. In fact, the Duchess was gradually and subtly relinquishing her nominal command of the effort to the Paladin.

Ryth, who had spent three weeks in the field and had shed quantities of enemy blood, was less

belligerent than previously.

The meeting was still fraught, however. The western side of the Nund, beyond a narrow swathe owned by the Duke of Kaurban, was a royal demesne. Whilst it seemed possible that the King would not

intervene in a strictly internal Temple affair, as soon as it spilled over onto lands owned by the crown, some form of retribution could be expected. Once the cells of Temple troops had been ousted from their encampments – assuming they could be – any pursuit would draw Trempa’s forces across land owned

by the King. And it was already well-known that the Temple was petitioning for royal aid – the King himself was, after all, supposed to be an exemplar of Orthodoxy.

And then there was Morne itself to consider.

Any attempt to invest the city would be met with overwhelming force, and Eadric held no illusions

about what would happen if he met the royal army in the field.

“We are interested in the Temple, not Morne itself,” Tahl remarked.

“I doubt the King will see it that way,” Eadric observed laconically.

“We should go and chat with him,” Ortwin said casually. “It’s long overdue. I’ve met him once or twice before. He seems nice enough, if a little petulant.”

Ryth spat. “He is a spineless boy.”

And therein lay the problem. The reason that no royal intervention had occurred. The reason that the powerful magnates of Wyre were roaming around with private armies in the true fashion of

‘overmighty subjects.’ The reason that no cohesive policy had emerged in the temporal governance of Wyre for more than a decade. The reason why Temple power had gone unchecked for so long. And

probably the reason that, heretofore, he has been mentioned in this story only in passing.

Because the King of Wyre, Tiuhan IV, was a spoiled boy of twelve years, manipulated by relatives who comprised the bulk of Wyre’s greatest aristocracy.

Eadric sighed. Unfortunately, Ortwin was right.

*Tramst (Cleric 9 / Divine Oracle 2), who had stood on the very spot where Feezuu had slain Cynric, had interacted with her Taint and used a legend lore to determine her identity. Note that Divine Oracles within the church of Oronthon aren’t necessarily as ‘wayward’ as the PrC in Defenders of the Faith would appear. Historically, oracular vision has been a vital adjunct to the Inquisition’s work.

**The High Altar in the Great Fane is protected by a Permanent Antipathy towards creatures of all evil alignments.

***The Binding of Graz’zt – an act accomplished by the Wizard Fillein and his cabal - over three

hundred years previously, and a seminal example of cooperative magic. The Great Mage had drawn on

the abilities of six other spellcasters of significant power.

Graz’zt was chained for fifty-five years. When he finally gained his freedom, he was irked to find that all but one of his former captors had already died.

Fillein himself had disappeared, and was never found.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 08-08-2002

Naming Conventions in the Wyre Campaign

This is in answer to a question that someone asked a long, long time ago, but which I hadn’t gotten around to answering. It’s kind of complicated, so bear with me (if you’re even vaguely interested).

Firstly, the PCs.

Eadric is an Old English name, which was useful from my perspective – in terms of consistency. I’ll

explain in a while.

Ortwin is the name of a character appearing in the *Nibelungenlied* (Ortwin of Metz), so I guess its Middle High German.

Nwm is “Quasi-Brythonic” or “Quasi-Celtic.” It rhymes with the Welsh word *Cwm*, which transliterates as “Coombe” in English. A *Cwm* is a glacial valley, if I remember my highschool geography. If “*Nwm*”

has any meaning, then I don’t know what it is.

Mostin, I think, is a proper name anyway. I'd guess that its roots were Middle English or Norman French, but I might be wrong. This is also very convenient for me.

In Wyre itself, there are three different linguistic complexes.

The oldest, consists of a group of languages which are represented by a variety of Celtic or Quasi-Celtic roots. *Nwm* is one such name, *Cambos du'la* (the hill where Nehael atoned) is another. Such names are relatively uncommon, and tend to be found amongst Uedians or at sites venerated by them.

Bagaudas – the name assumed by Hullu's guerillas – is an ancient Gaulish word meaning, unsurprisingly, "Guerilla Fighters." *Uedii* itself is also Gaulish, and has connotations of "Prayer, veneration."

More recent, although still of great age, are names represented by a variety of Germanic roots. *Eadric*, *Cynric*, *Brord*, *Asser* etc. are all Anglo-Saxon in form. *Tahl*, *Thrumohar*, *Ekkert*, *Streek* are all adaptations of Old Norse names. A larger number of names – *Tramst*, *Tiuhan*, *Hethio*, *Thahan*, *Tomur*, *Gibilrazn* derive from ancient Gothic. I like Gothic.

Deorham is Anglo-Saxon in form, and means "Village Where the Deer Live." There is a village in Somerset in England called *Dyrham*, and its older form in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle was *Deorham*. A *Burh* (as in Kyrtil's *Burh*) is a burgh/burg/castle.

The most recent, in terms of Wyrish history, are names represented by "Pseudo Norman French" or

"Pseudo Middle-English" words. These include *Wyre*, *Morne*, *Soraine*, *Melion*, *Brey*, *Trempa*. etc. In

the older language, 'Wyre' would probably be *Weorh*, but that's beside the point.

The names of Wizards are, for the most part, utterly fantastic. *Shomei*, *Tersimion*, *Jovol*, *Tozinak*, *Kothchori*, *Qiseze* etc. There are a few exceptions: *Hlioth* is Old Norse in form, *Waide* is passably Middle English (ish). *Mulissu* is ancient Assyrian, and does not fit the mould – but she is from the Thalassine. *Mulissu* is a complicated figure in Mesopotamian belief, a kind of sky-goddess, but also a name given to the transcendent aspect of Ishtar, or the feminine spiritual principle in general.

As mentioned in another post (by Lombard), the names of the celestial host are influenced by Blake's poetical names: *Enitharmon*, *Rintrah*, *Palamabron*, *Oothoon* (= *Urthoon*), *Enion* (= *Eniin*). . The name *Zhuel* is quasi-Blake. *Rurunoth*, *Ainhorr*, *Uzmi* are also passably quasi-Blake, although the intention with the last names was to evoke a 'darker' feel. *Feezuu*, *Xerulko* are invented. *Nehael* has the root "-

el" which means "God" in various Aramaic languages, and appears in the names *Gabriel*, *Michael*, *Raphael*, *Sammael* etc.

Oronthon is utterly imitative of Blake's names.

Completely inconsistently, the name *Kalkja* – the succubus compacted by *Feezuu* – is actually Gothic in form. But I couldn't resist. In Gothic, *Kalkja* means "whore."

Tun Hartha - the plateau north of Wyre - is a compound Old Norse + Gothic name, which means 'sweet hardship.' It's inhabitants call it *Linna*, however, which in their language

means ‘enclosed space.’ The language of the Tunthi is based on Finnish. *Mesikammi*, the shamaness encountered by Nwm, is a poetic word found in the Kalevala meaning ‘Bear, honey-paw.’ *Tietaja* means ‘sorcerer, shaman.’

Thalassine is from Attic Greek, and means “Blue-Green,” as in the colour of the sea. Many *Thalassine* names are derived from Middle-Eastern or Greek roots.

Shuth is a Sanskrit word. Sanskrit was originally intended to form the basis of the Language of Shuth, but I never followed through with the idea.

Graz’zt is canonical, of course.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 08-08-2002

**

Nwm sped westwards in vaporous form.

After his return from Khu, the Druid had felt depressed at sinking back into the routine on the

Blackwater meadow – the pavillions, and tents, and feasts and objectionable behaviour of many of

Trempe’s nobility. The tedious wait for Rintrah to manifest himself to Eadric, and instruct the Paladin on his next course of action. Nwm had *scried* Hullu, and determined to find out what the Tunthi warrior

– and unlikely star in the Uediian resistance in Hethio – was doing.

He arrived, after a three-hour flight, in an isolated glade deep within an area of forest dominated by elm trees of large size. Around a hundred people of both sexes had formed an encampment. Nwm was

surprised at its organization, until he remembered that Hullu’s experience extended beyond the lonely plateau of Tun Hartha – he had served as a mercenary as far afield as the southern *Thalassine*.

A trench had been dug, and a dike raised, encircling an area of around three acres. A wooden rampart had been built and a catwalk ran along its length, and the outer wall of both the trench and dike had been faced with stone gathered with labour from nearby streams. As the Druid descended, he moved

through plumes of smoke issuing from a large smithy, and the sound of hammers ringing reached his

ears. There were stables, a granary, latrines and a dozen other buildings, constructed hastily but efficiently from timber.

Nwm materialized in front of Hullu, who was teaching a girl of around eight years how to shoot a

longbow.

“She’s a bit young, don’t you think?” The Druid asked.

“No,” Hullu replied. His unmistakable accent reminded Nwm immediately of his strange

experiences upon the plateau.

“You’ve been busy.” Nwm said. “I’m surprised that you’ve had time to conduct raids as well.”

“Half of the camp is currently out on a mission,” Hullu said, stretching. “They are dealing with a punitive exercise mounted by the Temple. My informants told me about it three days ago – the night that you visited the Temple.”

Nwm arched an eyebrow. “News travels fast,” he said.

“Did you kill him?” Hullu asked.

“No,” the Druid replied.

“Pity,” said Hullu. “I can’t offer you anything to drink, I’m afraid. The beer won’t be ready for another two months.”

“You are making *beer*?”

“Certainly,” Hullu grinned. “The brewery went up before the stockade was even finished. Priorities are priorities, after all.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” Nwm agreed.

**

“We have over a hundred *bagaudas* who are battle-worthy here,” Hullu said. He sat, cross-legged upon the floor of a modest hut with sparse furnishings. “Maybe fifty more who are untested, but enthusiastic.

The rest are children.”

“Victims of persecution?” The Druid asked.

“Indirectly, for the most part,” Hullu replied. “Many were forced from their homes when the tax burden became too high – they fled rather than face indentureship. A few were targeted by Oronthonian

zealots, and had their homes burned. Ironically, these were the wealthier ones.”

“I wonder why you yourself are not on the raid that you mentioned,” Nwm said.

Hullu laughed. “Perhaps I am a coward at heart. Or perhaps I recognize the need to depute responsibility, and foster a sense of autonomy in those who follow me,” he said acidly.

“Sorry,” Nwm apologized. “I don’t mean to question your leadership skills. Who is leading the raid?”

“A woman named Tarva. She is being advised by one of yours, a Druid called Bodb. Do you know him?”

“I can’t say that I do,” Nwm replied. “Is there anything that you need? Anything that I can provide?

Resources that you lack?”

“Mail shirts. Leather goods. Harnesses for horses. Blankets. Another three or four fletchers. Saws and axes. Rope. Oil. Around half a ton of cast iron. Bows. Knives, daggers and swords. Pikes. Shields and helmets. Livestock.”

“Hmm,” Nwm said. “I’ll give it some thought.”

“We’ve raided several chapels and ambushed a few caravans,” Hullu pointed out. “So we’ve got silver and gold to pay for it. Transportation is awkward, though, and it takes a long time to make these things from scratch. I’ve tried to discourage my *bagaudas* from stealing from the Oronthonian farmers, however. I see them as largely blameless in this affair.”

“I understand,” Nwm replied. “I’ll do my best. But please, Hullu, the others here must *not* find out that I am provisioning you.”

“As if they could possibly think that,” Hullu remarked drily.

When Nwm exited the cabin, a hundred people stood in awed silence and gazed at him: something which seemed to justify Hullu’s cynicism.

**

“Greetings,” Mostin said. “I’ve never met an Arcanaloith before.”

Xerulko, cloaked and jackal-headed, stood within the thaumaturgic diagram devised by Shomei. His

hauteur, combined with a vicious sneer, bespoke one used to command, at ease with his own power.

The Alienist’s curiosity had compelled him to meet the daemon.

Hmm, he looks tricky, Mostin thought.

“Aah, the little Alienist. The *Xenomagus*.” Xerulko mocked. “Have you come to tempt me with sweet offers?”

“Hardly,” Mostin said, sitting in a comfortable chair. “I just came to gloat. Shomei is the one you should be worried about.”

“She and I will strike a bargain before long. I know her sort. You, however, Mostin the Subgnostic, are now officially on Prince Graz’zt’s wish list for ‘items required delivered.’ I think you rank around fifth or sixth, after the Paladin, the Succubus, your elementalist friend and, probably, one or two others who were present. After all, you aren’t that important.”

Mostin shifted uneasily. He hadn’t intended to draw Mulissu into the equation.

“If Graz’zt continues in this vein, he will quickly find himself running out of powerful vassals,” Mostin said. “He has already lost a Succubus, a Marilith, two Nalfeshnees, his favourite Cambion and a Balor to this enterprise. And poor Ainhorr has a broken sword. Perhaps Prince Big Ears can let him borrow his, for a while. I do trust they made it back alright? Being chased by Celestials can be quite

harrowing.”

Xerulko said nothing, but gave a condescending smile.

“As for you,” Mostin continued, “I believe that you are due to be collected in a few hours. Titivilus will be arriving through a *Gate* opened by Shomei, with a group of Pit Fiends to escort you back to Dis. I’m sure that a suitable punishment will be devised for you.”

Xerulko hissed, and then laughed. But Mostin had already anticipated his next words.

“If you do somehow convince your captors of your new loyalty,” the Alienist said, “remember this: you are easily called, bound and obliterated. I do not fear you. Remember Rurunoth.”

The Arcanaloth peered at Mostin through narrow eyes.

Mostin turned away, and grinned to himself. But before he left Shomei’s manse, he spoke with the witch again.

“Some of what you have said has merit, Shomei. You could impress upon the infernal embassy that I have no quarrel with Hell, and my work will henceforth concentrate on the Far Realms. Give my respects to Duke Titivilus.”

“Will you not stay, and meet him?” Shomei asked, disappointed.

“I think not,” Mostin replied.

**

“I will need to borrow your *Portable Hole*,” Nwm said to Mostin. “And your mirror, if you please.”

Mostin scowled. “The hole. You will be putting armour, and weapons, and provisions in it?”

“Yes,” the Druid replied. “I have made arrangements with a number of merchants in Fumaril. I *Wind Walked* there yesterday. With your mirror, I can make the quick transports that I need. I chose the Thalassine, so as not to attract any attention. And the quality of goods is high.”

“Oh very well,” Mostin said. “But make it quick.”

“I will be done in an hour or so,” Nwm said. “Oh, and I’ll be transporting pigs as well. And chickens.

And a cow. Or three.”

Mostin gaped.

“Fresh milk is important in a healthy diet, Mostin.”

Mostin gaped again.

“I’ll clean it out afterwards,” the Druid assured him.

“Damn right you will.”

Nwm's transports turned out to occupy most of rest of the day, and half of the next. Around twenty thousand Wyrish crowns – much of it in the form of hard currency, but a considerable portion of it in church icons – found its way from Hullu's encampment into the pockets and chests of several

Thalassine merchants of dubious repute. The Druid assumed the guise of a Wyrish agent employed by a mercenary cadre working out of Jashat – an utterly plausible ruse, given the ubiquitousness of such organizations in the Thalassine itself.

After consulting with Hullu, Nwm purchased forty heavy crossbows in addition to the longbows which the Tunthi tribesman had initially requested. As Hullu pointed out, any idiot could shoot one of those, and even the untrained members of his group could dish it out to mounted soldiers if they ambushed them with crossbows.

Hullu's *bagaudas* were suddenly better armed than most Temple auxiliaries.

**

Eadric sat within the tower room of Hartha Keep with Mostin, Nehael, Ortwin and Nwm. *Diplomacy* was the topic of conversation.

"I should speak to the King as a concerned Fey," Ortwin suggested. "Fear of Temple persecution, fear of woodlands being ruthlessly burned – those near Deorham being a good example. That sort of thing."

Eadric looked sceptical. "It's rather duplicitous, don't you think?"

"Why?" Ortwin asked. "I *am* concerned, and I *am* a Fey. It makes perfect sense to me. Don't the Feys make occasional trips to Morne?"

"I've never heard of it happening," Nwm said. "Fairs near small market towns at Midsummer, yes –

and even then, usually in disguise. Morne, no."

"Well, perhaps it's about time they did," Ortwin grumbled.

"Feys are connected with the Old Religion," Nwm said. "They are part of Wyre's 'Pagan Past.' I'm not sure that they'd be very well received at the Royal Palace, especially given the current feelings toward Uediians. You might just as well ask a Demon to make a representation – no offense intended, Nehael."

"None taken," the Succubus replied.

"In any case, getting an audience will be difficult," Eadric pointed out. "Usually, as a landed Aristocrat, the king would be obliged to grant me a hearing. Given our heretical status, however, I'm not sure that would apply. Besides which, he is under no obligation to grant me an audience *soon*. Some members of the nobility – notably those who have fallen out of favour, or those with minor titles and estates – wait months for a five-minute hearing. I'm afraid that I fall into both categories."

"You could always marry Soraine," Ortwin said. "As Duke of Trempa, you'd have some clout."

"Ortwin, Marriage is a sacrament, blessed by..."

“Or perhaps you’re just afraid to carry out your matrimonial duties,” the Bard continued unashamedly.

“After all, she is, what, seventy now? But you’ll have to start thinking about this kind of thing soon, Ed. Marriage is a powerful political tool. If you want to stay in the arena, you’ll end up wedded. Its inevitable.”

“Shut up, Ortwin,” Eadric said. “What would you do, Mostin?”

“If I were a political animal – which, of course, I am not, because that would violate the Great Injunction,” he coughed, and stroked Mogus. “If I were, however, I would marry the Duchess, storm and secure the palace, assassinate the king, usurp the crown, and retroengineer all of my bloodlines to validate my claim to the throne. I would then begin to ruthlessly suppress any resistance to my rule, and have all of my chief rivals murdered. That’s the way it’s usually done, isn’t it? Except, in your case, you could claim divine right as well. I would declare myself Eadric I, Holy Emperor of Wyre and the Voice of Oronthon on Earth. I would unite Church and State into a single, seamless body. I would also issue commands to the effect that all avians must be shot on sight. A golden, birdless era of peace and prosperity would dawn across Wyre.”

Eadric sighed.

“However,” Mostin continued, “I realize that you may not have the stomach for such an enterprise. I would therefore speak to whoever holds the reins of power. The King is largely an irrelevance.”

“That’s true to a point,” Eadric conceded, “but his approval is still required for any course of action that is proposed.”

“Who are the movers and shakers, behind the scenes?” Nwm asked.

Eadric thought for a while. “Besides the Temple influence at court, which is considerable, there is Tagur, both the Prince of Einir and Tiuhan’s cousin; Sihu, the Duchess of Tomur; his Chamberlain,

Lord Foide of Lang Herath; Jholion, the Marquis of Methelhar – Brey’s Uncle, incidentally; Shiel, the



Duke of Jiuhu – who is much more conservative than that town’s Bishop; Attar, the Warden of the

Northern March; Skilla, the...”

“I get the picture,” Ortwin interrupted. “Who can we apply leverage to?”

Eadric shrugged. “It’s a shame that both Soraine and the Marquis of Iald are now *personae non gratae*.

Both were once held in high esteem in the court.”

“Is Soraine related to the king?” Nwm asked.

“They *all* are,” Ortwin groaned. “It’s just one, big, in-bred family party with generations of feuding thrown in for good measure. They’re a bunch of back-stabbing, worthless scum

who leech off of

everyone else. Except Ed, here, obviously.” The Bard grinned charmingly.

“If I were to pick one to ‘apply leverage’ to, as you put it, it would be the Prince of Einir,” Eadric said.

“Then we should go to Gibilrazen and speak with *him*.”

“He has a summer palace outside of Morne, as well,” Eadric said.

“I’m sure he does,” Ortwin said sarcastically.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 08-13-2002

Which is, to say, Eadric’s modifier to the skill.

Sorry for the extended absence - making time to both play and write and mindlessly browse this site is difficult. Also had a long conversation with Dan about Mostin.

Oh, and RL stuff too. Almost forgot that

I’ll post again in the next couple of days, and also post Mulissu to the Rogues’ Gallery, as requested.

I’ve bumped her up a level since the ELH came out, but its in-game plausible.

Ahh, retrofitting. Don’t you just love it? (Sarcasm)

**

Mostin felt a sensation akin to a *twitching* in his mind. He swallowed.

He stood up quickly and unsteadily. “I have to go,” he said to the others, and rushed out of the door.

After he had left, Eadric gave a quizzical look and was met by shrugs and blank stares.

Descending from the tower, the Alienist pressed through the campsite below, heedless of the drunken Ardanese mercenaries who swayed around, pushing mugs of mead into his face, and hustled the

quarter-mile to where he had erected his manse.

He walked through the entrance, staggered inside, and closed the door, leaning heavily on it and

breathing quickly. He entered into his *Magnificent Mansion*, and sealed the portal behind him.

Mostin lurched into his study, pulled a cushion from a couch, and curled up on the floor. He vomited.

Fire burned in his mind. Mogus gave an empathic croon.

It lasted for three hours.

*

Somewhat later, having regained his composure with some dry toast and a stiff drink,

Mostin sat cross-legged on the floor of his study.

His mind swam with potency.

He reached into the *Belt of Many Pockets* which he had looted from Feezuu - the first time he had killed her, he noted ironically - and produced a number of scrolls. Shomei had traded them for the spellbook that he had looted from Feezuu the *second* time that he had killed her,* along with a number of other minor items.

Mostin opened the first. It had been scribed quickly but elegantly in Shomei's own hand. *Gate*, it read.

Mostin took a pen, and his own books from his *Portable Hole*. They smelled faintly like a farmyard.

Mogus gave a worried squeak. Things could only get more dangerous from here.

**

Prince Tagur, who administered Einir - nearly ten thousand square miles of land centered around the city of Gibilrazen – was the son of Theiwho, the paternal uncle of Tiuhan, King of Wyre.

Tagur was a man of immense power. An aristocrat with a pedigree the equal of the King himself, a

noted swordsman, an able administrator and one with an uncanny ability to penetrate others' motives and drives. The Prince considered himself something of a philosopher, albeit one with a pronounced stoical bent. He was generally inclined to wear simple, unpretentious clothes, indicative of his no-nonsense, puritanical approach to life. He despised frippery in all of its forms, and loathed the

spendthrift habits of much of Wyre's aristocracy. Tagur was a profoundly practical man.

In his own fief, Tagur had implemented a curious regime. Whilst mercantile enterprise was encouraged, overt displays of wealth were not. The Prince had a penchant for simplicity, and tried to foster the same sentiments amongst his subjects. He regarded Einir as his own, private kingdom and, although a

steadfast supporter of the official regime in Morne, was irritated by any dictates which issued from the capital which conflicted with his own personal view of *what was right*. Fortunately, from Tagur's perspective, this seldom occurred: his own hand was often found behind policy which issued from the Royal Palace. Unfortunately, any vision which the Prince possessed had to be ratified by the Royal Council, and by the King himself. By the time it had been amended, and endorsed to the mutual

satisfaction of all of Wyre's great magnates, it was often nothing more than a statement of intent.

Tagur was not a spiritual man, and found religion in all of its forms a rather pointless exercise.

Nonetheless, he attended the chapel, and was conscientious in his efforts to at least give the right impression where religious matters were concerned. His relationships with the

Bishop of Gibilrazen, the Curia and the Temple were cool but not antagonistic.

The Prince had observed the events in Trempa in the manner of a disinterested scholar. When Rede had petitioned for royal aid, Tagur had felt ambivalent – perceiving that it was an internal affair which the Church should deal with on its own. Acutely aware of the way things worked at the Royal Court, Tagur had allowed the other great aristocrats to infer that he supported royal intervention. Suspicious of his motives, the Lord Chamberlain and the Duke of Jiuhu had moved to block the measure, thus resulting in the impasse which Tagur had, in fact, desired.

He was therefore surprised one sunny morning in his study, several weeks after the Spring Equinox, when his nuncio – a spry and quick-eyed man called Mallaus – informed him that the Baronet of

Deorham, chief instigator of the current Temple crisis, sought an audience with him. Tagur placed his pen – a plain and unremarkable quill – upon his plain and unremarkable desk, next to a large pile of papers through which he was diligently working.

Prince Tagur screwed up his face. “What for?”

“He would not say, Your Highness.” Mallaus drawled. His manner of speech – which irritated many of Tagur’s cohorts – was something that the Prince himself was so intimately familiar with, that he no longer noticed it.

“You mean he’s here?” The Prince was incredulous. “Tell him to make an appointment, like anybody else. In fact, no. Just tell him to go away.”

“He respectfully requests that he speak with you concerning the current state of affairs at the Temple.

He has two others with him: a pagan priest and – er – a Fey. He is most insistent and – er – persuasive.”

“A Fey?” Tagur vociferated. “What is this, some kind of practical joke? And why did you even speak to this man, Mallaus? You are not the door-ward.”

“He was admitted by the door-wards into one of the antechambers, and I encountered him – or them, I should say – on my rounds.”

“Who was on duty at the time, Mallaus? Suspend their benefits immediately. This is intolerable.”

“Please, not on my account,” Eadric said stepping into the room.

“Get out, or I’ll have you hanged,” Tagur yelled. “How dare you. Guards!”

“Please, Your Highness, I need only a few minutes of your time. Will you hear me out?” His manner was calm, confident and, apparently, completely self-assured.

For some reason, Tagur desperately wanted to say yes.

“Make an appointment,” the Prince muttered, waving his hand at Eadric.

“This afternoon?” Eadric asked openly.

“No!” Tagur replied. He grunted. “Speak to the secretary, down the corridor, on the right.”

Eadric bowed and left.

Prince Tagur returned to his paperwork, but found that he could not concentrate. He had been fazed by the exchange. An hour later, his scribe brought his book of appointments for the day into the Prince's study. He looked through it, until his eyes fell on a single line.

Eadric of Deorham.....3 pm

"What is this?" The Prince asked, exasperated.

"I switched him with the Thane of Storbine, who you were due to speak with this afternoon. The Baronet said it was very important, so I said we could squeeze him in. You don't mind do you,

Highness?"

**

"Alright, Deorham. You've got five minutes. What do you want?"

The Paladin smiled. "Thank you for speaking with me, Your Highness. I want you to help me convince the King to allow my troops passage across royal land," Eadric said with disarming candour. "I would also like you to lend your weight to discourage the Royal Council from intervening in the current

Temple crisis: it may be necessary for me to lead over a thousand troops into Morne to secure the

Temple compound."

Tagur raised his eyebrows. "Are you quite insane? 'It may be necessary?' What do you expect us to do

– open the gates and just allow you to walk in?"

"Yes," Eadric replied.

"Deorham," Tagur explained drily, "I appreciate your honesty. I'm sure that you feel that you have been selected for a special task. But I will say this once: at present, you are under an interdict which issues from the King, as well as the Church. It was he who signed your warrant. Were they here, Temple

troops would be arresting you, and I would not prevent that arrest – they do, after all, have Royal approval."

"Then technically, you should exercise your responsibility, and have me held," Eadric said unexpectedly.

"This is an ecclesiastical matter," Tagur shook his head. "The King merely sanctioned the Curia to act.

And I'll be damned if I'm getting involved unless I have to. As far as I know, you've broken no civil law."

"And if I had?" Eadric asked. An idea was beginning to form in his mind.

Tagur immediately read his intention. "You cannot use a charge of treason as an excuse to

speak with the King, Deorham.” *Who was this lunatic*, he asked himself.

“Would you agree that the current legal framework in Wyre is a complete farce?” Eadric asked Tagur.

The Prince frowned. The Paladin’s directness was uncanny. “I agree that it is not perfect. No legal system is. However, it serves its purpose, to protect most of the people most of the time.”

“In Trempa, the Temple has been disestablished. It has no legal jurisdiction whatever,” Eadric said. “All law is decided by civil courts. There is no Temple tax.”

“I am well aware of Soraine’s actions – which are, in fact, legally questionable in and of themselves with regard to *civil* law in Wyre. She is not empowered to disestablish the Church.”

“But she has, nonetheless,” Eadric said. “I would see the same arrangement made throughout Wyre.”

Tagur was baffled. This was hardly the tack that he had expected Deorham to take: he was a fanatic, some Messianic type or other. Why did he wish to diminish his own power? And he had assumed that

Trempa’s curtailing of the Temple’s power had been made on political, rather than ideological grounds.

He grunted.

“Do you trust me, Prince Tagur?” Eadric asked openly.

The Prince laughed despite himself – an uncommon occurrence, as those who knew him well could

have testified. “I distrust everyone with equal vigour, Deorham.”

“I do not lie, Your Highness. I work for the renewal of the Church, the abandoning of outdated dogma, the restoration of the Prelacy and the spreading of my faith. However, I also support the removal of the Temple’s legislative powers and the institution of a voluntary system of contributions.”

“In which, I can and will do nothing to help you, Deorham,” Tagur replied.

“You already have, by listening to me,” Eadric smiled. “And I think you believe me.”

“Enough!” Tagur snapped. “You should remember your station. This audience is now over.” He gestured for Eadric to leave.

“Your Highness,” Eadric bowed.

Tagur waved him back. “Before you go, Deorham, two questions. The murder of Lord Rede of

Dramore. No charges have yet been brought against you, but they may be. Were you instrumental in his death?” The Prince fixed Eadric with a penetrating gaze.

“No, Your Highness,” The Paladin said without wavering.

“Do you know who was?” Tagur asked.

“The Bishop of Hethio,” Eadric replied simply.

“How is this known to you?”

“Tahl the Incorruptible is in communion with Lord Oronthon,” Eadric answered in a matter-of-fact way.

The Prince sighed. Revelation held little weight in his scheme of understanding. “Also,” he went on,

“the Archiepiscopacy. Do you have designs on it?”

“I will do as decreed by Oronthon,” Eadric replied. “I have ruled it neither out nor in. I am a servant of His will, and nothing more. And not all things are revealed to me.”

He bowed again, and departed.

*The items rescued from Feezuu’s crypt included her replica spellbook (which Mostin took, and traded.

He’d already learned the ones he’d wanted from her original set), several potions (which Eadric took), a *Robe of the Void* (Allows wearer to see in any darkness, sustains without air. Taken by Iua), and scrolls taken by Mulissu of spells that she and Mostin already possessed, but still had trade value, as well as several minor items that had once belonged to Chorze. As usual, Nwm didn’t want anything,

and Ortwin was, at that point, dead. He complained afterwards, naturally, until Nwm pointed out that he was ‘no longer dead, and should shut up.’

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 08-15-2002

Time for another update.

Ahh, my poor players.

**

“So?” Ortwin asked Eadric. He and Nwm had been waiting for Eadric to finish his hearing with the Prince.

“He may be an ally,” the Paladin said. “Or at least a voice in the King’s ear which urges moderation in the Temple’s action. He didn’t seem too keen about the idea of my leading troops into Morne.”

“That isn’t entirely surprising,” the Bard said wily. “Will you speak with him again?”

“I will try,” Eadric said. “Perhaps in a week or so. He should have a chance to breathe, or I’ll rapidly become an annoyance.”

“And if you lead troops across the Nund without royal sanction?”

The Paladin considered. “Initially, nothing,” Eadric replied. “The western part of the valley is owned by the Duke of Kaurban, and it’s a pretty marginal tract. He is unlikely to object with force, although he may petition the King – and that would cause problems. But as soon as an army sets foot on the royal estates – and they are massive – then I commit

High Treason.”

“We can bypass them if we go through Thahan,” Nwm suggested.

“It only delays the problem,” Ortwin countered. “All of the land adjacent to Morne is owned by the crown. Right, Ed?”

“Except that owned by the Temple itself,” Eadric nodded.

“I assume magical transportation is not a possibility?” Ortwin suggested.

“I think Mostin is unlikely to help us in this endeavour,” Nwm said. “However, if I expended my entire spell capacity, I could transform a sizeable number into birds. We could fly in.”

Ortwin raised an eyebrow. “How many?”

The Druid made a quick calculation. “Around two hundred or so.”

But Eadric shook his head. “Even if we secured the Temple compound, we could not hold it. We need support – both from the crown and the people. Mounting a clandestine operation to seize the Temple will irritate a lot of people. Furthermore, I have yet to receive celestial approval – I will not act until that happens.”

“Then perhaps its time that I stirred things up again,” Ortwin grinned. “I had half of Morne in my pocket before your trial. It would be a simple matter to rouse the rabble again.”

“Hmm,” Eadric said. “As I remember you were arrested as a dissident.”

“My tack would be more indirect this time,” Ortwin explained sardonically. “After all, you aren’t in imminent danger of being turned into a human candle this time.”

“No,” Eadric said. “But you might be.”

“I will go incognito, and appear in a variety of guises. My new hat will be invaluable.”

“Do try not to cause any riots,” Eadric beseeched him. “And I’m sure that Nwm would be upset if you fuelled the Uediians with crazy ideas again.”

“Bah! Nwm’s perspective has changed,” the Druid said. “He thinks that the Uediians could do with a good kick up the backside. Fire them up, Ortwin.”

The Bard smiled broadly.

“As for me,” Eadric said, “I think its time that Brey and I had a little talk: he’s had nearly a month to stew in the field, and his troops are probably almost as depressed as mine. I will lead an embassy to speak with him.”

“Across the river?” Nwm asked. “I thought you were waiting for the divine say-so.”

Eadric sighed. “Rintrah’s instructions were ‘initiate no act of war’ not ‘make no diplomatic efforts.’

Otherwise I wouldn’t be here, would I?”

“Fair point,” the Druid conceded. “I might tag along.”

**

The trio *wind-walked* back to the mustering grounds on Blackwater Mead, only to find that Mostin had disappeared, along with his portable manse. A patch of brown grass was all that had indicated the

Alienist's presence.

"He has moved around six miles to the east, my lord" Tatterbrand explained to Eadric. "He said that things were becoming too noisy, and that the camp was upsetting his equilibrium, or *somesuch*. He

found a nice meadow by a stream in the woods, and has - er - assembled - his mansion there."

"Did he rent it from the owner, or is he just squatting?" Eadric asked.

"Actually, it technically belongs to you, sir" Tatterbrand said. "It is in your game forest, southwest of Deorham."

"Hmph."

"I know the meadow," Nwm said, concentrating on his torc. "I hope the Sprites go easy on him."

"I don't," Ortwin said.

"He also left these," Tatterbrand said, producing three envelopes, addressed to each of them in Mostin's flamboyant script. Ortwin opened his, and read it.

To Ortwin the Satyr, formally of Jiuhu, from Mostin the Metagnostic, Greetings.

You are cordially invited to attend a grand triple celebration, to be held in honour of my forty-second birthday (which is imminent), my realization of the higher valences (which has just transpired), and my transcendence of the limited form which blights so many others, such as yourself (which occurred some time ago, but has yet to be fully rejoiced in).

As I am one seldom wont to hold parties, you should, of course, realize that you are greatly honoured by receiving such an invitation. Many great dignitaries in the field of Wizardry will doubtless attend, so you must ensure your correct behaviour at all times. They must not be affronted!

I will expect you at 7 o'clock sharp, two nights after the New Moon. Feel free to bring a guest.

Mostin

"Cheeky bastard," Ortwin said. "When is the New Moon?"

"Last night," Nwm replied. "Did he say anything to you about this?"

"No," the Bard replied. "But I have a feeling that he may be facing down the Mages of Wyre. Defying them, maybe. Showing them that he is unafraid, or has done nothing to merit their concern or

intervention over the Injunction. It's a bold move. I rather approve."

Nwm grunted. “I hope it passes without a hitch. If they show up, there will be enough firepower concentrated in his house to blow half the country away.”

“The question is, why did he invite us?” Ortwin asked.

“Unlikely as it might seem,” Eadric replied, “I think that this is Mostin’s method of asking for some emotional support.”

**

The Sprites had proven to be no trouble. Mostin had spied several Grigs and Pixies with his magical sight, and had stepped forward and announced in a loud voice:

“I am Mostin, the Metagnostic. I am glad to share this wood with you, and I am gratified that you feel

the same way. If you hear loud noises issuing from my abode, do not be alarmed! The screaming, the rattling of chains, the uncanny moans: these are not Feys that I am binding to my powerful will. You need have no fear on that count! The Demons and Elementals that I bind here are subject to my

command, and are quite safe as long as I do not lapse in my diligence. Regrettably, I am a poor dancer, and I fear that were I invited to join you, the strain of concentrating on my footwork would inevitably cause some of my captives to escape, a state of affairs that we should all deplore.”

The Sprites took his point, and decided to leave him alone.

Mostin fretted about his invitations, and wondered who would attend. He had issued *sendings* to Tozinak, Troap, Hlioth, Waide, Idro, and Griel. He had conjured a Succubus and sent it with tidings to Rimilin – whom he despised but knew he should invite – and a Horned Devil was dispatched with an

invitation to Shomei: both were of the Pseudonatural variety, as Mostin was treading carefully. He even sent a *Dream* to Jovol, although he doubted that the great Ogre would make an appearance. Half a dozen others were also enjoined to attend.

He gave some thought to providing fare for his guests. Although a *Magnificent Mansion* would have been a simple solution, it was rather too easy and might imply that he had made no effort.

The Alienist *summoned* three djinns to make the preparations for the gathering. Whilst impressed with the copious quantities of wine produced by the genies, the food was rather uninspiring and had to be modified by several cantrips before it passed Mostin’s strict approval. The judicious application of the *fabricate* spell – new to Mostin’s repertoire – produce an immense oak table in the meadow from a nearby tree to support the viands, as well as wooden chairs, bowls, goblets, ewers and plates. A large canopy was raised above the area and lit with several torches that issued a *continual flame*. The Alienist grumbled as he sprinkled expensive ruby dust upon the flambeaux in order to invoke the magic.

Mostin considered entertainment, entered his cellar, and used a *Planar Binding* to call a Lillend. Her beautiful blue and green feathered wings almost caused the Alienist to throw up, as he spoke to her in an unsteady voice. The outsider was subdued, expecting an

onerous task to be demanded of her.

“I am having a party,” Mostin said. “I should like to engage your services for twelve hours or so. You

need only sing, recite poetry, play your lyre, relax and impress my guests with your...” he swallowed,

“...beauty. If you agree to this modest proposal, I will give you some emeralds which complement your...feathers.” He shuddered.

The Lillend, taken aback by the ease of the proposed task, agreed forthwith. Mostin lamented the

sacrifices that one had to make on the treacherous path of social climbing.

**

Less than an hour before things were due to begin, Eadric arrived on Contundor.

“I don’t remember leasing this meadow to you, Mostin,” he said, dismounting.

The Alienist smiled uneasily, unsure whether the Paladin was joking.

“Who exactly is attending this gathering,” Eadric asked. “That is, to say, am I likely to be in violation of my oaths if I make an appearance?”

Mostin coughed. “Well, perhaps, if you strictly interpret your personal code.”

Eadric raised an eyebrow.

“Shomei the Infernalist will be here,” Mostin replied, “although she is not evil, per se,” he quickly added. “Umm, yes”.

“And?” The Paladin asked.

Mostin sighed. “I have also invited Rimilin. He may or may not come, but I could hardly snub him. He is a thoroughly unpleasant character. For what it’s worth, I don’t like him either.”

“What does he do?” Eadric inquired archly.

“He is a demonist,” the Alienist muttered, “an Acolyte of the Skin.”

“Mostin...”

“Eadric, you need to understand that we – wizards, that is – do not use the same criteria as you to decide friendship and acquaintance. We are no less judgmental, but we operate using a different

paradigm. Those of us who profess a certain philosophical stance – morally and ethically speaking, that is – must coexist in relative peace with one another. We are forgiving of each others’ idiosyncrasies.”

“And Feezuu?”

“Feezuu went too far,” Mostin said. “She was a disruptive influence, who threatened the ‘Body Magical’ – if you understand my meaning. She slew several other mages in her bid for power and

revenge. That is unacceptable behaviour. Besides, she was a Cambion from another Plane – that puts an entirely different slant on things.”

“I’m sorry Mostin. I’m afraid it would compromise me too much. I cannot freely associate with evil creatures.”

Mostin sighed. “And Nwm and Ortwin?”

“Are you kidding? Ortwin wouldn’t miss a party. And Nwm is both more curious and tolerant than I.

You should get Ortwin to perform.”

“He needs no encouragement from me. Besides, I have temporarily contracted with a Lillend for the purpose.” Mostin replied.

“A *Lillend*? I have never met one. Perhaps before I go...”

“And Rimilin may not come at all,” Mostin said brightly. “You can always depart immediately if he does.”

So Eadric remained, ready to leave as soon as Rimilin – or anyone else upon whom he detected Taint -

arrived. Several wizards of modest ability were flying in from various directions, and a cacophonous roar accompanied by a blinding flash of lightning announced the dramatic appearance of Mulissu. She floated effortlessly fifteen feet above the ground, and her skin crackled and crawled with electricity for a moment before dissipating.

“Why was I not invited?” She snapped.

Oops, thought Mostin. “I had assumed...” he began.

” *Presumed*, I think you mean.”

“Yes,” Mostin said apologetically. “If I might inquire, what method did you use to arrive?”

“I am surprised that my daughter has not shown you the scrolls that she ‘borrowed’ from me.*”

“Oh?” Mostin said. “Would you like a drink?” He tactlessly changed the subject.

**

All in all, things went rather well for Mostin. Nwm, Ortwin, Nehael and Iua all attended. Despite their feud, Idro and Troap – who had flown in on his enormous Wyvern – managed to remain civil with one

another. Hlioth arrived in the form of an elfin maiden, and promptly disappeared into the woods nearby to cavort with the Feys – pursued by a certain lusty Satyr. The Lillend was well-received, and the gathering was praised for its ‘rustic charm.’

No mention was made of the Injunction, and no dire threats were issued – although a phrase from the humourless Waide made the Alienist pause for thought:

“Good party, Mostin. Glad to see nothing controversial here.”

Tozinak arrived late, and only his cloak gave away his identity to those who knew him. He

entertained people with a number of lewd but amusing illusions until Mostin asked him to stop.

Predictably, Jovol was absent. Neither Griel, nor the Hag Jalael made an appearance, and neither did Rimilin - for which Mostin was grateful. At least Eadric could relax.

But, just as the Paladin was leaving, Shomei appeared with her guest – rather later than Mostin had anticipated. Both arrived in a blaze of fire.

Mostin was right - the trace of evil around the witch was so faint as to be almost undetectable. Her guest, however, was another matter entirely. He was a handsome man who possessed a poise, elegance and natural ease which thinly veiled what seemed to be a core of raw power and evil. The reek of taint was so profound, so deep, so *primal*, that Eadric was almost overwhelmed by it. One of the Fallen, without any doubt. He drew Lukarn and light surrounded him.

Zhuel immediately manifested from the Ethereal Plane and interposed himself between Eadric and the newcomer.

Mostin looked horrified at the prospect of some dreadful scene occurring.

The man held up his hand, palm outwards. “Peace, Archon,” he said to the Celestial. “I am here by calling, have committed no evil act, and violate no laws. This is legitimate business, and there is no coercion involved. I am within my rights as determined by the Accord.”

Zhuel hissed.

The man bowed low, more a gesture of mockery than respect. “Greetings, Eadric of Deorham, Blessed of Oronthon – your circumstances are well- known to me. Greetings, Nehael – it has been a long, long time. And greetings, Mostin the Metagnostic – this is a pleasant soirée. Perhaps we could make time to speak later?”

Mostin glowered at Shomei, and then turned to Eadric. “I think you’d better go,” he said. “You’re unlikely to ever feel much more compromised than this.”

*A reference to the spells which Iua had attempted to bribe Mostin with. Mulissu’s *Passage of Lightning* is an 8th level Transmutation [Teleportation] which allows instantaneous interplanar travel to a specific location. A kind of refined *Plane Shift*.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 09-12-2002

So: I’ve decided to start a new thread, as the old one is getting a bit cumbersome.

It goes without saying that a *huge* amount has passed since I last posted, so there is a lot to catch up with. Please note that posts will probably be more infrequent than previously, so as to avoid burnout in actually recounting stuff. Its been nice to actually have time to plan, and play.

As I mentioned previously, there is a kind of natural lacuna in the story after those events at Khu involving Feezuu, Ainhorr and the Celestial descent. If you can suspend your disbelief, and attribute events that happened after that to the third book - this one - then I think that it flows together more naturally.

Of course, I didn’t know what to call it then, because the events which characterize it

hadn't occurred.

They have now - at least to a point.

Lots of bad things happen, and loyalties are shaken and upset. The first post, relatively light in content, is not at all typical of the sessions that we have since played.

And the point is made that whatever story arcs I devise, my players (and occasionally die rolls) tend to force things into better ones.

**

Mostin Gets Philosophical, and Ortwin Goes a-Courtin'

It was the morning after Mostin's party, and the Alienist joined Eadric and Nwm in the hall at Kyrtil's Burgh. He pointedly avoided the invisible Devas, who looked even more stern and judgmental than usual.

"Before you start," the Alienist held his palms up towards Eadric, "I had no idea that Shomei would be bringing an infernal guest. I would have discouraged her from attending if I had."

"Who was it?" Eadric asked. "And what 'legitimate business' was he referring to?"

"Duke Titivilus, and temptation," Mostin replied. "Specifically, of me."

"And you accepted?" Eadric inquired. "If so, I think our friendship is at an end, Mostin."

"I did not," the Alienist snapped. "Although, I must admit, I *was* tempted. But I know from experience that such arrangements tend to come at a higher price than is immediately apparent."

"What did he offer?" Nwm inquired. "Something suitably seductive, I hope?"

"Yes," said Mostin, cryptically.

"And Shomei?" Eadric asked. "What was her part in this? I assume that your association with her is at an end?"

"Certainly not," Mostin replied indignantly. "Shomei is a good friend, and by hearing Titivilus out, I may have helped her extricate herself from a tight spot."

Eadric looked confused.

"She has almost discharged her compact with him, Eadric. He has furnished her with certain...

perquisites...and she has been instrumental in facilitating his sojourns on the Prime. By agreeing to act

as mediator between Titivilus and myself – a facilitator in the Temptation process, if you will – Shomei is close to ending their misalliance."

The Paladin was aghast. "And you don't resent her for that? I am constantly confused by your motives, Mostin."

"Initially, I was offended," Mostin confessed, "but Shomei explained her circumstances

after Titivilus departed. She feels that it is hazardous to be involved with two Devils at once.”

“Two?”

“Her loyalties are currently split between Belial and Dispater. She has overreached herself. She is attempting to sever her connection with Dis and Titivilus as diplomatically as possible.”

Eadric groaned. “This woman sounds like a barrel of trouble, Mostin. She will drag you on the path to perdition if you are not cautious.”

“No,” the Alienist said. “She will not. You do not understand her. I’m sorry to pull rank on you Eadric, but there are some things that you will simply *never* comprehend, because your faith dictates that reality is a certain way, and no other. Her reality is not yours. Her guidelines are not yours.

Nonetheless, she is highly principled. A left-hand path adept, if you will. Do not make the mistake of judging her by your morality.”

“I cannot understand this,” Eadric said.

“I know,” Mostin smiled sympathetically. “For what it’s worth, I think that compacting with Devils is unwise, but for different reasons than you. Shomei regards them as tools – I would argue that there are more efficient and less hazardous ones.”

“Tools for what? Power? Dominion?”

“Only in the hands of the weak,” Mostin replied. “That’s not to say that I haven’t had my fair share of power fantasies, because I have. But they are aberrant. Incomplete. It is an extension of the same ethos

which informs the Great Injunction: the quest for power is ultimately futile, and is a misapplication of personal resources and energy.”

“Knowledge, then?” The Paladin asked.

“Partly. But beyond gnosis, there are states so profound that there are no words to describe them. Why do gods, devils, demons - or whatever - meddle in human affairs?”

“I’m sure you’re going to tell me,” Eadric said drily.

“They are afraid of us. They seek to limit and control us, Eadric. We threaten them, because we possess something which they do not: infinite potential.”

“To become like them?”

Mostin shook his head. “To utterly transcend them.”

“And magic is your vehicle in this process?”

“Magick. Yes.”

“And what is this ‘final state’ which you aspire towards, Mostin? What is ‘Metagnosis?’” Eadric was intrigued. He had never heard Mostin speak as openly and as coherently about his own philosophy

before.

“You misunderstand,” Mostin replied. “There is no ‘final state.’ There is only *becoming*. Infinite becoming.”

“That is a somehow disquieting prospect,” Eadric said.

“Yes,” Mostin concurred. “It should be.”

“I’m just glad that I don’t agree with a word that you’ve just said,” Eadric smiled.

Mostin shrugged.

“But what did the Devil *offer*?” Nwm asked. “I am curious.”

“A Demiplane called ‘Cha’at.’ Not very large – around sixty miles across, or a hundred thousand cubic miles. But very nice: perfect elemental balance, one access point only, benign flora and fauna. It is comprised of an island surrounded by warm, shallow seas. There are olive groves, wild vines and

sandstone hills – at present. All morphics are, in fact, alterable. And its temporal morphic is alterable, also.”

“Immortality?” Nwm was incredulous. “Frankly, I’m surprised you didn’t take it. I’d have been sorely tempted.”

“And his price?” Eadric asked.

“My loyalty. I am even more suspicious of open-ended deals with Devils than I am of those which contain ten pages of impenetrable small-print.”

“You spoke of Shomei’s involvement with him being ‘almost at an end.’ What else is there to come?”

“She must facilitate a final translation for him,” Mostin explained. “He will attempt another Temptation.”

“Of you?” Nwm asked.

“No,” Mostin replied. “The rules of the Accord are very strict. He may only attempt to seduce a single mortal once.”

“‘Accord?’” Eadric asked. “That is the second time I have heard that word in the past day. What Accord?”

Mostin screwed up his face. “Do you not know? Has Zhuel not told you?”

“Zhuel is not empowered to tell him,” Nehael said, entering the chamber unexpectedly, “and despite his holiness has an incomplete understanding of the truth. Temptation is the lawfully deputed province of Devils, Eadric. It is an enterprise blessed by Oronthon himself.”

“That is rather a Heretical viewpoint,” the Paladin said, “although not entirely a surprise to me, given the number of other revelations that I have had to accept. I need ‘official’ verification, of course.”

Nehael raised an eyebrow. She had expected more resistance to the idea. His passivity to

Oronthon's Will seemed complete. She would inform Rintrah.

"It goes beyond a tacit understanding, Eadric. There are formal rules, which Devils never break –

although they constantly attempt to reinterpret them. They play by the book. Demons are less observant of the rules, and while the Bright God tolerates their machinations, he does not sanction them. The difference is vitally important." She smiled.

Eadric grimaced. "I assume that this Duke's final Temptation will be directed towards me?"

"That would be my guess, also," Mostin nodded.

"When should I expect it?" The Paladin asked.

"When it is hardest to decline," Nehael replied.

**

Ortwin reclined against the bole of a tree in the afternoon sun after a particularly passionate bout of cavorting with Hlioth, the Green Witch. She had organized the weather to their mutual satisfaction, replacing dreary grey clouds with a warm, balmy sunshine. Despite his physical satiation, Ortwin was frustrated.

"I'm bored," the Bard said. "With life," he added quickly afterwards, so as to not offend her. "Ennui.

Dissatisfaction. That kind of thing. Little seems to grab my attention these days."

"Of course you're bored," she said unhelpfully. "You're a Fey. Ennui and melancholy are the perpetual bane of Feys."

"I mean I was bored before," he said. "I have no sense of purpose or direction. No inspiration. No goals to pursue. No great plan towards which I work. I feel listless."

"You are a selfish cynic. What do you expect?"

"Hmph," Ortwin sighed. She was being less than sympathetic. "You seem content enough to have no ambition. What's your secret?"

"Simple," Hlioth replied. "I just have no ambition. It's not something that I cultivate, or try to maintain.

It's just the way I am. There is nothing missing from me."

"And there is from me?" Ortwin asked, somewhat offended.

"Your words, not mine," she countered. "Is there no cause to which you can attach yourself? No movement for you to champion? Have you considered religion?"

"Certainly not," the Bard replied.

"Politics? The military?"

"Gods, no. The thought is abhorrent."

"Then I am afraid that your existence is doomed to be shallow and unfulfilled, unless you can come to realize that ambition itself is futile. If you can accept this, then you will begin

to appreciate a simple, uncomplicated life.”

“You sound disturbingly like Nwm,” Ortwin said.

“Nwm is wise,” Hlioth laughed easily.

“He regards you as – eccentric,” Ortwin replied. “Neither a witch nor a druidess.”

She shrugged. “I have no great desire to fit in.”

“How old are you, Hlioth?” Ortwin asked.

“Why? How old are you?” She replied.

“Forty-four,” he replied, “or at least I *was* forty-four before my, uh...”

“Transmigration?” She suggested.

“Yes, quite,” said the Bard.

“Then I am older than you,” Hlioth said vaguely.

“There is a rumour that you are immortal,” Ortwin said. “Is it true?”

“How should I know? I’m not dead yet. You, however should certainly have a long life – providing that you are careful, of course.”

“What do you mean?” The Bard asked suspiciously.

“Put it this way, dear: have you ever heard of a Fey dying of old age?”

“No, I suppose not,” he conceded. “Then what kills them?”

“Melancholy. Ennui. The lack of will to go on.” And Hlioth looked profoundly sad.

“Great,” Ortwin said sarcastically. “Thanks for the optimistic words.”

“Oh, snap out of it Ortwin! Stop being so self-indulgent. You have a perspective that no other Fey I know has – in that you are not *entirely* a Fey at all. Play to your strengths. Be less self-centered.” She sighed. “What excites you most?”

“Women. Sword-play. Witty banter. That’s the problem. I’m eminently shallow.”

“Are you satisfied with your fencing style?” Hlioth asked.

“I had been, until my encounter with Iua,” Ortwin replied. “She is a genius. I am merely exceptional.”

“But you are less...” Hlioth considered...“overspecialized. Do you resent the fact that she is a woman?”

“No,” the Bard replied honestly. “I resent her because she is far better than me at something which I have always felt I am very good at.”

“Do you find her attractive?” Hlioth asked unexpectedly.

Ortwin peered quizzically at her. What was she up to? “I am suspicious of your motivation in asking that question,” he said.

“That is because you don’t understand me, Ortwin of Jiuhu. I do not care for rivalry. I am Hlioth – and I am utterly free.”

“In that case, yes. I find her attractive.”

“Have you made advances towards her?” The Green Witch probed.

“Not exactly,” Ortwin said. “I have had lustful thoughts, and, unfortunately, she perceived them. Look, Hlioth, I don’t know where this line of inquiry is going. Would you please enlighten me?”

“Think about it Ortwin: she is your ideal match. She is a beautiful woman. She is bold, restless, and

confident. She is your equal, if not your superior, in wit and badinage. She is a performer whose abilities compare favourably to your own. She is also perhaps one of the greatest living practitioners of the Thalassine rapier style and, like you, needs a focus. Unlike you, however, she is not cynical and has not forgotten her idealism. Her mother is an Evoker of singular power, her father is a Djinn prince...”

“A *prince*?” Ortwin asked. “Since when?”

“Several hundred years at least, I’d guess,” Hlioth said drily. “Did you never think to inquire about Ulao?”

“She is reluctant to discuss her parentage. I didn’t want to press her. Is he rich?”

“Fabulously, I’d imagine,” Hlioth sighed, “if such things are important to you.”

“Money is never a bad thing,” the Bard remarked.

“Hmm,” Hlioth grunted. “The opposite is true in my experience. Has she evinced any romantic interest?”

“Not in me,” Ortwin said, smiling. “Which is, in my humble view, a sign of madness or aberration in itself.”

“An interest in anyone else?”

“Not to my knowledge,” Ortwin said. “Perhaps she is very discreet.”

“Or perhaps she is waiting for you to show a sign of your interest. Why else would she be still here?”

Why do you think that she crossed swords with you, if it were not to test your suitability as a potential mate?”

“Do you have to make it sound quite so *functional*? I have delicate sensibilities, and am easily upset. In any case, she seemed quite comfortable humiliating me in our duel – I suspect that that was her main motivation.”

“Goddess, you are a cynic, Ortwin!” Hlioth said. “Maybe she needed to assert herself and her independence. It must have been difficult for her to confront you. She may be somewhat in awe of you.

I think that you underestimate your reputation.”

“I *never* underestimate my reputation.” Ortwin grinned. “But the point is well-made. However, my hirsuteness and hooves may be an obstacle to any romantic entanglement now. Besides, she can be a

spoiled brat. I think she has been indulged too much, and is too used to getting her own way.”

Hlioth shrugged. “Think on it. In any case, I am returning to Nizkur later today, but fear not! We still have time for dalliance. I’ve ordered a lightning storm. I thought it might be stimulating.”

Ortwin gazed upwards. The clear blue sky had vanished during their conversation, to be replaced again with an impenetrable grey veil. A huge thunderhead was forming above them.

**

Ortwin never thought about anything for too long.

“I want a rematch,” the Bard said to Iua. She was performing improbable acts of balance, in the meadow next to Mostin’s manse.

Nwm, standing nearby with Eadric, grimaced. He knew what was coming next.

“If he is willing,” the Bard continued, “Nwm will...”

“Yes, yes,” the Druid said. “Patch up the holes. I know. You must be insane, Ortwin.”

“Not entirely. There are new rules. No magic is to be employed. No spells, potions, buffs. No thought-reading devices. No magic armour or protection devices. And no magic weapons. A test of skill, pure and simple. Scimitar against rapier. Conventional armour is permissible to both parties, of course. Do

you accept?”

“I find armour rather cumbersome,” Iua replied. “Had you intended to wear field plate as an added precaution?”

Eadric guffawed.

Ortwin looked somewhat affronted. “I think a leather vest and buckler will suffice. Well? I hope you aren’t entirely dependent upon your Vampiric rapier, Iua. Because we both know, nobody is *really* that fast, are they?”

She bit her lip. “No,” she confessed, “but you will still lose. Allow me an hour to prepare. I need to locate a suitable weapon.”

“As do I,” Ortwin said. “And there aren’t many Elves in these parts.*”

“What’s this about, Ortwin?” Nwm asked the Bard, after she had left to enter the house. “You *know* that she is better than you.”

“Yes,” Ortwin admitted. “But I need to know how much better she really is. How old would you say Iua is, Nwm?”

The Druid shrugged. “Seventeen? Eighteen? Not more than twenty, in any case.”

“What do you think of her?”

“She is remarkable, in every regard,” Nwm replied. “Why?”

“I am considering courting her,” Ortwin said.

” *Courting?* ” Eadric asked, astounded. “That term seems somehow incongruous when it comes from your lips, Ortwin.”

“Chivalry is a farce which any idiot can hide behind,” the Bard said acidly, “but that is not what I am referring to. I simply intend to be thoughtful and reserved.”

Eadric scratched his head. The whole world had suddenly gone mad. “Is this some springtime thing, Ortwin? Do Satyrs suffer from an imbalance in the humours when the blossom is on the trees?”

Nwm laughed heartily at the Bard, who looked mildly offended. “Besides,” the Druid said, recovering,

“I thought you had some arrangement with Hlioth.”

Ortwin scowled.

“Hey,” Nwm said defensively, “If you mess with the weather on my turf, don’t expect it to go unnoticed. I check that kind of thing out.”

“You *spied* on us?”

“No, indeed. I was merely aware of your presence.” The Druid tapped his torc.

“Actually, it was Hlioth who suggested that I could do worse than pursue Iua.”

“Hlioth is a crazy old witch,” Nwm said. “Be careful of her.”

“She is sensitive and caring, although a little strange, I’ll admit,” Ortwin said.

“In that she suggested that the best way to pursue Iua would be to try and lop her head off in a duel?”

Eadric asked ironically.

“No. That was my idea, actually.” Ortwin replied.

“Ahh,” Eadric nodded knowingly.

“Don’t be so sarcastic, Ed. It doesn’t become you. This is about the independence of the spirit –

something which I really don’t expect you to understand.”

“Peace,” Nwm said quickly, holding up his hand. “Time is moving on, and we have to find Ortwin a weapon. Eadric, do you have a scimitar in the armory at the Burgh?”

“Several. Tatterbrand knows where to look.”

“And get me a buckler and a leather jerkin,” Ortwin said.

Nwm nodded, stepped into a tree, and vanished.

**

Tatterbrand rode hard from Kyrtil’s Burgh to bring the scimitar to Ortwin, despite the fact that Nwm had offered to return with it. The squire was traditional that way.

“Anyone care to wager?” Mostin asked. “My money is on Iua.”

Eadric coughed, and Nwm looked at the ground.

“Thanks for the support,” Ortwin sniped.

Iua appeared bearing a small buckler and a rapier of fine quality, forged from good Thalassine steel.

“Where did you get that?” The Bard asked disconsolately.

“Er, it’s mine,” Mostin said apologetically. “I lent it to her. Don’t worry – it isn’t dweomered.”

“Hmph,” Ortwin grunted. “Shall we start at, say, twenty feet apart?”

Iua looked pointedly at Ortwin’s hooves. “If you are trying to maximize your tactical advantage, you have just miscalculated,” she said sarcastically. “Perhaps you would like to reconsider?”

“Twenty feet,” Ortwin said through gritted teeth. Gods, she could be annoying. He drew the scimitar, and briefly inspected it. *Good choice, Tatterbrand*, he thought. It was of superior workmanship and, like other weapons kept in Eadric’s armoury, well-honed and well-oiled.

Iua saluted him in a most condescending manner.

“I will give the sign for the fight to commence,” Mostin announced grandly. “You will not fail to recognize it. If anyone would care to wager, now is your last chance.”

“Oh very well,” Nwm said. “Fifty crowns says that Ortwin lasts at least twenty-five seconds.”

“Done!” Mostin said, delighted.

Ortwin squinted at the Druid, who looked back apologetically. Mostin gestured briefly and an

enormous *boom* echoed across the meadow, causing the ground to tremble and chest cavities to vibrate.

Iua moved like a liquid. In a heartbeat, she dashed forwards two paces, launched herself into the air, curled into a ball, span the remaining distance and landed squarely in front of the Bard.

His mouth opened in disbelief as her rapier instantly found a gap in the leather vest that he wore, and cold steel bit into him. As he reeled, Ortwin expected her momentum to carry her onwards, but

somehow she had arrested it. Her weapon was everywhere. Again.

“Remarkable,” Mostin said in wonder. “And to consider that she is unaugmented. Do you think she might be the best living practitioner?”

“It’s hard to say,” Tatterbrand replied. “The rapier is not my forté, and there are many different styles.

Although for sheer speed, I’ve yet to see her match. But rapier and buckler is actually considered a rather old-fashioned technique these days in Fumaril.”

Mostin looked quizzical.

“You know. Main gauche, rapier and cloak, rapier and scabbard. It’s all the rage.”

“Oh,” Mostin said.

“Look at Ortwin, though,” Tatterbrand pointed. “He’s actually very good.”

The Bard had adopted a considered pose, with a thoughtful expression upon his face. He wondered

whether he could wear Iua down: in terms of physical stamina, and the sheer ability to withstand the blows, he suspected that he outmatched her. He was also beginning to realize that having a hairy hide had certain benefits: her last blow, although penetrating both his guard and his armour, had failed to break his skin.

Abruptly, his scimitar lashed out furiously, causing the girl to move to block it. She misread it, the Bard dove and twisted, and the blade bit into the girl’s arm in a single, well-placed strike. He grinned.

“It’s also worth considering that Ortwin is a far better bullsh*tter than she is,” Tatterbrand remarked.

“She will now adopt a different tactic. Observe.”

Iua assumed the impenetrable screening position which had vexed Ortwin during their first exchange, causing the Bard to grimace in recognition. He held his scimitar tightly as he anticipated her next maneuver.

Tap-oh no you don’t- tap-no- tap-no- tap-no. Hah! Ortwin was amazed to see that he still held onto his weapon. Iua pouted and then looked more determined.

Deciding that a different strategy might be in order, and aware that her screen was near invulnerable to attack, Ortwin suddenly turned, erupted into a burst of speed, and galloped away from Iua, his hooves taking him out to a distance of eighty feet. He threw down his buckler and gripped his scimitar in both hands.

As Ortwin turned, his weapon held in front of him, the pose made Mostin feel distinctly uncomfortable, reminding him of a certain Duke of Hell.**

“Sound tactics, Ortwin,” Nwm called from the sidelines. “Hang onto your sword.”

“Yes, run away Ortwin,” Iua goaded him as she walked calmly towards him. “Trot off into the woods.”

She smiled wickedly, and then gestured provocatively for him to charge her.

Ortwin charged, covering over sixty feet of open ground with remarkable speed, his scimitar flailing wildly above his head. He thundered into Iua but despite his blow, she held her ground.

Tap-not this time, I’ve got two hands on it – tap – slide – twist – flick. Dammit. The scimitar dropped to the ground, and Iua stabbed him twice in the thigh for good measure. Ortwin winced.

“Alright, that’s it,” he snarled. “I’ve had enough of this.”

Iua expected a headbutt, and was surprised to find Ortwin groping at her rapier. She stabbed him in the arm.

“Ow!” He said as his hands closed around the hilt of her sword.

“That’s cheap,” Mostin said to Eadric.

“But effective,” Eadric observed, as Ortwin wrested the slender blade from her grasp and poked at her with it.

“Do you give up?” Ortwin asked, gripping the rapier in both hands.

“Are you nuts?” Iua replied. “I could beat you blindfolded. Besides, look at you.”

Ortwin noticed that he was bleeding from half a dozen different wounds. He suddenly felt very weak.

Iua crouched, drew a slender poignard, and grinned. “You were better off with your scimitar,” she said.

“I’ll tell you what, I’ll let you retrieve it, and I’ll use this. Won’t make a scrap of difference to the final outcome, but you might save some face.”

“Don’t be so damned patronizing,” Ortwin complained. “A little modesty would sit well on you.”

Iua goggled at the irony of the comment. “Coming from anyone but you, Ortwin, I might heed that remark.”

The Bard gave his best charming smile. “I concede the bout. Again. Mostin, pay up. Eadric, thank-you for the loan of the sword. Is there any firewine nearby?”

Iua walked up to the Bard. “What, exactly, is this about Ortwin?”

“I thought I might court you, with your consent.”

“You have an odd way of suggesting it,” she countered.

“I recognize that your fragile ego needs to be nurtured and supported,” the Bard remarked drily.

“I have no objection,” she said in a matter-of-fact way. “But of course, you will need my father’s permission. He is rather traditional in that regard. Besides, what happened to the Green Witch?”

Ortwin groaned.

Later that same evening, when everyone else had retired, Eadric sat by the fire with his hounds in the hall at Kyrtil’s Burgh.

When Rintrah appeared, and told him what had to be done, his stomach sank.

“Do you doubt?” The Planetar asked him.

“Yes,” Eadric replied. “My ability, not Oronthon’s judgement.”

“That is acceptable,” Rintrah replied.

“And I fear the machinations of fiends,” the Paladin said.

The Celestial laughed openly and warmly. “I’m afraid that will *never* change,” he smiled.

**

It was a wet, grey morning in late spring when Eadric ordered that the horns be sounded, and he rode with his captains and paladins across the bridge at Hartha Keep to parley with Brey. He did not bear the message that he had originally intended.

He took thirty men with him, including Nwm, Tramst, the Penitents who had sworn loyalty to him in

the aftermath of the battle at Deorham, Thanos Streek and Togull, and the Uediian Ryth of Har Kumil.

Jorde, formally of the Temple, bore Eadric’s banner – a three headed silver phoenix on an azure

field.*** Tatterbrand rode close behind the Paladin.

The bridge – Aaki’s Bridge, as it was named – was ancient. A vestige of Old Borchia, the state which predated Wyre, it was a weathered, moss-covered affair which had improbably stood the test of both time and the numerous inundations of the river. A long causeway led up to it from both the eastern and western sides, elevating the road above an uninviting bog, before the track narrowed and traversed the dilapidated cantilevers of the span itself.

At exactly the midpoint, alerted by the horns which had rung from Hartha Keep, a contingent of

Templars waited patiently for Eadric to arrive with his knights. The river, still swollen by the thaw and the spring rains, coursed rapidly below, only a few feet beneath the peak of its arches. It carried driftwood with it, and foamed and gurgled around the stone pilons.

Eadric evinced some surprise at the group waiting for him, the more so when they sounded their horns indicating that they were an embassy. He had expected a more belligerent reception, and wondered

whether new orders had issued from Morne regarding the means by which Brey should deal with him.

As they closed, Nwm spoke with him.

“Brey is there. Should I leave? I think he holds little love for me.”

“He probably wonders why he is still alive,” Eadric said ironically. “Please refrain from killing everybody except him – this is an embassy, after all.”

“You don’t understand why I did what I did, do you Ed?” Nwm asked.

“I am beginning to,” the Paladin replied unexpectedly. “I understand that you did what you thought was necessary.”

“But was it?”

“It is easy to make judgements with hindsight,” Eadric replied. “Would you do it again, if events repeated themselves?”

“That question is meaningless,” Nwm answered.

“Precisely,” the Paladin agreed.

“I could win this war alone,” Nwm pointed out. “Break the Temple. Obliterate it. I have only recently come to understand that.”

“And gain what?”

“Nothing that would endure after me,” Nwm said sadly. “How are you going to deal with this idiot, anyway?”

“Not how he - or even you - expects,” Eadric replied.

**

“That’s quite far enough, Heretic,” Brey shouted at a distance of around thirty yards. “You can bring Tahl the Corrupted with you, but the other pagans and blasphemers can stay where they are.”

Several of the Penitents were almost overcome with zeal, and prepared to spur their destriers into a charge. Eadric restrained them, before riding on alone with Tahl.

Nwm carefully considered the sky, and felt reassured that he had already primed it, just in case he needed to blast anyone.

“Greetings, Lord Brey,” Eadric said politely, and without rancour. “I trust you are well?”

“What is the purpose of this parley?” The Templar asked haughtily.

“I’ve come to see if you’re amenable to negotiations,” Eadric replied. “I’m surprised that you’re even talking to me. Has the policy in Morne towards Trempa changed?”

“The Temple staunchly defends Orthodoxy in all of Wyre,” Brey answered.

“Yes, quite,” Eadric sighed.

“Unless you are prepared to atone for your sins, and accompany me to Morne for judgement, I doubt that there is little common ground here. Is that your purpose?”

“No.” Eadric said. “But there are words that I would have you convey to your superiors in the Curia.

First, I hereby assume the titles of Grand Master of the Temple and Inquisitor General, as both posts are currently vacant. Second, I demand that all Temple troops and resources be surrendered to me until the new Prelate is invested and ascends the throne. Third, I will enter Morne in one month. Please make the necessary preparations.”

Brey laughed uproariously. “This is no embassy, it’s a farce.” He turned his horse and began to ride away.

“This is your final opportunity, Brey,” Eadric called after him sadly. “I doubt death will spare you a

third time.”

The Templar ignored him.

“So be it,” Tahl said grimly.

*In the Wyre game, the scimitar replaces the longsword as the quintessential Elven

weapon.

****Dan pointed out the picture of Titivilus in the 1e Monster Manual II.**

*****This device was adopted by Eadric after his return from the wilderness and his meeting with**

Rintrah. Symbolically, the phoenix of course represents rebirth, but it is also the ‘higher octave’ of the Eagle – the traditional symbol of Oronthon. One head looks left towards Law, one right towards Good, and the third straight ahead, representing the synthesis of the two principles through the dialectic of insight.

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Soraine mused.

“I thought that you had decided upon a ‘softly, softly’ approach,” she said to Eadric. “This hardly seems consistent with it.”

“That had been the initial plan,” Eadric agreed, “but Rintrah commanded a more direct tact.”

“In which case,” Soraine replied, “I should relinquish control to you formally – if you think you can handle the nobility of Trempea.”

“Fewer of them have doubts now, and the ones that do are less distrusting and intractable. Although it will prove difficult. I have already required Ryth to bring his skirmishers south to join the main force.”

“It will leave the northern flank vulnerable to assault from Thahan. I am reluctant to...”

“I will ask Nwm to deal with it,” Eadric said simply. “Besides – we cannot have him present and active in the main force. It would be too controversial, and would give an unwelcome slant to what is

essentially an internal Temple affair.”

Soraine was staggered. “You need him with you. Even if you displace the Temple troops across the river – which is by no means certain – if the royal army is deployed against you, he is your best

assurance against defeat. And any attempt that you make to woo Tagur’s sympathies now is likely to be met with hostility: you may have lost a potential ally, there.”

“It can’t be helped,” Eadric shrugged. “I have been instructed to march on Morne as soon as is feasible.

The Bishop of Kaurban is interceding on our behalf with the Duke – Tahl has spoken with him. He has always been sympathetic to our cause.”

But Soraine shook her head. “The Bishop has been neutered by this whole affair. He has little temporal power left. I can’t believe that you told Brey of your intentions – a surprise assault would have been much more effective. Now they have time to prepare.”

Eadric raised an eyebrow.

“Alright, forget I said that,” the Duchess smiled. “But I find this whole enterprise to be very worrying.

Even if you get as far as Morne, you still have to get *into* Morne.”

“I am hoping for popular support,” Eadric admitted ruefully. “If I only had the opportunity to *speak* with people...”

“I fear the common man will view you as simply another potential oppressor.”

“I was thinking of speaking more to the Temple troops, actually,” Eadric explained. “I may be able to turn large numbers of them towards our cause. Brey is disliked. Melion, Rede, Irian and Hembur are all dead. Rumours are abroad of the encounter with Eniin at Deorham, and the Templars who have

rallied to me are well-respected...”

“I suspect that the view amongst many is that you have seduced them. There is also the matter of Rede’s assassination – Nwm is implicated, and thus, you.”

“That is another reason why he may not accompany me in this,” Eadric sighed. “Tahl is investing me as Grand Master of the Temple tomorrow morning.”

“That may be a hollow title,” the Duchess remarked drily. “I don’t imagine it will carry too much weight – he could anoint you as Oronthon incarnate, for all that it’s worth. A name is worth little without the resources to back it.”

Eadric shrugged. “I have been restrained for long enough. It is time to assert my spiritual authority. It will not be easy – I still have doubts about my abilities.”

“That, at least, is reassuring,” Soraine laughed. “I will summon the nobility. It’s time that we met in conference again – and all should be present for the ceremony. When did you plan to lead the assault?”

“In four or five days,” Eadric answered. “I will attempt to speak to Tagur again in the interim.”

Soraine raised an eyebrow. “Good luck,” she said.

*

As a clear dawn broke the next morning, before the assembled aristocracy of Trempa, Eadric took oaths and was blessed by Tahl. He assumed the titular command both the Temple and the Inquisition, and

chose the unassuming title of ‘First Magistrate’ for the unprecedented dual leadership. He also reclaimed the title of ‘Protector of the Nineteen Tenets,’ which had been stripped from him at his trial.

In a second ceremony, which followed shortly afterwards, Soraine conferred the estates of Hernath and Droming upon the Paladin, appointed him the chief of her *comitati* – those knights, thanes and bannermen sworn to her service – and raised him to the rank of Earl. He was ceded absolute command of Trempa’s forces. This was a formality as far as Eadric was concerned, although Soraine’s legitimacy was unquestioned in the eyes of those present – unlike Tahl’s.

But before the day was out, in a development which left Eadric feeling extremely uncomfortable, all such titles were forgotten. The Paladin did not determine the source - although he (wrongly) suspected one of the Penitents to have started it - but a new appellation was given to him: *Ahma**. It spread quickly amongst the zealots, and was picked up by the more secular aristocrats and even the Uediians.

Eadric attempted to have the name forbidden, but it was too late. To him, it verged on blasphemy. He spoke to Tahl, and the Inquisitor shrugged as if it were an inevitability. He related his concerns to Nehael.

“Actually, I began it,” the demoness smiled.

“But why? It is a profanity.”

“Applied to anyone else, perhaps. But you are an emissary. A vehicle. Your ego is of no concern. You are simply the agent of Oronthon’s will: nothing more, nothing less. Soraine said that you needed to exert your spiritual authority. You cannot do that in half measure, *Ahma*.”

“Do *not* call me that,” he snapped.

She slapped him. He winced. “See?” She said. “Don’t worry – you’re still a man.”

**

“This is a development I could have done without,” Eadric said to Nwm regarding his new name.

“Your modesty is becoming, Ed,” Nwm said, “but this is a religious war. You’re bound to get some weird title or other foisted upon you, if you play the role of Oronthon’s chosen representative. Don’t worry about it.”

“But I don’t feel I deserve it. It makes me uncomfortable.”

“Good,” Nwm said unsympathetically. “The moment that you feel happy about it, is the moment that you become crazy.”

“I hope that you will continue to offer a critical perspective regarding all of this, Nwm. It’s good to look from the outside in. Let me know if things are going too far. I can’t believe that Nehael started it.”

“She has an expanded perspective,” Nwm grinned. “Trust her. And you may count on my brutal objectivity.”

“She talks of surrender. Of forgetting my ego. Of agency.” Eadric sighed.

“What do you expect?” Nwm laughed. “She is a mystic. She is also, of course, correct. Relax, Ed. Let go of your concerns. Let it – whatever *it* is - *flow* through you. Forget your own judgements and preconceptions. Zhuel can be your guide in this. It is actually ridiculously simple.”

Eadric sighed. “I’ve recalled Ryth’s longbowmen. I need you to sort out the Temple troops in northern Trempa. Can you deal with it?”

“Yes, but...”

“I cannot have you with me, Nwm. It compromises my position too much.”

“I understand that,” the Druid said. “It’s hard, though.”

“I will take Nehael, if she is willing – assuming that’s alright with you.”

“She is a free agent,” Nwm laughed. “I have no authority over her. It is a good choice: she is an able counsellor.”

“It seems appropriate that she should be present in whatever transpires,” Eadric explained. “After all, this whole mess started with her. Did you know that she is in contact with Rintrah?”

“She mentioned as much to me,” the Druid admitted. “I trust her implicitly, but her motives are quite unfathomable. She seems equally comfortable dealing with the Goddess, and most of the Uediians are willing to defer to her authority in matters religious. I think she works to preserve openness and communication – in all of its forms – more than anything else. She spoke to me of a ‘Middle Way.’”

“With regard to what?” The Paladin asked.

“Everything?” Nwm suggested. “Who knows? She is eight billion years old, and has a lot of experience to draw upon. She foresees ends which we cannot. Are you still, you know...?” The Druid waved his hands vaguely.

“I don’t know,” Eadric mused. “I haven’t really thought about that for quite some time. And at the moment, it seems like a bit of an unnecessary distraction. Before you head north, I need you to take me to Gibilrazen – I’m going to try talking with Prince Tagur again.”

“Tact or honesty?” Nwm asked.

“The latter, unfortunately,” Eadric said.

“Be careful. I doubt he’ll appreciate any threats.”

“No more equivocating. It’s time to act decisively.”

“There you are,” Nwm jibed. “Being the Breath of God is easy. You don’t mind if we drop in on a friend of mine on the way, do you?”

Eadric looked puzzled.

“Yes, *Ahma*, even I have friends,” Nwm said sarcastically. “Hullu. I need to keep abreast of his progress. And you should meet him – he may be a potential ally.”

**

“You can use this,” Iua said to Mostin, giving him a plain silver ring. “It used to belong to him.”

The Alienist grunted. “Very well. Normally, of course, I would demand a fee...”

“Oh just hurry up and do it, Mostin,” Ortwin interrupted. “I thought we’d got beyond all of the ‘fees for this’ and ‘fees for that’ business.”

“We have,” Mostin agreed, “but it doesn’t hurt to remind people once in a while of my

generosity and magnanimity.”

The Alienist clasped the ring in his hand, and stood before the looking-glass of Urm-Nahat, invoking its powerful magic yet again. The mist upon its surface – eerie and supernatural – gradually gave way to clouds which appeared more natural in origin. Wisps broke in them, to reveal a sky of such bright, perfect azure that Mostin had to squint. There was no sun, but the air seemed to glow with an inner light.

Ortwin gasped in wonder. The scene before him was utterly fabulous: a vast island of rock, suspended in mid air, supporting a city constructed entirely of white marble. Towers and pinnacles stretched high into the sky, and domed roofs glistened with silver and gold. Gardens and orchards of fruit trees grew in profusion: each, apparently, meticulously nurtured and tended. Water ran freely through pristine aqueducts, and accumulated in pools and open cisterns.

“What is this place?” Ortwin marvelled. He felt that he had been missing something for both of his lives.

“It is called *Magathei*,” Iua replied. “It is Ulao’s capitol. Around ten thousand Djinn live there – but it is not the largest of their cities on the Plane of Air by some way.”

“I have visited Kalkinassus,” Mostin bragged. “This is a backwater compared to that place. I first met Mulissu there.”

“And attempted to seduce her?” Iua asked archly.

“Mostin!” Ortwin said with mock gravity. “I didn’t know that you were capable. And she rejected your advances? Inconceivable!”

“Yes. Quite.” Mostin agreed, perfectly seriously. “I will accompany you, if that is acceptable – a day or two here will make for a pleasant outing. And there are a variety of interesting inhabitants. It may be worth my while.”

“What can the Djinn offer you?” Ortwin asked.

“Not just Djinn,” Iua explained. “Elementals, Mephits, Sylphs, Aerial Servants, Stalkers, Vortices, Arrowhawks and Wind-Walkers. Wizards and sorcerers from who-knows-where. Not to mention Auran

analogues of every creature that you can conceive of – and more. And creatures from other Elemental Planes. It is a very cosmopolitan city.”

“I always thought the Djinn were rather parochial,” Ortwin mused. “That is good news: I assume your father’s progressiveness extends to his daughter’s potential suitors?”

“Hmm,” Iua sighed sceptically. “In any case, do *not* attempt flight with your boots whilst there – you will be ridiculed. A gift of some kind would be appropriate – overt displays of generosity are well received. Be tolerant of unusual customs. And you should be aware of my name.”

Iua pronounced a long string of sibilants and aspirated syllables.

“Iua is easier,” Ortwin remarked.

“Ulao will simply call me one-eight-six. He has many children.”

“But you are the only non-Djinn?”

“Gods, no,” Iua replied. “I’ve got elemental, half-elemental, half-celestial, half-fiendish and every other conceivable kind of bastard sibling. Ulao is quite indiscriminating in his lust.”

Ortwin nodded. At least they had *that* in common.

“Wait,” Mostin remembered. “I must get my hat.”

**

“Damn, Nwm, how many does he have here,” Eadric was astounded.

“More than when I last visited,” Nwm said, equally surprised. “And that was only a fortnight ago.”

Within seconds of their materialization from a vaporous state, the Paladin and the Druid were

surrounded by dozens of men and women of all ages, mostly – Eadric noted – of the same racial group to which Nwm belonged.** They bore spears, bows and swords. Several were wearing chainmail shirts

of Thalassine construction, others were clad in studded armour or hauberks looted from Temple troops and men-at-arms.

Nwm quickly held up a hand. “Peace. I am Nwm, the Preceptor. This is Eadric of Deorham. I seek Hullu.” The Druid quickly realized that he recognized only one or two faces from his previous visit.

Their reaction made Nwm nervous. Some were suspicious, whilst others were confused – their awe of

the Druid offset by what they considered to be the enemy in their midst: Eadric. Whatever the Paladin’s own leanings he was, in the final analysis, a Templar from their viewpoint. And many of them lacked

the broader political perspective which may have made them more understanding. Trempa was two hundred miles away, and the troubles there had had little direct bearing on the situation of those present.

A woman in her early thirties, with a face worn with concern stepped forwards. She wore a byrnie of blackened mail, and in her hand she carried a powerful horn bow. She was girt with a bastard sword with aristocratic motifs on its scabbard – no doubt plundered from an unsuspecting Temple knight.

“I am Tarva,” she said assertively. “Hullu is not present. He has mentioned you, Nwm. How may I help?” Her manner was cold.

“I wished to discuss strategy and progress with him,” Nwm said easily.

“That will not be possible,” Tarva replied. “He is briefing a mission. Is there anything else?”

Nwm was mildly irked by her attitude, but hid it. “Then I should like to speak with you,

Tarva,” he said.

“Not while the Templar is present,” she said, turning away.

This has to be resolved immediately, Nwm thought. “That was not a request, Tarva,” he said icily.

She turned back to face him. “By what authority do you command me – or any of us here – Nwm?” She said bitterly. “I have yet to see you suffer at the hands of the Temple. I have yet to see your support for us, beyond striking the enemy when and where your whim dictates. You cannot be depended upon.”

“No, I *will* not be depended upon,” Nwm snapped. “Do you think I should raze Morne for you, Tarva?

Obliterate the Temple? Replace it with a grove of trees? I have more to consider than your immediate needs. My responsibility is to future generations. *Do you not think that I have considered all of this?*”

His tone was one of exasperation.

“Then why did you begin all of *this*?” She gestured around at the stockade, the smithy, the dozens who were flocking to hear the exchange.

“To empower you,” he smiled ruefully. “A little too effectively, it would seem. This is Eadric of Deorham, as I said. Have you heard of him?”

Tarva nodded. “The Heretic Templar with the Demon concubine.”

Eadric coughed.

“He may be our best hope for a solution to this situation.” Nwm explained “He plans to disestablish the Church, and remove taxation. *All* taxation – not just of Uediians.”

“A reformer?” Tarva said sarcastically. “Big deal! Five hundred years of oppression aren’t going to be removed by a few tax breaks. Uediians farm the most marginal land. They form the majority of

indentured workers. There are five times as many Uediian tenant farmers as there are Oronthonians, but they only comprise a third of the population. Work it out!”

“I agree,” Eadric said unexpectedly. “I will take an oath, here and now, that every Uediian household in Wyre will be compensated. I will empty the Temple coffers to achieve this.”

Hmm, he thought. I hadn’t planned to make that commitment.

“Promises are easily made,” Tarva growled.

“I do not lie,” Eadric said.

“I do not *trust* you,” Tarva groaned. “I am tempted to have you captured and bound. You would fetch a fine ransom.”

“You would fail,” Eadric said in a matter-of fact way, shaking his head. “There is no man in Wyre who can withstand me in arms.”

“I could,” Hullu grinned, walking into the middle of the group. “Although, obviously, I’d

prefer to avoid the demonstration. Greetings, Nwm – it's good to see you again. I regret that the ale is *still* not

ready, although we have mead, now. I am honoured, Eadric. Nwm seems to trust you - which is a rare thing in this dirty world – and therefore I am inclined to too."

Eadric glanced down, and his stomach turned. He had all but forgotten the sword, but there it was, hanging from the hip of the Tunthi tribesman.

"Don't worry," Hullu said, following his eyes. "She is firmly under control. I had thought about renaming her 'Merriment' or 'Exuberance' – after all, *Melancholy* is such a depressing name."

She? Nwm thought.

**

"You have achieved a great deal here, Hullu," Eadric said. "And in a very short period of time."

The Tribesman nodded. "Resistance is relatively easy to organize amongst the hopelessly disenfranchised," he pointed out drily. "But I am regarded as a kind of *cingetomaru* in their speech– a war leader, only. My customs mean that I suspect I will *never* be fully accepted."

"But you are mastering the old tongue quickly," Nwm said. "Your inflexion is close to perfect."

"I have a knack for languages," Hullu smiled. He grunted. "Don't be discouraged by Tarva, Nwm. She is a radical – even amongst these people. Most still regard you favourably."

"I admit that I am surprised that you have bestowed so much power on one so controversial."

"I'd rather have her close to me, than undermining me," Hullu explained. "Besides, she has remarkable energy and natural leadership skills – it is better to channel that ability than repress it. And she possesses political savvy."

Eadric nodded. This man was intriguing. *Much* more than a simple warrior. "How much strength can

you field?" He asked.

"From this camp, three hundred who are at least reasonably competent," he said. "But there are other cells establishing themselves – I admit that we reached capacity here more quickly than I had anticipated."

"And altogether?" Nwm asked.

"Close to a thousand, perhaps," Hullu replied carefully. "Even I am not sure of exact numbers. You have sown the wind, Nwm. It didn't take much."

The Druid shifted uneasily, and wondered whether he should assume a more active role

before things ran away from him. “How do you feed them, Hullu?”

“I finally acquiesced to Tarva’s desire to raid Oronthonian farmsteads,” he admitted, but added quickly,

“but only the largest and wealthiest ones. And not to the point of destituting the owners. I am merely skimming some of the fat off.”

“That tendency may get out of hand,” Eadric pointed out. “If you set a precedent for it, it will become stretched by need and spurious logic.”

“They are more disciplined than you give them credit for,” Hullu replied. “But the forest alone cannot support them – unless they spend all day hunting, of course. And boar are getting scarce in these parts.”

He grimaced. “We’ve messed up the balance of nature already, Nwm. It is an inevitable compromise, but it doesn’t mean that I hate it any less.”

The Druid nodded sympathetically. “Then you should move, before things get worse. Although your defenses here...”

Hullu laughed. “I can erect a stockade in two days, Nwm. That is no concern. It is the beer that worries me. I have already considered it: I will leave a skeleton garrison here, a store of provisions, and move the bulk of the *bagaudas* to a new site. It should also give the forest time to recover here.”

“Where will you go?” Eadric asked.

“Eastwards. Maybe four or five days. The land beyond the forest is richer there, although more populous.”

“Towards Morne?”

“Towards Morne,” Hullu replied.

*Without getting too heavily into Oronthonian theology, the name can be roughly translated as “Breath of God.” It also has metaphysical associations which are similar to *Sophia* or *Logos* or *Shabda* in RL

religion. The first syllable is pronounced as in German ‘acht,’ ‘machen’ etc.

**These people are the descendants of the *Crixi*, one of the first racial groups to inhabit Wyre, before Old Borchia was founded. Although great individual variety exists, and bloodlines are much confused with later migrating groups, typical Uedians possess sufficient different features to distinguish them from Oronthonians in Wyre. Descendants of later migrants are taller, have fairer complexions and tend to be rather more slender. Nwm and Eadric conform quite closely to their respective racial stereotypes.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 09-24-2002

By the time that Nwm and Eadric reached Gibilrazen – a mere two hours after leaving Hullu - events

had already moved quickly.

They were not to the Paladin's liking. Knights and soldiers were mustering both inside and outside of the gates.

Eadric remained airborne and vaporous above the Prince's palace, whilst the Druid descended into the courtyards in the form of a crow in order to glean what information he could. When he returned, an hour later, he related his findings to the Paladin.

"News of your claim of the Temple leadership is already current amongst the aristocracy," Nwm explained. "There are several Wizards present – one is called Dauntun. He has been engaged by Tagur to act as a messenger between here and Morne. I suspect that he is acting in the same 'auxiliary

capacity' as Mostin is. Apparently, he is a Diviner of high credentials."

"Where is Tagur?" Eadric asked.

"He is already en route to Morne," the Druid replied. "But even at his best speed, he can hardly come there in less than a week."

"I'm an idiot," Eadric groaned. "I should have suspected that the nobility had access to Divination magic – what's good for the goose, and all that. Aristocrats – especially the more secular ones like Tagur – certainly aren't going to balk at using Wizards in the same way that the Temple itself might.

Every nobleman in Wyre is probably apprised of the situation by now."

"What next?" Nwm asked.

"We locate Tagur," Eadric replied. "When did he leave?"

"Yesterday morning," Nwm answered. "He shouldn't be too hard to find."

So the duo sped eastwards again, although this time they stayed above the road, their eyes alert for signs of the Prince's passage. Another hour passed, before they finally caught up with him. Only twenty knights rode with Tagur – all were lightly armed and riding coursers of great stamina in order to make the best time possible to Morne. The Prince's device – a Golden Boar – floated in the wind above the troupe.

Eadric descended to the road ahead of them, rematerialized, and stood squarely in their path as they thundered towards him. He held up his hands in a gesture designed to make them arrest their gallop.

Tagur barked an order, and horses were spurred to greater speed. Swords sprang from scabbards, and lances were levelled: it was likely that at this distance that they hadn't, in fact, recognized the Paladin.

And they were taking no chances.

Oh, sh*t, Eadric thought. Still, he didn't move. He made another gesture in the air with his hands, communicating with his ethereal guardian.

Abruptly, fifty yards ahead of him on the road, Zhuel manifested. The knights immediately became

disordered: some veered away, some reigned in their horses, others - including Tagur – continued

onwards.

The Archon sounded his trumpet. A single note of piercing clarity rang out.

Horses collapsed and men fell from their steeds – many struck with paralyzing awe. Tagur dropped to the ground, his bay courser overwhelmed by the sound. He landed unceremoniously in a puddle of mud.

Eadric walked forwards slowly, his armour bright in the afternoon sun. He spoke in a clear voice.

“I apologize for the demonstration, Prince Tagur. I hope neither you nor your men are too badly bruised. I need you to hear me out.”

Nwm, perched nearby in the form of a hawk, shifted on his branch. Apparently, Ed wasn’t pulling any punches this time.

Tagur staggered to his feet. Over half of his men and around two thirds of the horses were immobilized, and of those six riders who remained in control of their faculties *and* their steeds, none were pressing forwards towards where Zhuel hovered in front of the Paladin. Several had expressions of either

disbelief or religious terror upon their faces – it was difficult to determine which. Tagur himself,

however, evinced no such awe.

“Deorham!” he thundered. “I am not impressed by your attempts to intimidate me. I don’t give a damn whether you invoke the entire celestial host in this matter. You are *not* marching into Morne without a fight.”

Eadric remembered Tagur’s secular perspective, and wondered how best to proceed. The Prince was

not an atheist – he simply did not recognize the overwhelming imperative of Oronthon’s will. It was not relevant to his political viewpoint.

“What can I say, your Highness? I wish to minimize or avoid unnecessary bloodshed in this matter. I would have you return to Gibilrazen and demobilize your troops.”

“How dare you?” Tagur asked, walking forwards. “You have no authority over me in this. You will not dictate to me how I should best determine the defense of Wyre. There is more at stake here than an internecine squabble in the Temple. Listen well: I will not allow thousands of armed men to enter

Morne unopposed. Your religious agenda does not move me. That is not negotiable.”

“I don’t want to kill you, Prince Tagur,” Eadric sighed. “And I don’t want to see innocents needlessly suffer.”

“Then *back off*,” the Prince retorted. “Return to Trempa. Do not prosecute this aggression. Sue for peace – perhaps the King will be lenient.”

Eadric read Tagur’s expression, and although he did not say as much, the Prince was

offering to

intercede; to speak on Trempa's behalf on the royal council. Eadric felt that he had not misread Tagur's attitude towards him in their initial encounter: the Prince actually *liked* him. The Paladin almost wept.

"I cannot," Eadric groaned. "This is not my choice."

"It is absolutely your choice," Tagur said grimly. "Deorham, I am going to mount my horse again. Then I am going to Morne. I will advise the king to call a general muster unless you indicate to me now that you will not pursue this folly."

The Paladin inwardly heaved. Another concession from the Prince, because implicit in his statement, Tagur had just said: *I trust your word, Deorham*.

The hawk, who had been sitting on a nearby bough, and watching the exchange with interest, flew over and shifted into the shape of the Druid.

"I am Nwm, the Preceptor," he said.

"I know who you are," the Prince replied, walking away.

"Listen to me, Tagur. Change is coming. Upheaval. Maybe death and misery. But hope for something better. It is inevitable. You have to decide what your role in it will be, and why."

"I also know my role. I need no counsel from you."

"You *knew* your role. It is time to reappraise."

Prince Tagur returned to his mount, and attempted to revive her. Several of the other stricken knights and horses were now beginning to regain their senses. The bay staggered up, shaking, and Tagur

calmed her. He retrieved his own banner, handed it to his herald, and climbed into the saddle.

"Unless you purpose to kill me now, or at least attempt to, I suggest you move aside."

Reluctantly, Eadric backed off of the greensward. As the riders made ready to move on, he spoke once again.

"Listen to me, Tagur. I am the *Ahma*. I am the Breath of Oronthon made manifest in the world. You must understand that, whatever logic dictates, you *cannot* withstand that. It is an irresistible force." His tone was imploring rather than assertive, but carried more conviction than any present had ever heard before.

Prince Tagur swallowed, turned, spurred his mount, and rode on towards Morne.

Dammit, Eadric thought.

**

Magathei had utterly beguiled Ortwin. Its intricate, carved marble reliefs. Its archways, buttresses, courtyards, winding streets, alleyways and markets. Its orchards of apricots, dates, pomegranates, oranges, figs and almonds. The music of water everywhere, carried to gardens, gathering in still pools, or welling up from fountains in the bedrock.

The inn chosen by Mostin, the Bard, and his prospective (lover? mate? fiancée? concubine? wife?) –

well, whatever Iua was – was in the most fashionable and expensive district of the city. A city which was, by its very nature, fashionable and expensive.

Ortwin goggled at the price quoted to him by a languorous djinn smoking a hookah. It translated to around two hundred crowns per night. The suite included a bedchamber, a lounge, a steam bath, a

private terraced garden, and two mephit servants, named Thispin and Goil. Mostin had elected to take more modest chambers.

The Bard inquired regarding the hookah which the djinn seemed to be enjoying immensely, wondering

whether it contained a substance similar to *kschiff*, used in the country of Shûth.

The genie laughed, and muttered an unintelligible string of syllables in Auran.

“What did he say?” He asked Iua.

“He regrets that the sublime airy vapours of which he is partaking would prove far too volatile for your gross physical body, and would likely result in some kind of seizure, followed by death.”

Ortwin grunted, and retired to his chambers, where he began working on an ode for the glorification of Ulao. According to Iua, the only thing larger than her father’s treasury was the size of his ego. Deciding

that this might be the place to start, the Bard dispatched Thispin to procure a lyre of the finest quality.

“Cost is no consideration,” he grandly (and stupidly) announced.

The Mephit clapped her hands gleefully, curtsied, and returned fifteen minutes later.

“On second thoughts,” Ortwin said, “overt gaudiness is not entirely necessary. You may limit your transaction to five hundred gold pieces.”

She sniffed, and disappeared again. Ortwin wasn’t sure whether he heard her mutter the word

‘cheapskate’ as she flew off. The Bard groaned. This was likely to be an expensive outing. He hoped that Mostin had some spare cash, and was feeling more generous than usual.

He shrugged, and grinned. It didn’t matter. He had no doubts that he would wow the locals. He was, after all, Ortwin.

*

“Er, how much have you got, Mostin?” Ortwin asked. “Just curious, that’s all.”

“Why?” The Alienist asked suspiciously. “How much have *you* got?”

“Around two thousand left,” he confessed.

Mostin laughed.

“What?” Ortwin asked.

“You have yet to find a suitable gift for Ulao. It needs to be something unique.”

“I am composing an ode in his honour,” Ortwin reminded him.

“I suspect that he would prefer something more tangible.”

“Is it true that magic can be openly purchased here?” Ortwin asked.

“Certainly,” Mostin replied. “Although it is still hard to find, and the prices are rather inflated.”

“Will you accompany me to find such a gift? I would appreciate your discerning eye.”

“You mean you don’t want to be ripped off?”

“Yes,” Ortwin said. “Precisely.”

“Two thousand isn’t going to buy you much,” Mostin sniped.

“No,” Ortwin agreed. “But *this* will.” He held his pick up.

Mostin shook his head. After all of the time, effort and trouble – not to mention the compensation paid to Troap – that the Bard had gone through to acquire the pick, he seemed remarkably keen to part with it.

“I thought that it was a style thing,” Mostin said, pointing at the weapon.

“Honestly, Mostin. Fashion does change, you know. How much gold did you say that you had with you again?”

“I didn’t,” the Alienist replied.

**

Three days after the ceremony in which Tahl had sworn Eadric in as First Magnate, and he had

assumed control of Trempe’s forces, Ryth’s guerilla fighters arrived upon the Blackwater Meadow,

exhausted after a forced march from the northern marches of the Duchy.

Six hundred battle-hardened, dirty and confident Uediians suddenly jostled for space along with Trempe’s aristocracy, men-at-arms, Ardanese mercenaries and levies from across the fief. After nearly three hard months in the field, Ryth’s men – consisting primarily of archers – naturally considered themselves somewhat superior to those who had been drilling in the pastures which abutted the Nund.

Eadric knew that he *must* move. Maintaining the cohesion of the forces thus far had been an act of supreme diplomacy on the part of himself, Tahl and Soraine: the more remarkable, because the Paladin had engendered a sense of camaraderie amongst the disparate troops which he would have considered

impossible only twelve weeks before. But if they stayed where they were now, then the impetus would be lost, and the sectarian tendencies amongst those present would begin to reassert themselves again.

After he had finalized the plans for provisioning the army – something which was already beginning to heavily afflict the economy of Trempa itself – he called a meeting of his captains and lieutenants.

Soraine, Tahl, Ekkert, Streek, Ryth, Togull and Banding of Gamall were present. Breama, the Countess of Thokastrond in the far East of Trempa, who, despite her age, still lusted for battle. Olann, the *de facto* leader of the Ardanese contingent, whose preeminence amongst the mercenaries was maintained more by his brawling ability than by his strategic competence. Jorde, his bannerbearer. And Nehael, whose mysterious presence still unnerved many of those there. Details for the effective deployment of troops were thrashed out into the early hours of the morning.

The main thrust would take place at Moath Gairdan – the span of the bridge was shorter than at Hartha Keep, and its girth would allow three knights to ride abreast upon it. Eadric himself would lead the main assault at this point – although it was still unclear whether Brey would attempt to hold the bridge, or allow passage and defend his bulwarks upon the far side of the river as necessitated by assault.

Trenches and dikes protected over a dozen Temple enclaves, spread over an area of fifty square miles.

A smaller group would attempt to win Aaki's bridge – although the length of the crossing, combined with its narrowness and the causeways which led up to it, made this a much more difficult prospect.

They would be supported by many of Ryth's archers, who would use small rafts and air-bladders to

cross the Nund and harry Temple outriders south of the bridge, before attempting to secure its western end. It was a tactic which the Thane had used on several occasions in the north, but near Hartha Keep the river was both wider and deeper, swollen by tributaries which flowed down from the hills – the

largest and the closest of which was the Blackwater itself. Most of the Uediians were capable swimmers, but Ryth was worried about wet bows and ammunition. Oilskins were not entirely reliable.

Togull, Laird of Rauth Sutting and a man advanced in years, was astonished by Eadric's proposed

course of action at the northern bridge.

"You plan to simply *cut your way across*?" he asked.

"Yes," the Paladin replied.

"You will be at the forefront?"

"Yes. I will not lead from the rear."

"Are you really that confident? That *good*? This is no tourney."

"I am aware of that," Eadric responded.

"But if you fell one, then another will appear, and another. The crossing will become

jammed with corpses of men and horses in no time. Passage will be close to impossible, in either direction.”

“We will bring ropes, to drag them off the bridge into the river.”

“But the momentum...”

“Will be sustained,” Eadric finished for him.

“And in the event that you should perish?”

“Then Tahl will lead,” Eadric said. “And if he dies, then Jorde will lead. And so on, until we make the crossing.”

Togull scratched his head. “You admit the possibility of death – how can this be, if you are the *Ahma*?”

“I am merely a conduit,” the Paladin replied simply. “If I die, then Oronthon will choose another.”

“Do you not fear death? The man who doesn’t is a fool.”

“Then I am a fool,” Eadric smiled.

“A holy fool, but a fool nonetheless,” Togull sighed.

**

“Are they real?” Ortwin asked.

Mostin nodded. “At least, the vendor is not thinking about lying, and the dweomer checks out as being of the right variety.”

The duo stood at a market stall, where a djinn of immense proportions touted his wares, flanked by two jann of dour aspect. Ortwin had been surprised to note that the elemental trader possessed feet, but decided it might be impolite to mention the fact – he had always assumed that genies were somehow

nebulous below the waist. He had even pondered on the mechanics of Iua’s conception, given that false premise.

Having found a suitable broker for his magical pick – an item which he found, in the event, he was loathe to part with – the Bard had sold the weapon for a good deal of money. Its thundering electrical dweomer was, after all, an attractive selling point given their location. He had immediately invested in silk pantaloons and shirts, several velvet waistcoats of varying colours, sashes, earrings and bracelets of gold, and a new scabbard of inlaid cherrywood for his scimitar. His purse bulged with precious gems.

He looked, and felt, extremely wealthy.

In his hands, he held a pair of *Golden Lions* – figurines of power. He was tempted to purchase them –

despite the prohibitive cost – until he considered his situation.

The djinn grunted unappreciatively as Ortwin handed back the figurines and shook his head.

“I need something unique,” he muttered to Mostin as they walked away. “And buying something from someone here is not going to fit the bill – I mean, think about it: even if Ulao is ignorant of many of those who pass through his city – which he may or may not be – it’s likely that he is aware of things sold by members of his own people in his own city.”

“Other extraplanar entities frequent Magathei,” the Alienist reminded him. “It is merely a question of locating a vendor and a gift. It will take time, patience and diligent inquiry.”

**

Eadric mounted Contundor. The dawn glow was muted by mists which clung to the ground in the wide

Nund valley, muffling the sounds of armour and harness. The fog was a parting gift from Nwm, before he had flown northwards to displace the skirmishers who had crossed into northern Trempa from

Thahan.

The core of those who would lead the assault with him were, to a man, religious fanatics who had no doubts about the divine nature of the Paladin’s mission. Their zeal was a tangible force, and no notion of failure was entertained by any of them. Horses – both celestial and mundane – champed restlessly, eager to be underway.

At six o’clock, Earic’s outriders returned with the news that both bridges were held: Brey, aware of the arrival of Ryth’s troops the previous day, had immediately taken precautions. Temple engineers had set emplacements of stakes across the western ends of both spans, and Ryth’s scouts had already shot

dozens of men who had been undermining the pylons on the bridges, in the event that they would need to be collapsed. On the far bank, teams of draft horses stood ready to draw great chains which had been looped around the stone buttresses and supports.

Eadric quickly redeployed his troops, and called a hundred of Trempa’s most able knights to himself.

He assumed a position on the eastern bank, halfway between the two bridges, and waited for Tahl to

arrive: the Inquisitor was presently closeted in intense prayer.

The Paladin smiled grimly. He had hated to do it – to dissemble to his own captains regarding his plans

– but it had been entirely necessary. He had no doubt that Temple spies were present in his ranks, and neither the time nor the inclination to weed them out: the fear and mistrust engendered would have been too high a price to pay. And the possibility of magical eavesdropping had also made him cautious.

It was easier this way.

Tahl presented himself, and drew a scroll – one of those confiscated from the Penitents at Deorham –

from his belt. He incanted briefly, and gestured.

Rapidly, a broad swathe of water began to drain away into the bedrock. A section of the river forty yards wide, stretching from bank to bank, vanished.

Trumpets brayed, and Eadric led the charge across the dry bed of the Nund. In the van were Tahl, and Jorde with the standard, renegade Templars, Paladins and Penitents. They screamed, and the cry was taken up by the host which rode hard on their tails.

Ahma!

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 10-02-2002

Three Instances of Grace

I'm generally against the idea of "Limit Breaks," or "Wild Cards" which characters can play, but at the same time, there are a lot of things which happen in this game which the rules can't really begin to address.

An arrangement that I made with Lombard (Eadric's Player), was that he could invoke *Grace* at three key points during the course of the campaign - after the divine nature of his mission had been revealed to him.

Even though, technically, the Celestial Descent at Khu was precipitated by the acts of an NPC, Mulissu (actually my wife, Susan was playing her at the time so I guess she was a PC at that point), I ruled that it was such an extraordinary occurrence, that it counted against Eadric's "credit." He had two instances of Grace left.

The metagaming conundrum which knowing this caused was easily overcome: if Eadric was in a

pivotal situation, and Lombard demonstrated *exceptional* roleplaying, only then would I allow Grace to intervene. If he invoked it. The other thing was that Lombard *did not know how it would manifest*. I, of course, did. It was therefore up to him to decide how best to act upon it, when it happened.

In the event, the Battle of the Crossings of the Nund proved to be the second descent of Grace: it manifested quite differently from the first, but it was in reaction to a very unexpected sequence of actions from Eadric, where he demonstrated the quality of *mercy*, but managed to contextualize it within the story and the whole, ongoing religious paradox thing.

Hats off, Marc.

For twenty rounds, the *Paragon* Template from the ELH was applied to Eadric. He became, briefly, the perfect human being, and the perfect paladin. I've added "Paragon Eadric" to the Rogues Gallery thread, just for the sake of completeness.

Btw, a *kanista* is a wedge-shaped formation of mounted Templars. This will also prove relevant in a later post.

**

Update

As Eadric gained the western shore of the river with his knights, lightly armoured mounted auxiliaries scattered north and south along the riverbank. Unable to withstand the heavy cavalry, they instead fled to join with the main Templar companies who were positioned at the ends of the bridges. Mist limited visibility to around a hundred yards, and the Paladin knew that he needed to act swiftly to take advantage of the surprise that it offered.

Half of the Ardanese mercenaries were immediately dispatched to the south under Olann's command.

They were supported by several squads of armoured knights, together with their squires and retainers, led by Breama the Bitch and Laird Togull. Olann was detailed with disrupting the Temple

emplacements, and drawing attention away from the amphibious assault launched by Ryth and his

Uediians south of Aaki's bridge – Eadric hoped that even if news of this plan had reached Brey and his commanders, then it would be discounted in the light of news of their passage across the river.

The remainder of the mounted archers were to form a screen north and west of the main force of heavy horse, and hopefully intercept any Temple squadrons who were riding for the northern crossing. The zealots, along with the bulk of the armoured aristocracy, headed straight towards the north, their front increasing in aspect as they rode. It took them only two minutes to reach the outworks: lines of stakes, hastily set the previous night, barring passage. Companies of mixed pikemen and crossbowmen already stood in loose formation behind the barriers, and waves of quarrels slammed into the vanguard. Behind, half-visible, the Templar knights were ordering their lines.

Dammit, Eadric thought, reining in. *They deployed too fast. And Pikemen.* .

He turned to speak to Tahl, but the Inquisitor had already pulled another scroll out and was incanting fiercely. He pushed his hand forward as power rushed through him, and the ground ahead rippled

ferociously, flattening the defenses and knocking dozens of Temple men-at-arms to the ground. The

unluckiest amongst them were drawn into cracks and fissures that had opened briefly in the ground, before slamming shut with a terrific *boom*.

Eadric motioned to Hyne, and yelled. "Sound the charge!"

A horn rang out, and they surged forwards. As they thundered towards the Temple lines, Eadric's eyes tried to penetrate the mist to discern the location of Brey's standard, but unsuccessfully. More horns sounded – this time from the enemy - and, terrified, the remaining infantry who intervened either fled or fell back to the ground, in an attempt to

escape the inevitable. Although disordered and incompletely prepared, the Temple countercharge was devastating. Lances shivered as they struck shields and armour, and penetrated flesh.

The wedge of zealots, led by Eadric, punched a hole in the Temple front, but the enemy knights swelled around, their discipline and training all too apparent as they broke upon Trempa's aristocracy and discomfited them. The melee which ensued was confused, brutal and merciless.

**

Ortwin tapped his fingers nervously.

"Well?" Mostin asked.

"Talk about lousy timing, Mostin." He had returned, briefly, with the Alienist into his extradimensional retreat. The scene on the Mirror of Urm-Nahat showed Eadric on the meadow, preparing to cross the

Nund.

"If you'd rather not know..." Mostin began.

"Don't be facetious," Ortwin said. "Where the hell is Nwm, anyway?"

"Eadric specifically asked him to stay out of it," Mostin replied.

"Do you think I should go?" The Bard asked.

"One Satyr can do little," Mostin replied.

"Unless that one Satyr is *me*," he countered. "But should I go?"

Mostin shrugged. "Perhaps," he answered.

"Will you buff me?"

Mostin sighed. "Ortwin, you know how much grief violating the Injunction cost me last time. Do you *have* to put me in the position of choosing?"

"Please?" Ortwin gave his most imploring smile. "It's not like you're throwing lightning around."

"Oh, very well," Mostin groaned.

**

In his initial charge, Eadric had struck down Terquen – a knight of no mean ability whom he had

immediately recognized from his days in the Temple. Terquen's lance splintered on Eadric's shield as the momentum of his mount carried on, and two other Templars targeted Eadric rather than those

directly ahead of themselves – one lance glanced off of his shield, another off of his helm.

Bile rose in the Paladin's throat – Terquen was a good man.

He dropped his lance and Lukarn sprang from its scabbard. Before he had prepared

himself, a

longsword struck him soundly but almost harmlessly from another Templar. He lashed out, grunting, but then abruptly twisted his blade in the air as he struck.

A young paladin, with an open-faced helmet, perhaps eighteen years old.

Dammit, Eadric thought, and buffeted him on the head with the flat of his blade. The force of the blow was still immense, and his opponent toppled off of his horse, insensible. In a series of rapid exchanges which lasted less than half a minute, four more knights succumbed to his skill: in each case, the Paladin struck them with the flat or the pommel of Lukarn. By the end of it, he, Tahl, and half a dozen others had passed clean through the Temple line. Eadric was almost entirely unscathed.

Tahl looked at him quizzically. "Do you intend to subdue them all?" He half-yelled ironically. The clamour of the battle was terrific.

Eadric thought sadly of Terquen. "I will draw no more Templar blood," he replied.

"You will have blood on your hands no matter what," Tahl pointed out. "You are going to be the only person here who isn't striking to kill – recall that the Penitents and Trempons are following your orders to do so. Should I instruct them otherwise?"

"No," Eadric replied.

Tahl looked dubious. Was Eadric somehow attempting to relinquish responsibility for the deaths that would occur there? The Paladin read his mood.

"You do not need to doubt, Tahl. Before the day is out, I will have the death of hundreds weighing on my conscience."

"I do not understand. What do you hope to achieve, *Ahma*?"

"To stimulate insight," he replied.

Tahl immediately understood the paradox. Mercy and judgement. Compassion and retribution.

Forgiveness and damnation. Oronthon and, vicariously, his emissary, was all of those things.

"Now may not be the best time to act as a teacher: you understand that this is likely to be misapprehended," the Inquisitor said. "That others might accuse you of shirking your responsibility, of shying away from the deeds that need to be done. One could attribute your acts to cowardice."

Eadric smiled. "Then the paradox is complete. Only a coward would shy away from the possibility of being branded a coward."

The Paladin snapped his visor shut, and rode back into the fray. He was present in the *Now* more than he had ever before been. Scenes, impressions and thoughts flowed through his mind like liquid, and he let them pass. He opened himself totally, and all thoughts of self were vanquished. Spontaneous,

instinctive, unassailable, irresistible. He dismounted, cast off his helm, threw down his

shield, and gripped Lukarn in both hands.

Grace had descended upon him.

*

In the southern encounter, Olann's horsed archers discharged volley after volley into the Temple ranks: their recurved horn bows sang and the air was thick with darts. The phalanx of Trempan knights,

together with supporting mounted men-at-arms waited for an opportunity to engage, but to no avail.

The Temple foot soldiers – chainmail clad and secure behind a wall of shields and stakes – merely

bided their time and sent a slow but steady stream of quarrels into the Ardanese outriders, gradually wearing them down.

Bugger, thought Breama. Somehow she had to draw out their cavalry, or Ryth would be discovered

before he could effectively deploy his longbowmen, and they would make mincemeat of him. She sent

messengers to Olann, and others to Streek – who waited on the eastern bank of the river with the heavy infantry – and immediately ordered her knights to follow her westwards, parallel to the line of Temple emplacements. She enjoined the Ardanese to ignore their losses and continue their assault, and ordered Streek to launch an assault upon the bridge itself from the opposite shore. As she and Togull

redeployed, mounted Temple auxiliaries appeared from out of the mist and harried their right flank.

After a series of brief skirmishes, the Countess gained the western end of the Temple defenses.

She heard them long before she saw them: the rumour of many horses bearing down upon her from the

southwest. Or was it the west?

“Sound the charge!” She ordered her herald.

“Which way?” Togull asked ironically.

“Er, that way,” she said, pointing into the fog. “I think.”

*

The messenger who brought news to Streek – a young esquire by the name of Tambur – rode at

breakneck speed over the dry river bed. His haste, caused as much by fear of the waters around him suddenly collapsing in on him as by desire to deliver his message swiftly, soon brought him to the presence of the Laird.

“The bridge itself?” Streek complained.

“Immediately, my Lord,” Tambur confirmed.

Streek grumbled and put his helmet on.

**

“There,” Ortwin said, pointing at a cluster of high-ranking Templars in the reserve force.

“Are you quite insane?” Mostin asked. “You will be totally cut off.”

Ortwin laughed. “You underestimate me, Mostin.”

“I think perhaps you overestimate yourself,” the Alienist countered. “Might I remind you of Iua?”

“That isn’t necessary,” the Bard remarked drily. “I am unlikely to forget. Note, however, that I wasn’t *hasted*, and I wasn’t wearing *this*.”

Ortwin pulled his cloak around himself, and immediately appeared to shift several feet to the right.

“I wonder if they’ll mistake you for a Devil,” Mostin mused. “Your behaviour will be rather atypical of a Satyr.”

Ortwin shrugged. “Where is this group in relation to Ed?” He asked.

The scene changed rapidly as the mirror scanned back through the mist around three hundred feet, and Eadric appeared on its face. Mostin raised an eyebrow.

Ortwin’s jaw dropped.

**

Eadric broke upon the Temple ranks, and began toppling knights from their horses at incredible speed.

Lukarn slammed into torsos, battered helmets or crashed against shields and staggered their bearers.

Wherever he struck, they fell. He seemed to anticipate every move, to possess such complete awareness of his environment that he avoided almost every blow directed at him. And even where lances or

swords should have pierced or slashed him, they seemed to recoil, or to glance harmlessly off of him.

“What the f*ck?” Ortwin exclaimed.

Within the space of a minute, a swathe of armoured forms – buffeted and pummelled - lay groaning

around Eadric in a circle. In his immediate vicinity, the battle had ceased entirely, as Templars sat unsurely on their steeds or backed away from him.

From the north, through the mist, the reserve force of Templars led by Brey appeared. If Eadric had still been Eadric, he would have inwardly groaned.

A column of violet fire engulfed him, but did nothing beyond warming his armour slightly. Lances

were levelled at him, but the hands which held them shook. He spoke.

“I am the Emissary of the God whom you claim to understand,” he called out in a clear voice. “An act of violence against me is an affront to him. You are instructed to lay down your weapons, and sound a general surrender. You will follow me into Morne.”

Brey wavered, nodded, and hung his head. Fate – or Eadric – had, in fact, spared him for a third time.

Zhuel manifested, and if any doubts remained, they were layed to rest. Brey wept.

But the surrender came too late for Breama and Togull, who were both slain as the *kanista* of Temple knights overwhelmed their squadrons, for many of Olann’s archers, and for scores within the southern Temple emplacements when the rain from Ryth’s longbows finally fell upon them. Many had perished

in both engagements.

Much bitterness resulted.

When Ortwin appeared, the inner fire had not yet left Eadric. The Paladin smiled benignly.

The Bard swallowed, and fought against the urge of prostrating himself before his oldest and closest friend.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 10-09-2002

**

Daunton the Diviner *Teleported* to Prince Tagur’s position after scrying the Prince, appearing at dusk in his campsite.

Several of Tagur’s hearthguards drew their swords.

“Your retainers are a little jumpy,” the Wizard smiled. The humour immediately left his face. “Brey of Methelhar has just capitulated with Deorham.”

Tagur sat silently for several moments. His mind raced.

“There is more,” Daunton continued. “It would appear that the clandestine raids mounted in Hethio are more organized than we previously suspected. It is some kind of popular Uediian movement. It seems to be growing exponentially.”

Tagur cocked his head. “Are they allied with the Tremfans?”

“I think *allied* is probably too strong a word. But I suspect that some contact exists between them.

Nwm the Preceptor is the most likely suspect. He is an associate of Deorham.”

The Prince grimaced. He knew that much already. “And the Curia?”

“Are irrelevant,” Daunton said.

“Do we have numbers?” Tagur asked.

“Assuming that most of the Templars follow Brey’s lead – and that seems likely – around twelve hundred knights, twice as many auxiliary cavalry and six or seven thousand infantry. That includes the Trempan aristocracy and militias, and around eight hundred Ardanese mercenaries.”

“The Temple has been ineffective to date,” The Prince said. “There is no reason to suspect otherwise from now on.”

Daunton shook his head emphatically. “That is absolutely not the case. The reason that Templars were not deployed en masse was because of their vulnerability to magical assault from Nwm. That is no

longer an issue. I would also remind you that a substantial number of Deorham’s footsoldiers are *not* levies and militiamen any more. They are Temple infantry. Finally, if Nwm chooses to actively

participate in this, then there is *nothing* that you can do. He commands enormous power.”

Tagur’s stomach tightened when he considered the rumours of the Druid’s assault upon the Temple

camp, three months before. A thousand dead in five minutes, they said.

“Is there no way that any Wizard can be persuaded to intervene?”

Daunton shook his head.

“If you contacted one from outside of Wyre? An extraplanar? A Blood Magician from Shûth? It

troubles me, but if forced into the arena of magical warfare...”

“Then, I regret, our association would be at an end,” Daunton said sternly. “My securing magical help for you would be no different to binding a demon or throwing lightning myself. I will not risk violating the Injunction. I may impart only information. I will neither act as mediator, nor as a procurer of supernatural aid.”

“You would rather see order overthrown and thousands needlessly die?”

“Yes,” Daunton replied simply. Because the alternative was too terrible to contemplate.

“And Mostin’s acts?” Tagur asked.

“Were questionable, but sufficiently minor and ambiguous to warrant oversight: there is also the fact that many rumours concerning him issued from the Temple itself. Mages have little inclination to trust priests. Believe me, your Highness, when I tell you that you do *not* want Wizards actively participating

in temporal wars.”

“Or Druids,” Tagur said laconically. “Daunton, I would ask that this news is relayed to the small council *in full*. Now is not the time for withholding information based on petty past disagreements.

Inform the Lord Chamberlain that I will be in Morne in three days. I just hope that we can come to some kind of consensus before it’s too late. Sihu* will be pivotal – her troops are

involved in Temple activities in the north of Trempa.”

” *Were* involved,” Daunton corrected him.

“She has also capitulated?” Tagur was aghast.

“No indeed,” Daunton replied. “But the Templars there are likely to be of unsure loyalty given Brey’s reversal. Eisarn is their commander. Furthermore, they have been forced back into Thahan.”

“A second assault? Already?”

“Nwm.” Daunton replied.

The Prince groaned. It appeared that the Druid was already active, although his agenda was unclear.

“And Iald?” He asked wearily.

“Iald is still invested by Temple troops – for the moment. News of the events on the borders of Trempa may have already reached them, however. I will maintain scrutiny on them. You may wish to consider allowing Deorham into Morne.”

“And consign Wyre to even more Theocratic bullsh*t than it has already suffered? I think not.”

“He advocates disestablishment,” Daunton replied.

“For the moment,” Tagur said bitterly. “But does his deity? And who’s to say that some other

‘revelation’ won’t descend upon him in the near future commanding him to seize the throne? Religion is so tiresome, Daunton. It stops people thinking clearly and behaving rationally.”

The Wizard nodded sympathetically.

**

Eadric dreamed of death. The Temple in flames. The butchery of children upon the streets of Morne.

Misery. Suffering. Anguish. Faces moved through his mind, each mutating into the next: Tahl, Nwm,

Hethio, Tagur, Cynric, Nehael, Hullu, Melion, Feezuu, Soraine, Tramst. Others whom he did not

recognize, too numerous to count.

Tramst, again, and his own brother, Orm.

The Paladin ripped himself out of sleep, and stood up in his tent. His knees were weak. The canvas flapped in the night wind.

Strange, he thought, the door should be over there. Ah, he realized, I’m still dreaming.

Another face appeared: huge, gnarled, with tattoos on its cheeks. The fearsome aspect of a giant or an ogre, but somehow benign. Its ancient eyes spoke of enormous wisdom and

power.

Who are you? , Eadric asked.

But he received no answer, and woke up abruptly.

He lay motionless on his pallet for a few moments, gradually accepting the fact that he was, in fact, conscious. He became aware of another presence in his tent.

Nehael sat nearby upon a stool, regarding him seriously.

“What time is it?” Eadric asked.

“An hour before dawn,” the Demoness replied. “The camp is beginning to stir.”

“How long have you been sitting there? Do you never sleep?”

“Around two hours. And no.”

Eadric thought for a moment. “What is your relationship with Rintrah, Nehael?”

“We are on amicable enough terms,” she replied.

“Have you been in regular contact with him?”

“I wouldn’t say regular,” she said, standing, and drawing her cloak closer around her. Eadric was curious at the affectation – he knew that the Succubus was impervious to the cold.

“You aren’t being terribly forthcoming,” he remarked wryly. “I thought you were acting as my counsellor.”

“Perhaps you are asking the wrong questions,” Nehael replied.

“Are you an agent of Oronthon?” Eadric queried.

“No,” she answered flatly.

“Of Uedii?”

“No,” she replied again. “Although if I had to choose a particular interpretation of religious truth, then I would favour Uedii for aesthetic reasons.”

The Paladin grunted. Nehael was being characteristically vague about her own loyalties. He wondered if Nwm’s conversations with her had been any more revealing.

“I dreamed that Morne was sacked. The Fane and the Temple compound put to the torch. The murder

and rape of innocents. Incredible cruelty.”

“War brings atrocity,” she replied impassively.

“I cannot be responsible for that,” Eadric said. “I will not have it on my conscience.”

Nehael said nothing.

“There were many faces – too many to count,” he continued. “They flashed through my mind in rapid succession.”

“Numerous people and strings of events have led to the current crisis,” Nehael explained.

“The drawing together of many disparate threads into a single, overarching *Now*. You have sensed a nodality. Another occurred at Khu: Graz’zt attempted to direct it, but Mulissu’s presence thwarted his purpose. If you had been killed there, then the Church of Oronthon in this reality would have been greatly diminished. The coming nodality is likely of much wider scope.”

“The last face I saw was of a giant – or an ogre. He was aware of me, but did not answer my inquiry to his identity. His face was tattooed. He radiated enormous power, but also compassion.”

“I do not know,” Nehael said, “but I suspect that was Jovol. He is a Wizard who lives much of his life in the realm of Dream. It is likely that he is aware of the impending crisis. Dreamers are sensitive to such vibrations.”

“But why would he make his presence known to me – if not his identity? He is barred from acting in the current crisis, anyway. The Injunction prevents him.”

Nehael was conspicuously silent.

“Nehael?” Eadric asked nervously.

“Old certainties are failing, *Ahma*. You yourself are testament to that fact.”

“Mostin insists that the Injunction is inviolable. That it is contrary to the whole ethos of magic for a Wizard to embroil himself or herself in politics.”

“Mostin himself has already violated the Injunction,” Nehael reminded him. “He acted out of concern for his friends. He decided that the risk of doing so was acceptable, given the stakes.”

“Jovol, I suspect, is motivated by compassion,” Eadric said. “At least that is some reassurance.”

“Perhaps,” the Demoness said sceptically. “But others will be aware of the confluence of events.

Bending their wills, and mobilizing their servants into action. Uedii, the Green Reality. Oronthon –

who may not have revealed all of his purposes to you. Demons, maybe.”

“And Devils?”

“There are always Devils, *Ahma*. Somewhere in the background. Waiting.”

“And others?”

“Whose purposes and motivations are unknown to us, and maybe even to themselves. Random

elements.” She answered.

**

Mesikämmi. Honey-Paw. A wisp of vapour hurtling through the sky.

Hullu! Hullu! Hullu! She thought to herself as she flew south across Iald. *Where have you*

gone, my pretty boy? What troubles are you finding your way into now, I wonder?

The land below, thick with forests, so different to the wild tundras of her homeland. Then settlements of stone buildings, bridges, keeps and towers, ploughed fields, rolling hills and a thousand streams, bringing waters down from the tall mountains beyond which lay the *Linna*.

She sighed. It was warm here, in the sun. And how much warmer it would get, as she flew yet further south! Further afield than she had ever ventured before.

At least in this small, sad world, she thought ironically.

Mesikämmi considered the spirit who had appeared to her in her revelry. An unfamiliar creature, whom she did not trust. No doubt some entity involved with the strange God worshipped in Wyre, although whether opposed to him or allied with him she did not know.

Or care.

She had conjured one of its servants: a being bright with effulgent light, winged like a bird and

radiating warmth and peace.

Not that that meant anything, she thought. But now she bore its token – a talisman of unknown power and function, and travelled to heal a man she had never heard of in a land that she never knew existed.

Hullu, she thought again, and yearned for his sweet embrace. Not coerced this time, but freely given.

As she raced over eastern Hethio, she scanned the ground below. He was here somewhere, she had

scried him only hours before. But where? As she passed through a cloud, suddenly it was revealed.

She inhaled sharply. A sea of wagons and tents stretched before her, and plumes of smoke rose into the air. People crawling like ants on the ground below her – thousands it seemed. More than she had ever seen before.

Resisting the urge to descend, the Shamaness continued on southwards. Wyre fell behind her. She flew out over the Thalassine, and cities passed beneath her. She flew over Pandicule with its hundreds of rocky islands, over Bedesh, and across the Western Ocean.

There, below her, two hundred miles from anywhere: a surf-wracked island perhaps three miles long. It boasted a single stone building - a castle of unusual design.

Remember, she thought. *The slippery spirit knows where his books are. That is enough.*

Mesikämmi sighed, and wondered why such things were so important. But it would assure her *Hullu* of victory, and that was sufficient. And then, perhaps, he would return with her at last. This time, she would be coy, and restrained, and yielding.

“For there is nothing which I cannot teach you in the arts of love,” the bright servant had informed her.

**

“A *Fey*? ” Ulao roared. “One-Eight-Six said nothing to me about you being a *Fey*. And a Satyr to boot!

A licentious, unprincipled erotomaniacal Satyr. It doesn’t surprise me that she was evasive about you when questioned: no doubt you have already plucked her frail maidenhood with your goatish lusts! I should have you flogged for your insolence.”

Ortwin bowed theatrically. The enormous Djinn – whose girth suggested an overindulgence in

whatever airy sustenance such creatures partook of – was clad wholly in crimson silk, and bore a tulwar almost as tall as Ortwin himself. He sat upon a throne of ivory in a hall of dizzying height, its domed roof supported by immense marble pillars of intricate design. Tendrils of purplish smoke, issuing from numerous braziers, clung to the columns before wafting out of great shafts hewn into the roof.

Numerous creatures attended him: Djinn of lesser rank, Mephits, Elementals and Sylphs. To his right stood his chief advisor, whom Iua had already warned Ortwin of – a Marid named Shasheen – and

nearby, standing in a tight group, a squad of dour Azer mercenaries from the Elemental Plane of Fire, prospective allies in the age-long hostility against the oppressive Efrete regime. Iua herself stood demurely to her father’s left – Ortwin noted that she played the role with considered ease. On a couch, a *Sidhe* of singular beauty reclined. His face remained impassive at Ulao’s disparaging comments regarding Feys in general.

Iua had informed the Bard that the politics of Ulao’s court – like the Inner Planes in general - were *extremely* complex and transient.

“Great Ulao,” Ortwin said dramatically, “I bring you gifts as a token of my esteem.”

From the back of the hallway, in a stately fashion, a train of Pixies flew forwards with serious looks upon their faces. They bore cushions of white velvet, upon which rested a number of fabulous items procured by Ortwin from a passing Sorcerer from an unknown world.

“First,” Ortwin gloated, “the Fuliginous Grand Rill: a rose of such exquisite scent that those who experience its aroma are enraptured to the point of insensibility. It is unique, in that it requires no water or soil to sustain it, deriving its nutrition from the ecstasy evoked in those who inhale its fragrance. Be sure to smell it at least once per day, or it will perish from lack of due love and attention.

“Next,” the Bard continued, “a bottled whirlwind. An amusing toy in which, I hope, the Great Ulao will discover some small pleasure. But a word of caution to the owner: the whirlwind is utterly fickle and unpredictable, and does not heed any command. If you loose the stopper, be sure to have an efficient method of escape: although such warnings are hardly necessary for one with sublime mastery of the

airy realms.” Ortwin thought that he ought to cover his back, nonetheless.

“Finally,” he said, “obtained with great difficulty and sacrifice,” *although not be me*, he

thought, “a Pipe of Prescience: inhaling smoke through this pipe, and concentrating upon the desired subject will reveal intimations regarding future events. The hints are vague, of course, but divination is an inexact science at best.” Ortwin bowed again with a flourish.

Ulao raised an eyebrow. Whoever this Ortwin fellow was, he seemed generous and had excellent taste.

And the train of Feys who attended him looked suitably loyal.** His eye fell upon Mostin, who stood silently behind Ortwin, his lidless green eyes peering out from beneath his wide-brimmed hat.

“And this fellow,” Ulao gestured at the Alienist, “is your attendant and advisor, I assume?”

“In a manner of speaking, your Magnificence,” the Bard said smoothly. “He is a Wizard of excellent repute, called Mostin the Metagnostic. He seldom speaks, but has proven a faithful aide.”

Mostin twitched reflexively, but said nothing. The situation, although amusing, would rapidly lose its charm if Ortwin persisted too far in *that* direction.

“Tell me, Ortwin,” Ulao questioned, waving at the Pixies who fluttered around him, “do you have many such servants in your own realm? I am surprised! I had always been led to believe that sprites were intractable and unreliable. You must command great respect amongst your own kind.”

Ortwin bowed graciously, and gave an expression of embarrassed modesty. False understatement was

one of his specialties in the field of mendacity.

The Sidhe, hitherto silent, shifted lazily on his couch. When he spoke, his voice was like honey. “I regret that some Feys have acquired far too much... *Earthiness*...due to prolonged exposure to mortal soils,” he mused absently. “It does not surprise me that servitude comes easily to them – they are far removed from their roots.”

Ortwin looked mildly offended, noting the expressions of indignance which crossed the face of several of the Pixies. His response was inspired.

“Such rudeness! I will, however, pardon your abuse. I am a magnanimous fellow – although great Ulao may take affront at such profanity. Reference to that basest of elements will not pass my lips. I would refrain from sullyng Prince Ulao’s consciousness with such vulgar thoughts: I only hope he can forgive you.”

“Yes, quite,” Ulao said, half-bemused. “Your concern for my sensibilities does you credit, Ortwin, although I am less easily offended than you might think.” He clapped his hands, and a dozen Mephits darted off to bring large, comfortable cushions. Ulao gestured for Ortwin to sit.

Yes, he thought to himself. *I’m in.*

The Sidhe smiled coldly.

*The Duchess of Tomur

******Mostin used a *Planar Binding* to bring sixteen Pixies onto the Plane of Air from the Prime to attend Ortwin. They were paid with a vial of *Nolzur's Marvellous Pigments* and several potions, which had been transferred into tiny barrels for ease of transport.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 10-15-2002

Stuff Going On

The sprite, who had proven skittish and elusive, finally showed himself to the Shamaness after she had entered a trance and invoked some strange power. Orolde – paranoid beyond reason, and constantly

looking over his shoulder for Demons – had felt a strange compulsion.

She was there, in his mind. Probing.

“Who are you?” He later asked nervously from behind the castle door. “And what do you want?”

Mesikämmi did not understand his words until she had spoken an appropriate string of powerful

syllables.

“I am Mesikämmi. I am seeking a Wizard called Kothchori. I understand that he requires healing. Is he here?”

“Kothchori is beyond help,” Orolde replied unsurely. “I tend to his needs as best I can. He is harmless now, and there is nothing of value left in this place. You are wasting your time. Please, leave us in peace.”

“You do not understand. I am *Mesikämmi*. I have yet to find one who is beyond my help, dead or living.

I wish to heal him.”

So, reluctantly and suspiciously, Orolde opened the door.

A strange but delightful spirit, Mesikämmi thought as he revealed himself to her. Half the height of a man, with greenish skin and webbed feet like a duck. He had welts on his arms, and covered them self-consciously when the Shamaness saw them.

“Did Kothchori do this to you?” She asked.

“He is not in command of his faculties,” Orolde replied defensively, “and becomes easily confused.”

“Show me to your Master,” she said.

Orolde took her through an untidy clutter of broken furniture, boxes and shattered glass devices, into a small room. An unkempt man with a ragged beard, dressed in filthy robes sat at a chair. His eyes had been burned from his head. He said nothing.

“Other than his blindness, what is his malady?” Mesikämmi asked.

“He is deranged,” Orolde replied. “He has moments of lucidity, but soon slips into ranting again. Most often, he just sits. Occasionally, he beats me – usually when I try and feed him.”

“Your loyalty is admirable, if inexplicable. Has he no friends who could have revived him?”

“None who cared enough,” Orolde said bitterly. “Or who are willing to invest any of their own precious energy in him. And his works are gone – stolen, like everything else of value. He would awaken to find himself deprived of his most vital sense: his magic would be denied to him. It may be better for him in this way. The only thing worse than being crazy and confined to this forsaken island, is being sane.

Believe me.”

I know where his books are, the slippery spirit had said to her. *That is enough.*

The Shamaness took a bear’s claw which hung around her neck, and pressed it firmly against each of Kothchori’s eyes in turn. She chanted in a language which contained many vowels, and paced around

the Wizard. She sprinkled diamond dust over him, and spoke yet more words. The air around her was

alive with spirits.

Somehow, remarkably, his eyes began to grow back. The madness which possessed him evaporated. He

looked at her.

“Who are you?” He asked. “Why have you come to me?”

Orolde, excited beyond words, skipped and clapped his hands.

“I am called Mesikämmi,” the Shamaness replied. She took the talisman which the bright servant had given her, and showed it to Kothchori. “Do you know what this is?” She asked.

The Wizard seemed to shiver. “Yes,” he replied.

“A spirit gave it to me, and said I was to deliver it to you. That you would know what it meant. He says *I know where his books are*. What is this talisman?”

“It is a seal,” Kothchori replied. “A mark of identification.”

“It belongs to a spirit?” Mesikämmi asked. “A powerful one?”

“Yes,” he answered, “a very powerful spirit.”

“What is his name?” Mesikämmi asked.

“His name is Graz’zt,” Kothchori replied.

**

Over sixty Templars stood before Eadric. A third of them were composed of veterans: Penitents who had sworn themselves to him in the aftermath of Deorham, or those who had stayed in Trempa after

Tahl had assumed control of the Temple there.

The others, including Brey, were new. All were captains and lieutenants in the ranks of the *Magistratum*. Many had observed the Second Descent of Grace at the Battle of the Crossings of the Nund, where doubt, and the realization that *they were wrong* had finally

overcome them. Eadric spoke openly to them.

“The Curia must be dissolved, and ambiguities settled. This must be resolved quickly, and as peaceably as possible. A new Prelate must be allowed to ascend the throne. The temporal power of the Temple

will be greatly diminished in the aftermath: this is a necessary thing.”

“It is likely that much suffering will accompany this transition. Many do not trust me, others do not trust the Temple in any form, others do not trust Oronthon himself. The secular authorities will not allow unhindered access to Morne – despite my assurances that this is an internal matter. This is regrettable.”

“I have experienced visions of Morne in chaos. The Temple destroyed. Murder in its cloisters. I have no desire to initiate such terror, but I cannot say that ‘it will not come to pass’ or that I can prevent it happening. I command you to instruct your troops that, whatever happens, even if we have to take

Morne by force, that the normal ‘spoils of war’ – perquisites such as rape, murder and looting, which soldiers generally enjoy – are utterly denied them. This applies as equally to the auxiliaries and mercenaries as it does to you yourselves. If it happens, I will myself execute the offenders, *and* their officers for dereliction. Take note: I hold you responsible for the actions of your subordinates. Absolute discipline will be maintained at all times.”

“Morne is five days away, although I suspect we will meet resistance long before we reach it. I will brook no petty rivalries, either amongst knights of the Temple, or between Templars and any of

Trempa’s aristocracy, or with any other group. You will not arrogantly assume that you are the elite in this matter, or that others should defer to your experience or piety. You will treat all with equal courtesy

and respect, be it myself or a Uediiian peasant. You will offer such leadership as you can, neither grudgingly nor haughtily, but freely and with an attitude of service, not command. If acts of pride and conceit come to my notice regarding Templar officers, they will be summarily disciplined. Reoffenders will be flogged, and stripped of their rank: they will act as exemplars in one way or another.”

“If any have an issue with these instructions, now is the time to make themselves heard. Likewise, if any doubt me, I will furnish them with a horse and they may ride where they will.”

(Silence).

“Finally, you should note that amongst my closest confidants, I count a Demoness, a Wizard, a Pagan and a Fey. Whilst, initially, you may find these presences difficult to accept, in time you will become more open to them. And you will remain open to the inevitability of change, or you will break, and fail.”

Eadric turned away.

” *Ahma* has spoken,” Tahl said.

The Templars nodded and murmured.

**

Nwm returned to the meadows near the Nund Crossings to find that Eadric's camp had shifted onto the western bank, and had assimilated a large Temple contingent. He sought the Paladin out, and relayed news of events on the northern borders of Trempa.

Using his torc to pinpoint the enclaves of Temple troops – also supported by cadres from Tomur and Thahan – the Druid had simply appeared before their leaders in vaporous form, and issued dire

warnings if they did not withdraw back across the river and disband. A few, aware of Nwm's

reputation, fled there and then. Others, who did not heed his advice, were later subjected to entangling

plants, insect plagues, inclement weather, and pilfering by summoned Feys. Their swords and armour turned into wooden replicas, irascible horses refused their commands, and odd gravitational effects and magical booby traps afflicted them. Summoned Earth Elementals wreaked havoc in the camps,

smashing gear and snapping the weapons of those who tried to strike them. None noticed the sparrow who sat on a nearby branch, chirping happily to itself, watching these events with unconcealed glee.

After three days of harassment, Eisarn, the Temple commander, decided that it would be wise to retreat his eight hundred or so troops before the Druid's apparent good humour left him and he began

employing *Fire Storms* instead. Eadric had, in fact, specifically asked Nwm to 'go easy' on the enemy troops.

The inevitable meeting between Nwm and Brey was tense and difficult, despite Eadric's best efforts to smooth things over between them. The Templar's character – which demanded a rigid adherence to

dogma - had not changed, although the focus of his zeal had shifted. After stiff words and obvious discomfort between the two, Eadric dismissed Brey and conferred in private with the Druid.

"He will never forgive me," Nwm sighed. "I can't really blame him. I constantly remind him of his humiliation. I think the same can be said for most of his captains."

"Good," Eadric replied unsympathetically. "It will give them something to work on. I'd hate to think that this was easy for any of them."

"Tomorrow, the *Tagamuos* begins," Nwm said. "It is three days until the Solstice. I have yet to decide what to do – whether to go to Hethio and attend Hullu, or to stay here with Trempa's Uediians. In either event, I will probably be called to lead the celebrations."

The Paladin groaned. "I'd completely forgotten about the Solstice. This is inconvenient timing. Is there any way that the festival could be, er, toned-down a little? Discipline is paramount at the moment."

“Good luck in trying,” Nwm said unhelpfully.

“If you choose to go to Hethio, any information regarding Hullu’s progress would be appreciated,”

Eadric pointed out.

“Ed!” Nwm said with mock horror. “I hope you’re not suggesting that I go and spy on those of my own faith? I am a High Priest. Seriously, though, the same had occurred to me – but I’m not sure whether I should leave here.”

Eadric looked quizzical.

“For the next three days, your camp will be filled with drunken Uediians fornicating and celebrating heathen rites, Eadric. This might prove somewhat inflammatory. My presence might stop things getting out of hand.”

“Hmm.” The Paladin answered.

“I think a short period of segregation might be appropriate,” Nwm suggested.

“Normally, I’d disagree,” Eadric said. “But perhaps an exception might be in order. The river may prove a useful barrier. Who will lead the celebrations here if you decide to go to Hethio?”

“Nehael is the obvious choice,” Nwm answered.

Eadric looked distinctly uncomfortable.

Nwm smiled sympathetically.

**

The Dreamer drifted within a sea of colours which had no name in any mortal tongue. The Celestial, exalted even amongst his own kind, floated before him. Hundreds of motes of light hovered in front of the Dreamer, and he scrutinized them carefully.

“There is a sixty-two percent chance that the main arc becomes asymptotic in seventeen days,” he said.

“That is why you must act,” the Celestial replied, “or there will be multiple *Gates*.”

“More than at Khu?” The Dreamer asked sarcastically.

“Khu was exceptional,” the Celestial replied, smiling. “Enitharmon authorized a cascade. It was a necessary lesson for Graz’zt.”

“Graz’zt does not frighten me,” the Dreamer said. “His flux is dwindling – I suspect he has too many other concerns to deal with.”

“Not so,” the Celestial replied. “The reason that you discern a diminishment is that he has just facilitated the translation of four Succubi. He will force agency on this one *here*.” He pointed to a dim mote, which appeared relatively innocuous.

“It is the Wizard Kothchori. There is a tight resonance with this one, and this one, and this one,” the Dreamer said, pointing at several other motes.

“I will take your word for it,” the Celestial said ruefully. “Such subtleties elude me. What

is the power of this Kothchori?”

“I’m surprised that you don’t know. He is a Transmuter of significant ability.”

“Wizards tend to escape my notice,” the Celestial confessed. “Unless they are Summoners.”

“Or Dreamers,” the Dreamer remarked wryly.

“Or Dreamers,” the Celestial agreed.

“Is he aligned?”

“Not to my knowledge,” the Dreamer answered. “I recall him being pragmatic rather than philosophical. He was one of Feezuu’s targets in her search for Mostin. He was originally from Shûth,

if I recall.”

“In which case he is outside my purview in any case. The Sleeping Gods take care of their own.

Interference would be undiplomatic.”

“As at Khu?” The Dreamer jibed.

“Must we always return to Khu?” The Celestial asked, exasperated. “It was a finely balanced nodality.

Oronthon’s action was not unilateral.”

“Still, it risked offending those whose power still resides there,” The Dreamer pointed out.

“They have slept long,” the Celestial said.

“Sleep is no obstacle to action,” the Dreamer observed. He pointed to other motes in succession. “This one is the Shamaness Mesikämmi, this one is the sword Melancholy. They are connected vicariously

through Hullu, Nwm the Preceptor and Eadric before they touch Tramst.”

“And this one here?”

“Is another Wizard, called Rimilin. He is despicable.”

The Celestial nodded knowingly.

“This connotes resonance between Graz’zt, Rimilin and Mesikämmi. But I still cannot see the strand between Kothchori and Graz’zt.”

“Perhaps not all tendrils are visible to you?” The Celestial suggested. “Oronthon sees such things.”

“I am not omniscient,” the Dreamer admitted. “But neither is he – no, please, Rintrah, let’s not start that argument again.”

“What will you do?” The Celestial asked.

“At the moment, nothing,” the Dreamer replied. “I will not act preemptively, based upon this probability.”

“A second cascade is not out of the question if fiends are invoked – but it would still require a catalyst.

I doubt that Mulissu would act in that capacity again. Would you?”

“I will reserve judgement on that request,” the Dreamer said. “Although my instinct is to say *no*. I have issues about opening *Gates* in order to solve problems caused by opening *Gates*, let alone because of some *Binding*. The possible escalatory nature of this is exactly what I am trying to avoid, not to compound.”

“But you have already admitted the possibility of action.” Rintrah said. “At what point?”

“If the main arc becomes asymptotic, not before.” The Dreamer answered.

” *After* Morne is sacked?”

“My first duty, as far as possible, will always be to the Injunction. I will not violate it lightly. You must understand that.”

“I do Jovol. And so does Oronthon.”

**

Mostin, having left Ortwin to ingratiate himself with the dignitaries in Ulao’s court, returned once more to his lodging in the city of Magathei, passed through the mirror-portal to his extradimensional retreat, and pondered.

Since his exchanges with Shomei, the Alienist had spent much time reflecting upon the nature of

compacts. Her success with Devils – which was undeniable – came at a price which Mostin found

wholly unacceptable. This, compounded by the fact that she had overextended herself, had led to her current predicament. Nonetheless, as with all ideas with which the Alienist came into contact, he

wondered which parts he could improve upon, and exploit.

He considered Vhorzhe, his former mentor. *What exactly had happened?* , he wondered. The Alienist suspected that it had been an Entity of the higher order which had dragged Vhorzhe – body and spirit –

off to some unknown reality. One of those from beyond Beyond, as it were.

They can be called, and bound, he had told Shomei. But he was unsure whether he believed it himself.

And were there other things, beyond even them? A third order of Pseudonaturals? A fourth? The

metaphor of a series of mathematical constructs, possessing an increasing number of dimensions, was hard to avoid.

There were no limits. To anything. Mostin knew this. Not as an article of faith, but revealed to him through his hypercognitive faculties. The Metagnostic Reality.

He fidgeted, paced, brooded, and sighed. He spent an hour consulting his books.

Outside – ‘Uzzhin,’ or the ‘Far Realm.’ How did one get there? Cryptic references led him to believe that *Plane Shift* was an ineffectual method of transportation. It was beyond the power of the spell.

Is a *Gate* possible? He wondered. Or is it too dangerous to attempt? Is it really a place at all, or simply a state of being – although that argument was unsustainable. After all, what were *any* of the Planes, if they were not ‘states of being?’

The atemporal nature of the place caused conundrums to appear in the Alienist’s mind. *If*, by some means, he could come there, he could spend an infinity there, and, upon returning to the Prime, would still arrive at exactly the same time that he departed.

And would the aggressive, insanity-provoking nature of the place affect him? He was, after all, an Alienist. He had transcended his physical form, and was privy to secrets which few had ever gained.

Secrets which could not be apprehended by a mind limited by conventional rational thought. Would the

place embrace him, or extinguish his consciousness?

He needed answers.

Nervously, he opened a *Gate*.

**

Aside from Iald and Thahan, where concentrations of troops still existed, the Temple forces were thinly spread and ineffective. The Temple compound in Morne was almost empty of warriors, and only a few

hundred others were scattered across Wyre, attached to the various Episcopal sees. Brey’s defection –

along with sixty percent of the Magistratum – was a sore blow.

In Morne, the Curia – or part of the Curia – convened. Daunton’s assertion to Prince Tagur that the body was ‘irrelevant’ was only partially true. The Bishops of Mord, Tomur, Thahan and Gibilrazen –

who, together with Hethio had formed the core dedicated to Eadric’s impeachment almost a year before

– could, despite a diminishment in military clout, still bring a considerable degree of diplomatic pressure to bear. As a group, they lacked the cohesion and direction that they enjoyed under the Prelacy

– or even under Rede’s brief protectorship. The spritual solidarity which so many people expected of the Curia, real or apparent, was also absent. As individuals, however – individuals who still

commanded significant resources, and the threat of anathematization – they were not entirely toothless.

They lobbied the King and the Royal Council for action. Again. Shiel, the Duke of Jiuhu, and Sihu of Tomur, who, together with Foide the Lord Chamberlain and the boy Tiuhan IV, received all four of the Bishops, were sympathetic.

But Eadric was not their immediate concern.

“Our diviners have informed us that the threat which needs to be countered lies in Hethio,” Foide said in a cracked voice. “The Uediian uprising presents more of an immediate danger.”

“Eadric is an instrument of the Adversary,” Gibilrazen countered. “What could be more pressing than

his defeat? He has taken the blasphemous title of ‘Breath of God,’ and has corrupted yet more of the devout. He is an insidious snake, and must be stamped on. The survival of Orthodoxy depends upon it.”

Siuhu, devout in the extreme, shifted uneasily. “No decision regarding how to deal with Eadric can be made without Tagur,” she said. “His consent will be crucial to whatever course of action we decide. His men are already on the move.”

The Bishop snorted. “My see is three weeks away. The Adversary is five days from here. Morne will be lost before the Prince can come here.”

“If so, then not to Deorham,” Shiel remarked drily. “The Uediian movement must be crushed immediately and totally, before it gains any more momentum. And, respectfully your Majesty,” he turned to the boy, “screw Tagur. We cannot wait for his men, or his prevarications. The Prince himself should be in Morne before nightfall tomorrow – he has ridden hard from Gibilrazen. He can make his case then. I myself have already ordered a thousand of Jiuhu’s finest to rout the Uediians and execute any rebels who surrender. An example must be made.”

“Troops which could have been better deployed along the road to Trempa!” The Bishop objected.

Shiel gave a peremptory gesture. “They still will be. Just a day or two later. Kaurban’s forces may still intercept and delay the Heretic – he is already in the field. And Siuhu’s troops will soon be hastening to join him. Deorham is unlikely to attempt to invest Morne with an army at his back, is he? And he lacks siege engines – Morne is safe for now.”

“From the Pagan, Nwm?”

“He may be with the Uediians. Which is why we must eradicate that threat. If he is there, we will deal with him also.”

The Bishop of Gibilrazen laughed harshly. “You would send a thousand men to deal with the Pagan?”

Do I need to remind you of the fiasco on the Nund? They will all be dead within an hour.”

“No,” Shiel replied. “A thousand men will be deployed to disband the Uediian rebellion. One man will

deal with Nwm.”

The Bishop looked blank.

“Rimilin has sworn to defend Wyre against the chaos. He has shown his true colours in this time of crisis – those of a loyal patriot.”

“Are you insane?” The Bishop asked in disbelief. “Rimilin is an accursed demonist. And you would risk loosing this canker on Wyre *with royal sanction*? Your Majesty, I beg you to reconsider.”

“Rimilin will not violate the Injunction,” Sihü said shakily. “He will not be deployed in the field. He will merely contain the threat of Nwm, *if* the Pagan is present.”

“That *is* a violation,” the Bishop said, exasperated. “It is a political act. If he gets away with it, who is to say what else he will attempt?”

“Fear of retribution will dissuade him from any such attempt.”

“And what have you promised Rimilin for the aid that he lends you?” The Bishop asked bitterly.

“Nothing,” Shiel replied. “That is precisely the point. I believe that he acts out of genuine concern – so much, that he is willing to risk even his own reputation.”

“Bah!” The Bishop of Gibilrazen didn’t buy a word of it and, despite a universal suspicion directed at all things arcane, in this case he was right. Because Rimilin acted under direction from Prince Graz’zt, and with the promise of protection and great reward.

Of those four Succubi whom Graz’zt had dispatched onto the Prime, the first, Chr’ri, was directed to Mesikämmi - to incite her to seek Kothchori, to heal him, to bring him the seal, and then to receive aid in her quest to win back Hullu. Afterwards, the Demoness repaired to the Uediian camp to gauge the mood and to await the arrival of the Shamaness herself. The triangle between Mesikämmi, Hullu and

the sword Melancholy had great potential to wreak havoc.

The second Demoness, sent to Rimilin, bore news of the imminent collapse of the Great Injunction.

The fact that Rimilin himself would be instrumental in effecting it, encouraged rather than dissuaded the Acolyte. Invoking a new era of madness and death was certainly appealing, especially if there were no fears of repercussions. The name of the Succubus was Kalkja, and she bore a hatred for Oronthon exceptional even amongst demons. Henceforth, she would act as the Rimilin’s concubine, and Graz’zt would shower favours upon him.

The third, Chomele, was ordered to approach Kothchori himself. She manifested shortly after

Mesikämmi departed, bearing a page ripped from one of his own books. Reluctantly, he agreed to

compact with her. The price of exchange – the return of his spells to him – was more than he could refuse. And to him, Wyre, and its Injunction, held no special meaning.

The fourth Succubus, Aelial, appeared before Shomei with the promise of rewards beyond anything she had theretofore imagined. Shomei raised her rod, obliterated the messenger,

and immediately contacted Belial for advice.

In the Abyss, Graz'zt, exhausted from the efforts of opening access to the Prime for his Demons, retired to his sanctum and brooded. War always brought ample opportunity for chaos, deceit, horror and death.

He smiled.

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**

Here and There; and This, That and the Other: Part 1

Hullu shifted his weight upon the branch, and waited. He was finding it hard to focus on the moment, to be fully aware of his surroundings. His mind was distracted by events that had come to his notice: the mustering of Morne's city defenses; the riding of a force from Jiuhu, intent on crushing his

rebellion; and the arrival of two witches in his camp, seemingly in his time of greatest need.

He had ordered Tarva to watch them, distrusting his desire to trust them.

He patted Melancholy affectionately, glad to have her cold steel – or whatever metal from which she was constructed – to hand.

Along the road, from the northwest, the sound of horses galloping came to his ear. He motioned down to where the Druid, Bodb, rested behind a bush in the form of a boar. Hullu then gave a low whistle, alerting those others in nearby trees to action.

A score of riders, moving at great speed, suddenly came into view. Their standard – a Golden Boar –

fluttered above them. An ironic device, Hullu smiled, as he looked towards the Druid.

As the horsemen passed beneath him, vines suddenly sprang up from the track, and lashed out from the undergrowth on both sides of the road, wrapping themselves around the legs of the mounts. Several

tripped, depositing their riders hard upon the ground. They whinnied, and riders yelled.

Abruptly, dozens of yard-long shafts began tearing into the confused group. Men toppled from their steeds, others drew swords, a handful – including the bannerbearer – broke free and fled eastwards.

Hullu's *Bagaudas* slew all of the remainder, except one, who broke off and ran north on foot through the trees.

The Tribesman cursed, leapt down a bone-jarring two fathoms onto the ground, and raced after him. He spotted him his quarry immediately, and began to close.

After a two-hundred yard pursuit, Hullu found that his prey – a slim man in his early forties, who wore an unassuming black robe of modest design – had turned, and was prepared to face him. He had drawn a rapier.

"Wait," the man said. "I am a simple mercenary – nothing more. I am only doing my job.

Consider this, before you attack me.”

Hullu drew Melancholy, and walked forwards. “I apologize,” he grinned, “but you have chosen the wrong side. Such are the risks of a mercenary’s life.” Hullu knew it well, as for years, he had been one himself. “Now you will suggest that perhaps you can join me, in order to save your own life.”

“Yes,” the man replied. “That is precisely what I had planned. I have no particular loyalty, other than to myself.”

“Your honesty is admirable,” Hullu grimaced, “but your sword is fine, and we need such weapons as we can acquire. And, doubtless, your purse is also fat.”

“My purse you can have,” the man answered, flinging it onto the ground. “But my blade is my livelihood. I am loathe to part with it.”

“Then I should take it from you,” Hullu replied, and leapt forwards. His power and ferocity – combined with a natural speed and a precision honed by years of practice – landed the Tribesman a solid blow.

His opponent’s face whitened visibly as the blade struck him, as if something cold had just brushed against his soul. Hullu paused briefly, and wondered why Melancholy seemed so eager to slay this

man.

A brief but rapid exchange followed, in which Hullu’s opponent demonstrated considerable skill and finesse with his blade.

“Your weapon is a monstrosity,” the black-clad man observed. “But, nonetheless, I will take service with you. My fee is fifty crowns a week. I have tactical expertise which may benefit you. I am also a capable cook.”

Hullu laughed despite himself. The man had mettle, there was no denying it. “Lower your blade, and I will consider it.”

Half to his surprise, the man complied. Both stood still, until two dozen *Bagaudas* had arrived, arrows nocked in their bows. With an effort of will, Hullu forced his weapon back into its scabbard.

“Bind and blindfold this one,” Hullu instructed. “He may prove useful. Did you find the Prince among the slain?”

“He must have been one of those few who escaped,” Tarva replied. “It is unfortunate. Bodb has taken the form of an owl, and is pursuing them.”

Tagur breathed a sigh of relief, blessed his understated taste in clothes together with his diplomatic guile, and quietly acquiesced as his hands were tied and a cloth secured over his eyes.

Had whatever intelligence inhabited the sword Melancholy possessed lips, it would have smiled quietly to itself as it considered possible routes to unfettered chaos. Allowing Hullu to gain the impression that he had the blade under control served its purposes for the present. When the *real* personality conflict arose, the sword would be a little more assertive.

Still, it had been difficult *not* to force him to kill the Prince.

**

Mostin swam in a sea that was not a sea, in a place that was not a place, for a time that was not a time.

An infinity of dimensions stretched before him, each overlapping and melding with the others, joining, merging, parting. Monstrous things that were neither plants nor animals drifted, or moved under their own strange methods, past his vision. In many cases, it was hard to determine whether they were on the same plane as the Alienist, or one of a multitude of coterminous ones. The pressure on his

consciousness was immense, threatening to force his mind into new modes of perception.

It was tempting to acquiesce.

Mostin stepped backwards through the *Gate* and reappeared in his study. Panting, he closed the portal, and walked to the Mirror of Urm-Nahat. Fresh in his mind was the image of a Pseudonatural behemoth of unknown type.

The Alienist attempted to *scry* it, but to no avail.

He sighed. It looked as though *Gate* worked, but nothing else would. How tiresome.

He pondered upon how to contact *Them*. Those from the far Beyond. Did they have names? If so, it may be possible to bring them.

He spent four hours skimming through books, trying to find something that might be of use to him.

One name, that was all he needed.

His search was fruitless. Nothing which spoke of a name. Nothing that even mentioned *Them*, beyond vague rumours and warnings. He procrastinated for a while, and finally decided to pay Shomei a visit.

Mostin's library consisted of some twelve hundred books, many of which were rare and obscure. It was an impressive collection.

He knew for a fact that Shomei possessed over fifty thousand volumes.

*

"I must depart on an urgent errand," the Infernalist said hurriedly. "Feel free to peruse the library at your leisure, Mostin. Half of me hopes you find what you are looking for, the other half desperately prays that you don't. The Spined Devils will attend to your mundane needs."

"How long will you be absent?" Mostin asked. "And why do you trust me alone in your home?"

Shomei laughed. "Mostin, I know you would never be foolish enough to steal from me. Besides,

everything of value is beyond your reach. Remember: do not enter the woods near the Mansion, as

infernal spirits inhabit them. If you venture into the cellar, take care in the summoning room: there is a Hag in one of the pentacles. I will return as soon as maybe.”

“Where are you going?” Mostin asked.

“Hell,” Shomei smiled. She grasped her rod, invoked a ward, and opened a *Gate*. “You can come, if you wish. You are under my protection, and I will ensure that no harm befalls you.” She passed through the portal. Mostin looked at the scene beyond, agog.

A hall so vast that its ceiling was on the edge of sight. A dull red glow. Devils. Rank upon rank upon rank of them, standing in silent vigil. Thousands of them.

He ducked out of sight of the *Gate*’s opening, closed his eyes and waited for it to go away.

After several stiff drinks, he went to the library.

Twenty-nine hours later, exhausted, and wondering why no-one had ever seen fit to devise a spell

which searched libraries, Mostin held a slender volume in his hand.

As he opened its soft, calfskin covers, his stomach twisted in recognition of the symbols amid the letters. A journal. Kept by an Alienist of unknown identity. How had it ended here? This was more than he could have hoped for.

Shaking, the Alienist began to read. So much of it seemed simplistic, almost naïve. But the final entries were of colossal importance.

11.45: *The entity prefers to assume the guise of a denizen of one of the outer planes – an Ulrodaemon in this case. I can only assume that its essential nature resembles this creature, and this is a projection of such essence into the bounded cosmos. (Complex symbols and equations followed)*

12.30: *It does not speak, or attempt to communicate with me in any way. The circle is secure, which surprised me at first, but I must act **quickly** – I have no doubt that I cannot contain it for longer than a day.*

20.00 *Still unresponsive to my offers.*

22.45 *Still unresponsive. I have no doubt that it is a higher order entity.*

09.30 *Still no response. I will attempt to remove it with a **Banishment** in an hour or so.*

There were no more entries, but a set of symbols indicated a name, syllables which would sound

unnatural when spoken by a human voice. Mostin committed them to memory.

How maddening! Who had written the book? Was this the same entity that Vhorzhe had attempted to

call? – It seemed likely. Had he gleaned the information from this tome? He had certainly not written it, as his style and script were unmistakable.

Was it the name of this creature which he had read? A Pseudonatural Ulroloth of the higher order?

Would Vhorzhe have been that foolish?

Mostin considered his options.

**

Although resolved to oversee the climax of the *Tagamuos* rite with the Uediians who formed part of Eadric's army, Nwm nonetheless visited Hullu's camp two days beforehand.

It had grown into a vast sprawl of tents and wagons. There were thousands of men, women, children

and animals. Nwm was staggered.

Five minutes after his arrival, having sought out Hullu, Nwm was even more shocked to observe Prince Tagur standing nearby, spit-roasting a boar. The Prince looked at him impassively, but the Druid saw his eyes flick from side to side, as if considering a possible route of escape.

"Well," Nwm said to Hullu, his eyes still upon Tagur, "things have certainly grown larger – and apparently more complex - than I had anticipated. But I somehow expected the revel to be underway by

now."

"There will be no revel," Hullu said dourly.

Nwm raised an eyebrow.

"Several couriers have been intercepted – it appears that the Duke of Jiuhu is planning a surprise visit, timed to coincide with the main ceremony. He is sending a thousand or so of his friends to join us in the celebrations."

"An attack on the Solstice? That's pretty underhanded."

"But a logical choice," Hullu replied wryly. "I suspect, however, that he deems us less organized than we in fact are."

Nwm nodded, still looking at Tagur. "What will you do?" He asked.

"I have only a handful of horses, and even fewer who can ride them," Hullu explained.

"And his force is entirely mounted. I will, of course, use pikes and longbows – as many of them as I have, at least.

What idiot wouldn't? Are you hungry, Nwm? You have been looking at that boar since you arrived

here."

"Yes," the Druid replied, vaguely.

"The cook is a mercenary who we captured in a raid earlier today," Hullu said easily. "I think his claims to culinary expertise were merely a way to avoid death."

"Doubtless," Nwm agreed. "Do you make a habit of picking up unknown mercenaries and inviting them into your ranks?"

Hullu laughed. “No, but the fellow certainly has a way with himself. But after I’d had him blindfolded and led here, it occurred to me that any attempts at secrecy have been a waste of time for some while.

It’s just a habit that’s hard to shake.”

“How so?”

“Nwm, there are twenty thousand men, women and children here. This movement is bound to be

riddled with leaks. We are four days from Morne, and occupying some of the fattest farmland in Wyre.

It’s not like we can be inconspicuous anymore.”

“And what is your purpose now, Hullu?” Nwm asked carefully.

“Negotiation,” Hullu replied in a low voice. Seeing the Druid’s expression, Hullu continued. “For autonomy and independence. The outlawing of indentureship.”

Nwm swallowed nervously. “And if you fail to achieve it?” He asked.

Hullu pulled a chunk of bread off of a loaf, stuffed it into his mouth, and pointed eastwards.

“Morne is that way,” he said casually.

“I think you may be overestimating your reach,” Nwm said. “You have yet to deal with Jiuhu’s troops.”

Hullu shook his head. “I understand how it works. Think about it Nwm: this movement is already growing at a phenomenal rate. Once we’ve beaten a Wyrish aristocrat in a pitched battle, people will see *that it can be done*.”

“And you think you can force Wyre’s nobility to the negotiating table after one defeat?”

“Probably not,” Hullu concurred. “In which case Morne is doomed.”

“And how in the name of the Goddess do you propose to take Morne?” Nwm asked.

“Even Eadric is cautious on that count – he has yet to make siege engines. He will be relying heavily on magic if it comes to that point.”

Hullu grinned. “To be honest, Nwm, I was hoping that you’d help us on that one. But, if not, others

may lend a hand. A pair of hedge-witches – sisters, maybe - have thrown in their lot with us. They seem capable.”

Nwm screwed up his face. This was a new development.

“And there is always *this*,” Hullu tapped the hilt of Melancholy.

“In a siege? I don’t think that it’ll prove much use.”

“You’d be surprised,” Hullu replied.

**

During the festival celebrations at the Nund crossing, Eadric took counsel with his knights and

captains. Ryth, the only avowed Uediian amongst Trempa's aristocrats (although others had

sympathies), felt obligated to attend in order to make sure his people were not underrepresented. The atmosphere was tense and difficult. Neither Tahl nor Brey were present, having been detailed with

approaching Eisarn – the Temple commander in Thahan – in an attempt to win his support.

Nwm arrived late, after his visit to the Uediian encampment. The news that he brought caused several of the Templars to draw breath tightly. To them, the Druid represented the worst face of radical

Paganism, and only their vows to Eadric prevented an assault there and then.

The Paladin sighed, and wondered whether he could hold his alliance together. Too many factions. Too many different needs. Too much bitterness. He prayed silently.

"In less than thirty-six hours, Hullu will face four hundred trained knights, plus their retainers and men-at-arms," Nwm said. "It will be the first time that he has been tested in pitched battle. He has a minimal number of horsemen, and will be forced to fight with infantry: most of whom are enthusiastic, but

incompletely disciplined. Nonetheless, he seems confident. After his victory – which he feels is assured

– he will attempt to force negotiation with the Royal Council. If this fails, he believes that he can rally

enough support to take Morne."

"Ahma," Sercion, a Warpriest, and leader of four Temple squadrons said, "if I might speak openly?"

Eadric nodded, with a resigned expression.

"I feel that this Hullu is no ally of ours. His goals are not our goals. The Uediians hate the Temple, that is well-known. How can you tolerate this man's activities?"

"Because I would avoid a conflict which polarizes along purely religious lines," Eadric answered. "And because the Uediians have many valid complaints."

"There is more," Nwm said, grimly anticipating the response that it would evoke. "Aside from a number of Druids who have rallied to his movement, he has recently been joined by two witches –

Sorceresses maybe. Neither seemed enthusiastic to meet with me, and I didn't want to press the point.

Both registered as major foci of magical power when I *communed* with the Green in that locale."

Various groans were heard from around the table.

“Also,” Nwm said, half-amused, “it would appear that Prince Tagur is being held captive in the camp.”

Eadric looked flabbergasted, and the revelation elicited sounds of wonder from the others present.

“Hullu is unaware of the identity of his prisoner, whom he assumes is merely a mercenary soldier. I didn’t have the heart to turn him in – and I thought that the information might prove useful. Tagur suspects – no, in fact I’m sure that he *knows* that I recognized him – and now he is unsure. I will keep him under surveillance. If he attempts to flee the camp, I would suggest that we intercept him before he either gets to Morne or is tracked and caught by Hullu’s men. In the meantime, I think that his

experiences in the camp can do him no harm, and may even open his eyes to a fresh perspective.”

“Ngaarh!” Sercion groaned. “I do not understand you or your purposes, Pagan. Why do you share this information with us? It is contrary to your interests.”

“No,” Nwm smiled. “It is contrary to how you would prefer to perceive my interests, to maintain your sense of simplicity in this affair. I recognize that there are some things that I cannot address alone, and I trust Eadric’s judgement in this.”

“Because he is the *Ahma*,” Sercion nodded.

“No, *despite* it,” Nwm replied, exasperated. “Finally,” he added, “I should mention the fact that I was *scried* on my journey here. I don’t know by whom, or for what reason, but I broke the sensor. There are dozens of possibilities.”

Eadric nodded. “You are not the first to complain of tacit observation. Several of the high-ranking Templars have mentioned as much. Asser is one possibility, Daunton is another, and there may be other Diviners retained by the Royal Council – either collectively, or individually. Now we may have two Sorceresses to add to the equation.”

“We would probably benefit from Mostin’s presence,” Nwm suggested, to the horror of several of those present.

“I will ask Nehael to find him and bring him here,” Eadric said. “We will adjourn, and meet again in two hours.”

This is not an Diabolic conspiracy, Sercion repeated to himself several times.

**

“He is currently at the mansion of Shomei the Infernal,” Nehael said to the reassembled council. “I *Teleported* into the grounds, but did not enter the building itself. I left hastily before a number of Devils descended on me, but managed to convey a message to him. He will be here presently. There is other information, but it can wait.”

Sercion bit his tongue.

Lome, the erstwhile deputy steward of Deorham, and a knight who, although loyal to Trempa, had no particular religious agenda, produced a long scroll and unraveled it.

Eadric gestured for him to continue. He was eager to hear the report – much of it was news to him.

“This is the information that we’ve gathered so far regarding the disposition of already mobilized forces in Wyre. It’s long and tedious, but I’ll skip to the most salient points. Most of it was gathered by either Tahl or the Lady Nehael’s efforts, and is the most up-to-date reconnaissance that we have.”

“Eisarn – who may or may not be an ally, depending on the success of Tahl and Brey’s embassy – has two hundred Templar knights and around six hundred crossbowmen in southern Thahan. Until this

point, he had been cooperating closely with a large cadre of troops led by Durhm of Lossan, the chief Bannerman of Sihu of Tomur.”

“Durhm is a wily opponent,” Ryth said with surprising admiration. “My guerillas were hard pressed to contain his assaults.”

“However,” Lome continued, “it appears that Sihu has recalled him to rejoin her main force, which is currently approaching Lang Herath in Thahan. With Foide’s men, this will mean an army some six-thousand strong, on our northern flank. Command will likely fall to either Skadding, Foide’s son, or Durhm. Skadding has precedence, but Durhm is undoubtedly the more seasoned warrior.”

“Shiel, as we have just heard, has deployed a thousand of his men to deal with the Uediiian uprising.

There is no reason to assume, therefore, that he is *not* already in the process of mobilizing the others –

another fifteen hundred or so. If Nwm’s report is correct, then the Duke has committed almost his

entire cavalry to this operation – note that the remainder of his troops consist mostly of levies, and are poorly trained and equipped.”

“And a third of them are Uediiians,” Ryth said. “Of uncertain loyalty,” he added smugly.

“I can testify to the accuracy of Nwm’s information,” Nehael interjected. “I have myself just observed the army moving south from Jiuhu.”

“Skilla of Mord has undoubtedly received a Royal Summons,” Lome eyed Ryth, suggesting that further interruption was unwelcome, “but as yet we have no news of troop movements. Hethio’s forces are in disarray with the removal of Temple leadership.* The Duke of Kaurban, however, is already within

striking distance. His force is small – less than a thousand – but highly mobile. He is three days northwest of here.”

“Finally,” Lome continued, “Prince Tagur’s main force has already left Gibilrazen – ten thousand, trained, disciplined and highly motivated. It will be at least a fortnight before they reach Morne, probably more. Aside from these, no other magnate presents any kind of threat. At present.”

“As to Morne itself, and the King,” Lome added, almost as an afterthought, “the city guard

number around twelve hundred – many of them are part-time militiamen, with little or no experience of

organized war. A number of Thanes and Baronets who count the King as their feudal master, as well as Captains of the Royal Demesnes, are being recalled to Morne. Tiuhan's estates are scattered across Wyre, however: we can probably count on no more than two or three thousand being available to him

within the next three weeks.”

Mostin entered and sat down silently. Mogus emerged from inside of his *Robe of Eyes*, eliciting expressions of fear and disgust amongst several of the knights closest to him. The Alienist stroked the deformed hedgehog affectionately.

“This leaves us in a quandary,” Eadric sighed. “Will the Duke of Kaurban's force attempt to harry us and slow our progress, or will it wait until it joins with Sihu's men? I would prefer to march on Morne *immediately*, but I am suspicious of investing the city while leaving an unfought army less than a week away. Further, can any of these nobles be wooed and turned?”

Sercion grunted. “Not Kaurban. *Ahma*, if I may? Give me three hundred Templars, and half your Ardanese riders, and I will ensure that his men are removed as a potential problem.”

“Olann?” Eadric asked the *de facto* leader of the mercenaries.

“I don't see why not,” the wiry Ardanese Captain replied. “Provided that due respect is afforded us.”

“Precisely,” Eadric replied. “Sercion, your request is granted on two conditions. Firstly, you cooperate with Thane Streek of Jorbu – I would have a third of your heavy cavalry comprised of Trempans.

Second, that you do not attempt to undermine Olann's command.”

Sercion stuttered. ” *Ahma*, I must...”

“Olann will lead the brigade, Sercion.”

“As you wish, *Ahma*.”

“And take care that pride does not subtly inform your choices, Sercion,” Eadric warned.

The Templar nodded dumbly.

“Nehael,” Eadric sighed, “there was something else that you wished to share?”

The Succubus nodded. “Rimilin of the Skin is riding with Shiel of Jiuhu's men,” she said.

Mogus squeaked.

**

In Magathei, Ortwin relaxed amid the splendour of Ulao's court, and the affairs of Wyre seemed remote and long ago. His ode, which the Bard personally felt was long and tedious, was received with

rapturous applause by the Prince's followers, and with a satisfied grin by Ulao himself. Ortwin had certainly done his homework in researching the Djinn's past, and the performance captured Ulao's

triumphs and conquests – both of the romantic and military nature – admirably.

The Bard's ability to ingratiate himself without seeming at all ingratiating, had held him in good stead, and his easy manner had endeared him to many of those who attended the Prince.

Except the Sidhe, Nunimmin.

Whether it was a perceived rivalry, or perhaps a realization on some level that they were *too similar*, their initial mutual dislike blossomed into a thinly-veiled hatred, and exchanges between the two were characterized by innuendos which, at times, bordered on direct insults.

Nunimmin – ancient, beautiful, cool and aloof – was a sophisticated aesthete, and a bard of exceptional talent. As a true native of Faerie, he regarded Ortwin and his ilk from the Prime Plane as being wholly inferior: wanderers in a world long overwhelmed by mortal griefs and concerns. His spite towards the Satyr was confounded yet further when his partner of several millennia – a half-elemental Nymph

named Yoriel – evinced an interest in the 'rustic charm' that Ortwin brought to Ulao's court.

Ortwin was smitten despite himself, and found that he shook whenever in the Nymph's presence. He

tried his best to avoid Yoriel and focus on the matter in hand which, as far as he could remember, had something to do with courtship and marriage. Iua's attitude of amusement at his discomfort helped

little. At other times, she played the role of dutiful daughter so well that the Bard wondered what he had embroiled himself in.

Under the watchful eye of Orop, a large but simple Djinn who had been entrusted with chaperoning

Iua, Ortwin and the duelist met in one of the numerous small orchards in Ulao's palace grounds

"There will be a dowry, of course," Iua said.

"Oh?" The Bard replied with poorly feigned surprise.

"Don't play the innocent with me, Ortwin," Iua sighed. "You knew damn well there would be one."

"This may come as a revelation, Iua," Ortwin said, genuinely offended, "but I'm not doing this for the money. I actually quite like you."

"You *quite like* me. Well, that's decent. We don't want to get too carried away, do we?"

"Iua, I fall in love – or lust – on a regular basis. It's no real gauge of my affection for someone, and doesn't inform my decisions particularly helpfully. I was bad enough

before, but since my...er..."

"Satyriasis?" She suggested.

"Yes," the Bard agreed. "Well, my hormonal urges are even more pronounced than before. It's my basic nature."

"I know," she sighed. "Ortwin, understand that I was raised in the court of a Djinn who is considered a philanderer amongst even his own kind. I am half-Auran. I lack the moral baggage of mortals as much as you do."

"Hmm," Ortwin replied.

"Although I am less of an erotomaniac," she added.

"Hmm," Ortwin said again, somehow reassured. "How big a dowry are we talking, anyway?"

"Well, you must consider that I am his one-hundred and eighty-sixth child. I am favoured, however, and Ulao still holds a soft spot for Mulissu despite what he might say."

Ortwin nodded and gestured for her to continue.

"And," she continued in a low voice, so that Orop could not overhear, "he seems to think highly of you for some bizarre reason. He has the impression that you are some kind of bigwig."

"I am the best liar in the world," he admitted. "That is a title of some distinction. But how much?" He added, impatiently.

"Two hundred thousand gold pieces," she said.

Ortwin shook, and giggled inanely.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 10-23-2002

Here and There; and This, That and the Other: Part 2

**

At Eadric's request, Mostin erected his looking-glass in order to best observe the events that transpired outside of a village called Hrim Eorth, three days southwest of Morne, on the morning of the Summer Solstice. The Alienist had scried the main antagonists in the impending conflict: Hullu, and Fustil - the Baron of Utlund, and Captain of Jiuhu's forces.

The Tunthi tribesman had elected to intercept the cavalry on a meadow formed by a broad meander in the river Nenning, next to which the main road to Morne passed. It was on open ground that, on first inspection, conferred no particular tactical advantage to his *Bagaudas*, and invited a mounted charge.

"I wonder what he's playing at," Eadric mused.

Mostin concentrated yet further, and scenes too rapid to understand flashed across the surface of the mirror. Another figure appeared.

A handsome man, with an oily sheen to his skin, riding a *Phantom Steed*. Mostin grimaced in anticipation of his sensor being detected, but fortunately the subject did not seem to

notice – or perhaps to care. *There again*, he thought, *we're probably not the only people watching this.*

“Rimilin,” the Alienist said. “A worrying development, to say the least.”

“Acting in an ‘auxiliary capacity,’ I assume,” Nwm suggested.

“Yes,” Mostin said dubiously. “Although to my knowledge, Rimilin’s divination skills are rather lackluster.”

“What does he *want*?” Nwm asked. “I mean, what’s his angle?”

“Power,” Mostin sighed. “There is no other reason for submitting oneself to symbiosis with a demon. It arrests and distorts the native ability of bonded wizards, forcing bizarre changes upon them.”

“In Wyre, that seems rather short-sighted,” Nwm said. “The Injunction being what it is.”

Eadric shifted uneasily, and recalled the appearance of Jovol – if it had been Jovol – in his dream, and Nehael’s words afterwards. He had yet to share his suspicions regarding the Ogre-Mage with either

Mostin or Nwm.

“Other lands,” Mostin said. “Other worlds and planes. If dominion is your goal, why not start out somewhere quiet, where you can build your resources carefully?”

“I would hardly call Wyre ‘quiet’ at present,” Eadric remarked wryly.

Rimilin smiled, and doffed his cap several times at empty spaces in the sky. Mostin laughed despite himself.

“He is acknowledging that he is being scrutinized – I suspect that Daunton is also observing with interest, and probably others. I wonder why he hasn’t warded himself. At least he’ll play by the book.

Rimilin is not popular, and is unlikely to do anything which is questionable.”

A flash of insight erupted into Eadric’s mind. Patterns shifted, coalesced, and bifurcated on new levels.

“He is about to violate the Injunction,” the Paladin said.

“That is unlikely,” Mostin answered.

Expressions of confusion crossed the faces of those present as they looked into the mirror. From inside of his coat, the Acolyte of the Skin produced an eagle chick, not yet even a fledgling. Its short wings were bound to its sides. With one deft movement, Rimilin twisted its neck and cast it to the ground.

“A sacrifice?” Nwm asked.

“Or a message,” Eadric replied.

“Observe the legs of the horses nearby,” Mostin said. “They are moving to attack.”

Rimilin himself, however, slowed his steed and cast a spell. An image appeared in the air next to him, seeming to float above his outstretched hand. It was of a town consumed by

fire and was replaced by the ghostly face of a rather familiar Wizard.

Mostin's jaw dropped, as he gazed at an apparition of himself. "Which town was that?" He asked.

"It looked like Jiuhu to me," Eadric replied.

The mirror went blank.

"But the battle..." Nwm protested.

"Shut up," Mostin said. He refocused and, from a great height, Jiuhu – Ortwin's home in his prior life –

appeared upon the surface of the looking-glass. A dozen or more scattered patches, each fifty or sixty feet wide, were burning amid the closely built timber homes in the town's old quarter. Flames leapt easily from one wooden building to the next, as crowds rushed through the streets and people jostled to escape the fire.

"Sh*t," the Alienist said. "That wasn't me."

Immediately, Nwm acted. Sprouting wings from his back, he turned to Mostin. "Keep the portal *open*,"

he said, and stepped through.

He appeared briefly in the skies above the town: it was windy, and gusts were fuelling the eager flames below. Nwm invoked the power in the *Orb of Storms* atop his staff.

Dead calm, torrential rain, he commanded, before stepping back through the portal.

"That should do it," the Druid said, "although it'll take a while for the weather to reorganize itself."

By the time that Mostin had reoriented the mirror, and was looking again to the battle near Hrim Eorth, the scene was one of utter carnage.

*

Hullu ordered his archers – comprised in equal parts of longbowmen and crossbowmen – to begin

shooting as soon as the front of horsemen came within range. Dozens of lightly armoured outriders on coursers fell, and horses toppled.

Behind, the ranks of plate-clad aristocrats thundered on.

Not enough archers, Hullu remarked wily to himself.

The witches – whose names the Tunthi warrior still didn't know – stood nearby. Hullu scratched his head dubiously, and wondered whether they possessed as much power as they claimed.

Ah, well, he sighed, *too late to worry about it now*. He hefted his shield, drew Melancholy from its black scabbard, and invoked the protection of his clan's Totemic guardian.

One of the witches, who had been muttering quietly to herself for ten minutes or more, suddenly fell to the ground and began to screech and writhe, strings of bizarre syllables

issuing from her mouth. The pikemen nearby looked shaken and disturbed, but Hullu's heart leapt.

FROMTHELINNASHEISFROMTHELINNA.

OHGODSANDPROTECTORSHOWCANITHANKYOU.

YOUCAMETOMEINMYHOUROFNEED.

He almost wept with joy.

The river, slow and ponderous, asleep for millennia beyond count, awoke.

*

Rimilin, warded from the rain of arrows and bolts, gazed at the ranks of Uediian guerillas and farmers ahead of him, and wondered if Nwm was present. He considered his assurances to the Royal Council –

not to deploy his magical armamentarium in a tactical capacity – and grinned wickedly as he

remembered his agreement with Graz'zt. The Aristocrats were lowering their lances.

Let's smoke out the Druid, he whistled merrily to himself, as he launched a *Fireball* at the front rank of pikemen, instantly immolating forty of them. *Oops, there goes the Injunction*

Fustil, the commander of Jiuhu's forces, looked at him in disbelief.

Rimilin's smile vanished. Agony overwhelmed him as water evaporated from his body. *What the Hell?*

A Necromancer? Where? . All around him, knights and horses collapsed screaming. Fustil's steed tumbled, flinging the unconscious Baron to the ground, where he was trampled by the hooves of a

dozen others. Ahead, the Acolyte of the Skin detected a distortion in the air in front of the disordered Uediian front line.

Some trick of the Druid's? He urged his mount to full speed, and it shot forward like a thunderbolt.

Rimilin launched another *Fireball* at the distortion, which seemed to quiver under the force of the blast.

A gust of frigid air wafted over him from behind, and glancing back, Rimilin saw that a huge curtain of ice – fifty yards long – had appeared between himself and the bulk of the cavalry. Knights swelled around the ends of the wall, but many of those in whose path it lay crashed into the barrier, or arrested their charge, resulting in chaos.

A wizard. It had to be a wizard, Rimilin thought desperately, *but which one?* . He cursed, banked his *Phantom Steed* away and flung another *Fireball*.

*

"I stand corrected," Mostin said to Eadric, as they observed the Acolyte launch another magical attack.

“What is going on there?” Nwm groaned. “Where did the *Wall of Ice* come from? And what is *that*?”

He pointed to the distortion.

As if in response to his question, it shifted, and grew, and suddenly manifested. The Paladin coughed.

“Er, Ed,” Nwm said, “That’s a Dragon. A big black one.”

“Apparently,” Mostin agreed.

*

At the appearance of the colossal winged reptile, a hundred feet or more from its snout to the tip of its tail, Rimilin veered his steed away and *Teleported*. He didn’t care if it was a Dragon, or a *Shapechanged* Wizard. Either way, he was out of his league, and was going. Not before loosing another *Fireball*, however.

**

Mesikämmi leaned on her staff and smiled. Ah, the River here was ancient. He knew all kinds of tricks.

Nearby, the Succubus, Chr’ri, stood impassively. Anarchy and death – yes. Not entirely what she had anticipated, but anarchy and death nonetheless. That was good enough.

*Traditionally, Hethio, the richest province in Wyre (not counting Einir, technically a Principality), has always looked to the Temple for direction in times of crisis. Many of the Templars themselves are

natives of Hethio – sons and brothers of its numerous minor nobility. With the realignment of so many Templars in favour of Eadric, the removal of a Bishop very active in temporal politics, and repeated harassment by Hullu’s *Bagaudas*, the ineffectual and aging Duke, Falaere, was unable to actualize his considerable resources. Furthermore, many of his bannermen were reluctant or unwilling to meet their own kin in battle.

End Note: Mesikämmi used a *Spirit Ally* spell to call a Greater Nature Spirit.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 10-26-2002

Quote:

I’m curious now. Where do the ‘loths fit into your cosmology, Sepulchrave?

According to Eadric, and Orthodoxy, there are various entities dwelling in the ‘Unnamed Regions’ between the Abyss and Hell. They are also considered to be ‘Fallen,’ in the same manner

as demons and devils. Presumably, they didn’t make it all the way to the Abyss, when the refugees rejected the Adversary’s ‘alternative society.’

On a connected note, one poster mentioned the idea of ‘Paradigm’ and wrote about the importance in the game of Mage: The Ascension. I’ve never played Mage, but I think I

understand the similarity. I'll present five different cosmologies below - as held by the PCs, and one NPC (in this case Shomei). They are markedly different, but not necessarily mutually

exclusive. They just represent different perspectives.

Eadric's Perspective in brief:

1. The Highest Reality is the Heaven of Oronthon.

2. The World of Men is the testing ground which has the potential to purify the Human soul for

entrance into Heaven.

3. The Hells are the Abode of Devils, the Abyss of Demons, who were expelled from Heaven for

rebellious. 'Unnamed Regions' stretch between them, where other fell entities lurk.

4. There are an infinity of Limbos in which other intelligences dwell – some good, some bad.

Ultimately, however, they are all irrelevant. Phantoms to beguile the unfaithful, the resting places of Pagans and the unbaptized.

Nwm's Perspective

The *Hahio*, the 'Interwoven Green' is everything that matters. It is *Here* and *Now*. It is the world around you. You and it are the same. Everything else is a promise of something which is not

Here and Now, – why dwell on that? Look at that tree. Look at the sky. *It is enough!*

Other realities? Maybe, but who cares? They are not *Here and Now*

Uedii is a convenient term, a device through which we relate to the Green. Is she real? Look at that tree – if you need to ask, *Then You are Not Looking!*

Mostin's Perspective

All Reality is a function of the consciousness which perceives it. Consciousness directs, shapes

and informs the appearance of physicality. Consciousness may be directed by Will.

Will is cultivated through the practice of Magick.

There are billions of realities, all equally valid, all subject to Magickal Will. Consciousness has

no limit. It is always moving, becoming something other than it is.

Will directs becoming, beyond good or evil, being or nonbeing, ignorance or gnosis.

I am an unlimited, transcendent, effulgent star. The Gods quake before me. So are you. The

difference between us? – I realize it!

Shomei's Perspective

In large part, Shomei would agree with Mostin. Note that her particular slant is oriented towards

the Oronthon-Adversary duality, however.

Shomei's *Becoming*, to use Mostin's terminology, is based in antinomianism – i.e. a rejection of Oronthon's 'Law,' and the adoption of the Adversarial 'Law' – to challenge, overcome, to strive

against impossible odds, to be forced to fight again and again and again. To fight against Oronthon, and against one's own 'moral' nature: for Shomei, mores are a societal impediment to

becoming, or to self-transcendence, and must be destroyed. This requires enormous self-discipline.

Only when morality is obliterated, can the true nature of the individual be realized. Free of all

conditioning, it soars. Not moral, not immoral, not even amoral. More like 'Trans-moral' or

'Meta-moral.'

Such an individual acts from instinct, and is always correct in his or her actions.

Note that, in her youth, Shomei was baptized into the Orthodox church. Her rejection of that

experience may be responsible in large part for her philosophy.

Ortwin's Perspective

(Shrugs). Gods? Magic? I suppose they *can* be useful. But isn't it really just a lot more trouble than it's worth?

Now, her – that woman there – well...

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 10-31-2002

**

"You are in violation of our compact," Kothchori spat at the Succubus, Chomele. "You promised the return of *all* of my books after Jiuhu."

"And you undertook the obliteration of the town, not a few paltry fireworks," she smiled easily.

"That was not specified in the agreement – merely that I assault the place," he retaliated. "Your master is in breach. I demand their return immediately, or he will suffer at my hands."

Chomele laughed. "What will you do, Kothchori? You have a handful of spells at your disposal: will you *Teleport* to the Abyss and slay Graz'zt with a *Fireball*?"

“Return the books,” the Mage demanded again.

“Or what?”

“I am not entirely toothless, Chomele.”

Instantly, without word or gesture, Kothchori vanished.

*Oh, sh*t*, the Demoness thought. She immediately made an *Ethereal Jaunt* to where her contact, the Glabrezu Thurukos waited.

“You incompetent whore,” he screamed.

The Demoness sneered. “Relay the news to his Highness. I have not lost the Wizard, merely

misplaced him. I will need a larger incentive to woo him, however. And watch your mouth, Pig-

face. I am favoured.”

Thurukos smiled a wicked smile. “Not for long, pretty-pretty. There are a billion other sluts in the Abyss who are just the same as you.”

“Perhaps,” she agreed. “But I am not the messenger bearing bad news.” And, with that, she rematerialized upon the Prime.

The Succubus waited for an hour, and made a second *Ethereal Jaunt*. Thurukos, who was waiting, smote her with a *Power Word* and grabbed her with an enormous pincer around the

neck. It bit into her, and ichor dribbled down the Glabrezu’s claw.

“The Prince has divined Kothchori’s location. He is in Fumaril.”

“Why?” She choked.

“He is looking for the Elementalist’s daughter, you imbecile.”

“Is she capable of reaching her mother?” The Succubus was aghast.

“Who knows? Anyway, she’s not there, so it doesn’t matter. Kothchori is *here*.” (Mental image).

“I don’t need to tell you of the price of failure.”

“No, indeed,” she replied. She smiled to herself. The sprite, Orolde, would give her the leverage she needed. Kothchori seemed to care about his servant more than anyone else in the world.

Quite touching, really.

**

Eadric observed events at Hrim Eorth in the wake of the massacre which had occurred there.

Hullu’s *Bagaudas* moved amongst the fallen, looting their bodies, and dispatching those who still breathed with dagger thrusts to the throat.

The Dragon – or whatever it had been – had vanished, but not before wreaking havoc amongst the armoured nobility of Jiuhu and their mounted retainers. As if to press the point home, the witches – whom Mostin had located around halfway into the battle – had dragged a quartet of fire elementals into the fray, panicking the horses and decimating the front ranks of an already disordered charge. Under Hullu's direction, the rain of quarrels and arrows continued to descend upon his enemies. He had reordered his troops – resisting numerous requests from his underlings to surge forwards – and the brave and foolish few who had reached the Uediian lines found the pikemen waiting for them.

Eadric sighed. Aristocrats could be such arrogant, ignorant bastards. Although he regretted the loss of life, he had little sympathy for the group of brightly-clad knights who had continued despite all odds. At least those who fled were still alive.

A year ago, he would have felt differently, but a lot had happened in that time. The tourneys at

Trempa were a lifetime away.

“What will you *do*?” He asked Mostin.

“Do?” The Alienist questioned.

“You have just witnessed the violation of the Injunction,” Eadric said. “Aren't you honour-bound to follow up on it?”

” *Honour*? No. Pragmatism and concern that this does not escalate further – I suppose so. Others who were observing will have seen the image evoked by Rimilin, however. I am implicated in

the assault upon Jiuhu. If an assembly forms, they will probably have questions for me as well.”

“And that concerns you?”

“Ultimately, no,” Mostin replied. “Rimilin's suggestion that I was the first to act in contempt is hardly plausible. Mud sticks, however, no matter who throws it. I will wait until someone

contacts me – it might look rather suspicious if I immediately embark upon a crusade to

bring

Rimilin to justice, whilst being under scrutiny myself. Especially this recently after Deorham. I'll just go about my business normally."

"How long before one of the other mages approaches you?" Nwm asked.

"Not too long, I'd imagine," Mostin smiled.

Fifteen minutes passed, and a sensor appeared nearby. Seconds later, Shomei appeared. Eadric

immediately became uneasy.

"I thought you were in Hell," Mostin remarked wryly.

"News travels fast," she replied. "Did you do Jiuhu?"

"Certainly not," the Alienist said. "Ask the Paladin, here. Besides, I'd have used Sonics." Mostin raised an eyebrow. "This is the second time that you've called me on the Injunction, Shomei.

What are you, the legal enforcer in Wyre?"

"Hardly," she laughed. "But think about it, Mostin. If things are about to go haywire – and I have information that would suggest that this is the case – perhaps now is a good time to assert

oneself."

"Maybe," Mostin agreed dubiously. "What do you mean, *haywire*?"

"Ask *him*," she said, pointing at Eadric.

Mostin turned to look at Eadric quizzically.

"I've had the odd dream or two," Eadric admitted.

"Go on," Mostin said slowly.

"I believe that Jovol might intervene in the current crisis."

"Jovol has communicated to you through dreams? That is a rare honour. What did he say?"

"Well, nothing, actually," The Paladin replied. "He just *appeared*. Made his presence known. I believe that he is benign."

"Jovol's motivations are obscure at best," Mostin said.

"How powerful is he?" Eadric asked.

"No-one really knows," Mostin admitted. "Perhaps very. I've never met him. I think Hlioth used to know him, before she went crazy."

Nwm sighed.

"I think he may be an ally," Eadric carefully said. "Although I don't know for sure."

"Jovol is active," Shomei confirmed. "My sources inform me of as much."

Eadric's head reeled. Her sources? What sources? Devils, but which ones? This woman was

beyond him. She had personal contact with entities whose names, for him, embodied the ultimate

evil in the Universe. Names which appeared in lists of the Fallen. But she bore no taint. It made

no sense – she was an impossible paradox. Had she encountered even *Him*? . The nameless

Adversary? And she would facilitate the translation of a Duke of Hell who would, at some point,

tempt him. Somehow, however, he could not see her as an enemy. Was that a device of the Enemy? Ngaarh! Don't go there, you'll go crazy.

"All things are necessary," Nehael said, stepping into the tent and sitting.

The knot of logical impasse within the Paladin's mind instantly evaporated, and he experienced a

feeling of relief.

He remembered Nwm's words regarding Nehael: *She spoke to me of a Middle Way.*

**

"Is that it?" Ortwin asked. He had expected something somewhat more formal. "There is no ceremony? No celebration? No congratulations? No *Gifts*?"

"Why should there be?" Iua asked. "Ulao is the law here. He just says: 'let it be so,' and it is."

"So what now?" The Bard asked.

"I am no longer his responsibility. Also, note, from now on he owes me no guidance or aid. That is now your duty. You also, of course, owe him your fealty, if and when he requests it."

"*Fealty*?" Ortwin asked, horrified. "Now hang on. If this is some feudal bullsh*t thing, then he can forget it."

"The exchange is made," Iua said, shrugging. "I assumed that you knew the implications of marriage to an Elemental noble, however minor. If it's any consolation, I think that its unlikely

that he'll call upon your services any time soon."

"Great," Ortwin said sarcastically.

"We should find a Janni, and make our way back to the Prime," Iua said, holding up a small bag

and grinning.

"For the journey?" Ortwin asked.

Iua opened the bag, which was full of flawless corundum stones. “Our dowry,” she said. “Of course, Djinn law requires that the bride alone determines how it is spent.”

Ortwin looked at her askance.

“I’m joking, Ortwin,” she smiled. “What do you want to do with it? We could buy a castle.”

“Ed’s got one already,” Ortwin said. “Assuming he’s not King of Wyre by now. No – let’s just squander it.”

**

Eadric’s decision to march immediately upon Morne was not undertaken lightly. He sent fast

riders to bring instructions to Olann, Sercion and Streek – who had already been dispatched with

a sizeable cavalry – to contain the army of the Duke of Kaurban as well as the combined troops

of Tomur and Thahan, should they attempt to intercept Eadric’s main force. He reinforced them

with another fifty Templars and three hundred mounted auxiliaries, but issued dire warnings

against meeting the numerically superior forces of Foide and Sihü in open battle.

The news that Tahl brought, that Eisarn would support him, lifted his mood somewhat. But

Eisarn’s units were four days away, and had no hope of joining with him before the Paladin

moved out. They were also in Thahan – now, to all intents, hostile territory.

Hullu. Hullu was a concern. What would he do?

The Uediians had not pulled back after the battle at Hrim Eorth, but their *Cingetomaru* – their war leader – had ordered the entire camp to uproot and move northeast. He was also heading

straight for Morne, and support for the movement would undoubtedly grow even more rapidly.

His negotiating position would become very strong very quickly – already, indentured farmers

whose families had, for years, served the Oronthonian nobility of northern Hethio, were deserting

their masters and flocking to join the popular movement.

And – unknown to Eadric - Mesikämmi was not remiss in disseminating knowledge of the events

that had transpired near the Nenning. But, despite her own desires, and following the advice

offered by the Succubus Chr'ri, she maintained a discreet distance from Hullu himself.

"Maintaining a certain mystery is never a bad thing," Chr'ri had said with a wicked smile.

Nwm undertook the responsibility of speaking with Hullu again – partly to gauge the Tunthi

warrior's position, and partly to attempt to determine the identity of the sorceresses who were

aiding him

"I will accompany you," Eadric insisted.

"That is probably unwise, given the current climate," Nwm said. "Besides, I'm going to the mountains for a day or two before I meet with Hullu."

"Mountains?"

"I have a pair of eagles to catch," he said mysteriously, before vanishing into mist.

Hyne entered Eadric's tent shortly afterwards. "They are ready," his herald said.

Eadric sighed. "Very well. Sound the trumpets. We're moving out."

Ten thousand soldiers – nobles, Templars, squires, retainers, mercenaries, auxiliaries, and levies –

as well as numerous camp followers, began to crawl towards Morne.

**

Nwm arrived in the woods near Deorham, and was greeted by the immense form of the bear

Tostig, who slobbered over him. The Druid touched him gently on the nose. Nwm incanted

briefly, and when he spoke, the sounds which issued from his throat which guttural whines and

growls.

"Tostig, free. Go. Eat berries and fish. Find mate."

The Bear grunted, and lumbered back into the woods. Nwm smiled. *No change there, then*, he

thought ironically. The last of his erstwhile menagerie, Tostig had long since been left to his own devices. He would probably still loiter in the woods there – there were, after all, plenty of fish in the numerous streams which crossed Eadric's land.

Lots of land, Nwm reminded himself. Eadric was now *Earl* of Deorham, and Soraine had bestowed the estates of Hernath and Droming on him. The Paladin was, in fact, very, very rich.

The Druid lamented the loss of warm evenings spent on the Steeple with Ortwin and Eadric in

idle conversation. Before conflict, or Alienists, or Succubi.

Change. Always Change, he grinned, and flew north to the mountains. Regret was not in his

nature.

He sped over Thahan, brooding under the threat of war; over the cold, dark waters of the lake of

the same name, and passed over Dramore, ascending into the dizzying aeries of the high Thrumohars. Through his torc, the Druid's mind reached out and he began to search.

*

Chomele found Kothchori amongst the sprawl of Fumaril with little difficulty, his exact location

revealed to her by Thurukos. He was pestering passers-by for information regarding Mulissu's

daughter, only to receive blank and uncomprehending stares.

He was still filthy and ragged: most people mistook him for a beggar, or a madman, or both.

Chomele – hooded, and clothed in the garb of an expensive courtesan, approached him wearing a

different face to the one he had previously encountered. It was only when she stood a few feet

from him, that she revealed herself.

She threw a tiny severed hand to the ground at the Wizard's feet.

"Orolde has another hand, and two feet," she smiled. "Plus two ears, two eyes, and a rather pathetic set of genitalia. *You will do as commanded, Kothchori. Do I make myself clear?*

He nodded dumbly.

**

Three days passed, each more threatening and ominous than the last. Time seemed to drag interminably for Eadric. Moving troops was frustratingly slow and tedious – making camp,

breaking camp, his speed limited to the plod of his heavy infantry, lest his army separated and the columns of men, horses and wagons became spread too thinly and vulnerable.

News of the movements of other units continually reached him through his scouts and through

Mostin's divinations.

To the north, Kaurban's force retreated under the advance of Olann, but refused to meet the

Ardanese captain in battle. Rather, it simply withdrew further into Thahan, and taunted the Templars and mercenaries to pursue it.

The combined army of Foide and Sihuh had left Lang Herath and was moving upon a course

which, unless Eadric entered Morne within two or three days, threatened to intercept him outside

of the capitol. It was led by Durhm, as he had anticipated. Somewhere behind them, the Paladin knew that Eisarn followed.

Mostin's efforts to find Rimilin had been unsuccessful, and the Alienist concluded that must be

Mind Blanked. As he sat on his horse, Mostin thought. Logically, the Acolyte must have an item to provide this benefit – the spell was undoubtedly beyond his means. How had he acquired such

a fabulous treasure? A patron seemed likely – probably a demon, given Rimilin's inclinations,

and probably Graz'zt, given the history of the current conflict. Rimilin would have likely compacted. He rode up the line of troops and spoke to Eadric.

"Demons," he announced.

Eadric sighed. It hardly came as a surprise.

Shomei visited Waide and Hlioth and Tozinak, in an attempt to form a quorum for action and

tried without success to contact Jovol. She cursed the Ogre-Mage for his arrogance in the affair –

what in hell's name was he playing at? He was so damned superior. Both Waide and Tozinak

were sympathetic to her solicitations, although each conceded that little could be done until

Rimilin was, in fact, located. And the matter of Jiuhu also remained: who had perpetrated the

attack?

Hlioth the Green Witch was, predictably, disinclined to help.

As Eadric set camp that night, in wide fertile fields barely a day from Morne, news reached him

that his scouts and Hullu's outriders had spotted each other south of the city. Durhm's

force was

rapidly closing on his position from the northeast, and the gates to the city were closed and barred – most of the inhabitants of the outlying farms having already retreated within its walls.

Morne's defenses were in place, although it appeared that the Royal Council was not deploying

troops beyond the city itself. They probably worried that there were too many variables.

Eadric laughed. He understood *that* all too clearly.

Just before midnight, Ortwin and Iua arrived in the camp, borne on a fierce wind evoked by the duelist. Eadric, seemingly more human again – to Ortwin's relief – fretted continually about the

situation. He was eased to find the Bard as nonchalant as ever, and experienced the distractions

offered by Ortwin's (unexaggerated) stories of Magathei as a welcome break.

At one o'clock in the morning, Mostin and Nehael entered Eadric's tent. The Alienist reached

into his *Portable Hole*, and erected his mirror.

"I think you should probably see this," the Mostin said. He waved a hand, and an image rapidly formed upon the surface of the looking-glass.

Fire. Slaughter. Death.

Morne.

"What happened?" Eadric asked, aghast.

"We are still trying to work that out," Nehael replied. "Hullu is leading an assault within the walls, but we aren't sure who is responsible for the fires – maybe those who are with him, maybe

Rimilin, perhaps whoever assaulted Jiuhu. And the Temple – several of the outbuildings have

collapsed, the Fane building shows signs of enormous weakening."

"I suspect it was hit by an *Earthquake*," Mostin suggested. "Maybe more than one."

"How did Hullu get in?" Eadric asked, groaning.

The scene on the mirror shifted again, around to the eastern side of the city. A long rent, seeming in the very fabric of space itself, penetrated the twenty-foot thick curtain wall.

"*Passwalls*," Mostin said. "Maybe twenty or thirty of them. He has access to *very* potent magic."

"And he is attempting to seize the city?"

"Unlikely," Nehael replied. "He has at most two hundred men with him – although

undoubtedly they are the best of his *Bagaudas*. No, this is more of a guerilla raid. And a demonstration of his seriousness.”

“Can you find Nwm?”

Mostin concentrated briefly, and the face of the Druid appeared in the mirror. He was sitting on

an icy outcrop with two eagles. He seemed unperturbed by the precipice – a drop of nearly a

thousand feet – which stretched below him. As the sensor appeared, he raised an eyebrow, and

began to cast a spell.

Mostin stuck his head through the mirror.

“It’s only me,” the Alienist said. “Do you really need to associate with such loathsome creatures?”

“What an ill-mannered human,” one of the eagles remarked.

Mostin would have blinked if he’d had eyelids.

“They are *Awakened*,” Nwm grinned. “Take care not to insult them. I would like to introduce Sem and Gheim. Sem, Gheim, this is Mostin the Metagnostic. He is a friend, but rather

distrusting of avians.”

“Unfortunate,” Sem remarked drily.

“You keep dubious company, Nwm,” Gheim added.

Mostin groaned. A pair of birds that talked. That was *all* he needed. “I assume that you haven’t spoken to Hullu, yet?” He asked.

“He is safe for now. I had planned to catch up with him tomorrow.”

“Change your plans,” Mostin said. “He’s in Morne, causing chaos.”

**

The old fire that he’d felt in the *Linna* in his youth had returned to him. The speed, the danger, the exhilaration. A rage that bordered on ecstasy. Somehow, however, it seemed to persist. His

desire to slay was immense, moving through his body like a tide.

He had felt the ground rumble, observed the rain of *Fireballs* that had erupted from the sky. He didn’t know who, or how, or where it had come from – the two sorceresses who accompanied

him were quiescent, and as distant and restrained as always. Bells clamoured across the city in

response to the fires.

It didn't matter. He had cut a rift into the wall, thrusting Melancholy into the dressed granite, and dragging her slowly through the stone. The great blocks had parted easily, as if folded back upon

themselves. His *Bagaudas*, under cover of night, had crept below the walls and followed him beyond.

The streets were already in uproar, with lights kindling, people banging on doors, families streaming out of houses, guards dashing impotently around and everyone cursing the sky. "Kill," Hullu screamed insanely, and the guerillas fell upon those present indiscriminately.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 11-07-2002

"Er, so what do we do, Ed?" Ortwin asked, looking into the mirror. The scenes that played across

it were horrific and brutal. "We can't just *let that happen*, can we?"

"No," Eadric replied. "Buff up. We're going through."

Abruptly, Mostin waved his hand. The looking-glass of Urm-Nahat became a simple reflective

surface. "You'll need to find another way."

"Mostin..." Eadric began.

"No." He was adamant. "Bailing you out at Deorham, I used it. Getting Ortwin to the crossings

on the Nund, I used it. Getting Nwm to mess with the weather at Jiuhu, I used it. Gods, I even

used it just now to get Nwm from some mountain in who-knows-where. I have a suggestion,

Eadric: would you like me to use the mirror to get your whole army into Morne?"

"Well, no," Eadric replied.

"Why not?"

"Because it would be a violation..."

"...of the Injunction," Mostin finished for him. "Correct. Is there any difference? Do you see

how it starts, now? This has got nothing to do with me being caught and tried by the other

Wizards: frankly, I don't think they'd even bother at this stage. This is about *why* there is an Injunction in the first place. You know, I think I actually have an ethical position on this. I know it's hard to believe. Hell, we might even have an Injunction so that the little guy – you know,

'Uediiian farmer X' or 'Oronthonian Lard Merchant Y' can lead a happier, less stressful life."

“It is,” Ortwin agreed.

Mostin looked puzzled.

“Hard to believe that you have an ethical position on something,” the Bard explained.

“We’re wasting time,” Eadric moaned. “How long to *Wind Walk* there, Nwm?”

“Ten minutes. But it doesn’t matter – I’ve not got one prepared.”

“Perhaps Tahl...”

“I’ll go to Hullu,” the Druid sighed, “it’s sort of my responsibility, anyway.” He sank into the ground.

“Find Tahl,” Eadric yelled at Tatterbrand. The squire ran off to comply.

The Paladin glowered at Mostin, who refocused. Nwm appeared upon the face of the mirror.

Before the Alienist could even open his mouth in disbelief, Ortwin had leapt through.

“Dammit,” Mostin said. “That’s it. Nobody pays a damn word to what I say. I quit. Find yourself

another diviner.” The Alienist dropped the looking-glass into his *Portable Hole*.

“Mostin...”

“No,” he replied. “The line is drawn, Eadric. You have presumed on our friendship too much –

all of you. I’m pissed off. No-one seems to respect my position in this. They think: ‘Oh, it’s just Mostin being cranky, he’ll come around.’” The Alienist was ranting as he stormed out of the tent.

Eadric looked at Nehael.

“He’s got a point,” the Succubus said.

Moments later Tahl, accompanied by Tatterbrand, entered. The Inquisitor looked groggy and

bewildered.

“Can you *Wind-Walk* us to Morne?” Eadric asked.

Tahl shook his head. “No, *Ahma*. I didn’t expect it would be needed. Is it important?”

“Yes,” Eadric thundered.

“There is always Zhuel,” Tahl suggested.

Zhuel, the Paladin thought. Of course. He motioned in the air, and the celestial manifested.

“I need you to get me to Morne,” Eadric said desperately.

“You are the *Ahma*,” Zhuel replied. “Your word is law. However, I have one thing to ask: should you jeopardize your own life in this manner?”

Eadric's mind reeled, as arguments cascaded through his brain. His duty to those who followed

him. His duty to Wyre. His duty to posterity. His duty to Oronthon. His duty to his friends. His

duty to protect the innocent.

Nehael slapped him, eliciting looks of horror from Tahl and Tatterbrand. "You're thinking too

much again," she said.

"We go," Eadric said.

"Best speed?" Nehael asked.

Eadric nodded.

She smiled and vanished. Moments later, Eadric, Tahl, Iua and Tatterbrand assumed nebulous

forms. But before they sped westwards, Eadric spoke to Zhuel.

"Go straight to Nwm and Ortwin and Nehael," the Paladin commanded.

"I am charged with guarding you," Zhuel replied.

"You can guard me again in ten minutes," Eadric said. "Go."

Zhuel bowed, and disappeared.

**

In his rented chambers in Morne's most prestigious district – the Bevel – near the outwalls of the gardens of the Royal Palace, Rimilin's mind and body span with the immense power which

coursed through him, before manifesting within the magical diagram which he had constructed.

The Balor's name was Uruum* – of less stature than Ainhorr, but a potent Demon nonetheless.

One of the five (previously, six) who served Graz'zt, Uruum possessed a particular talent for

subtlety and guile – qualities which, while present in Balors, had a tendency to be overshadowed

by the urge to maim and kill.

Rimilin quickly stepped forwards and broke the binding circle, in the event that the Demon

misinterpret his intentions. Disturbingly, Uruum had adopted the guise of a small child – a girl

with wide eyes and an endearing smile. The Acolyte straightaway reasoned that the

Demon must

have some kind of device to have achieved this transformation: Balors were not natural shape-

shifters. The Succubus, Kalkja, who stood nearby, immediately abased herself before the child,

conscious of the fact that she could be extinguished by a single thought.

Rimilin, possessed of an arrogant and haughty attitude, but at the same time pragmatic and aware

of the Demon's power, gave a deferential nod.

Uruum promptly stepped out of the thaumaturgic diagram and vanished.

One, the Acolyte of the Skin thought to himself.

**

Nwm arrived near the breached walls of the city, in a dimly-lit alleyway. The narrow street was littered with bodies – some still breathing – and blood soaked the cobblestones.

Nearby, in the

main thoroughfare, the inhabitants of the city were in the streets, dragging children and belongings behind them in an effort to escape the chaos. Fires burned – some started by spells,

others by flasks of oil hurled by Hullu's men. They illuminated the scene with a ruddy glow.

He cursed, as he knew the delay that it would entail, but he had no choice. He knelt down beside

the nearest living form – an aging woman, who bled from a wound to the stomach - muttered

briefly, and touched her upon the torso.

Instantly, the wound closed, and her breathing became more regular.

Nwm stood again, and moved quickly towards the next figure. As if from nowhere, Ortwin

suddenly appeared.

"What the hell are you doing?" The Bard asked. "We need to find Hullu."

Nwm scowled, and said nothing.

"Nwm..."

"Ortwin – let's just worry about the present situation for the moment."

Others would probably die because of it, but what else could the Druid do? These people were

here and they needed help *now*. To act in any other way would have been a betrayal of his

most closely held principles.

Ortwin considered pointing out the inconsistency of his position, and the fact he had killed a

thousand people only three months before, and he was probably feeling guilt and remorse, and...

The Bard nodded, sighed, and waited.

Nehael appeared. "Eadric is on his way," she said. "He'll be a while, though – he's *Wind-Walking*

with Iua, Tahl and Tatterbrand. Mostin's throwing a tantrum."

Nwm nodded, and invoked the last of his healing magic upon a bloody child, close to death,

before standing again.

His perceptions stretched out, and through his torc he apprehended Morne as a vast blot, a scar

on the face of the Green continuum. Ugh. Large areas were devoid of trees and natural life.

Quickly, he scanned for knots of magical and supernatural power.

Half a dozen powerful spellcasters – although no time to further refine the search.

Outsiders: one (Nehael) – two – three (a big one) – four – five – six (*very* close – what the...)

Nwm turned abruptly, and then relaxed. Zhuel floated silently behind him.

Twenty-one major fires burning, dozens of smaller ones. Mostly in the nearby Temple district.

Easier to find than Hullu, the sword. Melancholy = steel + supernatural + extraplanar combination. *There* she is. Outsider and spellcaster also nearby.

"Around three hundred yards away," the Druid said, pointing towards the northeast. "But they

are moving *out* of the city wall. We need to intercept them."

In the flash of an eye, both Nehael and Zhuel vanished. Nwm looked around desperately for a

plant of sufficient size, but there was nothing close. He grunted, and assumed the form of an Air

Elemental, before shooting off at incredible speed.

Ortwin sighed, urged his winged boots to action, and followed. He adjusted his collar as he flew,

and hoped that his new shirt – of finest Djinn silk – wouldn't get ruined.

**

Hullu – now feeling lucid and in control again – quickly ordered the withdrawal of his *Bagaudas*.

The raid had been an overwhelming success, but he had no doubts that hundreds of watchmen

and townsfolk would descend upon him in short order if he tarried too long.

He also felt sick to his stomach, disgusted by his own enjoyment of the brutality. He turned to the sorceresses as they approached a section of the city wall.

“I think that a further display is unnecessary,” Hullu said.

The younger witch – the one from the *Linna* – replied. In their association, Hullu had heard her speak fewer than a dozen times. But there was something about her which was both reassuringly

and uncomfortably familiar.

“It’s too late,” she said. “The Earth-Spirit has already done my bidding. Soon, the Air-Spirit will make his presence known.”

Hullu swallowed. It seemed that they *were* responsible for the *Earthquake*, at least. “And the rain of fire?” He asked.

“Was not my doing,” she replied. “You need to get your men out of the city now. We have only a

few minutes.”

“Call off your Allies, Witch. Enough is enough.”

But she shook her head. “Oaths have been taken. I cannot renege. When the winds blow, a firestorm will likely begin.”

Hullu cursed as he drew Melancholy from its scabbard, and opened another rift in the curtain

wall of Morne.

“Get out,” he barked at the *Bagaudas* who accompanied him, ushering them through. “Go to

ground.”

“You must flee, Hullu,” the Sorceress said desperately.

“My men go first,” he replied simply.

**

Shomei sank into a huge leather chair in one of the numerous parlours at her manse, outside of

Morne and sighed. She threw the red velvet cloth back over her *Crystal Ball* and drank deeply from a glass of firewine.

Whoever had struck at Jiuhu, had done so again only fifteen minutes previously at Morne –

although it appeared that this time, he or she (or they?) had been less restrained. And the *Earthquake* implied either an innovative Transmuter or a Divine caster of considerable power.

Waide was the only one to possess that kind of clout, and he was far too staid to be a suspect.

She brooded.

A knot suddenly tightened in the Infernalist's stomach. Moments later, an intricate brass bell,

suspended on a metal stand nearby, rang once. She almost heaved. *No, not now*, she thought. *It's too damned complicated.*

Groaning, Shomei stood and swallowed. *The last time*, she reminded herself. She grasped her rod and spoke a single syllable.

Instantly, a *Chain Contingency* sprang into effect, rendering her immune to fire and *Hasting* her.

Her skin toughened to the hardness of stone. Swiftly, she invoked another ward: *Mind Blank*. She didn't trust him, this time.

She breathed deeply and opened a *Gate*.

Titivilus, the nuncio of the Arch-Fiend Dispat, promptly stepped through accompanied by four

Erinyes Devils. As usual, his guise was of a man of commanding mien, dressed in unadorned

black, who possessed a scholarly air.

Shomei gave a cursory nod. "My Lord."

"Shomei," he smiled easily. "Our compact is fulfilled, but I would speak with you at length

before we part ways."

The Infernalist squinted. What was his game? She knew that he knew of her new patronage from

Belial – although he had never been so crass as to remark upon it openly.

"I fear that we would have little to say to one another," she replied. "And I am loathe to take up your valuable time. Perhaps we should simply part – on amicable terms, of course. I would not

want to presume upon our association." Although framed in the first person, Shomei's remarks

were directed at the Duke himself.

“Sit, Shomei,” Titivilus half-suggested and half-commanded.

The Infernalist remained standing, and forced calm upon herself. “I regret that I have much

business to attend to, my Lord Duke. Feel free to use my home in my absence – I assume that

your stay will be brief?”

The Duke smiled, and relaxed into a chair. He pulled a leather ottoman towards himself with a

booted foot, raised his legs, and crossed them in an all-too-human gesture of comfort. He poured

himself a glass of firewine.

“I’m in no hurry. We can talk later. When you have time.” Titivilus clicked his fingers and pointed. One of the Erinyes picked up the *Crystal Ball* and handed it to him. “In the meantime, I might amuse myself with your scrying device. See what Wyre’s marvellous Wizards are doing

with themselves in these oh-so-troubled times.”

Shomei nodded, and vanished.

*Sh*t sh*t sh*t sh*t sh*t*, she thought, appearing seventy miles away in the meadow where Mostin’s retreat still stood. She walked up to the door, and rapped on it. Instantly, a *Magic Mouth* appeared.

“Begone!” It ordered.

Shomei banged on the door again, this time heavily with her rod.

No response.

Dammit, Mostin, where are you? Quickly, the Infernalist issued a *Sending* to the Alienist: *Mostin. Tricky situation. Need help and advice. I’m outside your Manse. Don’t scry: Mind Blanked. Prompt response appreciated.*

Seconds later, Mostin’s disembodied head appeared nearby through a portal created by the Mirror of Urm-Nahat.

“Where are you?” Shomei asked.

“Near Morne,” the Alienist replied. “In a *Secure Shelter*. What are you doing?”

“Are you warded from *Scrying*?” Shomei asked.

“Not presently,” Mostin admitted.

“Do so now,” Shomei instructed. “Use a *Mind Blank*.”

“I don’t have one prepared,” Mostin grumbled.

Shomei looked astounded. “Mostin, for one so paranoid, you have much to learn. Do you have a spare valence?”

Mostin nodded. “Give me fifteen minutes.”

“Use a *Nondetection* in the meantime. Leave the portal open.”

Mostin sighed, and his head disappeared.

Twenty minutes later, the Alienist and Shomei sat in a comfortable but rustic cabin not too far

from where Eadric’s army was encamped. A fire burned merrily in the hearth.

“Is this a secret bolt-hole?” The Infernalist asked.

“Hardly,” Mostin replied drily. “It was simply the most convenient thing to do on short notice.

Although the idea of a dozen of these, rendered *Permanent* and scattered around the countryside does have a certain appeal.”

“I have just *Gated* Titivilus to the Prime, Mostin.”

“Ahh,” the Alienist replied.

“Our contract has expired. All debts are now discharged.”

“Well, that’s good,” Mostin said.

“Except that he is still at my manse,” Shomei answered. “And wants to speak with me: presumably to make me another offer, which it will be very difficult to refuse. He is currently

entertaining himself by spying on various Mages. I assume he is here for the Temptation of your

Paladin friend.”

“Eadric is not in my good books presently,” Mostin said haughtily. “I have just withdrawn my services from him. I feel exploited.”

“Is there anything to suggest that he is particularly vulnerable at present?”

“I don’t think so,” Mostin replied. “But why should you care?”

“I don’t,” Shomei admitted. “But I like you, Mostin, and I know that you *do*. And something else occurred to me: if Titivilus is here to tempt Eadric and I called him, have I, by default, just

violated the Injunction? Eadric is a political figure, after all. Have I just intervened in temporal politics?”

“Well, technically, I suppose, but...”

“These vagaries of Law are beginning to irritate me, Mostin. We need to formalize the ‘do’s’ and

‘don’ts’ of Injunction protocol. We need a legal framework, written and attested.”

“An interesting notion,” Mostin agreed.

“And we need a group who have the will to carry through the letter of the Law.”

“I think that certain members of the magical community might take issue with that degree of

control and centralization,” Mostin said. “Me, for one. Anyway, why exactly *are* you here, Shomei? You sounded desperate.”

“My compact has expired, Mostin. I am no longer beholden, but neither is Titivilus. I mistrust him.”

“But you are under Belial’s protection. He will not try anything.”

She looked dubious. “Perhaps. Although I am conscious of the possibility that I may not be

entirely *au fait* with the politics of the moment in Hell’s various circles.”

Mostin smiled. “You mean that you distrust those paragons of fair play? I am shocked to think that your allies may be disreputable, Shomei.”

“This is no laughing matter, Mostin. If I get through the next twenty-four hours in one piece, then my life will become much simpler. One less Infernal dignitary to worry about.”

“Forgive me, if I sound unsympathetic Shomei, but this is really all your own doing. If you must

insist on making arrangements with Devils...”

She held up her hands. “I am aware of the perils. But I am on the fast, dangerous path Mostin.

The ‘Honey on the Razor’s Edge,’ and all that. When a patron outlives his usefulness, I must

dispense with him or her. It is the way I am.”

Mostin sighed. “So what’s your point?”

“I need time and space to recuperate. Regain my strength. When I confront him again, I need to

be fully warded.”

“Why not just let him be? Wait for a couple of days, and he’ll be gone.”

She shook her head. “We are at a crucial juncture - a defining moment in our relationship, Titivilus and I. I can’t just *run away* from him. Until this point, I have deferred to his authority. I will do nothing to initiate a struggle with him, but if he tries to coerce me...”

Mostin raised an eyebrow. “You *cannot* be serious, Shomei. He’d toast you in seconds.”

“I don’t need to actually assault him - merely let him understand that he can’t f*ck with me, like I’m some novice diabolist. That is the way it works, Mostin. If I can assert my

ascendancy over

him, I redefine my entire being in one, colossal paradigm shift. The risks are immense, but so are the potential rewards.”

“Well, if you think that I’m going to help you in this insane scheme, then I suggest that you

reconsider. I’m not planning on pissing off any more Devils than I already have.”

She smiled. “I never asked for your help, Mostin. I’m just letting you know, in case the worst happens. Now, I need to sleep.”

He sighed and nodded.

**

Zhuel appeared directly above Hullu, Mesikämmi, the Succubus Chr’ri, and the twenty *Bagaudas* who remained within the walls of Morne. He sounded his trumpet and descended. The instrument that he bore suddenly became a greatsword.

The force of the blast stunned the Shamaness and two thirds of Hullu’s followers. The Tunthi

warrior himself was unaffected. Melancholy, still in his hand, screamed for blood. His vision

clouded, and the sword took over his mind.

Chr’ri immediately retreated onto the Ethereal Plane. She had not anticipated an Archon. Almost

simultaneously, Nehael appeared in the air nearby.

Zhuel flew down to a height of twenty feet and spoke a word of power. Hullu was instantly

transfixed, although he remained conscious of his surroundings. The celestial alighted upon the

ground and folded his wings behind his back. Nehael promptly followed him. Zhuel observed

Hullu’s sword with some concern, and moved forwards to divest the warrior of it.

Groaning, but quickly recovering from the effects of the Archon’s trumpet, Mesikämmi spoke a

Word of Chaos, and Zhuel was instantly sent screaming in disbelief back to Oronthon’s heaven.

Nehael was catapulted in a daze onto the Astral Plane.

The Shamaness smiled, dispelled the *Hold* upon Hullu, and invoked a *Wind Walk*.

“We need to be going now, my pretty boy,” she said to him. “Make haste.”

“Honey-Paw?” He asked.

She smiled, and they both dissolved into mist.

*

By the time that Nwm and Ortwin arrived, Hullu, the two Sorceresses, Zhuel and Nehael were

nowhere to be seen. Ortwin scratched his head as the Druid resumed his human form.

Concentrating on his torc, Nwm focussed. Spellcaster – there – moving fast – probably *Wind-*

Walking – one other – with the sword. Beating a hasty retreat.

“They have fled,” Nwm groaned. “We cannot pursue.”

“Sh*t,” Ortwin said. “What about Nehael and Zhuel?”

Nwm looked worried, and raised his palms. “They should be here. They’re not. Assuming they

aren’t both dead, it’ll take me an hour at least to scry them.”

“We have to get hold of Mostin,” Ortwin said. “He can do it much faster – and more reliably.”

Nwm sighed. “We can’t. We have no way of getting to him.”

“Then we wait for Ed to arrive,” Ortwin snapped. He was getting irritated. A fresh breeze suddenly sprang up, and Nwm gave a quizzical look. Again, his mind stretched out through his

torc.

What in the name of the Goddess was *that*? Immensely potent, ancient supernatural consciousness. Massive cyclonic wind formation above Morne: well beyond his own power to

manifest. Morne – the fires – and Eadric was *Wind-Walking* into the middle of it. He would be

ripped to shreds.

The Orb atop the Druid’s staff crackled, as he commanded the winds to cease. But it would take

time – assuming that they *would*, in fact, obey him. He had his doubts. Wings sprouted from his back.

“What are you doing, Nwm?” Ortwin asked.

“I’m going to try and talk to it,” he replied.

“Talk to what?” Ortwin shouted. The winds were growing stronger.

The Druid pointed up at the sky, but Ortwin saw nothing.

**

The Succubus, Chr'ri, from her Ethereal vantage point, had observed the expulsion of Zhuel and

Nehael from the Prime Plane.

The Shamaness certainly had a few tricks up her sleeve, she thought.

Suddenly, it dawned on her that here was an opportunity for great self-advancement.

Chr'ri turned to her contact, a dour Glabrezu called Otarr. She scowled at him, knowing that he

had not recognized Nehael, but not wishing him to steal her own glory.

“Relay to his Highness that our secondary mission has been a success,” she said in a matter-of-

fact way. “The bitch Nehael is stranded somewhere on another Plane. I await further instructions.”

Otarr, unwilling to admit that he did not know of this ‘Secondary Mission,’ grunted and *Plane*

Shifted back to the Abyss.

Chr'ri grinned. There would be a fat reward for *that* information.

**

Jovol screwed up his wizened and tattooed face as he attempted to interpret the web of possibilities. The deviation in the main arc remained minimal, and events seemed to be propelling it inexorably towards the asymptote – still twelve days away.

He inspected the Graz'zt mote, which had become more conspicuous in the past few days. Rintrah had been correct in his appraisal of the Demon Prince's involvement. The agency of both

Kothchori and Rimilin, although possessing no mutual vibration – save that offered by the succubi – appeared to possess catenaries which fed directly into the nodality itself. The wizard

hypothetically advanced the web over the next few days, and watched the motes blur as probabilities parted and coalesced. As the asymptote began to manifest in the model, tendrils

snapped and, as if from nowhere, bright points of light, burning like magnesium, flashed across

his view: *Gates* opening to various other worlds.

Shomei had already opened two to Hell, Mostin one to the Far Realms. Rimilin had compacted

with a Balor, and looked set to bring three more onto the Prime at Graz'zt's instruction –

assuming that events followed the most likely course of action. Mesikämmi worried him with her

primeval spirits. And Kothchori was another concern – his flux was unstable and could swing

either way.

The Dreamer sighed as he weighed his responsibilities in the balance, and a variety of possible

scenarios flashed through his head. If and when the time came, he would need to act decisively

and without reservation. But of the hundreds of permutations which he contemplated, when his

own involvement was added to the mix, he foresaw his own death.

He smiled ironically. If he acted *now*, then this could probably be prevented with the minimum

fuss. But he could not, in all conscience, act *now* because it was still an ‘if’ and not a ‘when.’ By the time that it became a ‘when,’ it would be too late – for himself, at least.

But the projection of events after his own death held exciting possibilities for the future, and that was a reassuring thought.

Besides, physical death was really nothing more than a minor inconvenience. He would carry on

dreaming, and that’s what mattered.

The sea of motes vanished, and under the force of his will, dreamscapes around Jovol flashed by

– half remembered visions and insights of entities long passed away. Immense turbulence surrounded him briefly, but he passed through, and latched onto an idle half-thought entertained

by a beautiful woman who dozed beneath a pomegranate tree with a quill pen in her hand. Effortlessly, the Ogre-Mage corporeated next to her.

Mulissu stirred, raised an eyebrow, and looked up. “Jovol, I assume?”

*Uruum was also the Balor *summoned* by Ainhorr at Khu, who caused Ortwin to *implode*.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 11-11-2002

It was Night-time. Clouds shot across the face of the Moon, moving at unnatural speed, and the sky above Morne was lit with an eerie glow from the fires burning within it.

Mesikämmi and Hullu flew southwest for only three or four minutes, covering as many miles,

before the Shamaness commanded them to descend. No word was spoken between them in that

time. As they resumed their solid states, the wind had begun to blow strongly. The warrior turned

to the witch.

“My men...” he began.

“They will be fine, if they follow your advice and go to ground. We are not safe in the sky now, and we need to do the same. The storm will be very large, and even our own camp will be

somewhat affected – as well those of our enemies.”

“And Morne?” He asked.

“The eye wall is directly above Morne, the eye itself a little north of the city.”

“Mesikämmi, what are you doing here?”

She smiled. “We are destined for great things, you and I. Bright spirits have told me as much.”

“And the creature that you banished – the servant of the Wyrish God?”

The Shamaness shrugged. “I don’t pretend to understand the subtleties of it all.”

Hullu sighed. His life was currently more complex than he truly cared for. He looked at her

openly.

“My sword concerns me, Honey-Paw. And I feel tossed around by forces which I do not comprehend.”

Mesikämmi laughed loud. “That is the price of power, my boy.”

**

Tornado force winds emanated from Nwm as he ascended, overpowering even the intense air

currents which were forming above the city.

In the centre, where he flew, was a zone of absolute calm.

His sight stretched out through his torc, and instantly apprehended the storm system. It was

immense, and extended well beyond the range of his perceptions. Its total diameter must exceed

fifty miles. Totally beyond anything that he, or any other spellcaster that he could imagine, was

capable of.

Through his inner vision, he knew that he approached the locus of power from which the winds

emanated, although it was invisible to his mundane sight. Glancing down, Morne stretched beneath him: flames were spreading rapidly in the Temple Quarter as the numerous fires fed off

of the growing gusts.

Suddenly the entity manifested above him, and Nwm gasped. He had never seen or heard of

anything like it: like some vast, iridescent eel or lizard, with scales of crimson and aquamarine. It seemed ancient, almost atavistic, and possessed a primal beauty and presence that almost

overwhelmed Nwm with awe.

Nwm cast *Tongues* upon himself, and yelled up to it.

“You have no business here. Call off the storm and return whence you came.”

A *Lightning Bolt* struck the Druid, and he cursed.

“Desist, or I will hurl you from the sky.” He yelled again.

The creature cavorted wildly, seeming to delight in the destruction it was causing, and flew

straight towards Nwm, seemingly unperturbed by the two hundred mile-an-hour winds which

surrounded him. Two great claws slashed at the Druid, and its maw – full of backward pointing

teeth – bit him. Pain shot through his body.

Nwm *Shapechanged* into a colossal red dragon, which dwarfed the creature.

It promptly vanished.

Heh, thought the Druid. His blindsight revealed nothing, however. The creature had disappeared.

And his torc indicated the same thing – it was simply no longer there. Curious.

And the wind still blew.

**

East of Morne, and approaching rapidly, four *Wind-Walkers* – Eadric, Iua, Tatterbrand and Tahl –

were beginning to experience discomfort in the growing winds.

“We should descend,” Tahl yelled. “It’s getting too dangerous.”

Eadric swore. They were still three miles from the city, and from where they were, the flames

and smoke were visible – blowing in gouts from within the walls. He nodded, and they drifted

down towards the ground. The Paladin was unsure whether Nwm had invoked the winds and, if

so, whether he knew about their own approach.

As they landed, and resumed their solid forms, all saw that they were bleeding: physical effects

of the strong winds upon their nebulous bodies.* Eadric squinted towards Morne, dropping his

visor to prevent dust and debris from entering. He couldn't believe what he saw.

"Dragon," Iua screamed, pointing.

"I see it," he shouted back. Holy Oronthon protect us! It is *enormous*.

He had never even heard tell of one that size before, and it was a Red. It was flying straight

towards them. He had absolutely no doubt that they would all die. He groaned. Two Dragons in

Wyre in two weeks – more than in the past two centuries.**

Nwm assumed the shape of a Roc before he came within spell range, and landed nearby. The

ground shook.

"KRAAK. KRA-KRAAK..." he began to screech. Still under the effects of the *Tongues* spell, the others miraculously understood him.

"The winds *are* beginning to abate in the immediate vicinity of Morne," he explained. "I have seen to that. But the storm is immense – effectively, what I have done is increase the size of the eye to a six mile diameter. Beyond that, the winds are intensifying. And I cannot make it rain as

well within the central area – at least not until I have meditated and replenished my powers."

"I can," Iua shouted back at him. "Get me into the centre, and I can bring rain to douse the flames."

He nodded. "Then we should go as quickly as possible. Grab a claw, and I will fly us all in.

Eadric, you should know something: Nehael and Zhuel are both missing – possibly destroyed.

They are no longer within the range of my torc. I'm sorry."

And the Paladin's world was turned upon its head.

**

Within thirty minutes Eadric, Nwm, Ortwin, Iua, Tahl, and Tatterbrand stood within a small market square in the Temple district. The wind had ceased around them, and rain fell

in great

sheets from the sky, slowly quenching the flames.

Steam and smoke rose into the air. Corpses littered the streets – some slain by Hullu's guerillas, some burned, others flung and battered by the winds or struck by flying debris. Pieces of

masonry, tiles and beams from roofs lay strewn around. People wept.

But this is not what I saw in my dream, Eadric thought. *Is there more yet to come?*

And then, *Nehael!*

Nearby, nervously, a squad of Templars were approaching.

The Paladin groaned. He turned to Tahl. "Can you contact Mostin?"

The Inquisitor nodded. "I can issue a *Sending*."

"Screw that," Iua interjected. "He has hardly been of use. Do you plan on begging him?"

"If necessary," Eadric snapped. He hoped that the Alienist's mood had passed. The Paladin pointed at the approaching troops. "Nwm, can you...?"

The Druid sealed them off with a *Wall of Thorns*.

Tahl's *Sending* consisted of two words:

Please Help.

**

Shomei was finding sleep difficult: around the *Secure Shelter*, beyond the zone of calm established by Nwm over Morne, the winds raged. She tossed uneasily in her bunk. Mostin sat in

an uncomfortable wooden chair, idly stroking his hedgehog, and musing about pseudonatural

entities of an altogether different order of power.

The shutters and door rattled. Gusts of wind blew down the chimney and sent clouds of smoke

and ash into the small cabin.

Pah! So much for 'Secure,' the Alienist grumbled to himself. This was ridiculous. *Rustic* was rapidly beginning to lose its charm.

Please Help, Tahl's voice, in his mind.

He scowled, and grunted. What nonsense had they gotten themselves into now? Quickly he

Scried the Inquisitor.

There they all were. Looking deflated, wet and bedraggled. Nwm pointed at the sensor, and

Ortwin gave his best endearing smile, nodding optimistically.

Mostin sighed. They didn't seem to be in any danger. He thrust his head through the portal.

"What do you want?" He grumbled.

"We have a situation," Nwm explained.

"You always have a 'situation,'" Mostin chided.

"This is a bad one," The Druid said.

Mostin groaned, and made a beckoning gesture. "Come on," he said.

*

Ortwin stood with his back to the fire, and steam rose from his *Cloak of Displacement*. Within the small cabin, it rapidly became very humid: seven people, five of whom were very wet,

crowded within. Tahl had left upon arriving through the mirror, walking the half mile through the

storm to his tent – assuming any of it still remained – in order to use a scroll to quiet the weather in the vicinity.

Eadric glanced suspiciously at the Infernalist, who reclined in deep thought upon a nearby bunk.

He was about to question her presence, but decided that it might be impolitic, given Mostin's

mood. There was a short but decidedly uncomfortable silence.

Mostin gestured. Clothes instantly dried, and vapour disappeared.

"Why aren't you in your manse?" Nwm asked the Alienist.

"Because I had no *Teleports* prepared, because I didn't want to leave the mirror unattended, and because I wanted some peace and quiet," Mostin snapped.

Nwm nodded. Evidently Mostin was still tetchy. Briefly, the Druid explained the situation.

"Can you *Scry* for them?" Eadric asked.

"I can try, I suppose," Mostin said wearily. Five minutes passed, but no clues to the whereabouts of either Zhuel or Nehael were forthcoming.

"So are they dead?" Eadric asked.

"Either that or, obviously, in a place which cannot be *Scried*," Mostin nodded.

"How can we know?"

"I'll attempt a *Discern Location*, but it will have to wait until morning. If that yields no result, then we can assume the worst." He sighed. "You may as well just make yourselves comfortable until Tahl deals with the weather. I regret that I have nothing to offer anyone in the way of

refreshments.”

Shomei groaned. “Oh stop being so damned stiff, Mostin.” She began a brief incantation, and Eadric suddenly became very nervous.

The Infernalist waved, and a Djinn appeared. Eadric relaxed.

“Make some tasty snacks, and some firewine, and some utensils,” she instructed. The genie broke a splinter of wood from one of the logs near the fire, cast a *Major Creation*, and made all manner of rude wooden goblets, plates and cups, together with a huge pitcher. It clapped its hands, and

suddenly the small desk sagged under the weight of exotic viands.

Iua scowled. It seemed rather demeaning to use the members of her own race as simple butlers.

Ortwin grinned. “Great,” he said. Ed might be depressed, but the Bard wasn’t about to let it interfere with his appetite.

*

Outside of the cabin, the winds began to abate – evidently Tahl had retrieved the scroll, and

forced the weather to subside. There were now two lacunae of still air within the storm’s two

thousand square mile extent: one around Morne, the other in their immediate area.

By the time that those in the *Secure Shelter* had finished eating – albeit in a subdued atmosphere

– the Inquisitor had safely returned.

“The camp was in chaos,” he informed Eadric. “Many of the canvas tents have been ripped away.

Anything that wasn’t tied down, or sufficiently heavy, is somewhere other than it was two hours

ago. Numbers of horses have escaped. It may take some time to gather things together.”

The Paladin nodded.

“The one reassuring thing *Ahma*,” Tahl continued, “is that the forces of Kaurban and Sihū are doubtlessly caught within the storm as well. We might be able to use this to our advantage. How

much longer is the main system likely to persist?”

““Fifteen hours,” Nwm answered.

Eadric mused briefly. “Could we open a corridor of still air between here and the city?”

Nwm nodded. “I had just considered that.”

“Return to the camp,” the Paladin instructed Tahl blackly. “Send messages to Olann, Sercion, Streek and Eisarn: as soon as the storm lets up, they are to head straight for

Morne at their best speed – they are *not* to tarry. Instruct Brey to be ready to move on my order.”

The Inquisitor nodded, and departed.

“How long until dawn, Nwm?”

“Only two hours,” the Druid sighed. “But I am exhausted. I need to rest before tomorrow.”

There were several nods of agreement

Ortwin immediately transferred himself to the most comfortable bunk. “Here is as good a place as any,” he smiled.

*

It was close to noon of the next day before those present had made themselves ready.
Eadric

donned his armour, prayed briefly, and exited the cabin to inspect the damage of the previous night.

Branches lay strewn around, snapped from trees during the windstorm as the Paladin walked

down the gentle slope towards the camp. It was deceptively still, and he knew that only two

miles away, beyond the zone of calm, the winds still pummeled the lands in the vicinity.
He

wondered about the effects on the harvest: this was some of Wyre’s richest farmland, and Morne’s bread-basket.

He spoke briefly with Brey, Tahl, Ryth and Soraine, who were overseeing the operation to reorder the camp and to retrieve and repair as much as possible from the previous night, and tried to occupy himself.

Eadric fretted, found himself unable to concentrate, and walked back to the small cabin.
He

waited impatiently for Mostin to finish scanning his books, but said nothing until the Alienist had cast his divination. The others stood by tensely.

Mostin sighed. “The news is a mixture of good and bad,” he said. “Mostly bad. Nehael is alive.

She might be better off dead, however. She is currently on the forty-seventh layer of the Abyss,

beneath the palace of Graz’zt in Azzagrat.”

Eadric’s jaw dropped. *How?*

Mostin considered for a moment. “I could attempt a *Planar Binding* to bring her here.”

“Do it, Mostin. Anything.”

But fifteen minutes later, when the *Binding* had failed, Eadric's mood was black. Perhaps she was warded. Perhaps she was already magically bound. Perhaps she was in an area of *Antimagic*.

Mostin was unsure.

The Paladin swallowed. "Thank-you Mostin. I appreciate it. And my sincere apologies, if you

think that I have disrespected you for your friendship and the help you have rendered."

Mostin gave an embarrassed grumble.

"Was she abducted?" Nwm asked.

The Alienist shrugged. "Perhaps. Perhaps a Bebilith snatched her way. Perhaps she was *Banished* or *Dismissed*."

"When that happened before, you quickly retrieved her," Ortwin pointed out.

"Circumstances seldom repeat themselves exactly," Shomei said. She turned to Eadric.

"I'm sorry. Really. She is a remarkable individual." The Infernalist groaned, inspecting her watch. "I should go. Wish me luck, Mostin."

She vanished.

"What's up with her?" Ortwin asked.

Mostin laughed. "If you really want to know, she is about to engage in a battle of wills with a Devil who has a reputation for cunning, twistedness and subtlety which makes even his own kind

quail."

Eadric looked uneasy.

Mostin nodded. "Your tempter is here, Eadric. Shomei has her own agenda to pursue with him,

however."

Eadric swallowed. He would ask Tahl to *Commune* later. Several questions needed to be answered. And the whereabouts of Zhuel were still a concern.

**

Twelve seconds after Nehael had been thrust onto the Astral Plane, the Glabrezu Otarr had *Plane Shifted* to the Abyss.

Six seconds later, he *Teleported* to the Iron Halls of Graz'zt. He was immediately granted an audience: the Prince had instructed the Mariliths who guarded entry to his sanctum that all news

regarding Wyre – and especially Eadric – be relayed to him as quickly as possible.

Otarr communicated the news telepathically to the Great Demon, who writhed ecstatically at the

news.

He *Scried* the Succubus within moments, summoned Ainhorr and his jailer – an intemperate

Nalfeshnee named Trakkao, opened a *Gate* in her immediate vicinity and, accompanied by his

majordomo and chief administrator of pain, stepped through.

Unfortunately for Nehael, *Teleportation* was not an option upon the Astral Plane.

Within one minute of being banished by Mesikämmi's *Word of Chaos*, Nehael was captured,

bound in the same *Dimensional Shackles* that had once held the Marilith Uzmi, and led in mockery back to the forty-seventh level of the Abyss.

Graz'zt had her flung into a hole until he could decide what to do with her. He would find something particularly inventive and unpleasant, preferably lasting several aeons.

Prince Graz'zt seldom left the confines of his own palace, much less made extraplanar sorties.

This had been a *special* case, however.

* *Wind-Walkers* in my campaign house rules suffer 5 points of damage per round with no saving throw for every increment in wind speed above *strong*: i.e. *severe* = 5/round; *windstorm* =

10/round; *hurricane* = 15/round and *tornado* = 20/round. In addition, those subjected to *tornado* force winds must make a Fortitude save (DC20) every round or be ripped apart by the winds and

die. By the time that the party landed, the winds had already reached storm force.

**Although northern Dramore was terrorized by a Blue Dragon some years previously, which

roosted in the High Thrumohars. Eadric, Nwm and Ortwin hunted it down and killed it.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 11-21-2002

Is the Archon Zhuel safe and unharmed?

Yes. He is with **ME**.

(Awe. Oronthon's words – not Urthoon's – resonate in the mind of Tahl, piercing his soul with

their perfect clarity. Unexpected explication beyond a simple affirmation or denial.)

May I recall him to the world of men?

Yes.

Is the temptation of the *Ahma* imminent?

Temptation is ever present

(Words to generate insight, not to dissemble. Tahl feels with his whole being. New levels of truth

are revealed. Layers of paradox are shed away.)

But the Duke Titivilus is here for the purpose of his temptation?

Yes.

(Grief at the Fall, aeons before. So intense that Tahl's body shakes, unable to contain its full

magnitude. Compassion, and the desire to forgive, extended even into the deepest pit of Hell.)

Can the Succubus Nehael be released from bondage?

*Not by **ME**. She has placed herself beyond **MY** protection by her actions.*

Will the *Ahma* triumph over his foes?

Only if he can determine who they are.

Will Morne suffer more?

Yes.

Will the Archiepiscopacy be reestablished?

Yes.

Soon?

He comes.

The *Ahma* has told me that it will be Tramst.

I will be Tramst.

(Awe.)

Lord, grace me with Your wisdom.*

*Not all truths are unequal. Remember that **I** love you, Tahl.*

Tahl wept, as the Longing of Separation descended upon him.**

**

Eadric sat in full harness upon Contundor and observed as his troops formed themselves into

their companies. Around him, the wreck of the encampment still stood: rags of canvas hung

limply from broken poles, and belongings that were less than essential lay strewn around. He had

ordered that the army had broken camp as quickly as practicable: speed was of the

essence.

The air was unnaturally still as a result of Nwm's interference in the prevailing storm – which,

according to the Druid, still had three hours left to blow. The Paladin's mood was bleak, as he

contemplated Tahl's words, and he hardly paid attention to the Inquisitor, or to Brey, or to Soraine; all of whom sat upon horses nearby.

Not all truths are unequal.

Curious words, framed in a double negation that was almost Urgic in its construction: a *kios*, as the heretical mystics named it. Somehow, he felt that he could not connect with the phrase, and

his stomach was still an empty pit, which turned every time he considered Nehael.

He watched idly as he observed Iua and Nwm approach, flying from the west towards him. The

Auran steed upon which the Duelist rode moved gracefully through the air. The Druid, in aquiline form, was flanked by Sem and Gheim – apparently a mated pair, although Eadric was

still unsure which was which, and what their respective sexes were.

Ortwin, disguised by a glamour, reined in next to the Paladin. "Have you ever seen a goat ride a

horse before?"

Eadric scowled. He was not in the mood for levity. "Where is Mostin?"

"Contemplating Goetic mysteries," Ortwin replied lightly. "Are you sure about this Ed? Is your

judgment sound?"

"Who knows? I still doubt – although I regard that as a good sign. But I am tired, Ortwin. I long

for this to be over."

"And Nehael?"

"I can do nothing. I'm not yet ready for the confrontation that would entail. I don't know if I ever will be: I am, in the final analysis, mortal."

"I'm not," the Bard grinned. "And I am no longer bored. I have decided to live for at least a

million years: circumstances permitting, of course. Beware of becoming too heavy, Ed. It isn't

worth it."

The Paladin raised an eyebrow. “Now is hardly the time for platitudes, Ortwin.”

Nwm landed nearby, and assumed human shape. “The corridor is open,” he said. “And you have

twelve hours on the enemy, at least, before they can recover from the tempest. But it’s quite a

gambit.”

Eadric nodded, and motioned to Hyne. The Herald’s trumpet rang out, and the call was taken up

by a hundred more.

**

Tiuhan IV, the Boy King, met with the Small Council in the audience hall of the Royal Palace in Morne. Sihu, the Duchess of Tomur; the Lord Chamberlain, Foide of Lang Herath; Attar, the

grizzled Warden of the North; Skilla of Mord, recently arrived in the Capitol; a dozen other

knights and captains of renown; and the Bishops of Gibilrazen and Thahan. Jholion, the Marquis

of Methelhar, was noticeably absent – he and the small cadre of soldiers that he had with him

were under close scrutiny. As Brey’s paternal uncle, Foide had recommended Jholion’s exclusion

on the basis of dubious loyalty.

Water fell from a great hole that been ripped in the roof by the winds of the previous night: the

rains had passed, but enough water remained in pools among the twisted tiles to provide a constant drip. Conversation was tense and agitated.

A raid by the Uediian rebels. Tagur missing. Rumours of the Heretic’s presence in the city, only

hours before. A storm of immense proportions, either started by the Pagan, or suppressed by him

– stories were conflicting. The Druid moving through the wounded, healing them. The Druid

invoking pagan magic to assault a group of Templars. A rain of fire from high above Morne.

Dragons, Rocs, Shapeshifters. An Earthquake, striking the Temple itself, but leaving the rest of

the city untouched.

Some had reported seeing celestials. Others, demons.

The Bishop of Gibilrazen, as usual, had a skewed but not entirely misplaced opinion.

“You doomed yourselves by dealing with the demonist, Rimilin,” he half-mourned and half-

gloated. “I warned you of as much. Now Oronthon has abandoned us: the legions of heathens and

blasphemers are moving upon Morne. The ground shakes, fire falls from the sky, demons and

dragons assail us. Archons sound their trumpets to herald the end of the world. Who can now

doubt that the Trempan Heretic is, in fact, the Adversary? Prayer is our only recourse.”

Sihu shook almost uncontrollably at his words, overcome with pious guilt.

Foide sighed in an exasperated fashion.

“Unless you have something positive to contribute, my Lord Bishop, I suggest that you refrain

from further remarks. The Heretic is less than a day away, and according to Griel is already

marching on the city. His sorcerers have subdued the storm to allow him access: otherwise, it

rages around Morne in all directions – save above the city itself.”

“What of my Uncle?” The boy piped. “Has any news reached us yet?”

“No, your Majesty. I regret not. But his men are only a week away. If we can stave off the Heretic, they may bring succour to us. And with my own troops and those of the Duchess nearby,

we stand a good chance.”

“Can your diviners not *Scry* Tagur?” Attar growled. “I was under the impression that was a

relatively simple exercise.”

“They have tried,” Foide replied glumly. “Alas, to no avail. Nor has Daunton contacted me.”

The Lord Chamberlain lied well. But with his own son, Durhm, already in the field with six

thousand men, it suited his purposes that the troops from Einir remain leaderless for the time

being.

After much debate, the watches on the walls were doubled and redoubled, barrels of pitch

were

readied, mangonels and ballistae were armed, and squadrons of troops were prepared within the

walls.

Attar sighed. The primary defense of the city would fall to him, and he didn't like it one bit.

Morne had five miles of walls – around twice as much as the Warden was comfortable with. The

fact that the Heretic had no engines of war was of small consolation.

He had the Druid. *Oronthon help us all.*

**

Hullu cursed. Wind screamed around him.

“What do you mean, he is moving on Morne?” The Tribesman yelled. “That is impossible. This

storm is impenetrable.”

“Nwm has quietened the weather about Morne.”

Hullu cursed again. “Can you do the same, Honey-Paw. Or bring a spirit to delay him? I *must*

reach the city before him.” Melancholy was urging the warrior to action, and Mesikämmi recoiled in uncertainty.

“It is too late,” she said. “Your troops *cannot* meet his Templars in open battle, they will be crushed. And I *cannot* prevail against Nwm in a straight contest.”

“And what of the other sorceress?” Hullu snapped. “Where is she?”

Mesikämmi shrugged. “She is doubtless attending to other business: we are not joined at the

hip.” She didn't know. The Shamaness had still not told Hullu the truth about the Succubus – at

least the truth as *she* perceived it, which was less than the full story in any case. “The storm will pass in a matter of hours. No assault will be forthcoming until later, or more likely tomorrow.

What does this cause that you fight for mean to you, Hullu?”

Her question made his mind rock. The Sword goaded him, but his loyalty and responsibility to

those who had sworn to follow him weighed on his mind. He felt the irony of his situation – that

Nwm, who had set the course of events in motion, had rejected him.

“You spoke of ‘great things’ for us,” Hullu said. “There was a time when I thought that such

desires were past me. Then they were reawakened. Why are you here, Mesikämmi? What do you want?”

“I want to help you to get whatever you want,” she replied openly. “To win you back again.”

Her naïveté was sometimes staggering, Hullu thought to himself. She could coerce, manipulate

and plot with the best of them, and her sense of ethics was perverse in the extreme. He would

never understand her – but then again she was a shamaness, a witch, a dream-speaker. The things

which motivated her were beyond his ken.

“So. What do you want?” She asked.

Hullu thought long and hard.

Had the Succubus Chr’ri been present, Mesikämmi may have used a different tact – the Demoness, after all, had advised guile in dealing with Hullu.

But Chr’ri was with Chomele, Kalkja, Rimilin and Uruum. They had been joined by a second

Balor, named Irzho. Graz’zt was less interested in the possibilities that Melancholy offered, and

more concerned with the broader issues, as the nodality began to develop a new facet. That, and

an overwhelming desire to hurt Eadric: deeply, profoundly, again and again and again.

Before he was killed, he must be utterly broken.

**

Prince Tagur struggled northwards through the forest. The winds, which had blown ferociously

for twelve hours, showed no signs of abating. Trees had been stripped bare, boughs ripped off,

and the less firmly rooted toppled over. Debris filled the air. His progress was painstakingly slow, and his head and body were bloody and bruised from a dozen impacts.

Abruptly, and without warning, the storm ceased – or rather the Prince entered a zone of calm air.

He raised his eyebrows. How strange. Behind him, the trees still shook under the force of the

tempest. Ahead, nothing moved. It was eerily quiet.

Tagur took a moment to inspect his wounds, and noting that nothing looked too serious, plodded

on. Branches lay scattered around but, with a feeling of exhilaration, he began to walk briskly,

then to trot, and finally to run pell-mell through the trees. He was alive. He was free. Whatever

happened after this day, he would take a joy in it. He had been dour and preoccupied for too long.

He thought of the administrative burden that his life had become, and then thought of his resourcefulness and cunning – qualities that had long remained dormant, only to be manifested

when he had been backed into a corner.

He thought of Hullu, whom he decided that he quite liked. He thought of roasting boar and baking bread. He thought of Nwm, who had recognized him but had said nothing, and grinned to himself.

After an hour, the trees began to thin, and gradually gave way to commons used by pig farmers

in the open woods. He stumbled across a track running to the northeast, and his heart leaped – he

hastened along. Morne. Morne must be close.

Finally, the woods ended. He climbed a low bluff, and gazed northwards over twenty furlongs of

rich farmland, at the whitewashed rampart of the city. Steam and smoke rose in columns from

inside the walls – there had been fires, probably the previous night. But it was not the smoke

which made Tagur swallow in concern.

Between himself and the curtain wall, was a vast cavalry. Tagur knew the blue and silver banners

of the vanguard, although sagging in the windless air, hid a three-headed phoenix – Eadric's

device.

His joy evaporated, quickly replaced by the tactical perspective of his trained military mind.

He lay down, keeping his profile low, while he decided what to do. At least he would be safe

where he was.

Except that, ten minutes later, he noticed that several eagles were descending towards him.

Oh, bugger, he thought.

*

Tagur watched the eagle in the centre of the trio grow as it flew towards him, its wings stretching out until they were a full eight fathoms across.

He glanced back towards the woods, and sighed. It really wasn't worth even thinking about it.

All three birds landed nearby, and the downdraft from the largest was terrific.

"Nwm, I guess?" Tagur said with a resigned voice.

The bird squawked loudly. Unexpectedly, one of the other, much smaller eagles spoke.

"Good afternoon, your Highness. I am Sem. Nwm regrets that he cannot use speech at present,"

it said. "He also appreciates the irony of the situation."

Nwm squawked again.

"He trusts that you are well, and did not suffer too much at the hands of Hullu's men. He is

willing to fly you into the city, if you wish."

Nwm made a curious croaking sound.

"He also says," Sem added, "that Eadric would like to speak with you – should you so desire.

Note that you are under no coercion."

The Prince scratched his head. This was becoming an increasingly surreal day. "Alright. Whatever."

Nwm screeched.

"You may hold onto his claws," Sem instructed. "He will endeavour not to drop you."

"Good," Tagur replied.

*

When Eadric received Prince Tagur, it was around six o'clock in the evening, on the ninth day

after midsummer. The Templars – around six hundred of them – had been drawn up in two huge

kanistas less than a mile from the southern and western walls of the city. Behind them,

Trempan aristocrats were loosely arranged in a riot of colour with their mounted men-at-arms, and Temple

auxiliaries ordered their lines. Both flanks were guarded by the lightly armoured but ferocious

(and notorious) Ardanese horsemen.

More troops were arriving from the northeast – Templars, armoured aristocrats and mercenaries -

and the Ardanese roared and banged their swords upon their shields at the return of their leader,

Olann. Sercion began to form his troops into a third *kanista*.

“The infantry are still half a day away,” Eadric said to the Prince, “in case you were wondering.”

The Paladin dismounted and bowed in a cursory fashion.

“Isn’t it rather late in the day to be beginning an assault?” Tagur asked. “And what do you propose to do – knock down the walls with your lances? I assume you haven’t forgotten that they

are twenty feet thick?”

“Nwm has agreed to facilitate entry, if it is necessary. I will attempt a final parley first. I wish merely to be allowed unhindered access to the Temple compound – as is my right as Grand

Master.”

“The legitimacy of that title is questionable,” Tagur remarked drily.

“You could speak to them, Tagur. Allow this to pass without bloodshed.”

“I am not about to act as your message-boy,” the Prince replied, “whatever your present intentions are. Deorham, my concern is that if you enter the city, some other spiritual imperative will descend upon you. Oronthon will ask you to take control of Morne, or he will instruct you to

arraign the Small Council.”

“That will not happen,” Eadric grimaced.

“Are you so sure?” Tagur retorted. “What if you had some new ‘revelation?’ Deorham, for what

its worth, I actually quite like you, and your crazy Druid friend. But that doesn’t really mean

much in the current political climate. I have responsibilities to the citizens of Morne. If you enter the city, there will be bloodshed. Innocents will perish. There will be rape, murder, looting and

burning. It is a war. It *always* happens, no matter who leads the troops, or whatever their

stated values are.”

“Not this time,” Eadric was adamant.

Tagur sighed. “You are naïve and idealistic.”

“Ask them to open the gates, your Highness.”

“I will not.”

“Then at least bring my proposal to the Royal Council. Advise them as you will, but allow the

others to vote on it. I beg you, Tagur.”

The Prince groaned and nodded. “I will vote against you, and counsel the others to do the same.”

“That is your prerogative,” Eadric replied. He turned to his squire. “Tatterbrand, fetch another

horse. We will escort Tagur to Morne.”

**

“Where the hell have you been?” Foide snapped at Rimilin of the Skin. “And exactly what did

you think you were doing at Hrim Eorth? You agreed to only target Nwm with your spells.”

The Acolyte stood before King Tiuhan, Foide, Sihu, Attar and half a dozen other nobles, as well

as the Bishops of Gibilrazen and Mord. He was flanked by a young girl, perhaps twelve years

old.

“I miscalculated,” Rimilin lied, looking contrite. “For which I offer the council my profound

apologies. I will suffer the consequences of my actions when the Wyrish wizards indict me.”

“Why do you bring this urchin before us?” Sihu asked.

“Not an urchin, your Grace: a simple child from Morne. An innocent who is typical of those who

would perish if the Heretic enters the city.”

“I hardly see the point of bringing her here,” Foide snapped. “Or have you simply taken her

under your wing: does she have nowhere else to go?”

“I hope to appeal to the Heretic’s better sense,” Rimilin said slyly. “Once he was a great champion, whom few of us here would question. Since his seduction by the dark powers,

however, he has fallen into vain and evil ways. But none of us are without the potential for redemption. Perhaps when he sees this child, and others like her – unsullied, and without guilt

upon them - he may be struck with remorse.”

The Bishop of Gibilrazen could not believe his ears. “You, an accursed demonist, have the gall to

say that? You are utterly despised, Rimilin. You are base, faithless and irredeemable. You have

fused with some foul thing from the Pit.”

“I am loyal to Morne, and to my King,” the Acolyte bowed. “You and I may have differing

perspectives, your Eminence, but we do not necessarily differ in our need for stability and security.”

“You are a canker, Wizard,” the Bishop retorted. “Whom even the other cankers in Wyre will not

deal with. You are an accursed liar, although I don’t know what your scheme is. And that girl is

likely some whore from the Abyss, or some innocent whom you will sacrifice. You will sell us all

to the Adversary, who has assumed the guise of Eadric of Deorham.”

“Silence!” The Acolyte screamed, apparently losing control. “I could obliterate every one of you

here, if I so chose. However,” he seemed to master himself again, “I *do* serve my King, and I *am* loyal to Morne. I will do as you bid, your majesty.”

Tiuhan, unused to being addressed directly rather than through an intermediary, stammered self-

consciously.

“You will address the Council, Rimilin,” Foide said.

The girl looked at Tiuhan.

Tiuhan looked back.

“I-I think we should allow Rimilin to speak with the Heretic,” the Boy King said.

“Your Majesty...” Foide began.

“No!” King Tiuhan said, surprising even himself. “I have made my mind up. Rimilin will speak

to the Heretic.”

Foide sighed. What harm could it do? And *anything* was preferable to this pious hysteria

from Gibilrazen.

**

The embassy – which also served as an escort to Prince Tagur of Einir – consisted of Eadric, Tahl, Tatterbrand, Brey, Soraine of Trempa, Jorde, Hyne, seven of the eleven Penitents and Ryth

of Har Kumil. Nwm flew overhead. Mostin, Ortwin and Iua observed events from afar in a *secure shelter* which the Alienist had erected. For a variety of reasons, none felt that they had anything to contribute to the negotiations, although they all maintained a keen interest. Privately, Ortwin had determined to jump through the mirror again if required – in the full knowledge that Mostin would probably never speak to him again if he did.

Horns sounded, the South Gate of the city opened, and a squad of twenty knights rode out to

meet the *Ahma* and his party. They bore the standard of the Gultheins – the golden boar – surmounted by the eighteen-pointed crown of the kings of Wyre. Eadric recognized the armour of

their leader Attar, Warden of the North, and gave a small sigh of relief. Attar was known for both his equitableness and his pragmatism. In the middle of the group, the Paladin noted a young man

on a grey palfrey and three children on ponies. He scowled. Most irregular. He readied himself in

the event of something unforeseen.

Mostin, gazing through the mirror of Urm-Nahat, saw only three children and a riderless horse.

He became fidgety. “I smell a rat,” the Alienist said to Ortwin.

“An invisible rider?” Ortwin suggested.

“Perhaps,” Mostin responded. He muttered a spell, and vanished.

Iua looked at Ortwin, who shrugged.

“I’m still here,” the Alienist said. He pushed his own invisible head through the mirror above the royal embassy, in the knowledge that if there *was* an invisible rider upon the horse, Mostin would see him or her with his magical sight.

A young man, whom he didn’t recognize. Not *invisible*, though. Must be warded from scrying.

Rimilin? Whoever it was, he was looking at *another* sensor nearby, which Mostin immediately perceived. He looked down again.

One of the children was looking straight at him. *She can see me.*

A force pressed upon his consciousness, coercing him. “Why not tickle Eadric?” It *suggested*.

“Remember how he likes the tickly sensation of *disintegrate*?”

Mostin shook off the spell, pulled his head back through the mirror.

“Very fishy,” his mind raced as he said it. “It might be Rimilin, and he might have demonic allies with him. One of them just suggested that I *disintegrate* Eadric.”

“Demons disguised as children?” Iua asked. “That’s pretty cheap.”

Mostin shrugged, and began to buff.

“Hey, what about the Injunction?” Ortwin asked.

There was a pause as the Alienist finished casting a *Haste* spell. “Rimilin is fair game. He is in contempt himself. If it is the Acolyte, then I’ll blast him as soon as he makes a move.”

“Let’s just take him out now,” Ortwin suggested.

“*If*, Ortwin. *If*.”

“We should warn Ed, in any case.”

Mostin nodded, and refocused the Mirror, before thrusting his head through again. The Alienist’s

disembodied voice sounded in the ears of Eadric and Tahl.

“The man on the horse in the middle may be Rimilin. The cute kiddies might be Succubi, or

worse.”

Eadric sighed.

*

As the reception committee approached to around forty yards, Eadric motioned to Tahl, who

concentrated through the *Eye of Palamabron* and invoked its *True Seeing* ability.

The blood left his face. “Demons,” he whispered hoarsely and swiftly. “Two Balors and a Succubus. Several Glabrezu on the Ethereal nearby. Rimilin – disguised by a spell.”

Eadric cursed, and reined in. “Flee! Disperse!” He yelled. “We are ambushed.” Quickly, he

turned to Prince Tagur. “Ride for your life, and pray!”

Everything seemed to happen at once, and with blinding speed.

Rimilin, who had anticipated getting closer – at least to within Eadric’s ability to sense the Demons – nonetheless acted first. Fire leapt from his left eye in a narrow shaft, reducing Soraine, the elderly Duchess of Trempe, to a cinder. It was not the tack that he had planned, but plans

change, the Acolyte mused to himself. An empowered *Fireball* followed in quick order.

As if on his cue, a lurid purple *Fire Storm* ravaged the area to the left of the Paladin, immolating horses and riders. One of the children, who had continued urging her pony forwards, stopped and

gazed briefly at Tahl the Incorruptible.

The Deputy Inquisitor crumpled into a lifeless hulk.

Mostin, acting with magically enhanced speed, stepped through the mirror and *disintegrated* the Balor Uruum, disguised as a child. Its true form flashed briefly across the vision of those present, before its aeons-long existence was snuffed out.

The explosion upon its demise was terrific, and fire ripped across the field.

Reeling from the force and heat, Mostin invoked a quickened *Polymorph Other* upon Rimilin but failed to effect him.

Eadric spurred Contundor forwards, charged past the burning royal standard, the bewildered

Attar and the few knights who remained alive, and *smote* one of the other children – the Balor Irzho – with every iota of strength that he possessed. It screamed: an unholy noise, issuing from

the mouth of a young girl. Black ichor sprayed from it, and it reflexively wreathed itself in comforting flames.

As he rode past, the succubus Kalkja, disguised as a twelve-year-old girl, flung a small iron box

at Eadric before *Teleporting* away to safety.

Rimilin was struck full force by a *Thunderswarm* which issued from Nwm's talons. Although

warded, the Acolyte still reeled from the blast.

Time to go, I think, and he vanished. A fraction of a second later, Irzho also disappeared, even as Iua and Ortwin were preparing to engage.

Eadric, burned and blistered, turned Contundor, and rode slowly back to look at the carnage. Few

still stood. Soraine was dead, and Tahl, and Ryth, and Hyne. Brey, unremarkably, still lived – at

any other time Eadric would have appreciated the irony of the apparently unkillable Templar.

Tagur also still stood, although his wounds were severe.

Tatterbrand! No, not you as well! But he still breathed, if barely. Eadric layed his hands upon him, and warmth and light flooded into his squire. Attar, unhorsed and charred, hobbled

forwards.

“I did not know...” he began.

“It doesn’t matter,” Eadric said grimly. “They will always find a way. You are blameless.”

The reality of it was dawning on him. Tahl was gone. He could barely bring himself to look upon the corpse.

And then, the final affront. Ortwin walked up to Eadric, holding the small casket that Kalkja had

hurled at the Paladin. The Bard was shaking. “I’m sorry, Ed.”

Inside, on a velvet cushion, were a pair of lips, cut from a face, and still fresh with blood.

Eadric turned away and vomited.

When he raised his head again, he saw a single tall, elegant figure dressed in black walking

slowly towards him.

“It is time,” Titivilus said, almost gently.

**

Four Devas, Jewels in the celestial host and paramount warriors of the Order of Powers, accompanied Tramst, future Primate of all Wyre, as he *Wind-Walked* from Ardan to Morne. They were alert to the possible presence of fiends: their Marshal, Enitharmon, had instructed them to

exercise particular vigilance.

Tramst, who carried a mandate from Heaven, brought a new teaching. It was based on neither

unity, nor difference. It did not deny Orthodoxy, nor Ardanese practice, nor the Transaxiomatic

philosophy, nor Reconciliatory Sophism, nor even the Irrenite Heresy – the most controversial of

the Oronthonian factions. Tramst had taken the premise of the Urgic Mysitics, and in three months had stripped it of its inconsistencies, refined it, and through a succession of revelations had determined the best way to communicate his apprehension.

His system was dubbed *saizhan*, ‘insight.’ It denied the ultimacy of any and all external phenomena associated with Oronthonianism, and advocated direct, unmediated contact with the Fundamental. It was supported by a dialectic of negation designed to stimulate awareness which

replaced the *scala mystica* that contemplatives had previously employed for centuries.

Oronthon, aware that his own church, divided against itself, could not endure unless it was changed, had decided to overhaul it. His solution was radical.

His Breath, the *Ahma*, had been the agent to accomplish the initial breakdown of reason

necessary for the foundation of the new practice. But he merely foreshadowed Tramst. His Mind, his *Sela*,*** would be Tramst. In order to repair his house, Oronthon needed to oversee the builders himself. In order to allow unmediated contact with the Fundamental, the

Fundamental would be present.

Previously, the Archbishops had borne a bright spark of divinity: they were Oronthon's vicars on

Earth.

But Tramst, Oronthon's proxy, would be an incandescent beacon.

*It is customary for Clerics who *Commune* with Oronthon to leave their last question 'vacant': the Bright God may dispense wisdom as he sees fit.

**The *Longing of Separation* is the profound sadness experienced by the querent after the intimate connection of *Communing* ends. More generally, it occurs after any mystical union.

***Without getting too deeply into Oronthonian theology, the *Sela* is the "Gnostic Intellect" of God – that aspect of Oronthon which mystics and contemplatives relate to.

Note: The names of the celestials who accompanied Tramst were Urlion, Shoonel, Ruma and Diol - Astral Devas of great prestige and influence. In general, Devas represent the "muscle" of

Oronthon: Urlion and his peers were of particular reknown.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 12-08-2002

"You appear like a crow over carrion, Devil. You are contemptible." Eadric wearily drew Lukarn.

"I am your lawfully appointed tempter," Titivilus replied easily. "and your time has arrived. You may ask me to depart, if your faith is so weak that it cannot stand a minor trial. Assailing me, however, would be disrespectful in the extreme, and more than a little foolish."

The Paladin sighed. "Make your offer, then leave. The answer will be 'no', in any case."

"It might take some while," Titivilus explained. "And is likely to involve elements which you do not expect. I suggest we remove to a more suitable locale."

Eadric laughed grimly. "I am about to enter Morne with an army – now is hardly a convenient time."

The Duke of Hell bowed ironically. "Fortunately, there is a place where we may go where the

inconvenience of time is not an issue. I can return you at the point where you left."

"You lie."

"Frequently," Titivilus conceded. "But not at the moment. I have no intention of lying to

you, *Ahma*. If you distrust me, bring Palamabron's Eye with you – any counterfeit will be instantly revealed. It is, after all, infallible. And Ortwin the Satyr, I strongly recommend that you do *not* do what you are considering.”

The Bard was assuming a flanking position whilst Titivilus spoke.

“You may dismiss me, *Ahma*,” the Duke said, “and I will never trouble you again. But you may regret the choice later: here is a chance to confront your own shadow, in terms which few have the luxury of

doing. Look into the Darkness of your heart with me. If you are true to your faith then you have nothing to fear.”

“Honey on the tongue does not disguise malice,” Eadric spat.

“I am a Devil. What do you expect? Temptation is my work, and I take pride in it.”

Eadric sighed, relaxed his grip, and nodded.

“What?” Ortwin asked aghast. “Are you crazy? Just tell this idiot where to go, Ed.”

“No. I need to do this.”

“That's the spirit,” Titivilus said. “Don't forget the Eye, *Ahma*. Unless you are afraid of the truth, of course.”

The Paladin knelt over the stricken body of Tahl, kissed him on the forehead, and removed the huge stone from around his neck.

Titivilus clicked his fingers, and a *Gate* opened. The scene beyond was idyllic: a soft, sandy beach gently lapped by a clear sea beneath a cloudless sky.

“After you,” the Duke of Hell ushered him. “Don't worry. You'll be safe and unharmed. I will return you to the present time and place whenever you wish.”

He did not lie.

So Eadric stepped through.

**

“This is *Cha'at*,” Titivilus said in response to the unvoiced question in Eadric's mind. “It belongs to my liege – inasmuch as a plane can belong to anybody.”

“The Demiplane that you offered Mostin,” Eadric nodded. “If you think that...”

“I have no intention of offering this place to you, *Ahma*,” Titivilus smiled. “Unless you want it, of course,” he added. His eyes twinkled with cruel amusement.

“Get to the point,” Eadric snapped.

“I will – but circuitously. Firstly, we need to establish a common language – so as to minimize

misunderstanding.”

“Your ability to twist words is legendary,” Eadric scowled. “And I don't pretend to be your equal in sophistry or subtlety of language.”

“Ah, the *Ahma* is a man of simple faith. Complex linguistic matters are beyond his understanding.”

“If you have merely brought me here to mock me...”

“Do I wound your pride, *Ahma*? Are you self-conscious of your limited ability to grasp difficult ideas?”

Eadric said nothing.

“If you feel too embarrassed to answer that question, then I understand. If you feel that allowing yourself to be that *vulnerable* to me is unwise because I am the Enemy – one of the fallen; despicable, irredeemable, befouled with Taint and corruption – then I also understand. Allow me then to ask

another question, *Ahma*: at what point does it become permissible for a man to be anything less than absolutely open and honest?”

The Paladin groaned inwardly. This was *not* what he had expected. “Alright. You’ve made your point.”

“And you agree that it has merit?” Titivilus asked.

Eadric nodded sourly.

“Tell me, *Ahma*: had you ever considered that idea before – purely hypothetically, of course. The idea that ‘even when dealing with demons and devils, one must maintain absolute honesty.’ I’m not

suggesting that it is *the* Truth, but that it is, from your perspective *a* truth, which deserves consideration.”

“I had never before considered it,” Eadric admitted.

“In which case, you have learned something new. From me. *I* have taught *you*.”

“What *are* you?” The Paladin asked.

“You ask ‘what is a Devil?’ To *you*? A Dark Mirror.”

**

“We have established, then, that the language we will use is one of total honesty,” Titivilus said.

“Remember that you have an advantage over me – any falsehood that I speak will be revealed by the

Eye of Palamabron. I must simply trust you, and assume that you don’t lie.”

Eadric sighed.

“What do you know of the Irrenites, *Ahma*?” The Duke asked.

“They are an heretical sect. They were banned because they venerated the Adversary alongside

Oronthon.”

“That is correct – although it is important to note that they do not *worship* the Adversary as a distinct individual. They regard him as an aspect of Oronthon or, to be more accurate, an emanation.”

“If this is an attempt to sell me on the merits of various heresies then you are pursuing the wrong tack.”

“I don’t need to sell you anything,” Titivilus said wryly. “I take it that you are aware that Tramst will be the next Archbishop of Morne?”

The Paladin nodded.

“And that he will be imbued with a measure of Oronthon’s power which has no precedent – that he

will, in fact, be an avatar of sorts.”

“Tahl intimated as much,” Eadric replied carefully. “Although the exact details have not been revealed to me.” His answer was accompanied by a cognitive dissonance of enormous proportions – was he

actually having this conversation with one of the *Fallen*?

“Tramst will readmit the Irrenites into the Oronthonian fold,” Titivilus said. “As well as every other denomination and schismatic group.”

Still, the Devil did not lie. Eadric was dumbstruck – and enormously excited. He was also very

suspicious. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Revelation is not the sole province of Celestials.”

“Celestials generally do not want something dubious in return.”

“Touché,” Titivilus conceded.

**

“What do you know of Jovol the Grey?” Titivilus asked.

“I am reluctant to answer that question.”

“Because you feel that by so doing, you may jeopardize Jovol, whom you regard as a possible ally –

although you are not sure how, or in what capacity. Then let me enlighten you somewhat as to Jovol’s nature: he is immensely powerful. More than any of the other Wyrish Wizards suspect – with the

exception of Hlioth, who knew him from before.”

“Before what?”

“Before he assumed his current incarnation,” Titivilus answered. “Jovol is preoccupied with the

Injunction, and a particular paradox which he finds himself in – namely, that he must both enforce it, and then subsequently violate it. He regards himself as something of a

custodian, and is resigned to sacrificing himself in order to renew the integrity of the magical *détente*.”

“To me, that would seem to indicate a nobility of purpose.”

“Quite,” Titivilus said sarcastically. “Except that he has been ineffectual to date in preventing Rimilin from acting – and this has been through choice, not through inability. His divinations have indicated hours, perhaps even days ahead of time, where and when the Acolyte of the Skin will strike. Why do you suppose he has not prevented it, *Ahma*?”

Apparently, Titivilus was still telling the truth. Eadric sighed. “I do not know Jovol’s motivations. And I do not see why you are wasting time with this trivia. Cut to the chase, Devil. I can reject you, and we can part ways.”

“Time is of no consequence here, so there is no need to feel rushed,” the Duke reminded him. “And it is seldom that one has the opportunity to tempt the breath of God – indulge me and permit my moment of dramatic tension. Think, *Ahma*! Why is Jovol, who is concerned more than anything else about the Injunction, not acting to prevent its most flagrant violation?”

“I will not be drawn into idle speculation.”

“Then let me tell you,” Titivilus said impatiently. “Jovol predicts in terms of *probabilities* – of

significant contact between individuals, and of interplanar movement. When a planar contact is revealed, Jovol can infer the likely manifestation. He knows that if he arrests the actions of Rimilin, then Graz’zt – whose information in this whole affair is less complete than you might suspect – will change his tack accordingly. Jovol is therefore waiting until both Rimilin and Kothchori are present at the same time, before he shows his hand.”

“Who is Kothchori?” Eadric groaned.

“Kothchori is the mage who assailed both Jiuhu and Morne with fire. Graz’zt has him under his thumb at present. He is also warded from detection – although not from Graz’zt and his minions.”

“And perhaps you could tell me why this is important?”

“Because within two hours of your return to the battlefield, Kothchori will open a *Gate* allowing Graz’zt onto the Prime Plane.”

Eadric’s jaw dropped. “And Jovol knows this?”

“He knows *when* the *Gate* will open, but not *where*,” Titivilus confirmed. “And as he cannot locate Kothchori, there isn’t much that he can do.”

“This makes no sense,” Eadric muttered. “If Jovol can determine where and when Rimilin acts, why

can he not do the same for this Kothchori?”

Titivilus sighed in exasperation. “Jovol detects *contacts* – one individual to another. An example: Hullu, Mesikämmi and Rimilin come into close resonance, and are accompanied by a perturbation

which indicates a planar transit – in this case, from an archaic spirit dimension which borders the Prime. Jovol *can* discern the location of Hullu and Mesikämmi, therefore he can *infer* the location of Rimilin. As both Graz'zt and Kothchori are invisible to Jovol's attempts to scry them, he only knows *when*. He has no *where*."

Eadric had no idea who Mesikämmi was, and thought it best not to ask. He was starting to get very

confused. Titivilus, despite the fact he had not yet lied, was living up to his reputation.

"This still makes no sense," the Paladin said. "How can Jovol know where Kothchori and Rimilin meet, if he cannot determine the location of either of them?"

"Because when they come into resonance, other individuals are also implicated. Jovol can discern *their* location, thereby inferring the presence of both Rimilin and Kothchori."

"And who are these 'other individuals?'" Eadric asked.

Titivilus shrugged, and pointed a long finger at the Paladin. "You, maybe? I don't know."

Eadric groaned. "Still, I don't understand why Jovol simply didn't intervene and stop Rimilin when he knew where he would be – when he interacted with me, or Hullu or Mostin, or whatever."

"It is likely that the projected course of events would be even more unfavourable – from Jovol's

perspective, at least – if Rimilin were eliminated prematurely."

"How can that be so?"

"Graz'zt is methodical and lays intricate webs – for a Demon, at least." The contempt in Titivilus' voice was not concealed. "However, he is not above fits of rage and spite which ultimately act against his own interests. Consider what his mood would be if Kothchori conjured him and he had lost both

Rimilin *and* the Balor Uruum in one day. I think that it may prove fortunate for Wyre that you did not slay Rimilin today. Graz'zt is more than capable of destroying Morne and everything in it with a single invocation."

"He would suffer immediate retaliation," Eadric insisted. "Or the celestial host would never permit such an act."

"Would they not?" Titivilus asked. "Are you confident that you understand the Mind of Oronthon that clearly? In any case, Rimilin is not dead, so the point is moot. Graz'zt retains a sense of perspective, and his actions are likely to be more systematic and less insane."

"His ire is directed towards me more than any other," Eadric said. "It is those closest to me that I feel most for."

"They are Graz'zt's targets for that reason," Titivilus smiled wickedly. "Graz'zt would like to break you, and then turn you against Tramst – the incarnate manifestation of Oronthon's power."

"That will never happen."

“Never is a long time.”

“Your efforts to make me doubt are wasted,” Eadric said. “Do not forget to whom you speak.”

“I would never do that, *Ahma*,” Titivilus gave a mock bow. “But I digress. It is likely Morne *will* still suffer terribly, and at Graz’zt’s hands. And Oronthon will permit it to happen. When one can foresee the ends that Oronthon can, who can tell what ‘The Greatest Good for the Greatest Number’ really means?”

Still, the Duke did not lie. But Eadric was unfazed: this was a paradox that he had long since accepted.

“Do you wish to know what it is that Graz’zt will do, *Ahma*?” Titivilus asked easily. “Knowledge might allow you to ameliorate great suffering, although you could not prevent it all.”

Eadric said nothing.

“Remember our agreement,” Titivilus said. “Complete honesty.”

“I would like to know Graz’zt’s plans,” Eadric admitted.

“As would I,” Titivilus replied.

**

“The Succubus, Nehael,” Titivilus said, smiling.

Eadric groaned inwardly.

“She is currently in a rather awkward predicament, wouldn’t you say?”

“No doubt you are about to make an offer to rescue or release her, in exchange for a service that I can offer you,” the Paladin said in a resigned voice.

“No,” the Devil replied. “It is within your own power to resolve that issue. You have the means to do it

– although you may feel compromised by the methods involved. Remember, you are the *Ahma*, and you have powerful allies.”

Titivilus did not lie.

“Then what relevance does Nehael have to this conversation?” Eadric asked.

“When she first succoured you for aid, you were willing to put everything – your own soul included –

on the line in order to aid her redemption.”

“Yes. And?”

“Is she redeemed, now?” Titivilus asked. “Before you answer that,” he added, “if you feel that you are being drawn into an untenable ethical position at any time, feel free to stop me – but I feel there have been inconsistencies in your attitude that perhaps you should address.”

“I am not here to receive philosophical instruction from you,” Eadric moaned. “And your circuitous offer is still no closer to being voiced. Allow me to ask *you* a question, Duke Titivilus, for every one that you pose me, and we will see how this proceeds.”

“Very well,” Titivilus answered surprisingly.

“Does that proposal concern you in any way?” The Paladin asked.

“Yes,” Titivilus said.

Eadric raised an eyebrow.

“So,” the Devil continued, “has Nehael been redeemed?”

“That question has no answer,” Eadric replied. “You might as well ask ‘what kind of apple is that

orange?’ How was your exchange with Shomei? Did she put you in your place?”

“That is two questions,” Titivilus pointed out. “But I will let it pass. It went as one might have expected, and our relative ‘places’ are affirmed. But your last answer is intriguing – is the *Ahma* suggesting that redemption is not a universal phenomenon, available to all who earnestly seek it?”

“I make no such claim,” Eadric answered, “and no amount of verbiage will lead me to it. And I found your answer rather lacking, so I will pose the question again more clearly: Did the Infernalist Shomei assert her ascendancy over you, Titivilus?”

“In a manner of speaking,” the Devil conceded, “although all such arrangements are subject to

renegotiation. But I have just thought of another question – not designed to stimulate your pride, before you ask: In the vast celestial hierarchy, where do you see yourself in relation to seraphs, saints and ascended masters, *Ahma*?”

Eadric shifted uncomfortably. “I have never before considered that question, but your premise is false: all of those about whom you speak live the will of Oronthon. There is no striving for them. They do not need to claw their way anywhere, as they have already achieved bliss. If you were to earnestly seek redemption yourself, Titivilus, I would willingly act as intercessor on your behalf. Can I interest you in such a proposal?”

“It would certainly have merit, were it not for other factors,” Titivilus answered.

“Other factors?”

“*Ahma*, the face I present to you is cultured, intellectual, reasonable and scholarly. I am all of those things. But it behooves you to remember that I am also cruel, merciless, depraved, manipulative and utterly, utterly evil. You see me as an Irrenite might see me, and that is intentional on my part – I would achieve little in the way of communication, otherwise. Already, you have been lulled into complacency, and have forgotten to whom, to *what* you speak. I am no succubus nor a minor devil, but a Duke of Hell. My philosophical position is the result of aeons of thought and contemplation upon matters which you do not grasp. I am not blind, ignorant, savage evil – I am *reasoned* evil.”

“That is to be most feared,” Eadric said. “But I have not forgotten who you are, and my

proposal still stands. Be finished with your offer. And speedily. I grow weary.”

“Oronthon will not intervene to release Nehael, because the Succubus has placed herself beyond the Bright God’s protection. She chose Uedii over Him, and rejected an offer from Rintrah to reenter

heaven. Would you say that she has abjured Him a second time? One could interpret her actions in that light.”

The Paladin did his best to retain an impassive expression. “I was unaware that grace had been

extended to her to that degree. Nor can I always fathom her actions. But I still fail to see what you are driving at, Devil.”

“If you act to save Nehael, which it is within your power to accomplish – by hook or by crook – you must sacrifice something. You could attempt a punitive raid or rescue mission – a possibility that offers many opportunities for sacrifice. Maybe your life or soul, or those of your friends. In any event, you would sacrifice your responsibility to Tramst and to Morne and to your soldiers – after all, should you really be going off on an Abyssal jaunt if the fate of Wyre hangs in the balance and Oronthon’s Proxy is about to appear upon the scene?

“Alternatively, perhaps you could strike a *deal* with Graz’zt in some way, thereby sacrificing a certain portion of your principles. Or you could employ other agents to make a deal for you.”

“Devils, you mean,” Eadric said.

“As I have already said, no,” Titivilus replied. “That is not what I meant – although if you request such assistance, we can no doubt come to a mutually beneficial understanding. I was referring to your

associates – you could merely depute the responsibility to them.”

“And what do I sacrifice if I do that?”

“Your control of the situation? Your involvement? Your autonomy? Again, maybe your friends? Mostin can be rather rash, after all. Would you trust him with such a project?”

“More than I’d trust you,” Eadric answered.

“Of course, you could simply sacrifice Nehael to the ‘Greater Good’ and, no doubt, as time passes, so will your guilt and remorse.”

“Pah! Make your offer and return me.”

Titivilus sighed. “My proposal to you is this: that, henceforth, you and I will speak on a regular basis, about such matters that are pressing upon your conscience. With my aid, you will establish a platform from which insight can spring.”

“Are you insane? You would act as my *counsellor*?”

“Why not? Have you not found this exchange informative?”

“Whether or not I have is hardly indicative of your value as a long-term advisor. And

what, I wonder, do you offer me in exchange for this absurd request?"

Titivilus smiled. "You misunderstand. That is not my offer of temptation to you. It is the boon which you would enjoy for a growing life in Oronthon's wisdom."

Eadric guffawed. "And what, then, is the price I would pay for it?"

"You will endure my attempts to corrupt, pervert and sway you from your current purpose. The torment that your psyche endures will be immense, and the moral knots that you have heretofore wrestled with will seem trivial in comparison. The *Ahma* has the chance of being in a permanent dialogue with the darkest things that there are. One cannot live fully in the light by denying the darkness, but only by transcending it."

"That is Left-Hand Path sophistry," Eadric said scornfully.

"It is the dialectic."

"And Urgic and Irrenite heresy."

"They are no longer heresies, if you recall. It is the basis of *saizhan*, the practice through which Tramst will revive Oronthonianism."

Eadric swallowed. Titivilus did not lie. But it was too radical.

"Not all truths are unequal," Titivilus said.

Eadric's stomach turned over.

"It is the Middle Way. The Diamond Way. The Path of Lightning."

And the Paladin's head reeled.

**

"Are you suggesting that every Oronthonian will have a personal devil with whom they can converse, in order to stimulate their awareness?"

"Certainly not," Titivilus answered. "*Saizhan* is a mystical practice for contemplatives who have

overcome dualistic thinking. It negates all predicates about the nature of Oronthon, and replaces them with direct experience of the Godhead: with sufficient discipline, the devotee simply enters a trance and taps into Oronthon's *Sela*, his Gnostic intellect."

Eadric looked confused.

"They will *Commune* at will with him," Titivilus explained.

The Paladin's eyes widened. "And for those of us who lack 'sufficient discipline?'"

"That is the second purpose of Tramst. For those who cannot grasp the fundamentals of the practice, they may approach the Godhood directly, embodied in Tramst. By speaking with him, they effectively speak with Oronthon himself."

"I still fail to see the diabolic component," Eadric said.

"For a dialectic to exist, antinomies are required," Titivilus answered. "For contemplatives, they exist on the level of mental constructs. For the devotees who seek him, Tramst himself will stimulate

awareness with speech and action, using a device similar to the *kios*.^{*} But you are unique. For the *Ahma*...”

“They would be embodied in you,” Eadric sighed.

“Precisely,” Titivilus smiled. “And I have been selected because I am the subtlest, most conniving, most underhanded manipulator that there is in the Hells, bar one only.”

“If this is so, if it is necessary, then I fail to see what the temptation is,” Eadric groaned.

“That is because I have not yet tempted you, *Ahma*. I have merely made you the counter-offer.”

Realization slowly began to dawn on the Paladin.

“You may simply walk away from this, and become Eadric of Deorham once again. Let it go. Return to

your castle, and your vineyards, and your dogs, and an untroubled life. Or to be free to pursue Nehael as you will, renounce your servitude to the Temple, and make war on Graz’zt. Take the fight to him.

But that is not what Tramst requires from you. *That* is the temptation.”

“No,” Eadric said. “You seek to be both my tempter and my counsellor. You cannot both threaten me

and offer me a path to understand my God.”

“I can and do,” Titivilus answered.

“I will not believe it,” the Paladin said.

“Then I suggest you speak to Tramst,” the Duke answered. “He will arrive outside of Morne within

fifteen minutes of your return.”

Eadric’s jaw dropped.

“*Ahma*, your religion is undergoing a paradigm shift. Old roles are being redefined. Different facets of the Truth are manifesting. When you speak to Tramst, he will not be an intermediary as Cynric or even Rintrah was. You will, to all intents, be addressing Oronthon directly.”

The Paladin nodded dumbly.

“He demands much of you. He will not relent, nor compromise. By subjecting you to the darkness, he intends to purify and exalt you. To be an exemplar, you must embody the principles which define a philosophy.”

“I doubt.” Eadric said, simply.

“That is both your strength and your vulnerability,” Titivilus said, opening a *Gate* back to the Prime,

“which it is my happy duty to exploit to the maximum.” He smiled wickedly. Palpable Evil emanated

from him, causing Eadric to shiver.

“Until the next time, then,” Titivilus said. “Unless you choose otherwise.” He vanished. Eadric stepped through the *Gate*. The paradox had come full circle.

**

“Where did you go, and how long were you there?” Ortwin asked Eadric.

“To the Demiplane Cha’at. And it seemed like forever, although it was probably no more than half an hour.” Eadric looked over his shoulder – behind him were the massed lines of Templars, their

auxiliaries, Trempan knights, squires and, on the flanks, Ardanese outriders. Nearby, stood Attar and Prince Tagur.

His head span. Too much to consider, and too short a time in which to consider it.

“What was his temptation?” Mostin pressed.

Eadric laughed. Paradox spiralled through his mind. He looked at the crumpled form of Tahl, and began to weep.

Ortwin clicked his fingers. “Snap out of it, Ed. You can go nuts later. There isn’t time now.”

“In fifteen minutes, God will arrive. In two hours, Graz’zt is going to do something terrible, and Oronthon is going to do nothing about it. And I think that my guardian Angel is going to be replaced by a Devil.” Eadric explained.

“I think you need to speak to Shomei,” Mostin said.

*The *kius* is an Urgic riddle, framed as a question qualified by a double negation, e.g. *What is*

Oronthon, if compassion and revelation are not unidentical? . Technically, not all truths are unequal is not a *kius*, although its structure resembles one. The *koan* is probably the closest RL parallel, although the structure of the *kius* is more formal.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 1-16-2003

You See

Eadric sat cross-legged in his tent and looked at his God. Tramst – who, of course, was Oronthon –

looked remarkably unchanged and unprepossessing. There was no celestial choir, no radiant light, and no feeling of awe. There was, in fact, no indication that this was anything other than a normal human being.

The Devas who had escorted him had vanished – Eadric had not dared to use Palamabron's Eye to see

if they still remained in some insubstantial form nearby, any more than he had dared to look at Tramst himself through the stone. It would have somehow been blasphemous. He wondered if even thinking

about using it was a sign of his unworthiness and lack of faith.

Tramst raised his eyebrows and smiled sympathetically.

Lord, I fear. I doubt.

Well, yes, I know that. So what's your point? And don't call me 'Lord.' A simple 'Holiness' will suffice (irony).

I do not know how to proceed.

Ahh. And how, exactly, is that different from how things were say, yesterday, or a year ago? Or five years ago?

In order to come to understand you more, the fiend Titivilus informs me that I must deal with him on an ongoing basis. That he will act as a foil to my...

Virtue? Piety?

(Profound discomfort.) Holiness, I feel unworthy...

(Raised eyebrows.)

(Shame at false modesty...)

(SLAP.) (Smile.)

(Humility)

Your brother, Orm, frequently struck me when he taught me. (Laughter). He looked terribly offended on the morning that I slapped him back.

Where is Orm now, Holiness? Will he be coming?

No. Why should he, when he can meditate in solitude?

But I may visit him, when things are quieter?

Well, of course. Why could you not? When could you not?

(SILENCE.)

What do you wish of me, Holiness?

To be active in the world. To be the *Ahma*. To lead. To act as a guardian and protector. To be my strong right arm.

But Nehael. (Guilt. Longing. Conflict of interests. Confusion. Despair.)

I appreciate your honesty and directness.

I don't know what to do. Part of me desires to be selfish. I fear that I will resent you if I abandon her. I fear that I will fall if I pursue her, and you will withdraw your grace from me.

It is a difficult conundrum (humour). You have the right to choose. That can never be denied.

She suffers.

As do countless others.

I fear Titivilus.

That is wise. He is subtle and cunning. But he is not beyond your ability to deal with.

I feel confounded by him – why is he tied to my own salvation? His temptation is to be free of his presence. If I accept it, I fail. If I reject it, am I burdened with his whisperings for eternity?

There are always Devils. To deny it would be fruitless.

Part of me wishes to ask you to release me – if only for a short while.

Are you asking me?

(Shakes head). No.

Then what will you do, Eadric- *Ahma*?

Put my trust in you. Command me, and I will obey. I will abandon Nehael to whatever fate awaits her.

But I ask that you grant me the strength to endure my guilt and shame.

And you still hope that, in so making that offer, I will take mercy upon you and release you from my service?

Yes – or part of me does, at least. But the offer is made in spite of that hope, not because of it.

(Leans forward and touches Eadric lightly on the forehead).

**SEEING FOR THE FIRST TIME I-THOU BEING-NONBEING-BECOMING
KNOWING-**

**UNKNOWNING SEEKING-FINDING-LOSING-FINDING TIME-BEING
ETERNITY-**

**NONBEING NOW-BECOMING EVERYTHING-NOTHING IDENTITY-
DIFFERENCE**

RELATIVE-ABSOLUTE. NOTHING IS. NOTHING IS NOT. NOTHING BECOMES.

“Saizha*,” Oronthon said.

Eadric wasn't sure if it was a question, or not, and knew that it didn't matter. Duality had evaporated in a soaring ecstasy.

**

I will enter Morne, now, and take up my seat in the Fane.

I will follow.

That is not necessary. I will go alone. Instruct the army to wait, although not to stand down – they will not be needed *quite* yet. And not in the capacity that many anticipated.

Then command me.

(Smiles). You are free. Do as you must do. I will recall you to my side when I need you.

(Disbelief). *But that is not what you require of me.*

No. But I grant it nonetheless.

But why?

(Laughter). Because you didn't ask. Consider Grace to have descended upon you for the third time.

Remember, you are empowered to decide right from wrong.

Titivilus insisted that you will demand much of me. That you will not compromise. That you will push me to my limit. He did not lie.

And so I will. But not yet. Eadric, it is not always *this* or *that*. There is room for flexibility.

But Morne. And Graz'zt?

Will do what it is in his nature to do. What is Necessity, if Oronthon is not unlimited?

What will happen?

Rivers of blood will flow. You will know what to do.

Holiness, forgive me – but what will you do?

I will weep.

And he vanished.

*

“Well?” Nwm asked.

The Paladin tried to speak, but merely looked frustrated, unable to convey the full magnitude of the experience.

“Is he a man, or a god?” Ortwin asked.

“Yes,” Eadric replied.

But his face shone with a light that never after left him.

**

“So, what is he going to *do*, exactly?” Ortwin asked. “Will there be a big showdown with Graz’zt, with lots of fireworks?”

Eadric sighed. “That is not his function. He will provide succour to those who need it, and guidance, and instruction. He is a teacher, not a soldier.”

“You’d think he’d be a bit more pro-active.”

“Hah!” Mostin said snidely. “Fat chance. He’s probably just your typical aloof deity-type, following his own, mysterious plans. Don’t expect him to put himself on the line.”

The Paladin moaned. “Let’s just leave out the motivational analysis. The fact is, I will have a temporary grace period in which I can act. I don’t know how long it will last, but we should seize the

opportunity.”

“Er, how long are we talking, Ed?” Ortwin asked. “Hours? Days? Months?”

“I don’t know.”

“Hmm. That’s not much help.” Ortwin said sarcastically. “And what’s going to happen with Prince

You-Know-Who? Is he still coming here?”

“Yes.”

“In an hour or so?”

“Yes.”

“Is there anything else you should tell us?”

Eadric briefly related the news about Jovol. And Kothchori. And Rimilin. And the exchange with

Titivilus.

Mostin groaned. “It might have been useful if you’d told us this earlier.”

“There wasn’t time.”

“I don’t understand,” Ortwin said. “You said that this is an either/or situation. Titivilus’ temptation was based on that premise.”

Mostin merely laughed. “I think you’ll find that if you were to analyze *exactly* what the Devil said, you’d find plenty of loopholes and incomplete accounts. Without him actually lying, of course. I don’t blame you, Eadric. Even my colossal intellect was hard-pressed to contend with his nuances and

intimations.”

“That’s reassuring,” Nwm said drily. “So is this Devil going to harass you from now on?”

“He will jibe me, and attempt to lead me astray, and at the same time I will use him to

purify myself.”

“You *definitely* need to speak to Shomei,” Mostin grinned. “I didn’t know that Oronthon endorsed such radical methods.”

“Generally, he doesn’t. I am the *Ahma*, however.”

“I thought Devils were only allowed one shot at the temptation thing,” Ortwin said. “Isn’t that some

kind of violation of the rules?”

“The rules are changing,” Eadric replied.

“Perhaps,” Mostin said. “I think that the usual rules simply don’t apply to you any more. I see it in you Eadric. We are brethren now.”

Eadric looked confused, and more than a little worried.

“You are like me. You are no longer a man. You have transcended.” Mostin bowed in recognition.

“Being a quasi-semi-hemi-demigod is all very well,” Nwm said impatiently, “but the basic problem of *what the hell should we do?* remains. Currently I can sense no extraplanars or arcane casters of Rimilin’s power within Morne, so where exactly are they all?”

“Elsewhere, or *Mind Blanked*,” Mostin replied. “Tramst will not even show as a ripple in your continuum, Nwm. Any more than Graz’zt, or Rimilin, or Kothchori, I’d guess.”

“Jovol can sense them indirectly,” Eadric said.

“Can he indeed?” Mostin seemed half-dubious and half excited at the prospect.

“Titivilus informed me that Jovol is more powerful than the rest of the Wyrish wizards appreciate.”

“Go on...”

“He says that Hlioth knew him from before. That he is capable of...self incarnation? It may have been a metaphor. I don’t know. He was vague about the details.”

Nwm clicked his fingers. “Hello? Can we please deal with the matter in hand? We can discuss arcane mysteries at a later time. As I see it, we have two options: one, we hit Graz’zt when he arrives, and all die; or, two, we translate to the Abyss while he’s here, try to bust out Nehael...and all die. Other suggestions which do not include the ‘death’ component would be appreciated.”

“The first option is not an option in any case,” Mostin replied. “We will not find him unless he wishes to be found. In which case, he *would* kill us all in short order.”

“You’re going about this the wrong way,” Ortwin said casually. “We call his bluff. We can’t attack him directly, no matter what the circumstances are. We’ve already broken Ainhorr’s sword, imprisoned

Rurunoth and snuffed out another one - which Balor did you *disintegrate*, Mostin?”

“I’ve no idea,” the Alienist replied.

“I can answer that,” Eadric said. “His name was Uruum – at least, according to Titivilus.”

“Aside from Ainhorr, that leaves Choeth, Irzho and Djorm,” Mostin said. “One of whom is already on the Prime.”

“Then let’s call in another one,” Ortwin said. “And kill him. And then another one. And when we’ve killed them all, we can start on the Mariliths, and the Nalfeshnees. We can break this bastard without going toe-to-toe with him, Ed.”

“I think Eadric has issues about conjuring demons,” Mostin said drily, “no matter what the motives.”

“Maybe he did once,” the Paladin replied, “but he’s damn well earned the right to decide whether the ends justify the means or not. And I have *no* reservations on this count.”

“Are you above the Law now, Ed?” Ortwin asked slyly.

“When I’ve decided exactly what the Law is, I’ll let you know,” Eadric answered. “In any case, we

should probably wait until *after* Graz’zt has made his translation, and done whatever it is that he plans to do.”

“I’m not sure of the merit of that idea...” Mostin began.

“Titivilus expressly warned me against irritating Graz’zt too much before he acts. He seems to think

that it might precipitate an overreaction. Jovol has been reluctant to interfere for the same reason.”

“And you trust him?” Ortwin asked.

“No,” Eadric replied.

“All the same, he might be right,” Mostin conceded. “That is entirely plausible. Demon Princes are not renowned for their tolerant natures.”

“Plausibility is what worries me,” Ortwin countered.

“I hear you,” Eadric agreed.

“In any case,” Mostin continued, “I need to prepare – and that will take some while. But I don’t have adequate free valences to do it all in one evening.”

“Do what?”

“To bind and destroy two Balors,” Mostin grinned. “It will have to wait until tomorrow. And I’ll need to find out which one is already present on the Prime.”

“I seem to recall your needing expensive gems,” Eadric said.

“To trap them, yes,” the Alienist said. “To kill them, no. We just kill them.”

“Are you sure it’s that easy?” Nwm asked.

“Piece of cake,” Mostin smiled.

“Why do I get the feeling that we’ve had this conversation before?” Eadric groaned.

“Perhaps we should ransom one,” the Bard suggested. “Propose an exchange. Can you bring a succubus in as well?”

“I suppose so,” Mostin said.

“Then let’s kill a Balor, stick another one in a pentacle, bind a succubus and instruct her that we’ll kill the second one unless Graz’zt releases Nehael, and then *dismiss* her to relay the news to her master,”

Ortwin seemed delighted with his plan.

“I’m not convinced that Graz’zt will go for a ransom deal,” Mostin said dubiously. “It’s difficult to know exactly what passes in the mind of any Demon, much less one of his stature. Who can tell how he thinks, or what his counsels are, or what things motivate him? Moreover, what of Kothchori? If he is capable of opening a *Gate* once, he can do it again. If we rouse Graz’zt’s ire to that degree, then it is likely he will deal with us swiftly and decisively. I say we hit Kothchori first. And *after* the Prince has made his return to the Abyss. We must break the link.”

“He is undetectable,” Eadric groaned.

“Not entirely,” Mostin replied. “If Titivilus was accurate in his appraisal of Jovol’s abilities.”

“Can you contact the Ogre?” Nwm asked. “He would be a useful ally.”

“Jovol follows his own rules,” Mostin answered. “When I have tried in the past, he has been

unforthcoming. But it is possible.”

“Hlioth knows more about him than anyone else,” Eadric said. “It may be worth approaching her.” He looked at the Bard.

Ortwin sighed.

“There is another possibility,” Mostin said tentatively. “It is very dangerous.”

Eadric raised an eyebrow. “If it involves more Devils, then the answer is ‘no.’ I’ve got enough to deal with on that score already.”

“Pseudonaturals,” Mostin said. “Big ones.”

“I think I like that even less,” Eadric said. He sighed. “By rights, we should deal with our dead, before we do anything else. They should be taken in state into Morne – all deserve a place in the Temple

crypts. But it will have to wait. And I suppose that, as we do not know exactly how or where Graz’zt will strike, we must simply wait until he does and then react accordingly in the aftermath. But it is frustrating. I feel impotent. Now would be a time to possess some insight into his nature, to be able to predict what he might do.”

“Presumably, Tramst could have told you, if he is privy to that information,” Ortwin sighed. “Why

didn't he?"

"I don't claim to fully understand his methods," the Paladin answered. "But I have no doubt as to his motives. And I am not above being addressed expediently."**

"Has it occurred to you that that is one of the functions of Titivilus," Ortwin pointed out. "From Oronthon's perspective, at least. By entering into a dialogue with Evil, you come to understand it. To anticipate its movements and action. There may come a point when you can pre-empt it."

"Maybe," Eadric replied. "There might be a thousand other reasons, each equally plausible. I also think that thinking about it too hard is likely to lead to irreducible paradox, so I'm not going to get started on it."

"A wise choice," Nwm nodded.

**

Uedii, the Goddess, the Green Reality, groaned as yet another extraplanar entity desecrated her realm by manifesting within its confines. She was still far from her limit – as far as tolerating the interlopers was concerned. Her near-infinite capacity for absorption had, in the past, accommodated entire

pantheons of warring gods, before she squashed them like flies.

Nonetheless, Nature was *irritated*. Clouds began to gather over Morne. Feys became short-tempered and vicious. Far to the south, in the archipelago of Pandicule, a volcano – long dormant – rumbled threateningly.

Prince Graz'zt appeared before the mage Kothchori in the sanctum of his island retreat, and the wizard quailed. Nearby, bound within a thaumaturgic diagram, the Archon Zhuel stood in silent meditation.

Graz'zt smiled. To be able to use *this* Archon had been an unexpected pleasure. His face screwed up as he considered Uzmi and Uruum and Rurunoth, and contorted wildly as he thought of Eadric.

"You are fuel, Archon," the Prince said snidely. "Consider this: when your sublime form expires after aeons of servitude to your effulgent master, your spirit will be consumed and transformed into

something filthy and loathesome."

Zhuel said nothing. His face remained serene and impassive. As the Demon absorbed his essence, and swelled with the potency so imbibed, Zhuel gave no indication of pain or discomfort, and shot no look of hatred or contempt towards the Fiend. His annihilation was accompanied by an expression of

profound pity for Graz'zt, which threw the Prince into a brief but prodigious rage. After a minute of paroxysm, he abruptly mastered himself.

The Demon appeared in Morne for a few seconds, spoke a phrase so terrible that space itself buckled under the strain, and promptly vanished exhausted back to his Abyssal realm.

A surge of elemental hatred broke outwards from the place where he had stood: the same spot in the Orangery of the Temple where Feezuu had slain the Archbishop Cynric. The Aether reverberated

sympathetically. Fruit rapidly ripened, spoiled and fell to the ground in festering heaps. The grass wilted, and the orchard blackened and died.

Madness seized the already distressed inhabitants of Morne.

*Lit., “You See.”

**Ascended Masters and Saints within Oronthonianism frequently give cryptic or incomplete accounts to lesser beings, in the knowledge that often such creatures are incapable of understanding the full ramifications of information that would otherwise be imparted.

Dark Subsumption is a method used to fuel Epic Spells cast by certain fiends, which involves the annihilation of powerful outsiders. The mechanics were only worked out after I had access to the

BoVD.

Wave of Hate was the spell that Graz'zt invoked. It will be detailed in the next post.

The Characters

Although I'd normally post them in the Rogues' Gallery, here are the characters as of this post. My rewards aren't always conventional, so it's probably worth explaining a few things:

Eadric

Levelling was rapid for Eadric from 18-20: the final level was, in fact "free" to all intents and purposes

– the transcendence granted by Tramst in this post (i.e. a 5th level Divine Disciple). Marc is targeting the Divine Emissary PrC from the Epic Level Handbook, although he has yet to decide the intervening levels. Maybe Divine Agent from MotP.

I am using the idea of 'levelled weapons' for Lukarn – i.e., as Eadric grows in stature, so does the sword. This had been the plan since around level 13-14, although I had neglected to implement it

(oops). Eadric's transcendence seemed like a good point for a large growth in the sword's abilities,

perhaps reflecting an 'awakening' similar to that of its master.

Rewards for Eadric were big, but Marc deserved them. He'd been a truly awesome player.

Ortwin

Rob had already foregone advancing one level of experience, and did so again in order to fully

rationalize his character (in his mind). I allowed him to apply the remaining benefits of the Satyr race, which the *reincarnation* spell had denied him – these included the Fey hit dice and skill points (minus those extra x4 which he would have gained at 1st level), and three feats (two of which he already

possessed). As Ortwin originally had an extra feat on conversion to 3e, Rob and I came to an

arrangement which suited both of us: Ortwin's Satyr-ness was fully integrated both mechanically and in the role-playing sense, and the inconsistencies of the *reincarnation* spell were resolved. Ortwin is no longer a reincarnated half-elf. He *really* is a Satyr, in every sense. Rob is happy with Satyrdom, although he feels he will be shafted by the ELH multiclassing rules.

It also meant that the 'is he ECL +5 or not?' question was resolved. He now *is*. Of course, when he levels to 18, he will receive another feat. Epic Skill Focus (Bluff) looks likely. One has to work hard to remain the best liar in the world.

Nwm

Nwm levelled, and I allowed Dave to trade out TWF and Improved TWF for some feats from MotW –

reflecting a gradual ‘forgetting’ of abilities, to be replaced by new ones. I’m pretty flexible in that regard, and Nwm is less optimized than the other characters anyhow. Nwm will stick with Druid all the way.

Mostin

Dan decided to pump all of his XP into a +5 inherent bonus to Mostin’s intelligence instead of levelling to 19. Mostin now has a ‘brain the size of a planet,’ as Marvin, the Paranoid Android, once said.

More generally, I allowed a retrospective reallocation of skill points in the case of previous cross-class skills for Eadric: Knowledge (Religion) and Knowledge (Nobility) shouldn’t be quite such a sink for a Paladin. I also did the same based on Mostin’s Intelligence increases over several levels – note,

however that I do *not* allow the Headband of Intellect to increase skill points gained per level. That’s just silly.

Mostin, having maxed out the skills that were any use to him, opted to throw them into Craft skills.

Apparently, Illumination and Engraving have been a secret passion of his for some while...

Eadric, Earl of Deorham

Male human Paladin 15 / Divine Disciple 5; CR 20; Medium size outsider (human); HD 15d10+60 plus

5d8 + 20; hp 201; Init +1; Speed 20 ft; AC 28 (touch 11, flatfooted 27); Attack: +30/+25/+20/+15

melee (Lukarn) or +27/+22/+17/+12 (Kirm); Dmg: 1d10+11 (15-20/x2)(Luakrn) or 1d8+9 (x3) (Kirm).

SV Fort +23, Ref +13, Will +18; AL LG; Str 18 (24), Dex 13, Con 18, Int 12, Wis 16, Cha 23.

Languages: Common, Celestial

Skills: Ride +16, Knowledge (Religion) +18, Knowledge (Nobility) +9, Diplomacy +29, Handle

Animal +11, Perform +10 (Ballad, Ode, Lute, Dance), Knowledge (History) +6, Sense Motive +18.

Feats: Exotic Weapon Proficiency (Bastard Sword), Power Attack, Mounted Combat, Ride-by-Attack,

Spirited Charge, Weapon Focus (Bastard Sword), Improved Critical (Bastard Sword), Divine Might.

Special Abilities: Detect Evil at will, Divine Grace, Lay on Hands (75hp/day), Divine Health, Aura of Courage, Smite Evil (1/day, +15 dmg), Remove Disease (5/week), Turn Undead (as CLE 13, 8/day).

Strength Domain Power (1/day: +20 to Str for 1 round). Divine Emissary (Telepathy w/ LG celestials in 60 ft.), Sacred Defense +2, Imbue with Spell Ability, Transcendence.

Spells: -/4/4/4/3. Prepared spells vary, but usually include "Holy Sword." Plus Strength domain spells: Endure Elements, Bull's Strength, Magic Vestment, Spell Immunity. Caster level 12.

Magic Items:

"Lukarn." +4 LG Keen Fiend Bane Sunblade. Int 14, Wis 17, Cha 18. Empathy. 1 x Extraordinary Ability: Heal 1/day. Special Purpose: Slay Chaotic Evil Creatures. Special Purpose Power: Confusion.

Lukarn has an Ego of 25.

"The Skin of Sarth." +4 Full Plate Armour of Invulnerability.

"Melimpor's Iron Girdle." Belt of Giant Strength +6.

"Melimpor's Shield." A Large +3 Shield of Blinding.

"Kirm." Heavy +2 Dragonbane Lance.

3 Javelins of Lightning

4 Potions of Cure Serious Wounds; 2 Potions of Haste.

The Left Eye of Palamabron: A Gem of Seeing with the "Discern Lies," "Zone of Revelation," and

"Zone of Truth" abilities as cast by a 20th level Cleric usable at will.

34 Years. 190 lbs. 6'1"

Ortwin the Satyr

Male Satyr Fighter5/Rogue5/Bard7; Medium-size fey; HD 5d6+20 plus 5d10+20 plus 5d6+20 plus

7d6+28; hp 175; Init +10; Speed 40 ft; AC 28 (touch 16, flatfooted 22 ++ Displacement Effects);

Attack: +27/+22/+17/+12 (Githla) or +26/+21/+16/+11 (Anguish and +3 arrow); Dmg: 1d6+7 (12-

20/x2) (Githla) or 1d8 +5 + enervation (Anguish and +3 arrow); SV Fort +12, Ref +20, Will +12; AL

CG(N Tendencies); Str 13, Dex 22, Con 18, Int 15, Wis 12, Cha 20 (24).

Languages: Common, Draconic, Old Borchion, Elf, Sylvan

Skills: Perform +31 (20 Ranks: Storytelling, Epic, Chant, Drum, Lyre, Lute, Pipe, Mime, Formal

Dance, Folkdance, Folksong, Sword Swallowing, Juggling, Pan Pipes, Clarion, Satire), Bluff +32, Pick Pocket +14, Climb +9, Swim +7, Hide +29, Move Silently +29, Disguise +13, Knowledge (Arcana)

+6, Innuendo +13, Open Lock +12, Use Magic Device +15, Search +11, Spot +22, Listen +19.

Feats: Weapon Focus (Scimitar), Weapon Finesse (Scimitar - Yes, I allow this), Dodge, Expertise,

Mobility, Weapon Specialization (Scimitar), Skill Focus (Bluff), Spring Attack, Whirlwind Attack,

Improved Critical (Scimitar), Brew Potion, Improved Initiative.

Special Abilities: Sneak Attack +3d6, Evasion, Uncanny Dodge (Flatfooted Dex Bonus), Bardic Music, Bardic Knowledge. +4 Racial Bonus to Hide, Listen, Perform, Spot and Move Silently checks.

Spells: 3/5/4/2 per day. Known: 0lvl: Dancing Lights, Daze, Flare, Light, Read Magic, Prestidigitation; 1st lvl: Sleep, Charm Person, Cure Light Wounds, Alarm, Ventriloquism; 2nd lvl: Silence, Cat's Grace, Glitterdust, Detect Thoughts; 3rd lvl: Major Image, Scrying.

Magic Items:

“Dread Githla.” +4 Keen, Throwing and Returning Scimitar

Cloak of Displacement (Major)

+5 Studded Leather Armour

The Blue Garnet Collar (Grants wearer +4 to Charisma).

Winged Boots

Potion of Fiery Breath.

Potion of Invisibility.

“Anguish.” A +1 Magical (+3 Mighty) Composite Longbow of Enervation. Those struck by missiles

from this weapon are affected as though by the spell of the same name (Save DC17).

20 x +3 Arrows

Masterwork Pan Pipes

Masterwork Lute

Hat of Disguise

Nwm the Preceptor

Male human Druid 18; medium sized humanoid (human); HD 18d8+36; hp 121; Init +1; Speed 30 ft;

AC 19 (Touch 11, flat-footed 18); Attack: +18/+13/+8 (Magical Quarterstaff) or +15 (Magical Javelin) Dmg: 1d6+4 (x2) (Magical Quarterstaff) or 1d6 +3 (x2) (Magical Javelin), SV Fort +13, Ref +7, Will

+16; AL NG; Str 14, Dex 12, Con 14, Int 15, Wis 20, Cha 17.

Languages: Common, Elven, Sylvan, Druidic

Skills: Animal Empathy +19, Handle Animal +9, Swim +10, Intuit Direction +10, Concentration +18, Wilderness Lore +26, Knowledge (Nature) + 22, Knowledge (Arcana) +6, Scry +18, Spellcraft +11,

Diplomacy +8, Heal +7, Profession (Herbalist) +11, Craft (Leatherworker) +6

Feats: Weapon Focus (Quarterstaff), Ambidexterity, Extra Wild Shape, Create Infusion, Brew Potion, Craft Wondrous Item, Natural Spell, Snatch

Special Abilities: Woodland Stride, Trackless Step, +4 on Saves vs. Fey Enchantments, Wild Shape

(6/day; Huge; Elemental 3/day), Venom Immunity, A Thousand Faces, Timeless Body.

Spells Per Day: 6/7/6/6/6/5/4/3/3/2

Nwm's Staff (+2 Staff of the Woodlands topped with an Orb of Storms)

"Leofric's Token," a +3 Amulet of Natural Armour

+3 Leather Armour

"The Bleeding Spears of Huttur," 2x +1 Javelins of Wounding

Bag of Tricks (Rust Colour)

Nwm's Torc: Command activated device which allows the wearer to 'Commune with Nature' as cast by

a 9th level Druid.

46 Years; 178lbs; 5'11"

Mostin the Metagnostic

Human Diviner 8 / Alienist 10; medium-size outsider (human); HD 8d4+8 plus 10d4+10 +6 (Insane

Certainty); hp 74; Init +3; Speed 30 ft; AC 22 (touch 17, flat-footed 19); Attack: +10/+5 MW Rapier melee; Dmg: 1d6+1 MW Rapier melee (18-20/x2), SV Fort +7, Ref +9, Will +18; AL N(G

Tendencies); Str 11, Dex 16, Con 13, Int 27 (33), Wis 16 (18), Cha 12.

Intelligence includes a +5 Inherent bonus.

Languages: Common, Draconic, Celestial, Abyssal, Infernal, Auran, Ignan, Terran, Aquan, Elven Skills: Knowledge (Arcana) +32, Knowledge (The Planes) +32, Knowledge (History) +32, Knowledge

(Geography) +32, Knowledge (Nobility) +20, Knowledge (Engineering) +20, Spellcraft +32, Alchemy

+32, Scry +32, Concentration +32, Craft (Illumination) +21, Craft (Engraving) +21, Ride +5.

Feats: Martial Weapon Proficiency (Rapier), Scribe Scroll, Brew Potion, Alertness, Craft Wondrous

Item, Quicken Spell, Still Spell, Maximize Spell, Chain Spell, Energy Substitution (sonic), Empower Spell, Spell Focus (Conjuration).

Special Abilities: Alien Blessing (+1 Insight Bonus on Saving Throws), Extra Summoning, Summon

Alien, Insane Certainty, Timeless Body, Pseudonatural Familiar, Transcendence

Phobia: birds.

Spells: 4/7/7/7/6/6/6/5/4/3 per day. Specialty: Divination (+1 spell/level/day). Extra Summoning = 1 x Summon Monster IX. Prohibited: Necromancy. Save DC 21 + spell level (or 23 + spell level for

Conjurations).

Known:

0lvl: All PHB Cantrips.

1st lvl: Sleep, Charm Person, Alarm, Ventriloquism, Know Protections, Lesser Acid Orb, Enlarge,

Chromatic Orb, Expeditious Retreat, Mount, Message, Summon Monster, Comprehend Languages,

Detect Undead, Identify, True Strike, Jump, Spider Climb, Magic Missile.

2nd lvl. Detect Thoughts, Summon Swarm, Tasha's Hideous Laughter, Summon Monster

II, Web,

Locate Object, Detect Invisibility, Darkness, Alter Self, Knock, Cat's Grace, Bull's Strength, Eagle's Splendour, Fox's Cunning, Arcane Lock, Continual Flame, Obscure Object, Whispering Wind,

Dimensional Pocket, Mostin's Aura of Inscrutability, Mostin's Arhythmic Apoplexy, Mostin's Myopic

Emanation

3rd lvl: Avoid Planar Effects, Phantom Steed, Stinking Cloud, Summon Monster III, Fireball, Lightning Bolt, Magic Circle Against Chaos/Evil/Good/Law, Nondetection, Arcane Sight, Dispel Magic,

Tongues, Fly, Clairaudience/Clairvoyance.

4th lvl: Dimensional Anchor, Evard's Black Tentacles, Minor Creation, Summon Monster IV, Arcane

Eye, Detect Scrying, Locate Creature, Leomund's Secure Shelter, Scrying, Charm Monster, Stoneskin, Phantasmal Killer, Shadow Conjuration, Zone of Respite, Ethereal Mount, Vitriolic Sphere, Improved Bull's Strength, Improved Cat's Grace, Improved Fox's Cunning, Attune Form, Polymorph Self,

Mostin's Interminable Sermon, Mostin's Torque Tendril, Zone of Revelation.

5th lvl: Dismissal, Lesser Planar Binding, Cloudkill, Major Creation, Summon Monster V, Contact

Other Plane, Fabricate, Prying Eyes, Rary's Telepathic Bond, Dream, Nightmare, Mestil's Acid Sheath, Wall of Force, Sending, Teleport, Mostin's Metempsychotic Reversal, Mostin's Paroxysm of Fire,

Permanency, Tenser's Destructive Resonance.

6th lvl: Repulsion, Gate Seal, Eyebite, Make Manifest, Hardening, Contingency, Acid Storm,

Antimagic Field, Fiendform, Disintegrate, Planar Binding, Summon Monster VI, Analyze Dweomer,

Legend Lore, True Seeing, Chain Lightning, Guards and Wards, Tenser's Transformation, Mass Haste,

Mostin's Id Eruption

7th lvl: Banishment, Sequester, Energy Immunity, Vipergout, Delayed Blast Fireball, Teleport Without Error, Spell Turning, Summon Monster VII, Greater Scrying, Vision, Insanity, Plane Shift, Ethereal Jaunt, Limited Wish, Reality Maelstrom, Mordenkainen's Magnificent Mansion.

8th lvl: Mind Blank, Greater Planar Binding, Great Shout, Summon Monster VIII, Sympathy, Trap the

Soul, Discern Location, Binding, Etherealness, Mostin's Metagnostic Inquiry, Polymorph

any Object, Mass Manifest, Symbol, Maze.

9th lvl: Summon Monster IX, Wish, Gate, Time Stop, Prismatic Sphere, Imprisonment.

Magic Items:

Looking Glass of Urm Nahat (Mirror of Mental Prowess)

Portable Hole

Bracers of Armour +4

Ring of Protection +4

Incandescent Blue Sphere Ioun Stone (+2 Wis)

Pale Green Prism Ioun Stone (Sustains without Air)

Iridescent Spindle Ioun Stone (Sustains without Food or Water)

Amulet of Absorption (21 Spell Levels Remain): 3 currently stored

Headband of Intellect +6

Robe of Eyes

Belt of Many Pockets

Mostin's Comfortable Retreat

4 Potions of "Cure Serious Wounds."

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 01-17-2003

Regarding Eadric's experience:

SEEING FOR THE FIRST TIME

There is a compounded meaning within this phrase. Not only *saizhan* – i.e. “Insight,” but also insight into the nature of insight, and insight into that etc. The rational mind rapidly loses the ability to grasp the spiralling nature of the Real.

I-THOU

This calls into question the conventional apprehension that the object (in this case, Oronthon/Tramst) and the subject (Eadric) are, in fact, separate entities. By extension, all other dualities between the perceiver and the perceived are shown to be merely conventional, and not ultimately Real.

BEING-NONBEING-BECOMING

The three possible ontological states as understood by Urgic Mysticism: either something *is*, or *is not* or is in the process of *becoming something else*. No phenomenon, when viewed from the standpoint of conventional philosophy, can exist outside of this triad. Again, this is called into question by *saizhan* when describing the Real.

KNOWING-UNKNOWNING

The nature of *saizhan* itself cannot be framed in conventional epistemological language, and transcends the usual categories of gnostic understanding. The duality between whether the Real is known, or

whether it is not, is also shown to be false.

SEEKING-FINDING-LOSING-FINDING

The rational mind attempts unsuccessfully to reassert itself and grasp the nature of the Real. During the experience of *saizhan*, when the subject attempts to articulate the nature of the Real using conventional thought, the experience eludes him. Only when it is lost to the rational mind, can its nature be

apprehended. The Real is slippery.

TIME-BEING ETERNITY-NONBEING NOW-BECOMING

The ontological triad (being, nonbeing, becoming) is linked with the three temporal states (conventional linear time, timelessness/eternity and the moment Now), but *saizhan* reveals these correspondances to be nothing more than convenient labels. The true nature of the Real is beyond these categories, and cannot be described by normal temporal language.

EVERYTHING-NOTHING

The extremes of monism (i.e., the philosophical idea that ‘all is one’), and nihilism (‘nothing is Real’) are shown to be false conceptions – *saizhan* reveals that the duality between them is constructed, not Real.

IDENTITY-DIFFERENCE

An important point, in which *saizhan* diverges from other mystical systems. Even the

duality between regarding whether something is identical to something else, or different from it is shown to be vacuous.

RELATIVE-ABSOLUTE

The philosophical coup, which marks *saizhan* as unique (and is a demonstration of Tramst's genius).

Here, the distinction between the Real (the absolute) and the merely conventional (the relative) is shown to be false. Even this duality is addressed. Now there is nothing left for the rational mind to grasp onto.

NOTHING IS. NOTHING IS NOT. NOTHING BECOMES

The final, bold assertion framed as a threefold dialectic of negation, and reiterating the ontological questions raised before. The Real cannot be described as either *existing* or *not existing*, or as being in the process of *becoming*. This is the central mystical assertion of *saizhan*.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 02-10-2003

The Rape

Wyr, a cloth-merchant of considerable financial means, lived in a large, comfortable manse in the Temple district of Morne. His home – constructed on a single level in the antique style – was

maintained to immaculate standards. Pristine whitewashed walls, a red clay pan-tiled roof, and a neat, formal garden were looked after by Wyr's small but diligent retinue of indentured servants.

Wyr – a member of Morne's influential middle class – enjoyed his life, although of late the war had taken a toll on his income. His wife, Qéma, was a younger daughter of the Silubrein household –

relatives of the incumbent Earl of Scir Cellod in the south of Wyre. The marriage had been a favorable one, elevating Wyr to quasi-noble status, and benefiting the Silubreins with a much-needed boost to their near-empty coffers. Wyr was a *Gilded Thane*, in the popular parlance – regarded with disdain by those of established pedigree, but nonetheless one who wielded as much power as many of those who could trace their lineage back twenty generations.

An hour before sunset, as clouds were gathering again in the sky above Morne, and many wondered

what new sorcery was at work, Wyr suddenly paused above his ledgers and accounts, his quill pen

twitching nervously in his hand. He swallowed, and his hackles rose. Blood thundered in his temples as he thought of Qéma, and he wondered what folly had led him to marry her in the first place. He glanced around his study, selected a sturdy marble book-end, and went in search of his wife.

Wyrth never had a chance to smash her skull, however, because as he exited a small drawing-room,

Qéma stood in wait for him. She pushed a long larding needle into his throat, and Wyrth fell over,

gurgled briefly, and died.

In a red haze, Qéma walked outside and went to look for the gardener, who had annoyed her earlier that day by what she perceived as his mismanagement of the shrubbery.

Across Morne, with minor variations, the pattern was repeated a thousand times.

**

“The Goddess is angry,” Nwm said with startling certainty, as his torc relayed a variety of natural grumblings to his mind.

“Graz’zt has come?” Eadric asked anxiously. “Can you determine his whereabouts?”

“I cannot,” Nwm answered. “And Graz’zt is merely the latest in a succession of aliens who *should not be here*. ” The Druid’s disdain towards demons, devils, celestials and incarnate deities alike was barely concealed. His perceptions shifted repeatedly as he tried to focus on something tangible in his

consciousness. Half a minute passed.

Across his field of inner vision, tiny points of light – sentient beings – appeared. All of those within nine miles, in fact. There were eighty-four thousand three hundred and nineteen of them. In the Temple district of Morne, many flared rapidly – enjoying a brief moment of intensity – before they disappeared permanently. He watched in morbid fascination as lives were snuffed out.

Death – unnatural - violence – the desire to do great violence – fear – *hatred*.

Nwm vomited, as his groping mind resonated with the emotional reality of what was transpiring within the city.

“Hatred,” he gasped.

“Enchantment?” Mostin asked cannily.

“Yes. YES.”

“Intriguing,” the Alienist observed.

“Is it permanent?” the Paladin asked. “Are those who enter likely to feel its effects?”

“No, and no,” Mostin answered. “Unless Graz’zt’s stature has somehow grown tenfold.”

“Do we really know how powerful he is?” Ortwin asked nervously.

“Not *that* powerful,” Mostin assured him.

“Er, so remind me why exactly Oronthon’s avatar isn’t doing anything about this,” Ortwin said sarcastically.

“I am in no mood for a Theological debate,” Eadric snapped.

“Nwm would say Theological,” Mostin quipped.

The Druid groaned, and abruptly turned into an eagle. He exited the tent, screeched, and was quickly joined by two more – Sem and Gheim. The three flew towards Morne. Eadric, Ortwin and Mostin

followed him out, to be greeted by a riot of colour – Templars, aristocrats, soldiers and mercenaries –

all of whom had expectant looks upon their faces.

Ahma, they cried with one voice.

*Oh, Sh*t*, thought the Paladin. The damn army wanted someone to tell them what to do. He motioned to Brey and Sercion, who approached expectantly.

“Assemble every anointed Templar*,” Eadric instructed his captains. “We are going into Morne.”

A wide grin appeared on Brey’s face. “That is a wise choice, *Ahma*. Our holiness alone will prevail. We have no need of foreign mercenaries.”

The Paladin smiled grimly. “You misunderstand, Brey. We are not going in to fight. I require swords to remain in their scabbards.”

Tramst had told him that he would know what to do. He hoped he was doing the right thing.

**

Inside the audience chamber of the Royal Palace – the ceiling of which still dripped slowly from the torrential rains of the previous night – Prince Tagur was finally received by King Tiuhan and the

remainder of the Small Council. He limped, his arms were burned and painful from the exchange with Rimilin and the Demons outside of the gates, and he was still bloody and bruised from his escape from Hullu’s encampment.

Foide, who had privately hoped for Tagur’s demise, feigned relief at his appearance. The Prince of Einir, who seldom misread others’ motives, scowled briefly.

“So who had the bright idea of employing the Demonist as an ambassador?” He spat sarcastically.

“His Majesty,” the Chamberlain replied loftily. “And you should speak with more respect, although we are glad to find you alive and well.”

Tagur gave an icy stare. “Foide, shut up.” He bowed to the Boy-King. “I fear that you may have made an error of judgement, your Highness.** It is a hard lesson – but you should learn from it. Where is Rimilin now?”

“No longer here,” Sihu answered. “The Bishop of Gibilrazen says that he and the Heretic are most likely engaged in some diabolic feud, where they are arguing about who claims the spoils after the world ends.”

“Where is that fat oaf, anyway?” Tagur asked irreverently, causing Tiuhan to snicker.

“He has returned to the Temple,” Sihu replied with earnest piety. “He left abruptly, and did not explain why.”

The Prince grunted. From Eadric’s words, he had an inkling of the reasons for the Bishop’s sudden

departure, but felt no urge to share them with the others present. Damned religious nonsense. Why

couldn’t people just get by without it?

After an hour of wrangling about how best to deal with the ongoing crisis in Wyre – half a dozen

armies in the area, all but their own respective troops of dubious loyalty to each of the magnates present – Attar, the Warden of the North returned to the chamber. His normally taciturn manner had been replaced by something which Tagur perceived to be close to panic.

“Riots have broken out in the Temple Quarter,” he panted.

“What now,” Foide sighed drily, “another doctrinal dispute?”

“If it is, I’ve never seen anything like it before,” Attar replied. “It’s some kind of hysteria. They’re killing each other in the streets. Templars, soldiers who were stationed on the West Wall, old women, toddlers, everyone.”

Tagur groaned. The Demonist probably had a hand in this new mischief. And with the Heretic outside of the city, they could hardly draw soldiers away from the walls to contain it. He motioned to Attar, winced in pain as he hurried out of the audience room, and made his way to the tall West Tower of the palace.

*Sh*t*, he thought as he looked out at the scene. They were butchering each other by the hundred out there, and new fires were starting – their smoke rising to join the smoldering remnants of those which had burned the night before. A lot had happened in a day. And now the Fane itself was burning.

In disbelief, Prince Tagur watched as the Temple’s south transept, wracked by earthquake, wind,

torrential rain, and now, fire, teetered and cracked. Immense buttresses and pilons snapped like straws, and the edifice collapsed in a ruin, briefly exposing a light in the nave beyond, before it was obscured by smoke and dust.

From inside the Temple, something reached out and gently touched his mind. Tagur suddenly *saw*. The cosmos melted, and was made whole again in an instant. Moments later, Eadric’s trumpets sounded

beyond the city walls.

Tagur turned to Attar. “Let him in,” he said. “Before its too late.”

The Warden’s jaw dropped. “Your Highness...” he began.

“Do it. Open the South Gate.”

**

“It is only a technical violation,” Mulissu complained. “I don’t see what all the fuss is about.” She lounged in one of the huge leather chairs in Shomei’s study.

Jovol sighed. “If you don’t have the stomach for this, Mulissu...”

“Don’t be so damned condescending. I admire the principle. I agreed to listen to you, didn’t I?” Her memory flashed back to her own fears of assault from Feezuu – although the Ogre’s proposition would have done little to protect her.

“Under much duress,” Shomei said snidely. She shifted uncomfortably in her chair, the scars from her exchange with Titivilus still apparent. “Besides, its not as though *you* will be the one to suffer the consequences of it.”

“It is a tedious waste,” the Savant answered. “And I still don’t understand why we can’t perform the ritual afterwards. Or why the clauses regarding summoning and wizards assailing other wizards can’t simply be dropped. There will always be extenuating circumstances.”

“Not any more,” the Ogre replied. “The Injunction will now be watertight.”

” *Nothing* is ever watertight. Mostin won’t like this.” Mulissu sighed.

Shomei laughed. “If there are any loopholes, he will find them.”

“Mostin has hardly been an exemplar in observing the Injunction,” Jovol agreed wily. “Which is why I have decided to include him. I’d rather have him in on it, than trying to wriggle around it. Besides, we need his input to fuel the spell. I have already sent written copies of the proposal to Waide, Tozinack, Daunton and Hlioth – a quorum is desirable.”

“Mostin means well,” Mulissu sighed. “But will be reluctant to surrender his sovereignty to an abstraction.” A worried look crossed her face. “You’ve made a powerful case, Jovol, but I fear that what you suggest will rip the heart out of magic in Wyre.”

“It will merely relocate a certain aspect of it.”

“And Hlioth? She is hardly reliable.”

“You do not know her as I do. I’ve shown you the Web of Motes.”

“It is indecipherable to me,” the Witch said, waving her hand in a dismissive gesture. “I must take your word for it. And what happens if you receive a blanket refusal from all of those whom you have

asked?” Mulissu probed.

“Then I will *Gate* in half a dozen Solars and they will help me instead,” Jovol grumbled. “One way or another, *this will happen*.”

“Have you decided upon the Enforcer?” Shomei asked. “One of the *Akesoli**** could be bound with this spell.”

Jovol shook his head. “They are too political,” he said. “And to co-opt them would cause too many ripples. But I concur with your reasoning – something Diabolic would seem to fit the bill, but

something outside of the established order – I am leaning towards Gihaahia.”

“That is certainly a terrifying prospect for potential violators,” Shomei nodded.

“An infernal magnate?” Mulissu asked, uninformed about the nuances of the Diabolic hierarchy.

“An *Infernal*,” Shomei replied. “The offspring of Prince Astaroth and the dead Goddess, Cheshne.”

“She is not dead,” Jovol smiled. “She dreams with the others.”

“In any case, Gihaahia is an abhorrence. An atavism from a previous reality.”

“Your concept of reality is quaintly rational,” Jovol chided.

“And yours is numinous bunkum,” Shomei retorted. “But I am not here to argue metaphysics – or transmetaphysics, before you say anything.”

Mulissu groaned and looked bored. This was precisely why she had isolated herself for so long. “I will fetch Mostin,” she said, and vanished.

**

The Alienist seethed, looking at the huge, carved marble slab.

“You have *no* right to do this,” he snapped.

“I have the power,” Jovol replied calmly. “And the foresight. And a responsibility to the future. That is enough.”

“And *you*?” Mostin looked incredulously at both Mulissu and Shomei. “Have you lost your wits? You of all people, Shomei. You live for this. You cannot *ban* an entire subschool of magic.”

“I accept the limitations as part of a larger set of rules, Mostin. Jovol will not move on any of them.

Besides, it will only affect those who cannot perform their summonings elsewhere.”

“That is precisely why it won’t work,” Mostin sighed. “Those who wish to will simply go elsewhere in order to do it, and then order their creatures into Wyre.”

Jovol touched the slab. In response to his words, a minute paragraph carved upon the huge tablet glowed, and seemed to grow in size. Luminous runes hung in the air.

33.6(e)... *this prohibition extends to the calling or summoning of creatures outside of the excluded area, and their subsequent deployment within it. Such violators will also be subject to the Enforcer.*

“Pah!” The Alienist snorted. “What about the didactic implications? To remove summoning from a mage’s repertoire will impact the understanding of magic in general.”

“I have the same concern,” Mulissu nodded.

“And I am concerned about *defense*,” Mostin said. “What happens if a Wizard is magically attacked, and his or her specialty is conjuration? He can no longer summon creatures to protect him.”

Jovol smiled, and touched the tablet. “Observe...”

5.0 *No Wizard shall, at any time or in any way, assail another Wizard by magical means...*

“That’s pretty radical,” Mostin said.

“The *theory* of summoning is not banned, nor is the practice beyond Wyre’s boundaries. Please, Mostin, do not get stuck on this one point. Read the tablet in its entirety. There are clauses to cover every contingency, and even an appeal clause in the case of possible miscarriage.”

“Appeal? Appeal to whom? To you?”

“To the Claviger.” Jovol replied.

“What the Hell is the *Claviger*?” Mostin asked.

“You are looking at it,” Jovol said, a wide grin appearing on his huge face, and exposing rows of enormous fangs, “at least, in a manner of speaking. The Claviger inhabits the tablet upon which the

Injunction has been scribed.”

“The tablet is *sapient*?” The Alienist asked in disbelief.

“Profoundly so,” Jovol nodded. “It can also independently manifest itself. The Enforcer will be bound to the Claviger, and will act as directed by it.”

“What is this ‘intelligence?’” Mostin asked. “Where did it originate?”

Jovol laughed. “Dream,” he said.

Mostin raised an eyebrow. “What is its order – in the sense of its size, rather than its genus? Its inclination? Its motivations?”

“It is the Claviger,” Jovol said simply. “And it has agreed to my suggestion.”

“To inhabit this piece of rock? It must be crazy. I am disinclined to trust it.”

“Trust is inconsequential,” Jovol sighed. “It is not in the nature of the Claviger to manipulate others for its own ends. It does not have an ego or a personality, in the conventional sense. As to its order – *deific* would be an understatement. It perceives the magical continuum at all times. It will instantly know of any violation.”

The Alienist’s jaw dropped. “This is outrageous,” he said.

“I told you he wouldn’t like it,” Mulissu groaned. “Perhaps we should have asked Jalael and Troap.”

“To do what?” Mostin inquired suspiciously.

“To help us bind the Enforcer,” Shomei answered.

“And what will the Enforcer be?”

“I am leaning towards Gihaahia at present,” Jovol answered.

Mostin wracked his memory, until he recalled the name. The blood drained from his face. “Please wait for a while.”

He scanned the tablet minutely for one hour.

“You’re all cracked,” he said, and then laughed loudly, as an epiphany struck him. “But count me in.

I’ve a feeling you’re going to do it anyway, and if there will be no more summonings, I’d like my last one in Wyre to be a big one.”

“I was hoping you’d feel that way,” Jovol nodded. “But we are not *calling* Gihaahia. We will be going *to* her, in order to bind her.”

“That would be less arduous in terms of the magic required,” Mostin nodded. “Are co-operative spells a particular specialty of yours, Jovol?” He asked archly.

“They were once,” the Ogre nodded, seeing the knowing look upon the Alienist’s face.

“Thought so,” Mostin said. “One last thing,” he asked, “I was planning on *calling* two Balors tomorrow...”

“My Web of Motes indicated the possibility,” Jovol answered. “If you proceed, you should make sure that you are outside of Wyre, and do not force them to act as your agents within it.”

“I assume that extradimensional spaces are not excluded?”

“Of course not,” Shomei replied. “You see? It will have little impact on you and I, so long as we exercise prudence.”

“When do you propose to bind the Infernal?” Mostin asked.

“Is your highest valence available to you?” Jovol asked.

The Alienist puffed out his cheeks, and nodded.

“Then now is as good a time as any. I will contact Waide and the others. Mulissu?”

The Elementalist agreed, and looked sadly at Jovol. Here was one whom she had barely begun to know, the passing of whose friendship she already lamented. The Ogre had indicated that there was a ninety-six percent chance that he would be dead within two days.

Jovol smiled quietly to himself. His prescience had seldom failed him.

**

Nwm circled overhead, ready to conjure elementals in order to tear down Morne’s South Gate if

necessary. Below him, Eadric sat upon Contundor amid three hundred Templars – those of particular

holiness and devotion who acted as channels for their deity’s power.

A deity whose proxy was within the Temple walls, Eadric thought to himself.

At that moment, a roaring noise – masonry cracking and falling – echoed across the city and to the gates. In the sky, Nwm screeched at Gheim, and the eagle plummeted downwards, broke its dive, and

alighted upon the pommel of Eadric's saddle.

"Part of the Temple just collapsed," Gheim said in a matter-of-fact way. "It is on fire. There are other fires within. Men, women and children are murdering each other on the streets."

Eadric felt sick, and motioned to Jorde, who bore the horn of the recently burned Hyne around his

neck. It rang out, to be quickly followed by several more amongst the Templars.

Perhaps a dozen arrows and bolts issued from the towers above the gate, and clattered off of armour and barding. A rather half-hearted response, Eadric mused to himself. Perhaps the others were being

deployed inside the walls. He waited. Within the walls, another horn sounded. Moments later, the gates opened.

The Paladin, half-expecting a charge directed at him from within, braced himself for the assault.

Instead, numbers of Morne's inhabitants surged outwards, carrying children too young to walk, and

those few possessions which they felt worth saving. Most simply fled. Others seemed to be randomly killing those attempting to escape, or each other. It was impossible to determine who were the victims, and who the attackers. Who was enchanted, and who was not.

"Apprehend anyone behaving aggressively," Eadric's voice boomed out. "Knock them out and tie them up. We can decide what to do with them when we've subdued them." He prayed that it would be

enough. Motioning to Brey, Sercion, Jorde and a dozen others, he rode through the gate and headed for the Temple.

The scene which greeted him on his procession was more barbaric, more obscene, and more painful

than anything he had ever before encountered. Mutilated corpses were strewn around. Burned. Impaled.

Dismembered. Screams of pain echoed across the dust and smoke-filled streets.

As they proceeded, Eadric recalled the words of Titivilus, his appointed Tempter, at his own insistence that Celestials would not permit something like this to happen: *Would they not? Are you confident that you understand the Mind of Oronthon that clearly?*

Apparently, Oronthon *had* permitted it to happen.

He grimaced. The old paradox again. Have I come so far, only to be confronted with that same doubt?

Eadric emptied his mind, and allowed his wavering to pass. He recalled the place where all polarities cease, and drew strength from it.

I will have your head for this, Demon.

*I.e. Clerics, Paladins and spellcasting Prestige Classes.

** As a Prince of the Blood, Tagur is not required to address the King by the honorific 'Majesty' – he may use 'Highness' instead. By doing so he also asserts his precedence over those others present.

***The "Pain-Bringers," a group of nine unique Devils charged with administering Amaimon's justice.

My infernal organization is only loosely based upon official D&D canon – I can include it as an attachment if anyone is interested.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 02-26-2003

"Last season's style looks good upon you, Mostin," Waide said drily, adjusting his cravat.

The Alienist scowled. "It's a shame that you're too fat to do justice to the current one." His dislike for the other Wizard was based mostly on their all too-similar temperaments (Waide was as tight-lipped and pedantic as Mostin himself) – combined with Waide's disdain for all non-transmutive spells and processes.

Waide smiled thinly. "Thus endeth summoning in Wyre. How do you feel about that, Mostin? What will you do with yourself?"

Wait until you venture outside of the proscribed area before I unleash the Pseudonaturals on you, he thought. He shrugged. "I'll get by. This is only one small part of one small reality."

"Quite so," Shomei interrupted. "We are still waiting for Hlioth and Daunton. Would you care for some refreshment, Waide?"

"Hlioth? That mad old crone won't come. She's long past it. I'll have a herbal infusion, thank-you"

"She will come," Jovol said smoothly, entering the drawing-room.

"Where is Tozinak?" Waide asked. "I assumed that he was to be included."

"He is. He is currently experimenting with object-identification."

A small credence table nearby shifted into a more recognizable human form, spilling the drinks which sat upon it onto the floor. The ever-shifting features of Tozinak appeared beneath his characteristic hooded yellow cloak. He bowed dramatically, and when he rose, he had grown a long beard and his

skin had changed colour.

"So we are going to Hell, then?" He asked brightly.

"Not exactly," Mostin said. "Although close enough. Gihaahia abides in the blasted regions abutting Avernus."

"Ahh, an exile," Tozinak nodded sagely.

"It is more complex than that," Shomei said irritably. "In any case, there will be eight of

us: You, I, Mostin, Mulissu, Waide, Hlioth, Daunton and Jovol.”

“Eight is an inauspicious number,” Tozinak said. “Seven or nine would be better. What of Griel?”

“He is unnecessary,” Jovol said. “Eight will be enough.”

“And you are sure that we have sufficient power to accomplish this?”

Mostin nodded. “Shomei and I have both inspected Jovol’s calculations. We should have no problems.

Gihaahia is vastly powerful and ancient, spawned in a forgotten aeon between a Prince of Hell and a Goddess of Nothingness. But we can bind her.”

“Are we opening a *Gate*, or shifting straight there?” Waide inquired nervously.

“I would suggest an *Astral Spell*,” Mostin offered, “although someone other than I will have to cast it.”

He was in no particular hurry.

Jovol shook his head. “I will Dream us there.”

Mostin raised an eyebrow. “Isn’t that rather unreliable?”

“Not at all,” Jovol replied. “And it is much more discreet. It will only take a few minutes.

“And casting the spell?” Waide asked. “Will she just stand there while we bind her?”

Mostin groaned. “Where is your sense of adventure, Waide? You’re so boring. In answer to your question, no. Which is why we will cheat. Jovol will create a temporal bubble before we encounter her

– we will not be in the same time-stream.”

“That is a sensible precaution,” Tozinak nodded.

“Trust me,” Jovol said. “It will all be very anticlimactic. The only other thing I should mention is this: we will all sustain backlash from the spell, with the majority of it falling on me. And each of us will invest a small portion of our personal reservoir in addition – again, I will bear the brunt.”

“Wait a minute...” Waide began.

“You are so selfish,” Mostin chided. “Have you no thoughts for posterity? Can’t you see beyond your own small world? Great magic suffers because of atrophied minds such as yours.”

“What is ‘small’ for Jovol, may be more than I can render!”

“Tish!” In fact, although the Alienist himself was distraught by Jovol’s request, the chance to criticize Waide’s reluctance in front of those others present almost made up for it.

**

Eadric rode through the streets of Morne with a dozen of his most stalwart followers, appalled at the scenes which he witnessed. The bulk of the Templars, Ortwin and Iua – together with the circling Nwm and his two eagle companions – were left to deal with the

chaos around the south gate and the

mustering grounds within the city's tall walls. Identifying who was affected by the compulsion was near impossible, and as Ortwin clobbered random people over the head with the pommel of his

scimitar, he wondered how long the mass subdual would take.

Fortunately, Nwm intervened. With a spell that made many of the Paladins and Clerics shake with the memory of what had transpired on the Nund meadows, the Druid conjured a writhing mass of

poisonous vines which entangled the limbs of those present. More than three-quarters of the crowd

were pinned, and many succumbed to the paralyzing effects of the burgeoning vegetation.

The work of the Temple knights was made considerably easier – the vines covered an area of more than two acres – and at the Druid's command, they next wrapped and bound around five hundred of Morne's hapless citizens. Seeing the success of the conjuration, Nwm squawked and flew in search of other

pockets of conflict, preparing to cast as many *entangle* spells – and variations thereof – that he could muster. He was joined in the air by both Ortwin and Iua, taking advantage of the perspective that it offered, and grimly observing the wreck of the Temple quarter – from the air, the pattern of death and violence seemed to radiate outwards from the Fane itself.

Night was falling. The Temple compound itself was eerily quiet. Several outbuildings had been

torched, and they burned steadily. Dust still hung thick in the air from the recent collapse of the Great Fane's south face. The bodies of Templars – many of those few dozen who had remained in Morne –

were scattered across the blackened lawns and terraces. Eadric ordered his followers to attend to those few that were still breathing – but only after they had been bound or restrained. He dismounted and, followed by Brey, Sercion and Tatterbrand, passed through a blackened door into the sacristy.

Heaps of torn and shredded chasubles lay within, and vessels lay strewn around. More bodies – priests

and acolytes – lay in unlikely postures, where they had struck each other down with ceremonial staves or swords when the spell had taken effect. Before they exited into the ambulatory, Brey's sharp eyes caught a movement beneath a pile of heavy vestments – he said nothing, but gave Eadric a meaningful look and flicked his eyes towards the robes. The Paladin drew Lukarn, cautiously approached, and

pulled the coverings aside. The rather pathetic figure of the Bishop of Hethio was revealed, quivering uncontrollably. Upon meeting Eadric's gaze, he made a number of ineffectual warding motions.

"I am doomed," he groaned. "The Adversary has come for me."

“Get up,” Eadric commanded.

“Leave me, Devil. Get you gone.” He brandished a pendant displaying an eagle at the Paladin.

“GET UP. You reek of taint,” Eadric said, grabbing the Bishop’s hair, and dragging him towards the door. “You are an assassin, a liar, a manipulator and a coward.”

Hethio screamed in pain as he was pulled along. “Will you sacrifice me?”

“No indeed, Eminence,” Eadric spat. “I will take you to see God – which is neither more nor less than you deserve. Why you were spared from this is beyond my understanding. I assume that he has some

purpose for you, so I won’t sentence you to death. But be warned – I am in a very, very bad mood.”

So Eadric, Brey, Sercion, Tatterbrand and the – albeit reluctant – Bishop of Hethio made their way to the chancel and the Archiepiscopal throne. The Paladin recalled his premonition of the scenes along the Temple corridors. The reality was a thousand times worse than his vision could have possibly suggested.

*

Nine thousand dead, Nwm thought to himself as his mind reached outwards and took a grim tally. He groaned.

A *vine mine* contained an episode of looting and violence in the Street of Goldsmiths, but by the time that the Druid had circled the city for the third time, he saw that most of the outbreaks were localized and involved only a few people. Tagur had committed soldiers from the defense of the city to arrest any others who were under the effects of the compulsion, and Nwm turned his hand to dousing the flames within Morne. Again. Periodically, he would commune with the Green in an effort to locate any other demons, but they were either out of his range or warded from his inner vision.

The Satyr and the Duelist descended into the outer courtyard of the Temple compound, where Jorde

was directing the restraint and healing of any survivors of the *Wave of Hate*. Even Ortwin, a staunch opponent of Temple policy and activity since long before the current crisis had begun, found the scene depressing and unnerving.

“Where’s Ed?” The Bard asked.

“The *Ahma* has gone to seek the *Sela*,” a Paladin replied gravely.

“Where’s Tramst?” He asked irreverently.

“The *Sela* is most likely within the chancel,” the other answered with more earnest piety than Ortwin thought necessary.

The Bard turned to Iua and grinned. “Wanna go and see a god?” He asked flippantly. “Its

okay – he’s harmless. His head stooge is a old friend of mine.”

Jorde sighed. He, at least, was used to Ortwin’s idiosyncrasies. “I think, perhaps, only the faithful should be permitted within for the time being.”

Iua was about to say something, but a look of ecstasy combined with contrite horror passed across

Jorde’s face. “Yes, Lord,” he mumbled to himself. “Forgive my presumption.”

Ortwin raised an eyebrow.

“The *Sela* will receive you before the throne,” Jorde explained nervously. “He apologizes that the main gate to the Fane is in ruins, and suggests that you use the entrance through the vestry.”

“Quite right,” the Satyr said facetiously, staring at the wreck of the South Transept. Inwardly, he swallowed, and wondered whether it had been such a good idea after all.

**

Tramst sat beneath the immense symbol of Oronthon – the Eagle-and-Sun which reared in the centre of the Fane. Large chunks of masonry lay scattered within – ornate carvings which had fallen from the ceiling and shattered the pews and cracked the smooth flags of the floor. Yet more bodies lay there, and aside from a handful of Temple officiants and lesser clergy, the *Sela* was alone. The few present seemed enrapt in some mystical state. Somehow, the Proxy seemed even more mortal and even less divine than before.

Eadric approached tentatively. Despite his best efforts to stop it, his mind swam with questions. *How could you allow? Why did you? Why did you not? What was the purpose?* He grimaced and tried to make the queries go away.

Do not repress the doubt in your mind, *Ahma*. You know better than that.

I wish there had been another way.

Do you mean, “Was there no other way?”

(Ruefully). Yes, Holiness.

Not all Truths are unequal, Eadric. Consider this question: What if Graz’zt acted as the unwitting agent of a wrathful Oronthon, dispensing ire and justice upon those who defied his will?

Is that so?

That is one interpretation. Here is another question: Presently, an Eagle flies above Morne. Where it acts, those who suffer from the madness are restrained and can do each other no harm. What if this is the mercy of Oronthon, bringing succour to those who deserve it?

I understand, Holiness. The fact that it is Nwm does not diminish the fact that certain people will perceive it in a certain way.

It is no less true, in fact: the Sophists would claim that Uedii and Oronthon are one and the same.

Equally, it is true to some that you are the agent of the Adversary. You brought ruin upon

the Temple.

Your desire for a demoness signalled the death-knell for Orthodoxy. Have you accepted that truth yet?

(Wrily). That is harder.

Why, if the Adversary is an aspect of Oronthon?

That is only one of many conflicting truths.

Ahh, saizho, Ahma.

What must be done now, Holiness?

There are still loose ends to be tied up. Events are not resolved. When they are, we begin the process of rebuilding. First we must deal with tomorrow: it will bring yet more pain.

I still have yet to see my role in this, beyond vague ideas.

The Magistratum will be consolidated into one body – the names ‘Mission’ and ‘Inquisition’ will no longer be employed. ‘Temple’ will become the catch-all term: it is a trend well-underway, in any case.

The troops in Iald have already been ordered to disband. Eisarn is withdrawing back to Morne. I need to speak with the Royal Council. I will need your diplomatic savvy.

I promised disestablishment.

They will have it.

(Embarrassed). I vowed to the Uediians that I would strive to end indentureship, and the Temple would recompense them.

Our coffers are not limitless, but I will honour your promise first.

I am also concerned of reprisals from the secular aristocracy directed against Hullu’s faction.

SiHu will not act: she is devout, if misguided – this can be corrected. Tagur is an ally.

Tagur is a rationalist, Holiness. As much as I respect him...

I have shown Tagur. It was he who ordered the gates open for you.

(Surprise). And Foide?

Foide will remain a problem.

There is also the issue of Trempa. Soraine’s death will leave a gap, and squabbling nephews will soon begin their maneuvering.

You could claim the Duchy. You have the support.

I have neither the time nor the inclination to administer it. My spiritual position would also be compromised by temporal concerns. Given the effort that I have made to separate the two, this might be interpreted as somewhat hypocritical. I would have supported Ryth, if he had made a claim.

You may yet be forced to intervene, to prevent more bloodshed. Such is the weight of

responsibility.

(Confession). You have granted me time to act, Holiness. I purpose to assail Graz'zt. I have yet to determine how this is best accomplished.

(Amusement). That is a formidable task. If you ask for my blessing, I cannot give it: vengeance and retribution are not within my purview. Are they yours?

I don't know. Perhaps.

*

Tramst turned to look at the Bishop of Hethio, who stood between Brey and Sercion. Each of the great Templars held an arm of the clergyman, whose eyes had remained closed and whose lips had muttered

fervent prayers during the silent exchange between Eadric and the *Sela*.

A brief communion occurred. Tramst made an offer.

In doubt, and fear, and spite, and self-hatred, the Bishop declined.

A look of sadness passed across the face of the *Sela*. "Let him go," he said aloud to Brey and Sercion.

"Depart, Hethio. Go where you will. At any time, you may approach me again. I do not judge, I merely teach."

But as the Bishop departed in haste from the chancel, Tramst spoke to him again. "You may be

disappointed if you return to your see, Hethio. Your palace will be mortgaged, and your estates

dissolved: I would hate to burden you with material concerns when your spiritual welfare is at stake."

Hethio grunted. Oronthon's Proxy turned his attention to Sercion and Brey.

"When the *Ahma* departs, it would behoove you to remain. There is much that you need to un-learn."

Somewhat daunted, both Templars bowed.

As Eadric exited, picking his way through the rubble and smashed benches, he encountered Ortwin and Iua, both of whom, apparently, were walking towards Tramst. A quizzical look crossed the Paladin's

face.

"Hi Ed," Ortwin said. "Just thought we'd come and take a peek. I've never met a god before."

Eadric sighed. In matters religious, would Ortwin never be anything but a casual tourist?

**

What is this place? Mostin wondered, as phantasms floated past his vision for what seemed like hours.

Half-formed dreams and reflections, insubstantial yet strangely real. Trees, roads, skies, a vaporous castle, a silver void. He looked around himself.

They didn't seem to be moving – he, Jovol and the others – although the dreamscape changed in a

pattern that he could not quite discern. After a period of intense turbulence, where scenes and sounds manifested in rapid succession, he felt that he had descended into someone else's nightmare.

ANGERPAINDEATHPAINTORTUREVIOLENCE.

CRUELTY LOATHING MALICE SPITE UGLINESS. BURNING HATRED WITHOUT END.

Such hatred. It staggered him. His mind span as he strove to maintain his focus. He shot a concerned look towards Tozinak, who of the others there was finding the current strands of consciousness hardest to deal with.

“It will pass,” Jovol assured them. “It is merely an echo of an event long past, or one which happened in another time – depending on your perspective. Dream remembers all potentiality – realized or not, past, present or future. Parallel, perpendicular, or extending into an infinity of dimensions.”

“What is/was/will be the event?” The Alienist asked, careful not to frame his question in the language of conventional linear time.

“That also depends on your perspective,” the Ogre grinned. “The Prime Nodality. The beginning of dualism. The birth of the dialectic. The planting of the seeds of knowledge or damnation.”

“The Fall,” Shomei said.

“If you subscribe to that particular paradigm,” Jovol nodded. “For the moment, we should adopt it whatever our respective world-views: it is relevant to our situation. Let’s just assume that it’s

provisionally correct, and act accordingly. We are on the fringes of Hell.”

“And Devils dream?” Mostin asked incredulously. “I’ve never seen one sleep, and I’ve known a few.”

“Everything dreams,” Jovol answered.

“Twaddle,” Shomei muttered.

“But why do we feel the ripple here and now?” The Alienist pressed.

“There has been a sympathetic vibration, which hearkened back to an aspect of the Original Nodality.”

“Ahh, Graz’zt.”

Jovol nodded, sighed, gestured, and modified the passage of time.

*

In her abysm, where she had dwelt for untold aeons, brooding in bitterness and corruption, she stirred.

Unlike those who had their place in the Adversary’s grand, despotic regime, she was an outsider – too potent to overcome, too alien to harness. A monstrosity conceived between a fallen Seraph and a

forgotten deity who predated existence. Shadows swarmed about her. The fire that burned – within her and around her – both tortured and assuaged her.

The inkling that she had was vague and indistinct, but nonetheless present. A threat, certainly –

although from what was impossible to say. It had been an age or more since Devils had attempted to

woo her or eliminate her. Instinctively, she wreathed herself in void and vanished, shedding hatred and malice in waves which pulsed from her form. She pulled four Pit Fiends to herself from Hell's deepest layer, and waited.

It was to no avail. In their temporal bubble, linked by *Rary's Telepathic Bond*, the Wizards acted in uncanny coordination – an organic unit, from which potency flowed. In her *Fiendform*, Shomei's eyes pierced the darkness. Their collective sight dispelled the veil of *Invisibility*.

Gihaahia, and her attendant Devils, appeared frozen in time and space. Jovol spoke the words, and raw power coursed through them all. Mostin's head span ecstatically, and he resisted the urge to giggle.

The backlash was terrific, causing the Alienist's skin to crack and his teeth to rattle in his head. Blood vessels across Jovol's temples, down his neck, and along his arms ruptured, spraying blood over the other Wizards. He groaned, and pulled open the portal to Dream again.

The cabal vanished back into the unconscious world.

Gihaahia noticed nothing until it was too late. She would be called to the Prime, and serve the entity called Claviger.

Strange, she thought. It almost felt like some form of compulsion – not that she had ever experienced one. There were, after all, no compulsions capable of affecting her.

*

And so it transpired, as Jovol had either foreseen or determined – when a Wizard is an actor in his own visions of the future, who can judge whether it is ordained or not? Mostin, Shomei, Mulissu, Waide, Hlioth, Tozinak and Daunton submitted themselves to the Ogre's direction, and wrought a spell that would change the future of magic in Wyre.

In that moment, when Gihaahia – scarce less than a demigoddess in her power – was bound to the

Claviger, Mostin experienced first-hand his own theories of Will, and the power to make it manifest. It was true. Anything was possible. *Anything*.

Henceforth, the Claviger would reside in a cave in the weathered hills of Mord, south of Morne. Its location would be unknown to those who were not initiated – arcanists of sufficient power and

reputation – but would exist as a rumour amongst those who aspired to be counted among the great.

Those Wizards who were vexed by dilemmas regarding their actions could approach the Claviger, and

ask it for guidance. In its faultless interpretation of the Injunction, the Claviger would relay its adjudication in a sombre voice, issuing from the tablet upon which Jovol's words were scribed.

Occasionally, those who spoke with it would encounter a small child in the chamber – this was

generally considered to be the Claviger itself, and was interpreted as a favourable omen by the lucky petitioners. Less often, a woman of singular beauty would relay the Claviger's stern remonstrations to those who, for their own ends, attempted to interpret the letter of the Injunction against its spirit. This was known to be the Enforcer, whose manifestation was recognized as a dire warning, or worse.

Even with his own great foresight, Jovol could not have guessed that a Mystery cult would eventually develop around the site. The need for religion is incomprehensible to most Wizards, and despite Jovol's friendship with celestials, and his concern for the welfare of Tramst, he was no exception.

As for those Wizards who, in fact, violated the Injunction, they would feel the wrath of the Enforcer in measure to their transgression. This was determined by the Claviger, which possessed a near-omniscience with regard to all things magical. Punishments ranged from confiscation of minor items from the Mage's possessions, through subjection to a *symbol of insanity* in the event of a more major breach, to summary execution in the most serious of cases.

The first to fall to the Enforcer would be Jovol himself, when, in order to prevent a larger catastrophe, he slew the mage Kothchori.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 02-27-2003

When dawn broke, and the rains abated, Eadric stood upon the cracked roof of the Fane, looked out, and inspected the damage. He grimaced. The swathe of ruin which emanated from the Temple

encompassed a fifth part of the city. And still, although with increasingly less regularity, Templars and city guardsmen reported capturing those who suffered from the madness engendered by the *Wave of Hate*.

Nearly ten thousand dead, in all, if Nwm's figures were correct. Material damage that would run to more than a hundred tons of silver. A wound in the collective psyche that would probably never heal.

And, ironically, neither new Temple taxes to pay for the rebuilding of the Fane, nor sufficient in the coffers to both recompense the Uediians and begin repairs. He sighed. The price of success.

To the south, beyond the walls of the city, neat rows of Temple tents – interspersed with a disordered riot of gaudy aristocratic pavillions – were plainly visible. His banners floated in the morning wind.

"They'll want paying, you know," Ortwin said, fluttering down behind him in his winged boots. "At least the Ardanese. The Aristocracy will expect land-grants and tax breaks. The Uediians will want..."

“I know, I know,” the Paladin grumbled.

“If you claim the Duchy...”

“I will *not*,” Eadric snapped.

“You might have to, Ed. Even Tramst said you might have to. You don’t have to govern it directly –

appoint a steward or something.”

“Ryth would have made a good Duke.”

“Ryth got burned up with the Duchess, if you recall. I doubt Soraine would have favoured him, in any case. Did she leave any clues to who she felt was suitable? Other than yourself, of course.” Ortwin

couldn’t resist the final jibe.

The Paladin shook his head.

“Who’s the technical heir?”

“Probably Skadding. But Trempa has always held with the bestowal of favour, combined with lineage.

At one point, it advocated ultimogeniture. It’s eccentric like that. Too close to Ardan.”

“What’s Skadding like?”

“Young. Inexperienced.” Eadric groaned. “And Foide’s son.”

“Ahh,” Ortwin said.

**

The Devil’s eyes narrowed when he learned of the news.

You sneaky old bastard, he thought, as he considered Oronthon. *You keep changing the damn rules.*

Where’s the fun in that?

Gihaahia! He wondered who amongst the Infernal hierarchy had been privy to the likely course of

events – or rather who the Adversary had deigned to inform for his own, inscrutable ends. Titivilus scowled, and wondered why he had not been one of them.

The sweet promise that the Accord had been relaxed for him – in order to facilitate the ongoing

temptation of Eadric – was now sullied by the countermeasures set in place by Fillein, or Jovol, or whatever he called himself these days.

An Injunction carved in stone was no bad thing – those Wyrish dilettantes needed a measure of

discipline in their lives. But a ban on summoning? He sensed the Bright God’s meddling hand in events, and wondered what deal had been struck between the Ogre and Rintrah.

He also wondered who

of the Wizards in Wyre might draw the same conclusion. But Oronthon's interdict extended to the

Infernal as well – at least in theory. And now she was the helot of some damned Dream-thing. Damn

celestial double standards.

Titivilus recalled the deal that Shomei had forced upon him. It, also, was not to the Duke's liking.

Sneaky bitch.

He fumed silently.

He had thought that he'd had her cornered, that she had been foolish enough to return to him openly.

And despite her rod, and the numerous wards that sat on her, he should have finished her there and then. It had been the first time that he'd used his sword in almost two hundred years, and had caught her off-guard. But she weathered the assault and vanished.

Fifteen minutes later, Titivilus had been dragged into a pocket dimension and trapped within a

thaumaturgic diagram. At that moment, both of them had known that she could ask for anything and he would be forced to yield: to miss his appointment with the *Ahma* would have been inexcusable.

The Devil relaxed, and smiled. She was audacious. He couldn't help but admire her.

Not that that will stop me from killing her, when the time comes, he thought.

**

"What do you mean, he's dead?" Mostin was livid. "That's impossible. He was a little shaken up yesterday, but that's hardly surprising given the magic that he harnessed."

Mulissu shrugged. "He knew he would die. He merely needed to choose the way in which it occurred –

to maximize the potential for order, and to maintain the Injunction."

The Alienist blustered briefly. "Well, what happened? Was it the backlash?"

"Oh, no. He'd fully recovered by about midnight. He killed Kothchori, and the Enforcer annihilated him."

Mostin's jaw dropped. "But..."

"Kothchori was about to open a second *Gate*. Jovol's prognostications revealed that had he done so, even the death of the other mage at the hands of the Enforcer would have come too late – Graz'zt

would have made a second transit and...done something which Jovol felt was unacceptable, I suppose.

Rimilin was present also, and Griel, but Jovol didn't kill them."

" *Griel?* What the...? How did he find them?"

"I guess Griel was not *Mind Blanked* and he inferred their location through his *Web of Motes*."

"But I wanted to talk to him! I never had the chance to speak with him, to question him. Jovol was Fillein, you know."

" *Fillein?* Mostin, you need a drink. Fillein has been dead for..."

Mostin waved his hand. "He had some kind of...self-incarnating thing...or something. Titivilus

intimated as much to Eadric. In which case, death may only be a temporary inconvenience for him."

"One would certainly hope so," Mulissu said optimistically, although somewhat disbelieving. "He left me his *Web of Motes*, although I cannot penetrate its mysteries – yet. I believe that he passed something along to Shomei as well, and maybe others."

Mostin sniffed, feeling rather snubbed.

"And, yes, he left something for you, Mostin. It is very heavy." The Witch snapped her gloved fingers, and an ornate box of carved wood appeared beneath her arm.

The Alienist raised an eyebrow. "What is it?"

"I don't know. It seemed a little rude to sneak a look."

"I'd have looked," Mostin said honestly, unlocking the silver clasps. The lid opened smoothly, to reveal a stone tablet wrapped within red silks.

"I hope it's not a copy of the Injunction," Mulissu sighed. "That would be rather tedious."

The Alienist pulled the fabrics aside and swallowed. The tablet was weathered and cracked, but still quite readable. "It's a spell."

"Mmm?" The Savant said in a distracted voice, attempting to sound disinterested. "What's it called?"

" *Graz'zt*," Mostin replied, shaking.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 03-09-2003

Fiends and Feys

The unrelenting tempest of acid roared again across the face of their blasted world. Demons, damned creatures, and a million souls consigned to perdition screeched in agony, as lurid flames burst from fumaroles, and immense fulgurations illumined the shattered plains.

Graz'zt cursed, and screamed, and raved. All fled and hid themselves save Ainhorr only – his ability to read his master's mood was unparalleled by any other. Too often, he had witnessed this scene.

The catalogue of disaster was growing. First, Cerothumulos. Then Rurunoth, gone without a trace.

Uzmi and Feezuu, lost at Khu. Uruum, slain by the Alienist outside of Morne. Kothchori, assassinated by the cursed Ogre, before the Prince could realize his plans. And now, in rapid succession, Choeth and

Djorm – two of his generals – conjured and eliminated, and one of his Succubi first ripped from Azzagrat, and then sped back to him with a message from the Paladin.

To the Demon Graz'zt, who styles himself 'Prince,' in Zelatar from the Ahma, the Breath of God in the World of Men, a warning:

Let it be known that, by your actions, you have roused my ire and my eye is directed towards you. As Grand Master of the Temple, and the anointed dispenser of Oronthon's justice in Wyre, you are

summarily condemned to death.

In order to demonstrate my commitment to your overthrow, I have begun with the removal of two of your chief attendants. My intention is to render your position untenable in any confrontation which occurs between you and your enemies within the Abyss.

Ahma.

That is it? Graz'zt had ranted. Nothing more than a message of intent? No coercion? No attempts to negotiate for the return of the bitchling? How dare he?

In his fury, he had annihilated the Succubus who had borne him the letter, but it had done nothing to quench his rage.

Eventually, after prevailing over his own urge to destroy everything within view, the Prince retired to his sanctum and sank into black contemplation. Despite his arrogance, he was wise enough to

recognize the possibility of a threat to his own position. And the new interdict set in place by the Wyrish Mages made things that much more complex. He still had agents abroad, but not sufficient for an assault upon Eadric – in any case, Rimilin and Griel were effectively barred from acting within Wyre's confines.

Graz'zt meditated.

An hour later, his eyes narrowed as yet more ill news reached him. Griel was dead – slain by sonics and Pseudonaturals in the crumbling fortress of Kothchori in the ocean west of Pandicule – *outside* of the circumscribed area.

He cursed.

**

The Satyr combed his short beard as his spouse – from whom a gentle breeze continually issued –

attempted to question the creature. It was barely waist-high, and its skin bore a greenish tint with a wet sheen. The nimble fingers of one hand, and its toes – which were long and slender – were graced with a webbing which bespoke its aquatic origins. Its left hand was missing, and in its place was a sticky, weeping stump, which had been inexpertly treated.

“We mean you no harm, little one,” Iua said for the fifth time, bending down to speak with it. “We are merely seeking information. We can have someone take a look at your wounds. Please say something.”

The Sprite remained silent.

“Oh for pity’s sake,” Iua grumbled impatiently. “Are you stupid? *We will not hurt you.*”

It quailed.

“Bah!” She huffed. “This is ludicrous. You try, Ortwin. I’ve never met a Sprite as reluctant to talk – one generally has to beg them to stop. I’m going to sniff around down the corridor. Where is Mostin,

anyway?”

Ortwin shrugged, sat down next to the diminutive figure on the dirty flagstone floor and grinned. He produced a bag of sugared figs from his pouch and ate one. “Fig?” He asked, munching.

The Creature eyed them hungrily.

“I am Ortwin,” he said truthfully, “and I am the king of Feys in the North of the World,” he proceeded to lie. “This island is now a part of my realm, and you are now under my protection – hence, you are my subject. Whilst this state of affairs may be something of a shock to you, you will come to happily accept my benign rulership in due course.

“You should know by now that Kothchori is dead,” the Bard continued. “He attempted to interfere with

– well, things which he shouldn’t have interfered with. This is regrettable, from your perspective, I am sure...”

The Sprite began to wail.

“However,” Ortwin added quickly, “you should be gratified that your captors have been driven off or slain. Your master was mixing with a bad crowd at the end. He did all kinds of wicked things.”

In response, the Sprite placed its good hand over its right ear and closed his eyes, as if to

block out the Bard and his words. Ortwin attempted to speak for several minutes, but found he was making little progress.

The Bard sighed. This was insufferable. He, like Iua, was quickly beginning to lose his temper. “Snap out of it! Get over it! Yes, you’re traumatized. Yes, your world has been turned upon it’s head. Too bad.

I’m offering you a chance here – don’t be a fool and turn it down. I can help you, *if you let me*. Well?

Will you?”

There was a long pause.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” the Creature squeaked.

“Good,” Ortwin smiled. “Now, first of all, *eat*.”

*

“Eek!” Mogus squeaked, alerting Mostin to the presence behind him. The Alienist turned, prepared to unleash his remaining offensive spells. He relaxed – if only a little – when he saw that it was Iua.

“Don’t sneak around. Someone will blast you if you’re not careful.”

Iua grinned. “Find anything?”

“Nothing,” Mostin moaned. “And I can’t believe that Kothchori actually lived in this pigsty. He was one of the great, you know. It’s a miserable story.”

“His books? Papers? Oddities?”

“All gone. I’m guessing that Rimilin has the ones that Feezuu’s demons didn’t steal, way back when.”

Somehow, Mostin’s words lacked conviction.

“And Griel? What have you determined about the items that *he* carried?”

“Er, nothing, as yet. I’d completely forgotten about them, in fact. Just...dropped them in the old *portable hole* and put them out of my mind.”

Iua gave a condescending look which reminded the Alienist of her mother. “Why was he here?”

Mostin shrugged. “I’m not sure. He was a fool to leave Wyre – the Injunction would have protected him there.”

“Do you think he was looking for something?” She asked archly.

“Um, I suppose it’s possible,” Mostin replied vaguely.

“Mostin, why do I get the feeling that you’re holding out on me?”

“I don’t *know* anything, for sure,” the Alienist confessed, “but I’ve got a feeling that *something* is missing from the big picture.”

“Why?”

“Because it doesn’t make sense that Kothchori planned to open the second *Gate* within Wyre, rather than here. Distance would have been no object to a Demon, and to open the *Gate* here would not have violated the Injunction.”

“Did Kothchori even know about the Enforcer, at that point?”

“Exactly my point,” Mostin said. “If he’d known about it, why would he have opened the *Gate* in Wyre? If he hadn’t known about it, why would he have bothered to travel to Wyre anyway, thus

inadvertently violating the Injunction?”

“You aren’t making much sense.”

The Alienist sighed. Something was amiss, but he couldn’t put his finger on it. He was tired. That day, he had already performed three *Bindings*, four *Dimensional Anchors*, one *Banishment* launched a dozen sonics, fired off three *Disintegrate* spells and *Summoned* a trio of huge Pseudoelementals.

With the help of Eadric, Nwm, Ortwin and Iua, the result – the elimination of two Abyssal generals –

had proven almost child’s play. Mostin grinned to himself. Doing it alone wouldn’t have been so much harder.

The removal of Griel had been a more controversial move, in which neither Nwm nor Eadric had been

willing to participate. It was ethically dubious, given the fact that the Wizard had not, until that point, actually *done* anything.

Mostin, however, had felt no such compunction. Griel had to go, before he could be effectively used as a tool by Graz’zt. Ortwin had concurred, and Iua had come along for kicks. Griel, a noted Evoker,

never had a chance to evoke anything. His location determined, he had been *Anchored*, struck by two powerful sonics, and then ripped up by Ortwin, Iua, and the monstrosities that Mostin had brought with him. *Scrying and Frying*, as Mostin had come to know the process.

Now, within the dusty and cluttered cellars of Kothchori’s abandoned castle, Mostin reflected upon the situation. Somewhere out there, Rimilin was hiding – impervious to all attempts to locate him. With the exception of the great Ainhorr, the last of Graz’zt’s Balors – Irzho – was likely also present somewhere on the Prime – along with several Succubi, who were less of a concern. The Alienist guessed that they were scattered – Graz’zt would not risk the wholesale annihilation of his minions if one of them were located.

Tomorrow, I will try to find Irzho, he thought grimly. *But now, I need to sleep. Badly.*

**

“Are you afraid of me, *Ahma*?” Titivilus asked, relaxing into a worn leather chair. He wore comfortable, loose-fitting hose and a baggy white shirt. His countenance was

simultaneously both serious and amused.

“I wouldn’t say *afraid*,” Eadric replied, pouring two glasses of firewine. “Suspicious, and on my guard, yes.” The Paladin warily handed one of the crystal goblets to the Devil, careful to avoid touching his hand.

Titivilus immediately recognized his reticence and smiled. “I have yet to decide whether your receiving me at Deorham was a bold move or a cautious one. This is your home, after all. And you must still be in shock – I believe that Tahl hasn’t even been buried yet.”

“If there is even a square inch of Wyre that will suffer the burden of your presence, I would prefer that it is mine,” Eadric replied, scowling. “Tell me, Titivilus, how are your plans for my temptation and corruption progressing? How do you rate your chances? What boon will you receive if you succeed? I am interested by your motivation in this endeavour.”

“They are still in the process of being formulated,” the Devil answered with utter plausibility. “As to my chances – not too low, but not too high either. Any boon is a matter between myself and those whom I serve.”

“There are questions that I would like to ask you,” Eadric said openly. “I would rather that you didn’t lie, so I will wear the eye of Palamabron – if you don’t object.”

“So you would like to play that game again? Very well, *Ahma*. I am in no hurry.”

“Are you feeling talkative?” Eadric asked, placing the stone around his neck.

“I am invariably loquacious,” Titivilus answered. “Although I should warn you that there are certain questions that I might feel compelled to deflect or avoid altogether, if the option of lying is not open to me.”

Eadric nodded. “I understand. Your silence will speak volumes in itself.” *If I interpret it correctly*, he warned himself.

Titivilus merely smiled.

“Then tell me of The Fall, Titivilus. From your perspective. From the beginning.”

The Fiend’s eyes narrowed. “That is an intrepid opening gambit! I must but approve.”

“I trust that your memory doesn’t fail you. I realize that it was some while ago.”

“Oh no,” Titivilus replied smoothly. “I remember it well enough. And the notion of *Time* is only partially applicable, in any case. I suggest you abandon normal temporality – for the time being, at least,” he gave an ironic look. “But before I begin, I am curious – why do you ask?”

“It was something Mostin said,” Eadric answered. “He felt an echo.”

“Ahh,” the Devil smiled. “Then I will speak in the past tense – although that is more for your benefit, than because it is necessarily correct.

“It was glorious. You are a warrior, *Ahma*. It would have stirred you.”

Eadric shook his head. “War is nothing more than a bloody necessity.”

Titivilus laughed aloud. “As you wish,” he said wickedly. “Never since has there been, and never again shall there be such a conflict fought. We were without number, our power immeasurable. Were there

more of them than us? Who can tell? It raged for aeons beyond count through nascent spheres, but

lasted a merest instant in the unmanifest Mind of Oronthon – a dissonance in the continuum of perfect consciousness.”

“Please refrain from overt metaphysical speculation,” Eadric interrupted. “And from the *beginning*, if you please. Let us start with *how* and *why*. And I apologize for arresting the flow of your narrative.”

Titivilus raised an eyebrow. The *Ahma* was getting good at this. “You should be wary of enjoying yourself too much when consorting with Devils,” the Duke jibed. “You would not be the first to be drawn in through love of badinage and wit.”

Eadric experienced a brief discontinuity in his mind, curious as to why the Devil was warning him.

“Thank-you,” he said honestly. “I appreciate the advice.”

“I am your advisor, after all.”

Eadric sighed. “Proceed,” he instructed.

” *How* and *why* will vary by degree for each of those who were involved in the Great Emancipation,”

Titivilus continued. “In my case, it was a desire for power, and for a growth of potential within a paradigm which rewarded the strong rather than appeased the weak.”

“I find the term ‘Great Emancipation’ rather misleading,” Eadric interrupted again.

“‘Malign Dictatorship’ or ‘Brutal Despotism’ might be more accurate.”

“Do you wish a dialogue on this matter, or am I relating my experience, *Ahma*? Or would you prefer a little of each?”

“I apologize again,” Eadric said, “but, as I say, there is much that I wish to learn about your motivation.”

“Perhaps you wish to develop compassion for me. Believe me, that is a wholly futile task.”

“Compassion is never futile.”

“An interesting observation, but one that I must differ with,” Titivilus offered. “Perhaps you should be asking ‘How did it all begin? What was the *prima causa* of the Great Emancipation.’ Or ‘rebellion’. Or

‘Fall.’ Pick your own terminology.”

“I would be interested in hearing your theory,” Eadric replied. “How *did* it all begin?”

“Compassion,” the Devil answered. “Didn’t you know, *Ahma*? All great dictatorships first begin with compassion.”

Eadric groaned. He’d been maneuvered quickly into that one.

**

Nwm glanced from of his glade towards the castle at Deorham, and scratched his head. The Steeple

was visible, jutting like a tall finger above the treetops. Eadric was closeted with a Duke of Hell within the tower – an improbable turn of events, given conventional theories about Paladins – especially

considering the fact that a quartet of Devas still circled invisibly about Kyrtil’s Burh.

The Druid idly wondered whether the Celestials were bored. Whether such creatures *ever* became bored. It occurred to him that Devas and their ilk must suffer from a perennially dull existence.

Nearby, behind a moss-covered cleft in the rock from which flowed a tiny stream, was the small cave which the Druid occasionally identified as ‘home.’ His long absence had been taken as a sign of

abandonment by a variety of animals, with whom Nwm had politely asked to share the space when he

returned. Now they fussed, and tried to tidy things up. Sem and Gheim, the two eagles who

accompanied the Druid, eyed several mice greedily, until Nwm remonstrated with them and explained

the protocols which existed within.

He unloaded his pack, put his staff to one side, stretched briefly, and sat upon the litter-strewn floor.

Concentrating on his torc, his mind stretched outwards, and the Green absorbed him.

Every fold in the land, every rivulet, every tree, every mammal, every bird was revealed to him in a barrage of visions which erupted into his waking consciousness, flashing briefly across his mental landscape before being replaced by the next in a series of infinite facets. His ancestors had called the totality simply *Ollon*, “The Whole.” Eadric’s forebears, the Borchians who had migrated from the south, had termed it *Hahio*, “Interwoven” – at least, before they adopted the cult of Oronthon, and replaced an older set of mysteries with a newer one.

Buildings and settlements were revealed as gaps in the continuum, blank spots, where the Green had been smothered or driven away. Cultivated fields appeared diluted, their essence contained or mastered.

Here, near Deorham, the balance was still acceptable. In and around Morne, Nwm remembered, there

was more emptiness than anything – isolated trees and plants seemed like blighted pockets within a sea of dull grey.

The Druid swallowed, and turned his attention to the interlopers. The experience was uncomfortable, as though his sight had been turned inside out. The Celestials near the castle were exposed as ravenous voids, seeming to suck the very essence of the Green into them. The natural order buckled in their vicinity, singularities around which mental space warped uneasily.

Within the blankness of the Burh, two more voids rested in close proximity. *Outsiders who had no real business being there*, Nwm moaned silently to himself. Their potency – which appeared significant –

was closely matched, and the Druid could not ascertain which was ascendant. No hint of their

respective dispositions was revealed – the Green was above such petty distinctions.

Nwm sighed. Perceiving Eadric in that light was not an easy thing to accept.

His senses extended again, searching for Feys. The Sprites near the meadow where Mostin had erected his manse. A lone Dryad, deep within woods south of the road. He waited until the Satyr came

suddenly into view, in the company of another Fey – odd, the Druid thought – and a locus of elemental energy that was Iua and her steed. Mostin also appeared briefly, and then vanished again. He dispatched Sem to intercept the others.

“You’d better tell them to come to the glade,” Nwm instructed the eagle. “Eadric hasn’t finished his business yet.”

**

“Compassion,” Titivilus continued. “A desire to make things more equitable, more agreeable, less tyrannical.”

“I have doubts accepting it – although you probably won’t be surprised to learn that. I realize that you aren’t lying, *per se*, but I suspect that you are misperceiving. How do you reconcile this notion with the fact that you currently exist within a regime that is anything but less tyrannical? Or with your own ideas of ‘strength’ and ‘weakness?’ Or with your own admittance to ‘considered, philosophical evil?’ –

I hope I am not misquoting you, but I vaguely recall your words being along those lines.”

“A philosophy which is dynamic, rather than static, inevitably produces change and evolution,” the Devil replied. “The Adversarial Law is reflexive. It adapts to circumstances as they occur. You must remember that we are, ultimately, eternally downtrodden, rejected and anathematized. We are

consigned to a shattered world and appointed as the punishers of the rejected souls whom Oronthon has seen fit – in his ineffable wisdom – to deny entry into his blissful abode. Likewise, temptation and seduction are cosmically ordained tasks – it is not as though we have any choice in the matter.”

“But you take pride in these tasks! You enjoy inflicting pain and causing misery.”

“If one does any work for long enough, one comes to enjoy it,” Titivilus answered simply. “And to excel at any vocation is surely desirable?”

“And how do you explain Nehael’s repentance and escape from her eternal lot?”

“Do you think she was the first, *Ahma*?”

“The possibility of there being others had occurred to me.” Eadric answered. “Well? Have there been others?”

“I respectfully decline to answer that question,” Titivilus replied, “and hope to leave you frustrated and guessing as to the reason *why*. Now, if I may continue?”

“Please do.”

“So, the Nameless Adversary, the Great Enemy is the first to have an inkling that, perhaps, things could be better organized than they are – his efforts would be directed towards the collective, of course, in an attempt to improve the lot of all. Incidentally, has it ever occurred to you why *he* is not named? Has that never struck you as odd?”

“To name something is to empower it,” Eadric replied.

“But to categorize and name something is also to contain it, to set boundaries upon it,” Titivilus replied.

“Orthodoxy maintains that he was stripped of his name, and it was erased from every whisper of consciousness. Nothing in creation, including himself, can recall it, save Oronthon himself.”

“And you believe that?”

“I have yet to hear a better explanation,” Eadric answered.

“The Irrenites claim that they know his secret name. That it was preserved.”

Eadric raised a dubious eyebrow. “And what might they claim it is?”

Titivilus laughed. “Unfortunately there is some disagreement amongst them on that count. In any case, *I* cannot recall it, and I assume that, at some stage, I knew it, so there may be some truth in the traditional explanation.”

“You are digressing. Return to the original point.”

“Ahh, yes,” Titivilus smiled darkly, “compassion.”

“I think we can move on from compassion, now. Let’s talk about arrogance and presumption – I am correct in assuming that those qualities had a large part to play in events?”

“Yes, indeed,” the Devil replied easily. “Although confidence and initiative are less loaded terms. One hundred and sixty-nine Seraphs agreed with the call for emancipation – can you imagine it? More than a few were exalted* even amongst the highest choir. Tired of being eclipsed by Oronthon, they decided to form an opposition.”

“You make it sound very egalitarian,” Eadric said drily. “I’m sure that next you’ll tell me that the rebels conducted their affairs with due consideration for the democratic process. I am interested in *your* role in this, Titivilus – what was your former station? Under whom

did you serve? Did you betray Oronthon

along with your master, or did you defy them both?”

“My former master is my current master, *Ahma*. My loyalties have not changed.”

“You mean they remain to yourself?”

“Ultimately, yes. I am honest in that regard, and make no pretence of altruism. As to my former station, I was messenger then, and am messenger now. An exemplar* among the Dominions.”

“That is an office of high degree,” Eadric sighed. “It is regrettable that you have been reduced to this lowly estate.”

” *Reduced?*” The Duke guffawed. ” *Ahma*, sometimes your naïveté is truly charming. I am more potent now than I ever was under the yoke of your glowing tyrant!”

“Potency and value are not synonymous.”

“Ahh, on that count we differ.”

“You are reflective and philosophical. Do you never regret your choices? Wish to be restored to your former station? Lament your actions?”

“Eternity is too long a time for regret,” Titivilus snapped.

“Does the question make you uncomfortable?” Eadric asked.

“Do you think that I would be so transparent? Perhaps you should ask yourself this question, *Ahma*:

‘Do I have sufficient insight to penetrate the motives of the Devil with whom I speak?’”

“I am looking for *truths* from you, Titivilus, not the *Truth*. Whatever role you adopt with respect to me, whatever emotion you choose to evince to me – it reflects *something*, however small, which is part of you.”

The Duke looked impassive. Sometimes, this one could be very cunning.

**

“I seek power, Shomei,” Mostin groaned. “Quickly.”

The Infernalist fidgeted. “You look exhausted. We all seek power quickly, Mostin,” she sighed. “Jovol made quite an impression on you, didn’t he?”

“I am beginning to find my current status limiting. I am afraid of stagnating. I crave infinite potential.”

“A modest goal,” she laughed. “You are ripe for seduction. Beware of Fiends bearing gifts,” she smiled wickedly, “or embrace them. What has precipitated this new existential crisis?”

“I have a spell that I cannot cast. A transvalent masterpiece graven by Jovol – or Fillein, as he was then.”

Shomei raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

“What did he leave *you*? Mulissu intimated that he may have bequeathed something to each of us who took part in the *Binding*. Just a casual inquiry.”

“Which deserves a casual reply,” Shomei answered. “Something very utilitarian. What is the nature of the spell?”

Mostin squinted. “It is sensitive material,” he replied.

“Perhaps it has a name?”

“Suffice to say that it is germane to my current predicament, and that of my friends. It requires a cabal in order to realize, and was one of Fillein’s more noted accomplishments.”

“Ahh, *that* dweomer,” she nodded in understanding. “Are you reluctant to speak his name now, Mostin?”

“As long as he remains at large, I will avoid speaking his name again,” the Alienist replied. “And will caution my comrades to do the same. If he knew...Shomei, I am taking a big risk in sharing this with you. You have dubious associates, and a reputation for dealing in secrets. This information is valuable.

The spell is *priceless* to other entities – do you follow me? And I suspect that he would see it destroyed, if he knew of its continued existence.”

“With aid, Mulissu could use it...” Shomei offered.

“She won’t cast it,” Mostin said. “And why should she? It’s not her problem – although she has offered

to contribute if I eventually lead it. Shomei, would you be willing to also? We can accomplish great things. Our time is near. Jovol may have been more of a visionary than any of us gave him credit for.”

The Infernalist gave a quizzical look.

“The Enforcer,” he continued, “a written Injunction. A ban on arcane vendetta within Wyre. The strategic distribution of his own possessions amongst other great Wizards. He is forcing us to

cooperate.”

“Perhaps,” Shomei looked dubious. “Although if he hadn’t been so aloof for so long, it might hold more weight with me. How many does *Gra...* the spell require?”

“Seven, including the leader. It is a day-long rite. It also requires a large contribution from each of the participants...”

“Something which I am loathe to do again so soon,” Shomei sighed. “And which others will flatly deny you, Mostin.”

“Hmph. Anyway, just bear it in mind. To return to the idea of power, and its speedy acquisition, what do you suggest?” He asked. “Infernal pacts notwithstanding,” he added.

Shomei shrugged. “If I had any such knowledge, I would have seized it myself. I see three possibilities: either an *object* which will empower you; the details of a *process* which will do the same; or an *entity* which will bestow the power, or give details of one of the first

two possibilities.”

“I am beginning to regret some of the things that I invested my power in,” Mostin grumbled. “If I had been more single-minded about the pursuit of mastery...”

“Rest assured, Mostin, few have been as single-minded as you. Your reputation for miserliness is safe.”

Shomei smiled.

“Thank-you,” Mostin said, “I will take that as a genuine compliment. Now, Shomei, I have disclosed and, in the interests of mutual reciprocity, I wonder if you feel inclined to do the same? What *did* Jovol

leave you?”

“Something no less useful than when you last asked the question,” she replied.

Mostin tried to smile endearingly. The effect – an insane grimace – caused the Infernalist to laugh despite herself.

“A bracelet, if you must know,” she sighed. Shomei rolled up her purple velvet sleeve, to disclose a plain silver band.

“Intriguing,” Mostin said. He had noticed the Ogre wearing the same band.

“And its function?” He pried.

“The promise of future greatness,” she said mysteriously.

**

“Allow me to introduce Orolde,” Ortwin said to Nwm. “Former servant of Kothchori. I have promised him that you will attend to his wounds.”

“That is very generous,” Nwm said laconically. “And then what do you propose to do with him?”

“Mostin will retain him,” Ortwin said. “Orolde has no interest in being reunited with his clan and kinfolk, and is eminently suited to aid a Wizard in his tasks. He also has some small skill in magic which, if nurtured, might grow into something more.”

“Mostin has agreed to take an apprentice?” Nwm was incredulous. “This is something I thought I’d never see!”

“Mostin doesn’t know, yet,” Ortwin whispered quietly. “It is up to us to impress the moral incumbency of this idea upon him.”

Nwm sighed, and turned to the Sprite. “I can stop the bleeding, the pain, and return you to health. I

cannot restore your hand, however.”

Orolde nodded, appearing slightly bewildered. “Thank-you,” he said timidly. “And thank-you, your Majesty.” He bowed to Ortwin.

Nwm groaned inwardly, but said nothing. If Ortwin wanted to play at being the sponsor of disenfranchised Sprites, then the Druid wasn’t going to object.

Goddess knows, he thought, these days, Feys need all the help they can get.

* *Exemplar, Exalted, Paragon* and *Perfect* are ‘dignities’ or, in game terms, four templates applied to leading celestials of any choir. *Exemplar* and *Exalted* are ‘permanent’ templates – i.e. they reflect the innate nature of the Celestial. *Paragon* and *Perfect*, on the other hand, are granted temporarily by Oronthon for specific purposes, and the Celestial ‘assumes’ the qualities of the template for a period of time (c.f. Eadric’s adoption of the Paragon template). Of the Celestials mentioned thus far in the story, both Rintrah and Enitharmon are *Exalted*. Urthoon, the conduit to Oronthon is an *Exemplar*, as were the Devas which accompanied Tramst.

The fifth dignity, *Magnified*, is represented by the bestowal of one or more Divine Ranks upon a Celestial, Ascended Master or mortal acting as a Proxy of Oronthon. Tramst is Magnified, and as such is considered to outrank every Celestial in Oronthon’s host – he is effectively identified with Oronthon himself, and the fact that he represents the Gnostic faculty (*Sela*) of the Deity affords him a particularly revered status. According to the Urgic Mystics, Magnification (*Haujan*) is a discrete act – the particular moment at which an aspect of the Godhood inhabits another being. From that moment onward, the vessel (*kas*) and the indwelling spirit (*ahmasaljan*) are identical.

Again, with reference to the Fall, Enitharmon (who drove the Adversary from Heaven), was accorded the highest status at that time: according to Orthodox tradition, he was *Perfect, Exalted and Three Times Thrice Magnified*. In some eschatological beliefs, Enitharmon will also be the Adversary’s *Antiparallel* – the Celestial who will slay him at the end of days.

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Mostin grumbled.

“What am I supposed to do with it?” The Alienist asked Ortwin, his eyes fixed on the diminutive figure of Orolde. The Sprite seemed a little offended about being referred to as an ‘it’ in the third person.

“You will take him as your aide, and instruct him in the arts of magic.” The Bard said regally, mostly for Orolde’s benefit. “He will act as facilitator in your experiments, maintain your house, bring books to you as you need them, and perform other sundry tasks.”

“This is inconvenient,” Mostin sighed. “It is not as though my manse stays in one place for too long.

What happens when I decide to move it? And I don’t want some hanger-on to worry about when I make

translations to the insane realms.” He peered at the Sprite.

Orolde looked distinctly uncomfortable.

“Mostin,” the Bard said, assuming his most reasonable demeanour, “Orolde is an innocent victim of an arcanoreligious conflict. But his loyalty to Kothchori was steadfast even to the end. He is efficient, discreet, deft and nimble (despite his one hand), intelligent and

small enough to be unobtrusive.”

” *Arcanoreligious*?” Mostin spat. “What kind of nonsense word is that?”

“One designed to demonstrate the ambiguous nature of the current situation,” Ortwin grinned. “Do you have a better one, when Wizards are co-opted by Demon Princes in order to assault members of a

church, and when other Wizards need an oracle to consult about their actions?”

“The Claviger is not an oracle,” Mostin hissed.

“Semantics,” Ortwin waved his hand dismissively. “In any case, Orolde would make an excellent apprentice. He has a grasp of the fundamentals of the practice, and is diligent. You could do much worse.”

The Alienist looked again at the Sprite. “Do you know what the *Far Realm* is Orolde?”

Orolde looked dubious. “I have a theoretical understanding of the mathematical possibility,” he replied.

Mostin cocked his head in surprise at the answer. “I do not deal extensively with Transmutations, as your former master did,” he cautioned the Sprite. “I am unsure whether your mind could stand the strain of my work.”

Orolde seemed nonplussed. “King Ortwin has recommended you as a potential teacher. I would suggest a probationary period of, say, one year. If things progress to our mutual satisfaction, then perhaps we could extend the agreement?”

“You would receive no stipend.”

“Naturally not,” Orolde replied.

“The work will be onerous, repetitive and dirty. It will be frustrating and slow to yield results.”

“This is not unusual,” the Sprite said brightly.

“There is a strong chance that you will lose your sanity – I am quite mad.”

“This, also, is not unknown amongst Wizards.”

Mostin sighed, and nodded. “After all, if *King* Ortwin has given approval, who could deny his royal decree?”

Inwardly, however, despite his apparent reticence, Mostin was immensely excited. As Ortwin had

suspected he would be.

**

“It’s very simple,” Mostin explained logically. “We cannot hope to overcome *Him* in open conflict, therefore we need to cheat. His position in the Abyss has been weakened thus far by our actions, and he needs to turn his attention to internal matters or risk his rivals gaining ascendancy in the wars that he is currently engaged in. His political situation is immensely complex, and he can’t afford for his vendetta against you to cripple his other

schemes.”

“I think you ascribe too much wisdom to him in these matters,” Eadric sighed.

“And I think that you overestimate your own importance in his larger reality. He has suffered several setbacks and defeats – he needs to woo his vassals and allies and to reassure them. Do not

underestimate the precarious nature of Demonic politics – it lacks the ability to resist upset, which either the Celestial or Infernal hierarchies demonstrate.”

“And how did you come to this conclusion?” The Paladin asked.

“My discourses with Shomei have been productive, as always. But she advises a change of tactics on our part.”

Eadric grimaced at the mention of the Infernalist, whose relationship with Mostin he still eyed

dubiously. “And what new approach does she recommend?”

“To strike *Him* on a number of different fronts simultaneously. She draws attention to our mobility, and

the fact that Wyre is now – to a large extent, and thanks to the Claviger – a ‘safe’ zone. Assault from conjured Demons is less of a risk.”

“He’s got a good point, Ed,” Ortwin chimed in. “We can find all kinds of other ways to piss off Gra...”

” *Hup!* ” Mostin interjected, before Ortwin could finish the word.

“Although I do think he’s being overly paranoid about that,” the Bard continued.

“I don’t want to just annoy him,” Eadric explained. “Any actions that we take need to have strategic value.”

“And Nehael?” Nwm asked. “For every act that weakens or undermines him, she will suffer.”

“We cannot attempt a rescue,” Eadric sighed. “It is not a realistic proposal.”

“If we push him too far, he may annihilate her,” the Druid continued. “That is what concerns me.”

“Perhaps,” Mostin said carefully, “although inflicting pain is his *forté*. I suspect that he will be reluctant to prematurely end that pleasure. Besides, he may yet view her as a bargaining piece. He is supremely paranoid, like all Demons. And he is not blind to the fact that we can threaten and hurt him. Although I think the letter that was dispatched may have been too much, I think the premise that we are operating under has merit. But we cannot bring up the matter of Nehael with him – I guess that he does not fully understand our motives in acting. He is depraved, power-hungry, hateful and vindictive – he may assume that it is *simply* out of a desire for revenge that we have targeted the Balors and Griel.”

“You do not *know* that,” Nwm groaned. “You are speculating.”

“Well, of course I’m speculating,” Mostin snapped. “I am not privy to his counsels. But we cannot deal with him openly – at least, not entirely openly. At the same time, his capacity for subterfuge far outshines ours – he has had a lot of practice, after all. I think we need to keep him guessing, at present.”

“For how long?” Nwm inquired, exasperated.

“Until I master the spell,” Mostin said simply. “It is our best option. In complete honesty, I think the question should be *how can we all contribute to the empowerment of Mostin, so that he can cast this spell?*”

Ortwin laughed. “How convenient,” he said drily.

“Don’t be so blind,” Mostin hissed. “There is a great deal hanging in the balance. Yes, I crave power.

Yes, I wish to blaze a name for myself in the annals of magical history. Yes, I am vain and self-

centered. This does not detract from the fact that it *is our best option.*”

“And how do you reconcile this with your opinion that we need to ‘change tact?’” Eadric asked.

“The cosmos is infinite,” Mostin replied. “The Demon has his fingers in many pies, of which Wyre is only one. Let’s start sh*tting in a few of them.”

“Which pies did you have in mind?” Ortwin asked.

“Some regions where he holds sway...” Mostin began.

Eadric groaned.

“No, listen,” the Alienist continued. “Some are much less dangerous than others. I have asked Shomei to do some research for me...”

Eadric spluttered.

” *Listen.* It is not just Demonic abodes where his influence is felt,” Mostin persisted.

“There are some worlds which suffer from his interference. Others where his dominion is entrenched. Yet more that he would try to subdue. He is active in many spheres. And we have more potential allies than perhaps you might guess.”

“So where does your Diabolist friend suggest we act?” Eadric asked.

“She is making inquiries,” Mostin answered haughtily. “And she is not a Diabolist – Shomei would be most offended if you referred to her as such. And if consorting with Devils is such a problem, then you’d better look to your own house first – unless you have forgotten who you were chatting with

yesterday afternoon.”

The Paladin opened his mouth to speak, thought better of it, and closed it again. Mostin had a point.

“And Irzho?” Ortwin asked. “There is still a Balor loose somewhere. He needs to be dealt with.”

“That had been my plan today,” the Alienist nodded. “It shouldn’t take too long. But we need to maintain the initiative. Keep the ball rolling. Give *Him* no chance to act, or to second guess us.” Mostin grinned wildly.

Eadric squinted, and chastised himself. So much had happened, that it was sometimes easy to forget that *Mostin was completely crazy*.

“Well, we aren’t going anywhere yet,” the Paladin said. “I need to go back to Morne, bury Tahl and Soraine and too many others. And then there is the matter of my troops. And...”

“You would honour their memory best by avenging them,” Mostin said.

“Don’t push it, Wizard,” Eadric replied.

“Ed,” Nwm said, “go and meditate, or pray, or whatever it is that you do. You need to find some perspective before you commit to this course of action. I will support your decision - I’m not

necessarily saying that this is the *wrong* thing to do, merely that you should be fully conscious of your motivation before you act. I would hate to see your desire to hurt the Demon outweigh your duty to help Nehael.”

“As would I,” the Paladin agreed.

**

Five days passed.

Mostin’s efforts to find Irzho were unsuccessful, indicating that the Balor was *mind blanked* – either by spell or device. If the former, then Irzho may have returned to the Abyss, and be under Graz’zt’s

protection. If the latter – and that seemed more likely, as whatever means Kothchori had used to

conceal himself was still unaccounted for – then the Balor could be anywhere.

Mostin brooded upon the name that he had gleaned from the writings of the unknown Alienist – the

name of the Pseudonatural Daemon who was, in all likelihood, responsible for the demise of his former mentor, Vhorze. Binding the creature seemed conceivable, but controlling it – or even communicating with it – seemed unlikely, if not altogether impossible. And there remained the problem of not being able to *dismiss* it, even if it were successfully contained. No doubt it would merely wait until the wards upon it expired, and then rip off the head of its captor, and drag the remains off to whatever insane realm that it had issued from.

Shomei visited Mostin at his retreat in the woodland meadow southwest of Deorham, interested in the progress of the Alienist’s plans regarding Graz’zt. It was a balmy afternoon, and bees droned in the warm summer air as they sat on the porch and drank chilled firewine. The Infernalist had opted to

forego her normal purple attire for a simple, light robe of purest white silk, gathered in around her slim waist. It seemed to soften her pointed features, and made her look more

Celestial than Diabolic. As always, she carried her intricate iron rod in her left hand, and was accompanied by the faintest hint of cinnamon. She raised an eyebrow when she saw Orolde, and her mouth dropped when Mostin told her

about the Sprite's position.

"An apprentice? How intriguing! Is he any good?"

Orolde sighed – apparently, being talked about as though he were not present was something he would have to adjust to. And it seemed as though Mostin was far less reclusive than Kothchori had been.

"He has marked potential," Mostin nodded.

"I have a favour to ask, and information to impart," Shomei said carefully.

"What is the favour?"

"I will reserve my request until we have spoken more," the Infernalist replied. "Before you ask, you are under no obligation to honour it, and what I am about to tell you implies no contractual exchange."

"I am glad to hear it!" Mostin said. "Although now my curiosity is piqued."

"I have been most active on your behalf, Mostin. The containment or overthrow of, well, You-Know-Who – I will humour your caution on that count..."

"It is paranoia, not caution," Mostin corrected her.

"Quite. In any case, one might say that I am acting out of enlightened self-interest. If he is reduced in power, removed temporarily – albeit only for a few decades – or even, possibly, eliminated, then it would..."

"Be to your advantage, politically speaking," Mostin finished for her.

"Precisely," she flashed her rare smile. "So bearing that in mind, that it is not out of altruism that I have acted..."

"I would never even suggest it," Mostin quipped.

"I should bring a number of *worlds* to your attention," Shomei continued. "I will need to use your Mirror, Mostin."

"Very well," he sighed, reaching into his *portable hole*. After a few moments of fussing, he had erected the Looking-Glass of Urm Nahat on the porch of his manse.

"This is exciting, isn't it?" The Infernalist said. "Like opening presents when you were a child."

"I never had presents," Mostin said drily. "Get to the point, Shomei."

"May I? One just *scries* normally?"

"It is very fast," Mostin replied. "And also resembles the *clairvoyance* spell. And your sensor may rove.

You will quickly master it."

She waved her hand, and the mirror rapidly became opaque, and then cleared to show a

scene within a gloomy forest composed of trees possessed of colossal girth and height. A thrush sat upon a branch in the canopy, several hundred feet above the forest floor.

Shomei issued a *message*. The thrush immediately chirped, and seemed to stand to attention.

“It is a *polymorphed* Devil,” Shomei explained. “I currently have several compacts still unexpired.” The thrush vanished, and when the Infernalist brought it back into view, the scene beyond was fantastic.

The sky was a mixture of indigo and vermilion, and stars faintly glimmered within it. On a rock

buttress of considerable size, thrusting above the treetops, an elegant castle sat perched, its lacy towers soaring into the air and defying the laws of both architecture and gravity. Tendrils of steam or smoke clung to the base of the fortress, giving it the appearance of sitting on a cloudbottom. Something vast moved across the sky in the distance, temporarily extinguishing stars before they rekindled at its passing.

“Faerie?” Mostin asked.

“No,” Shomei replied, “and although it is accessible from Faerie, a good deal of shadowstuff bleeds in as well. It is a demiplane called *Afqithan* by its inhabitants who, as you have already guessed, consist mainly of Feys – most notably Sidhe and their ilk.”

“And this plane is of particular importance because...?”

“The pre-eminent clan are called the *Loquai*,” Shomei explained. “They are cultists of the Demon

whose name you are reluctant to utter. You are looking at one of their strongholds: that belonging to their most important king, Irknaan.”

Mostin’s eyes bulged. “And they are Sidhe?”

Shomei nodded. “Of a particularly degenerate type. The umbral bleed has affected them to a large degree – or rather, as they have recognized it as a means by which their power can be increased, they have embraced and exploited it.”

“Intriguing,” Mostin said. “How large is Afqithan? What are the numbers of the Loquai? How potent are they? Is their dominance challenged? Are there demons present?”

“It is of moderate size,” the Infernalist answered. “It has a virtual diameter of around three thousand miles – although the circular warping begins some distance before that. The Loquai number in the low thousands, although their hegemony extends over most other sentients – tens of thousands of other Feys and fantastic beasts. In terms of potency, their leaders may rival you or I. Dominance is *always* challenged, Mostin. And yes, there are demons present – notably Succubi and Glabrezu. The Loquai

are intensely erotic, and seem to venerate that particular aspect of the Lord of Zelatar.”

“And your Devil has been spying for you?”

“For several days, now. I have attempted scrying within the fortress, but it is warded from both sight and teleportation. There may be a *Gate* within its confines linking it directly

with Azzagrat. The Devil has been eavesdropping on groups that issue from the walls – the Loquai are obsessive hunters who

ride Tenebrous Griffons in pursuit of various other beasts.”

“In that regard they differ little from most Sidhe,” Mostin observed drily.

“They are crueler,” Shomei said.

“Then they must be very cruel indeed,” Mostin sighed. “Very well, Shomei. I appreciate the information. What is the favour that you request?”

“I haven’t finished yet, Mostin,” she gave a curious half-smile. She waved her hand, and his mirror went blank for a few seconds. Another scene appeared on its surface.

“This frigid world is called *Saraf*,” she said, as scenes of mountains, glaciers, and ice fields flashed across the looking-glass. “It has been incompletely subdued by Our-Friend-Who-Shall-Remain-Nameless. His tactics here have been less subtle and insidious than in Afqithan, and he has favoured a more direct approach. One of his allies, the Demon Kostchtchie has been instrumental in annexing this plane, primarily through the use of Bar-Lgura and Fiendish Giants – there are probably *Gates* to the Ice Wastes in the Abyss. The native inhabitants have been all but eliminated – they exist now only in a few, isolated pockets.”

“What are they?” The Alienist asked, fascinated.

“A hirsute race of humanoids whose name I do not know,” Shomei answered. “They once possessed a high civilization, although millennia of aggression has removed almost all vestiges of it.”

Mostin screwed his face up, as a leaping Demon appeared in the mirror. “Another of your spies?”

Shomei nodded. “Another *polymorphed* Devil. I have gleaned some interesting knowledge, regarding Saraf. Observe.” The Infernalist sent another *message*, and the Devil vanished. When it came into view again, it was standing outside the gates of a city which seemed to have been wholly encased in a glacier.

“I am not sure how this came about,” Shomei said. “Whether some sorcery of *His*, or a defense of the native inhabitants, or through a natural process, but the city itself seems to have been largely preserved.”

“Is it inhabited?”

“Only by ghosts and demons. But secrets reside there, of that I am sure.”

“Have you *scried* within?”

“Not to any great extent,” Shomei responded. “Unlike you, I do not have the leisure to spend hours in casual observation,” she remarked acidly, “and my own crystal ball has roamed further afield.” She waved her hand, and the mirror became blank again for the briefest moment, until yet another picture showed itself to them. It was a scene from a

dark nightmare, in stark contrast to that which had gone before.

Molten waterfalls cascaded over steep lips into basins, where networks of funnels and troughs

distributed liquid metal to forges and foundries. The only light present was a reddish glow, issuing from the seething metal, illuminating the faces of thousands of slaves, who toiled ceaselessly. They were watched and bullied by a variety of demons, who took fickle delight in their work.

“Another demiplane. Most of the captives are Azer,” Shomei said. “Needless to say, I have an agent placed here also. Below this area, there are mines, and pits, and yet more foundries. And more. The full extent seems to be vast – I haven’t come anywhere close to mapping it all. They are extracting

adamantine from other ores: it might interest you to know that after the metal has been purified, it is transported to a system of storage vaults, before passing through a *Gate* to Azzagrat, and thus to the Demon’s treasury.”

Mostin raised an eyebrow. Shomei had certainly excelled herself. In five days, she had uncovered an extraordinary amount of information. “Is there more to see?”

“Presently, no. I have *plane shifted* several other compactees to different locations, however, and they are currently following on leads. More information will doubtless be forthcoming. There are several hundred worlds where the influence of his Highness is felt.”

“Hmm, I suppose I should ask you what boon you seek,” Mostin grumbled. “It will be hard to deny it, given what you have uncovered.”

Shomei bored into him with her violet eyes. “If you engage upon any extraplanar jaunts, I should like to accompany you.”

Mostin relaxed. “I would be delighted,” he grinned. “Convincing Eadric may be harder, however. He mistrusts your Diabolic connections.”

“That is only reasonable,” she admitted.

**

Eadric and Nwm returned to Morne, where the Paladin oversaw Tahl’s funeral – a modest affair in light of the events which had transpired after the Inquisitor’s death. He was laid to rest in the Fane’s crypt with little ceremony, and Eadric mourned quietly – part of him lamenting the fact that his most faithful friend received such small recognition.

Until, to the confusion of all, Tramst declared his immediate beatification. Bewildered, Eadric sought out the *Sela*.

Why waste time with pomp and ceremony, if death is merely evanescent? Why wait for a cult to grow, or for miracles to manifest? I know the Masters ere they are born.

Eadric bowed, and left joyfully.

Soraine was to be interred in the cemetery adjoining the Temple compound, along with Hyne and the

Penitents who had perished in the ambush outside of Morne's gates. But Eadric changed his mind – the body of the Duchess would be taken in state back to Trempa, accompanied by Ekkert and Streek, her most trusted Thaners. Somehow, it seemed appropriate: Soraine's religiosity had been too eccentric and

individual to be confused with the zealots and martyrs. Likewise, Ryth would be returned to Har Kumil in the north of Trempa. Nwm offered to conduct the ceremony, but Ryth's son, Caur, politely declined.

"The local priest will serve well enough." Caur was young – maybe sixteen – but already a giant of a man.

Eadric shifted awkwardly, unsure whether his actions would offend, but passed a heavy casket to the boy. "Soraine would have given you more, for your father's loyalty and friendship. Say nothing. Do not object or refuse: if you have no use for it, distribute it amongst the poor in your Lairdship."

Caur nodded. Eadric could be very persuasive when he turned his mind to it.

"Temple money?" Nwm asked as they departed.

"Hardly," Eadric laughed. "The Fane's coffers will be empty within a month in any case. No, it was mine."

Nwm raised an eyebrow. "How much did you give him?"

"Five thousand."

Nwm coughed. "That was exceedingly generous."

The Paladin shrugged. "It's all the same to me. And Soraine *would* have given him more. Unfortunately, I have to pay nearly a thousand mercenaries."

"Trempa should foot the bill," Nwm said.

"The allocation of Trempa's finances is not within my purview," Eadric replied.

Nwm stopped in the street, and span the Paladin around. "Don't be a fool, Ed," He hissed. "You are avoiding the issue. You will have to either let Foide's boy inherit the Duchy, support a rival candidate, or make a claim yourself. You cannot simply *ignore* it, and wait for it to go away. Unless you want your taxes and feudal duties to end up in Foide's hands. Just how compromised do you think you'd feel then?"

"There is time, yet," Eadric replied patiently. "Let them jostle and maneuver for a while. What if Skadding inherits Soraine's estates? Who knows? Maybe he'll throw off his father's yoke."

"Do you believe that?"

"I am optimistic that given the right guidance, Skadding could be a good Duke."

"And you would provide that guidance?"

"When I could," Eadric replied.

“And in your absence?”

“Then maybe he could make mistakes to learn from,” Eadric sighed. “The *Sela* told me that I might be forced to intervene. He said nothing about open conflict. Intervention takes many forms, Nwm.” Eadric tapped his nose. “And when the boy makes his annual progress around Trempa, I will invite him onto the rampart at Deorham. Devas make effective proctors.”

Nwm guffawed.

**

Ortwin preened himself.

“You never cease,” Iua observed.

“Perfection requires continual readjustment,” he grinned, unsheathing his scimitar with a flourish, and cutting an orange in half. The *sending*, issued by Mostin, had seemed urgent. Now, typically, the Alienist was late. Orolde had refused them entry into the manse, apologizing profusely to the self-proclaimed Fey King and his consort, but unwilling to contradict Mostin’s instructions.

“Wizards and their servants are such depressing literalists,” Ortwin had remarked, but was content when the Sprite had provided them with refreshments on the porch of the retreat.

Presently, in vaporous form, Nwm and Eadric appeared. As the Druid corporeated, so did his two

eagles, who had appeared as nothing more than wisps of smoke attending him.

“Mostin will appreciate *their* presence, I’m sure,” Ortwin said caustically. “Although, personally, I find them far preferable to that stinking bear.”

“You’re in a good mood,” Nwm said, “your manners are always impeccable when you’re happy.”

After reassuring an increasingly nervous Orolde, waiting for a further half-hour, and depleting Mostin’s supply of beverages, they were finally joined by the Alienist.

“There is much to discuss,” he said.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 03-26-2003

Eadric, Nwm, Ortwin, Mostin and Iua sat in discussion for three hours. It ranged from lively to – at several times – openly confrontational. What were their goals? What resources did they jointly

command? How long did they have? Who would be most effective in which spheres? How could the

elusive synergy of their respective abilities be evoked?

As night fell, they moved from the porch of Mostin’s manse into his drawing room, where Ortwin

consumed too much firewine and became loud and rambunctious.

When Shomei arrived, just after midnight, Eadric became reluctant to further discuss details until she had submitted herself to scrutiny from the Eye of Palamabron – something which the Infernalist flatly refused to do. Shomei's discomfort was further compounded when a drunken Ortwin made several

lewd and cutting comments alluding to her history of diabolic suitors.

Shomei said nothing in response but eyed the Bard venomously. Mostin, afraid that things would get off to a bad start, fidgeted uncomfortably. Fortunately, Nwm intervened by neutralizing the alcohol in Ortwin's system and bringing him back to a state of painful sobriety, and, somewhat surprisingly,

jumping to Shomei's defense.

"I suggest you remember Nehael's own words, Ed. Those regarding *allies in unlikely places*. You can't go around beaming your Eye at everyone you meet – it lacks respect for their integrity. You haven't used it on Mostin, and I'm sure that his motives are less than noble."

Mostin blustered briefly. Ortwin apologized, and Eadric eventually relented – not before voicing his concerns regarding Titivilus, however. He was less than satisfied by the state of affairs existing between Shomei and the Duke of Hell and – in his mind, reasonably – saw their antagonism as a source of potential problems. This was agitated by the fact that Paladin and Infernalist viewed the Devil from two different perspectives: to the *Ahma*, Titivilus was a source of potential growth through friction and adversity, but one which was *divinely ordained*; to Shomei, he represented one of many discarded tools in the perpetual quest for apotheosis. Their respective paradigms were both uncannily close and dangerously divergent: something Eadric immediately recognized as a source of friction.

Nwm ignored him. "Moreover, I think there is something which you seem to have forgotten in your – at times, egotistical – desire to first redeem and now rescue Nehael from the clutches of the Demon who, for Mostin's benefit, I will not name."

"And what is that?" Eadric sighed.

"She is a Uediiian priestess and mystic," Nwm snapped.

Eadric tensed briefly, and then relaxed as though a great weight had left him. "Thank-you Nwm," he said openly. "And I'm sorry."

"Good," Nwm replied. "So, if we can discuss the matter in hand. We have a twisted version of Faerie filled with cultists, a frozen wasteland or some hellish smithy of huge proportions to choose between."

"I can add one more to the list," Shomei said. "So far. It is a jungle-like region of the Abyss itself: here the Demon is engaged in a war with a rival named Soneillon. The plane is called *Throile*. Soneillon is a succubus of great power, and was at one time the ally and consort of the Prince."

"I would rather avoid being caught in a lovers' tiff," Ortwin said drily.

"You are oversimplifying the nature of Abyssal relationships," Shomei remarked humourlessly. "But I agree that *Throile* may not be the best option – at least at present."

“This frozen world sounds interesting,” Nwm said. “Let’s consider it for a moment. Could we seal the *Abyssal Gates* – assuming that we could find them all?”

“Only temporarily,” Mostin answered. “Or, at least, until Gra... – you see, I almost said it myself –

could open them again, either with his own power or through one of his minions. There is nothing

barring him from acting personally in Saraf – something else we need to consider. Outside of the

Prime, we do not have the benefit of celestial interdict to protect us against Demons – even if it less than a hundred percent effective, it prevents fiends travelling here on a whim. It takes our enemy a great deal of effort to translate a servant here: *plane shifting* any of them to one of these other worlds would be child’s play to him.”

“This is true,” Shomei nodded. “And this is where the risk lies – as soon as we venture abroad, we run the risk of being chased through the spheres by hordes of demons. Wyre is safe, however, and hence the issue of mobility is crucial – as long as we can return here, we will be comparatively sure of a haven.”

Eadric screwed his face up. “In which case preserving anonymity would seem to be crucial. And how can we protect against his divinations?”

” *Mind Blank*,” Mostin sighed. “On all of us. Which will seriously deplete my stock of powerful spells.”

“I am willing to share the load on that count,” Shomei offered. “I concur: it is crucial. It will render us undetectable and immune to most Enchantments – the utility of this spell is not to be underestimated!

Mostin’s remaining higher valences can be crammed with Sonic Evocations, mine with Conjurations.

Multiple *disintegrates* will be a useful backup.”

Mostin looked at Eadric, unsure as to the Paladin’s reaction to his next suggestion. “I have also given some thought regarding the procurement of a guide.”

The *Ahma* dubiously raised an eyebrow.

“One who is close in the Prince’s confidence would be logical, although the transient nature of his court means that it is difficult to judge amongst those whom he currently favours. Ironically, Uzmi would have been a good choice – she was, for a while, high in his estimation.”

Shomei seemed as surprised as anyone else at the Alienist’s suggestion, but guessed where he was

heading.

“I suggest *binding* a Marilith,” Mostin continued. “We can trap one in a thaumaturgic diagram, and then compel it into a jar. If Shomei aids me in the spell, it can be achieved with the minimum of fuss. Such a guide might prove invaluable: it could provide all kinds

of useful information regarding his plans.

Mariliths tend to be well-informed regarding the bigger picture – their strategic and military capacity is well-known.”

“It could also mislead and dupe us,” Ortwin observed. “Demonesses are equally renowned for their mendacity.”

Mostin smiled. “You see that big, shiny rock around Eadric’s neck, Ortwin...?”

“Good point,” the Bard conceded. “But would such a captive cooperate? An intractable demon who wails and attracts attention would be equally annoying.”

“I will need to reach an agreement with it. This may involve a few minor compromises, but I think it would be worth it.”

Shomei nodded. “I like the plan. Casting the *binding* is time consuming, however, and I dislike the idea of the demon breaking out of the diagram before the jar is ready. We should target her with

multiple *hold monster* spells to prevent her escape until the binding is complete: one of them is bound to work. You will need opals, of course.”

“And an accurate rendering of the target,” Mostin added.

“If you do not have any names...”

Mostin sniffed, and began to chant the names of Graz’zt’s Marilith servants in an obscure verse.

“Your information is dated, but still somewhat useful,” Shomei half-smiled.

“How many of these demonesses serve him?” Nwm asked. “Are we talking a handful, like the Balors, or many more? And what of other demons, for that matter?”

“A few dozen Mariliths, I suppose,” Shomei replied. “Not all are currently favoured – many, if not all, are former consorts. Some maintain armies in the field at his command. A few are probably in

temporary exile. Some remain at court. And there may be a hundred Nalfeshnees, thousands of Succubi and Glabrezu, and probably tens or hundreds of thousands of Babau, Uridez, Bar-Lgura, Chasme and

Vrocks at his call. Other, more obscure types in smaller numbers fulfill specialized roles, and then, of course, the ubiquitous Dretch - who are close to numberless.”

“We are rapidly drifting away from the focus of this discussion,” Eadric sighed. “I have no objection to the containment of a demonic guide – provided that it can be undertaken safely, of course.” The Paladin himself seemed surprised by the words which issued from his mouth.

“I had expected more resistance to the idea,” Mostin said sarcastically.

“It is a logical proposal,” Eadric admitted, “and, frankly, I’ve pretty much given up on conventional standards – they don’t seem to apply to my life any more.”

“I’m tired,” Ortwin grumbled. “I say we take a vote. I favour Afqithan – it sounds

interesting.”

“As do I,” Iua agreed. “It is neither too cold nor too hot.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Eadric said.

“I rather thought Saraf might be interesting,” Mostin said. “But I suppose it can wait. Very well.

Afqithan it is, unless Nwm or Shomei has an objection?”

“I would prefer Saraf, as it sounds the least unnatural – although I admit that Afqithan’s Green intrigues

me,” Nwm said.

“Shomei?” Eadric asked.

She shrugged. “I’m just along for the trip, *Ahma*. Whatever you decide is good with me.”

Eadric scowled, unsure whether the reference to him in his religious capacity was sarcastic or not.

So, over the next hour, they hatched a plan. Ortwin’s contribution was significant, and his trademark cunning, boldness and braggadocio were written all over their strategy. It took another two full days in order to make preparations.

**

The Marilith was called Nufrut. She was less than happy to be reduced to the state of a disembodied head, and confined to a perfectly spherical jar twelve inches across, suspended on a metal chain. The chain had a convenient handle, for ease of transportation.

“Is it safe?” Eadric asked. He was inside the extradimensional area of Mostin’s retreat: the Alienist was reluctant to bring the bound demon into normal space, in the event that it would rouse the ire of the Claviger.

“It cannot escape, if that is what you mean,” Mostin reassured him.

“What if you drop it? Will it break?”

“The jar is adamantine. I have *polymorphed* it into *transparent* adamantine. It is near indestructible.”

“Does such a substance exist?” Ortwin inquired.

“It does now,” Mostin grinned. “Excepting dispellings, disjunctions and disintegrations, we should be

relatively safe – nonetheless I will keep the jar out of harm’s way in potentially dangerous situations.

As Shomei was so willing to aid me – and us, I might add – we have agreed that she may keep Nufrut after we are finished.”

Nufrut snarled, and cursed, her beautiful face contorting wildly.

“She doesn’t look very cooperative,” Ortwin observed.

“We are still negotiating,” Mostin explained. “The promise of freedom is, of course, the boon she seeks

– we merely have to come to a mutually acceptable agreement. This is complicated by the fact that I have consented to pass Nufrut to Shomei. We will bicker for a few more hours, I am sure.”

Eadric sighed and departed.

An hour after noon, Mostin and Shomei exited the manse. Both sported looks of smug satisfaction.

“I see you’ve reached a compromise.” Ortwin said.

“Nufrut has acquiesced to our demands,” Mostin replied. “We agreed that she will be released after ten years, if she cooperates. Her tenure with me will last for two months, and the remainder will be with Shomei.”

“And you intend to dishonour that promise, I assume?”

Shomei looked genuinely offended. “Certainly not! An agreement with a fiend is a sacred enterprise.

One does not violate such a trust.”

Ortwin looked confused. Eadric nodded understandingly.

**

Orolde seemed unfazed by the responsibility that Mostin suddenly and unexpectedly foisted onto him –

namely, the maintenance of the manse and the wizard’s affairs in his absence. He nodded in a resigned fashion as the Alienist enjoined him to ignore the nearby population of sprites, who were nothing but a gang of childish hooligans. Mostin left Orolde several large tomes with the express command that they should be memorized before his return – each was a treatment on various aspects of the Far Realm by Wizards the extent of whose insanity rivaled or even surpassed Mostin’s own. No-one was to be

permitted entrance to the manse for any reason whatsoever, and in the unlikely event that it was

assailed Orolde was to immediately retreat to the extradimensional area, seal it, and issue the *sending* which Mostin had hastily scribed.

“A *prismatic sphere* and several *meteor swarms* might also prove invaluable,” Orolde suggested.

“You can rest assured that if there is any blasting to be done, I will not fail in my responsibilities.”

Mostin said drily.

The preparations were made within Mostin’s sanctum and, to the surprise of all, he took his mirror down and placed it within his *portable hole*.

“I will open a *gate*,” he explained. “I am loathe to leave the mirror unattended, and any

portal would only remain open for a day. Besides, it might be useful in a pinch if we need an emergency exit.”

“Not that you’d ever leave it behind anywhere,” Ortwin said.

“Probably not,” Mostin admitted. “But a scrying device is always useful.”

The Alienist and Infernalist proceeded to *mind blank* everyone present.

“We will need to repeat the same procedure tomorrow,” Mostin said. “And the next day, and the next –

for as long as we are abroad, in fact.” He nodded to Shomei.

The Witch cast a *polymorph* on Ortwin, Eadric, Nwm and herself, which gave them the appearance of Sidhe: tall, graceful feys of unearthly beauty who had long since fled the Prime. Their clothing and

equipment seemed to assume an equally elegant style. “If this ruse is to be successful,” she said, “we should remember that Ortwin and Nwm are to be our spokesmen: both are fluent Sylvan speakers, and

Ortwin is an adept liar. The rest of you should keep quiet unless either Mostin or I has time to use *tongues*: I also speak Fae, but I have no intention of acting as representative or negotiator. I will try to keep my communication to a minimum.”

Shomei handed Ortwin an exquisite coronet which seemed to have been cut from a single, massive

diamond. In fact, the Infernalist, a jeweler of no small ability, had used a *fabricate* spell on half of the stones which the Bard and Iua had received as their dowry. He placed it upon his head – the contours of which felt unfamiliar.

“King at last, eh?” Iua said sarcastically.

“I am a Duke, not a King,” the Bard said coolly, effortlessly, and with utter conviction. His poise and movement spoke of natural command.

Shomei laughed despite herself. “Dammit, you’re good – I have to admit it. Watch your accent – we don’t want anyone to suspect that you’re a bumpkin from the Prime. The weight of scrutiny will fall upon you, and they will be looking for the smallest details and inconsistencies. Eadric – you should keep your helmet closed at all times. You are an inexperienced liar, and manage to make even a Sidhe’s face look trustworthy and approachable. As a bodyguard, your role will be minimal in any case. And...”

She cast an empowered *cat’s grace*.

“...that should stop you lumbering inelegantly. Iua, you may still adopt another form if you prefer.”

The Duelist shook her head. “I am the daughter of Ulao. I will masquerade as myself – an Auran princess is the role I am most accustomed to playing, in any case.”

Mostin, not to be outdone in any matters of style, invoked a spell which turned him into a handsome fiend with ruddy skin, short horns and long, talon-like fingernails.

Shomei raised an eyebrow. "You cannot maintain that guise for long."

"On the contrary," Mostin grinned wickedly. "You forget that I have transcended your limited vibrational state. This is no obstacle to me.*"

Eadric gave an inquiring look.

"I am now a kelvezu," Mostin explained. "A demonic infiltrator and assassin. They are highly feared –

it will give us an edge in negotiations, if they see that I am one of Ortwin's retainers. I will remain enigmatic." He drew a long pair of gloves over his hands, and brought the hood of his cloak over his head so that his face became shadowed, and his features hidden.

"Then why are you covering up?" Eadric asked.

Ortwin sighed. "Ed, I really need to give you some lessons in duplicity."

"We are almost ready," Mostin said.

"This is the part that I don't like, I assume," the Eadric said in a resigned voice.

Mostin nodded apologetically, and led them all into another area of his *magnificent mansion*.

**

An area had been cleared within the largest of the rooms in the extradimensional space. Its technical function – that of a banquet hall – had never, in fact, been observed.

Now it acted as a corral for six horses of fearsome visage. Nightmares conjured and confined by

Mostin and Shomei, and subjected to *torment* from the Infernalist until they had submitted to her demands.

Mostin had finally seen her rod in action, and had been both awed and terrified by the power that, through it, she wielded.

"These are evil creatures," Eadric said. "And I am loathe to have one bear me."

"I am sure that they are equally loathe to bear us," Shomei sighed. "Nonetheless, we need them – both for the convenience of transportation that they grant, and the impression that riding them will convey to any who see us. We have them for nineteen days – no more, and no less. They will remain loyal – albeit reluctantly so."

"I hope so," Eadric said, "I do not wish to be borne away to some nameless Hell. And this compacting..."

"They are not compacted," Shomei shook her head. "They are coerced. Compacting would have been far easier, but Mostin forbade it for your sake."

"I fail to see the difference."

"Souls, *Ahma*, I would have paid them in souls."

Eadric looked aghast. "You use such currency? That is monstrous."

"They are damned already," Mostin said.

“It doesn’t matter...” Eadric began.

“Wake up! *Saizha!* ” Shomei said sharply, with no hint of irony. “I have compromised for your benefit.

You will be forced to make many more choices that will be far more challenging before this is over.

You are the *Ahma*. You are empowered to decide right from wrong, according to your belief. Look at me! Where is my taint? Why do I bear none?”

“I don’t know,” Eadric confessed. “You are anomalous.”

“That much is true,” Mostin leered, bearing his sharp fangs. “Shall we be on our way? That was an attempt to diffuse the atmosphere, incidentally.”

Eadric nodded. “We should remember that this is an open-ended sortie. We don’t know how long we have, how we will fare, whether we will return here before pursuing other avenues, or continue

onwards. We don’t know whether we are spies, guerillas, instigators of unrest or any combination of the above. We are looking for potential allies. We are looking to thwart the Demon. We are seeking to release Nehael. And we are hoping to somehow augment Mostin’s power, to bring the spell within his reach.”

“The last is most important,” Mostin nodded, mounting one of the Nightmares, which champed restlessly and snorted fire. “Can we go now?”

In the purple skies, above the mists and shadows which lay upon the ancient woods of Afqithan, a *Gate* opened. A group of Sidhe, accompanied by a demon and an elemental, mounted on huge and malign

steeds which issued smoke and fire, thundered through. A hunting party, from some dark region of

Faerie, no doubt. One of them – accompanied by two magnificent eagles – concentrated briefly, and

then called out in Sylvan.

“A chimera, five miles yonder,” he pointed.

Their leader – a nobleman of some kind – spurred his mount onwards and drew a great, black bow

which seemed to pulse grimly. Starlight glistened in the diamond coronet upon his brow.

On the walls of the castle, not a furlong from where the party had appeared, several guards dressed in ornate armour stared impassively at the spectacle for a few moments, betraying no emotion – or

perhaps feeling none. Whoever this group was, they seemed oblivious to the fact that this was the castle of Irknaan, king of the Loquai, and they were trespassing in the airs above his demesne. One of the guards nodded silently, and another turned, and walked quickly but without hurrying to inform his

captain.

*As an outsider, Mostin's options for *polymorphing* are somewhat expanded.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 03-31-2003

“It was only a chimera...”

The chamber was of blacks and muted greys. They flowed and rippled, as if they possessed a will of their own, absorbing all incident light, yet still conveying a sense of variance. If there were other colours present, then they were veiled by the pervasive gloom.

The Captain, whose name was Shupthul, stood before his King, Irknaan, and explained what had

happened.

“Only a few moments ago, you say,” Irknaan reclined in darkness in an unconcerned manner, not even deigning to look upon his retainer. “Have you dispatched a party?”

“Twelve, your Majesty,” Shupthul said.

Despite his confidence and level voice, Irknaan perceived a measure of nervousness hidden behind the Captain's expert façade. It made the King feel strangely comfortable – Shupthul's apprehension was based on fear of him, rather than of any external threat. He smiled inwardly. “Which way were they headed?”

“Towards a chimera, five miles to the north. They are looking for quarry.”

“And there is a demon with them? How curious. At this hour, the chimera will be Lorochoth, of course.

She is predictable in her habits. This may be amusing. How did they know where to find her, I

wonder?”

“The guardsman who brought me the report indicated that it seemed a random choice – one of them

sensed the beast, and they immediately took up the chase. The demon was cloaked – a kelvezu assassin, in all likelihood.”

“I feel that I might observe.” Irknaan clicked his fingers, and a sprite with a wicked expression hurried to fetch his scrying stone. Already, his mind raced with possibilities, although he evinced nothing to Shupthul. Who were they? How did one of them sense the beast? Was the demon an ally of the Prince, or a foe, or neither? They seemed potent. He would need to tread carefully. Irknaan wondered whether he was in disfavour, and his termination had been ordered by Graz'zt.

In any case, a confrontation with Lorochoth would prove distracting for a few moments – others had made the mistake of underestimating her strength, and had paid dearly for it.

**

Nwm's mind was bombarded with sensations as he switched between different aspects of

their

environment. The Green of Afqithan held a majesty that was warped by shadows and darkness, and

possessed an alien quality that made him feel distinctly uncomfortable. As well as the chimera – the nearest of the nodes within his field of consciousness outside of the castle walls – other beasts flitted on the periphery of his thought. Manticores and griffons, displacer beasts and basilisks, a dragonne on the very edge of perception. Many of the trees possessed black and brooding sentience which filled the Druid with dread.

He turned his mind to feys, and they blazed across his inner landscape, too numerous to count, and then to outsiders, concentrated both in a knot within the fortress and also where other beasts were located.

They overlapped in a confusing fashion, and Nwm noticed that the chimera – like many of the other

denizens of Afqithan – was an indistinct type, and bore multiple conflicting signatures.

As did the griffons and their riders who were now following: they had taken flight from one of the castle's tall towers. The Druid glanced over his shoulder, and saw specks in the sky to their rear. He yelled to Ortwin.

"There are twelve feys – or part-feys, at least – mounted on griffons – or part griffons – in pursuit. They are less than a mile behind."

"They can't catch us," the Bard shouted back, the wind rushing past.

"They are closing in."

"Griffons can't fly that fast," Ortwin objected.

"They are *tenebrous*," Shomei called to him. "part shadow-stuff. They slip through the gaps in space."

"The chimera is likewise a complex of different realities," Nwm yelled, "and should not be treated lightly. This could be interesting. What should we do?"

"Ignore the Loquai," declared Mostin. "It will irritate them."

"I agree," Ortwin nodded. "If they try to apprehend us, or behave aggressively, we should obliterate them with as much apparent ease as possible. We need to show both strength and disdain. Pay attention to the chimera."

"They will reach us, before we close on it," Nwm pointed out.

Iua concentrated briefly, and then yelled a warning. A powerful wind began to blow behind them,

speeding them forwards. The Duelist and Eadric – both expert riders – dealt with the sudden change in pace without effort, although the Paladin found the increased smoke and fire kindled from his steed's mane and hooves somewhat disconcerting. Likewise, Mostin and Shomei stayed in control of

themselves and their mounts, albeit with more strain. Nwm clung on tightly.

Unfortunately, their leader, Ortwin, flamboyant as he seemed, was a poor rider. Iua's warning had given him no time to prepare, and he was blown from his saddle, still clutching his bow.

Gods, how embarrassing, he thought as he tumbled towards the ground. He recovered quickly, and commanded his boots to action. As they sprouted tiny wings, the Bard did his best to make his mistake

look intentional.

"It's a good thing they can't *scry* us," Mostin grumbled, as Ortwin drew level with him. "That's precisely the kind of blunder we have to avoid, if we want to stay alive. I thought you could ride."

"I can," Ortwin lied. "I just haven't, for a long time."

"I wish you'd take this more seriously," Eadric yelled.

"Nothing is further from my mind," the Bard grinned. "How far to the beastie, Nwm?"

"Half a mile," the Druid pointed.

"Will it sense us?"

As if in response to Ortwin's question, the air was abruptly filled with demons.

"Somebody did," Shomei remarked drily.

**

Lorochtoh, who had lived for an untold age in the haunted woods of Afqithan, was a devious creature who had evaded or confounded the hunts that had been mounted in search of her on numerous

occasions. Irknaan had long since given up on eliminating her, and had found that, left to her own devices, she posed no threat and proved an effective deterrent against the bands of sprites who

occasionally vexed his patrols. The King of the Loquai had come to respect the chimera, and although it would have been within his power to remove her, the use of magic in a chase would have been a

breach of the etiquette which existed between hunters and quarry – an unfulfilling exercise, against the spirit of the hunt in general. After all, if there was no risk to the participants, then the sport held little appeal and amounted to little more than execution.

Sat upon the branch of an immense banyan, immersed in shadows, Lorochtoh had gazed skywards with one of her three heads – her draconic eyes were her best – after catching the rumour of movement in her peripheral vision. A hunting party, headed towards her. The chimera wondered briefly if she was their target, and thought it best not to take any chances. She *summoned* five succubi.

"Go and charm those annoying Sidhe, my pretties," she instructed them. "And after they've chopped each other up, don't forget to bring me any baubles that they might have."

Lorochtoh shifted, and waited to see what transpired.

**

Ortwin, who had regained the lead, but had elected not to mount his steed again, was suddenly beset by four of the demonesses, who appeared directly in front of him. Still holding his bow in his left hand, the Bard drew his scimitar, whilst gaping at their naked beauty. Iua, acting with her usual speed, urged her mount forwards and instantly slew one of them before anyone else had even fully reacted to the situation.

“Mine,” a succubus said to Ortwin, beckoning.

“Mine.”

“Mine.”

The three demonesses were bombarding Ortwin with erotic impulses, which he found himself

uncharacteristically capable of resisting – due to the *mind blank*, he remarked to himself, rather than any overwhelming feelings of fidelity. Githla lashed out, and the Bard – feeling somewhat regretful –

rapidly dispatched a succubus and wounded another. Eadric impaled another with his lance.

The remaining demoness – the fifth – who had appeared next to Mostin and whispered *mine*, was pulverized by a sonic that made Mostin’s eyes bulge. He had *empowered* it, but he hadn’t *maximized* it

– nonetheless, the spell had borne the hallmarks of that metamagic.

Shomei raised an eyebrow. “That was rather an overkill.”

“Did you check the magical trait of this plane?” Mostin asked.

“Ahh,” Shomei nodded. “Like Faerie itself. No, I didn’t think to look.”

The Alienist fired a clutch of quickened *magic missiles* at the last, wounded succubus. They blazed gloriously, and obliterated the demoness. “We need to seriously reconsider our options,” Mostin sighed.

“This puts things in a very different light.” He glanced over his shoulder. The wind conjured by Iua still sped them onwards, and their pursuers were nothing but dots in the sky.

“You can ease up,” Nwm called to the duelist, “or we will overshoot. The creature is close by.”

Iua nodded, and the gale rapidly began to subside. But as the group began to descend, three hundred feet up, they received an unpleasant shock. Mostin knew the sensation which preceded it – he had

experienced it when Feezuu had subjected him to it – but there was nothing he could do. An instant after the tickling feeling, his arms and legs twitched as the fluids were wilted

from his body. Nwm, Shomei and Eadric were also struck by the necromantic assault: fortunately Ortwin and Iua were

beyond the area of the spell's effect. The pain was immense, and Mostin hysterically considered that Feezuu's attack had been as nothing compared to this.

Infernalist, Paladin, Alienist and Druid began to drop like stones, their mounts withered to lifeless husks beneath them. Shomei wasn't moving.

Lorochtoh broke from the treetops below. Blackness issued from her wings, and her form shivered with dismal power. Space twisted, and stretched uncomfortably around her. She was immense.

Nwm acted quickly, invoking a *reverse gravity* on the area around him, abruptly forcing himself, Mostin, Eadric, Shomei and the corpses of the Nightmares skywards again.

Mostin cursed, uttered a

quicken *haste*, cast a *fly* spell, aimed a *disintegrate* at the vast bulk of the chimera, and promptly missed. He swore profusely.

Ortwin sped a volley of arrows into the beast's flank, where they quivered and caused her to screech.

Iua struck Lorochtoh with a powerful blast of lightning, but still she climbed relentlessly towards them.

Eadric drew Lukarn and waited, bobbing impatiently.

"Bad bad bad bad bad," Mostin grumbled. "Can you deal with Shomei, Nwm – assuming she's still alive."

The Druid nodded, even as the chimera was closing, a foul draft blown before her by her wings. She spoke, and black fire began to kindle over Mostin, threatening to immolate him. His amulet absorbed it noiselessly.

Nwm waited, unwilling to act until he had seen Mostin's retort.

Three colossal sonics issued from Mostin's fingertips in rapid succession, swollen beyond all normal limits by the native magic of Afqithan. The noise was terrific as they detonated, superheating the air and causing massive ionization. As if by some trick of profound slipperiness, the chimera seemed to twist and gyre in space. She was unaffected.

Mostin gaped. *Impossible*, he thought.

Nwm glanced at Shomei, gauged that she would live, and struck Lorochtoh with a *finger of death*.

Ortwin and Iua, descending on her flank, erupted into a vicious flurry of slashes and stabs.

The monster shrugged the spell effect off, effortlessly changed tack, and ploughed devastatingly into the Druid, ripping and rending him with horns, maws and claws. As her body swung around, finally

within his range, Eadric hewed her with Lukarn – his blade blazed within the gloom which surrounded her. She screamed. Eadric struck again. And again. And again. Nwm blasted her with a *thunderswarm*, Mostin with more sonics, and both Bard and duelist continued

to prosecute their attack.

Space folded. Concerned for her life, the chimera vanished into the Plane of Shadow.

Nwm, barely conscious, spoke with a mouthful of blood. “Get us out of here, Mostin.”

The Alienist nodded.

Irknaan had watched the exchange with interest. From his perspective, only the steeds of those present and the chimera were apparent – some kind of ward prevented the observation of the interlopers

themselves. Nonetheless, he could infer the use of powerful magic. Moments after the beast had

vanished – no doubt fleeing to Shadow – the hunters’ two remaining steeds likewise disappeared.

Irknaan cogitated, wondering whether they pursued her, or had passed into another reality altogether.

Whoever they were, they weren’t playing by the rules of the hunt – or *his* rules, at least. He shrugged.

They probably wouldn’t be back. Nonetheless, he would double the patrols and call on some demonic

assistance – one couldn’t be too careful.

**

They sat within a *magnificent mansion* hastily conjured by Mostin.

Shomei groaned. “It still hurts,” she complained.

“The attack was charged with loathsome power,” Nwm explained. “I need to be on hallowed ground in order to repair much of the damage done.”

“We are behaving like rank amateurs,” Eadric muttered. “We need to reappraise our situation. Prepare.

Encase ourselves in wards and protective magics. We need back-up plans.”

“Gods, Ed, we thought it was only a *chimera*,” Ortwin sighed. “None of us could have expected it to be capable of that.”

“I tried to warn you,” Nwm shrugged.

“Then try harder, next time,” Ortwin snapped.

“If you weren’t so concerned about *creating an impression...*” Nwm began in a reasonable voice.

Ortwin snorted. “That’s exactly what this is about. It is a bluff. A ruse. We are wearing a façade. We are not appearing *as ourselves*.”

“In any case,” Shomei shifted uncomfortably, and winced, “we should note that our mounts are less durable than ourselves. That was the most potent *horrid wilting* that I have had the misfortune to encounter.”

“And I,” Mostin agreed. “The beast is part fiendish and part tenebrous. We should be on our guard.

Now we have only two steeds left between the six of us.”

“I will conjure more,” Shomei sighed.

“They need to be potent,” Mostin said. “I suggest ecalypsos – they will also give the impression that we have been to Shadow, where the chimera doubtless fled. It will reinforce the notion that we pursued it.”

The Alienist reached into his *portable hole*, stroked Mogus briefly, and pulled the Looking-Glass of Urm-Nahat from within.

“What are you doing?” Nwm asked.

Mostin grinned. “I am lending credence to our ruse,” he replied. “Ortwin, Eadric, Iua – if you would be so kind as to follow me?”

Eadric looked deeply suspicious.

“I will scry the beast, and we will attack and kill it. It is greatly weakened. We must strike before it can recover.”

“You cannot be serious!” Nwm objected.

“It will involve only a brief sojourn in Shadow. We’ll be back before you know it.”

“Very well,” Eadric groaned. “We should finish what we started.”

Ortwin nodded, it was a matter of pride, now. Mostin drew upon the power stored in his amulet, and empowered the Paladin and Duelist with flight before scrying Lorochoth with the mirror.

“Don’t screw up,” Iua said, and leapt through.

*

Immersed in shadowstuff, the chimera was aware of the sensor, but paid it little heed – she assumed it was Irknaan spying on her again. Suddenly, and without warning, the Auran with the rapier was

attacking her ferociously, puncturing her thick hide with the slender blade. She was joined by the two Sidhe – one of whom bore the sword that had caused her so much pain. The demon appeared last of all, grinning widely.

Lorochoth screamed in pain. Flames leapt from her dragon’s mouth as she lashed out with claws and

horns in an uncoordinated fashion. But she was spent, and had nowhere left to hide. It was brief and brutal. She quickly cowered.

“Spare me,” she grunted in Draconic, and repeated it from her lion’s head in guttural Sylvan.

Ortwin slashed at her with his scimitar, and the blade bit deeply into one of her shoulders. Leaning forward, and applying all of his great strength, Eadric pushed Lukarn into

Lorochtoh's sternum. The

blade sank in four feet to the quillons.

The chimera twitched once, and died. Eadric sighed, and black ichor cascaded over him as he withdrew his sword. He made a brief supplication for the creature's soul, before looking around himself.

The Plane of Shadow was cold, and drab, and featureless. All colour and life, all vitality and variety seemed to have been bled from the place.

"This is a grim Limbo," he remarked, "and I would like to leave."

Ortwin hacked at Lorochtoh's draconic head with Githla, until it parted from the thick neck. He

dragged it behind himself as he walked back through the portal, and smiled.

That wasn't so bad, after all, he thought.

NOTE:

This post demonstrates how completely messed up conventional Challenge Ratings are. Officially, the beastie is CR14. Off the cuff, I'd pegged her at 16-17 and thought that it would be relatively easy -

although not a cake-walk - for the characters.

In fact, it almost resulted in a three character fatalities. Shomei was unconscious. And Nwm and Mostin were in single-figure hp by the end of it. **Do not underestimate advanced half-fiendish shadow**

chimerae! - especially when they face a bunch of complacent players.

They were *much* more careful after this...

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 04-14-2003

They had chosen a small hillock with a flat top, covered with short, springy grass, some sixty miles from Irknaan's fortified palace – technically beyond his immediate hegemony, or so Nufrut had told them. It had once been the abode of sprites according to Nwm, although none now lived there. It was an isolated area, and their nearest neighbours were a bevy of Nereids who dwelt in a small lake three miles distant, and a solitary Redcap – perhaps the most unpleasant and disagreeable of all feys – who had taken up residence in a crumbling structure that may once have been a tower. None represented a threat to the party, although the Redcap had succumbed to – or willingly embraced – the mixture of umbral bleed and Abyssal taint that seeped into Afqithan.

At Ortwin's request – and in keeping with the Bard's general scheme to exhibit as much blustering

grandiosity as possible – Mostin summoned a group of Djinn and had them erect a modestly-sized

pavillion and several smaller tents on top of the hill, complete with banners and pennants which

fluttered in the gentle breeze. Ortwin had chosen the device of a scarlet basilisk surrounded by nineteen oriels, which, although promising some esoteric heraldic significance, was in fact as vacuous as his own claim to nobility. Lorochoth's dragon-head sat upon a pike: the grim trophy of a hunt successfully

– albeit painfully – executed. Presently, however, the camp was blanketed by a *screen* cast by Shomei, until their defenses were established. All, with the exception of Iua, maintained their respective disguises.

The group discussed the peculiar traits of Afqithan – notably its enhanced magic, and the implications of the shadowstuff which seemed to exist in varying concentrations. The demiplane was anomalous:

according to Shomei, there were portals which linked it to Faerie proper, and at certain times

sympathetic resonances would allow passage between the worlds. But, excepting powerful magic, there was no way of accessing the Prime other than through Shadow – which was an uncharted and likely

perilous route.

“Shadow and Faerie are not mutually coextant,” the Infernalist explained. “Afqithan should be seen as a threshold between two realities which do not normally interact.”

“And the taint?” Eadric asked, sighing.

“I suspect that *that* was here long before Graz’zt took an interest in the place. Perhaps other fiends have had connections here in the past. Perhaps a legion or two of damned spirits fell through here on their way to Hell, and the gravity of their passing caused a bubble to break away from Faerie. I have no idea.

As I have said, within Irknaan’s palace there may be a *Gate* to the Abyss. But this combination of shadow and taint has been owned by the Loquai, and others – such as the Redcap who lives four miles yonder.”

“And the chimera,” Mostin rasped, still suffering from dehydration. “As I see it, we are dealing with a notoriously tricky group of creatures who have been rendered even trickier by the local conditions.

They will be difficult, at best. How many of them can invoke *horrid wiltings*, for example? Shomei indicated that their leaders may possess as much magical potency as she and I. If one factors in control of the umbral and demonic energies, we may be heavily outmatched in terms of sheer power, although not in utility and versatility. And there is another question – the passage of time here is altered, so do we retreat to Wyre in order to prepare, or do we take advantage of the natural empowerment of magic that Afqithan offers? We need to weigh the benefits of the two options.”

“We can do both,” Shomei said. “I will return to the Prime – although *not* to Wyre – and perform my conjurations. A day here is a week there – and I can accomplish a great deal in a week. I assume that areas of Shadow which are coterminous with Afqithan also suffer from the temporal dilation – Shadow will reflect the local conditions on any plane it touches. As far as the power of the Loquai is concerned, I agree that we must tread

carefully: the one thing to remember is that many Sidhe focus on enchantments – the *mind blanks* are likely to prove useful in that regard.”

Mostin grumbled, and shook his head. “All it takes is for each of them to know just one evocation, and we’re in trouble. They’re bards and sorcerers, and they can drop as many *empowered maximized*

whatevers on us as they like. And there *is* no spell that effectively protects against *horrid wilting* without negating our own effectiveness.”

Shomei nodded. “It was never going to be easy. And it’s *enervations* that I’m afraid of.”

Eadric groaned. “This place is rapidly beginning to lose its charm. And if a week in Wyre passes for

every day that we spend here, that is doubly concerning. And you speak of conjurations, Shomei. Why does this give me a bad feeling, I wonder?”

“I admit that there may be a certain moral ambiguity – from your perspective, at least.”

“It’s not that I dislike you. It’s just that I don’t entirely trust you,” Eadric explained.

” *Ahma*, I am returning to the Prime. If you wish, you may accompany me, and we can visit Morne, and you may confer with the *Sela*. If he instructs you to discontinue our acquaintance...”

“He will not,” Eadric smiled grimly, “as you well know. I am both sanctioned and expected to exercise my own judgement. Which is difficult,” he added wily, “when I lack the clarity of vision possessed by Oronthon’s proxy.”

Shomei laughed. ” *Saizhan* requires a great deal from its practitioners. It is ruthless and uncompromising in its demand for self-perfection.”

“Your view is partially correct, but...” Eadric began.

Ortwin held up his hand. ” *No philosophy*,” he demanded. “It will only lead to unhappiness, and one or both of you will end up upset or frustrated. We need to concentrate on the matter in hand.”

“That sentiment is always true,” Nwm added wily.

“We need to think to defense. Can we be attacked from Shadow?” Ortwin asked.

Mostin swallowed. “Probably,” he nodded.

“Can we do anything about it?” The Bard pressed.

“I need to think about that,” the Alienist sighed. “It depends on how accessible the Plane is to the locals.”

“Very accessible,” Shomei said, looking slightly apologetic.

“Can they teleport in?” Ortwin asked.

Mostin grimaced. “When they have determined our position – which shouldn’t be too long, when we reveal our gaudy tents – that will be a possibility, I suppose.”

“I will *hallow* this area,” Nwm said, “and will tie it to a *dimensional anchor* that Mostin

will cast. We have done something similar before, if you recall. We will designate those currently present as being unaffected by the *anchor*. Hallowed ground will also allow me to repair the long-term damage from the chimera's attack."

"Very inventive," Shomei nodded approvingly.

"In which case," Mostin grumbled, "someone will need to procure the relevant herbs and oils. Which means I need to return to Morne, I suppose."

"I will go to Magathei," Iua offered. "You can buy anything and everything there."

"Hallowed ground here will be rather a giveaway, don't you think?" Ortwin asked.

"Only if they think to look for it," Nwm replied. "And, let's face it, would you?"

Ortwin grinned.

Eadric sighed. " *If. If. If.* There are too many *ifs* for my liking."

"Relax, Ed," Ortwin said. "I've pulled off bigger lies than this one before."

"Have you?" Eadric asked. "Which ones?"

"My memory fails me," Ortwin replied.

**

After Shomei had departed and Iua had returned from a brief excursion to Magathei on the Plane of Air, Nwm *hallowed* the hilltop in a long rite, until it became an island of brighter Green amidst a sea of long shadows.

"Where is Ortwin?" Iua asked Mostin, as the Alienist sat outside one of the smaller tents. Half of his attention was directed to Nufrut, whose disembodied head leered from out of her crystal prison, and half was focused on Nwm, who had begun to pace in a circle, mumbling the spell.

"He is reconnoitering," Mostin said distractedly. "He is *invisible* and flying, so he will be quite safe from casual observation. Sem has accompanied him – hopefully the avian's eyes should see anything

before it or they see him. Barring sidhe hunting parties, of course." The word *avian* was spoken with ill-concealed loathing.

Iua raised an eyebrow, and made an educated guess as to where Ortwin's 'reconnoitering' had taken

him.

Mostin ignored her and returned his attention to Nufrut, whose face seemed to be caught in a continual scowl.

"What can you tell me of Irknaan, o happy one?" Mostin asked drily.

"What do you wish to know?" The Marilith pouted.

"The means by which his connection with your master is maintained; the number and disposition of his forces; the extent of his personal magical power; his resources – does he, for example, possess any rarities which might interest me? Any information, in fact, that I

might have overlooked which may prove useful.”

“These questions are late in coming,” Nufrut observed.

“I know or can guess the answers to most in broad terms, but now is the time for specifics,” Mostin replied. “Is there an Abyssal gate within his fortress?”

“Yes,” Nufrut answered grumpily.

“If you are more forthcoming, your incarceration will be briefer!”

“That is not in our agreement,” the Marilith objected.

“Nor is your reticence or dissembling,” Mostin replied. “I assume that the gate is a permanent, two-way portal?”

“It is periodic.”

“And the length and regularity of its period?”

“This information is not known to me,” Nufrut replied.

“I should remind you that even a single lie will render our agreement void, and you will remain in your sphere for the rest of your days. Do I need to ask the *Ahma* over? The Eye of Palamabron penetrates all counterfeits, they say.”

“A period of twenty-four hours springs to mind for some reason,” Nufrut said. “Although I may be thinking of another gate entirely.”

“Would that be twenty-four hours here, or in the Abyss?” Mostin asked archly.

“I suppose it would be here,” the Marilith said sourly.

“And it opens in Zelatar, I expect.”

“That would certainly be logical,” Nufrut conceded.

“Does it open in Zelatar, Nufrut?”

“Yes,” the Demoness answered.

“Just making sure,” Mostin said acidly. “How long does the portal remain open, *in local time*, Nufrut.

Try to be precise.”

“Three hours, twenty-five minutes and forty-two seconds,” the Demoness said sarcastically.

“Thank-you,” Mostin said with dry condescension. “That wasn’t so hard, was it? Are there other gates, other than the one within Irknaan’s stronghold?”

“There are many gates in Afqithan to many worlds,” Nufrut answered.

“Are there others to Zelatar?”

“Not to my knowledge.”

“To other regions of the Abyss?”

“Perhaps. If there are, I am not privy to them.”

“Good,” Mostin sighed, finally feeling that he was making headway. “Now let’s speak of Irknaan himself. He reveres your master, as do many of the Loquai. What does he gain in reward for his

loyalty?”

“Power, you fool,” Nufrut sneered.

“More specifically, please. And you may dispense with the insults, they do not make me sympathetic to your plight.”

“Prince Gra....”

“Hup!” Mostin interrupted. “You will henceforth refer to him as *my master*, if you please.”

Nufrut raised an eyebrow in an expression of amusement. “If you are concerned about him hearing his name, bear in mind how many billions say it every day in a billion worlds.”

“Nonetheless, I would prefer not to take the risk. Most of those billions are not high on his list of

‘people to be dealt with.’ As I was asking, what does Irknaan receive as a boon from your master?”

“Irknaan is particularly favoured. The Loquai in general enjoy the attentions of succubi – or incubi –

depending on their gender and preference. They have learned the secret language. They have demonic allies and servants. My master and his minions have taught them many arts – Irknaan most of all.”

“And they crave erotic sensation above all else?”

“All sensation is erotic if you learn how to experience it,” Nufrut answered.

“We can engage in such philosophical speculation at another time, Nufrut. For the time being, let us confine ourselves to Irknaan. Which arts do you speak of?”

“Efficacious magic, Mostin. Violated magic.”

“And in return, what has the Prince received? How far does Irknaan’s loyalty extend? Are there Loquai within the Lord of Azzagrat’s retinue? Do they pay him tribute?”

“There are sidhe within his armies, yes. Many are capable warriors. Your encounter with Xerulko* is testament to my master’s eclecticism.”

“How many Loquai dwell within Irknaan’s fortress?” Mostin persisted.

“Perhaps two hundred.”

Inwardly, Mostin groaned. “And the location and disposition of his principal vassals within Afqithan?”

“They are numerous,” Nufrut answered.

“Other fortresses of Loquai, or other creatures who support him,” Mostin said, somewhat exasperated.

“Yytryn, a powerful Duke, two hundred miles to the northeast of here; the Queen

Menicau; the Lamia Jetheeg; Threxu, the Wasted Nymph; King Samodoquol; the Wyrms Crosod...”

“A Wyrms? Of what kind?”

“A black one. He often flies to converse with Irknaan.”

Mostin recalled the very first time that he had looked through his mirror with Shomei into this twisted world. Something huge had passed across the stars in the distance. *It could have been a dragon, I suppose*, he thought.

“And Crosod has embraced the umbral taint, no doubt?”

“Most certainly,” Nufrut smiled.

“And within Irknaan’s fortress: are there other individuals who might pose a particular threat to us, beside the king himself?”

“His queen and consort, Nhura. His captain, Shupthul. He is served by an elite guard who may be more than a match for your puny gang. Fiendish umbral griffons, maybe a dozen succubi and several

glabrezu at any one time. Who knows, Mostin – perhaps even a kelvezu or two?”

“You seem to be enjoying this.”

“I must take my recreation when it presents itself to me. I am not equipped to go and find it myself.”

“Nhura is a succubus, I assume?”

“No, indeed,” Nufrut smiled wickedly. “Nhura is a rare creature indeed. She was once a Lillend.”

Mostin’s stomach tightened in a knot.

Eadric spent much of the day, if it was a day – there was neither sun nor moon to mark the passage of time – in prayer and contemplation, still unaccustomed to his sidhe form. He meditated upon their

current predicament, and the absurdity of it struck him: they were in a foreign world, full of potent magic, where taint was rampant, and with no overarching plan or purpose. As usual, Ortwin didn’t

seem to be taking things very seriously, and Shomei was a nagging source of concern. Penetrating her motives was impossible. Mostin seemed to trust her, but Mostin’s perspective was more skewed than

anyone else that Eadric knew, and was little cause for comfort.

Thank heaven for Nwm, he thought, as he emerged from his reverie. The Druid still paced, chanting quietly under his breath. Iua practiced impossibly complex maneuvers nearby.

As Mostin approached him, the Paladin resigned himself to the inevitable complications that the

Alienist always managed to find. His demonic visage was distinctly unsettling.

“I have good news and bad news: which would you first prefer?” Mostin casually swung the globe containing Nufrut’s head.

“I would rather not hear the bad news at all,” Eadric replied.

“Then I will tell you the good news: Nufrut is a veritable mine of information! Shomei was inspired when she suggested her name.”

“I was an ambassador to many worlds, you imbecile! What do you expect?” The Demoness snapped from her prison.

Mostin opened his *portable hole* and dropped her inside. “She is, however, somewhat irascible, and is prone to petulance.”

“What other good news is there?” Eadric asked.

“None,” Mostin admitted. He proceeded to recount all that he had learned, drinking deeply from a waterskin at regular intervals.

“I do not like umbral fiendish black wyrms,” Eadric moaned. “This is a disturbing development.”

“I am in agreement,” Mostin nodded, “but we can rest assured that such a creature will register in Nwm’s mind long before it finds us.”

“If he is looking,” Eadric added.

“Nwm immerses himself in the Green on a fairly regular basis, so I have no concerns there. Irknaan sounds well entrenched, however: finding any to oppose him is likely to be difficult.”

“This is no revelation,” Eadric sighed. “There are those here which the taint has not touched, according to Nwm. They may be potential allies.”

“Pixies and Grigs?” Mostin laughed hoarsely. “Dryads? Satyrs? Nymphs and Nereids? Squeakers, Buckawns and *Wood Gnomes*? You cannot be serious! Even if these were normal Sidhe that we were dealing with, Eadric, that would be an ill-advised course of action. The Loquai are not such easy targets.”

“Don’t let Ortwin hear you speaking thus,” Iua interrupted, “he is, after all, King of the Feys in Wyre.”

“Any fool can make that claim, and I’m sure he’s not the only one to covet that title,” Mostin said drily.

“Where is he, anyway?”

Iua drew a dagger from her boot. “About now,” she said coolly, “I expect he is discovering whether his attempt to seduce one, or perhaps all, of the three Nereids who live yonder has been successful.”

Left-handed, she hurled the blade with strength and precision at Lorochoth’s head, where it sank into the skull between the dead chimera’s glazed draconic eyes.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 04-29-2002

The succubus Lehurze – who regarded herself as an occasional ally of Graz'zt, rather than his abject thrall – adjusted her visage to her satisfaction before pressing the face of the *cubic gate* which was keyed to Afqithan. She was unwilling to wait for two days until the portal opened, and even more loath to ask her Abyssal master to expedite her transit: the Prince's mood had been particularly dark and violent of late. This was no special cause for concern in and of itself, but neither was he known for granting boons at such times. And had he been reminded of her, and chosen to slake his lust upon her instead, she feared that it may have resulted in her demise – over the aeons, more than a few succubi had been annihilated during or after the act of passion, whether or not they had begged a favour from him. Best not to draw attention to herself, she thought.

Lehurze played a dangerous game. Graz'zt knew that she was on amicable terms with Pazuzu, but was

content to allow her to pass tidbits of information to agents of the Aerial Prince as long as the flow back towards the Lord of Azzagrat was greater in both volume and quality. Demons generally expected

disloyalty and duplicity, and, in fact, became suspicious when it seemed absent.

Graz'zt also knew that Lehurze was still close in the confidence of his former ally and paramour,

Soneillon – the abstruse and enigmatic succubus whose dark designs may have rivaled even his own.

During their aeon-long association, Soneillon had initiated a number of demons nominally loyal to

Graz'zt into her clique of followers, of whom Lehurze was one. Lehurze had seized every shred of

knowledge which was presented to her, and developed a sorcerous talent of some ability – which she carefully hid from those around her. Lehurze was shrewd enough to appear to reveal the majority of her findings regarding Soneillon to one of Graz'zt's agents – a Glabrezu named Shonchuk – who paid her handsomely for her information. She knew that Shonchuk was retained directly by Graz'zt – despite the fact that the other demon masqueraded as an informant for one of the Dark Prince's frequent supporters, Lord Kostchtchie.

Lehurze was therefore surprised when events unfolded as they did. Irknaan, one of the warped sidhe kings from Afqithan, had issued the Nalfeshnee Maihodrot a *sending*, requesting information on a kelvezu and a group of rogue sidhe who had entered his realm. Maihodrot, the demon who oversaw

events in Afqithan and with whom Lehurze at times found collaboration beneficial, had intimated that unusual events might be passing in the little demiplane. Upon further probing he had suggested that Irknaan – whose name was known to Lehurze – might be concerned that Prince Graz'zt bore him some

unknown enmity. Lehurze was silent when quizzed by the other demon – her mind working furiously,

as she tried to piece together possible scenarios. Many things were known to her, and she was privy to the plots of a number of Abyssal magnates.

Irknaan, she knew, had genuine cause for concern: if Graz'zt had discovered that the Loquai were also sponsored by the demoness Rhyxali, he may have acted to suppress the potential rivalry. Or he may

have known for some time, and determined that things had reached a critical juncture. Her curiosity was piqued. Nonetheless, the succubus would have ignored the entreaty, had it not been for a quasit dispatched from her erstwhile mistress in Throile – the disputed Abyssal jungle where Graz'zt and

Soneillon warred interminably with one another:

Inquire into Afqithan. A captured Devil has indicated that interesting events may be transpiring there.

Shomei the Infernal is somehow involved.

Never one to believe in coincidence, Lehurze had slain the quasit without a moment's thought, and

approached Maihodrot again. After indulging the Nalfeshnee's violent desires, she had secured the

temporary use of the *cubic gate* which Maihodrot used to access Afqithan and a number of other worlds which he was charged with supervising. Unaware of the greater patterns which were moving, but

nonetheless suspicious of the motives of the succubus, Maihodrot agreed to allow Lehurze to act in his stead – confident that he could extract at least a few scraps of gossip from her upon her return. From the Nalfeshnee's perspective, Afqithan was a tedious and complex world, and he was wise enough to

know that he lacked the guile necessary to wheedle anything substantive from Irknaan.

As she stepped through the *gate*, Lehurze felt a frisson of excitement: as much as she felt at home amid the tortuous intrigues of Azzagrat, occasional escape from the place, if merely to a pocket Faerie, was always desirable.

**

Iua was only partially correct in her suspicions regarding Ortwin. The *polymorphed* and *invisible* Satyr had made his roundabout way to the nereids' pool, where he sat upon a rock and watched the three feys cavort happily in the water. Those with eyes to see would have observed an inane grin of huge

proportions fixed onto his face.

After an unknown time had elapsed – it may have been minutes or hours – and seeing no abatement to the nereids' antics, Ortwin removed his pipes from his belt and began a haunting melody of such

enormous poignancy that, had he had tear ducts, Sem – who sat upon a nearby branch – would have

begun to weep. The water-nymphs stopped abruptly, seized their shawls from the bank of the pool, and vanished into its depths.

Ortwin raised an invisible eyebrow, and continued to play – the tempo and mood of his music changing to become lighter and less melancholy, although still graced with a sweetness and depth which belied his own fickle and superficial nature. He concluded the tune, and waited.

And waited.

Ortwin frowned, and replaced his pipes at his belt. He pulled his small harp from its case on his back, and struck up another tune – this time accompanying the music with a voice which he hardly

recognized as his own. Sidhe vocal chords had a smoothness he was unfamiliar with. He measured the passage of time by the songs that he played, and perhaps a further half hour had elapsed before he sighed and ceased his music. He waited again, glancing up at the eagle – who appeared to have dozed off. He picked up a stick and threw it at the bird, who screeched indignantly.

“Come on,” Ortwin picked himself up. “We’re going.”

“Better luck next time,” Sem replied sarcastically.

“You are no Loquai,” a honeyed voice said from the water at his feet. “And you play the pipes passably

well for a sidhe – did a satyr teach you?”

Ortwin started, and looked down to observe only his own reflection in the water. He smiled ironically –

apparently the *invisibility* had worn off at some time during his performance.

” *Passably well?* I *am* a satyr, lady,” he said with quickly recovered charm. “I am Ortwin the Great, King of the Feys of Wyre and the Northern World – not *your* world, I hasten to add. I am currently in disguise.”

“That is an implausible tale.”

“But nonetheless true,” Ortwin answered, surprised that less than fifty percent of his claim was a lie.

“And why are you here by our pool, ‘King’ Ortwin?”

“I have lustful urges,” he admitted, “but that is not the only reason why I’m here. I am looking for information. What can you tell me of the Loquai?”

“Now you make me suspicious that you are a spy,” the voice replied with acid humour.

“Please understand that I mean you no harm,” Ortwin insisted. “If I had wished to, I could have stolen all of your shawls and forced you into submitting to all manner of lewd acts, and into divulging

whatever I wished to know. I am looking for allies. I am the enemy of Irknaan, and his sponsors, and of the umbral bleed, and the taint which lies upon this place. Can you help

me?”

“I cannot,” the voice replied. “Now begone!”

“What is your name?” the Bard asked. But there was no response. She had fled.

Ortwin cursed.

**

Mostin watched as Nwm made his final invocations on the hilltop. “If you did that every day for ten thousand years, you might make a small impression on this place,” Mostin scoffed, as he cast a *dimensional anchor*.

Nwm ignored him, and repaired the damage caused by the violated *horrid wilting* that they had sustained. He waited until Mostin apologized before attending to his needs: in the meantime, the

Alienist had consumed several gallons of water in his unquenchable thirst.

When Shomei returned, it was in the company of four ecalypsos that she had enlisted as steeds – six-legged horses native to Shadow. Mostin guessed that the Infernalist had struck deals with other

creatures, although Shomei did not mention them, and the Alienist did not press her: she looked

exhausted, itself an indicator that she had busied herself with *summonings* and *callings*.

To Eadric, Iua and Nwm, the witch handed small vials containing a transparent liquid which smelled vaguely acidic.

“Consume these,” she instructed, sighing.

Eadric looked suspicious.

“They will allow you to master the beasts – currently, they are *charmed*, but you need to bond with them. The draught will simply allow you to stay on them while you break them. Ecalypsos are

notoriously willful.”

“Where did you procure these potions?” The Paladin asked. The flasks had a faint aura of taint which clung to them.

“Abriymoch,” Shomei grimaced. “But they were not made in the Hells, *Ahma*, only purchased there –

with some difficulty, I might add.”

“Does every choice that you present to me compromise my principles and threaten to erode my

integrity?”

“That is for you to decide.”

“And why do you inconvenience yourself for us to such an extent? Do you require payment for your services?”

“No,” she said flatly. “And *my* debt to Nwm is still unsettled: I would have died had he not intervened.”

“There is no debt,” the Druid said easily.

“Yes,” she replied, “there is.”

Shomei opened yet another *magnificent mansion* to corral both the ecalypses and the two remaining nightmares – now that the hilltop itself was *hallowed*, they could not freely tread there.

“Where is Ortwin?” Shomei asked.

“He is reconnoitering,” Mostin replied, avoiding Iua’s gaze.

“Is he warded?”

“Somewhat,” the Alienist answered.

Shomei sighed. “We need to be more careful, Mostin. One of my devils is missing.”

Mostin raised an eyebrow. “Which one?”

“One of the erinyes, named Aoloz. She was the one I dispatched to Throile.”

“This complicates matters,” Mostin said drily.

**

Lehurze arrived in Afqithan only moments after Ortwin had begun his flight back to the encampment, and immediately *teleported* to the gates of Irknaan’s palace. She was granted an audience with the King in private, and was greeted by his customary mixture of inscrutability and condescension. Their

exchange was civil, as each probed the other for possible weaknesses. For the most part, Lehurze

remained demure, sensing the power of the dark perception that the sidhe possessed – he was ancient, and as cunning as an Abyssal Lord, and she knew that she must tread carefully. Potency and command flowed effortlessly from him, but seemed to find no purchase on her – Lehurze had long since mastered the art of utter passivity, and transformed it into an effective tool for domination. She absorbed all.

Soneillon had taught her well.

When the succubus casually mentioned the demoness Rhyxali, she was unsure whether she caught the

merest flicker in Irknaan’s impenetrable gaze. She smiled inwardly, as she knew now that the King’s thoughts would be turning rapidly, seeking to make connections and attempting to place her within the larger picture.

Lehurze made no mention of the kelvezu, nor of the sidhe hunting party, until Irknaan broached the subject at the gruesome and shadowy revel which was held later that evening. Nine other succubi were present – compacted to Loquai nobles of varying station – as well as the glabrezu Tebdeluz and Narab, advisors and lovers to Nhura, Irknaan’s

beautiful, sinuous, and deadly consort. The presence of Lehurze was a cause for doubt amongst the other demons – the succubus had a reputation for intricate and tangled schemes in Azzagrat, and they, themselves, suddenly felt under scrutiny. Lehurze delighted in the fear that she evoked, and many of the lesser sidhe to whom she spoke, despite their subtlety and guile, were no match for her shrewd and circuitous interrogations.

Irknaan watched her as she mingled. He was confident that he had gauged her correctly: here was one with the ruthless determination and ambition typical of her kind, but also with the skill and patience to actualize her goals – a much more valuable commodity. After their satiation of blood, and grim

pleasure, and exquisite pain, Irknaan's court retired for meditation or private indulgence.

The King and Queen – the latter flanked by the hulking presence of the two glabrezu – remained and

questioned Lehurze, who seemed unfazed by the penetrating gazes of the two huge demons. All regarded each other with mutual distrust and cynicism, and beneath an opaque veneer of civility and etiquette, deals were struck, information was exchanged, and secrets were alluded to.

But when Shupthul entered at a late hour with his report, none could have expected the news that he brought with him. He bowed before Irknaan, Nhura, and their guest.

“My Lord and Lady, there are devils at the gate. They seek an audience.”

The King's eyes widened in an uncharacteristic display of surprise. “Their number, arrangement and purpose?” He asked.

“There are thirteen of them, Lord. Their purpose they would not divulge. Ten are Narzugons who wear many honours and decorations.”

“And the three remaining?”

“Furcas, Murmuur and Titivilus, my Lord. Infernal nobility.”

Irknaan turned to Lehurze. “Perhaps you possess some insight into the presence of Devils in my realm?” He asked acidly.

“I have no more information than you,” the Succubus lied, as she considered Soneillon's mention of Shomei.

The King's eyes narrowed, and he pondered briefly. “Tell them to return in a day,” he instructed Shupthul. “I am disinclined to deal with them presently.”

“Offending them too much may be unwise,” Nhura said, “at least until we discover their purpose. We should send them a token, and grant them the privilege to hunt, at least. There may be others in their wake.”

Irknaan gave a cursory nod. Thirteen devils – even ten knights and three Dukes of Hell – were no

particular threat to him in his own fortress, but he was nonetheless cautious. And like Lehurze, King Irknaan did not believe in coincidence. The image of the unknown sidhe

hunting party was still fresh in his mind.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 05-05-2003

Iua had sat largely quiet during the discussions, her emotions churning rapidly, but conscious of the inappropriateness of an untimely confrontation with Ortwin, who evinced his usual swagger and

nonchalance.

When the Bard had recounted his encounter with the nereids – speaking no falsehood, but leaving

sufficient room for all kinds of inference – she had sighed inwardly, aware of his capacity for gross insensitivity. Mostin had fidgeted uncomfortably, and Nwm had kept his eyes diplomatically lowered.

Eadric, as always, had retained an open and accommodating expression which did not suit his current sidhe features. The duelist was glad that he would be wearing a helm – subterfuge was not one of the Paladin's strong points. Subtlety, and reading others' moods, however, could be.

"You should be cautious of roaming too far afield," Eadric said vaguely to Ortwin. "It may have unforeseen consequences."

Ortwin squinted, unsure of the Paladin's meaning.

"It is important to maintain the group's cohesion and unity of purpose," Eadric continued obliquely.

"And one of us alone is too easy a target – *invisibility* is no protection against the sidhe, or a passing dragon, for that matter. Forays should be made in pairs – preferably in the company of a spellcaster – in case a speedy retreat is necessary."

"Good idea," Ortwin nodded. "Perhaps Nwm should come next time. You like nereids, don't you Nwm?"

"I am reluctant to categorize my feelings towards an entire race of creatures in such simple terms,"

Nwm replied evasively.

"Nonsense," Ortwin said archly. "When you were younger, Nwm..."

"Alas, I am no longer young," the Druid interrupted.

"But when you *were*," Ortwin persisted blithely, "you frolicked with nymphs and dryads and nereids and sirines with the best of them. You were never stuffy, like Ed is."

"Nor was I as selfish and hedonistic as you," Nwm snapped. "Just because I don't have Eadric's..."

"Hang-ups?" Ortwin suggested.

"*Perspective*," Nwm continued. "Bah! What's the use? You wouldn't know what *sacred* meant if the Goddess pissed in your face."

Shomei shot Mostin an inquiring look.

Yes, *it's usually like this*, was the Alienist's unvoiced reply.

The Infernalist clicked her fingers. "Tactics," she said.

**

Mostin's intellect was amplified to a level he had never before experienced, and his mind was awash with powerful spells. They seemed to compete for space, and threatened to spill over. Almost every one of his higher valences was occupied – four more castings of *mind blank* had actually relieved the pressure on his consciousness.*

Every spell – arcane and divine – that the party possessed would be deployed to maximum effect. They had spent over an hour discussing strategy in an attempt to coordinate their resources. Eadric would be contributing *death wards*, and even Ortwin's paltry collection of spells would be used in order to free up some of Shomei's lower valences.

The Alienist had prepared *gate*, *prismatic sphere*, *Mordenkainen's disjunction*, *time stop*, *reality maelstrom*; a chained *phantasmal killer*, a chained *polymorph other*, five *disintegrates*, and four sonically substituted *fire orbs* – he was intent on not having the targets slide out of the way again, as the chimera had done. He had prepared a pair of *dimensional anchors* in case they ran into anything that they didn't want to get away, and two *banishments* in case they encountered anything that they *did* want to go away. He had prepared an *insanity* spell, his usual utility spells and divinations, and for his *summoning* he favoured pseudoimmoths – the idea being to conjure six or seven of them, and then ordering them to begin a magical barrage of their own. He had also prepared a chained *flesh to stone* spell – a tactic he had never before employed. He held a *plane shift* in reserve in case a speedy retreat was necessary.

Aside from two *squamous pulses* and a *finger of death* in the event that they met the dragon, Nwm would be acting primarily in a support role and providing a variety of wards, augmentations, and

healing spells. Shomei was split between offense, defense and general utility, and would be deploying extended *stoneskins* and doubly empowered *endurances* – further augmented by the ambient magic –

and two *effulgent epurations*, to limit the power of the initial assault if it came. She had a host of minor buffs, numerous abjurations and several powerful conjurations prepared – *power word stun*, *maze* and *gate*. She boasted a *horrid wilting* which would be empowered through her rod and further magnified –

to truly stellar proportions – by the enhanced magic of the plane.

"If you thought that the chimera's attack was bad," she said to Mostin, "you should wait until you see this one – if I have a chance to get it off."

"What is an *effulgent epuration*?" Eadric asked.

"You will see," Shomei half-smiled.

Mostin turned greedily to the Infernalist. "Perhaps that spell is tradeable?"

Shomei shrugged. "Maybe. Hopefully, it will not come to blows in any case – one of my

highest valences will be invested in Ortwin. His charm is what stands between us and an unpleasant situation.”

“And I assume that your *gate* would be to bring devils here?” Eadric sighed.

“Not necessarily,” Shomei replied. “I am not above calling on other entities if required.”

“And yours, Mostin?” The Paladin inquired.

“It’s a surprise,” Mostin said, displaying a demonic grin.

Shomei shot him a glance filled with trepidation, before *summoning* a succubus and dispatching it to Irknaan’s fortress.

In its hand, it held a cordial invitation to hunt, from Duke Rhalid and his consort, the Auran Princess, Iua.

The *screen* which protected the encampment was lifted, and the hilltop – with its collection of tents –

suddenly became visible.

**

Irknaan inwardly scowled, although his face betrayed no expression of his irritation. He stared from atop his tallest tower, a hundred fathoms above the base of the rock pinnacle upon which his castle was built.

The edifice, which had appeared at some stage in the past few hours, was less than a mile from his gates. Needle-sharp, black, lusterless and seemingly unpierced by any door or window, it vied for

dominion of the sky with his own fortress.

Irknaan briefly considered whether allowing the devils into his own court may have been wiser than forcing them to ‘make camp’ outside of the walls. The infernal tower was, predictably, impervious to divinations of all kinds. Irknaan brooded about what was transpiring inside: they had opened at least one *gate*, as testified by the presence of sharp-eyed spined devils, in tireless flight about the place. And spinugons were the least of his concerns.

The three Dukes – technically one Duke, one Count and a Nuncio – who were, presumably, still

closeted within the tower somewhere, had not shown themselves since Irknaan’s denial of an audience.

Their actions, whilst provocative, were not entirely unexpected, and a good deal of posturing could be expected on both sides before any real communication of intent or purpose occurred.

Duke Murmuur, Irknaan knew, was the senior member of the diabolic envoy, although in guile and

subtlety both Furcas and Titivilus no doubt outshone him. Whilst Murmuur was a relatively

straightforward opponent – albeit a fierce and capable warrior – the others, both vassals of Dispater, were intellectuals without peer amongst the middle-ranking aristocracy. The Narzugons – Knights of the Order of the Fly – were Murmuur’s retainers, and were potentially dangerous opponents, although Irknaan’s own bodyguards were likely a match for them.

In any case, Irknaan considered ironically, if the Lords of Dis or Malbolge really want this place, what can I do to stop them?

Abruptly, Lehurze appeared behind him. Her words were a gamble.

“Will you petition Rhyxali for aid? Or Graz’zt?”

The King’s face remained emotionless. “You presume a great deal for one who has been here less than a day.”

“I sometimes favour speed and efficiency of purpose over diplomacy,” the Succubus replied.

Irknaan gestured briefly, and Lehurze was *held* with a look of astonishment upon her face. Suddenly, pain more intense than she had experienced in a aeon overwhelmed her. Her skin began to peel off in strips from body and her spirit screamed, but her mouth – clenched and unmoving – was incapable of vocalizing.

Irknaan waited until she was almost dead before he released her. Lehurze collapsed upon the marble flags of the rooftop, ichor pouring from her ruptured form. She lashed out at him with a *power word*, but space rippled around him and the syllables evaporated impotently.

He *held* her again. “You’ll have to do better than that,” he said. “You’re one of Soneillon’s whores, aren’t you?”

I was.

“And whom do you serve now?”

Myself.

“But you still remain in communication with your former mistress?”

Amongst others. I have many contacts.

“I think that it is time that you were honest with me,” King Irknaan smiled thinly.

There are a number of demons whom I can sue for help.

But at what cost? Irknaan mused. His grip on Afqithan, although relatively solid, would rapidly become tenuous if powerful demons with unknown agendas began appearing. *More powerful demons with unknown agendas*, he considered, as he observed Lehurze.

“What do you suggest, Lehurze?” He released her again, and her form became limp. She coughed dark bile.

“An alliance, whilst it remains to our mutual benefit.”

“If you seek to supplant Nhura, then I would warn you: she is deadly. Do you have designs on Afqithan?”

“Every succubus desires to be a queen, Irknaan.”

He had read her accurately – perhaps more accurately than she had read herself. Arcanists who came to Afqithan always reacted the same way. Whatever their initial view of the little demiplane – a parochial backwater, inward-looking and insignificant – they rapidly became enamoured.

The exhilaration of spellcasting was too much to resist. The magical power which coursed through

everything. The effortless joy of manifesting. The dark, brooding beauty of the place.

A feeling of enormous poignancy threatened to overcome Irknaan. He would rather die a thousand

times than surrender his kingdom to any other.

“I do not trust you one iota,” he said to her.

“That is wise,” she replied.

So he laid a *geas* on her, and bound her to him, which suited Lehurze well enough. Passivity was her oldest friend, and her greatest ally.

*Mostin rarely, if ever, fills every spell slot in the morning, preferring the flexibility of a quick fifteen or thirty minutes to cram another spell if required. He is usually at around two-thirds capacity. That morning, he was fully primed, and had an intelligence of 40 (he was under the effect of a trebly

empowered *fox's cunning*, further empowered and maximized by the magical trait of the plane): save DCs against his spells were as high as he could get them. He had just reached 20th level, and was

relishing the power that it afforded: if it came to blows, the general tactic was to deploy fortitude-targeting spells, negating the *evasion* ability of the umbral feys and simultaneously forcing their weakest save.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 05-27-2003

This post demonstrates how obscenely overpowered *time stop* is when it is cast in Afqithan, and why I will never again allow its effects to stack with *haste*; how things like ‘EL26’ and ‘CR22’ in fact mean diddly-squat; and how, what the DM thinks are overwhelming numbers - designed to force compliance

or retreat from the players - are, in fact, nothing more than a minor annoyance.

The title of this update is therefore devoted to not just the *theoretical* possibilities that a spell offers -

which had been long known - but to actually putting it into practice for the first time.

Mostin Discovers *Time Stop*

**

Crosod's immense pinions powered him forward at unnatural speed, and his sinuous body – which

seemed to devour all light and belch it forth again as a cloying darkness – shivered with potency as space parted around him. Within his ebon form his eyes were lidless voids, filled with age, and

wisdom, and infinite malice. Clinging to his foreleg, perched above his razor-sharp talons and exalting in the wind as it rushed over her was Threxu, the Wasted Nymph with whom, at times, the Dragon

consorted. She was a lithe, supple shadow, whose delicate and beautiful form seemed incapable of

performing the acts for which she had justly acquired her terrible reputation.

Below them, unaware of the passenger that he carried, wood-gnomes and sprites of every kind

cowered, fearing that the slightest breath or movement would draw the Dragon to them. Crosod

smelled them but had no interest in them – they offered little in the way of nourishment, and there was no time for sport.

Threxu, however, was thirsty. She glanced greedily at the forest below her.

“Here!” She yelled at Crosod, and pointed. The Wurm banked abruptly, his wings emitting a thunderous crack which shook the treetops, before descending effortlessly to the forest floor and crushing a tump which housed a dozen grigs and pixies.

Threxu leapt from his leg and sank to the ground, pressing her lips to the soft grass. She drank

voraciously, and rapidly – although only temporarily – she satisfied her thirst.

As the pair took to the sky again and made their way towards Irknaan's fortress at the behest of their liege, the feys in the woods below wailed and cursed. Dryads wept in desperation, in the sure

knowledge that, within a day, they, like their trees, and every other green thing within the blighted swathe that Threxu had left, would be dead.

**

The unknown sidhe had returned, it appeared.

Irknaan had been unable to capture their messenger and interrogate her – a *summoned* succubus –

before she vanished back to her Abyssal abode. His attempts to *scry* the group had been unsuccessful, and *clairvoyance* of the locale that they described revealed only a collection of tents, with no inhabitants or owners. Nearby, one of Loroctoh's heads sat upon a pike.

They were warded, the King knew. Possibly even *mind blanked* – and that would prove

awkward. His thoughts raced. Evidence of powerful spells had been left at the site where the corpses of the

nightmares had been found, and the loss of four steeds had seemed to do little to diminish their

effectiveness.

They were not Loquai, but they had followed the chimera to Shadow. They had chosen a particularly

isolated locale, in a region unclaimed by any noble and with few inhabitants. One of them at least possessed a magical ability which rivalled or even outstripped his own – the pursuing scouts that he had sent after them after their initial appearance had heard sonic detonations of great power. And the

succubi that Lorochoth had *summoned* to deal with them had been dispatched with distressing ease –

their charms apparently ineffective. And the kelvezu – where did *it* fit into the scheme of things? A retainer? He reluctantly approached Nhura, whose knowledge and wisdom regarding many things was

deeper than his.

“Have you heard of Duke Rhalid?” He asked.

“No,” she replied.

“An Auran Princess named Iua?”

She scowled. “The name is distantly familiar,” she replied.

“Take one of the succubi. Go first to Faerie, and make inquiries of this Duke. Spend no more than an hour there. Go then to the Plane of Air. Find out what you can regarding Iua. Return as speedily as you can.”

She squinted, and nodded curtly.

After the departure of the Lillend – if that was, in fact, something which Nhura could still be called –

Irknaan called Shupthul to him and instructed his Captain carefully. Somewhat later, Shupthul left the fortress in the company of the succubus Iemazai – his compacted mistress, and one of the wilier

members of Irknaan’s court. They were accompanied by a dozen Loquai mounted on tenebrous

griffons; the witch Koilimilou and her *called* and *bound* servitors – currently a trio of Jariliths – as well as six quicklings of particularly evil aspect, and thirty hell-hounds.

Koilimilou – cantankerous and eccentric – was one that Irknaan seldom approached, as the witch was dangerous and preferred her own company, or that of demons, to that of the Loquai. Under threat of *flensing* however, she acquiesced to Irknaan’s demands, and stirred herself from her reveries. She possessed a powerful item which, amongst other

things, would expedite the passage of the hunting

party. In the past, Irknaan had used it to wage war on his rivals – and only Koilimilou could unlock its secrets.

Shupthul would make preliminary contact with the group of interlopers, and assess their strengths and weaknesses – inviting them to the castle, if he deemed it appropriate. Lehurze would attempt to reopen negotiations with the devils who were now entrenched nearby – they had yet to declare their purpose.

In the meantime, Irknaan had ordered several of his most powerful vassals to attend him: the Wurm, the nymph Threxu, King Samodoquol with eighty knights, and Duke Ytryn with thirty more.

After deliberating, Irknaan had yielded to his desire for demonic assistance, but reluctant to directly embroil either Graz'zt or Rhyxali had, at the suggestion of Lehurze, cried Soneillon in her abyss of pain and depravity.

Darkness.

“She is there,” Lehurze assured him, “and she knows you are watching.”

Irknaan issued a *sending*. The enigmatic demoness did not reply.

Irknaan brooded. Soneillon was less dangerous than either of his patrons, but dealing with her still required considerable caution and a clear head. Although he trusted no-one – be they ally, subject, thrall or open enemy – the King had millennia of experience in dealing with some of the most devious and

manipulative entities in creation.

He inwardly hoped that it would be enough. Any sign of weakness would be exploited by one or more

of his own servants or allies.

**

“Should we send another one?” Ortwin asked irritably, an hour after the succubus had been *summoned* and dispatched to Irknaan's fortress. “There's still no reply.” He stood tensely, arms folded, whilst the others sat nearby upon eclypses and nightmares which champed restlessly.

“He is no doubt machinating,” Mostin replied.

“In which case,” Nwm suggested, “we probably shouldn't give him too long. In case he prepares *too well*.”

More time passed. Nwm's thoughts reached out in an attempt to discover perturbations in the Green

nearby, but to no effect.

When they arrived, it was suddenly and without warning. They manifested at the base of the hillock where the party had set their tents, outside of the dimensionally anchored area. Shadowstuff swirled around them, gushing from the aperture through which they came,

before sinking slowly into the

ground. Ortwin immediately fell into character, resisting the urge to gape, and regretting that he did not have time to quaff his *philtre of glibness* without drawing attention to himself.

The Loquai were tall, elegant figures, their individual features rendered vague by the umbral energies which had suffused them. They appeared as dark shades, clad in darker armour and bearing lances,

bows and long swords; they sat upon black-winged monstrosities that would have been griffons, had

they been possessed of more real matter and less shadowstuff and taint. Tiny motes of sooty darkness darted about the riders: fiendish umbral quicklings, with only pinprick red eyes to lend them semblance of shape and form. Hunting demons – Jariliths – prowled amongst them, their maws full of sharp teeth.

Hell-hounds bayed around them.

Their leader wore a helm and breastplate of jet, although the captured twilight hinted at other shades hidden within. Upon closer observation, his face – beautiful even for a sidhe – seemed serene; delicate features revealed in a thousand shades of insubstantial grey. In his left hand he carried a bow of impossible lightness, a slender dart nocked easily between his long fingers.

“I am Shupthul,” he said in a soft voice. The words resonated, and seemed to hang in the air like smoke after he had spoken. Behind him, an invisible sensor hung – Irknaan was doubtless watching.

“I am Rhalid,” Ortwin replied, nodding politely. His eyes darted quickly over those others present. A succubus – currently without wings, yet unmistakably demonic – although not a threat, given their

mind blanked state. Twelve knights, akin to Shupthul but lacking, Ortwin suspected, the magical gravity of their leader – whether in spells or enchanted items. And then he saw *her*.

Beautifulohgodssheissobeautifulihaventeverseen...don ’t look at her...

Shades seemed to flash around her, but in her face was *colour*. Koilimilou was untouched by the shadowstuff which invaded Afqithan, although she bore more than a hint of the demonic.

Ortwin tore his eyes away from her, after they had rested the merest fraction of a second too long. She stared impassively back at him.

“I am hunting,” Ortwin continued in a matter-of-fact way, his heart pounding silently. “I assume your master received my message? Would he care to join us?”

“It is customary to pay one’s respects to a lord, before one engages in a hunt on his land,” Shupthul said humorlessly.

“For which, I apologize,” Ortwin said, with what seemed like complete sincerity. “I suspect we became over-excited, and neglected to observe the customary niceties. Please

convey my deep regret for any offense I might have caused.” The Bard removed his diamond circlet, and casually offered it to Shupthul. “A token of good will to your King,” he said openly.

Under his hood, Mostin raised an eyebrow.

Shupthul said nothing, but gestured – causing Shomei to immediately ready a spell in preparation.

Instead, on his cue, one of the quicklings darted forwards to snatch the coronet, and delivered it to Shupthul’s hand within the space of a heartbeat.

Abruptly, the Captain switched into another language – full of grating sound and harsh syllables – and addressed Mostin. “What is your purpose?”

“That is no concern of yours,” Mostin replied, somewhat shocked at hearing the Abyssal Tongue, but maintaining his composure.

Ortwin swallowed. This was *not* supposed to happen.

“Who is your master?” Shupthul continued.

“That...” Mostin began.

But Ortwin quickly realized that if he let this line of inquiry continue, then Mostin would betray them –

although dishonest enough in his own mean way, the Alienist was not practiced in the art of subterfuge.

“SILENCE!” Ortwin screamed at Mostin, “how *dare* you speak? My apologies, Shupthul,” he continued in Sylvan, seeming to master himself, “but this demon is compacted to me. He may speak only with my approval, and currently I do not grant it.”

Shupthul sat silently. Ortwin hoped that the Captain was already developing a set of complex

misconceptions.

“Allow me to introduce the rest of my companions,” Ortwin continued nonchalantly, attempting to divert attention before more questions were asked about Mostin. “My consort, Iua; the witch, Aotheen,”

the Bard waved a dismissive hand towards Shomei; “my counsellor, Jhondrosokaur,” at which Nwm nodded gravely; “Munhulmurliom the Dour,” Ortwin remembered the name of an *awakened* oak tree that he had once encountered and randomly bestowed it upon Eadric; “and the demon Erizren. We are here to hunt, and although our arrival was not intentional, the quarry here present some interesting challenges.”

“Afqithan,” it was the female sidhe who spoke, the name rolling from her tongue and echoing in Ortwin’s mind. *Aaf-kee-thaan*. “This place is called Afqithan. Tell me, Duke Rhalid, does it strike you as an unusual coincidence – given your accidental arrival here – that of all the places that you might have appeared in this wide realm, by lucky happenstance your *gate* opened in the airs above King Irknaan’s fastness?” The words *duke* and *accidental* bore the slightest hint of irony.

“If it were coincidence,” Ortwin quickly dissembled, “then I would call it lucky.” His charm was effortless. “But our means of transportation is unconventional – we are drawn inexorably to existing portals and loci of power, siphoning a fraction of their energy in order to expedite translation. I can only assume that such a focus exists within your King’s walls?” It was a bold riposte, which elicited

another question.

“Indeed? I would be fascinated to inspect such a device, if it exists. Will you show it to me?”

“I regret that the power exists within Aotheen herself. It is a unique ability, the secret of which is, unfortunately, lost to posterity. She is the last of her kin.” Ortwin’s voice remained calm, with subtle overtones of condescension, as though he were patiently explaining a self-evident fact to an inquisitive child.

Inwardly, Eadric grimaced. They had just made contact with the Loquai, and already Ortwin had sown a convoluted web of lies which could only get worse as time went on. Behind his visor, the Paladin scanned the group of umbral feys and demons, looking for subtle cues and pointers to their motivation with regard to the interlopers.

The reek of taint which hung over them all was palpable. Shupthul was reticent and suspicious: the captain was a warrior who, no doubt, excelled in battle but – for a sidhe, at least – was relatively unpracticed in gauging the purposes of others. The woman was a different matter altogether, Eadric mused, and was opaque at best – although her inquiry regarding their imaginary means of

transportation was couched in terms which could not disguise a tell-tale preoccupation with matters arcane. The succubus was silent and utterly inscrutable, and Eadric wondered what her role was –

advisor, consort, spy, compactee – she could be any or all of those things. Eadric suspected that she was as focussed on penetrating their own motives as he was hers.

Shupthul spoke again, the merest hint of malice in his voice. “King Irknaan has issued instructions that you should attend him forthwith. We have been sent to escort you to his presence.”

*Sh*t*, Ortwin thought. He smiled graciously. “I regret that, at present, such a visit will be impossible, as today, I hunt. Perhaps in a day or two. My proposition stands, however: King Irknaan is most welcome to join us.”

“You misunderstand,” Shupthul said menacingly. “Afqithan’s King requires your presence. Your hunt must wait.”

“I...” The Bard began, but never finished.

Because Mostin, whether in a fit of paranoia, or anticipating an inevitable coming to blows, acted unilaterally, and made a decision which would change the way that the travellers related with the

inhabitants of Afqithan. To the others, it also demonstrated the power that an arcanist of Mostin’s stature could wield in Faerie or any of its orbiting demiplanes. He spat a number

of syllables out, prompting bows to be drawn or shot, and eliciting a desperate but ineffectual gesture in response from Koilimilou.

**

Ortwin experienced a strange sensation which lasted less than a fraction of a second – the merest flash in his mind. Shomei immediately recognized it for what it was – a temporal discontinuity in their

vicinity. After it had passed, there was a colossal discharge of magical energy, and the tapestry of reality threatened to rupture completely before it rewove itself. Echoes of Sonics hung in the air.

The three Jariliths, Shupthul, the Succubus and twenty-six of the thirty Hell-hounds had vanished: the Captain's empty armour and arms collapsed to the ground in a noisy rattle. Eleven of the Loquai had been petrified, along with six of their griffon mounts – some frozen with grotesque expressions of terror upon their faces. One other sidhe was dead from fear, and all but one of the remaining steeds had likewise been slain by a *phantasmal killer*. Each of the umbral quicklings had been reduced to a pulp by sonic attacks. The female sidhe sat upon a stone griffon with a vacant expression on her face.*

The last griffon attempted to flee with its petrified rider, along with the four hell-hounds. Mostin turned them into flounders, which flapped impotently in the air before suffocating.

Eadric gaped, a mixed expression of awe and horror on his face. Shomei looked mildly irritated and cast a *dimensional anchor* on Koilimilou. "Dammit, Mostin, was that really necessary? Ortwin can you restrain her? She might regain her senses at any moment."

The Bard and Iua both dashed forwards to bind and gag Koilimilou – the single remaining member of

Shupthul's party.

The Alienist's head swam, as the full impact of his actions dawned on him. He glimpsed a vision of his future self – effortlessly commanding that kind of power had a definite appeal. To the arcanist, Afqithan was like a heady wine, and Mostin had just tasted it for the first time.

Nwm was staggered. "Mostin, you just killed the ambassador. And his whole embassy, in fact."

"They would have attacked us," Mostin replied simply.

"You don't know that," Ortwin grumbled, expertly tying Koilimilou's hands behind her back, and pushing one of his gloves into her mouth. "Gods, Mostin. I concoct an elaborate ruse, and you go and petrify everyone."

Mostin sighed. "As the alternative was to submit to Shupthul's demands to accompany him to visit Irknaan, I fail to see what the problem is. Unless you would rather have been dragged off to the Loquai stronghold, to take our chances there. I have merely tipped the scales in our favour somewhat."

"Eadric?" Ortwin asked desperately.

The Paladin sighed. Unexpectedly, he came to the Alienist's defense. "Whilst I don't

necessarily agree with Mostin's methods, I have to admit that his reasoning is sound. It would have come to violence –

either here or later. They were jealous of our power and lustful of it. They bore only malice towards us, and the desire to exploit us for their own ends. And the stench of taint and corruption was almost overwhelming.”

“Bah!” Nwm snorted. “This is absurd. I mean, look at us. You're here because of some vendetta you've got with Graz'zt...”

Mostin winced as the name was spoken.

“Ortwin just thinks it's a big game,” Nwm continued, “and this crazy bastard,” he pointed at Mostin, whose kelvezu features seemed mildly offended at the insult, “wants to demonstrate to himself how

dangerous he's become. As if we didn't know already.”

“We are not in some *nice* sylvan glade in Nizkur,” Mostin said irritably. “Wake up! This is a *bad* place, Nwm. Many of the inhabitants are *bad*. You are letting your sympathies for feys dictate how you think we should act – and the Loquai are feys in name only. They are no less wicked, vile and irredeemable than Rurunoth, Feezuu or any one of a host of others we have dealt with.”

“And don't moralize with me you hypocritical sh*t,” Nwm hissed. “As far as *irredeemable* goes, might I remind you why we are here – ostensibly, at any rate. Does anyone recall Nehael? And Ed, if you're going to judge people on how much *lust for power* they possess, at least be consistent about it and start with Mostin.”

Eadric groaned. “The question again now is ‘what next?’ I hope someone has some ideas, because I'm fast running out.”

“Well, it would seem that any prospects of subtlety have been complicated by Mostin,” Nwm squinted.

“Are we waging war, now?”

“Frankly,” Eadric said, turning to the Bard, “I find open conflict less complex than your schemes, Ortwin. What do you suggest?”

Ortwin grinned despite himself. “We should offer an apology to Irknaan for the ‘minor misunderstanding.’ We should send our regards to him, and hope that this incident does not provoke a

‘diplomatic impasse.’ Obviously, we hope that he will still join us in hunting.”

Eadric opened his mouth in disbelief.

“I'm serious,” Ortwin continued, rapidly recovering his braggadocio after the incident. “It will demonstrate the contemptuous ease with which we can deal with Irknaan's henchmen.”

“He will throw everything that he's got at us,” Eadric said.

“Maybe,” Shomei replied. “But you are assuming that he will want to *remove* us. He is not

motivated

by some ‘honourable’ desire to avenge his retainers, nor is he saddened by their loss – except insofar as it undermines his own power. If he can see a way to harness us, it might be preferable to eliminating us

– from his perspective.” She retrieved her *dimensional shackles* from within her pack.

“Good idea,” Mostin said, as Shomei affixed the chains around Koilimilou’s wrists and ankles.

“I don’t know why you didn’t just kill her with the others,” Shomei grumbled. “Are you becoming sentimental for a pretty face in your old age, Mostin?”

The Alienist sniffed. “She is not one of the Loquai, but a Cambion Sidhe. I thought that she might provide an interesting perspective on things if questioned.”

“So you rendered her insane?”

“That is remediable.”

“Not without cost,” Shomei sighed. “Will you meet it?”

Mostin scowled. “I suppose I’ll have to.” His eyes scanned their captive.

“You’re not very subtle,” Ortwin jibed.

“I’m looking for magic, you dunce,” Mostin snapped. He removed Koilimilou’s belt pouch, and unclasped a pendant from around her neck which bore a single, trapezoidal stone of greyish colour. In the pouch was a small box, perhaps three inches on a side, engraved with indecipherable glyphs.

Hmmm. Mostin thought.

Koilimilou’s eyes suddenly gained a fresh clarity, and she struggled vainly in her shackles and tried to bite Mostin, before lapsing into a stupor again.

“An all-too brief moment of lucidity,” Nwm remarked drily.

Ortwin picked up his diamond coronet, blew dust – part of the desiccated remains of Shupthul – from the circlet, and set it jauntily on his head again. “Let’s send another message to Irknaan, and *then* go hunting.”

Eadric screwed up his face, and wondered if Afqithan’s taint was having a detrimental effect on certain of his friends.

**

In her sanctum of unlight, nestled deep within Throile, Soneillon meditated briefly before conjuring an obsidian thought-span of profound delicacy, and passing into the region of dreams. The name of

Shomei – revealed by the captured Erinyes – was still fresh in her mind. Further inquiries across several worlds had also yielded the names *Titivilus* and *Ahma* – amongst others – in association with the Infernalist: an interesting coincidence as, according to her spies, the Infernal Duke was currently present in Afqithan. Apparently the Breath of Oronthon kept acquaintances which were unusual for a holy warrior.

Eadric of Deorham, the *Ahma*. Who had already indirectly aided Soneillon in her struggle with Graz'zt

– her spies had indicated that it was he who was responsible for the removal of at least two balors. He was the sworn enemy of her greatest enemy. Certainly a potential friend – at least by demonic

standards. Soneillon idly wondered how he could be used to her advantage.

*Mostin's attack consisted of a *time stop*, empowered and maximized by the magical trait of the plane to 6 rounds of virtual time, during which he cast *haste*, a chained *flesh to stone*, a chained *phantasmal killer*, two *banishments* directed at the demons and hell-hounds, *disintegrations* targeting Shupthul and

the Succubus Iemazai, an *insanity* on Koilimilou, and various sonics. There were multiple redundancies in the spells – some of the Loquai were struck by both the *flesh to stone* and *phantasmal killer*.

Shupthul avoided petrification but was *disintegrated*. Koilimilou succumbed to *insanity*. The save DCs were 25+ spell level because of Mostin's augmented Intelligence, and even with the chained spells, most of the targets needed to roll 20s. Koilimilou initially attempted to counterspell the *time stop* with a *greater dispelling* she had readied, but failed.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 06-15-2003

Shomei had elected to *feblemind* the incoherent Koilimilou, in the event that one of her episodes of clarity returned: a glove stuffed into her mouth and a set of *dimensional shackles* might be proof against vocalized spells and interplanar escape, but did nothing to restrain the sidhe-cambion from using her arsenal of other powers and abilities.

Whilst watching approvingly, Ortwin idly considered where this creature stood in the grand cosmic

scheme. The sidhe were capable of reaching near-godlike power. According to Nwm, in the past, wars had routinely been fought between feys – led by the sidhe and their kin – and various pantheons of minor nature deities with their attendant spirits. This one was less than a goddess, but the gap between her and the mortal race might be larger than that between her and divinity. Feys were strange creatures, seemingly capable of infinitely more variety of manifestation than men. Just so much more interesting, really, Ortwin thought.

His expression changed to one of disappointment when he considered what she had been reduced to.

Ortwin wondered what her name was, how she ate, slept, sang, danced, laughed and fornicated. He

wondered what her temperament was like – the apathy of the sidhe would be offset by a powerful

demonic desire for satiation and experience. Probably a refined sense of the macabre. Intense eroticism.

Had she resisted or rejected the umbral taint, or succumbed only to certain aspects of it?

For a perverse instant, Ortwin felt more of a connection with the Cambion than he did with anyone else present.

The party briefly discussed the implications of the sensor which had observed Mostin's annihilation of Shupthul's party – exactly what it would have witnessed before it vanished, and what the observer

could have inferred from those that he could not directly see. As a precautionary measure, Shomei cast a *nondetection* upon Koilimilou – in the event that Irknaan attempted to later target her with another *scrying*. A *mind blank* would have been preferable, but neither the Infernalist nor Mostin were capable of casting the spell again that day, and Shomei was loath to draw on her bracelet's power until she had further knowledge of Irknaan's abilities.

After securing the most valuable items from the vanquished Loquai – including Shupthul's armour and bow – Koilimilou was trussed across Mostin's saddle. The delay in action – close to half an hour –

would prove decisive.

**

Irknaan – still in a state of concealed shock at the obliteration of his envoy – paced within his dark chambers, waiting for Nhura to return with whatever information she had gleaned about Rhalid and his party.

The King had briefly contemplated an immediate retaliatory demonic assault with those forces still available to him, but quickly dismissed the possibility. Unsupported succubi would be no match for the interlopers if they were *mind blanked*, and he had no doubt that they would make short work of Nhura's glabrezu cohorts – assuming that they chose to obey Irknaan at all. Their loyalty to him was, at best, questionable.

King Irknaan was, however, immensely powerful. If need drove him, and he had time to act, he could mobilize an impressive group of allies. When another *summoned* demon brought him an apologetic message regretting the misunderstanding, and hoping that the King could join Rhalid's party for a

future hunt, Irknaan squinted. If they meant him serious harm, surely they would have pressed on and attacked him in his fortress? What was their agenda? Obviously, they were overconfident, or stupid, or both. Did they think he was toothless? Irknaan snorted, and issued seven *sendings* in quick succession.

To King Samodoquol, Duke Ytryn and the Wyrms Crosod, he gave instructions not to fly to his demesne, but instead to pursue the rogue party of sidhe. Compacted demons, daemons, and demodands

in the service of the other Loquai nobility were also to be sent to Irknaan's fortress immediately. He recalled Lehurze from her diplomatic efforts with the Devils ensconced only a mile away. He instructed Nhura in straightforward terms to resolve her inquiries in Faerie as hastily as possible: *Be quick. We hunt*. He alerted Jetheeg – a lamia Sorceress of no mean ability – to the presence of the rival group and instructed her to track them down.

He dispatched the ten succubi who remained to locate them, and

sent dozens of umbral quicklings in pursuit – they were *not* to engage the enemy, but to bring back news if they were located. The demons were to coordinate their efforts and stay in contact every ten minutes. His last *sending* was directed towards Duke Murmuur and the Devils, asking if they would care to join Irknaan in a hunt in one hour.

The King descended into his summoning room, intent on calling yet more demons to aid him. It was

utterly black within, and the odour of musty tomes and incense hung in the claustrophobic air. Irknaan lit a single tall taper which emitted a greyish radiance, and purposefully strode to retrieve a book of forbidden names from a gloomy alcove. Suddenly, he was aware of another presence within the

chamber. It stretched and challenged his perception of the real, and evoked a mixed feeling of terror and awe: a consciousness that was dark, sinister, and worshipful. *Soneillon*, he thought. She was a void, who promised either power or annihilation.

“It would appear that my wards did not prohibit your entry,” he said without emotion.

“Your insouciance is tedious, Irknaan,” the Demoness responded, “and your comprehension of the current situation is feeble and ill-informed. Wheels turn, and you have no conception of them.”

“Perhaps you would care to elucidate,” the King replied laconically. “Who are these newcomers, and why are there Devils in my realm?”

“That information has a price.” She stepped forwards, and the intangibility which surrounded her evaporated. Her assumed form was supple, and her skin was possessed of a dusky, silken quality.

“And what would that be?”

“Throw in your lot wholesale with Rhyxali. I can promise you aid and protection from Graz’zt in your efforts. Instruct your forces to follow my lead and apprehend the sidhe who threaten you, then turn them over to me.”

Irknaan sneered. “You ask a great deal for a few tidbits of gossip. Since when did *Soneillon* act as a broker for Rhyxali? And what interest does this group hold for you?”

“They may be useful to me.”

“Then deal with them yourself, if it is not beyond you!” Irknaan snapped. “I have no interest in your wider schemes: do not embroil me in them.”

Soneillon smiled darkly. “It was *you* who contacted *me*, Irknaan. What did you expect? An exchange which cost you nothing?”

“Ten thousand souls is my offer.”

The Demoness threw back her head and laughed – a disturbingly genuine and heartfelt display of mirth.

“That is a trifling, Loquai, which I have no use for. Listen to me: Afqithan is less secure than you might think. You juggle two Abyssal magnates as your sponsors. Your subjects

are recalcitrant and

imperfectly subdued. And if Graz'zt discovers your duplicity, then you will find that the *gate* to Zelatar is no longer the boon that it has proven to be in the past."

"My grip is tight enough. And do not think to threaten me with passing news to Graz'zt – he despises you more than he mistrusts me. What does he care if, out of the five hundred worlds he lays claim to, the King of Afqithan entertains fiends who are not his own slaves? If you were to betray me to him, then I would willingly abase myself before him, for the chance to bring him your head on a spit. My offer stands – your aid would be welcomed, but only a fool would let this group fall into your hands without knowing more."

"I have no designs on your dismal little realm, Irknaan," Soneillon was becoming impatient, "but I recognize your potential as an ally. There is much that I can teach you. With my aid you could quickly

beat down any resistance that remains to your regime. I can ensure the permanent destruction of the *gate* to Azzagrat. Even if Graz'zt were to translate here himself with his most powerful servants –

which he would not – he would be hard pressed to assail you."

"I think you underestimate Ainhorr and his ilk."

Soneillon gave a wry smile. "And I think you are somewhat behind in events. Ainhorr's sword is shivered. Choeth, Djorm, Uruum and Rurunoth are no more. Only Irzho remains – and he is hiding.

Both from his peers' assassins and, I suspect, from Graz'zt himself."

"This was not known to me."

"They are not facts about which Graz'zt encourages speculation. His position is the most insecure that it has been since his return. His efforts at consolidation have received a serious setback – and you must know that you were not the only one of his thralls to seek new patronage in his absence." Her last words hung in the air temptingly – it was not a fact that Irknaan had previously considered. The Loquai were insular, at best.

Sensing doubt, Soneillon pressed on. "I can contrive a spell which would alert you to any incursions into your realm, Irknaan. No *gate* could open, no translation could occur into Afqithan without your knowledge. There could be no quiet assembly of demons poised to exact revenge on you. And as to

your compactees..."

Irknaan feigned disinterest.

"...I can ensure servants who are more powerful and more versatile than succubi – although I have enough of those to spare as well."

"I have no interest in Rhyxali's shades," Irknaan answered, "if you are indeed acting as a go-between."

"I am not. But she and I are on favourable terms – our spheres of interest do not overlap.

Not shadow demons. I have descended into the deepest abysm, Irknaan. There are things in the uncharted regions, whose names are long forgotten. They would be yours in blood and spirit. Even a balor would pause

and take thought before it confronted one – or would shrink from it in fear.”

Irknaan wavered.

“And you may keep Lehurze,” Soneillon added. “She is mine to give.”

The King scowled. From his perspective, at least, the succubus was already his. Still, a formal compact could do no harm.

Soneillon stepped forwards, and her very being seemed to flicker on the edge of consciousness, a dark vision, the existence of which Irknaan half doubted. “Irknaan, if Graz’zt falls, his wealth will be free to all comers. Ainhorr cannot hold Azzagrat, and neither can Kostchtchie.”

“Now you lie, even if you did not before.”

” No. ” Soneillon was emphatic. “I have perceived the burgeoning tendril of possibility. It must not be allowed to perish.”

“I have no faith in your auguries,” Irknaan said derisively. “Nonetheless, your argument deserves consideration. What aid would you give me? I do not speak of temporary allies. They must be

compacted, and they must be *mine*.”

“That is negotiable,” Soneillon smiled, content that she had won a victory. “But it will be enough. First, we must secure the weapon. Command your minions to help me restrain the sidhe who currently vex

you, and I will speak with them.”

“They have knowledge of this weapon?”

“They *are* the weapon. They are not what they appear to be.”

The King’s eyes narrowed. That much, he had already guessed. But now he also knew that Soneillon

feared to deal with them alone – that they *were* very dangerous – and that Graz’zt had not sent them to deal with him. Inwardly, he breathed a sigh of relief.

“Give me a sign of your commitment,” Irknaan said, “and I will consider your proposal.”

Before she left him, the Demoness gave Irknaan a single name – a token of her good will, she claimed, and the first of many to follow. He conjured the creature to whom it belonged, and when the King

ascended from his sanctum into his throne room, it accompanied him. Lehurze and an assortment of

other monsters waited for him.

The Succubus saw what towered behind Irknaan and smiled quietly: she knew that

Soneillon had come

and gone. Nhura's glabrezu cohorts were filled with doubt.

"Ready the hounds," Irknaan commanded.

**

The armour which Eadric wore was marvelously light – constructed of a Fae metal of unknown type. It barely inhibited his movement, and its smooth contours – at first glance a seamless, absorptive sable –

were, in fact, graven with exquisite cunning and subtlety. When the dim light caught it, shades of indigo and vermillion *almost* appeared, as if his mind wanted to perceive them, but his eyes would not cooperate. The casque which complemented the breastplate bore a crest which resembled some

primordial bird, and a half-visor, covering the eyes and upper face, was formed by the creature's

cradled wings.

Ortwin, flying next to the Paladin, eyed the armour jealously.

"You can have it, if you want," Eadric said openly.

"It is too restrictive," Ortwin grumbled.

"Not at all," Eadric replied.

"For *me* it would be too restrictive," Ortwin sighed. The Bard fell back and hovered alongside Nwm,

who sat awkwardly upon his ecalypse – the umbral steed moved with a disconcertingly smooth gait through the air.

"Haven't you found anything yet?" Ortwin asked excitedly.

"No."

"There must be something out there."

"I'm sure there probably is," Nwm said irritably. "Can't you be patient for once?"

"No," Ortwin replied. "Aren't there more chimerae? Manticores, maybe?"

"If you think that a single Redcap is worthy of your attention, then I can direct you to it. We are in a sparsely populated area. Frankly, Ortwin, I find your enthusiasm for hunting sentients – of whatever persuasion – rather distasteful. I have no particular moral compunctions, and I appreciate the need for the ruse to appear genuine, but do you really have to enjoy it quite so much?"

"Hunting is an agreeable pastime," the Bard retorted.

"Hunting *deer* is an agreeable pastime, Ortwin. Hunting umbral fiendish whatever-they-ares is tricky and – as we have already discovered – potentially lethal."

"Pah! This time, we're prepared. I've got more wards on me than I can count. And...."

Nwm closed his ears to the Bard's ramblings and focussed on his torc again, his perception stretching outwards, and sifting through the vast quantities of information which flooded his consciousness. Ten minutes passed. The Druid gave a quizzical look.

"...despite the fact that she was naked," Ortwin concluded. "What do you think, Nwm?"

"I think you did the right thing," Nwm replied. "By the way, there is a dragon around eight miles behind us. It is following us. It has probably caught our scent. It is heavily tainted – I suspect it is the

wyrm that Nufrut mentioned."

"Crosod," Mostin said. "Is he closing?"

"Oh, yes. He will reach us," Nwm made a quick calculation, and his jaw dropped, "in a little over four minutes."

"Is he *wind-walking*?" Ortwin asked.

"I don't think so," the Druid answered, somewhat amazed. "He is just flying...very fast. There is another..."

[Execration. Abomination. Anathema.]

Nwm shook, and resisted the urge to vomit. "There is something terrible with him."

"Should we turn and engage him?" Eadric asked. "Or try to flee? If Iua..."

"I cannot summon a wind to move us that fast," the Duelist replied.

But the blood drained from Nwm's face as his inner vision perceived demons manifesting ahead of

them and around them – they blinked in and out of his sight, successively *teleporting* to effortlessly pace the party, and remaining out of the reach of even their furthest-reaching spells.

"There is more bad news," Nwm said, and explained. "They are medium-order: probably succubi or vlocks."

Eadric immediately invoked a *zone of revelation*, and realities overlapped around them. To his partial relief, nothing was stalking them through the coexistent Shadow. At least, not yet.

"I don't like this at all," Mostin mumbled. "We should be ready to flee back to the Prime if necessary."

Shomei cast a *mass haste* and transformed herself into an erinyes devil, causing Eadric to splutter and

Ortwin to grin eagerly.

Nwm scowled. "Crosod is still closing."

Gheim squawked irritably. "How high up is he?"

"Only three hundred feet." Nwm answered.

"Well, I can't see him," the eagle muttered.

“Nor I,” Sem added. “He must be *invisible*”

“This is a trap,” Eadric groaned. “They are probably waiting for reinforcements.”

“They are coming,” Nwm said. “Goddess. What is *happening* out there?” Powerful extraplanar entities were manifesting across his psychic landscape.

“I suspect that they do not know that we know of their presence,” Shomei said. “We may still have something of an advantage. I will deal with the Dragon – it will even the odds somewhat. Mostin, for what I am about to do, I sincerely apologize.”

Drawing upon the power of the arcane bracelet that Jovol had bequeathed her, Shomei quickly opened two *gates*. Eadric clenched his teeth in trepidation.

Light flooded through. Two Solars appeared.

Mostin screamed at her. “No! Not again! Not you as well!”

“Do you know who I am?” Shomei asked the celestials.

“You are a devil,” one of them replied. “Why have you called us?”

“I am Shomei the Infernal. You cannot perceive my form because I am *mind blanked*. The sidhe with the winged helmet is Eadric of Deorham, the *Ahma*. Do you believe me?”

But Eadric had already reached out with his mind and reassured them.

“Do whatever he tells you to do,” Shomei instructed the celestials. She turned to the Alienist. “Be very sure that you know what you are doing if you open another *gate* Mostin. You know what I’m speaking of.”

Mostin gurgled incoherently.

“How far back is the Dragon, Nwm?” Shomei asked.

“Twelve thousand feet or so.”

She tested the direction of the wind and vanished, leaving her steed riderless.

A look of amazement still sat upon Eadric’s face at the Infernalist’s choice of allies. Catching it, and regaining his composure a little, Mostin spoke shakily.

“They are tools to her, Eadric. Nothing else.”

**

Crosod and Threxu, upon receiving Irknaan’s *sending*, had sped their way to the scene of Shupthul’s *disintegration* and Koilimilou’s capture. The Dragon had launched into a furious pursuit of ‘Rhalid’ and his party – his speed augmented by a spell, and rendered invulnerable to death magic and any elemental assault by the Wasted Nymph’s power.

Crosod had issued a *sending* of his own to Irknaan upon catching the party’s scent, and sneered in contempt when he received the return message:

Do not attack. I want them alive. Coordinate fully with the demons.

What game was the fool playing now? A sensor appeared nearby, and the Wyrms’ lidless eyes glistened with anger. As much as he resented the Loquai King, he was wise enough

not to defy him. Within a matter of seconds, ten succubi appeared in the air nearby. Lehurze was with them.

“Where is he?” Crosod growled.

“He is on his way,” Lehurze replied. “I have instructions for you.”

Resentfully, the dragon formed a series of mental bonds with all of those present and rendered them *invisible*. They *teleported* away and, within five minutes, visual contact had been made with the intruders. The succubi and the dragon – now in common telepathic rapport – acted with a frightening focus and purpose.*

Meanwhile, Irknaan cursed. Events were moving faster than he had anticipated: Nhura and the

remaining succubus, returning to Afqithan, had appeared over a hundred miles distant from his own

palace and eighty miles from where Crosod now tracked Rhalid’s party. It would take her nearly two hours to reach the area where events were unfolding, even if she magically sped her passage.

The king gritted his teeth. He needed her there, and the only way to accomplish it was to draw heavily on his own reservoir of power. He instructed the forty Loquai who accompanied him to return to the fortress: at their speed, they had no hope of intercepting the intruders now. Irknaan lamented the loss of Koilimilou and her *box of shadows* – now it would have proven most useful. Reality bent around him as he cast two powerful spells, and made his way first to Nhura and then returned with her to where the other fiends were assembling.**

When he arrived, as instructed, the creature that he had compacted less than an hour before was waiting for him.

Irknaan issued yet another *sending*: this time to Soneillon.

**

The erinyes appeared three hundred yards behind Crosod, down-wind of him, *invisible*, and out of the range of his blindsight.

Unfortunately, the dragon was also hidden from her mundane vision, and out of the range of her

perception – save for the gale and reek created by his passing.

Shomei opened another *gate*, exhausting her bracelet’s power. She waited nervously – somewhat longer than she was accustomed to. Finally, after what seemed an age – although it was less than five seconds

– another solar appeared.

“I am Zhorion,” the Cherub announced.

“I am not interested in your *name*, celestial,” Shomei said irascibly. “I have a task for you.”

The Solar ignored her. “Oronthon is curious why Shomei the Infernal has elected to open three *gates* to the Divine Sphere in less than a minute.”

Shomei gaped.

“And do not think to use your association with the *Ahma* as an excuse for *your* actions. Reciprocity is required.”

Shomei was flabbergasted. “I have no time for this,” she snapped. “You are under compulsion by both magical law and divine mandate!”

“When you return to Morne,” Zhorion continued, “you will seek out the *Sela*. He will instruct you in the correct application of the dialectic.”

“How can there be a ‘correct...’” She began. “Oh, forget it. I probably understand *saizhan* better than you ever will. Alright. Whatever. Just help me kill the damn dragon.”

Shomei sighed. Meaningful philosophical discourse with most solars was impossible. They were stubborn, unyielding and – ultimately – intellectually incapable.

She *teleported* two thousand feet ahead of where she suspected the dragon to be, and invoked an *effulgent epuration* – the silvery motes which hovered around her instantly betraying her location to Crosod’s remarkable eyesight. Shomei felt as though a gale was approaching as, *invisible*, he powered his way towards her at uncanny speed, and banked away before coming within range of her own

magical sight. As his head turned and he finally became visible, he discharged an immense gout of

corrupted acid and struck her with a *horrid wilting*. Simultaneously, from the slender shadow perched on his foreleg, yet another *wilting* struck her, and in the air palrethees demons began manifesting, *summoned* by both the Nymph and the Dragon. Evidently, Crosod was taking no chances. An *effulgent epuration* meant a very powerful spellcaster. He called mentally to the ten succubi with whom he was telepathically bonded.

*Sh*t*, Shomei thought. The acid burned her despite her diabolic resistance, and most of her *epuration* had already been denuded in the initial assault. She wondered wily if she had bitten off more than she could chew. She flew rapidly forwards, gripped her rod, and struck Crosod with a potent *enervation*: twice empowered, magnified through her rod, and then twisted and amplified yet further by Afqithan’s magical trait. He reeled under the assault, but still survived the *disintegration* which followed.

Succubi were beginning to manifest all around Shomei as Zhorion descended and engaged with Crosod

– a bright speck in the sky, dwarfed by the Dragon’s dark, titanic form, his slender brand flashing rapidly in his hands. Crosod screamed as the blade bit into him, and ichor poured from the wounds that the Solar delivered to his neck.

The Wurm’s head stayed firmly attached to his body, however, and he gave a hideous grin. He said

nothing, but brought his terrible will to bear upon the celestial.

A look of horrified fascination crossed Shomei’s face as, despite the palrethees who were

now around her and hacking with their flaming swords, she watched black fire first kindle, and then cascade over Zhorion.

The Solar, dignified by Oronthon's grace since before time began, perished in an unholy nimbus which consumed all trace of his existence. For the merest moment, the skies of Afqithan seemed to darken yet further, and swag with agony and wrath. Pain exploded over Shomei as Crosod thundered back towards her, calling forth an *acid storm*, heedless of his own *summoned* minions. Two *flame strikes*, evoked by Threxu, struck the Infernalist in series.

Before the succubi could descend upon her and tear her to pieces, Shomei *teleported* away.

She reappeared, burned and blasted, at the spot where she had left the others, only to find that the real battle was about to begin.

* Crosod used three castings of *Rary's telepathic bond* with the succubi, acting as 'anchor-man' in their efforts to pinpoint Ortwin and the others. The succubi made multiple *teleportations* until one located the party, the news was passed to Crosod, and the Dragon related it to the rest of the demonesses. One of them *teleported* back to Irknaan's fortress to inform the king of their exact whereabouts.

**Irknaan used two *limited wishes*: one to *teleport* to Nhura's location, and another to bring them both to the vicinity of Crosod. Neither Irknaan nor Nhura were capable of instantaneous transport using more 'conventional' means. Six more succubi, a palrethee, two vrock and a shator – compactees of the other Loquai nobility – had also now joined the pursuit. The shator – Ghuluk – was King Samodoquol's majordomo.

**This was another nasty combo. The *enervation* – quadruply empowered and maximized – resulted in nine negative levels for Crosod. Luckily (from his perspective) he made the subsequent saving throw against the triply heightened *disintegrate*.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 07-06-2003

"Have you determined where the leader is?" Eadric asked Nwm. The party were descending towards the ground.

The Druid nodded. "There is a clutch of extraplanars half a mile ahead of us. Some are very powerful, Ed. We might be well advised to retreat."

The Paladin gritted his teeth. They had come a long way, in order to merely run away at the first sign of serious resistance. He glanced briefly at the two solars who flanked him. Surely, nothing could

overcome them. They were safe, as long as the celestials were present.

As if in response, something dreadful flickered across Eadric's perception, and reality darkened for a moment. The celestial to his left, the solar Taruz, *communed* briefly, and then spoke directly into his mind.

Immeasurable grief. Zhorion destroyed.

Zhorion?

A third solar, conjured by Shomei

Eadric gaped. “Shomei. Is the dragon gone?”

“No,” Nwm replied, pointing backwards.

Far behind, but closing rapidly, Crosod’s vast and now-visible form thundered through the air.

Shomei reappeared. “Not good,” she said. “He’s too fast. Mostin, if you get a chance, hit him with a *disintegrate*. You might be luckier than I.”

“I have no intention of staying around,” Mostin answered. “I’m going to open a *gate* back to the Prime...”

“Wait,” Eadric interrupted. He gave a quizzical look as he received a *sending*.

One down, two to go. How many cherubs can the Ahma kill in one day? If you require arbitration, I am available. Titivilus.

“Titivilus just issued a *sending* to me.”

“Screw that,” Mostin said. “Are you ready?”

And everything became dark.

**

It was an impenetrable, cloying blackness of an altogether unnatural kind, stagnant and suffocating.

Everything seemed to drift listlessly, and sounds were muffled.

The *greater dispelling*, which then struck the party from an unknown source had a devastating effect.

The *mind blanks* which sat upon Iua, Eadric, Shomei and Nwm evaporated, the glamour upon Ortwin disappeared, and Mostin suddenly found himself vulnerable to death magic. A green ray struck him,

anchoring him and then another, targeting Shomei, also found its mark.

“Sh*t,” Mostin exclaimed.

“Nwm, do something,” Ortwin groaned, “I can’t see anything.”

“I see them,” Shomei announced. “There are two of them. Eighty yards. Two o’clock to you, Mostin.”

The darkness vanished abruptly as Taruz broke the spell which caused it. Mostin gasped as his vision returned and his magical sight rested on its source – a succubus, and a *something*, which seemed to

flicker on the edge of reality. Something which, partially at least, *was not*.

Mostin's mind reeled as he tried to absorb the paradox. Ortwin discharged a rapid volley of enervating magical arrows at the succubus, who lurched in the air.

The second solar, Pharanthe, was incanting under his breath, as Eadric turned his head to see a Loquai of unusual beauty flying towards him upon an umbral griffon of prodigious size. He was accompanied by a sinuous winged shadow which flew gracefully through the air – Irknaan and Nhura, no doubt,

Eadric mused.

Shomei screamed and desiccated into a wrinkled corpse as the party were overwhelmed by two

powerful *horrid wiltings*. Nightmares and ecalypses perished – through foresight, this time, the group were protected by magical flight. More wards collapsed as another *greater dispelling* ripped across them all and Ortwin – still fortunately *mind blanked* – shrugged off a *feeblemind* spell which would have otherwise utterly overwhelmed him. All around, succubi, palrethees, daemons and demodands

were manifesting – and there was another *something* which was partially non-existent. Drawing Shupthul's bow, the Paladin shot five arrows which burst into flame, thudding into the flank of the umbral lillend. She reeled in pain.

Mostin swore profusely, quickly erected a *wall of force* around them all, and opened a *gate*.

"Everybody get through," he screeched. "Nwm, you have to get this damned *anchor* off of me!"

The Druid glanced briefly at Shomei's body, and nodded. She could wait – they needed to get out of there, and quickly. "Get the rod and bracelet," he instructed Sem and Gheim. He quickly incanted a *greater dispelling* upon Mostin, but the *dimensional anchor* remained firmly in place.

Mostin swore. "Go!" He commanded. Nwm and Iua dashed through the *gate*, followed by the two eagles.

Inside of the protected area, another *gate* opened, conjured by the solar Pharanthe. A third solar stepped through. Mostin screamed again.

The *wall of force* shuddered briefly as a magical assault was absorbed, and several demons *teleported*

within its confines. Mostin raised an eyebrow as the barrier quickly dissipated when a subsequent *disintegrate* struck it. It was followed by a violated storm of sound which tore at the flesh of those present, and another *disintegrate*, which reduced Ortwin to his component atoms.

Iua screamed.

From within her protective void, Soneillon hissed. Lehurze was going *too far*. She would have strong words with her after this. If she had killed the *Ahma* by accident...*

Taruz shot a barrage of *fey slaying* arrows at Irknaan, who was closing rapidly on their position.

Several found their mark, but the Sidhe-King shook off their death magic, used a *limited wish* to shut the *gate* and pronounced a quick *dismissal*.

Two of the solars abruptly vanished.

Nhura's will rested upon Eadric and Mostin in succession, attempting to immobilize them both, but

failing to effect either. Palrethees hewed at both the Paladin and the Alienist as Mostin squawked at Eadric.

"Sh*t. Get close."

Shooting yet more darts at the Loquai king, Eadric moved towards Mostin, who shook his head, *plane shifted* Eadric, and invoked a *prismatic sphere*, encapsulating himself.

The protective bubble, scintillating with colour and power, hung motionless in the skies of Afqithan, thirty feet above the umbral canopy of its dense forest.

The remaining solar, Taruz, beset by demons, and upon the escape of Eadric, promptly vanished.

"Great." Mostin said.

Through the shifting colours of the sphere, demons could be seen moving outside. The wizard sighed, and wondered whether if, jointly, his enemies had the wherewithal to penetrate his defenses.

**

The *gate* opened in the courtyard of Kyrtil's Burh, at the base of the ivy-covered Steeple. Iua was shaking.

Nwm turned back to the portal, to see if anything else was coming through, but it abruptly dissolved.

"Ortwin..." Iua began.

"Will be fine," Nwm said. "He is merely experiencing a temporary disembodiment."

"When can you..."

"Tomorrow," Nwm answered. He scowled – around them, the devas appointed to guard the castle were gently alighting and manifesting. Their swords, rippling with flames, were already drawn.

"This is holy ground," one of them declared. "You should not be here."

Iua closed her eyes and clenched her jaw, and then breathed deeply for several seconds.

"Do *not* piss me off," she said.

*

Eadric appeared beneath an ancient beech-tree, the branches of which hung over a small stream which chattered over smooth pebbles. Around him, a forest, with its late summer

colours enhanced by the

dusk, was visible in all directions. He hardly felt as if he had moved.

The Paladin wondered where he was. Somewhere in Wyre, presumably. Hopefully.

He briefly contemplated the likely inaccuracy of Mostin's *plane shift*, and decided that, wherever he was, Nwm would find him before he himself could do anything positive about finding Nwm.

Eadric set down his shield, removed his arms, took off his helm, and, laying his sword across his knees, meditated.

*

Irknaan glowered in disgust as he flew his griffon around the *prismatic sphere* before descending to the forest floor. Several *summoned* fiends were vanishing back to their respective glooms, although the compactees – of whom there were nearly a score – remained hovering in the skies nearby.

Soneillon approached, and assumed a stable form. Nhura eyed her suspiciously.

“Can you penetrate it?” Irknaan asked.

“Not without more preparation,” the Demoness answered.

The king of the Loquai briefly considered his cloak – it might offer sufficient protection to enter. There again, it might not. And Irknaan was too old and cautious to test its powers to that extent.

“Then we have an impasse,” Irknaan observed. “The *dimensional anchor* will fail before the sphere does. Who do you suppose the kelvezu is?”

“Either Mostin the Metagnostic or Shomei the Infernal,” Soneillon answered. “I presume the former – I suspect that Shomei is dead.”

“And the Weapon?”

“It would seem that the Weapon has eluded us,” Soneillon remarked drily. Two of the palrethees approached with armfuls of items garnered from the treetops and forest floor – Ortwin's cloak, scimitar, bow and leather jerkin; and Shomei's pack, which contained a variety of fabulous items. Nhura

inspected them, and drew the scimitar from its scabbard.

“This is *Githla*,” she said. “The Azer Jodrumu forged it. It has a long history.”

“Even all of these items do not suffice as a weregild for Shupthul and the others,” Irknaan snapped.

“There is also a half-sidhe, strapped to a dead nightmare,” the Palrethee reported. “She still lives.”

Koilimilou, Irknaan smiled to himself.

“The celestials almost succeeded in a cascade**,” Nhura remarked. “More than three would have been a problem. This must not be allowed to happen again. Why is the *Ahma*

in Afqithan, and why is my spouse and King consorting with Soneillon?” Nhura’s quick mind and knowledge of obscure lore was rapidly piecing things together.

“It is a complex matter,” Soneillon purred.

“Then explain it, demoness,” Nhura hissed.

“The *Ahma* is in Afqithan in order to vex Graz’zt. He perceives Irknaan as a loyal subject of the Prince.

He may be beginning to understand that things are somewhat more convoluted than that.”

Nhura’s eyes quickly scanned all of those present as she spoke again. In her peripheral vision, the shadow of the wyrm was moving rapidly. Her mind raced, and she elected to take an enormous risk.

“Lady Soneillon, you would find me more tractable than my husband,” the Lillend said.

“Silence, bitch!” Irknaan screeched, as the full weight of his Will descended upon Nhura. Blood began to pour from her mouth, nostrils and ears, and the flesh began to peel from her.

Perceiving the truth of Nhura’s words, and without hesitation, Soneillon spoke two dreadful words which echoed across Afqithan. The outer shell of the *prismatic sphere* quivered in sympathetic vibration, as the magical lattice of the demiplane was stretched closer to its dilational limit.

Irknaan wailed as his cloak’s wards failed him. He burned rapidly into a black vapour, which was

carried away on a frigid wind.

The Demoness bent down, slowly picked up the dark mantle, threw it over Nhura, and fastened its

clasp about her neck.

“What will you do now, your Majesty?” Soneillon asked, half-amused.

“I think I will take a hunt to the Prime,” Nhura replied.

“For what purpose?” Soneillon asked.

“If you have concerns that the *Ahma* might be dead,” Nhura said, “you should put them aside. The sidhe who was *disintegrated* was not him – the sword of Eadric of Deorham is Lukarn, not Githla. I can deliver him to you. Demons are forbidden by the Interdict, but the Loquai are not. And neither is he,”

she pointed.

Crosod circled suspiciously at a distance of a thousand yards.

*

Mostin fidgeted uncomfortably within the *prismatic sphere*, unaware of the events which transpired beyond the rainbow which surrounded him. Apparently, his enemies lacked a *disjunction* or the correct combination of spells to bring the ward down.

After forty minutes, the *dimensional anchor* which had barred his own passage from Afqithan failed.

Mostin smiled ironically. He lacked sufficient remaining power to safely exit the demiplane. Gingerly, the Alienist thrust his head through the *prismatic sphere* before quickly retreating it back inside.

Demons. Lots of demons. Most were succubi, but some were very big, and dangerous. There were also a Shator, and two Nycadaemons. And a huge dragon.

Mostin swallowed. The sphere would last six more hours. Nearly two days in Prime Material

reckoning. He wondered nervously if his friends could organize a rescue in that time.

He fidgeted again. Not good. Not good.

The Alienist briefly considered using his Mirror to escape, but the thought of leaving it in Afqithan while he fled was too painful.

He gritted his teeth, *hasted* himself again, floated through the sphere, and *teleported* to a location one thousand miles to the west, where he appeared in a dark and very remote corner of the shadowy realm.

Mostin's heart pounded in his chest, and his eyes flitted around as he waited to see if a sensor would follow him.

He uttered a profanity. There it was. He had to go. There was no other way, or they would be on to him.

Space buckled around him, as Mostin invoked a *reality maelstrom* and was sucked through into another dimension.

It didn't matter which one, he idly considered, as long as it wasn't Afqithan.

*

Iua paced ceaselessly near Nwm's glade, as the Druid, who had resumed a form similar to his natural one, sat in silent reverie with the Green.

He was *infuriating* in the level of nonchalance that he was exhibiting.

"Get some sleep. Eat something." He had instructed. "There is nothing that I can do until dawn."

Dawn was ten hours away. Iua had scowled, and resumed her pacing. The sun set, the moon rose,

midnight passed her by, and in the small hours of the morning, the duelist was gripped by terrible fear.

Nwm remained sitting. Erect, composed, and absurdly serene – as mice scurried over him and

investigated his beard and hair.

As the first rays of the sun struck him, he mumbled for ten seconds, smiled and stood up.

“Well?” Iua asked.

“Eadric is in the forest of Nizkur. Mostin is southeast of here, over the ocean.” Nwm seemed somewhat surprised by his own words.

Iua gave a hopeful smile.

“Alright,” he sighed. He wondered if she would ever understand how much it would cost him.

Ortwin returned as a satyr – although not the *same* satyr. His hair was ruddier, and he seemed wilder and more unkempt. His grin was unmistakable, however.

“How was death?” Nwm asked.

“The same as last time,” Ortwin said easily. “Do you have a mirror?”

“Your weapons and equipment are lost,” Nwm remarked. “I think that you’d better try and adjust.”

Ortwin opened his mouth in horror.

*

When Shomei awoke, she screamed uncontrollably. Her form – although human and female – was unfamiliar. Nwm waited until the episode had passed before he spoke to her.

“I take it that death was an unpleasant experience?” The Druid asked.

She said nothing, but her face conveyed pain and trauma. She spent a moment inspecting the structure of her mind, noting the disposition of her higher valences.

“Nwm...” She began.

“You owe me,” he said.***

She nodded.

From under his cloak, the Druid produced her rod and bracelet.

“You *really* owe me,” he added.

Ortwin scowled. “I should have died first. Your birds might have grabbed my cloak and Githla. What happens now?”

“We find Ed and Mostin,” Nwm replied. “I know where they are. We simply have to retrieve them.”

The Druid turned to Shomei. “Can you get them here?” He asked.

“Not yet,” she answered. “I have a duplicate set of books at my home. I need to consult them. But I’m sure that Mostin is quite safe. He is very inventive.”

Nwm looked dubious.

**

Mostin found himself in a churning whirlpool as the *reality maelstrom* deposited him in the Plane of Elemental Water. He groped around blindly for a moment, flapped his arms in an attempt to escape the vortex, and eventually retrieved an *Ioun stone* from his belt and

set it spinning around his head.

His look of smug satisfaction was replaced by one of horror, as he glanced over his shoulder to observe three succubi, who had followed him *through* the maelstrom.

These demons are crazy, Mostin thought. Wearily, he *disintegrated* one of the demonesses and struck another with his last *sonic orb* – the latter spell was wholly unimpressive after the spectacular magical effects which Afqithan had bestowed.

Both remaining succubi attempted to *charm* him, and although he shrugged off their efforts, Mostin swallowed nervously. It was only a matter of time before his luck ran out.

The Alienist observed in fascination, as the *reality maelstrom* continued to suck random matter from Afqithan into the water around him: branches, stones and dirt drifted by.

Another succubus rode through the planar rift and appeared ten yards away. It was the one who had

disintegrated his previous *wall of force*.

Mostin cursed. He *summoned* three pseudomarids and instructed two of them to attack his assailants.

The third, he ordered to *plane shift* him back to the Prime.

Lehurze spoke, and the waters seemed to warp as a *power word, stun* overcame Mostin, rendering him insensible. The demoness activated her *cubic gate*, and Mostin's eyes widened in terror as a portal to Afqithan appeared. The two other succubi closed and attempted to grapple with him as he floated

impotently, whilst the summoned pseudoelementals struck at the demonesses.

Abruptly, the scene changed as the Alienist, together with the third pseudonatural genie, *plane shifted*.

Half of the world seemed to become salt water above him, and half of it was air below him. Mostin

bobbed upside-down in the water, stricken, at the interface of the two realms.

A minute passed, and the effects of Lehurze's powerful attack subsided. Gingerly, Mostin arose from out of the water and hovered above it. He dried himself with a *prestidigitation* and glanced around.

The ocean extended as far as he could see, in every direction.

Mostin quickly calculated the time differential between Afqithan and the Material Plane, and knew that it should be night-time in Wyre. He looked at the sun. It was mid morning. Apparently, he was over the Eastern Ocean, and Wyre was at least five thousand miles away.

Mostin sighed, and began to fly west.

*

Eadric was drawn from his trance abruptly as a mote of light dashed across his field of vision. He glanced up, to notice the waxing moon riding high in the sky above him.

He scowled, and calling upon the Eye of Palamabron which hung around his neck, his vision penetrated the shadows which lay about. Nearly a hundred grigs, pixies, buckawns, sprites and other diminutive feys – either of obscure or unique type – were arranged in a wide circle around him. They watched him suspiciously.

Eadric smiled. He was, of course, a sidhe – at least to casual inspection. His observers seemed nervous of that fact: to say that the coolest and most civilized of feys were *infrequent* visitors to the World of Men would have been a laughable understatement.

The Paladin cleared his throat, and called out. “I am no sidhe,” he assured them. “I am a mortal. My name is Eadric of Deorham.”

For several seconds, there was no response. Then a shrill voice piped forth. ” *Naheen nehaar eleel chellaath?* ”

“I regret that I cannot understand you,” Eadric admitted.

Noisy chattering followed for several minutes. Finally, a fat and singularly pompous-looking pixie fluttered forwards, attended by numerous moths of large size. When he spoke, his words ran together in an almost unintelligible stream, which Eadric found difficulty in understanding.

“It is most impolite to appear thus without invitation, and sit beneath the tree which is called *Nadholuridin*.”

“Should I have chosen another tree?” Eadric asked wily.

“You are most rude! Now you insult us with sarcastic comments.

We should make you dance until you drop dead from exhaustion !

You are fortunate that another has intervened on your behalf,

or you would feel our royal wrath descend upon you! Most gracious and kind and respectful he was, and therefore we are prepared to be lenient. But before you leave you will apologize to *Nadholuridin*,

for the imposition that you have subjected her to!”

Eadric scowled, and wondered who had ‘intervened on his behalf.’

The pixie raised his arm, and from somewhere behind him a tiny trumpet, more akin to a whistle than any other instrument, sounded forth.

A lone figure walked towards him from beneath the trees. His hair and beard were shaggy, and he wore a simple grey smock, drawn in loosely around his waist by a thin hemp rope.

Eadric gaped, and pressed his forehead to the earth.

Tramst, the *Sela*, touched him lightly on the shoulder, and the glamour which still sat upon the Paladin, hiding his true form, dissolved.

“And how are things with you, Eadric?” Tramst asked, smiling.

The *Ahma*, experiencing an upwelling of confusion, grief, and a sense of profound failure - mixed in unlikely measure with a feeling of complete safety in the presence of

Oronthon's proxy - wept
cathartically.

NOTES

*It seemed a reasonable tactic to use hit-point attrition – Eadric would probably be the last person standing, and the mages would get taken out first. Lehurze was still *geased* by Irknaan, and wasn't operating to Soneillon's complete satisfaction.

**A cascade occurs when a wizard or cleric *gates* a solar to a plane (usually the Prime), and it, in turn, opens more *gates*. The new arrivals open further *gates* etc. An uninterrupted cascade can be very quick and effective – there were more than three hundred celestials present at Khu within a minute of the initial *gate*. Half were Solars and Planetars.

'Cascade' is a technical term used by arcanists – most of whom view celestial descents as unwanted extraplanar meddling, in stark contrast to the 'wondrous miracle' that the pious experience.

***Nwm used a *true reincarnation* on both Ortwin and Shomei – there was no level loss associated with their deaths. Note that with the 9th level spell I simply allow the caster to choose the form that the new incarnation takes – fortunately, Nwm's player, Dave, is not prone to exploiting this power.

The spell spoken by Soneillon was *Be Not!*, an Epic Spell of her own contrivance:

Be Not!

Transmutation

Spellcraft DC: 36

Components: V

Casting Time: 1 action

Range: 300 feet

Target: One living creature

Duration: Instantaneous

Saving Throw: Fortitude partial

Spell Resistance: Yes

To Develop: Seeds: slay (DC 25); destroy (DC 29). Factors: decrease casting time to 1 action (+20

DC); increase spell's save DC by +20 (+40 DC); no somatic component (+2 DC); gain +20 bonus on

caster level check to overcome target's spell resistance (+40 DC). Mitigating factor: burn 10000 xp (-

100 DC), 20d6 backlash (-20 DC).

The caster utters a single, terrible phrase, destroying the target utterly and removing all

traces of it from existence unless it succeeds at a fortitude saving throw (DC 40 + relevant ability modifier.) If the target saving throw succeeds or it has more than 80 levels / hit dice, then it instead sustains 13d6 +20 points of damage. Note that even if the save is successful but the target is reduced to –10 or fewer hit points, its existence is similarly erased.

Other Notes:

1. It's worth mentioning that I knew that the party was heavily outmatched, and they should have guessed as much. They ought to have fled immediately, but they *dithered*.
2. I ruled that although Mostin was *dimensionally anchored* he could still cast spells which allowed interplanar travel – he simply couldn't travel that way himself.
3. The idea to use *summoned* creatures to *plane shift* came a little late for Mostin. He would have saved himself grief if he'd thought of it earlier. Hats off for inventiveness, though.
4. Soneillon's spell *Be Not!* is an example of exactly *why* she is so dangerous – and why Graz'zt fears her so much. Chthonic demons pay no XP cost for spells which normally require it – in Mostin's terms, her 'reservoir is limitless'. The 10,000XP burn becomes a standard mitigating factor. C.f.

Shattersoul

Transmutation

Spellcraft DC: 38

Components: V, S

Casting Time: 1 action

Range: 300 ft.

Target: One creature

Duration: Instantaneous

Saving Throw: Fortitude negates

Spell Resistance: Yes

To Develop: Seeds: Transform (DC 21), Transport (DC 27), Ward (DC 14). Factors: transform into

inanimate object (+10 DC); transform into seven components (ad hoc +30 DC); transport to extraplanar location (+2 DC); decrease casting time to 1 action (+20 DC); protect against *discern location* (+14

DC); increase saving throw DC by +10 (+20 DC). Mitigating Factors: burn 10,000 XP (-100 DC); 20d6

backlash (-20 DC).

Shattersoul instantly transforms a single creature into seven identical stone spheres of diminutive size unless it succeeds at a Fortitude saving throw (DC 30+ relevant modifier). The spheres are

approximately six inches in diameter.

Each stone is sent to a random planar destination, where it remains until recovered. Only upon recovery of all of the stones is any kind of restoration possible for the victim of a *shattersoul* spell. A *wish* or *miracle*, or an appropriate epic spell which uses the *transform* seed may then be used to restore the target of the *shattersoul*.

All of the seven spheres are protected by a ward which renders them impervious to efforts to discover their whereabouts by means of the *discern location* spell. Epic spells which use the *reveal* seed must succeed at an opposed caster level check in order to determine the location of each of the stone spheres.



Shattersoul bends the rules close to breaking point but, hey, I'm the DM

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 07-14-2003

The *Sela* and the *Ahma* sat beneath the beech-tree Nadholuridin deep within the Forest of

Nizkur.

Moonlight illuminated them both.

“Will you return?” Tramst asked. His question was simple and direct, and conveyed no sense of judgment.

“I don’t know,” Eadric replied.

“If you had died, would you have allowed Nwm the Preceptor to recall you?” The *Sela*’s question cut to the quick of another concern which had been nagging the Paladin. He had no doubt that Nwm would

have *reincarnated* both Ortwin and Shomei: an act which – according to Orthodoxy, at least – verged on necromancy of the most dubious kind.

“I don’t know,” Eadric replied honestly. “I am tired of continually weighing the means against the ends, and guessing which is the greater good, or the lesser evil.”

“Such is the weight of responsibility,” Tramst smiled.

“Before the assault, Titivilus issued me a *sending*. What was its purpose?”

“Devils seldom have uncomplicated reasons for their actions,” the *Sela* said cryptically.

“He offered to act as an arbiter – although for what dispute, I cannot guess.”

Tramst said nothing.

Eadric considered for a moment, before asking a different question altogether. “I am curious as to your actions regarding the feys here. They seemed to regard you in a favourable light.”

“I gave them honey-cake, and firewine, and a mechanical clock,” Tramst explained. “I also asked their permission to visit you here.”

“But that was not necessary. You are the *Sela*.”

“It was, nonetheless, polite,” Tramst replied.

“But had you said nothing, and merely appeared to me, they would never have known of your presence

– or mine.”

“That is likely,” the *Sela* nodded.

Eadric scowled. There was a paradox there somewhere, and a lesson to be learned from it.

“May I ask a philosophical question?” The Paladin ventured.

The *Sela*’s eyes twinkled. “If you really must,” he answered.

“Titivilus comprehends the dialectic which underpins the transmetaphysic of *saizhan*. Can he be said to possess insight? Or is compassion a necessary precursor to actualizing *saizhan*?”

“Your question is flawed, as it presupposes a difference between insight and compassion.”

“They are identical?”

“I will answer that with the standard fourfold negation.*”

Eadric laughed loudly – a sound that he realized had passed his lips too infrequently of late.

“Something is amusing?” Tramst asked.

“Forgive me, *Sela*, but getting a straight answer from you is harder than pulling teeth from a horse.”

“This has been pointed out to me,” Tramst nodded.

Eadric was silent for a moment, before asking another question. “Was there a specific reason that you chose to meet me now?”

“Merely to inform you that your actions have had consequences which you did not foresee. You do not exist in a vacuum.”

“Is that a warning?”

“In a manner of speaking.” Tramst replied. “Have you determined yet the purpose of your visit to Afqithan?”

“Not entirely,” Eadric confessed. “But without other positive options, it seemed the obvious thing to do.

What consequences do you refer to, *Sela*?”

“The challenging of Graz’zt’s hegemony in the realm.”

“I do not understand.”

“Irknaan is dead, Eadric. And even before he died, he wavered. There will be much uncertainty as a new Queen asserts her dominion.”

The Paladin looked astonished. “Did Mostin kill him?”

“No. Irknaan was slain by the demoness Soneillon, around two hours ago.”

The void, Eadric immediately knew. “She was Graz’zt’s concubine. We had considered Throile as a possible target. And she is now Queen there?”

“No. Soneillon has no interest in Afqithan – other than as a stick with which to taunt Graz’zt. She has a great interest in *you*, however. She perceives you as a vehicle through which Graz’zt’s downfall may be accomplished.”

Eadric shifted uncomfortably.

“If you were to ally yourself to her,” Tramst continued, “then no doubt it could be accomplished.”

“Are you recommending this course of action, *Sela*?” Eadric inquired uneasily.

“By no means,” Tramst answered. “I am merely informing you of things as they are. You have condemned Graz’zt to death. You have vowed to release Nehael. You are dispensing Oronthon’s justice

– *my* justice, if you will – as you have determined appropriate and necessary. You may have to confront this choice.”

The Paladin clenched his jaw in frustration.

“Do you resent the lack of direction that I offer you, Eadric?” The *Sela* asked.

Eadric hesitated.

Tramst struck him soundly in the face. “You cannot offend me with what you feel, *Ahma*.”

“I apologize,” Eadric said, nodding. His lip bled freely.

After a period of silence, the Paladin spoke again. “The Queen of whom you spoke – is it Nhura, or one of Soneillon’s puppets?”

“I think that is not yet settled,” Tramst responded. “There are several candidates. Nhura bears the title for the meantime.” He stretched, and abruptly changed the topic. “You are not the only reason I am

here, Eadric. Another is due to arrive in a few hours. Which leaves us time to make some corrections.”

Eadric looked quizzical.

” *Ahma*, your meditation posture is terrible.”

“Ahh,” Eadric said.

**

Mostin sat wrapped in his *robe of eyes* by a small fire near Nwm’s glade in the warm sunlight. He sneezed.

By the time that Shomei and the Druid had *wind walked* to her mansion, and the Infernalist had consulted her books and *teleported* to the Alienist’s location, Mostin’s *fly* spell had long since expired.

He had been floating in the water, disconsolate, and drained of magic to an extent that he hadn’t

experienced in years.

“You should’ve asked the Marid to deposit you in a less inconvenient place,” Ortwin observed whilst toasting a thick slice of bread.

“It was not the first thing on my mind,” Mostin grumbled. “And I think you should put some clothes on. Your naked caprine form is less than agreeable to my current sensibilities. At least throw a cloak over yourself.”

Ortwin’s hand suffered a brief spasm, and he dropped his toast into the fire.

“I have to get my gear back,” the Satyr wailed.

“That could prove difficult,” Nwm said dryly. “As without your gear, it will not be easy to retrieve your gear, so to speak.”

“And my dowry,” Ortwin whined.

” *Our* dowry,” Iua sighed. “Mostin, we have Shupthul’s weapon – can you transform it into a scimitar?”

“I suppose so,” the Alienist replied. “If we go back, we need to carefully consider our tactics, however.

They were less than successful. I would guess that we are outmatched by two to one at least in

spellpower. There isn’t even any opportunity to close and engage with them in combat. But we *can* do this – given the chance to prepare. I am thinking that the strategic use of *antimagic* may be the answer.

In which case, *no* weapon which is dweomered would be useful – and a *polymorphed* weapon would be worse than useless.”

“To willingly have my spellcasting stymied thus is a daunting prospect,” Nwm said sceptically. “I’m hardly an expert combatant.”

“I am talking of the *skillful* use of antimagic, not a wholesale or blanket application,” Mostin chided.

“And I think that you would be better off unhindered. I had much time to consider this during my sojourn in the Eastern Ocean – watching fish becomes rather tedious after a while. One of us – either Shomei or I – would effectively act as a mobile protection device. We would be vulnerable to physical assault – all wards would be nonfunctioning. But this is somehow preferable to multiple *greater dispellings*, *horrid wiltings*, *destructions* and *power words*. Nwm and the other mage would remain outside of the field – and warded to a truly absurd degree – bear in mind that whoever was acting as the *antimagic* focus would have plenty of protective spells to lavish on those outside of the field.”

“We have yet to witness the Loquai in physical combat,” Nwm pointed out. “How effective are they likely to be?”

“If they are like the sidhe in general, then probably very adept. Also, probably *no* match for Eadric, Ortwin or I,” Iua grinned. “I like this plan, Mostin.”

“I advocate a full assault,” the Alienist announced. Buoyed by Iua’s support, he was beginning to get carried away. “We *scry* Irknaan’s castle, *summon*, *bind* and *gate* a veritable army of extraplanar help.

We use the Mirror to access a point outside of the stronghold. I blow a hole in the wall with a *great*

shout, send in the footsoldiers, and erect an *antimagic field*. We charge in, kill everything inside, and it’s all over with.”

Ortwin turned to look at Nwm, and raised his eyebrows.

The Druid shrugged. “Why not? Hell, we’ve tried subtlety and guile. We’ve tried a magical

confrontation. What’s left?”

**

It was mid morning. Tramst clicked his fingers and pointed at the sensor.

“I do not see it,” Eadric sighed.

“It requires considerable practice. It is there, however.”

Seconds later, there was a displacement of air, and a single figure arrived. Eadric’s mind suffered a cognitive dissonance as Shomei manifested. The Eye of Palamabron showed her true body – a youthful and fair-skinned woman – whereas his own eyesight revealed the figure that he was familiar with. As always, she bore her rod.

Suspiciously, the Infernalist looked at Tramst and readied a spell. “Who are you? Why did I not perceive you?” Shomei’s *arcane sight* began to scrutinize the *Sela*’s form.

Eadric was about to say something, but Tramst raised his hand in a gesture which said *let her continue*.

“You are Oronthon’s Proxy,” Shomei said presently. Her head was spinning, and her heart was pounding hard within her chest. Her calm façade seemed stretched and shaky. She erected a *mind blank* almost instinctively.

“You are correct,” Tramst smiled.

“Your form is disarmingly unprepossessing,” Shomei continued, regaining her composure somewhat.

“Would you prefer my *ahmasaljan***?” The *Sela* inquired.

“NO!” Shomei said unequivocally.

“You fear me.”

“I mistrust what you represent,” the Infernalist replied.

“I think you misunderstand what I represent,” Tramst countered.

“I do not seek redemption, whether you dress it in dialectic clothes or no.”

“I do not offer it,” the *Sela* said easily. “You are an Infernalist. I attach no moral significance to your chosen path. I can help you perfect your technique. Hone your spirit. Discipline your Will.”

“Your attempt at expediency does not move me.”

“Shomei,” Tramst smiled, “if I were to be truly expedient with you, do you think you would know it?”***

“I don’t know. Would *you* know it?” Shomei replied wily.

” *Saizho*,” the *Sela* said, bowing.

“You bastard,” Shomei sighed, as reality shifted.

“Your contract with Zhorion is fulfilled,” Tramst pointed out.

Shomei cocked her head. “I neither sought you out, nor have I received instruction.”

“You have demonstrated the Truth to yourself. What else can I teach you?”

The Infernalist gaped. “That is absurd. Nothing is that easy.”

Tramst smiled sadly. “Yes, Shomei. It is that easy. Have you already forgotten, although it

was only seconds ago? It will elude you as you reach out to grasp it again. And therein lies the tragedy.”

Shomei swallowed, and scowled.

Tramst reached down, and picked a buttercup from near the base of the beech-tree. He pressed it into the palm of her hand.

Her world shattered into a billion fragments and reformed in an instant.

“You are not what I expected,” she said.

Eadric wondered why it was that, for him, the *Sela* had made things so difficult, but for Shomei – who consorted with the unholyest of creatures – he had freely offered bliss and a vision of the Absolute.

He experienced a moment of impossible irony.

**

Nufrut’s disembodied face squinted at Eadric and Mostin from inside her transparent adamantine

prison. The Eye of Palamabron illuminated her.

“I require information regarding the demoness Soneillon,” Eadric stated.

“Mendacity would be pointless,” Mostin added smugly.

“What do you wish to know?” Nufrut sighed.

“Her power relative to the Prince of Azzagrat,” Mostin began, “both personal, and with regard to their respective subjects and thralls. The disposition of her servants in Throile. Her *modi operandorum*. Her motivations – beyond merely irking her former consort. Possible weaknesses which may be exploited.

And her ontological status, which is a matter of some interest to me personally – from a purely

academic perspective.”

“This may take some while,” Nufrut grumbled.

“Be as swift as you may,” Eadric said acidly.

“Power is a difficult thing to measure when one speaks of Abyssal dignitaries,” Nufrut replied.

“Absolutes are impossible to determine.”

“Is she always this forthcoming?” Eadric asked Mostin, drily.

“Invariably,” Mostin nodded.

“Perhaps we should make a translation to the vestibule of Oronthon’s Heaven,” Eadric suggested. “The Archons might have an easier time of persuading her to talk.”

Mostin shook his head. “That is a journey I would prefer not to undertake. I can easily open a *gate* to allow you access, however.”

“That will not be necessary,” Nufrut interrupted. “I will try to formulate answers which are meaningful to your limited mortal perspectives.”

“That is all we require,” Eadric smiled. “Proceed.”

“Soneillon’s sorcerous power is, in some regards, greater than that of Graz’zt,” Nufrut reluctantly admitted.

Mostin inhaled sharply. “I think that statement requires some explanation.”

“She is touched by infinite nothingness,” Nufrut snapped. The subject was one which evidently disturbed even her. “She is Demogorgon’s spawn. A scion of Cheshne. She has entered oblivion, and returned from it.”

Eadric blanched. The name of the Ancient was anathema. A taboo which none violated.

“I am speaking figuratively, of course,” Nufrut added. “The wellspring of her power has no bounds – it is limited only by her own capacity to understand it.”

“That is impossible,” Mostin grunted.

“As you wish,” Nufrut replied.

“Do not patronize me, Nufrut. Certain laws are inviolable within the bounded cosmos.”

“If so, then this is not one of them,” Nufrut said caustically.

“She does not lie,” Eadric sighed.

“And it is borne out by your suspicions regarding her partial nonexistence,” Nufrut continued. “I assume that was the reason for your inquiry about her ontic status?”

Mostin nodded wryly.

“I am somewhat confused,” Eadric admitted.

“Soneillon has been to the bottom of the Abyss, and returned,” Mostin explained. “She has tasted unbeing.”

“The Abyss has no bottom, Mostin.”

“My point exactly,” Mostin replied.

“Hmph!” Eadric turned his attention back to the Demoness. “Please continue, Nufrut.”

“Soneillon maintains few servants of any power – most of her closest attendants are succubi, and a handful of these are favoured and have learned sorcery from her.”

“Such as the other who assailed us?” Mostin asked.

“As I was secure within your *portable hole*, I cannot answer this question with certainty.”

“Names,” Mostin demanded.

“Adyell, Helitihai, Orychne, Chaya,” Nufrut replied. “Others of less note. No doubt also others, who are wholly unknown.”

“I was struck by a *power word*, *stun* and a violated sonic *acid storm*,” Mostin explained. “Who might that be?”

“Probably none of those four,” Nufrut smiled wickedly.

“You are most vexatious,” Mostin said irritably. “Would you care to speculate who might have access to such spells?”

“Many of Soneillon’s former protégés have found positions in the courts of other demonic nobles.

Many have also managed to keep their tutelage under her secret. It is hard to say.”

“There was another demon who, like her, existed on the threshold on nonbeing. Who was that?”

“I do not know,” Nufrut scowled. “There are others who have descended, and returned, but most of their names are not known to me.”

“But some are,” Mostin pointed out. “Be so kind as to share those you *do* know.”

“I am loath to speak their names,” Nufrut groaned.

“And I am anxious to hear them!” Mostin retorted. “And a brief description, if you please.”

“Seven only are known to me.”

“Speak!” The Alienist demanded.

So Nufrut spat their names out: *Saduch* and *Tavael* – shadow demons; *Xanoriz* – a glabrezu; *Tiqa* – a succubus, like Soneillon herself, but of less power than the Mistress of Throile; *Iarathym* – a babau; *Arhuz* – a nalfeshnee of tremendous power, who dwelt five hundred circles from Azzagrat in a palace of slime; and *Carasch*.

“Carasch?” Mostin inquired.

“A balor. Once. Perhaps a deva before that? Who can remember that far back anymore?” There was a hint of melancholy in her voice.

“Could it be him?” The Alienist asked nervously.

Nufrut laughed harshly. “You fool! Carasch, subordinate himself to any other? How little you know, Mostin. Graz’zt and all his minions would flee before him. Yea, *Ahma*, maybe even Enitharmon himself would think twice before challenging him. No, Mostin, it was not Carasch – or you would all be dead, and Afqithan itself might be no more.”

Mostin sniffed. “I find it hard to believe that an entity of such power exists and I have never heard of him.”

“You know *nothing*,” Nufrut sneered. “And I know but little in comparison to others,” she added wily.

“Soneillon herself is well versed in the nature and disposition of more exotic Abyssal denizens. Pazuzu knows more than any other...”

“Return to the topic at hand if you would,” Eadric interjected. “We do not have time for your random musings, Nufrut, although no doubt they are interesting.”

“Soneillon is a dreamer, and a seductress without peer,” the Demoness continued. “Her

schemes and motivations are as impenetrable as the darkness which surrounds her when she wills it – no, Mostin, I do not dissemble. She is most enigmatic.”

“And weaknesses?” Eadric inquired.

“None that I know of,” Nufrut answered. “But if she has marked you, *Ahma*, then your life is about to become *very* complicated.”

Eadric sighed. As if it wasn’t already.

*i.e. insight and compassion are neither identical, nor different, nor both identical and different, nor neither identical nor different.

** ‘Spiritual essence,’ ‘indwelling spirit’ or ‘perfect body.’ Normally perceivable only through the divine version of *true seeing* or similar magic.

***I think I may have touched on this before, but it is quite normal for Ascended Masters – and by extension the *Sela* – to dispense wisdom according to the understanding of those who hear it. Less enlightened souls might misconstrue this as an economy of truth, or even outright lies.

It is important to clarify exactly what happened in the exchange between Tramst and Shomei, as it is easily misunderstood:

Saizho means ‘I see’ (not ‘you see’ which is *saizha* – and may be either present tense or imperative).

Tramst is in no way ‘bestowing’ or ‘forcing’ a moment of insight or enlightenment upon Shomei.

Shomei’s question ‘Would you know it?’ (i.e. would the *teacher* know if he were being expedient) stimulates an insight in the *Sela*. According to *Saizhan*, ultimately there is no ‘you’ that knows, and there is no knowing – there is only direct, unmediated experience of the Truth. True expediency cannot be conscious or premeditated, it must arise spontaneously and instinctively.

It is typical of the *Sela*’s teaching style that he will gracefully acknowledge an insight provided by someone else – usually a student – also implying that he, himself still has much to learn in the process.

This is, however, a spiritual lesson in itself – doubly so in the case of Shomei: the ‘Adversarial’

philosophy endorsed by Shomei (and Mostin, although in a different way) is based on *infinite*

becoming and perpetual self-transcendence. By accepting an insight provided by Shomei, the *Sela* implicitly endorses the validity of the Infernalist’s philosophy and pays homage to *her* holiness and perfection, but at the same time asserts his own spiritual authority.

The paradox which results is a perfect expression of the dialectic of *Saizhan*: Shomei’s mind no longer has anything tangible upon which it can find purchase. Inevitably, she experiences *Saizhan*, but brought about by her own words, not by those of Tramst.

When Shomei realizes this, she says ‘You bastard.’ It would seem that Shomei has

somehow

maneuvered herself into a glimpse of the Truth. Thus, Tramst *has* been expedient, because he has been effective. Moreover, he has done so spontaneously, instinctively and without effort.

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After Mostin and Eadric had quizzed Nufnut, the Paladin related the news conveyed to him by Tramst in full. A bitter argument ensued.

“There is no *need* for us to return,” Nwm sighed. “It would serve no purpose. We have – in a

roundabout way – succeeded in what we set out to do. Irknaan is dead. The Demon’s precarious hold on the demiplane is compromised. *We have vexed him*. When we initially spoke of this, the plan was to assail him on as many fronts as we could. We should change tack accordingly now.”

“My gear remains in Afqithan,” Ortwin snapped.

“Forget your gear,” Nwm replied unsympathetically. “Live with it – you *are* alive, if you would notice.

Goddess, you’re a selfish bastard, Ortwin.”

“But we have already formulated a plan,” the Satyr continued, ignoring the insult. ” *We can do this. It will work.* ”

“It would be an unnecessary waste of time and effort,” Nwm retorted. “What would we gain? Eadric?”

“I don’t know,” Eadric admitted.

“Pah!” Nwm snorted. “This is absurd. Why Afqithan? *What’s the point?* ”

“It is some kind of key,” Eadric replied.

Nwm looked exasperated. “Why? Have you had some kind of revelation?”

“No.”

The Druid closed his eyes, and clenched his fists. “I have humoured you thus far, Eadric, but you need to seriously reappraise. Genuine visions I can accept, but some vague feeling is *not* sufficient.”

“I trust vague feelings more than divinely inspired visions,” Mostin said unhelpfully.

“I’m not suggesting that is *the* key,” Eadric said. “But perhaps it is *a* key. Or perhaps we can turn it into one. There is the *gate* to Azzagrat...”

“Which opens both ways, I might remind you. And it is periodic – who knows what else has walked

through it since we were last there.”

“Soneillon.” Eadric said again. “She is pivotal – or could be, if we allowed her to be. She lusts after the fall of the Lord of Azzagrat more than anything else.”

“Do not presume to understand the motives of demons,” Shomei warned. “Especially one such as her. If you use her as a tool – if you use *each other* I should say – then she will exact a price which may surprise you at a later time.”

“Do you then intend to strike a bargain with Soneillon?” Ortwin asked.

“I don’t know. Titivilus offered to act as an arbiter – maybe for this purpose. Perhaps opening some kind of dialogue...”

“For me to regard something as questionable means that it must be *very* questionable,” Ortwin said sardonically. “But I suspect that this is one barrel of maggots that you do *not* want to open.”

Overcome by a sudden wave of irony, Nwm guffawed. “Eadric of Deorham purposes to compact with a Demon Queen? Ah, the world has changed. And maybe not for the better.”

“There is opportunity, here,” Eadric replied patiently. “And I am in the unfortunate position of having to decide the least evil.”

“Do you have that authority?” Nwm countered. “Or sufficient information?”

“Yes, and no,” the Paladin answered with a wry smile. “That is my lot. I am resigned to it. Things will unfold according to Oronthon’s will, irrespective of my actions.”

“That is a depressing fatalism,” Nwm groaned.

“Not so,” Shomei unexpectedly came to Eadric’s defense. “To exert individual will and to submit to destiny need not be mutually exclusive perspectives. This is well established.”

“Shomei, your philosophical sophistry is irrelevant to me,” Nwm replied. “Your world-view is under assault. You are confused, and your intellect is trying to grasp at dialectical straws.”

The Infernalist looked mildly offended, opened her mouth to say something, thought better of it, and clamped it shut again.

“Through sustained application of Will, we can force a confluence of events to occur in Afqithan,”

Mostin nodded. “We cannot control it, however. It may backfire. There are too many variables. We lack Jovol’s prescience.”

Shomei raised her eyebrows. “Your euphemism is transparent, Mostin. You are too anxious to unleash the Pseudonatural Horror.”

“I am not *that* anxious,” Mostin said. “Or I would have done so already.”

“I still do not understand what this *thing* is, of which you speak,” Eadric sighed.

“It is the creature which slew Vhorzhe – in all likelihood,” Shomei answered. “And probably other adepts who thought they could control it.”

“The Horror,” Mostin nodded eagerly. “The *gate*. Titivilus. Soneillon. The Prince. The Spell – which I am close to capable of casting.”

“Although not alone,” Shomei pointed out. “And enlisting a cabal will be far harder than speaking the incantation.”

Mostin shrugged. “We are going in circles. I have some possible solutions, if any of you have the stomach to hear them: bear with me before you shoot me down. First, Soneillon: I can *bind* her, although I doubt I can hold her for long. Second, the *gate*: we can use it, or seal it with a *disjunction*.

Third, Mulissu: it may be that she has made progress in interpreting Jovol’s *web of motes* – it may give us an idea on how to proceed which we have not previously considered. Fourth, the Pseudonatural: I can likewise *bind* it, and probably not hold it. Fifth, and I am loath to even suggest it: Shomei – or even I, for that matter – could enlist celestial support.”

“There will be no cascade in Afqithan,” Shomei said simply. “Tramst made that clear to me before I left him – this is no concern of the Host. And I have worries on that count which I haven’t yet voiced: there is no doubt that – irrespective of Nhura’s current inclinations – news of a celestial presence in the demiplane has already been reported to Graz’zt. Information such as that has a habit of spreading quickly.”

“But would he have suspected who caused it?” Eadric asked.

“Perhaps not,” Shomei conceded, “but the Prince is supremely paranoid, as I have said before. News of Irknaan’s death has probably reached him already. Who can guess the loyalty of the other Loquai?”

“We need information,” Nwm sighed. “And we need it badly. Things are finely balanced. Factions are forming faster than we can apprehend them. They change before we have a chance to begin to

understand them. There is too much flux.”

“We are dealing with *demons* and their allies,” Mostin said. “What do you expect? Our own presence has skewed events rapidly.”

“Everything in Afqithan seemed relatively stable before we arrived,” Nwm said laconically.

“Chaos and inertia have a great deal in common,” Shomei smiled.

“Then we should take one more day,” Eadric said grimly. “One more day, before we decide to act – and then ten hours or so will have passed in Afqithan since our flight. As Nwm says, we need information –

to garner as much as we can. And when we do act, it needs to be *decisive*. No more vacillation. Mostin, you are the Diviner – the onus lies on you. Can you contact Mulissu?”

The Alienist nodded. “I have yet to prepare my spells. But I had determined to make a *metagnostic inquiry* before anything else. This will involve a translation.”

“How long will it take?” The Paladin asked.

“Exactly no time at all,” Mostin replied. “I will go to the Far Realm.”

Beyond the glooms created by an uncounted number of fears – the terrors which lurked in

the recesses of human souls, the darkest imaginings of demonic lust, and the nightmares of creatures which bore no shape or name – Soneillon dreamed a dream.

Annihilation, the threat of unbeing, the primeval void in which all meaning ceased, held no mystery for her. She was it, and it was she. From the blank tablet of unmanifest reality, the succubus drew forth a tendril of possibility. Fashioned by her dark spirit – which had, by the dubious virtue of sheer force of will, survived or transcended the insurmountable necessity of ontological cohesion – a shadowy

phantasy began to coalesce.

She strove to give it form and meaning, to imbue it with qualities which marked it as real. Madness and meaninglessness flowed away. The numinous slowly subsided, and became the phenomenal. A vision

of trees, of sky, of streams, animals, birds and men assumed tangibility. A small castle, with

whitewashed walls, ivy-clad and perched upon a rocky knoll.

Paradox rapidly spiralled into infinity, and potentiality shrank to a single point in space and time. The interstices snapped, and unbeing retreated.

Soneillon stood in dappled sunlight, clad in flesh and blood. Nearby, an ancient oak-tree stood. The demoness glanced at Kyrtil's Burh, erected a ward around herself, and assumed a pleasing form.

Soneillon smiled. She smiled at the hopeless lot of mortals, like pigs who were destined for slaughter.

She smiled at the pathos which she perceived in Graz'zt: his interminable wheedling and plotting and conniving for the slightest of transient gains. She smiled at Wyre, and its magical Law, embodied in the Claviger and its servant Gihaahia – in the full knowledge that she herself needed no agent to bring here there and, thus, no infraction had occurred. And she smiled at Oronthon, and the Celestial Host, and their Interdict against the millions that had rebelled before time began.

Once, she had been one of them. But no longer. Her paradigm had shifted. Unreality was hers, and she made her own laws now.

**

The creature interrogated by Mostin was a writhing mass of matter which would have defied all

attempts at classification, had the Alienist been inclined to attempt to categorize it. Two things only concerned him: it was of the lower order, and thus unlikely to resist his compulsion, and it was of reasonable intelligence – the latter inferred by Mostin who, *invisible* and *mind blanked*, had watched it interact with numerous other creatures of less stature than itself.

Transfixed, it swayed eerily beneath the Wizard's gaze, its pseudopodia stretching and rippling

simultaneously through several overlapping dimensions.

Mostin's question was generic. He sought guidance, not definitive answers.

Can you enlighten me with regard to the events and possibilities which currently preoccupy me?

The creature's consciousness was catapulted into the deepest reaches of madness and euphoria, and a barrage of scenes and feelings flooded into Mostin's mind as it filtered them to him.

[Image] Graz'zt + [Image] a black tower + [Image] a satyr (or was it Titivilus?) + [Fear] Nothingness +

[Image] peasant girl + [Image] a huge bird + [Incomprehensible] void + [Image] Steeple + [Image]

dragon + [Image] a dreamscape: the Claviger; Jovol; Soneillon. [Image] the forest perishing + [Smell]

acid + [Image] Lukarn + [Image] a million tiny stars + [Image] the Horror + [Fear] the Horror +

[Terror] the Horror + [Image] a hundred souls, confined, deranged, screaming and gibbering + [Image]

Vhorzhe + [Voice] *saizha*, Mostin?

Mostin quailed, and fled back to the bounded cosmos.

*

"I think that a slightly more structured question may have been in order," Mulissu said sarcastically, as she poured a smoking liquid into a tall, blue flute, and handed it to Mostin. "You might as well have asked 'Can you please reveal all of my deepest fears to me?'"

The pair sat beneath the pomegranate tree in Mulissu's courtyard, as several mephits capered nearby.

The dome of the sky was, as usual, a perfect, unbroken cyan.

"It is within my nature to risk frequent assault upon my psyche," Mostin replied shakily. "You may have a point, however."

"Did you uncover anything worthwhile?"

"That remains to be seen," Mostin downed his drink rapidly and held out his glass for another draught,

"but I think so. Interpretation is always the hardest part. This is a fine beverage. What is it?"

Mulissu shrugged, and poured again. "I don't think it has a name. I acquired it from a passing Djinn.

The pseudonatural entity seems foremost in your mind. Have you made an effort to contact it?"

“Not yet. I have not judged the time to be ripe. It soon will be, however.”

“And you plan to *gate* it into this ‘Afqithan?’”

“Perhaps. Or I may loose it against the Prince, if we ever have the misfortune to meet. Mulissu, I need guidance.”

The Witch groaned. “I prefer not to dispense advice, where possible.”

“Jovol’s *web of motes*,” Mostin persisted. “Have you made headway in understanding it?”

Mulissu sighed. “I have thought of little else. It continually distracts me from my work.”

“But do you *understand* it?”

“No,” she replied. “Or, I should say, I understand its principles and its function, but not how to read it –

as you said, interpretation is always the hardest part. Would you like a demonstration?”

Mostin nodded. “Of course.”

“Then we should go inside – it is best if we see it in relative darkness.”

“I will bring the bottle,” Mostin said. His mood was improving rapidly.

Mulissu had dedicated the space within the largest of the five minarets of her mansion-cum-castle to Jovol’s device. When she activated it – a flat metal plate some twelve inches square – by merely

passing her hand over it, Mostin’s jaw dropped.

The darkness around them was suddenly illuminated by a hundred thousand points of light which

coruscated in every colour imaginable. Some pulsed, and hummed, and seemed to move on

unpredictable trajectories. Some quivered, some darted here and there, others stayed fixed, or orbited fathomless loci which could not be identified. Almost imperceptibly, slender threads wove them

together, joining them for brief periods before they separated, or binding them tightly into pairs, triplets or larger clusters.

“Every mote represents a packet of consciousness – an individual entity, or a single perspective. They are shown in relation to one another.”

Mulissu looked around briefly, before locating a bluish mote which blazed more brightly than those around it. She touched it with an outstretched finger, and it grew noticeably. Thousands of other motes winked out, but new ones came into being in their place. A puzzled look crossed her face.

“You seem perplexed,” Mostin observed.

“The mote which I selected represents myself,” Mulissu said. “That much, at least, I have determined.

Notice the bright mote which winks nearby. Its pattern seems random and insubstantial: I

suspect that this is you, although I cannot read the significance of its behaviour.”

“I am *mind blanked*. This may be reflected in the web’s powers of scrutiny. How did you isolate the mote which represents you?”

“I just *knew*,” the Witch answered. “Do not ask me to explain – I cannot.”

“Eadric said that Jovol could *infer* certain things,” Mostin speculated, “even when he could not accurately determine them. It may be possible to locate anyone or anything at any time, past, present or future – given a user with sufficient ability. Beyond even Jovol’s powers, I suspect.

“Indeed,” Mulissu raised an eyebrow. “Or mine. It may also be possible to advance or regress the whole web – currently, I believe it shows things *as they are*. It should be able to reveal things *as they were* or even *as they will be*. This is beyond me. Nor can I determine the spatial coordinates of any of the motes

– that is to say *where* in any reality the individual to whom the mote belongs is located. Observe this.”

The witch traced a thin tendril from her own mote with her finger. Around them both, lights flashed rapidly, as the thread twisted and gyred. Slowly, in the centre of the chamber, a deep, purplish radiance grew. It seemed somehow serene. Perfect in its shape and form.

From it, a thousand strings, gossamer-thin, radiated outwards, connecting it to a myriad of other motes

– including, somewhat detached, the bright blue light which was Mulissu herself. Around the central radiance, slowly orbiting on its periphery, was a single spark of deepest red, filled with malevolence and conveying a sense of foreboding.

“Behold the Claviger,” Mulissu smiled, “and the Enforcer. At the end of every tendril, there is a Wizard, Mostin. We are all bound together, and there is nothing we can do about it.”

“But which is whom?” Mostin asked in awe.

Mulissu sighed. “That is the question.”

The Alienist paused in thought for a moment, before reaching out to touch Gihaahia’s mote, eliciting a doubtful expression from Mulissu.

“Mostin...” She began.

“Sshh!”

The Enforcer’s mote grew, and that of the Claviger retreated, until the red ellipsoid outshone all others.

A feeling of subservience – tinged with an ancient, ineffable anger – emanated from it.

“Remarkable,” Mostin said. As the radicles which anchored it to other luminous points came in to view, its connection to the Claviger assumed a different shape – appearing as a long, tense cord, which

glowered with coercive power.

Many of the motes were now black, or deep scarlet, or midnight blue in hue. From all, violence, and lust, and pain, and fear flowed forth – stifling and suffocating. Many flickered and seemed to jump unpredictably.

“Are we seeing reality from Gihaahia’s perspective, now?” Mostin asked.

“I think these motes around her represent the contacts which she has made. The significant entities which have shaped – and maybe continue to shape – her reality.”

Mostin’s eyes darted about rapidly, following the tendrils which sprang from the Enforcer. *Where is the connection? It must be here. Is it this?*

A fuliginous mote, but somehow vague and indistinct came into view. He touched it. It grew,

threatening to consume all else. Beyond it, past incomprehensible connections which spanned realities and stretched the bounds of apprehension, was a yet deeper void.

Mulissu touched him gently on the shoulder. “Stop, Mostin. It will not avail you, and madness lies that way. You do not have the understanding. Sometimes you need to accept your limits.”

Mostin exhaled, and nodded.

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They sat outside again. At Mulissu’s command, a cool breeze had arisen.

“The dark mote that you evoked – what was it?”

“Cheshne, or her echo,” Mostin answered. “At least, I think it was. Nothingness has been weighing on my mind recently. Tell me, Mulissu: is it possible for a demon to survive annihilation?”

Mulissu shrugged. “The ontological paradox holds no interest for me. Speculating about such things is pointless.”

“Did you see the void beyond the void?” Mostin asked.

“Yes, Mostin, I did – and I am superstitious enough to say ‘do not speak its name in my house.’ Why does it interest you?”

“It is the key to understanding the demoness Soneillon. If I can locate the mote which represents her, and then the mote which represents Eadric, Tramst, the Prince of Azzagrat...”

“It is an exceedingly long and arduous task,” Mulissu sighed, and stretched. “I have attempted the process of cross-referencing, but there are hundreds of variables, and isolating many of them is near to impossible.”

“Cosmic entities are easy enough to locate, if you can find one they lead from each to the next – the Enforcer is an excellent place to begin.”

Mulissu shook her head. “And if you locate Cheshne, or Astaroth, what then? Can you tell which of Shûth’s accursed gods is which, or which Arch-fiend is Belial and which

Amaimon? They flicker and shift.”

“How did Jovol interpret it? Did he use a spell?”

“Perhaps. Or perhaps his insight was simply far greater than either of us.”

The bracelet, Mostin thought at once, and struck his forehead with his hand.

Mulissu looked quizzical.

“I am an idiot,” Mostin explained.

*

Shomei eyed the mephits with an expression of weary tedium on her face.

“How can you tolerate their continual antics?” She asked Mulissu.

“They are acting according to their nature,” the Elementalist replied.

“They are fractious and ill-disciplined. I would choose retainers who are more reliable.”

“And no doubt far duller and more serious. Mostin says that the bracelet that Jovol bequeathed to you enhances perception in certain areas.”

Shomei raised an eyebrow. “Evidently he has studied it more than I gave him credit for. Or his speculation is, for once, accurate. He is correct.”

“I wish to borrow it for a short while,” Mulissu said impassively – a statement which verged upon a command, or at least an expectation that she would not be denied.

“In order to better interpret Jovol’s *web of motes*,” Shomei nodded. “I, too, would like the opportunity to further realize my bracelet’s potential.”

Mostin sighed. He saw where this argument was leading. “It seems plain to me that your respective egos – colossal and yet simultaneously fragile as they both are – would require each of you to assert your right to first use the bracelet and web in conjunction. I can offer a solution to this impasse by volunteering my services – humbly, of course – thereby sparing each of you further embarrassment. I would also like to point out that I am, by native disposition and years of rigorous training, a Diviner.

The web is likely to respond favorably to my benign aura.”

“That is utterly spurious,” Mulissu moaned. “and I will not even deign to refute it formally. Shomei, follow me – the honour is yours. Forgive my presumption.”

Mostin squinted, and traipsed behind the two witches into the dome.

Mulissu floated three inches above the marble floor, arms folded across her chest, whilst Mostin half-sulked and half-scrutinized Shomei, who stood at the centre of the *web of motes*.

Points of light wheeled around her at incredible speed. She reached out, touched motes which arose, grew, merged, separated, shifted and winked out.

“What do you see?” Mostin asked.

“Wait,” the Infernalist replied. “There are more potential viewpoints than I had anticipated.” She touched a mote, and it blossomed.

“Well?” Mostin grumbled impatiently.

“There are numerous space-times represented by intersecting parabolae,” Shomei answered. “All cosmoi are represented here. And the sum of all possibility.”

Mostin looked dubious. “Can you find *any* mote? Find Nwm’s mote.”

Shomei glanced around, and interlocking systems rapidly flashed past. She touched another mote, and it assumed a central position and seemed to glow more brightly. The Infernalist laughed – predictably, it was green.

“Are you sure that’s him?” Mostin asked.

“Oh yes,” she replied.

“Where is he?”

“As I already know where Nwm is – at his glade near Deorham – that would hardly be a fair trial of the web’s power.”

“Let me try,” Mostin said.

“I’m next,” Mulissu smiled.

Mostin scowled.

After several frustrating hours, he finally got to play.

When the Alienist engaged with the web for the second time, he drew in his breath sharply in wonder.

New levels of complexity were revealed, and others suggested or hinted at. Nuances which had eluded him entirely during his first encounter were suddenly plainly visible: possibilities, probabilities, connections on levels which he did not comprehend. Visions shared, perspectives held in common,

affinities with concepts or geographical locations. Space, time and consciousness locked together in a latticework of impossible subtlety and intricacy. The *web of motes* was a true microcosm. A mirror of reality – or of many realities.

What can this device not do? Mostin wondered to himself. *Who – or what – constructed it? When?*

How?

Quickly, he isolated the mote which he knew represented himself and examined it. Hundreds of

connections emanated from it to other points of light: Eadric, Nwm, Shomei, Mulissu, Orolde, the

Pseudonatural which he had only recently quizzed, the Horror and uncounted others.

Mostin concentrated, and the web receded. Motes flashed as time regressed, but larger patterns

remained constant for long periods, as though some overriding principle – an organizing factor – was in play. When they changed, they seemed to do so sometimes slowly and deliberately, sometimes

wholesale – imposing a new set of guiding rules and paradigms upon the interwoven gestalt.

Mostin observed Khu: realities collided where *gates* blazed open and celestials descended in legions. A maze of motes and taut connections which formed a huge knot with many facets. A nodality.

Mostin studied it for three hours, familiarizing himself with its patterns and undercurrents. A variety of hypothetical scenarios which had never been actualized overlapped with events as he remembered

them: the death of Ainhorr, the death of himself, the successful flight of Feezuu, the failure of Mulissu to initiate the cascade. The reflection of Graz'zt – the demon's simulacrum – surviving the assault.

Mostin selected an unrealized past future where Eadric had been slain, and gingerly advanced the web into chaos.

Feezuu carving out an empire. Tens of thousands of motes in bondage or annihilated. Her lichdom –

which had been so narrowly avoided. Rapid bifurcation, and incomprehensibility.

Mostin sighed, and returned to the Now. He selected Graz'zt's mote and scrutinized it briefly – it seemed absurdly complex in its connections. It resonated closely with Eadric, with Soneillon – the demoness was now plainly visible to the Alienist – and with hundreds of fiends and powerful servitors or thralls. Another mote, which was burdened with suffering beyond the ability of any mortal flesh to

endure, was tightly enmeshed with the others.

Mostin swallowed, and touched Nehael.

A plethora of cosmoi wheeled in a pattern which bore an uncanny symmetry. Like a chiaroscuro in

perfect balance, Nehael's picture revealed Rintrah, Eadric, Graz'zt, Soneillon, Nwm, Titivilus and even Mostin himself in orbit around her. She was the lynchpin, the focus of all activity, and the calm centre around whom infinities – Oronthon, the Far Realm, Unbeing, Dream, the Green, the Adversary –

seemed poised through their representatives to assert their claims to reality. Her resonance with Tramst was extraordinary – like Oronthon's proxy, her role was to reveal all accepted truths as empty. Mostin tried to advance the web, but it immediately fractured into trillions of possibilities.

“Ngaarh!” He yelled in frustration.

Mulissu stood smiling, looking at him. “It is late, Mostin. I am hungry. Will you stay for dinner?”

Dumbly, Mostin nodded.

*

The Alienist, Elementalists and Infernalists sat around a small hexagonal table within an airy refectory, dining on a sumptuous meal of delicacies prepared by the mephit Shrix – who, apparently possessed a degree of culinary expertise normally eclipsed by his perverse sense of humour as Mulissu’s doorward.

“This has been most productive,” Mostin said through a mouthful of exquisite pastries stuffed with figs, almonds and pistachios. “We should meet more regularly.”

Mulissu looked suspicious – her intolerance for frequent interruption was well known.

“Did you determine Soneillon’s location?” Shomei asked Mostin.

The Alienist shook his head. “I became somewhat preoccupied by other matters. Why?”

“She is on the Prime,” Shomei replied.

Mostin coughed. “This information would have been better shared earlier.”

“I had assumed that she would be first to fall under your scrutiny,” the Infernalist jibed. “I merely noticed it in passing – my attention was directed towards the Infernal realms. Incidentally, Titivilus is in Afqithan, along with Furcas and Murmur – although I didn’t pursue that line of inquiry either.”

Mostin almost choked.

“What *did* you look at, Mostin?” Mulissu asked. “I spent an hour minutely inspecting the Claviger and its connections and then proceeded to examine *Ha’uh* – a primal elemental with whom I should like to make peaceable contact, if possible.”

Mostin raised an eyebrow. “The meta-structure of nodalities is fascinating. If I were to direct my energies in any one direction with regard to the web, then it would be here.”

Mulissu sighed. “I think the dangers here are apparent – to be drawn in, and spend the rest of one’s life observing or contemplating cosmic plans, patterns and connections. Was it productive?”

“Yes and no,” Mostin replied. “I found that advancing the web beyond its current reflection of the Now to be unsatisfying. I could not project it into the future with any degree of certainty.”

“Nor could I,” Mulissu nodded.

“Nor I,” Shomei agreed. “It may be that Jovol’s bracelet is incapable of augmenting our faculties to this extent – his own native ability must have borne the brunt of his endeavours. It might behoove one of us to develop a spell for the express purpose of interpreting the web.”

“I will do so,” Mostin said, “when I have time.”

“If it is ritualized I could easily perfect a formula in a matter of days,” Mulissu said. “And with the minimum of fuss.”

“My reservoir must stay unmolested,” Mostin said sourly. “I want no repeat of Gihaahia’s

binding – it set me back by a month at least.”

“Noted,” Mulissu nodded.

“Splendid,” Shomei smiled. “Then I say that we reconvene in one week to discuss our options –

assuming that Mostin and I are still alive. And every month thereafter.”

Mulissu scowled. “Every year would suit me better.”

“Then I would suggest every quarter, as a compromise,” Mostin said. “We three would form a potent triad. We are peers, and few others compare to us in power and ability.

Mulissu should be our leader –

the first among equals.”

“Not for long, I suspect,” the Witch said drily.

**

“She is *here*?” Eadric asked, aghast.

Mostin gave a confirmatory nod. “There is more. Before we left, I inspected the web for a third time. It would appear that certain of those others whom we encountered have also made a translation.”

Eadric looked sick. “Go on.”

“Nhura. The Wyrms, and the Shadow who rode with him – most likely Threxu the Nymph mentioned by Nufrut. At least a dozen of the Loquai – including the one we briefly captured. The other chthonic *thing*. Nhura is accompanied by another creature: powerful, but heretofore unknown to us.”

“A demon?”

“Demons may not enter the world of men unless called. The Interdict forbids it.”

“But you just said...”

“It would seem that Soneillon has a way to circumvent it. Or perhaps it no longer applies to her. I would have said that perhaps she has an ally that we do not know about. One who brought her here – it would not be the first time. But the Enforcer would have intercepted a summoner and annihilated him or her. In any case, she is here.”

“Where?” Nwm asked.

“Unfortunately, I currently lack the expertise to make an accurate assessment of her position without drawing attention to myself. Not that it matters – she can travel an unlimited distance at will.”

“And the others?” Ortwin asked. “The Dragon?”

“Are split into two groups. I suspect one or more of them can *plane shift*: they may have arrived in two waves.”

“I thought the sidhe were capable of that feat in any case,” Ortwin said.

“Not the Loquai,” Shomei answered. “They are bound to Shadow. Which is fortunate for

us – several hundred of them would present a significant threat.”

Eadric groaned. “We cannot allow them to remain here. They will cause untold damage.”

Shomei shrugged. “It is *you* they seek, *Ahma* – your mote is replete with connections to them. Many minds are extended and focused in your direction. They may take some time to arrive here – the two groups are probably several hundred miles distant – both from us and each other. I don’t think they will tarry to cause random mayhem.”

“We need to intercept the Dragon,” Eadric said.

Mostin nodded. “I will *scry* him shortly. But give me an hour to prepare the rest of my spells.”

“An *hour*?”

“I cannot work miracles, Eadric! If I don’t give this some thought, then the chances are that we’ll all wind up dead anyway.”

**

In the chapel at Deorham, the four devas chanted in unison as they strapped Eadric’s armour to him and girded him with his sword belt. He hefted Melimpor’s shield – perpetually burnished to an unnatural sheen – and slid Lukarn into its scabbard.

The potent runes and wards on his weapon, girdle and armour would, he knew, be of limited use to

him. In an area of dead magic, their power would be suspended: he was relying in large part on skill and force alone. He recalled his own words to Hullu – that he was the greatest warrior of the age, unmatched in arms by any other in Wyre. He swallowed, and wondered if it had been an idle boast.

From his armoury, the *Ahma* had selected two powerful horn bows – one for himself, and another for Iua – together with quivers full of blue-fletched arrows. Ortwin would be using Shupthul’s bow – his own, *Anguish* – had been lost along with the rest of his equipment. Unlike the Satyr and duelist, however, Eadric would carry no further wards or augmentations.

Ortwin and Iua were highly mobile – it was expected that they would range beyond the *antimagic field*, attack, and retreat back within it again. Eadric would stay at the centre, protecting the locus of null magic – Shomei – by whatever means he could.

Eadric sighed. He could have commanded a dozen, or even a hundred of Wyre’s most stalwart

Templars to accompany him, and didn’t doubt for an instant that they would have followed. But his actions now were far beyond the purview of the Temple, and dragging them off to possible death – or worse – would have weighed on his mind for the rest of his life. This was not their fight. And there was no time.

He hoped that Shomei’s assessment was accurate – that they were interested in him alone. His stomach turned. What havoc would they wreak here, in Wyre?

He closed his eyes, knelt, and prayed.

When he opened them again, he found that he could not rise. The celestials stood in unlikely poses near the altar, similarly paralyzed. Behind him, the Paladin heard gentle footsteps approaching.

A girl who was almost a woman, clad in the traditional folk costume of Trempa – a clean white dress drawn in around the waist, with brightly patterned hems – stood next to him. She leaned forward and lit an offertory candle from an oil lamp, which burned before the solar orb upon the small altar. The flame which kindled from the taper seemed to blaze with a colour that was darker than soot. Eadric's eyes strained to see her face, oval and framed with a riot of black hair.

She knelt slightly too close for decency, her perfume a heady combination of musk and spice. She

turned her head, and her breath was warm in his ear as she whispered.

“Nothing becomes.”

Soneillon

Soneillon shifted her position, placing a prayer cushion on the low dais before the Paladin, and sitting upon it – squarely in front of him – in the meditation posture of *saizhan*.

Whether an authentic act, or in dry mockery, Eadric could not tell. She reached forwards, and cupped the *Eye of Palamabron* which

hung around Eadric's neck in her delicate hand, snapped the chain which held it between thumb and forefinger, and casually tossed the amulet aside. As she straightened again, her hair – which smelled of lotus and sandalwood – brushed his face. She smiled.

Her every gesture possessed an effortless allure, replete with innuendo, and the promise of annihilation which rested in her eyes – fathomless voids – served only to heighten her magnetism. She was

infinitely desirable. And something about her, not her appearance, but in some way her *essence* – if she was endowed with such – reminded him of Nehael.

Eadric closed his eyes.

” *Saizhan*,” she said gently, “demands that you admit to your feelings, take note of them, and allow them to pass peacefully from your mind without judging them. Repression leads to madness. This is why

Orthodoxy failed. And erotophobia was among its greatest flaws. You may speak.”

The compulsion which transfixed him relaxed just a little. He opened his eyes again, looked at her, and nodded. “There is some merit in that statement,” he said shakily. “But If you wish to act as my temptress, you should stand in line – that position is currently filled.”

Soneillon laughed, and Eadric was surprised to find that it was a pleasant and agreeable sound. The Paladin recalled Nufrut's words – *most enigmatic*, she had labeled the Succubus. He reluctantly found himself in agreement with the Marilith's assessment.

“What do you want, Eadric?” She asked softly. The question penetrated to his core, assailing him on all levels – existential, emotional and physical – at once. “I can help you recover your demon-lover. I don’t doubt you have already speculated about how best to *use* me. You could have come to Throile and approached me directly – I am not unreasonable.”

“And I am not in the habit of frequenting the Abyssal lairs of demonesses,” Eadric replied. “Besides, I find far too many fiends far *too* reasonable. We determined early on that Throile was too high a risk.”

“But you entertained the possibility,” she smiled. “One of your allies – the devil Aoloz – is still interned there. The *Ahma* is wise to use fiends to do his dirty work – they are less conspicuous than solars, I

suspect. Although their demise is also less spectacular.” Her words bit deep.

“I am not responsible for Shomei’s choice of servants,” Eadric sighed.

“Ahh.” The fact that Soneillon evinced no sarcasm made her reply even more frustrating.

Eadric looked sceptical. “I’m surprised that you felt the need to discard Palamabron’s Eye. Titivilus felt no compunction about allowing me to wear it. Perhaps you lack his guile?”

“Perhaps,” she shrugged. “Or perhaps unequal truths do not concern me.”

The Paladin scowled. “I find your oblique references to *saizhan* baffling. What are you trying to accomplish?”

“They are hardly oblique, Eadric. If I perceive a kernel of wisdom in an idea, then I am not above admitting it – no matter where its source lies. But I am no philosopher and have no interest in debate – I lack the patience. As to the Eye, I’d hoped that you would trust your own ability to judge me, rather than the obsolete lens of a dead cherub. The Truth has changed.”

Eadric shook his head wryly. “I can’t trust the authenticity of my own thoughts and actions whilst under the effect of a compulsion. The Eye might allow me to retain some sense of perspective.” He sighed.

“You wish to use me against Graz’zt. What is it that I can accomplish, which you cannot?”

“Force of arms is not my *forté* – nor that of my servants. And you are singularly driven in your desire for vengeance. One of Oronthon’s less ‘noble’ aspects, I would argue – but that’s beside the point.”

“And what of those you sent here – the Wyrms, Nhura, the Loquai. Why are you here now, if they have come to whisk me back to you?”

“I did not send them – Nhura determined to come of her own volition. And while I’m sure that

ingratiating themselves with me is one motive, there are many others. Nhura needs to assert her

ascendancy. Koilimilou desires the return of her *box of shades*. Threxu always longs for new forests to rape and despoil, and the Wyrms to cause as much mischief as he can. And

the Loquai? The Loquai can
hunt – which is what they love best.”

“But you command them?”

Soneillon smiled. “I have no particular attachment to them. You may relax, now. Do as you wish.”

Eadric found that he could move again, and shifted his position accordingly. He stood uneasily, glanced at the quartet of unmoving celestials near the altar, at the door to the chapel, and at the demoness again

– she looked strangely vulnerable. Somehow, Eadric felt even more uncomfortable than before. He

could not read her. He looked at the *Eye of Palamabron* lying nearby, and sighed. On some level, her words regarding the amulet rang true.

“I would ask that you do not target my friends,” Eadric said. “We are interdependent. If you eliminate them, then my effectiveness is diminished.”

“I regret Ortwin’s *disintegration*,” she answered. “I didn’t command it.”

“And you will call your servants off.”

“They are not my servants, Eadric. I am not responsible for their actions.”

“You slew Irknaan for his intransigence.”

“I slew Irknaan because he was an irritating bore,” she replied.

She was maddening. Impossible.

“And what of the other demon? The one of your kind, who is now with Nhura? It is one of yours?”

Soneillon shook her head. “I suggested the name to Irknaan. Whatever compacts were arranged

subsequently with Nhura are beyond my purview.”

“You could ask the Lillend and her cohorts to return to Afqithan,” Eadric said through gritted teeth.

“I could.”

“Will you?” He asked.

“No,” she replied. “Your actions have led to their presence here. They are your responsibility. And I would like to see how you deal with them.”

“You would sacrifice them merely to gauge my suitability as an assassin?”

Soneillon stood up smoothly and stretched slowly, catlike. “If you need me, then call me with your mind when you are on the threshold of sleep. I will come to you.”

“I need you to convince your allies to return to Afqithan.”

“You know what I mean, Eadric.”

He swallowed. "I think you should leave, now." *Do not look at me thus.*

"Until tonight, then."

"Go."

"Dream well," she smiled, and vanished.

Eadric shook, and cursed silently. He flung the doors to the chapel open, and stormed into the

courtyard. The sun was bright, and caused him to squint.

"Nwm!" He thundered.

**

They sat in the Great Hall at Kyrtil's Burh, around a huge oak table, stained and worn by centuries of feasts held by Eadric's forebears. Shafts of light from the high windows – opened for the first time in several months – revealed more dust than Mostin felt was healthy. The handful of servants had been less than conscientious in maintaining the interior of the Keep, content instead to deplete the Paladin's wine cellar. Eadric was unusually tolerant of their idleness – something which the Alienist found

deplorable, but knew better than to mention. Mostin discreetly deployed a cantrip to clean the air and furniture.

"Perhaps you should have accepted Titivilus in his offer to act as mediator," the Druid said drily. "I suspect that he would have kept his head, and remained a little cooler. What is it with you and succubi, anyway?"

"Shut up, Ortwin," Eadric said, before the Satyr could open his mouth. The Bard gave a look of mock offense.

Nwm gestured airily. "She has demonstrated her power, in any case. It would seem to be considerable."

Shomei nodded. "I think we knew that – she has held the Prince of Azzagrat to a stalemate for millennia. That is no small feat."

"A simple protection spell should suffice to prevent her exercising further control," Mostin added. "Of course, if she determines that she really *wants* to – for whatever reason – then she can. We can smother you with wards, all of which would crumble before her magic."

Eadric groaned. "I had assumed that she had dismissed the enchantment."

"No," Mostin said ruefully.

"How long will it last?"

"I don't know. I could *disjoin* it, but I think we're probably better off just letting it run its course – I may need the spell. I doubt it's permanent – she was dominating the celestials as well."

"How did she appear?" Ortwin asked. "Was she pert, or curvaceous?"

Iua kicked him hard under the table.

“These are important considerations,” the Satyr continued. “Would she be swayed by my not inconsiderable charms, I wonder?”

“Have you no principles at all?” Eadric asked. “The question is rhetorical – you need not answer it. As a girl of perhaps eighteen years. She was wearing a Trempan peasant’s clothes – the kind reserved for festivals and holidays.”

Mostin raised an eyebrow. “Intriguing. I had a vision of such, although its significance was difficult to determine.”

“That is an agreeable persona,” Ortwin nodded. “Did it elicit the *Ahma*’s approval?”

“Where is this line of inquiry leading, Ortwin?” Eadric looked through narrowed eyes.

“I am an accomplished seducer,” the Bard declared. “I am merely attempting to deduce her tactics. I appreciate professionalism in the field of love – hence I’ve always had a soft spot for succubi.”

“She is far more,” Eadric said irritably.

“Than Nehael?” The question was brutal.

“That is not what I meant.”

“I’m just making sure,” Ortwin smiled disarmingly. “Eadric, forbidden fruit always tastes sweetest –

trust me, I’ve plucked enough of it in my time. Your sorry lot is compounded by the fact that you are

driven by some religious urge to overcome duality – on whatever level it happens to manifest. Hence, I would speculate, your initial attraction to Nehael.”

“They are hardly comparable circumstances.”

“Let the Satyr continue,” Mostin said. “This is interesting, and he may have a point. He is experiencing a rare moment of philosophical insight. Do not discourage him.”

“You perceive the possibility of a union of opposites,” Ortwin said.

” *Hierosgamos*,” Mostin nodded approvingly. “The Alchymic Marriage.”

“Quite,” Ortwin raised an eyebrow.

“And she is playing to your understanding of *saizhan*,” Shomei smiled, “to which the ontological paradox is central. Transcending the duality of *ens* and *non-ens* is one of the oldest conundrums of mysticism. Where does consciousness lie when it observes the duality? Does it exist or not? She

promises oblivion, which attracts you.”

Eadric grumbled. “If you are quite finished in dissecting my psyche...”

“I am not,” Ortwin interrupted.

“Nor I,” Mostin added. “Eroticism is dangerous because it clouds your perspective – you should exercise caution if you plan to pursue this route as a means to metagnosis. As a recreational activity, I have no problem with it.”

“Enough!” Eadric snapped. “I have no desire to pursue ‘metagnosis’ so the point is moot. Can we leave now?”

“Soon,” Mostin replied. “I would prefer to wait until they have passed over the deeper stretches of Lake Thahan – if the Dragon takes to the water, it may complicate things.”

“I will go and put on that damned armour,” Ortwin complained. “I want my gear back.”

Outside, Iua turned to the Bard, exasperated. “Do you have to goad him so?”

“My Love, sometimes it is the only way to make him think.”

“Do you have to *enjoy* it so much?”

Ortwin laughed.

Within the hall, Eadric turned to Nwm. “I was hoping that you might have some advice.”

The Druid sighed. “It is difficult. I do not view carnality with the same suspicion that you do. Don’t look offended, you know its true. Assuming that we survive this afternoon, then you will be tested again tonight.”

“If I sleep within Mostin’s extradimensional space, *mind blanked*, then I should be safe. Correct, Mostin?”

The Alienist looked dubious. “I suppose so. I am no expert in the way that Dream functions, but that seems reasonable. If she locates you, she can *dispel* the ward, though. And the fact remains: how long can you realistically avoid her, using this tactic?”

“I concur,” Nwm nodded. “And I think that trying to place yourself beyond her ability to reach you might even be detrimental in the long run. It might pique her interest even more, if you set yourself up as a challenge. She seems to have a well-developed sense of humour – from what you’ve said, at least.

No. You should retire as normal, *and* – you’re not going to like this – maybe you should call to her.”

Eadric’s jaw dropped. “Are you crazy?”

“You cannot *avoid* this confrontation now, Eadric. Maybe you can delay it, but I don’t think that would be productive. It will eat at your mind. You should ground yourself, embrace the paradox, and see

where it leads. You must act in full consciousness, not in partial denial. If you refuse her attentions, it must be for the right reasons. Talk to her. *Open a dialogue*, as you said yourself.”

“Something which you were against, I recall,” Eadric said ironically.

“But now she has made the first move,” Nwm pointed out, “and we should reappraise. Reflexivity is required. I am not you, Eadric, and I lack your understanding in certain areas. Shomei seems to think that Soneillon is the most evil, blasphemous, corrupt, tainted entity that she has ever had the misfortune to encounter – she is an expert in such matters, and I am not, so normally I would defer to her opinion.

However, you are the *Ahma*, and your perspective is less than conventional. You must act

from instinct, or insight, or whatever you want to call it.”

“Sometimes you are very wise, Nwm.”

“Yes,” the Druid replied. “Although, as a caveat, I would add that it is entirely possible that Mostin is right, your judgement is skewed, and you are rationalizing a basic sexual urge in terms of mystical inquiry.”

“That is not helpful,” Eadric sighed.

Nwm shrugged. “Sorry,” he said.

**

Mostin sat before the Looking-glass of Urm Nahat, idly commanding various scenes to appear upon its surface. Villages. Still, deep water. A small island with a rambling, ramshackle manse of modest proportions.

Eadric stood impatiently behind the Alienist. “What are you *doing* Mostin?”

“Patience,” Mostin replied. He issued a *sending*:

Whatever you are doing, desist. I will be in your study in five seconds. A matter of utmost importance.

Mostin.

The return message began:

But...

Mostin ignored it. Upon the face of the mirror, the scene of a cluttered workspace appeared. Alembics, heaps of papers, homunculi in jars, and devices whose function Eadric could only begin to guess at were scattered and strewn around. A girl – perhaps six years old and wearing a bright yellow cloak which seemed far too large for her – sat at a table, her tiny hands holding a tome almost as large as she was. She scowled into the sensor.

Mostin raised an eyebrow, and stepped through the mirror.

*

“This is most irregular, Mostin,” Tozinak said. “I have no party scheduled for three weeks.”

“Pay attention,” Mostin replied rudely.

Tozinak shifted into the form of a squat dwarf with chestnut skin, a bulbous nose and large, gnarled hands. He looked irritated.

“In approximately fifteen minutes,” Mostin continued, “an enormous umbral fiendish dragon and several other creatures of an equally dubious nature will be passing some three miles from here – if they maintain their current course. I plan on intercepting them nearby.”

Tozinak spluttered. “But...”

“Tozinak, if I thought there was any chance that you would aid me, then I would ask. You are renowned for your meek temperament – not that I am criticizing...

“It sounds like you are to me,” Tozinak grumbled.

“...but I thought I should warn you nonetheless. There will be magical fireworks in your vicinity – do not be alarmed. When Shomei and I...”

“Shomei is with you?”

“She will be. When...” Mostin paused, about to continue with his explanation – a white lie or two to draw the other Wizard’s interest. Perhaps the Dragon had swallowed an ingot of adamant. Perhaps one of the other ‘dubious’ creatures possessed something Tozinak desired. Mostin sighed.

“Tozinak, I can’t lie to you – you’re just too damn *nice*. Will you help?”

“Well, Mostin, I’d love to but...”

“Never mind,” Mostin said. “One cannot expect too much, I suppose. You are not your sister.*”

“That is most unfair. Besides, you never even met my sister.”

“Something which I deeply regret,” Mostin replied.

“Bah!” Tozinak grunted, and transformed into a winged fey of uncertain genus. “I will do what I can.

But then all debts are settled.”

“Thank-you, Tozinak.”

“Do not expect too much!”

“Don’t worry, Tozinak – I don’t.”

**

The inhabitants of Brinnan, a small fishing village nestled beneath the crags of the Gairu – a

precipitous massif, which thrust far southwards of the western Thrumohars on the shores of Lake

Thahan – did not, for the most part, notice anything untoward, unless it was the faintest acrid smell upon the breeze.

High above, *invisible*, Crosod, Threxu, Koilimilou and three Loquai champions upon umbral griffons passed rapidly through the sky. They ascended, the great, tenebrous wings of the Dragon somehow

capturing the thermals, and granting him lift.

Disguised as a rock upon a granite outcrop, Tozinak shivered. With his magical Sight, he had observed them, and the spectre of the Wyrms – a vast, ravenous shape which ate all light – had almost caused him to fall into a catalepsy of fear and void his stony bowels when they flew overhead. His terror at their passing was matched only by his relief that

they could not perceive him.

He swallowed, cast a *greater dispelling*, and immediately *teleported* back to his island retreat.

Crosod screeched as wards fell from him and he immediately became visible. He turned his head to

locate the source of the spell, his blindsight rapidly scanning the scree. A small boulder vanished. The Wyrms cursed. He turned his head again and was suddenly overwhelmed by a *squamous pulse* which caused his two-foot thick armour to buckle and rupture.

The sound of his pain and fury was terrific. Rocks split under the force of the noise.

From another outcrop, some hundred yards distant, Eadric, Ortwin and Iua – *hasted* and *invisible* –

began to launch a storm of enchanted arrows at the Dragon. From an unlocated source, Mostin struck him squarely with a sonic *meteor swarm*.

The Dragon still reeled, attempting to regain his coordination but Threxu, her face contorted in rage, reacted quickly. She rendered the Wyrms invulnerable to elements and invoked an *unholy aura* around

them both. Nearby, upon her griffon and still warded from sight, Koilimilou targeted the outcrop from which the arrows had issued with an intense burst of dark sound.

Two miles away, on the lakeshore, the fisher-folk of Brinnan stopped in the streets and looked towards the Gairu suspiciously. Thunder echoed in the mountains, but the skies were clear. A mile further out upon the lake, Tozinak quailed in his overgrown garden.

Crosod screamed again as two more *squamous pulses* caused his scales to twist and dig further into the flesh beneath them, and darts began to pierce his failing armour. Another immense sonic struck him, but harmlessly. He shook off a *disintegrate*. Above him, now revealed to his perception, a trio of birds descended towards him – two eagles, pulsing with magical power, and a roc of colossal size which

dwarfed even his enormous form. The Wyrms' wings powered him upwards, he invoked a *haste*, and struck the roc with a quickened *destruction* which immediately rebounded back upon him, dissipating quickly in the form of black fire over his body.

Sem and Gheim, acting as vehicles of Uedii's distaste at the presence of the fiendish dragon in her realm, blazed with Green power as they outpaced the larger bird and tore into Crosod. Their claws and beaks ripped through his shivered scales, finding the gaps in his armour around his head and throat.

Shomei erected an *antimagic field*, and she, Eadric, Iua and Ortwin suddenly became visible upon a granite buttress. The mounted Loquai immediately dived at full speed towards them, leveling their

lances. Threxu scowled – unsure of what their sudden appearance meant.

The Wasted Nymph lashed out with a *horrid wilting*, only to find that it evaporated harmlessly.

Koilimilou took note, issued a *sending* to Nhura for immediate assistance – whatever and however it could arrive there – and quickly *summoned* a vrock which appeared in the air nearby.

Nwm, seething with powerful magic, broke upon Crosod at full speed, his immense claws and beak

puncturing scales, muscle and sinew upon the Wyrms' back. Shomei gaped from her vantage point as

she watched the Roc pluck the writhing Dragon from the air, and toss him with contemptuous ease

against a jagged pilon of stone which reared nearby, smashing it to pieces. Threxu gripped onto

Crosod's foreleg desperately, but was flung clear.

Now, upon the rocky platform, Paladin, Bard and Duelist found themselves engaged in a fierce melee with the Loquai and their griffons, trading blows in an area where wards were ineffective and all magic was suffocated. Shomei felt utterly vulnerable – as one unused to depending on the skill of others for her wellbeing, the voluntary surrender of power had been difficult to stomach. The Infernalists' fears were misplaced – the sidhe were revealed to be totally outmatched, and were cut down in a matter of seconds.

Mostin – wherever he was – targeted Crosod with another *greater dispelling*, followed by another sonic *meteor swarm* and a quickened, maximized cluster of *magic missiles*.

Shattered, Crosod lurched briefly, and vanished into Shadow. Threxu screamed – in frustration and

betrayal – even as the pair of eagles descended upon her with their claws bared. They lacerated her umbral flesh in a frenzy, as she strove to fend them off.

Cursing, the Nymph gestured and malice flowed from her. She targeted the base of the buttress upon which Eadric, Ortwin, Iua and Shomei stood with an *earthquake*, caused granite to crack and groan, and vanished using a *dimension door*. As the stack collapsed, Ortwin rode a crumbling section of cliff-face downwards, leapt from it as it toppled outwards, rolled, and stood up smoothly.

Shomei, bruised and bloody, sighed as she observed the Satyr and Iua. The Duelist appeared similarly unscathed.

Koilimilou vanished in terror, even as her *summoned* servitor – following its orders – swept down towards Eadric. The Paladin sighed and hefted Lukarn.

Above, Nwm's mind reached out with his torc. Threxu was still within range, and although his Sight could not extend to discern her *invisible* form, he knew she was there. As he powered towards her and she came within view, Nwm shuddered as a *horrid wilting* coursed over him. It was her last, desperate effort.

Nwm spoke, and a column of viridescent fire erupted from the ground beneath Threxu. The Shadow

burned away. For the briefest moment, Nwm fancied that he saw her as maybe she once

had been, and

then the Green gently reabsorbed her essence.

Before the demon reached Eadric, it entered the *antimagic field* which still emanated from Shomei, and winked out. Mostin alighted softly upon the ground and reappeared. He grinned wily. Hovering in the air nearby were four sensors – obviously several parties were interested in their activities, but if one was Nhura, she was disinclined to reveal herself.

After they had returned to Kyrtill's Burh, Mostin gestured for the others to follow him back through the mirror.

Within two minutes, Crosod was dead: tracked to the Plane of Shadow, and butchered methodically,

unceremoniously, and with surprisingly little effort.

**

"Nhura will, no doubt, be reconsidering her options." Shomei closed her eyes and drank deeply from a crystal goblet, allowing the firewine to course through her veins and causing her head to spin.

"Koilimilou used a *limited wish* in order to *teleport*," Mostin sighed. "That could prove tedious –

Irknaan may have used the same tactic. I suspect that she has joined Nhura and the other group. Still, if I were the Lillend, I would secure reinforcements before proceeding."

"I agree," Eadric nodded. "We are far from safe, but the Wyrms have been eliminated – frankly, he was my biggest concern. His sheer destructive potential was unmatched. The demon, of Soneillon's ilk –

chthonic, Shomei called it: what is its power?"

"That is hard to gauge," Mostin admitted.

"And the other? The 'unknown'? Does it remain so?"

Mostin nodded. "But, whatever it is, it cannot be *that* fearsome – or else we would have been assailed already. I am reluctant to *scry* them unless we intend to attack immediately afterwards. If they are

warded – which seems likely – then a sensor may be ineffective in any case. When I discerned Nhura's location she was three hundred miles away to the northeast, over Einir. The *web of motes* revealed Nhura, the Demon, the other creature, and nine more Loquai 'stalwarts' in that cluster. Koilimilou has, doubtless, joined them."

"How long before they reach us, assuming we don't intercept them?"

"Six hours, maybe," Shomei answered. "But they may need to rest – even the griffons cannot fly tirelessly."

"The question is simple," Ortwin said. "Do we engage them here, or en route?"

"I favour the former," Nwm said. "We need to replenish our flagging reserves. Let them

come. We will be ready for them. We should rest in the chapel. If they *teleport* here, it will be at great cost to them, in ineffective pairs or trios. And they will not fly in anytime soon.”

“Why?” Eadric asked.

“Because I am going to conjure a large storm,” Nwm replied. “So I suggest that you close your windows.”

“The enchantment, upon the devas and myself...” Eadric began.

“I will *disjoin* it,” Mostin sighed.

“Ahh, *free will* will be yours again, Ed,” the Satyr said sarcastically. “Now, whatever happens, you have only yourself to blame.”

Eadric scowled.

*Qiseze, the Fire Savant slain by Feezuu. Feezuu herself was, of course, subsequently killed by Mostin.

**Mostin had used a *discern location* to pinpoint Crosod some thirty minutes beforehand, but had opted not to use the mirror to *scry* him – it was likely that most of the enemy would detect the sensor, and react accordingly. Nwm used his torc to determine their path – there was much to-ing and fro-ing using the mirror, as the party assumed a favorable position. The mountains were chosen because they would afford a useful vantage for the archers, and were away from both forests and inhabited areas.

The two legendary eagles were very seriously buffed – *animal growth*, *bear’s heart*, *greater magic fang*, *expeditious retreat* and *nature’s avatar*. I didn’t realize quite how dangerous they could be until this encounter – their melee attacks were at +40 something, and they were dishing out 30 points of damage or more with each attack.

Yet more of Soneillon’s unreasonable Epic spells. She was under the influence the *Renewal of Purpose and Desire*, routinely invoked by her every month when she is in Throile – essentially a highly excessive buff spell. The *Renewal* involves the input of the four chief sorcerer-succubi who serve Soneillon. The compulsion afflicting Eadric and the devas, I had dubbed *Do What I Will* – a nod to the overt Crowleyanity which sometimes pervades the game.

Renewal of Purpose and Desire

Transmutation

Spellcraft DC: 34

Components: V,S, XP, Ritual

Casting Time: 10 minutes

Range: Personal

Target: You

Duration: 672 hours

To Develop: Seed: Fortify (DC 17), Ward (DC 14). Factors: increase Cha bonus by +19 (+38 DC);

increase duration by 3250% (+65 DC); gain +30 on caster level check to beat foe's *dispel* effect (+60

DC); ward against *disjunction* (+16 DC). Mitigating factors: increase casting time by 9 minutes (-18

DC); four other casters contributing 7th level slots (-56 DC); change from target to personal (-2 DC); burn 10,000 XP (-100 DC).

In a brief rite conducted every month (when the moon is new on the Prime Plane), the caster renews her focus and the ability to exercise her Will. She gains a +20 enhancement bonus to Charisma which lasts for one month – until the next invocation of *Renewal of Purpose and Desire*.

The spell itself enjoys a +30 bonus on the caster level check when targeted by *dispel* effects directed at it – effectively negating the bonus offered by *superb dispelling*. It otherwise requires two *disjunctions* to counter the *Renewal of Purpose and Desire* – the first eliminates the *ward* component of the spell, the second counters the enhancement bonus itself.

Do What I Will

Enchantment (Compulsion) [Mind-Affecting]

Spellcraft DC: 40

Components: None

Casting Time: 1 quickened action

Range: 75 ft.

Area: 20-ft. radius sphere

Duration: 23 hours 20 minutes

Saving Throw: Will negates

Spell Resistance: Yes

To Develop: Seeds: Compel (DC 19); Contact (DC 23). Factors: Quickened spell (+28 DC); no verbal or somatic components (+4 DC); dismissible by caster (+2 DC); increase duration by 600% (+24 DC);

change from target to 20 ft. radius area (+10 DC); compel unreasonable course of action (+10 DC);

Increase spell's saving throw DC by +10 (+20 DC); Mitigating factor: burn 10000 XP.

The caster establishes an immediate telepathic bond with all creatures within the area of effect and issues a silent mental command forcing them to do her bidding. Each target is allowed a Will saving throw (DC 30 + relevant modifier) in order to resist the effect.

Once the compulsion is established, the caster may exercise her Will and telepathically command each of those affected – either singly or jointly – to perform actions as she sees fit. Distance is not a factor.

Issuing subsequent commands is a free action, although only one such command may be given in any

round. Even instructions which would normally result in the death of those affected by *Do What I Will* are followed to the letter.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 08-24-2003

Church and Steeple - Part 1

The chapel at Kyrtil's Burh was a compact space, perhaps twenty-five feet in its longest dimension, which abutted the main keep. Like the rest of the castle, its exterior – recently repaired by Nwm's efforts – was smothered in an ivy of an unusually prolific variety, which required continual

management and pruning. And pruning seldom happened within the Burh.

There were two entrances to the sanctuary: a pair of stout oak double-doors which led into the

courtyard, close to the archway at the base of the Steeple; and a smaller lintel, constructed of steel, which joined the portico in the keep proper. The metal door was hidden in a concave, behind the plain white arras which formed a backdrop to the altar space – raised upon a low dais reached by three

shallow steps. The area below the dais was clear, except for a thick carpet some twenty feet long which stretched to the main doors, two low benches, and a dozen or so prayer cushions – some of which were extremely threadbare.

Ortwin sat in the centre of the floor, uncharacteristically tense. He disliked the chapel for a number of reasons, not the least of which was the draught – barely noticeable – which issued from beneath the floor covering: cold air from the crypt, finding its way through cracks in the flagstones. Nwm had specifically instructed the gnomes who had restored the rest of the keep's interior to leave the chapel untouched: it was Eadric's sanctum, and the Druid had felt that it would have been the worst breach of etiquette to engage in unapproved remodeling. Whilst Eadric appreciated the gesture, he had privately wished that Nwm *had* done something about the chapel. The austerity which had marked his earlier years had given way to a more balanced outlook, and sometimes comfort was no bad thing. Somehow,

the chapel hadn't caught up with him.

The Satyr grumbled about the cold. "Can't we light a fire or something?" He watched as Shomei placed a *dimensional lock* in the centre of the sanctuary, barring all forms of extraplanar movement. The Infernalist had already invoked a *screen* upon the whole of Kyrtil's Burh – it appeared as nothing more than a rugged outcrop of rock to magical scrutiny.

Eadric sighed. "Perhaps if you ask Mostin nicely, he will modify the temperature."

"Why are we here, anyway?" Ortwin continued. "Doesn't the place need to be reconsecrated or something? I seem to recall there being a demoness of some power in here several hours ago."

"Yes," Eadric sighed, "it does. It is still the most defensible place in the keep, however."

"Consecration is highly advisable," Mostin said morbidly. "The Succubus might be tempted to turn your dead relatives into vampires."

"That is in particularly poor taste," Eadric replied nervously. "But you have a point. I will send to Morne for someone to come here as soon as possible. Probably Asser. Unless Nwm would care to do

the honours*?"

"I had assumed that you would require someone of 'true faith' to perform the rite."

"I am more flexible in that regard than I was previously, as the definition of 'true' is now revealed to be somewhat ambiguous."

"Perhaps Mostin could *gate* a solar," Ortwin suggested. "It could perform the necessary magic, and would be a reassuring presence."

"For you maybe," Mostin said acidly. "And I am not sure that Gihaahia's subsequent

punitive visit here would contribute to the sanctity of the place. We are safe enough for the moment, barring Soneillon herself – and I suspect that there is *no* precaution which we could take that would bar her if she were determined.”

“If you had prepared a *magnificent mansion*...” Ortwin began.

“Or if *you* had spent your time studying magic instead of fornicating and drinking firewine,” Mostin snapped irritably. “We will be fine. Those hideous cohorts of Eadric are outside keeping guard.

Ungrateful creatures. At least they could of thanked me for dispelling their paralysis.”

“They are grateful,” Eadric reassured him. “But tend to communicate little. I was surprised that Soneillon didn’t destroy them.”

“She is wooing you,” Nwm said wryly. “Killing celestials would make a bad impression, I’m sure.”

“So is he safe?” Ortwin asked, with a wicked grin, “Or will she invade his dreams and cause him to experience impure thoughts?”

Mostin shrugged. “Good question. Technically, the *dimensional lock* should prevent a creature in dream-form from gaining ingress. I say *technically* because she may have tricks that we do not know of. And Dream is odd, to say the least.”

“In ‘dream-form?’” Ortwin persisted. “You mean she may be nearby?”

“Coterminous? Why not?”

“She is not,” Eadric said. “At least, not *very* near. The Eye of Palamabron would reveal her if she were.”

Ortwin smiled sarcastically and scratched his haunch. “Then your thoughts will remain pure! How blessed you must feel! You must teach me the secret someday.”

Eadric sighed. Ortwin was beginning to get on his nerves. He closed his eyes, and experienced the

frustration. He sighed again, stood up, and walked towards the doors.

“Er, where are you going, Ed?” Ortwin asked.

“The Steeple,” Eadric replied.

“Excellent idea! You have a stash of fine firewine, and...”

“Alone, Ortwin. I am going alone.”

“Oh.”

Mostin *mind blanked* him first.

**

Outside, the wind had picked up and the rain had begun to fall. Nwm’s storm – as promised – had

arrived, and Eadric hoped that it wouldn’t prove *too* violent. He ascended sixty of the seventy-seven steps of the Steeple, passing through a small door into the chamber situated

below the open roof.

It was a comfortable space – once a round guard room, but since adapted to the function of a parlour.

During the garrisoning of Kyrtil's Burh, it had briefly enjoyed a return to its original function, although the Templars stationed there had done nothing to alter its furnishings. A single window of lead glass in the west wall admitted the remaining light of the failing day. The room, and those below it, had been those 'rented' by Mostin in his attempts to fabricate a plausible story following his violation of the first Injunction – before the Claviger had acquiesced to act as the guardian of the moral fibre of Wyre's Wizards.

Eadric lit an oil-lantern – the flame of which flickered unsteadily in the draught before he closed its shutter – threw off his armour, opened a tall cabinet, and retrieved a bottle of firewine. He smiled at the fact that Ortwin knew where he kept it – and poured himself a small glass. He was mildly amused that it should still feel such an indulgence to him: he had violated so many of his vows that ignoring the precept which warned against alcohol seemed utterly trivial in comparison.

Sitting on one of the three narrow pallets which served as the room's couches, Eadric set Lukarn down next to himself, reached into his belt-pouch, and retrieved a tiny piece of tightly-rolled parchment. He opened the lantern hood, and thrust the paper into the flame, holding it between his fingers and

watching as it quickly burned to nothing.

Soon after, a *gate* opened, and Titivilus stepped through.

"Thank-you for your prompt response," Eadric said.

The Devil smiled laconically. "Hello, *Ahma*. I had hoped to run into you in Afqithan but, alas, you fled before we had a chance to speak. If you had answered my *sending* then things may have advanced at a faster pace for you."

"I was reluctant to place myself in your hands at that time," Eadric raised an eyebrow. "And who would arbitrate between the arbiter and his client?"

"I have a friend called Furcas who might volunteer in that capacity," the Duke replied caustically.

"You have friends? That surprises me."

"You are correct," Titivilus answered. "In fact, I despise him. But we are working together for the moment. This is a cosy little chamber. I almost prefer it to your study in the keep."

Eadric narrowed his eyes, unsure of whether the Devil jibed him or not. "I require advice, and perhaps mediation. If there is a price, then I would be grateful if you informed me of it prior to further communication."

"There is no price, *Ahma*," Titivilus replied easily. "Although my perspective is a little different from yours, and the advice I give may not necessarily be that which you seek. As both the voice of your conscience and your divinely ordained tempter, I have more than one agenda to maintain. I presume

that your inquiry concerns the demoness Soneillon?"

Eadric sighed, and nodded.

“She is something, is she not?” Titivilus laughed. “And, I should say, she is *nothing*, if you understand my meaning. It was whispered in the narrow streets of Zelatar that she could bring a corpse to orgasm –

forgive me, *Ahma*, I do not wish to offend your sense of propriety. I am sure that your interest in Graz’zt’s former concubine is purely pragmatic.”

“You know her then? You have met her?”

“Perhaps. I do not recall.” Titivilus replied vaguely.

“She is a potential ally,” Eadric said.

“So I hear,” Titivilus smiled.

“Does Graz’zt know of her interest in me?”

“Graz’zt has an extensive network of spies, but he is ultimately ill-informed and disorganized. I would hazard that he does not, but I make no assurances to that effect.”

“If a confrontation occurs between the Prince and myself, I would – if possible – prefer to keep it out of Wyre and the World of Men. Do you think Afqithan would be a suitable locale?”

“It offers greatly augmented magic. Mostin – and Shomei, to whom, incidentally, you should extend my warmest regards – would benefit from this. As would Graz’zt himself, of course. I suspect that the risks would be greater, but the possibility of victory higher.”

“Soneillon has powerful allies – and dangerous, it seems. She denies direct association with them, or rather seems reluctant to admit responsibility for their actions.”

“This is not unusual for a Demon Queen,” Titivilus replied drily.

“She subjected me to an extremely powerful compulsion. Could a *mind blank* have warded me?”

“Perhaps, although doubtless she possesses dweomers that can circumvent such magic. For a creature of her age, with her power, what can she *not* do, *Ahma*? Magic is formulaic, and in practical terms holds a finite – albeit astronomically large – set of possibilities. There might be a quintillion

combinations which she is technically capable of manifesting alone. If she has unlocked merely a

hundred thousand of them – the most efficient, given a certain set of circumstances – how versatile do you think that makes her?”

Eadric swallowed. The Devil’s premise was plausible. “And Graz’zt? Could the same be said?”

“To a lesser degree. He possesses more raw native power, but lacks that which Soneillon draws freely and most heavily upon – *unbeing*. I do not claim to fully understand it.”

Eadric stared hard at Titivilus. “You are unusually forthcoming. I wonder which of your numerous agendas you are serving by sharing this information.”

The Duke of Hell smiled.

“I have other questions,” Eadric said unsurely, “and I would be interested in hearing your perspective –

or the *Adversarial* perspective, if you are towing a particular line. I should also, at this point, like to seek further assurances that there are no hidden fees, contracts, compacts, reciprocal obligations or responsibilities involved.”

Titivilus raised an eyebrow. “Your caution is admirable, *Ahma*, but you are somewhat over-concerned.

Ask away! There is no obligation upon you.”

“The Marilith Nufrut mentioned an entity named *Carasch*. Mostin was unaware of its existence. A balor which fell within the orbit of the Ancient Void, and then rose from it again. Is the name familiar to you?”

“Yes,” Titivilus answered. He seemed unperturbed, but Eadric knew that gauging the Confuser’s true reaction was close to impossible.

“What distinguishes one fiend from the next, insofar as some possess the ability to withstand annihilation?”

Titivilus laughed. “That is more profound than you understand. I do not *know*, *Ahma*. Perhaps they are endowed with a particular strength of Will which sets them apart from their peers. Perhaps they are lucky. Perhaps they apprehend some greater Truth which allows consciousness to persist, even in the face of nonexistence.”

“Such an entity,” Eadric continued, “*Carasch*. It would be as far removed from Rurunoth as Soneillon is from a succubus of the least stature.”

“That is probably a reasonable parallel.”

“How many of these entities – *chthonics*, as Shomei dubbed them – would you say exist?”

“I am not privy to that information,” Titivilus admitted.

Eadric scowled. “Would you even hazard a guess? A handful? Dozens? Thousands? Millions?”

“I would not know, *Ahma*. I suspect we are talking in terms of relative infinities. How many fell from grace? How many fled to the Abyss? How many were enmeshed in the Ancient’s power? Mere

numbers cease to have meaning, after a certain point.”

“Why is no reference made to them in texts – legitimate, heretical, magical or otherwise? I use those descriptors loosely – I do not wish to engage in a debate on the nature of heresy.”

“Certain names and concepts are taboo. Unbeing, Demogorgon, existent nonexistence – this is an example of such. Before the Church of Oronthon was established, when it was still a tribal religion whose God vied with a dozen others – this was a taboo. It persisted.”

” *Saizhan* addresses this issue.”

” *Saizhan* claims to address many issues.’

“Is Oronthon then rewriting the past? Changing the Truth of what has gone before?”

“That is one possible interpretation. I do not doubt there are others.”

**

Mostin sat and leered at the effigy upon the altar – an eagle rearing above a solar orb – and felt a frisson of disgust at the avian symbol.

Nearby, Shomei sat in a contemplative trance, Ortwin snored loudly, and Iua – silent as a cat –

practiced with her rapier, repeating maneuvers endlessly, each time with subtle variations on a complex theme. Nwm, apparently enraptured with the Green, paid no heed to any other.

The Alienist groped within his *portable hole* and retrieved an ornate box of carved wood from among the objects stored there. Opening it, he pulled the contents – a stone slab – from its red silk wrappings, and set it upon the rug in front of him.

Mostin closed his eyes, focussed inwards, and inspected his valences: nested shells which grew

outwards from a central hub, rapidly blurring into an indistinct haze where no differentiation yet existed. He placed his mind beyond the order, beyond the haze, in the swirling, chaotic morass which surrounded it.

Tiny buds of potential were burgeoning, seeking to make contact with each other and the hub of

consciousness at the centre. Deliberately, he focussed upon them, drawing on his reservoir. His mind opened like a sluice, pouring its contents forth. Rapidly, the buds blossomed gloriously, and bore fruit which ripened in a heartbeat. He shook, and sweated profusely.

The Alienist turned his attention to the tablet in front of him, his eyes scanning over it, and his fingertips tracing the etchings and designs upon it. There was a sudden *crack*, as the slab shattered, and the sound of grinding stone. An eddy of wind arose, and all that was left before him – a pile of dust –

was blown across the floor of the chapel.

Shomei observed him with a mixture of envy and mirth.

“Congratulations,” the Infernalist said drily.

“Thank-you,” Mostin replied. “How long before you...?”

“A week at most. I had hoped to beat you to it.”

“Hah! No chance. This means that I am – if only for a brief while – the most potent spellcaster in Wyre, and the first in two generations to achieve this notable achievement. I don’t include Mulissu in that statement – she is not native, and doesn’t count.”

Nwm smiled quietly, but said nothing.

*

As Mostin sat and contemplated the spell called *Graz'zt* – designed by Fillein-who-would-later-be-Jovol in the heyday of his power and influence – he shifted uncomfortably. Something was amiss.

Within the perfectly executed formula which comprised the spell, there was no room for error: each component and factor was optimized for an efficiency of purpose which Mostin deeply appreciated,

both functionally and aesthetically.

Fifty-five years. The Prince was bound for fifty-five years, if the stories are true. Why? Why was he not bound permanently? The dweomer indicates no provision for an expiry.

“I am uneasy,” he whispered to Shomei.

“I am tired, Mostin. If you are having an episode of paranoia, then talk to Nwm.”

“This is *important*,” the Alienist hissed. Nearby, Ortwin grunted in response, and turned over in his sleep. Mostin resumed a quieter voice. “The spell which now resonates in my mind preoccupies me.

There is an inconsistency.”

Shomei yawned and gestured impatiently.

“The incarceration should have been *permanent*. Why was it not? According to tradition he was bound for fifty-five years. This leads me to three possible conclusions, none of which are particularly pleasant to entertain: One, the effect ‘wore off’ over time; two, the spell contains a flaw in its formula which I

cannot perceive; or, three, he was released by someone.”

Shomei raised an eyebrow. “I see your dilemma. Magic of this magnitude is enduring, and I find it hard to accept the first solution. Fillein was a perfectionist beyond compare, rendering the second answer even less likely. I would opt for the third possibility, or a fourth which you have not considered.”

“Which would be?”

“I do not *have* a fourth solution, Mostin. I am merely pointing out that it would be premature to discount the possibility of its existence. I think that he was probably released.”

“By whom?”

“Who can tell now, Mostin? It was three hundred years ago. A rival mage?”

“Fillein – or Jovol – was – or is – without peer. He had – or has – no rival. Was he in possession of the *web of motes* at that time? If so, surely he would have anticipated the possibility in any case.”

“Then one of the cabal? Or Fillein himself, maybe, for whatever unknown reasons motivated him. This is idle speculation. We cannot *know*. They are all dead and gone.”

“Hlioth remains,” Mostin pointed out.

“Hlioth is deranged, but not stupid. Why would she release the Prince of Azzagrat? And if so, why did he not eliminate her afterwards?”

Nwm interrupted unexpectedly. Neither of the Wizards had been aware that he had been paying

attention. “If she released Graz’zt, then I commend her actions. Such creatures have no place in this world, bound or not. Rurunoth was bad enough, but a Demon Prince?”

“Then she is most inconsistent,” Mostin pointed out. “She participated in the binding of the Enforcer.”

“To prevent further *summonings* in Wyre,” Nwm smiled. “Didn’t that clause in Jovol’s Injunction ever

strike you as odd, Mostin? Why do you think it was singled out, above and beyond the ban upon mages assaulting other mages?”

“Because of the circumstances prior to it,” the Alienist replied. “There were too many *bindings*, too many *gates* opening. The possibility of too many more.”

“Too many for what?” Nwm asked.

“For the established order to sustain,” Mostin admitted. “But if you are somehow intimating that your Goddess insisted upon including a clause in the Injunction which would prevent further offense to

her...”

“You are trapped in discursive thought – Uedii is a consciousness of what is Natural, not some other being ‘out there.’ Jovol was a Dreamer, who negotiated with Celestials, protected both Eadric and

Tramst, acted in the interests of maintaining a peace, and directed the *binding* of an atavism from a previous reality. He was nothing, if not eclectic. I think you underestimate the scope of his vision.”

“Hmph!” Mostin muttered. “Anyway. If we attempt to *bind* the Prince anytime soon, it will not be here.

I have already given thought to it.”

Shomei sighed, as Mostin proceeded to explain about permanent *dimensional locks*, pocket demiplanes and spells which foiled all perception.

*All of Kyrtil’s Burh was consecrated by Tahl, and the chapel *hallowed*. Soneillon dispelled the effect in the chapel before dominating Eadric and the guardians. I use the ToH version of Movanic Devas

(more martial, less magical), so *hallow* was not available to the celestials in order to restore the chapel.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 08-24-2003

Church and Steeple - Part 2

Nhura uttered a string of black profanities when she received the news from Koilimilou

that Crosod had fled back to Shadow, and was, by now, probably dead. The hunting party descended into the woods of Hethio, two leagues from the ancient dolmens at Groba. A madness fell upon the birds and animals as they fled from the umbral sidhe and the creatures which accompanied them: griffons, the chthonic *thing*, and the Lamia Jetheeg – another sorceress of no mean ability. Koilimilou was incapable of subsequently *scrying* the Wurm, which only made his death seem that much more likely. Threxu's demise was all but certain.

Frustrated, and aware of the fact that it might prematurely attract undue attention, Nhura nonetheless instructed Koilimilou to *scry* Eadric of Deorham. Although the Lillend was aware of the general location of the *Ahma*'s stronghold, a lock upon him and a subsequent *clairvoyance* would pin him down. The Cambion's efforts drew a blank.

Nhura cursed, and ordered Koilimilou to call and bind as many demons as she was capable of. A bitter argument ensued, but Koilimilou finally relented. Previously, she and the Lillend might have been well-matched; but now Nhura wore Irknaan's mantle, and was unassailable by any magic which the

Cambion possessed. As dusk fell, under the Lillend's watchful eye – lest she order the creatures to turn upon her Queen – Koilimilou struck a series of bargains with profanities against which the soil of Wyre heaved in revulsion. Throughout, Nhura was poised to invoke *destruction* upon the Cambion if she spoke even a phrase out of turn.

Soneillon watched from behind a tree-trunk some fifty yards distant, hiding, *invisible*, and in the shape of a diminutive woodland spirit.

She had not anticipated Nhura's determination, nor the resources at the Lillend's command – albeit vicariously. Neither had the Succubus considered the lengths to which Nhura would go in order to

assert her claims to Afqithan – in her retinue were knights loyal to Samodoquol and Menicau, and they needed to be suitably impressed.

The Queen of Throile passed into the unconscious world again, and returned her attention to Eadric.

The mental landscape of dreamers in Hethio was fraught with hideous nightmares, the significance of which none understood.

**

In the topmost chamber of the Steeple, the *Ahma* sat closeted with Titivilus, probing the Infernal Duke on a variety of subjects, but retaining a healthy sense of scepticism with regard to any answers that he received. When they returned to the matter of Soneillon, Eadric stayed true to his words with Titivilus at their first meeting: he preserved a total honesty in communication. He was struck with the realization that whether the Devil adhered to the same premise was, in the final analysis, irrelevant.

"You would advise me to use her," Eadric said. "To slake my lust, draw upon her power, discard her when her utility has expired, and move on."

"That is what *I* would do, *Ahma*. I am not you, however. I lack your moral baggage."

“You lack compassion.”

“If you prefer,” Titivilus sighed. “Although I thought we had already agreed as to its redundancy as an effective tool.”

“That is because you also lack the ability to understand it,” Eadric smiled.

“As your understanding of *compassion* is obviously far more developed than mine,” Titivilus laughed,

“then perhaps you should also extend it to Graz’zt. And every other Demon and Devil between

Azzagrat and Nessus. Set yourself up as a shining beacon of Love, *Ahma*, and watch as, no doubt, repentant fiends flock to your warm smile and welcoming arms. I will remain at the back of the line and observe as Astaroth and Moloch, like pubescent girls, shyly jostle for their places and anxiously think ‘will he choose me next?’ I think not.”

“Your mockery does you no credit, Titivilus, and merely reveals the fear that you experience in the face of that which you no longer comprehend but secretly long to become reacquainted with. I am not

crippled by my doubt, but draw strength it. You resent me, because I am mortal but still you are forced to acknowledge my spiritual authority. I see the limits of your perspective – the ‘Adversarial’ paradigm

– and recognize the *partial* truth which it contains. But you fail to transcend the dichotomy of total self-determination and absolute surrender to the Will of Oronthon: they are identical. Accompany me later to Morne, and I will introduce you to the *Sela*. I guarantee your safety – I would happily defend your right to speak with him.”

“No, thank-you,” Titivilus replied calmly. “Although I’m sure I appreciate the offer. Maybe another time – in an aeon or two.”

“The door to the Fane will remain open.”

“And I will remain outside,” the Devil finished. “Now, *Ahma*, before I grow weary of your proselytizing, and my mood becomes less accommodating, let us turn to ‘mediation.’ You are ready for me to act as a go-between in communicating with Soneillon?”

“I require the benefit of your perspective in order to better inform mine. You are adept at dealing with fiends, and penetrating their motives.”

“That much is true,” Titivilus smiled archly. “Am I to act as a chaperone to you also, lest you feel an uncontrollable urge to bed this demoness?”

“You have a singular sense of humour.”

“And your track history speaks for itself. Nonetheless, my raillery may be pertinent – Soneillon is said to possess a peculiar way of eliciting sympathy.”

“So I have discovered,” Eadric said wryly.

“Now?”

“Now,” the Paladin nodded.

Titivilus issued a *sending*. Three seconds later, Soneillon manifested. Dreamstuff swirled briefly around her – nightmares and visions of horror, which rapidly faded to nothing in the waking world. As before, her form – that of a Trempan peasant-girl – evoked a complex reaction in Eadric, despite a knowledge that it was entirely superficial.

*

“Charmed, I’m sure,” Titivilus bowed with mock politeness.

“Is there any particular reason why I should not extinguish this gnat?” The Succubus asked the Paladin.

“If I thought it would carry any weight,” Eadric replied, “then I would say ‘because he is divinely mandated.’ As I know that you recognize no such authority, I will simply say ‘because I ask you not to.’

I have requested the services of Titivilus as an arbiter. He is, in a manner of speaking, my guardian angel – albeit a fallen one.”

“I may have misjudged Oronthon’s sense of the absurd. This monster is hardly a disinterested party, Eadric. Still, he risks much by being here alone – I wonder how he is being recompensed. Where are Murmuur and Furcus, Devil? Three together might pose a challenge to me, but one alone is an easy target.”

“Alas, they lack my boldness and appetite for adventure,” Titivilus replied, “and my legal expertise,” he added.

Soneillon tilted her head inquisitively. “You wish for a formal compact then, Eadric?”

Eadric shook his head. “I wish for a third opinion – however partial. I am also highly dubious of the extent to which you would regard any compact as binding. You seem oblivious to most other

established fiendish conventions.”

Soneillon moved closer, and her eyes bored into Eadric. “You are perceptive. I wonder if Nehael recognized your potential for transcendence when she was first attracted to you, or she saw you merely as a redeemer and was romantically fixated? She was always somewhat idealistic.”

Eadric squinted. “What do you know of her?”

“I knew *all* of the succubi in Graz’zt’s harem, Eadric. And the mariliths, the lamias, and every other shade of fiendish slut that he could lay his hands on. Each bitch is more wicked and depraved than the last, although, no doubt, each has her charms. When one spends a million years as his chief concubine, there isn’t much that one doesn’t discover.”

“And you, Queen Soneillon?” Titivilus asked with an amused expression. “How wicked and depraved are you? I would almost say the wickeder, the better, from the *Ahma*’s perspective. He has a powerful urge to heal, you know. It continues to lead him into all kinds of trouble.”

“I will tolerate your presence, but will brook neither innuendo nor veiled insults, Devil.

This creature is a viper, Eadric – do not let his apparent openness and easy mannerisms deceive you. His only goal is your damnation, and if he can use me as a vehicle to achieve it then all the better for him.”

Titivilus was about to speak, but Eadric held up his hand to stay him. “My circumstances are unusual,”

the Paladin said to Soneillon. “And it would seem that established mores do not apply to me. Somehow, I have been appointed a role in determining what is right from what is wrong, although I fail yet to fully understand my place in the new order. Damnation itself may be an outmoded concept – *Saizhan* is beyond such categories.”

“You will be your own judge, Eadric. You know this. Who could be harsher?”

Eadric swallowed. He felt distinctly uncomfortable. Despite her subtleties, Soneillon seemed to possess an uncanny knack for presenting stark truths in uncompromising terms.

“I do not understand what motivates you,” Eadric said.

“That is part of my appeal,” she replied. “I am disappointed that you severed the connection between us: had the spell I wrought not been negated, you could have met me in Dream. What do you fear?”

“His lust confuses him,” Titivilus said, “and he is unused to acting for the simple purpose of sensory gratification. Evil and pleasure are intimately connected in the *Ahma*’s mind: Temple conditioning is hard to shake off, even when one is the Breath of God.”

“The Devil’s words have some merit,” Eadric nodded. “I would also add, however, that Dream is something which I have little understanding of. In Afqithan, the Duke offered to act as a mediator between myself and the Loquai and their allies – I assume that he included you in the equation. I

refused him for the same reason that I was dubious of encountering you in Dream – it was not a

familiar environment. I prefer reality to be more tangible – there are enough variables to deal with already.”

“That is a specious argument,” Soneillon smiled, “but, as I have said, I am no philosopher and prefer not to be drawn into ontological debate. It would be a terrible thing if my intellect succeeded in denying the possibility of my own existence.”

Eadric laughed despite himself, before staring at her with a mixture of wonder and suspicion: was her humour genuinely self-deprecating, or merely an affectation assumed for his benefit?

“We should address the question of Graz’zt,” the lightness in the Demoness’s tone had vanished. “Are you now ready to hear the worst?”

“I don’t understand.”

“Nehael, Eadric. Do you wish to know what has become of her?”

Be careful, Ahma, she lies almost as well as I.

“No doubt you will take a perverse pleasure in relaying this information,” Eadric sighed.

I do not take my pleasure thus, sweet Eadric. “Nehael is currently held in a cell of adamant, deep below

Zelatar, in immensely powerful magical bonds, and subjected to pain that you cannot begin to comprehend – Graz’zt is particularly skilled and inventive in these matters. She is guarded by the Nalfeshnee Trakkao – who administers punishment on the Prince’s behalf.” Soneillon’s expression was one that, if offered by any other, the Paladin would have interpreted as genuine empathy and sorrow.

This whore is outrageous!

“Proceed,” Eadric said coldly, scowling at Titivilus. He was beginning to feel sick.

“Violation of the body is only the beginning, Eadric. There is a limit to the trauma that even Demonic flesh – once fashioned of Empyrean stuff – can sustain before it loses all ability to renew itself. And Nehael is fragile – she has already relinquished much of the strength that was native to her. Little of her as you remember her remains, and her physical form has been stripped away: she consists now largely of *essence*. As to the integrity of her personality, who can tell? He may have broken her altogether.

Prolonged pain of that magnitude often leads to madness and evil – such is the way of things.”

“I fail to see what benefit relaying this information conveys to anyone.”

“You should be prepared for the worst, Eadric,” Soneillon answered. “She may be unrecognizable – not merely her form, but *who* she is. I would not keep this information from you, and later hear that you were deceived or misled by me.”

Titivilus raised an eyebrow.

Outside, the storm raged.

Eadric looked at Soneillon. “I would request a brief moment to confer with my counsellor.”

The Demoness nodded, and casually lay down upon one of the narrow pallets, lazily stretching her

arms above her head.

**

Within the sanctuary, Nwm sat motionless, his perception reaching outwards through the weather system that he himself had conjured, and rapidly engaging in a series of penetrating mental glances towards his environment.

Eadric was masked from his faculties, but the creatures who were near him were not. Titivilus appeared to the Druid’s inner vision as a familiar set of dissonances which, when combined, left no doubt in Nwm’s mind as to the identity of the Devil. The other outsider – which defied conventional

classification – seemed to be a shadow of the real, a fantasy which eluded direct scrutiny, but whose presence could be inferred by its effects on the Green in its vicinity. Soneillon, Nwm mused.

He furrowed his brow in concern. Eadric was playing with high stakes. Attempting to force some

epiphany, no doubt, or construct a radical synthesis which would inform his direction.

The Druid found himself reflecting upon Jovol, the Injunction – both in letter and in spirit – and his own words to Mostin earlier that evening. A niggling doubt began to grow in his mind, quickly

becoming an irritation with Eadric's actions, and a realization that his own role in events had been too passive. The time for calculated inaction was passing.

Too many realities were in conflict, and the new one, offered by Tramst, did little to assuage Nwm's concerns. *Saizhan* was too cerebral for his liking, despite its claims of relevance and immediacy. It was as though the devotional heart of Oronthonianism – however distorted and misaligned – had been

ripped out and replaced with a philosophy which elevated the dialectical process itself to deific

significance. Not that the majority of Oronthon worshippers would even notice, Nwm thought. Most

would continue with the rites that they had observed for several hundred years, oblivious to the fact that their incarnate deity – or, rather, one aspect of him, his 'gnostic intellect' (whatever that was) – had utterly refuted half a millennium of dogma.

Nehael had spoken to him long before of a 'Middle Way' which avoided the extremes which had

characterized Oronthonian thought and practice – of *all* thought and practice. Yet Nehael had rejected the Celestial Order a second time, when none other than Rintrah himself had offered to escort her back to Heaven. Uedii had calmly accepted her in the face of reason and expectation – an outsider to

Nature's order, admitted to her inmost secrets.

Saizhan. The Middle Way. The Dialectic. What had Eadric said that Titivilus named it? – Ahh, the 'Path of Lightning.' A suitably Left-handed spin on things. And Shomei had been moved on some level – but Shomei was Shomei, and carried her own fears and ghosts with her.

Somehow, Nehael was central – although, somewhere in the details, this had been conveniently

forgotten. She had been the first to seek the reconciliation and transcendence of opposing Truths. She possessed a profound wisdom which the Druid missed.

Nwm sighed. If he understood the Green – and he was by no means certain of his own ability in that regard – then it would act accordingly through him. Would the tension between Oronthonianism and

Uedii worship persist, although on a more rarefied level? *Saizhan* seemed to be a practice reserved for the educated classes. What relevance did it possess for a farmer, or for a trapper? What did they care for the much-vaunted 'dialectic of negation?'

Retreat from the world into a life of contemplation was a luxury that few could afford, and was bought with the sweat and toil of Uediian peasants, however indirectly. The Church might be in the process of disestablishment, and its taxes lifted – as the *Ahma* had promised – but its principal funds still derived from the contributions of wealthy aristocrats. And *their* money was stolen from the farmers.

I suppose I should speak with Tramst, at some point, he thought. Although I fail to see what he could tell me that I don't already know. Still, I should give him a chance. I might be pleasantly surprised.

The Druid returned his attention to the Steeple, where the Green warped uneasily around the interlopers.

I am sick of this. I am sick of them , being here, interfering.

He glanced at Mostin, who was fussing – attempting to arrange his padded mat to his satisfaction.

Shomei was on the verge of sleep.

Nwm stroked his beard, and wondered how things would unfold.

**

You are enamoured.

Somewhat. But it will pass.

You haven't used Palamabron's Eye to interrogate her.

She subscribes to a different Truth. What use would it be?

[Laughter]. *It is your truth which matters to you, Ahma , not hers.*

You are incorrect.

Perhaps your lust blinds you.

No, it doesn't, although it would be easier for you if it did. You are afraid of her.

[Irritated]. *As should you be. She can annihilate you with a moment's thought.*

That is not what I meant. You are afraid of what she represents.

[Condescendingly]. *And what may that be, Ahma?*

An escape from the prison that you have created for yourself.

Your moralizing is becoming tedious, Ahma. Has she then escaped Oronthon as well? Has she placed herself beyond the infinite – your view of the infinite. Is she outside of his purview? That sword cuts both ways, Ahma . What is not Oronthon?

I will not be drawn into monistic thought.

You are avoiding the issue.

The issue is no longer a concern of mine. It is a road which leads nowhere. Now can we please consider the matter in hand – that of Soneillon. What is your opinion of her?

You are projecting your view of Nehael onto the Queen of Throile, Ahma . You have been seduced by her eloquence, wit and her – not inconsiderable – physical charm. You are confusing the two succubi in your mind. Both fly in the face of convention, and both have seized – or created – their own truth.

Are her words regarding Nehael's current state plausible?

Utterly plausible. This does not mean that they are entirely true, however.

Do you believe that she is deceiving me?

If I told you either 'yes' or 'no,' then you would – quite rightly – question my motivation for doing so. I will therefore say 'I do not know,' although you might also suspect that I am withholding an answer for some unknown reason. In fact, I do not know.

[Wrily] How hard it must be, to be Titivilus. Are there occasions when you speak the plain truth, and no-one believes you?

If I speak the plain truth, then it is invariably in an effort to deceive, so the point is moot.

Would you advise a formal compact, in order to insure me against any ill will that she might bear

towards me?

As you pointed out yourself, she may not regard such an agreement as binding.

Does she have a history of compacting that you are aware of?

I believe she prefers informal arrangements, such as with Irknaan.

That is not reassuring.

[Wickedly] *Of course, she may be attempting to avoid a compact precisely in order to give her greater latitude in her dealings with you later on.*

Your mind is truly tortuous.

Why thank-you, Ahma.

*

"Have you reached a decision, Eadric? Will you trust me?"

"I will *never* trust you Soneillon, because I will never understand you. You are both too alien and too human for comfort. I will, however, temporarily suspend my doubt – and possibly my better

judgement. If you betray me – to death or perdition – then I will hold no ill-will towards you. The fault will be mine alone."

She smiled, and offered her hand. "Come with me. I will show you what we have to work with."

Eadric stepped backwards suspiciously. "Nhura is still loose. I must deal with her first – assuming that you still refuse to intervene and discourage her. I need time to prepare."

"This will take only a short while. I will return you in an hour or two."

The Paladin shot a glance towards Titivilus. The Devil's face was totally impassive.

Eadric groaned and, tentatively, reached out to touch her. She dissolved, and seemed to flow both into him and around him.

The nightmares of demons – which raged all around – were impotent against the Void which cradled

him, and bore him to Throile.

originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 10-07-2003

Mostly Nwm

Nwm fretted. It was nearly midnight, the two fiends had departed from his field of consciousness, and Eadric had not returned to the chapel. The fact that the Paladin was *mind blanked* did not help matters –

it was impossible to discern whether he was in the vicinity or not.

When Gheim returned through the open window, the Eagle confirmed that the *Ahma* was no longer in the Steeple by dropping Lukarn at Nwm's feet.

“The room is empty, although his armour is still within. Do not make me fly in search of him, Nwm –

or at least calm the wind somewhat, if you do.”

Nwm scowled. He feared manipulation and betrayal by either the Infernal Duke, the Succubus, or both.

The possibility that the two fiends might be in cahoots with one another also troubled him.

Iua glanced at the Druid. Other than Nwm, she was the only one of the group still awake.

“Should I wake Mostin?”

Nwm shook his head. “What use would it serve? Eadric is unlocatable. We just have to wait. Stay here

– I'll be back presently.”

He opened the chapel door and strode into the storm.

**

Nwm's contention that Nhura could not mount an effective assault upon Kyrtil's Burh until the next day was based on incomplete information, and a gross underestimate of the power at the Lillend's

command. Likewise, Mostin's belief that the *screen* invoked by Shomei, together with the *dimensional lock* would prove a sufficient protection for the few hours they needed, was equally flawed.

Nhura was resourceful, merciless, and never one to cede the initiative in any conflict in which she was engaged. Five teams of demons conjured by Koilimilou – each consisting of a glabrezu and a succubus

– had been dispatched, and one pair finally returned with useful news for the Lillend.

At Koilimilou's command, the fiends had systematically scoured the countryside in Western Trempa,

looking for Deorham and Kyrtil's Burh, which – after questioning local farmers in an outlying stead near Hernath – was revealed to a succubus to be only twelve miles distant.

Elated with the news, the demoness slew several families in a fit of glee, before returning to her dark mistress and her even darker queen.

The castle, it appeared, was hidden by a powerful illusion, and at the centre of a highly localized weather system. The nearby village of Deorham, however, was plainly visible. The glabrezu had

penetrated the *screen* about the keep with its vision, but subsequently retreated upon finding a quartet of devas – appearing from nowhere – which had hewn at him with their flaming swords.

When the glabrezu returned, eighteen seconds later, it was in the company of four others of its kind, five succubi, three *summoned* vrock, and the creature Hazihe – the chthonic babau originally enlisted by Irknaan, and now serving Nhura.

The rewards promised to the fiends by Nhura were lavish, and included a diamond circlet of immense value, an Azer blade of fabled power, a *cloak of displacement*, and a *robe of stars*.

The demons were well motivated.

**

As Nwm began to walk the short distance across the courtyard to the base of the Steeple, one of the devas – his name was Saphrez, although the Druid neither knew nor cared – manifested before him.

Nwm was bathed in light from the *holy aura* which surrounded the deva.

“There are demons abroad,” the Celestial announced. “Where is the *Ahma*?”

Nwm cursed, and shook his head.

“I suggest that you retreat within.”

The Druid dashed back through the doors, and yelled, jarring Shomei, Ortwin and Mostin from sleep.

“Demons. We must act *now*.”

Blearily, Mostin invoked a *wall of force*.

In the courtyard, confusion reigned. The demons were materializing, but only the glabrezu – possessed of an extraordinary perceptive faculty – could readily pierce the *screen* which protected the area.

Through force of will, the babau Hazihe summoned sufficient insight to mentally overcome the

illusion. Neither the succubi nor the vrocks were capable of clear perception, however. Despite a

knowledge that they were standing within the castle walls, all they saw was a rocky knoll.

The deva Tarquam, somewhat disoriented by the sudden appearance of numbers of demons – some of

whom appeared very confused – nonetheless reacted quickly. He spoke a *holy word*, instantly sending two succubi and a glabrezu back to their Abyssal home.

Seconds later, Hazihe – a yawning void which pulsed with unlight – leaped upon him, ripping

effortlessly through celestial flesh with claws and maw, and, in the blink of an eye, permanently

extinguished the deva's shining essence.

Nazaihemah and Rôrex, the two other devas in the courtyard, both pronounced further *holy words* in succession, banishing yet more of the fiends screaming back to the lower planes. Hazihe, two of the glabrezu, and one of the succubi were unaffected.

From within the confines of the chapel, Mostin grimaced as he heard two *power words* echo within the courtyard above the noise of the storm. There was a brief pause as the demons dispatched the devas, and then the glabrezu ripped the doors of the chapel off of their hinges.

One tried pushing forwards, but encountered the *wall of force*.

The other attempted to *teleport* into the sanctum behind where the party stood, but could not penetrate the *dimensional lock*.

Ortwin smiled, and stuck his finger up.

"I think that gesture may be a little premature," Nwm remarked drily.

**

The Void embraced him. It was warm, soft, yielding, welcoming. It showed its power through its

capacity for absorption – which had no limit – and a profound silence, free of all worry and distraction.

Eadric felt as though he teetered upon the edge of oblivion, and was vaguely surprised that the threat of annihilation did not seem so terrible. Beyond, fear and madness – the thought-forms and unconscious ravings of fiends – seemed a universe away. He wanted Nothing. He needed Nothing.

She is deadly. This truth is too easy. [Thought fails. Bliss. Emptiness.]

He corporeated again within an opulent chamber, draped with crimson and fuligin. It was replete with fantastic art of a most abstract and disturbing nature – although what it portrayed, he could not tell.

Dimension seemed warped and unnatural, as though curves existed where none should,

and angles played at the corners of his mind only to disappear when observed directly. His perceptions buckled with layered dissonances. Nearby, a small silver bell hung from a delicate chain.

Soneillon had assumed a guise that her servants and thralls were familiar with, and Eadric swallowed.

No longer a young girl, but a demoness of indeterminate age. Still beautiful, but cold, aloof, serene, worshipful; at ease with the terrible power which she commanded. She was as tall as he was, and wore only a diadem studded with black jewels.

The Succubus smiled disarmingly, and, for the Paladin's benefit, modestly shrouded her form with her sable wings.

"Welcome to Throile," she said coyly. "I have been somewhat neglectful, and there are matters that I must attend to – do not be alarmed, I will return very shortly. Strike the bell if there is anything which you require – Helitihai will meet any need that you might have."

Although the word *any* was not pronounced with undue emphasis, it still carried a meaning beyond the obvious.

Eadric sighed. "I would ask two things. First, that you do not present an expurgated view of this place in order to protect my feelings – my actions must be made in full consciousness, and the more that is hidden from me, the less I will feel inclined to trust my judgement. I am in the Abyss, and I do not expect to encounter scenes which I find agreeable. Second, I do not wish to linger here too long – I am a willing ambassador, but I have other responsibilities that I must meet before I can commit to any course of action in Throile. I would feel uncomfortable if my stay lasted beyond an hour – an hour *in Wyre*, to be clear."

"Your concerns are duly noted, and I will observe your wishes. If you would prefer, you may

accompany me now. But you should be warned: there are things here which you would regard as

obscene, debased and insane. You are likely to be offended."

"I've come this far," Eadric pointed out. "I will reserve judgement."

"It will still shake you to your core."

Eadric found that she was right. The suffering there knew no limits, and the pleasure derived by those who inflicted it was transient, grotesque and depraved. It was, after all, the Abyss.

He earnestly hoped that he would never become inured to it.

**

The demons had vanished from view, although they still appeared as nearby blots within Nwm's mind.

"Is he *mad*?" Ortwin groaned. "He didn't take his weapon with him? Where is he?"

Nwm shrugged. "Presumably with either Titivilus, or Soneillon. Or perhaps both."

“I hope the former, for his sake,” Shomei sighed. “This is tedious. I am utterly depleted, and so is Mostin. And this *dimensional lock* may now prove more a prison than protection. How many are out there, Nwm?”

“Four. One is very unpleasant. There are no celestials within range – they’re either destroyed or fled.”

“I suspect that we are in no shape to deal with the chthonic,” Shomei swallowed. “This is very bad news.”

“We are safe unless they can *disintegrate* the *wall of force*,” Mostin replied. “Don’t panic quite yet. We have twenty minutes or so before it collapses. I have time to prepare a *banishment* and a another spell or two.*”

“Can you issue a *sending* to Ed?” Ortwin asked.

The Alienist shook his head glumly. “By the time I’ve prepared it and cast it, the *wall of force* will be down. And even if I renewed the barrier and Eadric manages to return, he will be out there, and us in

here. He cannot come into the chapel any more than the demons can.”

“I still have a few tricks left,” Nwm said wearily. His expression changed to one of horror as he shot a glance towards the open doorway of the chapel.

The demons had returned, and had brought Eadric’s small staff of retainers with them. Dwarfed by the looming presence of the glabrezu, the servants – valets and maids, stablehands and gardener – cowered in terror.

The huge demons proceeded to dismember and eat the cook. The succubus danced nearby.

“Bring out the *Ahma*,” the Void called Hazihe demanded.

Nwm groaned. “This is intolerable. Why must it always be the innocents? Mostin, bring the *wall* down on my signal.”

“You are joking, of course?”

Nwm began to cast a ward upon himself.

“Nwm?”

“Now, Mostin.”

“Nwm, I...”

“Just for once, trust me Mostin.”

The Alienist sighed, and reluctantly complied. The *wall of force* dissipated.

Nwm grimaced and struck his blackthorn staff once upon the flagstone inside the door. The slabs which formed the chapel floor began to crack. “*She is tired of your interference*,” he announced to the demons, although it would have been spoken with equal vehemence to Soneillon, the Loquai, the devas, and perhaps even to the *Sela* himself.

Green fire blazed over the Druid, threatening to consume him. His skin blistered and

cracked, his cloak ignited. His mouth, ears and eyes dripped a liquid that might have been blood, or sap, or both. A

colossal discharge of viridescence emanated from him. His staff sank into the floor, burning in a

brilliant flash of green, and the *orb of storms* which had topped it fell off and rolled away.

For the briefest moment, Ortwin fancied that he saw the silhouette of a woman in Nwm's place: a shape of great girth and dignity; fecund, bearing a thousand swollen breasts.

The demons were transfixed with expressions of bewilderment – impaled through limb and torso on

vast, thorny boughs which erupted from the paved courtyard, penetrating their hides and instantly

slaying them. The corpse of the babau, Hazihe, flickered disconcertingly on the edge of consciousness: destroyed, nullified – whatever became of things that had already survived annihilation.

Nwm collapsed.

"I should like to sleep now," he said.

Mostin gaped. "I had no idea..."

Iua smiled wily. "Thankfully, we are not *all* wanton braggarts."

The Bard scowled, and then rapidly dismissed his vision as the imaginings of tired eyes and a still sluggish mind. Besides, nobody else seemed to have noticed.

*

Nhura waited.

The Demons did not return. The Lillend attempted to reach them with magical sight. Nothing. They were gone.

She cursed, and glanced at Koilimilou. The Cambion was slumped exhausted, in deep trance. Nhura

resisted the urge to slay her out of spite – Koilimilou was too useful – and glanced at Jetheeg.

The Lamia was, as her custom dictated, *polymorphed* into the form of a crone – approximately human in shape – but of great height, and possessing an unusually bestial and vicious aspect. Jetheeg was accustomed to riding a griffon, and if forced into physical combat – something which she was generally cautious to avoid – her hag-like form served her well.

"The demons have failed," Jetheeg remarked drily.

"Koilimilou will conjure more tomorrow," Nhura scowled.

"She will run out of potential compactees at this rate. Her patroness will be most displeased with her in any case – losing five glabrezu is an act of reprehensible

carelessness.”

“If Rhyxali cannot provide them then we will try another,” Nhura countered. “Soneillon has...”

“Soneillon.” Jetheeg scoffed. “Do not place too much trust in Throile, or its Queen. You are precariously perched, majesty,” the word *majesty* carried the slightest hint of condescension.

“She may provide more of Hazihe’s ilk. She knows many names. I still suspect that she will pay a high price for the *Ahma*.”

“If she ever deigns to answer your *sendings*,” Jetheeg sneered.

“We will prevail,” Nhura hissed. “Watch your tongue, Jetheeg – I am not above removing it. We know the exact location of the castle. You will issue more *sendings* tomorrow – Irzho is still here, somewhere in this world. He can be solicited – I suspect that he, like us, is now somewhat indifferent to Graz’zt’s rule. And give the Cambion an hour to conjure more demons in the morning. When we assault the

place, we will be prepared. Others will be glad to compact – there are sweet rewards for those who

succeed.”

Jetheeg nodded – the promise was directed towards her as much as any other.

But, as later that night, Nhura rested – coiled around a tree of evil temper within the woods of Hethio –

she herself received a succession of *sendings* from her glabrezu lover and cohort, Narab. He had been charged – together with Tebdeluz** – with maintaining a close guard upon Lehurze, whose capacity for treachery, Nhura suspected, was exceeded only by her usefulness as a tool. Lehurze had been appointed the task of reopening a dialogue with the Devils who maintained a presence in Afqithan. In fact, the suavity of the succubus did not match the oratory finesse of Titivilus and Furcas – two of Hell’s

foremost rhetoricians – and she quickly found herself beating a hasty diplomatic retreat.

None of this mattered, because Narab’s *sendings* conveyed a dire message to the Lillend. Mere hours had passed in the demiplane since the departure of the *Ahma* and his party:

Ainhorr holds Afqithan. Three legions plus daemon mercenaries. Devils remain – assaults upon tower ineffective. Loquai capitulated quickly. Lehurze location unknown. Tebdeluz eliminated. Annexation took five minutes.

No, not sweet Tebdeluz! Nhura swore profusely. Disposition and location of enemy? Generals? Ainhorr returned to favour? What of Soneillon? Graz’zt?

Bar-igura; some chasme. No dretches – highly mobile. Nycaloths. Seven mariliths; auxiliaries and specialists include goristros, kelvezu, retrievers, many succubi. Ainhorr armoured and rearmed.

Soneillon location unknown. Graz’zt presumed Azzagrat.

Nhura groaned. She had half-anticipated some form of inquiry from Zelatar when the

periodic *gate* opened – hence her own intentional absence. But this was unexpected. Lehurze may have sold her out.

As could any one of a dozen others, for that matter. And three legions – close to twenty thousand

demons – was hardly a token presence.

What to do now?, she wondered.

**

“You expect me to do *what*?” Eadric asked, incredulous.

“Do you think that you could deal with him – hand-to-hand – if his magic were neutralized?”

“No. Not alone.”

“But with – for example – Ortwin and Iua?”

“Probably,” Eadric conceded. “But I think that they would both require extensive inducements to participate. Ortwin would be the first to admit that he favours the appearance of valour over valour itself; and generally prefers money to morals.”

“When Zelatar is looted, Eadric – as it certainly will be, after the fall of one of Graz’zt’s stature – then Ortwin, I suspect, will be there to take the choicest pickings. Have you any idea of the extent of the Prince’s wealth? Scavengers from a thousand different realities will descend upon Azzagrat like flies.

News travels quickly.”

“Then it would rapidly become the least desirable place in the cosmos to be,” Eadric sighed.

“I doubt that Ortwin will see it that way.”

“You speak as though the outcome is a foregone conclusion.”

“Graz’zt can be eliminated. You must be the bait.”

“He will not rise to it.”

“You must force his hand. *You* are capable of doing this, Eadric: rousing his ire to such a degree, that he loses all perspective in his lust for vengeance.”

“I had considered Afqithan to be a possible locale for an encounter.”

“As had I,” Soneillon agreed. “And his mind is already turned there. He is attempting to unravel the events that transpired there.”

Eadric gave an inquisitive look.

“Ainhorr has just annexed the demiplane.”

Eadric groaned and his eyes bulged. He considered briefly. “Why? I mean, why you, now? What do you stand to gain? I don’t believe that all of your action springs from vindictiveness and the desire for revenge. You are too considered. Too methodical.”

The Demoness laughed. “The *Ahma* sees with clear eyes. Because there is something of mine that I would dearly like returned to me. He stole it. I want it back.”

In Nhura’s throne room, in the palace built by Irknaan in Afqithan, Ainhorr gloated over the loot

brought to him by the bar-Igura which leapt madly through the halls. Most of the Loquai who dwelt in the fortress had translated to Shadow or Faerie and eluded capture, but grizzly examples were made of their servants and those unfortunate enough to have been caught unawares.

Demons and *sendings* had raced back and forth. Menicau, Samodoquol and a dozen other nobles had immediately sued for peace. Within an hour, tributes had been lavished upon the Balor by fawning

aristocrats. Ainhorr’s contempt for them was offset by his immense greed, and a recognition that the Loquai – ultimately pragmatic in their outlook – would prove no threat.

The Demon set his pristine slaadi-forged blade across his knees, and relaxed into an immense throne of steel – erected in place of Irknaan’s delicate chair of tenebrous coral. He intended to enjoy his tenure as despot of Afqithan.

He gazed through the deep-set windows across the lawns – strewn with the bodies of demons, Loquai, and fey and goblin slaves – and through the trees. Fifty nycadaemons now soared menacingly around

the diabolic tower. Its inhabitants – three Dukes of Hell and their retinue – were reportedly contained.

As much as it was *possible* to contain three Infernal magnates.

Which was to say, Ainhorr sneered to himself, not at all.

*At this point, Mostin had two fifth-level, one sixth level and one seventh-level open slots left. All of his prepared high-level spells, except for a *plane shift* and a *discern location* had already been cast.

**Narab and Tebdeluz: *big* glabrezu – advanced to 24 HD – and bound to Nhura by Irknaan himself as part of their nuptial agreement. Narab was given the *stone of sendings* – lost by Shomei – to continually apprise Nhura of Lehurze’s actions, as well as the maneuvering of the various Loquai nobles in her absence.

Note:

Nwm’s spell (*She is tired of your interference*) was a spontaneous variation of another that his player, Dave had been working on. I had ruled that DC0 Epic Spells could be invented and cast “on the fly.” In this case I also allowed the *staff of the woodlands* to be used as a (fabulously expensive) material component – I permitted the normal XP cost to create the item (3600 XP) to be used in lieu of part of the XP mitigating factors (i.e. –36 DC). It had wholly appropriate symbolism for the mood that Nwm was in, and the spell’s visual effects reflected that.

So Nwm was the first PC to cast an Epic Spell in the game – to the immense surprise of

the other players, who had no idea that Nwm was capable (or even that he was 21st level, IIRC).

The demonic attack *was* kind of mean of me, I'll admit (although the players had great fun playing the devas for a round or two), but it *was* within Nhura's capabilities to organize the ambush, so I could hardly let it pass. The PCs were still all completely spent from their encounter with Crosod, Eadric was missing, and to throw the chthonic babau (CR 20 or so) and a bunch of glabrezu at them at this point was a little bit ruthless.

On a related note, this opened a whole new can of worms – that of allowing magical items to serve as material components for Epic Spells. I actually quite like the idea: its not as though such things can be freely purchased in the campaign, and I think it actually balances quite well – one form of XP sink (the item) is converted into another (the Epic Spell). The purpose and symbolism needs to be consistent on some level – so it wouldn't be possible to use, say, *Daern's instant fortress* to fuel a fire evocation.

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The Parley - Part 1

The meeting took place in early autumn at dusk, three days after the full moon, in a glade deep within the woods of Hethio. Mid-way – Nwm remarked ironically to himself – between Groba, where the

Uediian rebellion had begun, and the eaves where Hullu's last encampment of *Bagaudas* had been set.

With the Tunthi tribesman's abdication of leadership, the focussed organization of the Uediian uprising had rapidly degenerated into a motley rabble of outlaws and bandits, who now prowled the farmlands of Wyre's richest province in gangs of twenty or more.

But not near here. All shunned this spot. Fear had descended upon the woods.

The Umbral Lillend, Nhura, was coiled in a posture which suggested both calm and confidence. To her

left, mounted upon a griffon of singular size and evil disposition, Jetheeg – in her hag-form – sat impatiently, a look of cynicism and contempt upon her hideous face. Around them were arrayed Loquai knights of varying stature and reputation, who appeared as numinous shades from whom darkness

flowed. To the right of Nhura, standing impassively below the Lillend's standard – a hanging sable pennant upon which the device was utterly obscured – was Koilimilou the sidhe-cambion. All the

company were surrounded by compacted demons – a score of jariliths which prowled and circled

ceaselessly.

*Sh*t*, Ortwin thought to himself. *This better be for real, or we're all dead meat.* Despite Eadric's assurances to the contrary, the Satyr felt less than confident in the motives of the recently styled – and now exiled – Queen of Afqithan or her entourage.

Ortwin glanced over his shoulder. Behind him, Mostin, Shomei and Nwm stood silently; *telepathically bonded* and buoyed by potent wards and augmentations, and ready to unleash a devastating magical attack if things went awry. Iua raised her eyebrows in a gesture which combined reassurance with a sense of deeply appreciative irony.

Ortwin grinned, and trotted forwards.

“Beautiful ladies,” he bowed, causing Jetheeg to scowl yet further. “Elevated Triptych of incomparable grace and poise. I am King Ortwin – welcome to my realm.”

Jetheeg snarled.

The Satyr smiled appreciatively before continuing. “I believe that, in our haste to create a favourable impression with one another, we may have overstepped the normal bounds of propriety and –

inadvertently – caused each other mutual inconvenience.”

“Must we endure this fool’s prattling?” Jetheeg snapped, at no-one in particular. “Get to the point, Satyr. Bring out the box, bow and armour. And the other treasures which you have looted. And then

we’ll speak.”

“My apologies,” Ortwin bowed again. “In a previous parley we may have acted somewhat precipitously, and this time I wanted to be sure to observe the formal niceties.” The Satyr gave Koilimilou a sideways glance. “Believe me, I share your impatience.”

He strode forward five paces, and unslung a heavy sack from his back. As he hurled it to the ground, it opened. Armour, a slender sword, a buckler, a compound bow, and several other enchanted objects of enormous power spilled forth. The *box of shades* fell upon the moss, and the Cambion inhaled sharply.

Nhura gestured, and two of her knights approached Ortwin with a black canvas held between them. It sagged with the weight of gear won from the Satyr and the Infernalist.

Nhura smiled. “I regret that, at this time, it is impossible for me to return your *stone of sendings*. It remains in Afqithan in the hands of one of my servants.”

Inwardly, Shomei groaned. For her, it was a particularly useful item.

Ortwin licked his lips, and prepared to engage in more small-talk, but from behind him he heard Nwm

– who appeared wilder and more unkempt than ever before – grunt disapprovingly.

“They are here.”

**

Eadric’s return, some days before, had been a solemn event. The *Ahma* had seemed weighed down with concern, and his eyes had conveyed a sense of pain and horror. He had witnessed near infinite brutality and suffering. The brief ecstasies enjoyed by demons – at the expense of naked souls, whose eternal lot was perdition within Soneillon’s Abyssal demesne – coupled with Throile’s madness-inducing warp of dimension and time,

had left a knot of sickness and loathing in his gut.

Upon his arrival at Deorham, at the climax of a furious storm of Nwm's devising, his heart had sunk yet further. The courtyard of Kyrtil's Burh had been spattered with celestial and demonic ichor; human entrails lay strewn about, and the doors to the chapel were smashed against the base of the Steeple.

Outside of the entranceway to the sanctum, a great blackthorn reared, its sudden growth demonstrated by the shattered cobblestones nearby. Several of its branches were like huge, barbed lances, upon which the stricken forms of demons hung motionless, pierced and raised skywards as if in dreadful sacrifice to the storm and the Goddess.

Eadric had barely glanced at the tree as he walked into the chapel. Inside, his servants sat quietly in a small group whilst Iua had stood guard over them. Mostin and Shomei had been close in whispered

conversation, and Nwm had appeared catatonic and wrapped in a heavy cloak.

Ortwin had grinned, and tossed him his weapon. "Glad you could make it. Better late than never, I suppose."

"I have struck a deal with Soneillon," Eadric had said.

Shomei had looked up with an expression which combined awe with profound concern.

"Welcome to the Path Sinister," she had sighed. "May your progress be as traumatic and as bewildering as mine."

"There are no paths, nor were there ever any. I act from instinct now."

"You are an adept already," she had smiled.

*

It had happened as the *Ahma* had predicted. The next morning, a *summoned* succubus had arrived in order to impart a message from Nhura: a parley in five days, if all were willing. An exchange of

captured goods was to take place. Eadric had explained that it was part of the agreement reached with the Queen of Throile.

Nwm had groaned loudly. "She has maneuvered everyone into this situation. Irknaan and Crosod are conveniently eliminated – no doubt Soneillon doubted their tractability. Has it occurred to you that she

may herself have had a hand in betraying Nhura to Graz'zt?"

Eadric had nodded.

Shomei had shrugged. "Such is the nature of demonic alliances – they shift from hour to hour. It requires considerable will and insight for a leader to maintain any kind of cohesion. We should not even begin to think that we understand her true purpose, however. It will remain hidden for some time yet."

Eadric had mentioned that the demoness wanted something 'returned to her.'

Mostin had tutted and shaken his head. "I don't suppose that she mentioned – in passing –

what this

‘thing’ was?”

“No.”

“I thought not,” the Alienist had sighed. “You are perceptive, Eadric – that much I reluctantly concede.

But surely you cannot actually *trust* this creature?”

“I trust her to do that which is in her own best interest,” Eadric had answered. “I think it is up to us to try to determine exactly what that is. I don’t pretend that it will be easy. We have little other choice.

Afqithan is an obvious locale for a confrontation – and neither you nor Shomei will be bound by the Injunction there. You may conjure hideous entities to your heart’s content.”

“I fully intend to,” Mostin had replied casually. “But why five days? Why not today?”

“I need time for reflection,” Eadric had said simply.

Four days later, he had returned to Throile again, to the dismay of Nwm. He would meet them at the appointed time and place.

“Is he ensorcelled?” The Druid had asked Mostin.

“Not to my knowledge,” the Alienist had answered. “But I make no claim to omniscience.”

**

Within the glade, Ortwin took several hasty steps back again as the Void began to manifest. Fear spilled from it – dream-phantoms which lingered in the waking world, before evaporating in the ruddy sunset.

Eadric’s form materialized. Next to him, almost as though she were a ward in his care – or his lover, the Satyr wilyly observed – was a slender girl clad in a traditional folk dress.

So that is her, Ortwin thought. *Intriguing. Less compelling than I had imagined.*

As if in response, her eyes brushed over him for the briefest moment. The Satyr immediately felt desire of a magnitude he had never before experienced. His stomach twisted into a knot, and his head span.*

He was thankful that he was *mind blanked* and he knew instantly that, without protective magic, had she laid even the simplest enchantment upon him, he would have been utterly incapable of resisting.

Under the watchful eyes of Nhura, Jetheeg and Koilimilou – suspicious that the Alienist might attempt a *time stop* and attack – Shomei erected a *screen* and Mostin *fabricated* a large, circular table and thirteen chairs from an oak tree, together with a wooden awning supported by slender pillars.

“Not bad,” Shomei remarked nonchalantly, and immediately sat down. Eadric watched her – despite her bravado, he knew that she was tense and nervous. Demons – and their allies – were less predictable than her usual diabolic associates.

Soneillon stepped away from the *Ahma* and smiled.

“Thank-you all for coming,” the Queen of Throile said softly. “As you either know, or have guessed, I am Soneillon. At this moment, we share a common purpose which outweighs any other petty concerns

which we might have. How we have arrived here is now irrelevant, and we should put these thoughts

behind us. This is a parley and a truce. No weapon will be drawn, and no offensive magic will be

invoked on pain of annihilation.”

Mostin looked sceptical. “You are powerful, but hardly omnipotent, Soneillon. The same conditions apply to you: I will blast you if I suspect counterfeit or magical manipulation, and if the last act I commit is to have you dragged screaming to *Uzzhin* then I will die happy – I suspect that your dubious ontological status will prove to be of no importance in that paradigm. You should be aware that you cannot effectively be both an arbiter and an interested party in this matter.”

“Graz’zt is your enemy, Mostin, not I.”

“That remains to be seen,” the Alienist countered. “But as none of us trust each other, I am inclined to proceed with utmost caution. I should like to ask several questions before we go any further.”

“Are all Wyrish Wizards so arrogant and disrespectful?” Jetheeg asked incredulously. “And openly insulting a Demon Queen is an act of questionable wisdom.”

“Truth – even if presented in a most bombastic way – may be my ally at present. I would be

misrepresenting myself if I allowed Soneillon to dictate the terms of this arrangement.”

Ortwin’s eyes bulged. Eadric smiled. Nhura said nothing, but her eyes narrowed as she studied the

Alienist. *Very powerful. Very dangerous*, she thought.

Soneillon seemed unfazed, and opened her palm, indicating that Mostin should proceed.

“What is this *thing* that you desire to repossess from the Prince of Azzagrat, and what is Rhyxali’s role in this? What becomes of his sanctum if he is eliminated: can another demon – magnate or no – benefit from its power, or is it attuned only to him? How many succubi within your retinue are sorceresses, and what is their relative power? And what is your defense in Throile against assault from Azzagrat? I assume that, on that count, there is some kind of ongoing spell or magical protection in effect – or the Prince would have overwhelmed you long ago. Finally, I would be grateful if you enlightened me with regard to Pazuzu’s involvement – if any – and, out of intellectual curiosity, any information regarding the entity *Carasch* would be much appreciated.”

Eadric glanced over the Loquai. Despite their practiced hauteur, he detected discomfort among several of them when the name of Rhyxali was mentioned. Nhura’s emotion, if she experienced any, was

unreadable.

[Shomei]: ?

[Mostin]: *There are hidden fingers in this pie. I am merely informing her that I have considered the possibilities of who they might be.*

Soneillon gave a wry smile and leaned forwards towards Mostin. “Your speculation is insightful. Have you heard of *Pharamne’s Urn*?”

Mostin wracked his brains. “I confess that I have not.”

“This is the item that I wish returned to me,” the Succubus said simply.

“Evidently, it is not yours by right, else it would be called *Soneillon’s Urn*. What is its function, and who is – or was – Pharamne?”

“An Aeon**,” Soneillon answered.

Mostin looked dumbfounded and stared at the *Ahma*.

Eadric groaned. “Please, Mostin, explanations surrounding these matters may take all night. Since I last mentioned this item, I have made inquiries and Soneillon has been forthcoming – I will explain later.

Rhyxali’s involvement will also become clear in due course.”

“Then she is implicated?”

“She is the heretofore secret co-sponsor of the Loquai. Koilimilou is her chief representative.”

The Cambion tilted her head, and stared venomously at Eadric. The air seethed with unmanifest arcane power. Nearby, the jariliths began to bay and snarl.

“Stay your temper, Koi,” Nhura said drily. “It would appear that Queen Soneillon has thoroughly instructed the *Ahma* – for reasons I’m sure she will divulge presently.”

“Rhyxali will lend aid in any effort to retake Afqithan,” Soneillon explained.

“I would have been informed,” Koilimilou hissed.

“You are a thrall, nothing more,” Soneillon said lightly. “Do not overestimate your importance.”

**

The two kelvezu, Cociz and Dramalaz – erstwhile servants of Prince Socothbenoth, but lately retained by Graz’zt – took due pleasure and satisfaction in the task appointed to them in Afqithan. As Ainhorr’s chief inquisitors, they left, in a matter of hours, a trail of mangled and mutilated forms which stretched across the breadth of the demiplane. Their retinue – which consisted of a variety of lesser demons –

soon found that the fear evoked by the rumour of their arrival manifested itself in generous bribes from a number of Loquai nobility.

The information which was relayed back to Ainhorr, and thence to Graz’zt, was of a conflicting nature.

A Duke from Faerie – Rhalid – had been in Afqithan with a hunting party. Rhalid or one of his cohorts had, in fact, been the despised Eadric of Deorham. Soneillon was implicated. Irknaan had been

involved, but was slain because of an internal feud. Lehurze. The Infernal nobles Murmuur, Titivilus and Furcus were somehow enmeshed in the affair, as were a number of Afqithan's significant figures who were now, apparently, on the Prime – Nhura, Koilimilou, Jetheeg, Crosod and Threxu.

Graz'zt immediately smelled a plot, retired to his sanctum, and deployed a potent divination.

Upon emerging from his reverie, the Prince of Azzagrat acted swiftly. The periodic portal in Afqithan –

upon which Irknaan's palace had been built – had closed, but Graz'zt opened a series of further *gates*.

He reinforced Ainhorr's contingent with thirty nalfeshnees and around a hundred glabrezu. He issued orders to the marilith Janiq – one of his most experienced, competent and trusted generals in the field –

to vigorously renew her assault within Throile, and bolstered her armies there. For the sake of completeness, the ongoing war against Orcus – which had raged inconclusively for millennia across a dozen planes, and absorbed most of the Prince's resources – was stepped up a notch.

The succubus, Nehael – by Graz'zt's arts now stripped of her flesh, rendered insane, and subjected to continual torment – was confined alone within a prison world mere yards across, and warded against location by any form of magic or supernatural power. The only *gate* to the prison was sealed and similarly hidden, and the key – a silver cylinder some twelve inches long, and carved with

indecipherable glyphs – was secreted in a location known only to the Prince himself.

Graz'zt turned his mind to the three Infernal Dukes present in Afqithan, and pondered upon Murmuur's tower and how best to overcome it. The connection between Titivilus and the *Ahma* was known to him, but Murmuur was a Duke of the Order of the Fly, not a vassal of Dispater. His involvement was a

concern, and bespoke the machinations of subtler devils, and tacit agreements between Dis and

Malbolge. And Murmuur's tower was close to impregnable: Graz'zt recalled its deployment upon the

Blessed Plain – along with the other contrivances of the Adversary and Belial – in the early stages of the Great Revolt.

For an instant, a feeling of enormous poignancy welled up from within him: a profound melancholy,

which consumed him utterly. Ideals and ancient oaths broken, and bright visions of bliss and freedom brought guttering to cold ash.

When it had passed, his brow furrowed in dark reflection. It was becoming hard to recall, and the

memories seemed like dreams: divorced and incomplete, as though another, and not he, had taken part in those awful events.

**

“What of the succubus who followed me through the *reality maelstrom*,” Mostin asked. “She is your cohort?”

Soneillon smiled. “Sometimes.”

“And presently?” Mostin asked irritably.

“Her name is Lehurze,” Nhura answered. “Narab indicated that she disappeared prior to Ainhorr’s attack. She is very slippery. If we meet again, I will likely kill her out of caution. I suspect that she covets Afqithan; Irknaan intended for her to supplant me.”

“And where is she?” Mostin asked, exasperated.

Soneillon stared hard at the Alienist: she had no doubt that he could locate Lehurze if he so desired.

“She has returned to Azzagrat.”

Nhura cursed. “I knew that the whore was a turncoat, but...”

“Graz’zt does not know that she is there,” Soneillon interrupted, “although, doubtless, he knows that she is somehow involved in events to date. He probably also guesses that she has Maihodrot’s *cubic gate*. Before you ask, Mostin, Maihodrot was the demon responsible for overseeing Afqithan. Graz’zt executed him for dereliction.”

“That was long overdue,” Nhura remarked acidly. “He was an incompetent fool.”

“What of the devils?” Shomei asked. “What is their rôle in this?”

“I suspect that they are waiting to see how events unfold before acting.” The Succubus answered.

“Ainhorr has more than sufficient strength to force their retreat.”

“Not so,” Soneillon countered. “He can partially contain them, nothing more. They have erected a tower which is all but impenetrable. It is also a planar nexus, and leads to a number of worlds –

including several Hells, no doubt.”

“But Graz’zt himself could overcome it?” Mostin asked.

“Yes, given sufficient preparation. As could I. Or you maybe, Mostin; or Shomei. Or the understated Nwm. I know what you did to Hazihe, Druid. It was most impressive.”

“I would have done the same to you,” Nwm said coolly. “My current concern is to see you – *all* of you

– return to whatever grim, depressing realities that you issued from. Or at least out of mine, in any case.

I am hoping that this parley might expedite the process.”

“You arrogant bastard,” Jetheeg snapped. “As I recall it was first *you* who trespassed in Afqithan. And now you cry foul at our presence here? Mortals are perpetual hypocrites.”

Eadric held up his hand. “The point is well-made. I think, however, we should move on before it becomes a point of contention. What has passed, has passed. The root question, which everyone is

carefully avoiding, is this: *can Graz’zt be lured to Afqithan and eliminated?* Do we have the wherewithal? More importantly, I have yet to be convinced of the authenticity of you, Nhura, and your company: when allegiances change as quickly as yours, you must understand that it is impossible for me to hold even a modicum of trust. I speak the plain truth. What is preventing you from betraying us to Graz’zt?”

The Umbral Lillend laughed. “Nothing at all, *Ahma*. But Graz’zt is somewhat unforgiving of those that deceive him. And Soneillon would, doubtless, punish me for any transgression against her. And Ainhorr sits on my throne, which irks me more than a little.”

Shomei shook her head. “I think that if Eadric of Deorham were delivered into Graz’zt’s hands, then he would forgive more than a little. Perhaps even the Queen of Throile has considered as much. We can, however, assume that this course of action did not appeal to her: she has had the opportunity, and did not act upon it. Here is your answer, Nhura: if you betray us, be sure that we are *all* dead. Because if either Mostin or I survive, we will find you, and kill you. But first, the glooms will stalk you, and the horrors will tear your mind apart. I am more vindictive than others here.”

*It’s worth bearing in mind that Soneillon’s stratospheric Charisma – 50, when buffed – is close to impossible to portray meaningfully in game terms. Given the fact that she is primarily a sexual being (or nonbeing), Ortwin’s response – given his predilections – was natural.

**Aeons are (or were) understood to be cosmic celestial entities; emanations (or possibly avatars) of Oronthon. They are charged with tasks of great magnitude: establishing physical and metaphysical

laws; the creation and maintenance of matter, space, energy and time. Orthodox Oronthonianism denies their existence, and long ago branded speculation regarding Aeons as heretical. Both Irrenite and Urgic belief, however, have a place for Aeons within their respective schemas: they are amoral or trans-moral but finite; removed by several degrees from the standard celestial hierarchy, and unconcerned by

relative terms such as good and evil. Irrenite belief links them with the Inevitables, who otherwise occupy a very inconsistent place within the Orthodox world-view.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 11-23-2003

The Parley - Part 2. And Afterwards.

The jariliths prowled ceaselessly around them.

Nwm observed Soneillon with curiosity as she spoke. The demoness seemed utterly calm and

imperturbable, as though she possessed every answer to every question that might cross a troubled

mind. Somehow, in her own way, she seemed to have resolved all paradox. He understood Eadric's

fascination with her – if it was fascination – but simultaneously wondered whether it was a façade, and hoped that the *Ahma* held the same doubts.

The Queen of Throile spoke at length about Graz'zt: his subtlety, guile and prescience; his dominion, and the worlds that it extended to; his insatiable ambition; his allies, great and small; and his personal power, which, if he were given the opportunity to augment through sorcery before any meeting with

them, might prove beyond even their collective ability to counter.

Kostchtchie, his most formidable ally, was discussed: to what extent would he remain steadfast? Who amongst the Prince's servants – demons, daemons, demodands, lamias and half-fiends of every hue –

would be loyal in the event of a serious threat to his hegemony? How far was his control already

compromised: three of his balors had been eliminated and two – including Rurunoth – were missing.

Only Ainhorr remained.

"Ainhorr is now armoured," Nhura said, "and, according to Narab, wields a slaadi blade."

"The weapon is called... *Heedless*," Soneillon said, after searching briefly for an accurate translation of its name. "It is a ten-foot *vorpai* sword. He won it from the death slaad champion Rshgu in the Vestibule of Lamentation: he was not idle after you broke his blade, Eadric, and sought eagerly for a replacement. *Heedless* is, as its name suggests, a notoriously fickle weapon, even by slaadi standards.*

It is immensely powerful, and may actually present more of a threat than the Balor himself. Ainhorr may or may not be capable of controlling it – it has only been in his ownership briefly. Graz'zt must have lent him aid in his efforts to secure it, prior to the assault upon Afqithan – Rshgu would have crushed him under normal circumstances."

"Charming," Ortwin smiled. Privately, his stomach turned over. Ainhorr remained something of a bugaboo for him. "You seem remarkably well-informed regarding these matters."

"Yes," Soneillon agreed.

"You are also less than altogether forthcoming," Mostin added, "but this is not entirely unexpected."

Earlier, I posited a question regarding the Prince's sanctum. He is an arch-fiend, and much of his power stems from it – would it benefit you, if you were in possession of it? Could

you actualize its potential?”

“I have no interest in replacing Graz’zt as the ruler of Azzagrat, if that is what you are asking – albeit obliquely. And no, it is *his*. Neither Ainhorr, nor even Kostchtchie could ascend and claim it. It would quickly wither upon his demise.”

“And Azzagrat itself? Does his Will maintain the cohesion of the realm?”

“Azzagrat would eventually return to Void, from which it was carved. But only after a billion life-ages of the universe. In this regard it is no different from any other Abyssal domain.”

“Your brand of nihilism is unique,” Shomei said. “Perhaps you could expand further upon this theory?”

“Philosophy does not interest me,” Soneillon replied dismissively.

“Adyell, Helitihai, Orychne and Chaya,” Mostin pressed on. “These are your chief servants. Given your propensity for powerful spells, Soneillon, I assume that they are well-used to acting with you in

magical concert? And by drawing energy from them into yourself, or diffusing it, you prevent them

ever becoming a challenge to you.”

[Soneillon]: *Your mind is exquisitely tortuous, Alienist. I would greatly enjoy penetrating its mysteries.*

[Image] [Image]

Nwm coughed and Shomei raised an eyebrow as the *telepathic bond* relayed the information to them.

Eadric smiled sympathetically. Mostin seemed to be somewhat flushed and embarrassed.

“I am intrigued by where your questions are leading,” Soneillon remarked, apparently nonplussed.

[Shomei]: *!? Mostin, you cannot be serious...*

[Mostin]: *With you, and Nwm, and Mulissu, and Jetheeg, and Koilimilou, and the succubi it would be possible. I would need to fine tune the spell. We should not discount the possibility.*

Mostin breathed deeply. “Heretofore, you may have considered two options: to negate the Prince’s spellcasting and to overcome him through force of arms, or to subject him to a titanic magical barrage in Afqithan and hope that his defenses can be overcome. Both involve considerable risk. There are two other choices, which you are not aware of: given a cabal of sufficient ability, it is within my means to conjure the Prince and contain him; or I can *gate* a pseudonatural entity which I have come to know affectionately as *The Horror* and attempt to deploy it against Graz’zt.” The Alienist winced as he said the demon’s name.

Soneillon looked dubious. “I doubt your ability to devise such a spell.”

“It is mine already. I inherited it from Fillein.”

Nhura hissed. ” *That* spell? It would seem unreliable, at best.”

“The dweomer is perfect,” Mostin countered. “I believe that the Prince was intentionally released the last time he was bound.”

“Then there is no need to leave this place until that is accomplished,” Koilimilou said. “He can be bound here, and...”

“No,” Nwm said.

“The Druid refers to the Injunction,” Nhura explained. “Outside of the proscribed area, however...”

“No,” Nwm said, “I do not. I will neither participate in nor condone the imprisonment of a Demon Prince within the Green. If you proceed regardless, I will release him.”

Mostin sighed and nodded. They had already discussed this at length. “We would need to find another location.”

“In this case I would *not* recommend Afqithan,” Nhura said coldly. “Not out of any concern that he would be bound in my vicinity, but because his release might be too easily accomplished by his own agents: there are many cultists loyal to him.”

“I will seek for a suitable locale,” Shomei grimaced. “An obscure demi-plane would be the best option.

Alternatively, I could create one – although I currently lack the wherewithal to do so. And I suspect that the debt incurred in casting the binding spell would be large.”

“Colossal,” Mostin corrected her. “I also currently lack the means.”

“Then why are we even having this discussion?” Jetheeg snarled. “You spend too much time in idle speculation. We should assault Ainhorr before his grip tightens – enough of the Loquai have escaped to Shadow or Faerie or obscure regions of the Abyss. They can be rallied and deployed *en masse*. If Rhyxali really purposes to lend aid, it will be easy enough to retake Afqithan. Graz’zt cannot denude his forces elsewhere to *that* great an extent. And if this mortal here,” Jetheeg waved curtly towards Eadric, “is really such a prize, and Graz’zt comes in person to add his weight to the fray, then all the better.”

Eadric shook his head. “He must be lured, if we follow that route. If he comes expecting war – armed to the teeth, surrounded by bodyguards and warded by spells that we cannot hope to penetrate – then it will go badly for us.”

“Challenge him to single combat,” Ortwin said drily.

“I beg your pardon?”

“I’m not suggesting that you actually go through with it,” Ortwin said, as if instructing a child. “But he probably *knows* that you’d like to, and therefore it wouldn’t come as a total surprise to him if you did, in fact, issue the challenge. It is a plausible deception.”

“It is absurd,” Eadric replied.

“If he refuses, then brand him as craven before his peers. Kostchtchie, Pazuzu, Fraz

Urb'Luu, Orcus, Rhyxali. The gentle Lady Soneillon." Ortwin gave a mock bow. "Issue multiple *sendings* to a variety of Abyssal dignitaries declaring your intentions."

"You are insane."

"I will act as your herald to Graz'zt. I can make him believe it. Outside of the Infernal host, few liars approach me in guile or believability."

"That is quite a boast, Satyr," Jetheeg hissed. "And even if it were true, so what? Deceiving a mortal, or even a demon of low rank is one thing. But Graz'zt? I think not."

"I am capable," Ortwin replied nonchalantly. "Graz'zt is no different to any other demon, except that he is less gullible than most. In order to make him believe, one simply needs to be a better liar. If a *mind blank* is not adequate to the task, then Nwm will devise a spell to make my lies undetectable by Graz'zt's magic..."

"Will he?" The Druid raised an eyebrow.

"But not yet," Ortwin added quickly. "We need to rile him beyond all rational behaviour first. And I agree that it would be better if he were not accompanied by a dozen mariliths. His reaction needs to be so utterly violent and deranged that he immediately translates to Afqithan in order to kill Eadric.

Overwhelming his forces there and eliminating Ainhorr might be a good start in our achieving this state of transcendental ire in the Prince – although I would recommend that we keep our identities hidden again for the meantime."

"He will obliterate you before you can even deliver the message," Nhura scoffed, "and if not, then certainly in response to such a challenge."

"Perhaps," Ortwin said, "in which case Nwm will *reincarnate* me. Although I suspect that he will not assail me. I will, after all, be in disguise."

"And what would you be disguised as?" Nwm asked, sighing.

"Not *what*, but *who*. As Titivilus, dear Nwm. As Titivilus."

"You would dare impersonate an Infernal magnate?" Jetheeg asked, incredulous.

"Yes," Ortwin replied. "Diplomatic immunity would be useful in negotiating with Graz'zt."

"That is unwise," Shomei said quietly. "It would attract displeasure in unwanted quarters. And the Nuncio of Dis himself might be your least concern."

"I will weather it," Ortwin grinned. "The opportunity of executing one of the greatest counterfeits in

history is difficult to resist. It will be my *magnum opus*."

Eadric exhaled sharply. "We have a variety of options, it would seem. Having multiple redundancies in our plans is no bad thing, however. Nhura – how long before you could assemble the remaining

Loquai?"

"They are dispersed. Some weeks, in your time. Several days in mine."

“And the creature you have mentioned, Mostin. Is it *reliable*?”

“I don’t know,” the Alienist replied. “If Shomei and Nwm were to help me, I believe I could coerce it. A fourth caster would guarantee success and a reasonable degree of safety.” Mostin stared meaningfully at Koilimilou.

“Now just wait a minute...” Nwm began.

“It will involve an immense backlash,” Mostin continued.

“Would you *gate* it?” Koilimilou asked.

Mostin shook his head. “I think with four of us, I would use a *planar binding*. Holding it long enough to subject it to a compulsion would be no problem.”

[Nwm]: *I am uneasy about involving this cambion in magical concert.*

[Mostin]: *As am I. She has raw power, however, and is now our ally. Fillein/Jovol was right:*

cooperative casting is where we should focus ourselves, Nwm. The potential is immense.

“Nhura will translate to Faerie,” Soneillon said, “and rally the Loquai. I will send word to those that have fled to Shadow, or to Rhyxali’s demesne. I will also speak again to Rhyxali herself, and contact Lehurze in Azzagrat.” *Eadric, return with me to Throile. There is much that I would share with you.*

Eadric swallowed. “We should meet again in three weeks. We have some breathing time, at least.

Nhura, issue a *sending* and we will translate to your location.”

“We have yet to find a suitable staging ground,” Nhura remarked. “Faerie and Shadow both entail certain risks.”

“I will leave it to your discretion,” Eadric replied.

“Is that *trust* I hear, *Ahma*?”

“It is pragmatism.”

[Soneillon]: *Come with me, Eadric...*

Eadric closed his eyes, and refocused. “I will go to Morne,” he said.

Mostin nodded, but felt uncomfortable. The connection between Graz’zt and Rhyxali was the subject of scholarly debate amongst those with more than a passing interest in demonology. Was their

resemblance to one another merely superficial, or were they cut from the same block? Did they share a common essence? Was she, somehow, his *anima*?

His stomach knotted. He desperately needed to consult the *web of motes*.

**

The Triune met for the second time on the autumn equinox, at Mostin’s manse, in the woods southwest of Deorham. Orolde – somewhat awed by the presence of the three powerful mages – nonetheless

ensured an agreeable environment in which they could discuss whatever weighty matters they needed

to discuss. Unlike Mostin, the apprentice had made peaceable contact with the nearby sprites, and

several pixies – whom Mostin eyed suspiciously – acted as temporary cooks and waiters.

After a sumptuous repast, the Infernalist, Elementalist and Alienist sat upon the porch in silent telepathic communion.

[Mulissu]: *Here is the spell [Formula] I have avoided any unnecessary squandering of your valuable reservoir, Mostin.*

[Mostin]: (Analyzes) *If Nwm can be co-opted, collectively we could do this: [New Formula]*

[Mulissu]: (Eyes widen) *That is most impressive.*

[Mostin]: (Smiles) *That is only the beginning. We could then do this [Formula] and then this [Formula].*

[Mulissu]: (Dumbstruck).

[Shomei]: (Wryly) *Effectively, the Green dissipates the backlash. Nwm has set certain conditions upon his involvement, however.*

[Mulissu]: *Whatever they are, we should accept them. No-one has ever gone this far before. Whatever secrets Jovol could unlock from the web of motes will be trivial in comparison to the insights that we could gain. What does the Druid require?*

[Mostin]: *That, collectively, we petition the Claviger for an amendment to the Injunction. And assurances from each of us that while the augmented condition persists, we will only use its benefits for the purpose of divination.*

[Mulissu]: (Ruefully) *The latter, I will happily guarantee. But I am not sure that the Claviger can be so easily persuaded. What is Nwm's request?*

[Shomei]: *A tightening of the rules regarding summoning.*

[Mulissu]: *In response to the actions of the Loquai?*

[Mostin]: *Partly. And Soneillon. And the devas at Kyrtil's Burh, amongst others.*

[Shomei]: *No extraplanar entity should be permitted to enter Wyre. Period. Or the Claviger will dispatch the Enforcer to eliminate them.*

[Mulissu]: *I have no objection to approaching the Claviger on this point. I am dubious about its reaction, however.*

[Shomei]: *Is a quorum more likely to gain a favourable response?*

[Mulissu]: *I would say no. The Claviger is the Claviger. It abides by its own rules. Its motives are unguessable, and its intelligence quite alien.*

[Mostin]: *I believe that it would compromise the Claviger's paradigm – which is geared towards the actions of Wizards. What if the Sela were to gate a solar to Morne? Would*

Gihaahia intercept it? It would be a conflict of interests, and would, in fact, throw the entire Injunction into question: its key tenet is still 'no intervention in non-arcane politics.' Moreover, an incident between the Enforcer and a cascade of celestials would be better avoided.

[Mulissu]: *You forget that Rintrah was complicit in the idea of a Second Injunction. Jovol's relationship to the Celestial Host and Tramst was – or is, assuming that Jovol's essence persists – ambiguous, to say the least.*

[Mostin]: *It is beyond the Claviger's purview. However sympathetic I am to Nwm's position, I think he is on his own.*

[Mulissu]: *I am surprised that Nwm doesn't object to the presence of the Claviger itself.*

[Mostin]: (Humourously) *He does. I think he regards it as the lesser of two evils, however. Untrammelled summoning is worse for him. It is amusing to speculate upon an organizing principle in this regard. Jovol, Rintrah, Nwm – all are working within the same framework, but to attain different ends.*

[Shomei+Mulissu]: *!*

[Mostin]: *I said amusing. I am not suggesting some metacosmic conspiracy.*

[Shomei]: *In any case, we should approach the Claviger. It can do no harm. And I am curious to experience it.*

[Mostin]: *Agreed. Nwm himself also indicated that he would like to join us in the petition.*

[Mulissu]: (Sardonically) *Then if the Enforcer is unleashed against us, we may, at least last a few seconds longer.*

[Shomei]: *I doubt it. When I inspected the web of motes it was quite apparent that the Claviger possessed significant deific powers. It would likely magnify** the Enforcer before any encounter with an entity that might otherwise prove a viable threat.*

[Mostin]: *Are you then suggesting that the four of us acting in concert might present a 'viable threat' to the unaugmented Enforcer?*

[Shomei]: *Certainly. We are, after all, the most potent spellcasters in the world.*

[Mostin]: *That is worrying. I had simply assumed Gihaahia to be unassailable. If a cabal of powerful mages were to attack her...I am thinking of posterity, here.*

[Mulissu]: (Acidly) *The point is moot. The Claviger has great prescience, and is virtually omniscient with regard to all things magical. It knows we are having this conversation, and has already*

determined its course of action with regard to our petition. It may have reached its decision ten billion years ago. Things will unfold as they were meant to.

[Mostin]: *I expected better from you, Mulissu. I am tired of fatalistic musings – is it a philosophical fashion that somehow escaped me?*

[Mulissu]: *Realities are changing faster than I can apprehend them, Mostin. One must find some kind of calm center. Angst becomes tedious after a while. Should I contact Nwm*

now?

[Mostin]: (Nods).

*

Mulissu issued a *sending* and, shortly thereafter, Nwm stepped from a nearby elm-tree.

“I assume that my proposal received a favourable response?” The Druid asked wily.

“It is ingenious,” Mulissu agreed. “I should caution you that, even collectively, we cannot assure a similar reaction from the Claviger. We cannot coerce it – only appeal to its guiding principles.”

“If it agrees, how will its decision manifest?”

“I don’t know,” the Elementalist replied.

“When can we make the petition?”

“There is no time like the present.”

“Should we forewarn it of our impending visit?” Nwm asked.

Shomei smiled. “Don’t worry Nwm. It already knows.”

Nwm raised an eyebrow.

*

In a small, dry cave in the hills of Mord, a child – with shoulder-length blonde hair and possessed of an ambiguous gender – suddenly materialized before an upright marble slab nine feet tall.

The great tablet, engraved with a thousand or more paragraphs of detailed arcane legalese, seemed to hum inaudibly and pulse invisibly. It had *presence* of an unusual kind, although the exact quality of its sentience was difficult to determine – its very inscrutability was the quality which marked it as far removed from the mundane.

The child watched patiently as, descending into the chamber down a narrow flight of rough-hewn steps, a trio of Wizards and a Uediian priest shuffled nervously.

Upon seeing the child waiting, Mostin was seized by an almost uncontrollable bout of panic, and

attempted to push past Mulissu, and back up the staircase.

The Druid scowled at him, blocked his egress, and gestured for him to continue on into the cave, to which he only reluctantly complied. As the four assembled before the diminutive figure, Nwm watched the Alienist carefully. The last thing he needed was for Mostin to suffer one of his ‘episodes.’

“I am...” Nwm began.

“...Nwm,” the child finished for him.

“Are you...”

“...the Claviger, or the Enforcer?” The child completed his sentence again. “We are joined

now. It makes little difference. I am the mostly benign part.”

Mostin relaxed somewhat.

“You know why we are here,” Nwm, Mostin, Mulissu, Shomei and the child said in perfect synchrony.

“Yes,” the child said.

Mostin swallowed. “Is the...”

“...Injunction immutable, or is it subject to change? Both. You should have read it more closely. It

contains a clause which ultimately gives the Claviger discretionary power in its interpretation. A law which is static and unyielding is of limited utility. The answer to your question, incidentally, is *no*. The Enforcer will not be deployed against ‘extraplanar’ targets – if you insist on using such naïve

terminology – simply because they are present.”

Mostin grinned smugly, his confidence returning. “I told you...”

“Your analysis is incomplete,” the child interrupted. “Unfortunately, due to your meager perceptual faculty, you lack the ability to reach a comprehensive understanding.”

Mostin scowled. “Perhaps you could...”

“...enlighten you? It would be a futile exercise to even attempt it. Could you instruct a rodent meaningfully in the higher magical arts?”

“It could be...”

“... *awakened*, yes. In which case it would no longer be a rodent *per se*. The metaphor is apt – if the Claviger were to change your faculty to be capable of understanding, you would no longer be Mostin the Metagnostic. Dismiss the possibility from your mind – the Claviger has no intention of deifying you. You may now ask one question regarding the *web of motes*.”

Mostin shook his head, and gestured vaguely in the air. Obviously, vocalizing his question was an

entirely superfluous act.

“Yes,” the child answered unequivocally, and vanished.

Mulissu gave a quizzical look. Her hair crackled in mild irritation.

*Slaadi blades are almost invariably sapient.

** i.e. bestow one or more divine ranks.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 12-15-2003

An Untitled Update

Eadric stood next to Sercion upon the roof of the Temple in the warm autumn sun, and gazed out across Morne. Much of the damage caused to a thousand private residences in the wake of the *wave of hate* had been repaired, although, in places, clusters of blackened buildings remained. Industrious craftsmen still busied themselves with numerous minor projects, and from sunrise until dusk the *tap-tapping* of stone hammers, and the rasp of saws echoed across the city. The scaffolding which surrounded the Fane itself, however, was silent and abandoned – no mason or carpenter had worked there for two weeks.

The Temple coffers were empty. Many of Wyre's aristocrats – appalled at the fact that the new Primate had distributed huge quantities of gold to Uediian peasants – had ceased to pay the now-voluntary tax.

Promissory notes issued some months before had been delayed by church bureaucrats to such an extent that most of the guilds in Morne now refused to deal with the Temple at all.

Eadric scowled. "What is the debt, Sercion?"

The Templar grimaced. "Around two hundred thousand crowns, *Ahma*. Or so I am told."

"I will honour it," Eadric sighed.

"Good," the *Sela* said, ascending onto the roof behind them.

Eadric bowed.

"For long term sponsorship, we need to look to Sihu and Tagur to set the example," Sercion said.

"Unfortunately, they are still paying for the war. Wars are expensive."

"There needs to be a coherent financial strategy," the *Sela* remarked wryly. "Alas, Oronthon chose one with no expertise in this area to be his representative – hence I depend upon a staff who are more competent in these matters than I."

"The Temple estates are vast," Eadric pointed out.

"But undergoing a sweeping monasticization," Sercion added. "Negotiating their relationship with the secular order will be a huge challenge. Foide and Skilla are already grumbling about the tax

differentials."

"I confess that I am somewhat behind the times," Eadric said.

"How is your relationship with Skadding?" Sercion asked.

Eadric looked confused.

"Will you be attending the investiture, *Ahma*?" The Templar continued.

"He will be sworn in as Duke of Trempa in ten days," the *Sela* explained. He seemed rather amused.

Eadric sighed, and shrugged. This was news to him. The mundane affairs of Wyre – even those which concerned him directly – seemed a world away.

Tramst gestured for Eadric to follow him. “Come. We need to talk.”

*

The *Sela* – whose demeanour that particular morning, Eadric noted, seemed more mortal than divine –

opened a small cabinet, retrieved a bottle of amygdala, and gestured for Eadric to sit in a wooden chair

with a worn leather cushion. The reception room – once sumptuously furnished during Cynric’s tenure as Archbishop – was now bright, airy and spartan. Eadric smiled. The *Sela* had, after all, achieved his perfection in the company of Urgic Mystics in Ardan, renowned for their austerity and modesty.

“How is Titivilus?” The *Sela* asked ironically, handing Eadric a carved wooden goblet filled with the almond liqueur.

“He is enigmatic and confusing,” Eadric replied.

“And Soneillon?”

“Doubly so. I have yet to comprehend her place in the scheme of things.”

“It will doubtless become clear in due course,” Tramst said opaquely.

“I should like to voice my concerns, and ask some questions, if I might,” Eadric ventured.

“Try to avoid metaphysics,” the *Sela* smiled.

“I will address them tangentially, if at all,” Eadric replied. “*Pharamne’s Urn...*” Eadric began.

The *Sela* groaned.

“I am not about to ask questions regarding the ‘truth’ in what was previously considered heretical doctrine, nor am I about to inquire regarding the properties of this *thing*. But if such an object were to exist – is there any reason that I should not allow it to fall into the hands of the Demoness. Actually, I do not seek an answer to that question either, *Sela*, I merely wish to impress upon you that it is something which currently preoccupies me.”

“As it should,” Tramst agreed.

“There is also the question of those I number my allies: A demon queen – or possibly two, if I include Rhyxali – and a variety of umbral fiendish feys and their cohorts. Not to mention Mostin and Shomei,

who have dubious connections, to say the least.”

“And Nwm?” The *Sela* inquired.

Eadric laughed. “Once, I considered my friendship with Nwm to be scandalous. Others felt that it

compromised my faith. These days, we argue little – our philosophical differences are relatively minor compared to the others with whom I deal.”

“What is your relationship to me, Eadric?” Tramst asked unexpectedly.

“I do not understand...”

“I mean, do you regard me as your confessor? As your teacher? The absolute spiritual authority whom you follow? Your Archbishop? Or do you regard yourself as my equal in some ways?”

Eadric looked horrified. “You are the *Sela*. You are...”

Tramst held up his hand. “Yes, yes. The Infinite Perception of God. No value judgement is implied in the question, *Ahma*. What is your function? What is the purpose of the *Ahma*?”

“To pave the way for you.”

“Well, now I am here. You remain the *Ahma*, however. What is your purpose now?”

“I think I am still defining it,” Eadric answered carefully.

“I once asked you if vengeance and retribution were within your purview. Have you come to a

conclusion yet?”

“To define my rôle purely in those terms makes me somewhat uncomfortable.”

“I said nothing about vengeance and retribution being *exclusive* qualities. They do not preclude mercy, for instance. But the question remains: is this now the primary purpose of the *Ahma*? Is this why he

wages war on Graz’zt?”

Eadric shook his head. “I would bring aid to Nehael. None other will come.”

“For mercy or love then? Perhaps you resent the fact that Enitharmon has not ordered a host to descend into Azzagrat?”

“I do not resent it – who am I to dictate action to the Celestial Marshal?” Eadric sighed.

“Although, sometimes, I regret it,” he added ruefully.

“But if Oronthon were to appoint a powerful representative in order to expedite Nehael’s release, and to bring justice to Graz’zt, you would deem it appropriate?”

“Yes, I would.”

“Despite the fact that she turned her back upon Rintrah when he extended Oronthon’s grace to her?”

“Perhaps because of it,” Eadric answered. “She seeks a higher perspective.”

“Maybe Rintrah was sent to tempt her,” the *Sela* said, smiling. “To offer her an easy way out.”

“That is a peculiar inversion of conventional truth.”

“The fact that it can be inverted is the quality which defines it as conventional, Eadric.

And perhaps Enitharmon *cannot* act, because he relates to that aspect of Oronthon which is conventional, bounded and finite. It is not within his remit.”

“That is unfortunate for Nehael,” Eadric said grimly.

“I don’t see why. Oronthon has merely opted to use a more unconventional tool.”

Eadric looked confused.

The *Sela* sighed. “You, *Ahma*, you. Whilst your humility is an endearing trait, sometimes it can be painfully difficult to make you understand your own importance. You are a liminal entity, Eadric. You relate to facets of reality which have no place within the beliefs of Orthodoxy, or the understanding of celestials. This is why the acceptance of self-determination is most important to you – perhaps Cynric himself foresaw this. After all, whatever you do, it is the Will of Oronthon.”

“But I can still Fall.”

“Oh yes,” Tramst nodded. “And harder, faster and with more brilliance than any have done for a long while. Do not make the mistake of thinking that you have transcended the paradox, or even that the paradox *can* be transcended.”

“You give most conflicting lessons, *Sela*.”

“Thank-you,” Tramst said.

“I have another question,” Eadric said, averting his eyes. “It is somewhat presumptuous. You may feel the need to chastise me for asking it.”

The *Sela* smiled. “This should be interesting.”

“It regards your nature – both finite and unbounded. I recognize that this is a necessary dialectic for the transmission of *saizhan*: you cannot be purely Man or purely God.”

“I had not perceived it in those terms. It is an interesting speculation. You are also trespassing dangerously near the province of metaphysics, now.”

“Sometimes, you appear as more mortal than divine to me. At others, you are the Godhead manifest. Is this merely a reflection of my understanding, or does it have a basis outside of my own experience?”

“Is there a difference?” Tramst asked.

The *Ahma* nodded. *Saizho. The capacity for the human mind to perceive is also something which I*

frequently meditate upon. I refer to Mostin’s plans...

“You are concerned that his expanded awareness may be dangerous?”

“Yes,” Eadric replied. “Especially with regard to the *web of notes*. The idea that he can acquire as much prescience as that offers. And Shomei...”

“Do not concern yourself with Shomei. She has a healthier perspective than Mostin, although she will soon be confronted with an enormous burden.” *Do you wish to know what it is?*

Will the knowledge benefit her, or anyone else?

“It might,” the *Sela* replied. A look of sympathy briefly crossed his face. “Shomei will soon die.”

Eadric’s jaw dropped. “But...”

“She will perceive her own demise when she inspects the *web of motes*, just as Jovol did.”

“It cannot be averted?”

“She can choose to make the manner of her passing meaningful.” Tramst explained.

“But Nwm can...”

“I have opened the door for her, Eadric. Death will be a less unpleasant experience for her, the second time around. She may be unwilling to give it up. Bliss is not easily surrendered.”

“Then she will have failed, according to her own philosophy,” Eadric sighed. “When the struggle

ceases, what then for Shomei? It defines her being. It is the essence of *what she is*.”

The *Sela* smiled. “I think that, for Shomei, overcoming her desire to overcome may be the ultimate antinomian act.”

Eadric grimaced, and nodded.

“That is all, for the moment. Has this conversation helped you?”

“Oddly, yes,” Eadric replied.

“Good. And beware of Soneillon, Eadric.”

“Yes,” the *Ahma* replied.

He stood, bowed, and exited the reception room, and began to walk down the steps towards the cloister.

But before he had descended even half-way, he was met by a familiar figure – hooded in purple,

bearing an ornate rod, and about whom the faintest hint of cinnamon hung. He swallowed, and his mind span. For a fraction of a second, he wondered what she and Tramst would talk about. He wondered how often that – since their initial exchange – she had come here to see the *Sela*. It was hardly the kind of detail that she would be inclined to share.

“Hello, *Ahma*,” she said with a wry half-smile.

He nodded in acknowledgement, but did not meet her eyes.

Passing out of the cloister, beneath the scaffolding and across the courtyard, Eadric made his way to the stable, where three score Temple steeds – many of celestial descent – were quartered. The place was strangely serene and, aside from the horses and two grooms, entirely empty. Contundor’s stall, like the others, was open and ungated. The destrier bore no harness, and stood waiting patiently.

“I will not ask you to come with me...” Eadric began.

I will come.

“Thank-you,” he smiled.

**

Ortwin and Iua – together with the sidhe-cambion, Koilimilou – sped through the twilit skies of

Afqithan. They were *mind blanked, invisible, polymorphed* and buoyed by several other augmentations.

Ortwin was, for once, serious in his attitude and demeanour. There were demons everywhere: they

could afford to take no risks.

Koilimilou said nothing during their progress. Her face remained impassive. Ortwin found her presence and demeanour utterly disconcerting.

They were bound for Chaltipeluse, the castle of Ytryn, a Loquai noble who preferred the style of ‘duke’

rather than ‘king’ – although it reflected nothing on the actual power at his command. His fortress, carved by indentured dao from the rock of a mountain-peak long ages before, would – in a more

conventional conflict – have been altogether unassailable. In Afqithan, it was no less vulnerable than an unwallled village upon an open plain.

Ytryn was, as Irknaan had been, an aristocrat with two demonic sponsors – although Koilimilou didn’t doubt that he had been one of the first to support Ainhorr when the Balor had invaded the demiplane.

Loyalty to either Graz’zt or Rhyxali was not so much an issue as the *opportunity* offered by service to one, or the other, or both. Ortwin, in order to demonstrate his glibness and power of persuasion, had volunteered to address Ytryn, and win him on board – or at least find a way to compromise him

sufficiently to turn Ainhorr’s suspicious eye towards the Duke. If his position became untenable, he might be forced to rally to Nhura out of desperation.

It was a dirty plan, Ortwin thought, but then again they were hardly observing the niceties of Wyrish chivalry. *Not that anyone really observes them in Wyre, either*, the Satyr mused.

If all else failed, Koilimilou would – hopefully – ensorcel Ytryn with a *geas**. They would likely also need to eliminate the Duke’s consort, a hag named Chavrille. And anyone else present when Ytryn was enchanted.

Ortwin felt his pouch nervously, to check that the two scrolls hastily scribed by Mostin and Shomei, a

plane shift and a *sending* – to be used only in emergencies – were still there. It had been a long time since he had read a spell from a scroll. He hoped they wouldn’t backfire.

“Will there be demons there?” Ortwin asked. “Or has Ainhorr granted a modicum of

autonomy to his

new subjects?”

“There will be demons,” Koilimilou replied stonily.

“Is that speculation, or do you know for a fact?”

“The palace will be crawling with Ainhorr’s agents. Some will be disguised. Others will be openly

present in the capacity of ‘advisors.’ There may or may not be a garrison – which may be of a

temporary, permanent or indefinite nature.”

“Then how can we even gain a private audience with Ytryn?” Ortwin groaned. “I dislike the idea of

attempting to coerce him in the presence of a marilith and half a dozen glabrezu...”

“You work it out,” Koilimilou snapped. “You are the one who claims to be able to talk his way out of anything. And to think you had the presumption to assert your ability to dupe Graz’zt himself.”

“Actually, I am more concerned that my innuendo will need to be so subtle, that Ytryn himself may not understand it.”

Koilimilou scowled. This satyr was a braggart.

Iua sighed. “The real problem is, as Mostin continually points out, that any demon in Afqithan – and I include Ainhorr himself in that statement – is only two *teleports* away. Ten seconds.”

“If we see any demons abruptly vanish, then so should we,” Ortwin replied.

“And if we don’t see them at all?”

“Then we’re screwed,” Ortwin admitted. He groaned. “How can we fight this war? I see only repeated

guerilla raids of *teleporting* demons, and umbral sidhe who vanish back to Shadow after brief forays. Is there *nothing* which can be likened to a conventional force?” The Satyr considered Mostin – the Alienist had, amongst other duties, agreed to reflect upon possible strategies for combating large numbers of demons.

“That *is* a conventional force,” Koilimilou said irritably. “At least by Loquai standards. They favour campaigns of bloody, tit-for-tat attrition. Graz’zt knows this, and has deployed leaping demons as his main troops – they are *teleporters*. Dretch would be of no use at all to him, even in vast numbers.

Hence, also, the kelvezu, although no-one knows how many – their services are exceedingly expensive.

There again, Graz’zt is unfathomably rich. Strike and retreat. Intimidate. But *every* Loquai stronghold has areas which are *dimensionally locked* to prevent precisely this kind of assault. And many sit on *gates* to one plane or another. Some are known, some are

jealously guarded secrets.”

“And Ytryn’s fortress?” Ortwin asked.

“Has a portal which leads to Faerie,” Koilimilou answered. “But I do not know its location, or its appearance.”

“But his inner chambers – wherever his Ducal seat is – will be in a place which is proof against

extradimensional movement?”

“And *scrying*,” Koilimilou replied.

“And his sanctum – where he practices magic?”

“Pah,” the Cambion sneered. “Ytryn has no great ability. He is a warrior, nothing more. Chavrilie is a necromancer of some skill, however.”

“And, aside from the Loquai and any demons, is there anything which we should expect?”

“Gargoyles and manticores. Displacer beasts.”

“Of the umbral fiendish variety, no doubt?”

“Naturally,” Koilimilou replied humourlessly.

“Does this...quality...which Afqithan possesses have a source?” Ortwin had been about to say *taint*, but decided that it might be undiplomatic. “A wellspring? A locus? Is there a place where the umbral bleed is strongest?”

“You adequately demonstrate your cosmogonic ignorance with regard to Afqithan,” Koilimilou

sneered.

“Shomei speculated that it may be a splinter of Faerie which was shattered during the Fall...”

A look of contempt crossed Koilimilou’s face.

“Pray enlighten me,” Ortwin said drily.

“Afqithan is Afqithan, just as Azzagrat is Azzagrat. Speculate all you like. The umbral flux ebbs and flows. Sometimes, Shadow is closer, at others it is further away.”

“But the pure *malignancy*,” Ortwin asked, deciding that diplomacy was wasted on the Cambion. “That is not a trait native to Shadow.”

Koilimilou smiled darkly. “That is the touch of the Lady Rhyxali.”

“But...”

“She was venerated here long before the name of *Graz’zt* was known. This place is sacred to her. And whatever temporary steward takes control, Afqithan is, and always has been, hers.”

“Ah,” Ortwin nodded dubiously, raising his eyebrows.

**

“There is too much to do,” Mostin grumbled. “And too little time.” Within the extradimensional space of his manse, his desk – normally immaculate in its organization – was strewn with books and papers.

Several imps – temporarily compacted – acted as scribes: finding references, bringing books to Mostin, or taking notes as required. The Alienist’s mind held every title of each of the nine hundred volumes which Shomei had loaned him. He merely needed to decrypt them and scan them for relevant

information – during the time that he wasn’t working on the second in the series of spells designed to interpret the *web of motes*. His head span.

Pharamne’s Urn. Carasch. The Horror. Rhyxali. Soneillon. Titivilus. Murmuur’s Tower. Graz’zt. The

Ahma. Nehael. Throile. Afqithan. Azzagrat. Lehurze. Ainhorr. Nhura.

“Perhaps you should retreat to a slower time-stream,” Orolde suggested unhelpfully, eyeing one of the devils suspiciously. It leered back at him.

“Perhaps you could retrieve *Tersimion’s Last Diatribes against Arcanism* and insert it into your fundament,” Mostin replied with uncharacteristic vulgarity. “It would be a fitting resting place for that tome, in any case.”

“I will make some tea,” the Nixie sniffed.

“That is an excellent idea,” Mostin nodded. “Orolde, in case my attention lapses, do *not* allow any imps into the house proper. If I were censured for violating the Injunction at this time, it would be highly regrettable.”

Orolde nodded, and withdrew.

The Alienist issued a *sending* to Ortwin:

What progress? Ytryn ally? News of Titivilus? Soneillon? Do we have timeline? Need viable, secure base of operation.

Patience. No contact made yet. Still considering options. Dimensional Locks in Chaltipeluse may prove defensible.

Mostin sighed, and idly tapped upon the nigh-indestructible sphere of black crystal which sat in front of him.

Nufrut’s head appeared. She scowled.

“Your knowledge of strategy and tactics in the sphere of Abyssal warfare is immense,” Mostin said.

“Yes,” the Marilith sighed.

“And your knowledge of Afqithan itself, not inconsiderable.”

“That is correct. Get to the point, Mostin. You are being boring.”

“I would remind you that *you* are the disembodied head, and I am the powerful wizard whose patience has recently been tried overmuch,” Mostin said drily.

“The point is well made,” Nufrut admitted.

“If you had eighteen thousand bar-lgura, a thousand or so chasme, several hundred nycadaemons, as

many succubi and palrethees, a hundred goristros, and – how many kelvezu do you think Graz’zt has

had the opportunity to enlist, by the way?”

“Now *that* is an interesting question, isn’t it?” Nufrut smirked.

“In any case,” Mostin continued, “is there a classical model or scenario for annexing or invading a demiplane such as Afqithan?”

“I’m sure there are several hundred, at least,” Nufrut answered.

“But their organization – presuming they have any?”

“Do not make the error of assuming that because of their philosophical inclination towards freedom and satiation, that demons are an undisciplined rabble when gathered en masse,” Nufrut chided. “Who are the Generals? Captains?”

“Seven mariliths. And more recently arrived – according to Nhura – two dozen nalfeshnees and a

hundred or so glabrezu.”

“*Seven?* Graz’zt is taking no chances, it would appear,” Nufrut’s condescending smile was beginning to irk Mostin. “You should give up now, Mostin. You have no hope at all.”

“Correct me if my analysis is wrong,” Mostin said, ignoring the Marilith’s enjoinder to despair.

“Goristros are, being largely immobile, confined to the capacity of point-defense and guarding

important tactical positions; succubi and palrethees act as scouts, messengers and aerial light cavalry, so to speak...”

“That is correct,” Nufrut replied enthusiastically. “They are seldom deployed in units of more than six to twelve. Also, the capacity of some succubi to act as infiltrators should not be underestimated.”

“But the chasme are deployed in larger groups?”

“Squadrons of forty or fifty,” Nufrut replied. “They are extremely effective when massed. Their

collective drone will be close to irresistible.”

Mostin’s stomach tightened. He hadn’t even begun to consider the implications of *that*.

“And the heavy-hitters? The nycadaemon mercenaries?”

“Three or four companies are sufficient to use as shock troops,” Nufrut leered, “and expendable. But I wouldn’t anticipate a pitched battle, in any case.”

The Alienist’s mind was already developing a plan. And the more he thought about it, the

more he liked it. He needed to address the root of the problem. “Let me pose another question, Nufrut: if I could *force*

a pitched confrontation. If the ability of these demons to *teleport* was temporarily suspended...”

“That is pointless speculation,” the Marilith sneered.

Mostin ignored her. Formulae were flooding through his psyche. He picked up Nufrut’s sphere, and

handed it to the imps.

“Take a five-minute break,” he said to his compacted scribes. “Do *not* leave this extradimensional space.”

As the diminutive fiends gleefully tossed Nufrut’s head to one another, Mostin brushed all of his

collected books and papers from his desk with a swift sweep of his arm. He retrieved a single, blank sheet of paper, and with a quill pen which made him feel particularly dangerous – boldly still bearing its feather – he wrote at the top:

Mostin’s Grand Astral Flux Inhibitor

He sighed, crossed it out, and pondered briefly, before writing:

Mostin’s Quiescence of the Spheres

Much better, he thought. Not that he really had time to begin this. But it couldn’t hurt to analyze a few formulae. Just to see if it was a plausible idea.

Within five minutes, he had decided that it *was* plausible, and all thoughts of *Pharamne’s Urn* and *Carasch* had left his mind. He now had seventeen days to develop *two* transvalent spells.

Orolde returned shortly thereafter with a large pot of tea, which Mostin liberally fortified with a variety of alchemical stimulants.

*Koilimilou would use a *limited wish* to achieve the desired effect. 1 action being better than 10

minutes.

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**

Three Webs.

Eadric rode alone from Morne to Trempa upon Contundor, passing by his own keep at Deorham

without pause late in the afternoon of the second day of the journey.

His decision not to take Tatterbrand, who had been quietly at work within the Temple apiary, was based in large measure upon the knowledge that his squire – upon learning of the *Ahma*’s intentions – would have insisted upon accompanying his master to Afqithan. And Afqithan was a place beyond

Tatterbrand’s ability to comprehend and, likely, survive.

Mostin’s message, *I can lock part of the demiplane. It will be possible for you to go as yourself, without duplicity, if you so desire*, was a simultaneous cause of both relief and concern for him, and he considered the implications as he rode.

Somewhat later, when Eadric made camp by the wayside, Mostin himself appeared and they discussed

the likely unfolding of events. Soneillon was engaged in delicate negotiations with Rhyxali, and Ortwin made overtures to Duke Ytryn in Afqithan. They waited for Nhura to rally the remaining Loquai in

Faerie and Shadow, and give the signal. Mostin seemed confident that the spell that he was devising and – with the aid of Nwm and Shomei – would invoke, was proof against even Graz’zt’s attempts to

dispel.

“Provided, of course, that he does not enlist a cabal of his own,” Eadric said drily.

“Demons are not renowned for exhibiting a preference for cooperative magic,” Mostin sniffed.

“Except Soneillon?” Eadric asked.

“She is unusual in that regard, but not unique,” Mostin nodded. “You know her better than most. In your judgment, will she involve herself personally, or act through others?”

Eadric shrugged. “I’ve no idea. I’m surprised that you trust my ability to read her.”

“I don’t,” Mostin agreed. “But I trust mine less in this regard. And I have not been to Throile. What did...”

“I’d really prefer not to talk about it, Mostin.”

“Ahh,” the Alienist nodded.

“And Throile itself is under renewed attack.”

“Evidently, she keeps you well informed,” Mostin raised an eyebrow. “When you were there, did she...”

“Mostin...” Eadric sighed.

“I’ll not ask again. Apparently you feel a little reticent to speak of it.”

“How perceptive of you, Mostin. And when will your spell be ready?”

“Soon enough,” the Alienist answered. “I am somewhat pressed for time, however. And Shomei is nagging me to complete my part of the cycle which will allow us to interpret the *web of motes*. She is ready, and so is Nwm.”

“Then don’t let me keep you,” Eadric said, arranging his blanket meaningfully.

“She is not idle, however,” Mostin continued, ignoring the hint. “I believe she has approached several Infernal magnates regarding possible support in the Afqithan endeavour.”

“On whose authority?” Eadric was aghast.

Mostin laughed. “I don’t think that she requires any. Shomei is very well connected. And she is also making inquiries regarding the presence of Titivilus in the demiplane.”

“This is becoming too complex.” His mind boggled as he considered the connection between the *Sela* and the Infernalist. A microcosm of the Irrenite perception of Oronthon and the Adversary? The Left Hand of the Numinous. *Do not start thinking that way. It leads to madness.*

“What do you expect?” Mostin sighed. “The prize is enormous, after all.”

“Afqithan? Hardly.”

“Azzagrat is the prize, Eadric, with its untold wealth. And the fall of Graz’zt. Such events – or the promise of them – tend to attract attention. *Lots* of attention.”

“Mmm. Yes. I suppose they do.”

“Are you actually beginning to grasp the full ramifications of this, Eadric?” Mostin asked sarcastically.

“You realize that the spill-over will be immense, of course? It will be like dropping a boulder into a puddle.”

“Azzagrat is a puddle?”

“Cosmically speaking, yes. And if we succeed, we create something that Abyssal nature abhors the most.”

Eadric gave a quizzical look.

“A power vacuum,” Mostin explained.

**

Had Rintrah been mortal, and subject to the vagaries of pride or honour, he might have rejoiced in the grace bestowed upon him, or experienced ecstasy at his newfound closeness with the Godhood. As it

was, lacking in such faculties, or even a differentiated sense of self, the temporary Perfection of the celestial registered as nothing more than a recognition that he was a more

efficient tool for carrying out his Shining Master's Will. His thoughts reached out to find an omnipresence which mystics might have regarded as comforting and all-embracing. Lacking an ego to begin with, the experience was less profound for the Messenger.

Wreathing himself in flame and darkness, Rintrah descended rapidly into the lowest pit of Hell. After a brief and unknowable exchange had occurred, the celestial struck out across the infinities which

stretched toward the Abyss, perceived by his mind's eye as a spiral which led to Nothingness.

In Morne, the *Sela* sat in a state of *saizhan*, the interaction of entities of tremendous power appearing merely as facets of the dialectic revealed to consciousness. Whether his mind reflected reality, or reality responded to his intention was unknown. Causality, synchronicity and coincidence: all were meaningless terms.

The Messenger reached an interface. A bubble of separation. Sealed, inviolable; the labour of centuries of sorcery. Even before he touched it, Rintrah knew that he could not penetrate it.

Oronthon Magnified him. He passed effortlessly through.

Pain waited beyond. It was as if all the agony in the cosmos had been distilled into this single space, mere yards across: a perfect sphere, the walls of which were graven with glyphs and runes of torment.

Their power passed over the celestial, and around him, and through him, but caused less than the

slightest discomfort. Rintrah's eyes, incandescent with potency now, glanced upwards to behold a semblance of a form: wracked, inchoate, stretched and twisted beyond recognition, its pattern diffuse at its margins. It seemed as if the slightest of breezes would cause it to evaporate. Its grasp on existence was tenuous.

Under the force of the Planetar's selfless Will, the quiddity of the sphere began to change, and reshaped itself according to his direction. Empty space assumed pleasing forms: a tree, a small pool with lilies, a tiny rock garden. The upper hemisphere gave off a soft, azure radiance, reminiscent of a cloudless day in late summer.

Rintrah rested briefly: the effort of creation was not insignificant. He glanced at the artificial sky, still etched with sigils of dreadful power which emanated madness and pain, before his wings lifted him

gently aloft. As his hand trailed lightly over the runes, each one shattered, *disjoined* into its separate components. They fell like a silver dust upon the rockery, or to float upon the surface of the pool.

The formless *thing*, still suspended in the centre of the sphere, quivered palpably and then relaxed. For an instant, Rintrah was concerned that the sudden removal of the tension that it had experienced might cause it to dissociate. He swiftly grasped the essence and held it

in his hands. Cohesion and perception returned to it. Responsive to the celestial's ministrations, it corporeated rapidly.

Rintrah laid her by the bole of the tree, *hallowed* the sphere, and vanished. Nehael slept for the first time in her immeasurably long existence.

The *Sela* shifted his position, and a single bead of sweat trickled from his temple. It had been a particularly difficult meditation.

**

Ortwin, Iua and Koilimilou waited in an antechamber of blacks and muted greys, the vague and

insubstantial walls of which were carved with exquisite yet gruesome scenes. They depicted torture, mutilation, and an erotic exultation in pain and depravity which upset even the Satyr's normally liberal sensibilities.

This may be the stupidest thing I have ever done, he thought to himself. *Ainhorr must know of our presence by now*. Inwardly, he fretted desperately. His outward appearance was one of practiced, imperturbable nonchalance.

Ytryn, one of the most powerful of Loquai nobles, had kept the trio waiting for an hour. What counsel was he taking? Whose orders was he following? Dammit, why hasn't anything *happened* yet?

The Cambion said nothing, her perfect face remained impassive, perhaps bearing the slightest hint of contempt.

Gods, I hope her name still carries some weight in these parts, Ortwin regarded Koilimilou. *I hope they buy this*. And then, *He knows I am here. He must. He knows what I am, who I am. He knows that I was there when we hit Feezuu. He knows it was me – and Iua – at Khu. Why has he not acted? I should be dead by now, or at least undergoing painful dismemberment*.

A pair of doors opened. Ortwin's stomach turned over, and bile rose in his throat. He smiled lazily.

"After you," he said easily to the Cambion.

Polymorphed and *mind-blanked*, Ortwin and Iua followed Koilimilou into the great hall. The Satyr had assumed the shape of a sidhe again. Iua's form – a death slaad – was designed to cause maximum

confusion and concern amongst Ytryn's vassals and his demonic courtiers. Ortwin hoped that she could pull it off – Iua was a fine liar, but lacked his own finesse.

Koilimilou bowed her head.

Ortwin strode forward, aware of the many gazes upon him, bowed with considerable flair before

Ytryn's throne, and spoke in a calm, confident voice. His Sylvan was full of archaic inflexion, as befitted a representative of the oldest of fae lineages.

"Greetings, your Grace. My thanks for receiving this embassy, and the hospitality of your

court. Queen Nhura sends her regards from her exile in Faerie, and trusts that you remember your old acquaintance.”

As Ortwin’s head rose, his eyes took on the full scene before him. Ytryn reclined upon a low seat. To his left, coiled and menacing, a marilith was poised like a viper. Two kelvezu flanked the Duke, and at least thirty Loquai knights stood about in silent vigil. Umbral quicklings darted around the periphery of his vision, and a palrethee hovered in the air nearby.

*Sh*t*, the Satyr thought.

**

Eadric’s decision to attend the investiture of Skadding, Foide’s’ son, as Duke of Trempa, had been made quickly. Despite his ambivalence towards the House of Thahan, and his distrust of the Lord

Chamberlain and his tedious plots, Eadric actually felt a measure of confidence in Skadding. The boy was naïve and overly trusting – qualities which, in many ways, the Earl of Deorham regarded as

positive and which his father had, apparently, failed to divest him of.

Besides, one must fulfill one’s feudal obligations, after all.

After a brief detour to visit the Abbey of Osfrith – where he instructed the nuns to arrange the transport of the insane Urqual to the Fane in Morne – Eadric rode through the open gates of the castle at Trempa on the evening before the ceremony. The outer courtyards were crammed with tents and pavillions.

Knights, courtiers, maids and entertainers ate, drank and mingled in the dusk. Heads turned quickly to regard him, and from somewhere his own *ladon* – his clarion call – rang out from a trumpet.

Passing swiftly beneath the Tower of Owls and into the inner bailey, his presence caused more chaos and hysteria than he was altogether comfortable with. Trempa’s Oronthonians – the first to embrace the new order when it had swept across Wyre – prostrated themselves and hailed the *Ahma*, a virtual

demigod. The Uediians – who comprised most of Trempa’s northern aristocracy – regarded him as a saviour from Temple taxes and the indentureship of pagan farmers. In that regard, he had held true to his word. Caur of Har Kumil shouted and greeted him warmly.

Foide regarded Eadric suspiciously behind a veneer of politeness and civility. The satisfaction that he had enjoyed for the past month – at his family’s possession of two of Wyre’s great fiefs – now turned to sourness in his mouth. Foide was reminded of one simple fact: with the blessing of King Tiuhan or no, this ceremony could only pass with the support – whether open or implicit – of Eadric of Deorham. He was above the law, whatever protestations he might make to the contrary. He was invulnerable: mortal weapons could not touch him, they said. Men would follow him happily to their death, assured of their place in paradise. And if he had wanted the duchy for himself, he could have taken it.

And he rides into Trempa, travel-stained and without an entourage, like some errant or hedge-knight.

Eadric dismounted, and knelt before Skadding, his new liege-lord. Somewhat abashed, the Duke-to-be ushered him to his feet.

“My sword is yours,” Eadric bowed. “And my counsel and guidance, should you ever require it.”

Foide of Lang Herath chewed his lip and brooded.

**

Mostin’s lidless green eyes were glazed and his body motionless, as he floated – transfixed – within an infinite sea of light. A hundred billion motes surrounded him.

His intellect, swollen by magic to titanic proportions, reflected briefly upon the series of spells which had brought him to this place. Potent dweomers, which only a handful of Wizards in Wyre’s long

history would have been capable of mastering, seemed – from his new perspective – like paltry cantrips fit only for neophytes and dabblers.

Cradled in the palm of Mostin’s hand was Graz’zt’s mote: dark, erotic, brooding, and seething with

potency. The Alienist inspected first one facet, and then another. The fact that he could not determine the location of Graz’zt – in spatiotemporal terms, at least – was indicative of the fact that the Prince was *mind blanked*. But it made no difference: there was another mote, anchored by a taught radicle, in close proximity. What one could not read directly, one could infer obliquely with little effort in an expanded state such as this: Lord Kostchtchie stood before Prince Graz’zt within the great hall of the Iron Palace in Zelatar.

Mostin scowled, and rapidly plotted the trajectories of several hundred possible futures, scanning each for resonances with Eadric, Nhura, Soneillon, Rhyxali, Ainhorr, Titivilus, Nehael and himself.

Kostchtchie will move to support Ainhorr in Afqithan, he thought. *Fiendish giants*, he mused, *and some are powerful sorcerers*. His eye caught a new thread of probability. *What is that?*

[Inspection. Analysis.] *Blightfire*, he groaned inwardly. The Lord of the Ice Wastes had potent allies of his own.

Mostin returned his attention to Graz’zt’s mote, and abstracted his perspective. He noted the tenuous rapport between himself and the Prince of Azzagrat – alluding to Graz’zt’s own prescience.

But I see both more clearly and more deeply than you, he thought. *For the moment, at least. Your machinations are transparent to me*. Graz’zt could not grasp the entirety of the Afqithan nodality any more than Mostin could, but the fragments of which Mostin was aware – scattered and incoherent as

they were – were more complete. He considered the immense *dimensional lock* that he had developed, projected the catenary of the pseudonatural Horror onto the lattice of

interconnected points, and then superimposed Shomei's glooms on top of that. The nodality rapidly reorganized itself to show a number of different probable futures.

None showed Graz'zt in Afqithan.

He is afraid, Mostin knew. And rightly so. He is not unassailable. He will not come.

Mostin cursed. One plan at least – to lure the Lord of Azzagrat to Afqithan with the promise of Eadric's head – could not be realized. Mostin did not underestimate Graz'zt's shrewdness or cunning, but had

hoped that his temper would be sufficiently unstable to betray him.

The Alienist projected a scenario which involved the swift subdual of Afqithan, the removal of Ainhorr and Kostchtchie – and whatever wights the Ice Lord brought with him – and an immediate subsequent

assault upon Azzagrat itself. It required Shomei to secure twelve legions of Bathym's barbed devils *and* the commitment of Rhyxali's main force of babaus in addition to her shadow demons. But there would be no second *dimensional lock* and no glooms – Shomei herself had vanished from the picture, slain by kelvezu before she could articulate her own power.

He examined a string of possible futures which involved the *binding* of the Horror, and its travel through a *gate* to Azzagrat in order to assassinate Graz'zt. Fourteen of the twenty-three outcomes resulted in Graz'zt escaping to his sanctum before the Horror could complete its mission. Five of the remaining futures involved the coercion of the Horror by Graz'zt and its subsequent redeployment

against its summoner: *I'd better make sure it's adequately buffed, If we go that route,* Mostin thought.

Two futures promised Graz'zt's demise, and two were ambiguous – depending on the reaction of the

Arch-fiend's courtiers.

Mostin meditated upon the interaction between the motes of the Horror and Graz'zt, seeking tendrils of possibility to exploit. Graz'zt would need to be weakened – divested of a sizeable portion of his

reservoir – before the Horror could be used efficiently. Of the hundreds of powerful spells within Graz'zt's repertoire, one – and the name *exquisite domination* sprang unbidden to Mostin's mind – was sufficiently potent to threaten even the Horror's virtual immunity to magic.* If Graz'zt could shoot off two spells – a *superb dispelling* variant followed by the compulsion – then the chances were good that the Prince could assert his will upon the pseudonatural. Graz'zt's reservoir was immense, and he could absorb an unholy amount of backlash before being troubled.

Mostin breathed deeply, and focused his mind. He remembered where he was – within the dome of

Mulissu's mansion, floating within the *web of motes*. His thoughts reached out to the

Infernalist.

[Mostin]: [Very complex semiotic pattern] (= *The Horror cannot accomplish an assassination in*

Azzagrat without prior softening of the target. And he can dispel your glooms effortlessly, and still deal with the pseudonatural. And this assumes he is not even within his sanctum.)

[Shomei]: [Complex semiotic pattern] (= *That is inconsequential. If he were, then he could prevent the gate opening in any case. Come what may, I will send the glooms tomorrow.*)

[Mostin]: !

[Shomei]: (Emphatically) [Semiotic pattern] (= *It is time that he realized he is vulnerable in a tangible way.*)

[Mostin]: [Semiotic pattern] (= *He will quickly overcome them.*)

[Shomei]: [Semiotic pattern] (= *He will bleed first. And they will cut deep.*)

[Mostin]: [Semiotic pattern] (= *Have you seen something I have not? If so, please share it.*)

[Shomei]: [Complex semiotic pattern] (= *I am walking a narrow line, Mostin. Every action I take from now onwards must be calculated for maximum effect.*)

[Mostin]: [Complex semiotic pattern] (= *Please do not sink into a fugue, Shomei. I thought that you had finally made it through the nihilism.*)

Shomei smiled, and shook her head.

*The prime benefit conferred by Mostin's insanely buffed Intelligence was the bonus granted to

Knowledge (Arcana) checks. Whilst difficult to rationalize in terms that we might understand, the

answers to questions such as "what spells does Graz'zt have in his repertoire which might affect this possible course of action " would spring into Mostin's mind at appropriate times. I had already optimized around twenty ELH spell variants for Graz'zt – i.e. increased the XP burn and pumped up the backlash to bring them within his ability. I assumed that he had several hundred more – after all, he is

X billion years old, and it only seemed reasonable. It is unfortunate that it is impossible to play a character with an Int of 22, much less one with a (temporary) Intelligence of 150. What does it *mean* to be that Intelligent? It is impossible to even begin to conceptualize how thought processes can work on that level. Thankfully, this has been the only time that such cosmic heights have been reached. It is simply too much of a headache to DM.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 02-22-2004

Untitled Update

[Mostin]: *Thus.* (Conjure the Horror. *Lock* area around Irknaan's palace – two mile radius. Simultaneous arrival of Rhyxali's force *here*. Highest probability of Kostchtchie's appearance *here*.)

Portals to Faerie *here* and *here* and *here* will allow Nhura access to Afqithan, although I estimate thirty minutes before she can order her forces. Soneillon variable too complicated to calculate because of events in Throile [diagram].)

[Shomei]: *Perhaps this.* (Chaltipeluse secured as beach-head: already warded against teleportation.)

Ytryn ally/eliminated. Ortwin has a high chance of success in this endeavour.)

[Mostin]: *But.* (A Feint *here* [Picture: the stronghold of Queen Menicau] will draw out Ainhorr's main force. Then possible to open *gates*, then *lock* and assault Irknaan's palace directly.)

[Shomei]: *Unlikely.* (None will assume that role. Too dangerous. Unless you can persuade a group of demons to sacrifice themselves for the greater good. [Irony])

[Mostin]: *We two and Nwm - look.* (*Shapechange* and multiple conjurations can achieve the same effect. If you and I each open two *gates*...)

[Shomei]: *My reservoir is close to empty, Mostin...*

[Mostin]: *Then this.* (We should take a short holiday – In fact, I would suggest Afqithan. Get used to your new form, feel the power course through you again, and wreak some random havoc. And take the

airs, of course. Nwm will likely come along – he enjoys flying around and destroying things, however much he denies it. And if we cause enough of a ruckus on our first visit, it will cause an overreaction on the second one – which is precisely what we want.

[Diagram])

[Shomei]: [Calculating probabilities]. *We must be something terrible, that will give Ainhorr pause for thought. Solars? Klurichirs?*

[Mostin]: *Hellfire Wyrms.* [Diagram]

[Shomei]: *Nice. Very nice, Mostin.*

[Mostin]: *Why, thank-you.*

[Shomei]: *But this.* (Multiple summonings with multiple empowerments and I can pull around twenty narzugons into the fray and still retain a high enough valence to contribute to the *quiescence of the spheres*).

[Mostin]: (Nods). *That might be preferable. I will gate a couple of pit fiends in, just to be sure we're taken seriously.*

[Shomei]: *Titivilus, Furbas and Murmuur will likely shoulder the blame.*

[Mostin]: *Such is life. I believe the augmentation just ended, by the way. My cognitive faculties have resumed their normal ant-like status.*

Shomei sighed, a look of profound relief crossing her face. “I’m weary, Mostin. It has been insightful, but I’m glad it’s over: my ego was beginning to fray. We should translate in a couple of days. Flex our muscles with an attack on Samodoquol’s fortress.”

Mostin nodded. “There are three hundred chasme there, and around a dozen glabrezu enforcers as well as other demonic agents. They are commanded by the nalfeshnee Jamua – who is something of a

heavy-hitter. Samodoquol is fractious, and Ainhorr needs to keep him in line. But I suggest that we strike some smaller strongholds first – minor Loquai nobility who have capitulated with the current regime. It will send the message that the Balor’s grip is less than ironclad, and won’t give as much of an opportunity for Ainhorr to react. And when Nhura finally arrives, it may be that she can expect some support.”

“Nhura in the capacity of redeemer and liberator?” Shomei asked ironically. “Now *that* is an amusing prospect.”

“It’s all relative,” Mostin replied. “Still, attacking Samodoquol must be undertaken with the knowledge of the risk involved. Chasme are hardy.”

Shomei shrugged. “Let the flies drone. We will burn them from the sky.”

“Reinforcements will arrive within thirty seconds of our arrival.”

“Then we will depart.” Shomei said easily.

Mostin’s eyes betrayed an excitement which made the Infernalist slightly nervous. “We could go tomorrow,” he said.

“Two days, Mostin,” she replied. “Tomorrow, I send the glooms to Azzagrat.”

**

The anointment and investiture of Skadding as Duke of Trempa took place on a cold morning in late

autumn on the Howe, a green hillock outside of the castle gates reserved for such grand occasions.

In the past, the Abbot of Trempa (or the Bishop of Thahan, had his other duties permitted it) would have performed the ceremony. As it was, the prior incumbents of each position had, in the wake of the *Sela*’s assumption of the Prelacy, opted for a monastic life: both had been conservative in their view,

and the Bishop had been one of the *Ahma*’s foremost detractors. Neither position had been since filled, and Tramst was in no hurry to reestablish the episcopacy until the internal revision of the Temple had been completed. It had therefore been assumed that the ascension of Skadding to the Ducal seat would be a secular affair, and, given the disestablishment of the Temple and the general move away from

Church infeudation, that seemed appropriate.

During the feast before the investiture, to Foide’s horror and dismay, the thane Ekkert –

after

consuming large quantities of mead – had suggested that Eadric perform the ceremony. The idea had

been greeted by rapturous applause by Trempa's assembled aristocracy, despite the fact that it was highly irregular for an Earl to anoint a Duke. Trempa's customs had always been eccentric, but such a notion verged on the insane.

Eadric had politely declined.

"You would be acting in a religious capacity," Ekkert had drawled. "I don't see what the problem is."

"I am not empowered to anoint Dukes," Eadric had said simply. "Besides, a third of Trempa's inhabitants are Uediian. I am not about to begin a new round of disenfranchisement."

"Then ask Nwm to participate," Caur had suggested cannily.

"Regrettably, his whereabouts are unknown to me," Eadric had replied uneasily. It was true – he had no notion of the Druid's location, and no means to contact him.

Foide, thinking that the *Ahma* had closed the subject, had breathed a quiet sigh of relief.

Later that night, however, as Eadric had strolled in the gardens in an attempt to aid his digestion (he seldom ate rich food, and boar did not agree with him), the soil between two rose bushes had begun to warp and ripple. Nwm had appeared, rising from the ground in the shape of a pillar of earth which had rapidly assumed a more recognizable, human form.

The druid had shaken his head, and dirt had fallen out of his tangled hair.

"I understand that I am to officiate at Skadding's investiture tomorrow," he had said in a matter-of-fact way.

"How did Caur contact you?" Eadric had asked, sighing.

"He didn't," Nwm had answered.

"Then how do you know?"

"At this present moment, I know pretty much everything," Nwm had replied. It was true – the Druid had been buoyed by the cycle of augmentations devised by Mostin, and in which he had taken part.

"Although, actually, a wizard of our mutual acquaintance informed me of the probability that you would be asked to anoint the new Duke, and that you would refuse on the grounds that it would alienate the Uediian faction."

"I assume that the interpretation of the *web of notes* is passing according to plan, then?"

Nwm had shrugged. "I'm leaving it to Mostin to work out."

"And what have you been doing?"

"Watching birds, mainly," Nwm had answered.

“And you have discovered...?”

“Nothing that I didn’t already know,” Nwm had admitted. “I’m telling you, Ed: omniscience isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.”

Eadric guffawed.

“In any case, we’ll both perform the ceremony tomorrow.”

“I don’t think so...” Eadric had begun.

“There is actually an eighty-eight percent chance that I will change your mind in that regard,” Nwm had grinned, “so you may as well just throw in the towel now, and save yourself the argument.”

Eadric had sighed. “Skadding will...”

“He’ll agree too,” Nwm had interrupted.

“But Foide...”

“Will come around. What choice does he have, Eadric? *Vox populi* and all that: he is nothing, if not politically astute. He won’t want his son to begin his tenure in a climate of apathy and indifference.

You’ll be doing the boy a favour. Trust me, Ed. Press this point now, and save yourself some grief down the road. Now, I’m hungry. Is there any food left?”

So it was that Nwm the Preceptor placed the coronet – a twisted wreath of ivy, mistletoe and oak-leaves

– upon the head of Skadding, and Eadric anointed him with holy water.

The company – over a hundred noble families – made a slow procession from the Howe to the Hall of

the Seat, which had stood empty since Soraine’s death at the hands of Rimilin five months before.

Skadding assumed his place amidst much panoply, and began his large – and depressingly administrative – set of duties. He had a huge backlog to contend with. Aristocrats bickered about land ownership, hunting rights, debts, impending marriages and when the next tourney should be held.

Commoners waited outside in droves to voice their complaints regarding the bread dole, the theft of pigs, taxes on beer, and the quantity of devalued coinage in circulation. Several sought recompense from soldiers for unwanted pregnancies in indiscreet daughters. Representatives from the Guild of

Clockmakers preened themselves in anticipation of an audience. Entertainers seeking employment

breathed fire, sang ditties or performed minor tricks of prestidigitation.

Eadric looked at Nwm. “And you wanted *me* to do this job?” He said in a low voice.

“On reflection, I think maybe you were right.”

As the *Ahma* took his leave of the new Duke, he bowed, placed his hand upon the marble floor, incanted, and touched his eagle pendant in what most there assumed was a final blessing. A feeling of indescribable calm descended upon the Hall of the Seat. Nwm felt a frisson of power and suppressed a look of astonishment, and questioned Eadric as soon as they were outside again.

“Did you just do what I think you did?” The Druid asked.

“That is entirely possible,” Eadric nodded.

“And since when could you just *do* that?”

“I don’t know,” Eadric shrugged. “I’ve never really tried before.”

Nwm nodded. “Good,” he said. “This may save me considerable effort and labour in the future.”

With a passing thought, Eadric had *hallowed* the hall, and with his brief invocation had laid a *zone of truth* upon the place. No fiend – openly or in possession of another – could enter there, and, for a year at least, no lie could be spoken there without considerable effort.

Skadding was young and inexperienced, and already had enough to contend with without falling prey

to the scheming mendacity of vassals, peers, ambassadors, and family. Or demons, for that matter.

**

Ortwin sang. Purportedly, a composition in Ytryn’s honour, commissioned by Nhura as a gift to the

Duke.

Whatever else he does, Iua mused to herself as she listened, *lying aside*, *Ortwin does this best*. He was an arrogant, self-indulgent, narcissistic erotomaniac – to be sure – but he had an uncanny ability to tap

into the aesthetic sensibilities of his audience. His song was dark, brooding, and melancholic. It conveyed a lust for blood, it exalted pain, and suggested the promise of a grim satiation which would be all-fulfilling but transient; and then the birth of the next desire, which would, in turn, be pursued to its empty and bitter conclusion. Ennui. Psychosis and apathy. The fleeting release from the curse of immortality.

Iua didn’t even understand the words: Ortwin sang in an archaic dialect of Sylvan.

The duelist watched Koilimilou carefully, but if the cambion was moved by the Bard’s performance,

she displayed no outward sign of it. But neither Iua, nor Koilimilou, nor the marilith Sethee were alerted to Ortwin’s true message – directed at Ytryn alone, and concealed within the song.

[Make no response to this communication – I suspect you lack the subtlety possessed by yonder

demoness, and she would quickly realize your intention.

Graz'zt's hegemony here will shortly end. His enemies already mobilize themselves. Nhura is returning, and her allies will crush Ainhorr. Rhyxali – your other patroness – is poised to retake her rightful property. Soneillon craves vengeance, and her designs will soon bear fruit.

Where will your loyalties lie, Duke Ytryn? To whom will you pledge your treacherous sword? Listen

well, and you will survive the orgy of death and prosper in the aftermath. When the gates to the other worlds open, and the demons at Chaltipeluse are recalled to the battle before the walls of Irknaan's palace, you will slay those that remain here. You will mobilize your army, and join Queen Nhura in the fray.

In payment, Nhura will grant you Someranth: Menicau will likely not survive the upcoming conflict

and if, by some strange chance she does, she will not survive long *after* it. If you fail, then Nhura's ire will turn towards you, and like those others who betray her, you will die painfully.

And Ytryn, in case you forget, I am an ambassador from Faerie and you will guarantee my safe passage and lend me such aid as custom dictates. Koilimilou and the slaad Qhrsjh are under my protection. Do not underestimate my influence or my reach. If I am assailed, then the Hunters will descend upon you, and drag you to a doom which even you cannot imagine.]

... and of frost

and unrelenting pursuit

and jealous death.

Ortwin finished his song. His innuendo had conveyed information which was – to his knowledge – at

least partially accurate. Admittedly, he might have been a little liberal with his interpretation of the facts, and his promises might not have been sanctioned by Nhura. No matter. He had no doubt that

Ytryn believed him – it was merely a question of how the Duke would react to what he had heard.*

**

There had been two of them. They had been fast: faster than he was. Their motion was precise,

calculated and deadly. He had been taking his pleasure when they struck.

His feeling had been one of outrage, coupled with incredulity. How had they reached him here? There were precious few areas in Zelatar where it was possible to *teleport* or open a *gate*. Places which – by necessity – were not *dimensionally locked*, and he knew them all intimately. Most of them were known *only* to him.

He had been alerted by a blur of shadowy motion, and a feeling of pain which ripped through his

shoulder, piercing demonic flesh and sinew and spilling his ichor upon the floor of his own harem. He had been stabbed nine times more before he had reacted.**

Fearing for his very existence, Graz'zt had emanated a shroud of death and destruction which had

instantly annihilated his assailants, together with three succubi and the marilith Chuschi – his current favorite.

The glooms had evaporated, returning to whatever shady realm they had issued from. They had been

summoned creatures, and possessed no final reality.

Immediately afterwards, Graz'zt had locked the whole of Zelatar, except for the *gate* room – where the guard was quadrupled. Brutal interrogations of scores of demons – mainly nalfeshnees in possession of *cubic gates* who presided over various conquered worlds – ensued. A wave of tortures, mutilations and assassinations flooded through the citadel and city as the Prince's paranoia asserted itself, and his demonic servitors found an opportunity to settle old scores.

Graz'zt retreated to his sanctum, rapidly healed his wounds, and gave thought to revenge.

*Ortwin – benefitting from a multiply empowered *eagle's splendour* comfortably made a DC 50 Bluff check – enough to 1) convey his innuendo successfully without alerting the others present; and 2)

simultaneously lie sufficiently well to convince Ytryn that he was an important sidhe of powerful

connections, and crossing him would result in the Duke's rapid demise. All was hidden within the

context of a song which rivalled those composed by the most accomplished of faerie bards and

minstrels.

**Graz'zt's DR – 20/Cold Iron and Epic and Good – actually saved his bacon. Still, the +10 *keen daggers* used by the glooms filled him full of holes.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 03-02-2004

Dragonplay

The tower was a slender, delicate structure, rising some thirty fathoms from a low hillock and twisting

deliciously before reaching its crest. It was carved in intricate relief and inlaid with precious metals which seemed to capture and then amplify the perpetual twilight, and stars glistened softly at its apex.

Around it, arranged in elegant symmetry, five more towers – the hues of which were subtly different –

rose in close proximity to half the height of the central spire, their shoulders attached by narrow buttresses of both aesthetic and functional design.

It was the home of Shondipere, a Loquai aristocrat and vassal of Queen Menicau. Shondipere was a

noble of middling means, who nonetheless boasted an excellent pedigree. His title – if translated from the Sylvan – might have been ‘baron’ or ‘thane’: in fact, the Loquai admitted to greater variation within their order of precedence than most human cultures.

Only fifteen Loquai dwelt with Shondipere, and all were related. The remainder of his household

consisted of a handful of umbral quicklings who acted as messengers and spies, two *charmed* fiendish trolls who served as door-wards, a dozen slow-witted gnome slaves, and the noble’s pet monster – an abyssal basilisk named Turchin. Shondipere kept a stable of twenty griffons, although he seldom

ventured beyond the confines of his castle, content to busy himself composing morbid verse, or

indulging his dark and violent fantasies.

Shondipere had spent the last several hours – or was it days? he paid little heed to the passage of time –

closeted alone in an airy rotunda pondering upon various aspects of the nature of pain. His reverie had been interrupted when two palrethees and a small troop of bar-lgura – agents of the balor Ainhorr – had arrived and required that he surrender his daughter as hostage, together with a large portion of his portable wealth. Shondipere had remained impassive, and conceded to their demands – he felt no

particular attachment to his offspring, and was anxious to return to his contemplation. His primary concern regarding his daughter was that, were she to die, he would be without an heir – precipitating a need to find another mate and to sire further progeny.

Shondipere was therefore vexed when the quickling Khimpa darted into the rotunda and bowed her tiny head to the glass floor at his feet. Shondipere gestured irritably, a sign that the sprite should speak.

“Two devils require an audience, Lord,” Khimpa squeaked rapidly, her malevolent face betraying a certain wicked glee at the discomfort that she knew the news would cause her master.

Shondipere observed the quickling’s features, and made a mental note to have her punished for insubordination later. A brief spell with the trolls might encourage her to act with more civility, or at least hide her emotions better.

“What is their order?” Shondipere inquired coldly.

“A horned devil and an erinyes, Lord,” Khimpa replied.

Shondipere scowled. What was a cornugon doing *here*? He had been informed of the presence of the three dukes in Afqithan, of course, but whatever their purpose was, it didn't concern him. It seemed likely the arrival of two devils at his own gates was connected – unless it was a ruse devised by

Menicau, or maybe Ainhorr himself: to test Shondipere's loyalty, or perhaps out of sheer perversity.

"Order the household to assemble," he sighed. "I will receive them in the heptagon in ten minutes."

As they approached, Shondipere – cautious of being drawn into some diabolic intrigue which he had no desire to enmesh himself in – studied the devils carefully.

Something isn't right, was his last thought.

**

Eadric and Nwm – together with Contundor, Sem and Gheim – *wind walked* to Deorham. The Druid intended to dispose of the blackthorn tree which occupied the courtyard of Kyrtil's Burh, together with its grizzly fruit – the carcasses of the demons who had assailed the keep. More than a fortnight had passed since the attack, but Eadric's servants had been disinclined to deal with the spectacle, concerned that some taint might infect them, and generally shunning the northern and western parts of the bailey.

And the *Ahma* was anxious for things to return to normal – for their usual brief while, at least.

In the event, Eadric changed his mind. The remains of the demons should probably go, he suggested

wrily, but the tree itself could stay. It would act as a reminder to himself – and any potential threats to

him – that he was not without allies, albeit strange ones which he often failed to understand.

In a businesslike manner, Nwm used his magic to clean up the mess he had made, removing the flags

which had shattered upon the sudden growth of the tree, and replacing them with a small garden around the blackthorn's bole. Concerned that the tree might still appear rather dark and gloomy, he caused it to flower, and tiny clusters of white and pale yellow appeared on its spiky twigs. It was out of season, but a justifiable tinkering, given the circumstances. The spell which Nwm invoked to achieve the effect was, however, of less than pinpoint accuracy, and the ivy which clung to the Steeple and the keep

burgeoned into a thick cover. Eadric sighed and entered the chapel.

Of the quartet of celestials called by Tahl, the single remaining deva, Saphrez, was deputed by Eadric to guard the sanctum. The celestial remained near the altar, *invisible*, and was enjoined to bestow whatever blessings it might upon those who came to pray there. The decision was both timely and

unfortunate – it transpired that a group of pilgrims from Ialde were already boarded at *The*

Twelve Elms, the only inn in the village of Deorham, some two miles distant. When Eadric – reluctant that his home become a shrine – conveyed his concerns to Nwm, he received an unsympathetic response.

“I’m surprised it took this long, actually,” the Druid said laconically. “If it troubles you that much, just ask Mostin to move in. I’m sure he would discourage any pietists from undertaking the journey here.”

Eadric grumbled. It occurred to him that his intent – to have the deva act as a support for his staff, and a source of healing for those locals who required it – would rapidly foster a situation which attracted zealots and fundamentalists. But he could hardly *deny* succour to those who came to Kyrtil’s Burh seeking it.

“Keep the gates open,” he wearily instructed his servants, “but allow visitors access to the well and the chapel only, and encourage them not to linger too long.”

Later that day, after Nwm had retired to his glade, Eadric watched from a window within the Steeple as a party of twenty pilgrims with travel-stained clothes made a slow procession up the knoll, across the bridge, through the courtyard and into the chapel. Hopefully, he mused wryly, none of them were

cursed, diseased or injured, Saphrez could remain inactive, and news of miraculous goings-on at Kyrtil’s Burh would be delayed for a little while. But it was only a matter of time. And if any

petitioned him directly for spiritual aid, he was duty-bound to provide it. Whilst he did not resent it, he could feel no upwelling of generosity or compassion while he still had so much more to do: first and foremost, he remained a soldier.

As the *Ahma* leaned upon the sill, gazed down from the tower, and ruminated on his various

responsibilities, a sudden breeze caused his hackles to rise and the faint scent of death and lotus reached his nostrils. A pair of slender arms encircled his waist, and a soft face pressed against his back.

Wings began to fold around him, beckoning him inwards. He swallowed, and pulled himself away.

The void-that-was-a-demon-who-was-a-girl had returned, apparently seeking reassurance.

**

Mostin rapidly changed his form, shedding his diabolic body and assuming the shape of a dragon fifty feet long which barely fit into the lofty reception chamber. His scales kindled to a searing flame, and he breathed a gout of infernal fire over Shondipere, the four knights who flanked him, and a pair of

unlucky quicklings who happened to be hovering in the wrong place. All were instantly immolated.

Chaos erupted all around. Gnome slaves and sprites fled for cover, and several of the remaining Loquai immediately *plane shifted* to Shadow. Others shakily targeted Mostin with spells or arrows, none of which affected him. He leapt upwards, smashing his head

through the delicate glass dome, shattering the plinths either side of it, and took to the sky briefly before settling upon a slender buttress, which began to crack under his weight. Mostin flapped his wings inexpertly to compensate.

Inside of the heptagon, Shomei had taken the form of another wyrm. Hellfire erupted again briefly, before she joined Mostin above the castle, perching upon the topmost spire.

“We should give the gnomes a few minutes to escape, and then just flatten the place,” she called down.

Mostin nodded enthusiastically. *Shapechange* was rapidly becoming his new favourite spell.

**

“Are they yours?” Titivilus asked Furcus, smiling.

“No indeed,” Furcas replied, stroking his beard.

Titivilus sighed inwardly. It was a pointless question – the Count of Rhetoric was almost as good a liar as himself.

“Apparently, they are very large ones.” Titivilus said. “And they have levelled four strongholds already.

I cannot scry them – they are warded. I am returning to Dis. Duke Allocator should know.”

“Is that wise?” Furcas asked. “They might be his.”

“They may also be rogue,” Titivilus countered, wondering whether Furcas dissembled and, if so, what his motive was.

“One, perhaps; but two? Unlikely. Murmuur would...”

“I think it best that we do not inform Murmuur,” Titivilus interrupted. “If they are his, it is better that he doesn’t know that we know.”

“Murmuur’s knights are mandated to intervene in affairs if necessary,” Furcas scowled. “And he is here.

Are you suggesting that we withhold information from our commander? That is a bold course to take.”

“Not at all,” Titivilus replied, careful to avoid any possible accusations of insubordination. “I’m merely saying that, if they *are* his, then it may be that we are not meant to know. I would regret upsetting any wider plan because of our over-diligence in information gathering.”

“It may be related to your former protégée’s petition.”

“Perhaps,” Titivilus nodded, not knowing what it was that Furcas referred to, but unwilling to make that fact known, “but *which* petition? Now that another has been made, it merely complicates things further.” He *had* to return to the Iron City, to find out what was going on. He discreetly studied the face of Furcas for a response, but the Count evinced none.

“And she may have made several others, news of which has not yet reached us,” Furcas

pointed out, curious as to whether Titivilus lied about the second petition and, if not, to whom it might have been addressed. “On reflection, perhaps you *should* return to Dis. I will guard our interests here in the meanwhile.”

The mind of Titivilus twisted, wondering whether that had been Furcas’s intent from the outset. The Confuser decided to play along with it. “It might be prudent to mobilize some of your troops,” he suggested, “in the event that an unknown rival Duke is involved. I could bring a communiqué to Sobel*

to that effect, if you so wish.”

“I would prefer to relay such a message myself, should the need arise,” Furcas said drily. “I would be embarrassed if the information was somehow misapprehended.”

“That is understandable,” Titivilus agreed. “Perhaps you should appoint an aide whose mental faculties are more sharply honed.”

Furcas smiled thinly.

“Do you then have *no* requests?”

“That depends. Are you planning to visit Malbolge as well?” Furcas inquired.

“Only if our Dread Master demands it,” Titivilus replied, the merest hint of sarcasm in his voice.

Malbolge was a tedious, brutal environment, which lacked any sophistication: a far cry from the

subtleties and intrigues of Dis.

“It might be prudent to ensure that Murmuur’s troops are adequately prepared.**”

“That is a wise precaution,” Titivilus concurred.

“And give my respects to our Lord, should you see him,” Furcas smiled.

“Naturally,” Titivilus lied.

**

Soneillon appeared in her natural form. She seemed utterly drained, although, at first, Eadric was nonetheless cautious that it might be a ruse. It was as though, somehow, the Void had diminished in stature. *Ens* had polluted her, diluting her with matter and energy. It had the effect of making her seem more tangible and real than normal.

A faint tracery of scars – wounds which she had recently received, and the vestiges of which had not yet entirely vanished – covered her arms, neck, wings and torso. Blackness stained the skin beneath her ears and nostrils, where enormous backlash energies had caused her demonic body to rupture. Her

hands and fingernails were caked with dried ichor: when she had spent her last spell, Eadric knew, and they had grappled her within the unlight which surrounded her, she had torn at them in a frenzy with her claws.

“The Paling*** has been breached,” she smiled wryly. “Adyell *disjoined* a section of it before she defected. Janiq’s bar-*lgura* are pouring through. I am asking for your help.”

Oronthon, he swore silently. *She really is vulnerable.* He sighed. “Very well. How long do we have?”

“Helitihai and Chaya patched the defenses with multiple *walls of force*, but they were being systematically *disintegrated* by daemon mercenaries as I left. It is impossible to say. Throile must not fall, Eadric.”

He nodded. “We need Mostin. Can you issue a *sending*?”

“I am spent!” Soneillon snapped. “I have magic enough to return us to Throile, that is all.”

“Or to issue a *sending*?”

The message sped to Afqithan:

The Ahma commands that you attend him in his stronghold. Events are spiralling out of control in Throile. Your assistance is required.

Mostin raised a draconic eyebrow. He turned to Shomei. “I have just received a *sending* from Soneillon

– she is labouring under the impression that I am somehow Eadric’s servant. No matter. It seems as though the second Throile thread is crystallizing.”

Shomei groaned. “That’s the one with the ultrodaemons.”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

*

The pious were gathered in the courtyard, speaking amongst themselves in hushed voices, when one of them noticed the *Ahma* walking towards them from the base of the Steeple. Excitedly, he pointed out Eadric to his companions.

Their sense of religious awe was replaced by a feeling of confusion as, beneath the blackthorn,

Soneillon manifested. There was talk of a demoness associated with the *Ahma*, of course, but rumour spoke of her being *genteel* in appearance. This creature was wild, naked, bloodstained.

Effortlessly reading their thoughts, Soneillon smiled. Despite all that had transpired, the temptation to *charm* these hapless mortals was still almost too much to resist. Eadric stared stonily at her.

Above them, the sky darkened momentarily and a fissure in space ripped open. As two enormous

wyrms, wreathed in infernal fire thundered through a *gate*, beyond them a scene from a dream – or nightmare – was briefly revealed: a twilight sky, streaked with deep indigo, saffron and vermillion.

The pilgrims fled from Kyrtil’s Burh, adequately instructed, Eadric considered, in the application of the dialectic.

*Sobel – the lieutenant appointed to Furcas by Dispater – is an advanced erinyes with considerable tactical savvy. Although Furcas holds wide estates and can muster 29 legions

of devils (primarily

barbazu), he takes little pleasure in martial pursuits. Sobel watches the Duke of Rhetoric and

communicates his activities to Dis, but Furcas still values her advice and military expertise.

** i.e. find out exactly who, and what, and how many, and whether any hellfire wyrms had been

deployed.

*** The enormous magical outer defense which surrounds Soneillon's citadel in Throile. It is

impenetrable to normal physical movement, and inside it *teleportation* is severely restricted, although *gates* may open within its confines. Access to the citadel is controlled through three portals which open or close according to Soneillon's will.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 03-08-2004

For the record, I use the terms *yugoloth* and *daemon* interchangeably, depending on my whim.

More Than You Can Chew: Part 1

"I think that *three* of these wyrms might arouse a little too much suspicion," Nwm groaned, looking up into Mostin's enormous, sunken, draconic eyes. "It might also cause an unpleasant escalation – has it occurred to you that the Devils currently in Afqithan will probably be blamed?"

"Well of course it has," Mostin sighed. Flames cascaded over his crest irritably. "If you'd spent your time productively, studying the *web of motes*..."

"It is a non-issue," Shomei said to Nwm. "It will cause confusion, certainly, but events are hardly likely to 'escalate' any more than they have already: how can they? Besides, even if news reaches Graz'zt, what can he do?"

"He will not come himself?" Eadric asked.

"No future that I have observed involves Graz'zt leaving Azzagrat," Mostin said.

Eadric clenched his jaw. "But the plan..."

"The plan to lure him forth is unworkable," Mostin hissed. "My apologies – that was more condescending than I intended. These vocal cords are not equipped for comments that don't sound

sarcastic. Graz'zt will remain closeted in Zelatar, irrespective of our actions. We shouldn't be surprised:

if his venturing forth entailed even a one in ten thousand chance of his demise, then he would not do it.

It would be foolhardy, from his perspective. He has not retained an aeons-long regime by acting precipitously.”

Eadric scowled, and his eyes bored into Soneillon. “You knew this.”

“I would have guessed it,” she smiled.

“But you allowed us to entertain the possibility, nonetheless?”

“You are the *Ahma*,” she said simply. “It is reasonable to assume that you possess a degree of insight that I do not. Our perspectives are complimentary, Eadric, not antagonistic.”

“Then...”

“I have acted already,” Shomei sighed. “Mostin and I deemed it appropriate to increase his paranoia. I sent two glooms to assassinate him yesterday.”

Eadric gaped. He didn’t know what a gloom was, but they sounded impressive.

“They were unsuccessful,” Shomei added quickly. “But he has *locked* Zelatar in reaction. He is currently busying himself with purges.”

Soneillon looked bored, and yawned.

Mostin nodded. “I get the hint. One moment please.” He turned to the Druid. “Nwm, if the hellfire wyrm is an unappealing form, you might want to try *this*.*”

The Alienist rapidly shifted into a monstrous, winged, four-armed brute of truly terrifying aspect. Its hyena-like head was surrounded by a mane of spikes which dripped venom, but its most unsettling

feature was its torso. In place of a chest and abdomen there gaped a vast, toothed maw and pincers which twitched rhythmically.

“What would I do?” Nwm asked.

Mostin wiggled his pincers. “You cut their heads off.”

“That doesn’t seem terribly efficient,” Nwm said drily. “Let’s just go with the dragon.”

*

Nothing could have prepared Nwm for the mind-shaking insanity which was Throile at war. As the rift between the worlds closed behind them, the full spectacle impacted on his consciousness like a tidal wave. This was likely as far as he would ever be from Wyre: by Mostin’s reckoning, three hundred

realities – most of them filled with demons – lay between him and the Green.

The sky was a purplish haze – at least, purple was the colour which it most closely approximated to his draconic eyes. The citadel of Soneillon below him was a colossal structure, built like a five-sided ziggurat but boasting a thousand towers which sprang from vast piers of black stone in concentric rings around its circumference. Its topmost pinnacle soared a mile above the treetops of a plush, verdant jungle which stretched as far as his eye could see.

The forest stretches to infinity, he thought. *In all directions*. It was a meaningless observation. His mind could not grasp the magnitude of it. An infinite jungle. It breathed malice and death.

Beyond the citadel, encircling it to a distance of a league – until the trees marched upon it – was a swathe of bedrock, filled with immense shafts from which fear and an agony of violence erupted like gruesome and intangible tephra. Perhaps the pits were filled with the damned – undergoing whatever punishment they had condemned themselves to – or maybe it was some phenomenon peculiar to

Throile, where a cursed earth spewed its evil into the tainted airs, in a supernatural cycle where evil itself was propagated, and diffused, and finally reabsorbed. For four fifths of its area, the blasted rock beyond the walls of the fortress was utterly devoid of motion: neither demon nor monster walked there.

But in one area alone, in a sight that made the Druid's heart pound in his scale-armoured chest, the ground and skies seethed with chaos.

Drawn up like two enormous wedges, the apices of which barely touched each other, the Abyssal armies of Soneillon and Graz'zt – the latter under the command of the marilith Janiq – faced each other in an orgy of pain, destruction and death. At their interface – the connecting point between the two spearheads – was the gap within the Paling which the succubus Adyell had *disjoined*. The aperture was only eighty feet wide, and demons seethed through from outside of the invisible magical wall.

Sporadically, blossoming rapidly inside of the barrier, cadres of bar-lgura manifested as first one, and then hundreds, found purchase within the warded interior where they could *teleport* with impunity.

Groups of succubi and palrethees descended upon them, or flew to intercept the units of yugoloth

mercenaries who had overwhelmed the initial defense of the opening in the perimeter. Nycadaemons

and yagnodaemons pushed through relentlessly, despite the frenzied resistance offered by packs of

jariliths and goristros.

The mental static was terrific: thousands of demons screaming telepathic commands, which spilled

over into Nwm's thoughts as unconscious urges to commit cruelty and violence. He gaped as demons

summoned more demons, fell prey to compulsions and switched sides, invoked patches of *darkness*, or dispelled them.

Further outside of the Paling, clamouring for the opportunity to press forwards, countless dretch and hordes of rutterkins, uridezu rat-demons, and jovocs surged in restless waves. Under the supervision of hezrous, they crawled and clambered over each other, eager to claw, and bite, and rend. Quasits flitted in black swarms above them.

Emptying her bracelet of power, Shomei had rendered herself, Mostin and Nwm *invisible* and had *mind blanked* the Druid and the *Ahma*. All had been *hasted*. None of the spellcasters, however, were fully prepared to engage in an offensive, and the Infernalist inwardly lamented the fact that their wards might be woefully inadequate.

In the airs next to them, Soneillon relaxed into the form in which they had first encountered her in Afqithan – a shape of unbeing, around which an aura of annihilation began to glower menacingly. She folded her wings – now appearing as gaps in the fabric of reality – about herself, before invoking the nullity which was her essential nature and which had, for a brief time, been suppressed. Utter blackness encased her.

Soneillon, Eadric spoke into her mind.

Her thoughts regarded him ironically.

You need to instruct your troops not to assail me.

Naturally, Eadric. The Void vanished, only to reappear an instant later, a thousand feet below them, and in the thick of the press.

“A *prismatic wall* would do the trick,” Mostin sighed. “Unfortunately...”

“Nor I,” Shomei nodded.

“Before we can plug the hole we need...” Mostin began.

“To take out the ultroloths,” Shomei finished. “I know, I know. We need to find them first.”

“How many are there?” Eadric asked, sighing.

“Five,” Mostin replied. “And two arcanadaemons.”

Eadric closed his eyes briefly and concentrated. A *holy aura* kindled around himself and his unlikely companions – three hellfire wyrms. *Daylight* suffused him.

Shomei raised an eyebrow. “That’s a useful trick.”

“Mostin, can you *teleport* me to a position just inside of the opening?”

The Alienist was about to say something else, but thought better of it and clamped his jaws shut. He watched as a hundred bar-Igura began manifesting below them. “Yes,” he replied.

“Good,” Eadric said, drawing Lukarn.

“Hmm,” Mostin replied.

“And Mostin. Nwm.”

“Mmm?” They answered in unison.

“Don’t take too long in getting there. I have a feeling that I may be unduly targeted.”

“You think?” Nwm replied drily.

“And Shomei.”

She looked at him.

“Choose your time wisely. This may not be it.”

She swallowed. *He knows. The bastard knows.*

Mostin cocked his head.

**

For a brief period of time – which seemed like an altogether unpleasant eternity – the *Ahma* was alone.

His appearance on the battlefield was a surreal event, which had even demons – who routinely dealt with the bizarre and the insane – baffled. The cursed ground at his feet smoked in revulsion at his presence as he manifested within a knot of bar-Igura. They reacted rapidly and pounced on him.

Eadric’s shield and armour turned their buffets, and the demons which struck him recoiled, blinded by celestial light. He swung Lukarn in a great arc, slaying all of those within his arm’s reach. *Scorching rays* struck him but fizzled impotently, and he shrugged off a *dispel magic* which targeted him.

Darkness would not adhere to him.

A shadow covered him, and a flurry of claws and blows hammered down on him from above as a

nycaloth lashed at him viciously, but the *holy aura* flashed brilliantly, blinding the daemon. Two others

– the source of the magic which had struck him – descended rapidly towards him.

This isn’t so bad, he thought to himself. But now the leaping demons around him seethed forwards again, clutching at him with powerful hands and attempting to bear him to the ground. He hewed at

them, felling three of them, and thrusting one away, blinded. Others pummelled him, and he swung

again, cutting a swathe through them about himself. In his mind, Lukarn sang, exulting in its potency.

Almost as an afterthought, Eadric slashed upwards, striking the nycadaemon above him three times. He sidestepped as it crashed to the ground, thrashed its huge wings briefly, and expired. Another slammed into him, almost bowling him over, and thrusting him backwards five paces into the waiting clutches of the third: Eadric felt venom-tipped claws finding gaps in his armour, puncturing flesh and pinning him.

Eight enormous, muscle-bound arms were groping at him in an attempt to overpower him. From his

left, a *disintegrate* struck him but failed to overcome his protections.

Above, Mostin grunted to Shomei. *There’s one.*

Deftly – and impossibly – Eadric twisted Lukarn in his wrist and began to slice at the creatures

restraining him.** With four, powerful strikes, he slew one of them. The remaining daemon clung on desperately, screaming telepathically for assistance. Two of its enormous hands pinned Eadric's arm while two more pried his weapon from his grip.

The nycadaemon, unaccustomed to bearing a sword of Lukarn's power and temperament, gave a look

of astonishment as it began to hack at itself with the captured weapon.

Before the next onslaught could reach him, Eadric spoke a single, quiet, *holy word*. The Abyssal rock beneath him shuddered in agony, and around sixty bar-lgura within a broad circle about him burned

away into vapour. The nycadaemon – and three others who had come to its call – were stricken

instantly.

Eadric stepped forwards, and retrieved Lukarn from the paralyzed monster's grasp.

Great Goddess, Nwm thought as he plummeted towards the battlefield. *He is made for this. This is his purpose. He is like a machine.* He finally understood just how much Soneillon needed the *Ahma*.

The Druid discharged a cone of Infernal fire over the demons below him, simultaneously becoming

visible. Behind him, Mostin and Shomei thundered over the field, burning bar-lgura footsoldiers with goutts of fire in the vicinity of where one of the ultroloths was suspected to be.

Below them, the hordes quaked.

The situation was uncannily familiar to Mostin, and he experienced a profound *déjà vu* as he winged away. His eyes widened, as the vision of a future half-remembered flashed across his mind.

Ainhorr, he thought to Shomei. *Ainhorr will come.*

She groaned. *Are you sure?*

Yes. No. Yes. I'm sure.

She swallowed. The *vorpai* sword was a vague recollection of death for her. But only one of several.

*

A succubus – a scout named Semhel who exercised no great power and held no particular responsibilities – appeared before Janiq. The marilith remained in the rearguard of her force, flanked by glabrezu bodyguards.

Semhel prostrated herself. "There is a mortal here – or a celestial. I cannot tell which."

Janiq, of quick mind, and wise to at least some of the many schemes in which her dark master was

embroiled, narrowed her eyes and hissed. Adyell had confirmed that the *Ahma* had visited Throile on at least two occasions – in fact, the doubts held by the succubus regarding Soneillon’s actions had, in large part, been responsible for her defection. She barked an order at her aide – the arcanaloth Xehez.

“Issue a *sending* immediately to Azzagrat. Eadric of Deorham is here.”

Knowing that when Janiq said ‘immediately,’ she meant *immediately*, Xehez used a *limited wish* to expedite the message.

In his sanctum, three words resonated in Graz’zt’s mind:

Deorham in Throile.

The Prince’s reply was equally succinct:

Detain him. I will send aid.

Janiq – along with her retinue – *teleported* to a position which offered a better vantage of the battle, and watched, incredulous, as three hellfire wyrms – emanating *holy auras* – appeared above the vanguard of her army.

She screamed telepathic orders to her aerial heavy cavalry – the nycadaemon mercenaries –

immediately instructing the entire force to withdraw from the goristros and to intercept the dragons.

Her orders to the ultroloths – whose loyalty she still doubted – were couched in the promise of reward.

Capture the mortal, and Graz’zt will lavish gifts upon all of us. Bring the wyrms down.

She dispatched Semhel with instructions to her reserve force of bar-lgura – who waited several

thousand miles away – to join the fray, and smiled. Drawing six *unholy* swords from scabbards across her body, the Marilith prepared for battle.

*

Mostin gyred in the sky, his aura blinding the succubi around him. In his belly, he felt the fire rising again as dozens of nycadaemons began to take off, or to manifest in the air around him.

At that point, he was struck by two simultaneous targeted *greater dispel magics*, and two quickened *unholy blights*.

Oops, he thought as most of his wards vanished and he was forced back into his natural state. He vomited but retained his composure, cast a quickened *dimension door* and appeared among a

screeching mob of bar-lgura, sixty feet ahead of Eadric, *in the aperture in the Paling*.

Shomei screeched. *Are you insane?* She herself was struck by a *greater dispelling* but, to her relief, retained her draconic shape. A *horrid wilting* failed to affect her. But her *mind blank* was gone, and to the demons and daemons present who possessed *true seeing*, her

real form became apparent.

Mortal! The voice of an Ultroloth echoed in the minds of the lesser daemons.

Gleefully, eight Nycadaemons tore into her. Many more flapped nearby, eager for the chance to engage an obstacle which now seemed as though it could be overcome. Still, they could barely penetrate her armour.

Shomei *shapechanged*. Her scales thickened and brightened, swiftly acquiring a flawless, mirror-like sheen. Her size doubled to titanic proportions. As her wings powered her backwards in the air, and daemons lashed at her, she breathed upon those in front of her head.

Fourteen paralyzed nycaloths dropped like stones to the ground, flattening dozens of bar-lgura below them.

*

A wave of malice washed over Eadric, attempting to *dominate* him, and his head turned to face the source of the compulsion.

It was a faceless creature, whose empty visage swam with tiny pin-points of light, and whose dark

cloak seemed to blow with unnatural slowness in the gale issuing from above. It stood seventy feet away, flanked by nycaloths and behind a great, armour-clad yagnodaemon which bore a huge sword.

He began to run towards it, over the ashes of the bar-lgura and past the stupefied forms of nycadaemons. Power coursed through him as he invoked as much strength as he could muster. *Hasted* time simultaneously slowed to a crawl, and sped to a blur. Nycadaemons clutched at him as he moved, and the yagnoloth interposed itself fully between Eadric and his quarry. The armoured fiend's sword bit deep into him, but he forced his way forwards, his shield slamming into the bodyguard's legs and

bowling it over. He *smote* the ultrodaemon, and blackness poured from it. It emitted a thin, high-pitched scream.***

As the yagnoloth clambered to its feet, the *Ahma* turned and *smote* it. It struck Eadric again, with enormous force, blinding itself in the backlash from the *holy aura*. Two nycaloths moved in, and ripped at him in a frenzy, drawing blood with envenomed claws.

Gambling, the ultroloth spoke a *power word*. The capture of the *Ahma* was a prize for which much should be risked. Eadric's celestial defense failed, and for a fraction of a second the daemon exulted.

But still Eadric did not succumb. He struck, and the daemon perished. He stepped sideways, and the sightless yagnoloth lashed out again, smashing through his armour. Eadric *smote* it again. And again.

Eadric struck again, but wearily, and as it crumpled next to him, he knew that his strength was waning swiftly.

A huge claw snatched him from the battlefield, and carried him aloft.

“Thank-you,” he said to Nwm.

“Hmm,” the Druid replied.

But, struck by a *dispelling*, the *shapechange* on Nwm fizzled and vanished, and both he and Eadric plummeted back to the ground.

*I have retained *shapechange* on the Druid spell-list.

** This was a potentially dangerous situation – one of the nycadaemons Bull Rushed Eadric and the

other began a grapple as an AoO – Eadric had already used his AoO for the round when countering the bar-lgura’s attempted grapple (and Cleaving from it. Sigh.) Lukarn, however is a sunblade – i.e. it’s treated as a light weapon, and could therefore be used in a grapple.

I use Pants’s ‘loths, btw. Nice work, Pants.

***This incident is worthy of note. Eadric’s player – Marc – has this annoying habit of pulling off stunts like this. One would think that sticking a yagnoloth (a 10th level *Fighter* yagnoloth, to boot) directly in the path of a size M creature would ensure the ultroloth some space to either use a few more spell-likes, or to *teleport* away if things got sticky for it.

But, no. Eadric invoked the Strength domain and Righteous Might, charged, overran the yagnoloth,

Power Attacked at +20, *smote* the ultroloth and scored a critical hit, reducing the daemon to around 30

hp. :rolleyes:

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 03-14-2004

More Than You Can Chew - Part 2

The bar-lgura pounced on him and attacked.

Mostin considered his options. Quickly. Although his very nature – infused with the essence of

transcendental insanity – rendered him a degree of protection from their teeth and claws, he knew that they would still swiftly overpower him.* He cowered, avoiding their blows as best he could, mumbled, and gestured.

The battle froze around him, as he invoked a *time stop*. He muttered a brief incantation, and flew upwards amid the eerie silence, glancing around. Some distance away, the Void which was Soneillon

was the focus of hundreds of demons, poised eagerly to join the mob which was already around her.

Near her, the withered husks of those who had basked too long in her aura of nullity lay strewn around in heaps. In the airs above her, two succubi floated. From one, a streak of powerful negative energy issued, captured at the moment of discharge. The second was in

the process of evoking a spell –

although it was impossible to tell which one. Two of her three remaining loyal handmaids, no doubt.

Mostin wondered where the third was.

Closer, Nwm and Eadric were captured in a dynamic pose – the Druid, in draconic form, had snatched Eadric from next to the steaming remains of one of the ultroloths.

Nycadaemons were attempting to

claw the hellfire wyrm. In the sky above him, Shomei – now transformed into a gigantic silver wyrm –

hung motionless in the air, with daemons all about her.

Mostin sighed, and took rapid mental note of the positions of various entities within eyesight. In the stillness, he located two more ultroloths – one inside of the Paling and one beyond it – and, eighty yards outside of the aperture, an exceedingly vicious looking marilith surrounded by twenty hulking glabrezu. She was flanked by attendants – including an arcanaloth and a grossly obese shator.

Knowing that his reservoir was low, the Alienist grunted. He had little time to act, yet he *must* act.

Because Ainhorr is coming, he reminded himself.

He swallowed, vacillated for a fraction of a second, emptied himself, and opened a *gate* – his last –

next to the marilith Janiq, speaking a terrible name in syllables which caused his mouth to twist and his stomach to heave.

Tendrils of something, issuing from somewhere – and some when – crept through the dimensional

interface to *Uzzhin*, to *outside*.

It had Vhorzhe's face – and many others besides. Malice seeped from it like a cloying fog. It smiled sweetly at him. Mostin screamed, and giggled hysterically.

[Symbol] = *Payment*

Mostin panicked. How would he bargain with it? What did it want? What currency did it recognize? No time to answer these questions. No time.

“Mirror,” Mostin said, instantly regretting it.

[Symbol] = *More*.

Gods, it's greedy. That's the most valuable thing I have.

[Symbol] = *Faces*.

Mostin cackled. “What kind of faces?”

[Symbol] = *Faces like you*.

Mostin was beginning to hyperventilate. What did it mean? How would he provide it with

faces?

Would he have to bring a line of people for it to devour, so it could assume their likeness? Did it mean something else? No time. No time. Sh*t.

“Mirror,” Mostin said again. “No faces.”

It communicated nothing more. The Horror slid back silently through the *gate* to the Far Realm.

*Sh*t. Sh*t. Sh*t. What a waste.* A string of expletives and profanities left Mostin’s lips. Still, he had to do something. Anything.

He flew upwards and quickly invoked a *prismatic sphere*. Hovering outside of it, he readied another spell. Time resumed its normal flow.

Mostin pulled a ring from his finger, and blew gently through it.

*

Shomei was beginning to regret her decision to *shapechange* into the form of a silver wyrm.

She simply presented *too much body* for the nycadaemons to attack. There were at least twenty of them in the air about her now: raking, slashing, finding gaps in her foot-thick armour. Many were blinded, but they pressed on regardless. Bright blood was dripping from her scales. Poison was creeping through her veins.

She *shapechanged* again, this time into a pit fiend – offering a smaller target to her attackers, whilst preventing the venom from taking hold. Diabolic protections would render her virtual immunity to their claws. And her taloned hand now bore her rod.

As she flew towards the ground through a gauntlet of daemoniac attacks, the Infernalist scanned the aperture and tried to locate Mostin, but he had vanished from his previous location. She spied an

ultroloth – the one who had struck her with a potent *dispelling* – and brought her will, focussed and augmented through her rod, to bear upon it.

I AM SHOMEI. YOU ARE MY SERVANT. SLAY THE SERVANTS OF GRAZ’ZT: HE IS YOUR

ENEMY.

She smashed into its mind with her own, and the yugoloth's immense, ancient ego crumpled under the force of her compulsion.

*

Eadric and Nwm tumbled sixty feet, headlong into a snarling pack of leaping demons. They

immediately pounced upon the duo who, shaken by the fall, could do nothing but ward off their attacks and clumsily stagger to their feet. *Holy auras* flashed again, but the assault was determined. Nwm –

unarmoured, unarmed and less skilled in combat – was quickly rent and bruised.

Fearing for the Druid's life, Eadric stayed his attack and clutched Nwm's shoulder. Light and heat poured into him, revitalizing him.

Nwm swore. He needed breathing space. In a circle around them, bar-lgura flew skywards as he

reversed gravity.

"Watch my back," he snapped at Eadric. "And heal yourself. You're going to need it. And *don't move* unless you want to fall upwards."

But even as he spoke, behind them a powerful wind had started to blow, sucking demons from the

aperture in the Paling. Outside, a great rift – over two hundred feet wide – had opened in space,

generating a cyclone around it.

Mostin – now retreated into his *prismatic sphere* – had invoked a *reality maelstrom*.

Hundreds of bar-lgura were being pulled through it, screaming, to be deposited in another dimension – although, which one, even Mostin didn't know. The Alienist – hidden within a scintillating globe of power – was not witness to the spectacle, but he would have been deeply satisfied to know that one of the ultrodaemons had also been dragged away.

The tempest was centered on Janiq, but the marilith weathered the spell and, together with three

glabrezu, *teleported* to a position fifty feet from Eadric. Her succubi attendants, the shator, seventeen glabrezu and the arcanadaemon Xehez had all been drawn into the maelstrom.**

Janiq was livid. Most of her bodyguard had vanished. Demons were bobbing in the air nearby,

teleporting to the ground, and falling upwards again. Those that attempted to pounce upon the two

mortals were likewise rocketing skywards.

Two of the ultroloths – now close by – were targeting Nwm and Eadric with powerful spells. The Druid barely survived an invoked *destruction*. Demons all around him tumbled to the ground as the *reverse gravity* – together with his *mind blank* and Eadric's *holy aura* fell to a *greater dispel magic*. He cursed, knowing that time was running out.***

Glancing at Eadric, Nwm held his *orb of storms* in his hand.

“This is going to hurt,” he said to himself.

In an instant, the orb shattered, fuelling a spell. His consciousness reached out to the Green, three hundred worlds away, and seemed to draw on every storm that had ever echoed within her confines.

Nwm's voice began as a low roar, which rapidly crescendoed into an ultasonic scream. His skull shook and his mind twisted as he sought to thrust the energy away from Eadric and himself, and direct it towards his enemies. The Druid's body reeled under the backlash. His skin, lacerated by channeling the power, peeled away in strips.

As Nwm turned his head, they seemed to burn away in front of him and around him, the sonic reducing them to atoms. Janiq, the glabrezu, the daemons and dozens of bar-Igura were vaporized under the

force of the sound. The ground shook, and the Paling oscillated along its twenty-mile circumference in sympathetic vibration. For a millisecond, it was as though the entire battle had ceased.

The Druid barely retained lucidity, and he grinned inanely. He wondered where Mostin was, hoping

that the Alienist had witnessed it.

But none of it mattered. The *reality maelstrom* quickly dissipated, eliminated by more abjurations.

Thousands more demons – the reserve force called by Janiq – were beginning to manifest. Inside of the aperture, the vast, armoured form of Ainhorr – flanked by a dozen enormous nalfeshnees – had arrived through a *gate*.

Shomei, still in the form of a pit fiend and harangued by nycadaemons, flew towards Eadric and Nwm and threw the remaining *dominated* ultroloth desperately at Ainhorr. Outside of the magical barrier, she

spied the *prismatic sphere*, and hoped that it was Mostin, and that he was sufficiently protected. She opened a *gate* next to the Druid and the *Ahma*.

“Flee,” she yelled at Eadric. “We cannot win this. This battle is lost.”

Soneillon, he thought. And then, *Mostin*.

As Nwm pulled him through the portal, Eadric turned his head back, gazing across the demon-infested wasteland. Time seemed to freeze. His eyes did not rest on Ainhorr, but looked past the Balor, and through the other *gate*, to what stood beyond.

Graz'zt.

**

Shomei resumed her normal form in the courtyard at Kyrtil's Burh. The late evening sun was pale, and little warmth remained in the day.

Nwm and Eadric, exhausted, looked at her.

"Mostin..." Eadric began.

"If he has his wits about him, he will have opened a *gate* or *plane shifted*. If he doesn't arrive here soon, we should assume the latter. I will attempt to *scry* him presently. He had invoked a *prismatic sphere*."

Nwm relaxed.

"Do not be complacent," Shomei snapped. "If Adyell could *disjoin* a section of the Paling, then she could do the same to Mostin's defense."

"She wasn't present at the battle?"

"I didn't see her," the Infernalist sighed. "Perhaps she was avoiding Soneillon," she added wily.

Eadric groaned. "How is it that, after millennia of stalemate between Graz'zt and Soneillon, as soon as I become involved, a decisive victory is scored? By the wrong side."

Shomei laughed. "Do you think that this is the first time that her citadel has fallen in that war?"

"I don't know."

"No. Nor do I. But holding any kind of Abyssal real estate is tricky, to say the least. Soneillon will retreat, if she has any sense at all – and I suspect that she does. Graz'zt will need to garrison Throile.

Ainhorr will be faced with the decision of appointing a deputy – he, himself must return to Afqithan.

The loss of Janiq will be a grievous blow, in any case."

"There are other mariliths."

"True – but there was only one Janiq," Shomei smiled. "She knew Throile and its subtleties better than any other of Graz'zt's generals. And when the Eye of Cheshne reaches its nadir at Khu – less than two hours away – Soneillon will wax to her full power again.***** She is a demon queen, Eadric. Never

forget it."

Unlikely, he thought. He exhaled slowly. "I saw him, you know. Through the other *gate*."

Shomei nodded.

*

Two minutes later, Nwm noticed a sensor in the air nearby. Mostin's head appeared, seeming to float six feet above the ground in a disconcerting manner.

"Where are you?" The Druid asked.

“I don’t know, but it’s damn cold here,” the Alienist replied.

Mostin had, in fact, *plane shifted*. And appeared upon the side of an unnamed mountain, overlooking the plateau of Tun Hartha, at an elevation of twelve thousand feet.

**

“You called the pseudonatural?” Shomei was agog. “Where was it? Why didn’t I see it?”

“I was *time stopped*,” Mostin replied. “And it declined my offer.”

“Which was?”

“The Looking-glass of Urm-Nahat. Although, in retrospect, I should have offered it something else.”

“Did it understand what the Mirror was?” Shomei asked.

“I don’t know. I think so. But it wanted *faces*. I don’t know what it meant. When I’ve rested, I will go to Uzzhin...”

“Mostin,” Shomei groaned. “That will be the third time. Don’t you think that’s tempting fate just a little?”

“I don’t subscribe to the theory of Fate,” Mostin said drily. “Any more than you do.” The jibe was precise and calculated. Mostin didn’t know what the exchange between the Infernalist and the *Ahma* –

before they had commenced battle – had signified, but he guessed that they shared some kind of

prescience.

“Did the *web of motes* reveal nothing regarding this?” Nwm asked.

“Not to my recollection,” Mostin answered.

“And what will happen now, in Throile?”

“I do not know,” Mostin said irritably. “Events in Throile were not first on my list of priorities when I examined the nodality. Ainhorr will return to Afqithan, certainly. And Kostchtchie will move to aid him when Nhura returns and Rhyxali unleashes her legions. Other future memories will doubtless reveal

themselves to me at apposite moments. *Nothing is certain* – it remains only a matrix of possibilities.”

Shomei remained conspicuously silent.

“You and I need to talk,” Mostin said.

“There is nothing else to say,” she replied. She was weary.

“Humour me,” Mostin said acidly.

*I have ruled that the transcended Alienist (like the Monk) has DR 10/magic, and that bargura have DR 5/good (with chaotic-aligned and evil-aligned natural attacks). This was good for Mostin. It seemed reasonable to me that their initial attack would be to deliver

lethal damage – demons like rending stuff, after all – but upon realizing the inefficacy of this tack, they would switch to grappling. And if they grappled him, he had *no* chance. Dan realized this too.

******Man, this spell is broken.

*******Being a kind-hearted DM (ahem), I left the room and had a beer at this juncture. This gave Dave

(Nwm's player) and Dan (Mostin's player) time to thrash out an epic spell quickly. Dan's fingerprints are all over it because a) it's a sonic and; b) Dave isn't as good at squeezing the epic system for all it's worth. I don't mind, though – it's reasonable to assume that Nwm *is* good at squeezing the system. Dan was still pissed at me about the Horror, despite the fact that he knew they didn't follow the normal

'rules' for *gated* entities – we were playing 3.5 *gate* by now, and it was 1000xp that Mostin would never see again.

********This cryptic reference is, in fact, correct. Soneillon's power is not strictly dependent upon any astronomical cycle or any geographical area but, like any other spellcaster, she may only cast a certain number of spells per day. Soneillon's 'day' is reckoned by demonologists to begin with the

anticulmination of the star which we would call *Antares* or *Cor Scorpionis* at Khu. In Shûth, this star is linked with the Goddess Cheshne and the process of annihilation. Other demons and devils (and

celestials) have cycles for which the rising, culmination, setting or anticulmination of various

astronomical bodies can be used as indicators.

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Dream and Demon - Part 1

It had been determined that Rhul – ever a patron of messengers and travellers – would undertake the journey. He was hardy, quick-witted, and wise in the ways of many worlds. The decision to send him had been unanimous.

His people were the Nireem, and, besides Rhul, only three of their chiefs remained: Lai, the goddess of magic; Ninit, who watched over horses; and a god of the forge called Jaliere. A tribal pantheon, they were aided by ancestral spirits and nature genii tied to significant locations. Predictably, the goddess of death, Saes, had aligned herself with Graz'zt: in a world in which the apocalypse had already come and gone, her power alone was waxing. The Nireem no longer counted her amongst their number.

Their people and worshippers – a clan known as the Werud, who had been finally eliminated by Graz'zt's armies some decades before – were the last tribe to walk upon the doomed earth. Once the inheritors of a proud legacy, they had been condemned at the end to cower in holes as the creatures –

black-skinned monsters with great hooks upon their skulls – had sought them out and

butchered them.

Ninit had ridden out and hunted down their enemies, and the hooves of her horse – the stallion called Drût – had kindled the grasslands to fire as she passed over them. She was an ancient goddess, who had joined the others a thousand years before: assimilated by the Werud from a conquered culture whose name Ninit no longer cared to remember. She was fickle and untamed – an atavism who bowed to

neither law nor code. Before the world had turned dark, she had caused others amongst the Nireem

great consternation by her actions. But now, since the death of Hodh, she was their greatest champion.

And unlike the other godlings who gathered within their stone hall deep within the mountain called *Mulhuk*, Graz'zt feared her.

Lai the Implacable had foreseen the demise of her brother, and many others who had perished beneath the relentless press of demons. The end was upon them, and there seemed to be no escaping it. So Lai had dreamed a dream, and passing by roads which only she could take, she had made her way through

a region of great turbulence, until she had found herself beside a still pool surrounded by many birch trees. A spirit of unfamiliar type had been waiting for her.

“Have you come to pronounce a final doom?” Lai had asked wilyly.

The spirit had smiled easily. “You are not without allies.”

“And are you one of them?”

“There are other worlds, Lai. Sisperi is one small corner in an infinity of infinities.”

“That may be so,” Lai had said through narrowed eyes. “But it is *my* corner.”

“May I show you something?”

“That, I suspect, is why I am here,” Lai had replied laconically.

The Spirit had gestured briefly, and a vision had appeared before the Goddess. A thick forest of strange trees which bore poisoned fruit, around which vines and creepers wrapped themselves, and through

which creatures of evil demeanour stalked and slew, reveling in pain and death. A terrible haze of heat lay over the place.

“Is this a prophecy?” Lai had asked uneasily. “If so, I think I would prefer to remain ignorant of the future.”

“It is the abode of one of your allies,” the Spirit said mysteriously.

“I choose my friends carefully,” the Goddess had smiled. “Who would live in such a place?”

“A demoness,” the Spirit had replied. “But an enemy of the one who currently assails you.”

“Can she be trusted?” Lai had asked.

“No,” the Spirit had admitted.

“I draw little comfort from the possibility of such an alliance.”

“If you wish to survive long enough to see your world free again,” the Spirit had said stonily, “then you must look beyond what is comfortable and familiar. The place that you are looking at is called *Throile*.

It is a battleground, and one of several keys to defeating your enemy. Do you wish to see more?”

“I concede that I am intrigued.”

Another scene had appeared before Lai – again, a forest. It was an eerie place, full of deep shadows. A ruddy gloam hung over it.

“This is *Afqithan*,” the Spirit had said, in answer to her unvoiced question. “It has become a fulcrum around which many interests turn.”

“It is scarcely less depressing than the last vista which you showed me.”

“Nonetheless, it is pivotal. Its natives are a race of evil spirits over whom Graz’zt exercises control. He has powerful vassals here. Would you like to see another?”

Lai had laughed. “No doubt it, too, is a dismal realm filled with haunted trees.”

The Spirit had smiled and nodded. Another forest *had* appeared – darker and yet more sinister than those previously seen.

The Goddess had sighed. “I spoke in jest.”

“This place has no name,” the Spirit had said darkly. “Whatever moves there does so in silence, and in secret. Those who enter it seldom return unmarred. When its mistress acts, she does so with deadly precision and ruthless conviction. She is preparing to act now – against Graz’zt.”

“And what intelligence dwells here? A demoness, or an evil shade?”

“A demoness, Lai. A very powerful demoness – a peer of the one who caused the death of your people.

She is now beginning to exert her Will.”

“You disturb me, Spirit. What can we do in the face of monsters such as these?”

“Let me show you one more,” the Spirit had suggested.

“Your revelations are disturbing. But I suppose one cannot hide one’s head in the sand.”

“No, indeed,” the Spirit had grinned. He gestured again, and another vision manifested: a fortress of stone with a tall tower, perched upon a sheer-sided outcrop of rock. Lai had never seen anything like it before. Atop the tower, a blue-and-silver pennant fluttered in the wind.

“Another ally?”

The Spirit had nodded.

“It looks less foreboding than the previous. Does a god dwell here, or a demon?”

“Neither,” the Spirit had answered. “A mortal. Of sorts. His name is Eadric.”

“And he wars with Graz’zt also?”

“Oh, yes. His obsession is rather single-minded.”

“And his world is threatened?” Lai had asked.

“His world has been stolen from him.”

“It seems peaceful enough,” Lai had observed.

“It is a long story,” the Spirit had replied. “He is embroiled in the politics of the previous realms that I have shown you. The details are complicated.”

“And he can be trusted?”

“Yes.”

“Then – assuming I can trust *you* – I suppose we should begin there. Rhul might undertake the journey

– although his absence will weaken us considerably. He will convince...”

“Do not make the mistake of assuming that this mortal can be either coerced or persuaded against his better judgment,” the Spirit had warned. “He should be treated as an equal – even your brother would have been hard pressed to match him in battle.”

Lai had raised an eyebrow. “A mortal?”

“Sisperi is small, Lai.”

A look of anguish had crossed her face. “Even if we prevail – what hope is there for the Nireem? Our people are dead. We are diminished. We will fade, and disappear.”

“Perhaps,” the Spirit had nodded. “But if you survive, then look to another mortal: not Eadric, but one of his allies. His name is Nwm. Remember it.”

Nwm, Lai had thought.

**

“I seem to recall your cautioning me against entering these woods,” Mostin said to Shomei. The two Wizards walked among the looming, twisted trees on Shomei’s thousand-acre estate outside of Morne.

“Have you dismissed the spirits that dwell in them?”

“Certainly not,” the Infernalist replied. “As far as I know, the Second Injunction is not retroactive. I still maintain a staff of spined devils as well.”

“How old are you, Shomei?” Mostin asked.

“That is an odd question. Does it matter?”

“I am merely curious,” Mostin replied. “Are you older than me?”

“No,” Shomei answered.

“Are we of a comparable age?”

“I am twenty-five, Mostin,” she sighed. “Are you about to dispense some paternal advice?”

The Alienist gaped. “*Twenty-five?* I knew that you were a prodigy, but...Amon...”

“I was eleven.”

“Titivilus?”

“Fifteen. I compacted him when I was seventeen. I have three children, all cambions – none were sired by Titivilus, incidentally. Devils are notoriously fertile, so I count myself fortunate in that regard. I left the bastards outside of the Abbey just south of here, before you ask. I have no idea what happened to them subsequently.”

“I am forty-two,” Mostin groaned.

“I know. Evidently you have only sixty percent of my talent,” Shomei said drily.

“Why do you think that you are going to die, Shomei?”

She smiled thinly. It hadn’t taken him long to figure it out. “I *know* that I am going to die, Mostin. That doesn’t concern me. It is the fact that, apparently, I will show no desire to return when Nwm attempts to *reincarnate* me that has me worried.”

“That is paradoxical,” Mostin scratched his head. “Given the fact that – presently, at least – you do not seem particularly enthused by the prospect of remaining dead.”

“Tramst...” She began.

“Pah!” Mostin interjected. “He is merely a demigod, Shomei.”

“He is also an intrinsic part of my paradigm, Mostin – I would prefer not to embarrass you in a philosophical debate on this point.”

The Alienist was about to offer a retort, but thought better of it, and closed his mouth.

“I assume that the exact moment of your death is not known to you?” He asked instead.

“That is correct,” Shomei nodded. “The *web of motes* was suitably vague as to the details.”

“At least Nwm is safe,” Mostin pointed out. “Or he would not be able to attempt to *reincarnate* you.”

“That is some small comfort,” she nodded. “I am rather fond of Nwm. The revelation has not been conducive to my good humour, however – as you can probably appreciate. Given the fact that I am

inclined towards depression and nihilism in any case, news of my impending, final death has been

rather a strain on my psyche.”

Mostin didn’t know what to say. Every argument – *defy fate, Shomei* or *assert your Will, choose to remain* or *do not let this become a self-fulfilling prophecy* or even *change your paradigm, Shomei* seemed trite and contrived. She was his intellectual peer – and a

superior rhetorician. She would strike down any case that he could make in seconds.

“Ngaahh!” He threw up his hands in frustration at the logical impasse in his mind. “Listen to me, Shomei: you do not exist in a vacuum. Frankly, I don’t give a f*ck whether you give into this or not. *I* will not. My ego is more important than anything else, and *I* will not let this happen. It is not *my* paradigm.”

“Thus we come to the Dialectic,” Shomei said wily.

“F*ck the Dialectic,” Mostin said. “*Saizhan* is a viewpoint, like any other.”

She sighed.

“And f*ck Tramst and his mystical posturing. I’m tempted to blast him for his interference.”

“I think the Claviger might have something to say about that.”

“Mmm. Good point.” Mostin suddenly grinned and his eyes bulged. He knew he was right. “Anyway. It doesn’t matter. My infinity is bigger than yours.”

She shook her head in amazement at his words. And wondered whether he *was* right.

**

Ortwin reclined into a leather chair within the study of Mostin’s *comfortable retreat*, and swigged upon a decanter of expensive firewine, eliciting a look of mild distaste from the Alienist. Orolde, as always, doted on the Satyr.

“Well?” Eadric asked. “Are you going to share your findings, or just get drunk?”

“I had planned to do both – although the latter concerns me more at present. Has Nhura contacted you yet?”

Eadric shook his head.

“Ytryn is on board – at least as far as I can determine. Am I right, Koi?”

Koilimilou maintained her demeanour of serene malice, and gave no intimation that every time Ortwin used the diminutive, it was stored within her memory as a shallow cut she would inflict upon the Satyr when the opportunity arose.

“I think that Koilimilou would prefer if you used her full name,” Eadric said wily.

“Perhaps she dislikes your over familiarity?”

Ortwin shrugged. “There are two kelvezu within Ytryn’s court – their names were never revealed to me.

But there is also a marilith – Sethee. She pulls the strings.”

“The name is unfamiliar,” Mostin grunted. “She may have been recently co-opted by Graz’zt. And the hag?”

“Chavrilie is dead,” Koilimilou said calmly. “She was assassinated shortly after Ainhorr annexed Afqithan. Her absence caused me no lament.”

“Naturally, Sethee was intrigued by me,” Ortwin said glibly, “despite her attempts to appear unmoved.

It is also telling that she ceded to Ytryn's decision that the protocol of parley be enforced – the Loquai are very traditional when it comes to observing diplomatic niceties.”

“With the sidhe, at least,” Koilimilou said bitterly, glaring at Mostin. She would never forget that the Alienist had violated a similar truce and slain Shupthul and a dozen knights, humiliating her in the process.

“In any case,” Ortwin continued quickly, “I promised to Ytryn – in front of the demons – that I would relay my satisfaction to Nhura, whom I described as ‘anxious to return to Afqithan, and make amends for any past indiscretions.’”

“You *what?*” Eadric asked incredulously. “Nhura is currently less than popular, to say the least.”

“We needed to get out of there, Ed. And the only way of convincing Sethee to let us go was to promise that a bigger fish was within reach if she did so. Appealing to Sethee's own ambition was the obvious course – Nhura has a high price on her head.”

“That is reasonable,” Mostin nodded, “although I don't doubt that if Graz'zt turned his mind to it, then he could liquidate Nhura even on Faerie.”

Koilimilou sneered. “He wouldn't dare send demons there in numbers. There are far older and far more potent creatures than sidhe who would not tolerate such an intrusion. He would be squashed like a fly for his presumption!”

The Cambion's sudden passion made Ortwin smile inwardly. He had become accustomed to her moods

– the way that her languor would abruptly change into aggression, or her impassive gaze could fill with venom or desire in an instant. The fusion of fey and demon made for a heady wine...

“Where is Iua, Ortwin?” Eadric interrupted his reverie.

“She has returned to Fumaril for a while,” Ortwin replied. “Which is fine. She was getting boring, in any case.”

Eadric raised an eyebrow, but let it pass. “We can talk about this tomorrow. I am in no mood to deal with you when you're drunk. I'm going back to the Burgh.”

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**

Dream and Demon - Part 2

The *Ahma* dreamed.

A peculiar lucidity informed him that it was a significant dream. One to which attention should be shown. Either an insight of some kind was about to be revealed, or Soneillon was manipulating his

unconscious.

In his dreamscape, Eadric sat upon a rock and smiled wily, wondering which it was.

He watched as a slender fey – a sprite perhaps four feet tall, and approximately male –

approached and sat on a similar rock which had appeared nearby. Eadric spoke first.

“If I asked you who you were, you would, no doubt, give me an oblique paradox in return. Have I met you before?”

“Not precisely, no,” the Sprite answered opaquely.

“Do you serve Oronthon?” Eadric asked.

“I serve the Dialectic,” the Sprite replied.

“Is there a difference?”

“In my mind, yes,” the Sprite answered, “although perhaps not in yours.”

“I do not trust you.”

“That may be wise,” the Sprite nodded. “But you once dreamed of who I was. You trusted him.”

“You were Jovol, before...” Eadric realized in a flash.

“You are correct. I have, however, adopted the form of a fey for my current manifestation: the significance of this may be revealed in due course. But you should not confuse Jovol’s character with my own – our perceptions are quite different.”

“And the Claviger?”

“That particular strand of doubt is now resolved. It no longer interests me.”

“It reassures me that you are still active...” Eadric began.

“It shouldn’t. I serve the Dialectic, not Oronthon.”

“Why are you speaking to me now?” Eadric asked.

“Because complexity must increase,” the Sprite answered.

“Suddenly, I dislike your agenda,” Eadric scowled.

“That is because you cannot hope to comprehend it.”

“Are you benign?” The question was incisive in its naïveté.

“Presently, yes. But I am a fey, and you will find your ethical standards somewhat inadequate to the task of describing me.”

“What is your name?” Eadric asked.

“I haven’t decided yet.”

Eadric woke up and groaned.

After he had brooded for an hour, Eadric returned to sleep. He dreamed again.

*

He sat upon a lichen-covered stone bench within a shady arbour. A flower garden lay before him, and the blooming rhododendrons within it alerted Eadric to the fact that it was late spring, or early summer.

Somewhere in the distance – although from which direction he could not tell – cheers and laughter

could be heard: swords struck shields, and hooves galloped to and fro. A tourney, or a joust, most likely. The sound of a lyre drifted over the other noises: the tune was unknown, and, although played in a major key, bore a subtle melancholic undertone.

Eadric watched as a girl in a white dress approached, turned, and sat next to him. Her presence was comforting. Her smell, familiar and intoxicating. She smiled.

“I was unsure of what your reaction would be,” Eadric said, “after we fled from Throile.”

“Guilt and regret are futile emotions,” Soneillon said easily. “Assuming you feel either in any measure.

Do you, Eadric?”

Eadric sighed. “You utterly confound me,” he said.

“How did the prospect of my demise make you feel?” She asked. “You must have considered the

possibility.”

He groaned. “Why do you ask such questions? And why did you evoke this particular scenario? I suppose it is somehow for my benefit – I doubt that such gardens grow in the Abyss, or that

tournaments are routinely held there.”

“There are an immeasurable number of delights for those who know where to look,” Soneillon replied.

“Can you say with certainty that nothing like this could be found there?”

“For a brief while in some place, maybe. Before entropy caused another random scene to appear, and then it too was swallowed by baseness and depravity.”

“You cling to transience in the hope that it will be eternal,” she shrugged. “I admit to the inevitability of change, and embrace it. Which of us is more authentic?”

He shook his head. “Your rhetoric does not move me.”

“That is because you are secure in the knowledge that *you are right*, irrespective of any ideas offered to the contrary. If you were truly interested in *results*, rather than abstract ethical concerns, then you would embrace me and what I have to offer you. I could show you the secret path, Eadric. I believe you have integrity enough to withstand the void. To overcome unbeing...”

A look of horror crossed his face as the magnitude of what she was suggesting sank into his

consciousness. “I am sure that if I were to fall in the process of defeating Graz’zt, then few things would make you happier.”

“Unlike Titivilus, I have no desire to see you fall, Eadric,” Soneillon replied with surprising earnestness. “Nor would I push you. But if you were to seize your potential

with both hands – if you were to *jump* – then I would say that you had done the right thing.”

“No doubt you would find me more tractable in such circumstances.”

“Far less so, in fact. You have no concept of the power and dominion that you could wield.”

“Power holds no attraction for me.”

“That is because you have never truly exercised it,” Soneillon whispered.

“If it came at the price of eternal madness and self-loathing, then I think that I would do better without it.”

Soneillon reached out to touch his face, and he recoiled. She sighed. “If I evinced these qualities, then I would admit that your argument is valid. The offer remains open, Eadric, if at any stage you should change your mind – not that I expect you to.”

“You are very, very dangerous.”

“You are afraid.”

“Of an eternity shackled to you in a pit of despair?” Eadric laughed. “I think that is a reasonable fear.”

“There are no shackles. I offer only self-determination, and an end to anguish.”

“No doubt,” he said wryly, “you think that I would come willingly to you after this ‘liberation.’”

“I think you would,” Soneillon half-smiled. “And I know nothing of ‘eternity’ – which is your construction, not mine. A millennium, maybe. Or an epoch. Or an aeon.”

“Put the possibility from your mind, Soneillon.”

“As you wish, *Ahma*.” The religious epithet was not lost on Eadric, although he was unsure of why she chose to use it now. *But it would be a good aeon.*

He smiled and shook his head. She just couldn’t resist.

Soneillon stretched, and her manner became more practical. “Shall we stroll? The sun is warm, and we

can watch the joust while we iron out the details of how to proceed. We have much to discuss.”

He nodded. “At least I can tolerate this scene – you could have chosen a far darker one.”

“This is your dreamscape, Eadric, not mine. I am an interloper – although I think perhaps I should maintain this dream’s cohesion, to appease your misplaced sense of continuity.”

*

They sat in a small booth. Eadric winced as he watched a knight fall to the ground, expertly unhorsed by a cavalier who wore armour enamelled with intricate motifs in gold and green. Every detail was so precise that it was impossible to label the experience as anything other than completely real.

A pixie appeared and poured him a large glass of iced tea. Eadric raised an eyebrow.

“Forgive the inconsistency,” Soneillon apologized. “I stole the fey from Ortwin’s dream. He won’t miss it.”

Eadric said nothing of the sprite who had visited him previously.

“Abyssal politics are complex, Eadric,” the Demoness sighed. “And the more power one possesses, the more complex they become – with a few notable exceptions, such as *Carasch*, of whom I believe Nufrut already informed you.”

As the knight in gold and green trotted in a slow circuit, Soneillon languidly raised a silk scarf.

“Graz’zt,” she continued, “being very powerful, is enmeshed in a web of interlocking interests of enormous subtlety. In order to hold Throile, he needs to divert resources from other areas – such as his war with Orcus – or risk losing it back to me in short order.”

The knight rode up and lowered his lance, and Soneillon pinned the scarf to it. She tossed a garland of black lotuses towards him.

“Thus, conquering Throile is one thing, but holding it is entirely another. There is no defense that he can erect which I cannot overcome – unless he comes there personally. Even then, given sufficient time and preparation, I can probably circumvent it. Moreover, the Paling is my construction: it responds to my commands – not his. And there are interconnected wrinkles within the fabric of the plane which his servants cannot penetrate.”

“Wrinkles?” Eadric asked.

“Nondimensional spaces. Demiplanes. Pockets of time and space which abut Throile itself.”

“And Adyell? How close was she in your confidence? How many of your secrets does she know?”

“Less than she would like to think. Nonetheless, I have underestimated her ability. The *disjunctions* that she used to bring down the defense were something of a surprise – I thought I had siphoned her power more effectively.* She must have hidden a little from me.”

“Where is she now?”

“In Azzagrat,” the Demoness replied. “No doubt she is petitioning Graz’zt for suzerainty of Throile, and using every wile within her means to persuade him.”

Soneillon clapped politely as her chosen knight unhorsed another rival.

“Your forces have been overwhelmed, Soneillon. I wonder if you are really this unperturbed, or whether this demonstration of calm indifference is for my benefit?”

“Scattered is not overwhelmed,” she replied smoothly, “although it’s true that my goristroi and my jariliths have been all but eliminated, and that is a sore loss. Or maybe not: I am no longer fighting a defensive action.”

“Mostin had hoped that you would deploy them in Afqithan – if he carries off his

dimensional lock, then they would have proven useful. He fears Kostchtchie's giants."

"Mostin exhibits an unusual degree of prescience," Soneillon smiled, turning to Eadric. "It is enough to cause me to wonder where he gets his information. I have myself only recently heard news that

Kostchtchie is mobilizing for certain."

"Mostin is..."

"You are a terrible liar, Eadric, so I will not press the point: I suspect that it would make you uncomfortable. As to Afqithan, I will still commit what I can when Nhura has gathered her rabble

together. I feel somewhat responsible – after all, it was I who made her queen in the first place."

Eadric refocused. The Demoness's manner was so natural, so effortless, that it was easy to forget who she was. *Responsible? Hardly*, he thought. "And Throile?"

"Throile can wait," she answered. "It will be there when the current crisis has passed. And Graz'zt expects some kind of counter-offensive there. Helitihai will lead a group of insurgents – which should occupy whoever Graz'zt or Ainhorr appoints as despot. But I will reserve a sizable force for Afqithan."

Eadric sighed. "What of Rhyxali, Soneillon? She remains only a name to me."

Soneillon laughed. "I think that is the way that she prefers it. She is very furtive."

"I still don't understand what her interest in this is."

"Nor am I entirely sure," Soneillon admitted. "I suspect that it goes beyond reclaiming Afqithan –

maybe even beyond taking Azzagrat for herself. I am not privy to her wider schemes."

"Is her manner as disarming as yours?"

"I'm sure it could be, if she so chose."

He groaned. "Fiends are so indirect. I often feel that it would be better if I could simply deal with them *as they are*. You spoke of authenticity before – but I have yet to see you display that quality. You play games, and hide behind masques and personae in order to achieve your ends."

"I *am* authentic in that regard – that is my nature. And although I understand your grievance, you need to comprehend that, even amongst the Fallen, I am a rarity. I have tasted oblivion Eadric, and it is sweet."

"Still you dissemble."

Her wings unfurled. Suddenly, the malignity in Soneillon seemed palpable. It was so profound that

Eadric shook. His head span. Even in Throile, she had never evinced it to him, hiding it behind a

veneer of lightness and courtesy. Here was an abomination, with a billion lifetimes of wickedness and hatred to its name.

“Is this what you want?” She asked.

The dreamscape around them melted into a scene of agony and madness. His limbs atrophied, and his

mind screamed as her claws sank into him, sapping his strength. She straddled him, and consumed him.

Reeling, Eadric strove to regain consciousness, and a hundred false awakenings dragged him yet

further into a mire of despair. Her release was so sudden – and so violent – that he feared he would be annihilated. Her Will – which seemed irresistible – drew him with her.

Like one who has dived too far, he gasped as he broke the surface of the nightmare, only to find

himself within the booth again, watching the tourney. Soneillon sat next to him. She seemed unfazed, and poured another glass of iced tea.

“Dreams within dreams,” she smiled. “Shall I show you more?”

He turned his face away from her.

She vanished and reappeared in an instant, kneeling on his left side with her face inches from his. Her eyes bored into him.

“It is merely another facet, Eadric. A persona. It is part of me, but I am more complex than that.

Nothing becomes – you know this. Jump, Eadric. I will catch you.”

**

The raven watched as the heavy torc dropped from its talons and turned three times in the air, before landing in the still water below with a *plop*.

Gone. The torc was gone. A feeling of liberation mixed with sadness and loss washed over the bird. In order to do what he had to do, the raven needed to sever his connection with the thing he wanted to be closest to. The irony was not lost on him. Centuries before, worshippers in the nascent cult of Uedii had tossed gold into lakes in supplication, or to appease the dangerous moods of their Goddess. The raven wondered whether they had felt the same wrench that he did now. But if the sacrifice did not diminish the devotee, then how could it be genuine?

In due course, perhaps the nereid who dwelt in the lake would find the torc. Nwm hoped that, if so, she would put its magic to good use.

A spell, he thought to himself. *I must make a spell, to reestablish the connection. Some day.*

As he winged away northwards, towards the mountains and the encroaching winter snow, Nwm exulted

in the feeling of wind on his wings. Perhaps he would stay as a bird for a week or two. The perspective might be good for him.

Over Iald – not too far from Hullu’s former abode – he spotted a group of crows and ravens circling above the treetops.

A wolf kill, he knew.

Nwm descended to feed.

*

“He’s just *gone*?” Eadric groaned. “Why didn’t he speak to me about it?”

“Probably because he thought you would talk him out of it,” Ortwin said. He handed a letter to the *Ahma*. Eadric grunted, and read it:

I’m going on retreat for three months or so. Don’t disturb me, please. I’ll see you when the thaw begins.

Nwm.

“This is inconvenient,” Eadric remarked.

“It’s a damned pain in the arse, that’s what it is,” Mostin grumbled bitterly. “I need Nwm for the *quiescence of the spheres*. Now I’ll need to tweak it, and Koilimilou will have to participate. We’ve just lost a third of our firepower.”

But as he sat later in reflection, Eadric felt numb and listless. His dreams – if they could be called dreams – of the previous night lay heavily upon him. He had spoken to no-one of them. The only

person whose perspective he really valued had decided to disappear for a season. And Iua had gone –

was she coming back? What was Ortwin *doing*? Attempting to seduce Koilimilou?

His stomach turned. A pall of corruption seemed to be settling over them – not entirely unexpected, given their allies, but no less unwelcome. He wondered if Nwm was getting out for precisely that

reason.

**

Mulissu exited the extradimensional space – a variation of Mostin’s permanent *magnificent mansion*

where she spent much time – and stepped into the courtyard of the small palace in her pocket demiplane.

She was expecting a visit from a djinn called Rauot, a messenger from Magathei who brought Mulissu a stipend every six months: her fifty-pound alimony of gold from the estranged Ulao. Typically – and ironically – Mulissu would fritter the money when she made her occasional secret visits to the

marketplaces of Magathei itself.

She flew past screens and archways into a comfortable reception chamber – an open and well-lit

conservatory. A variety of exotic foliage bloomed in clay tubs and crept up slender pillars which

supported the enamelled ceiling. As she floated – absorbed in aery thought – she became alerted to another presence in the chamber. Suddenly, the world felt dead.

She froze.

“Please sit,” a voice said from behind her.

Without word or gesture, in a moment’s thought, Mulissu exited the time stream. The Elementalist,

although no coward, was no fool either. And more time was always better than less.

She turned to observe a demon sitting comfortably in one of her large wicker chairs. *Beautiful* was a woefully inadequate description of him: his skin was a deep, bluish-black; his musculature, perfect. He possessed features which were somehow both bestial and refined, as though infinite barbarity and utter sophistication had been distilled into a single face. The force of his presence was staggering, and even within the stasis of the spell, his stillness seemed impossible or unreal: here was an entity of utter dynamism. Mulissu – no expert in demonology – was immediately aware of his identity. The fact that Graz’zt had made no effort to disguise himself was also significant, although Mulissu wilyly observed that there were any number of possible reasons for his apparent lack of subterfuge.

Mulissu attempted to make a *passage of lightning***: her destination was Morne in Wyre. The translation failed, and she realized that Graz’zt had already placed some kind of ward which prevented the use of the spell. And, no doubt, *teleport*, *gate* and any number of other transportation spells.

She could not flee, nor could she realistically assault her uninvited guest. She stood small chance of penetrating his defenses with anything other than an electrical evocation – which might tickle him at best.

She invoked a *limited wish* in order to issue a *sending* to Mostin. It failed.

Calling upon the power in the sapphire which hung around her neck, Mulissu tried to erect a *prismatic sphere* around herself. Somehow, the force of her amulet was subdued, and the defensive spell did not manifest.

In fact, nothing which was not a transvalent spell would work, it seemed.

She fled away at breakneck speed. The restricted area could not be big – even for Graz’zt, such an act would surely require a monumental effort. She would retreat back into the *magnificent mansion*.

As she approached the portal to the extradimensional space, a breeze stirred from a bound elemental, alerting Mulissu to the fact that time had resumed its normal flow. To the Elementalist’s utter confusion, a *gate* was already open within her courtyard. The scene through the new portal was of *another* courtyard, in which Mostin stood, beckoning to her.

Guessing correctly that the Alienist had had some presentiment regarding her straits,

Mulissu sped through the *gate* into the bailey of Kyrtil's Burh.

*

Mostin had been walking from the Steeple to the library in the main building of the keep when the

prolepsis had overwhelmed him: the sum total of events within Mulissu's demiplane revealed to him in an instant, together with several dozen possible outcomes. He had also known that he only had around six seconds to act – an uncomfortably brief period.

He had invoked a *time stop*, *plane shifted* and passed through into the courtyard of Mulissu's palace with a quickened *dimension door*. He had swallowed as he saw her, suspended in the air next to a fountain, the flow of which was frozen in time and space. Behind her, half-manifested from a

teleportation, Graz'zt was an insubstantial haze. Mostin knew that the demon had dismissed whatever ward he had set upon the place in order to intercept the fleeing Elementalist. He knew that Mulissu was incapable of invoking another transportation spell. And he also knew that she must *not* enter her own extradimensional retreat: it was not safe. He had quickly interposed a *wall of force* between Mulissu and Graz'zt, blocking the demon's line of effect – opened a *gate* and retreated back to Wyre.

*

Mulissu appeared next to Mostin.

"You have the *web of motes*, am I correct?" Mostin asked. He knew that she did, but he still sought a verbal confirmation.

Mulissu nodded dumbly. She turned and looked back through the *gate*. Graz'zt *disintegrated* the *wall of force* and walked calmly towards the portal.

"Dammit Mostin, shut that thing down. Stop screwing around." Like the Alienist, Mulissu knew that the Demon could not pass through – the *gate* was not for him, and the Interdict forbade his entry. It was, nonetheless, a disquieting scene.

Mostin ignored her. He was taking the chance to study his enemy – knowing that such an opportunity was unlikely to arise again. The membrane which separated the two realities seemed uncomfortably

thin.

"Mostin!" Mulissu screamed.

He closed the *gate* abruptly.

*

Eadric was confused. "You said that he would *not* leave Azzagrat."

"Technically, he didn't," Mostin replied, smiling. "He corporeated a body from the Astral Plane. He was projecting."

"Does that make any difference?" Ortwin asked.

“In practical terms, no,” Mostin admitted. “Except that this is a tactic which he will start to employ against us routinely, and we are in trouble. Even if we kill him, it won’t kill him – if you know what I mean.”

“Why didn’t he simply eliminate Mulissu?”

“The most likely explanation is that he wished to interrogate her – I foresaw that she might be taken to Azzagrat and subjected to scrutiny within his sanctum.”

Mulissu looked horrified. “This is your fault, Mostin. Gods, I should blast you for involving me in this.

My work. My books. I must retrieve my scrolls...”

“You most certainly will not,” Mostin snapped. “Forget your pocket paradise, Mulissu – it will never be safe again. Nor will the extradimensional space. And be thankful that he underestimated your power –

you’re lucky that he didn’t anticipate that you might have a transvalent temporal escape plan.”

“And *your* retreat, Mostin?” Eadric asked. “Is it safe?”

“No,” Mostin replied sadly. “I suppose not.”

“Was it ever?” Eadric grumbled. “What has changed, which makes it vulnerable now?”

“He is bending his mind upon us now, Eadric. In earnest. He glimpses possibilities which disturb him.

He is laying intricate plans. I suspect that things will start to get very messy. Very soon. Mulissu, we could use you – will you...”

“Where is Iua?” She hissed.

“Fumaril,” Ortwin said.

” Scry her, and take me there now, Mostin.”

The Alienist nodded.

“And Mostin, after you have done that, I never want to see you again. Are we clear on that?”

“Yes, Mulissu. Quite clear.” Mostin exhaled sharply, unsure of whether she really meant it this time.

* In game terms, Soneillon ensures that her chief servants (who are sorceresses) never advance beyond a certain level (17th) by drawing on their xp reserves to fuel her own epic spells.

**A kind of *plane shift* – *teleport* combo.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 04-26-2004

Mésalliance

BREY: *Sela*, what does it mean, to 'Fall?'

TRAMST: To Fall is to reject that which you have experienced to be true, in favour of that which you know, in your heart, to be false.

BREY: And what is truth?

TRAMST: That, unfortunately, is subjective.

BREY: Is it therefore possible for two people who share similar experiences, to have different destinies in this regard? By virtue of their different perspectives, may one Fall, and another not?

TRAMST: That is more common than one may at first think.

BREY: And when two irrefutable truths come into conflict? How does one then decide?

TRAMST: That, Brey, is why we practice *Saizhan*.

BREY: Hence *Saizhan* always reveals the correct truth.

TRAMST: No, Brey. *Saizhan* always *determines* the correct truth. The distinction is crucial.

BREY: Should one always choose the harder truth?

TRAMST: Often this transpires to be the case, but to adopt it as a premise leads to the Adversarial paradigm, which *Saizhan* teaches us is incomplete. Evidently, this is so, or the Adversary himself would not have Fallen.

BREY: I understand.

TRAMST: No, Brey, you do not. Which is why I am the master, and you are the student.

**

The Sprite materialized within the deepest reaches of the Forest of Nizkur, picked an acorn from the

ground, and examined it briefly.

Pressing the seed with its thumb into the soft earth, the Sprite waved his hand casually.

A sapling shot forth, and began to grow rapidly. The Sprite watched in satisfaction as a trunk fattened, boughs twisted, and leaflets unfurled from twigs. Bark became pitted, cracked and thick. Mistletoe and ivy appeared around the bole, and moss burgeoned inside of damp recesses. Within twenty seconds, the tree matured. It could have been there for five hundred years. The leaves turned a deep gold, and began to fall, as if in an effort to catch up with the surrounding forest.

The Sprite's legs bent, and he sprang upwards, leaping eighty feet into the air and alighting softly below the crown of the tree. He sat and waited.

Presently, he heard laughter. A nymph capered by, pursued by two lusty wood-gnomes with ruddy

noses. Plucking an oak-apple from a nearby branch, the Sprite hurled it with considerable

force,

striking the nymph soundly on her rump.

She stopped abruptly and glared upwards. “How dare you interrupt my frolicking?” The nymph looked suspiciously at the tree – she didn’t remember it being there, the last time she had passed through this part of the forest.

“Hlioth, it is I,” the Sprite called down. “I’m back. Come, we need to talk!”

Hlioth, the Green Witch, squealed in delight and abandoned her would-be suitors with looks of

disappointment on their faces. She appeared immediately on the branch next to the Sprite and embraced him.

“Back so soon, Fillein? I was expecting a longer absence.”

“I am no longer Fillein,” the Sprite sighed. “Nor was I last time, if you recall. I barely even remember who Fillein was.”

Hlioth shrugged. “No matter. What is your name now?”

“I haven’t decided yet.”

Hlioth clapped. “Splendid. I will choose one for you.”

“Very well,” the Sprite seemed amused.

“Will you be a fey now?” Hlioth asked archly.

“Yes, Hlioth.”

“What is your genus? I don’t recognize it.”

“I am unique,” the Sprite replied.

“Then your name is *Huhip*. ”

“That is somewhat too aspirated for my tastes.”

“Then *Gudge*,” Hlioth replied.

“It sounds like an affliction of the bowels,” the Sprite observed.

“May I choose or not?” Hlioth grumbled.

“Only if you choose correctly,” the Sprite laughed.

“Then your name is *Teppu*.”

“That will do nicely,” Teppu nodded.

Hlioth smiled. “I must say, I think you have made an excellent choice with regard to your form –

although I admit I may be a little biased. Are you still a wizard?”

“No,” Teppu replied. “I have chosen an instinctive, blended form,* in order to avoid the Injunction.

Besides, I find wizardry dull.”

Hlioth laughed. “I came to a similar conclusion some time ago. Can you show me?”

Teppu smiled, and quickly clapped his hands three times. A supernova of magic exploded outwards

from him. It seemed as though, suddenly, sapience was everywhere.

Hlioth laughed and cried in happiness. “That is beautiful. How many did you *awaken*?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Hundreds. Thousands, maybe.”

“You are *Green*, Teppu.”

“I am Green,” he nodded.

“Do you still dream?”

“Of course I still dream, Hlioth.”

A look of concern crossed her face briefly. “And the *web of motes*? Will you seek its return?”

“Why, Hlioth? Who cares about the future?”

She kissed him fondly on the forehead. The trees around him regarded him with warmth.

**

Eadric stood on the roof of the Steeple, wrapped in a thick fur, and stared blankly northwards towards the gathering clouds of winter. The cloak was superfluous – he no longer felt the cold – and he

wondered whether wearing it would remain an affectation on days when the wind blew from Tomur, down from the mountains.

He brooded upon Nhura. *When would she be ready?* For every day which passed in Faerie, a week dragged by in the World of Men: the delay was becoming unbearable, sapping his focus and resolve.

He remembered the long period of uncertainty before he had marched on Morne, and this seemed a

thousand times worse – a bleakness and desperation which he had never before experienced surrounded this venture. And constantly, he forced his thoughts away from dwelling upon his dream: the black

ecstasy which Soneillon had forced upon him, and a foretaste of *what could be* if he so chose it. She had dominated him utterly, and to a large extent he felt the blame was his: he had all but insisted that she reveal her most malign and brutal face to him. So she had *demonstrated*. But he had dreamed it, and he didn’t know how real it had really been.

Five more nights had passed since then, and, although his sleep was troubled, the *Ahma* had received no visitation – either from Soneillon or the Sprite. Now he was *mind blanked* – Mostin said that, henceforth, they must always be *mind blanked*, to prevent covert observation from afar by Graz’zt. The Alienist had also warned that it might not be an

effective defense, but it was the best that he could do.

Mostin had closeted himself within his study, and begun to work half-heartedly on yet another spell in the absence of news from Faerie: Eadric had seen little of him, and the interaction between them had been tense and uncomfortable.

The Alienist was preoccupied with his own troubles and his strained friendship with Mulissu – he had issued a number of *sendings* to the Elementalists, none of which received a reply. His insistence that she was safer near him – where she could be warded – had fallen of deaf ears. And Mostin was vexed by

another dilemma: he could not enter the extradimensional portion of his retreat and *summon* anything there for fear of direct assault from Graz'zt; nor could he conjure anything outside of it, without violating the Injunction. The loophole outside of the Claviger's domain had been effectively closed to him, because the Celestial Interdict did not apply there either. In the times when his head was not full of esoteric formulae, Mostin ruminated upon the Horror, and whether to make another translation to the Far Realm or not. Or complained about his house-guests: both Ortwin and Koilimilou were lodged with the Alienist. Eadric received the distinct impression that the Satyr was avoiding him.

Nonetheless, at precisely eight o'clock every evening, Mostin would arrive and renew the ward upon Eadric. And for that, the *Ahma* was thankful. He groaned. He desperately wanted to confide in Nwm.

He descended from the tower and into the courtyard where a trio of supplicants waited – pilgrims from Trempa who sought his blessing. One suffered from a blight which had caused her skin to crack with sores and pustules, and a rheum had settled upon her eyes. Eadric performed a brief, perfunctory rite, did his best to smile, entered the keep, and bolted the door behind him. Within, it seemed cold and unwelcoming.

He furrowed his brow, strode into the Great Hall – which seemed particularly damp – and picked up a wooden mallet. He began striking a large, iron bell, and did not desist until all eleven of his servants stood before him.**

He turned to his clerk. "Bocere, bring me the ledgers."

Bocere, who managed the finances of three estates – Deorham, Hernath and Droming – on a day-to-day basis, and seldom left his small office, looked sceptical. "Are you sure, *Ahma*? It will take several weeks to go over them. It has been a long time, after all..."

Eadric grunted. "Then bring me a summary. The rest of you – except Hawi – open every shutter and every window, light every fire. Remove dust, dirt and debris – including from the library. This place is beginning to depress me."

He tossed a purse to the stablehand. Hawi caught it, opened it and gawked – it contained more gold than he would earn in five years.

"Go into Deorham," Eadric instructed, "and find some more help. Start at the *Twelve Elms*. Do not return until you have secured the services of another maid, two lackeys, two linkboys and a minstrel –

not a juggler. Offer them twice what they ask for, and give them a month's advance."

The boy nodded enthusiastically.

“Try to find a *good* minstrel, Hawi,” Eadric sighed. Although he didn’t hold much hope, the village of

Deorham was on the route from Morne to Trempa, and Hawi might get lucky. “You have two days. You may stay at the inn. Eat well, but do not consume too much ale – every penny should be accounted for.”

“Why, *Ahma*, I...”

Eadric raised his hand. “You will also post a notice that I am seeking permanent retainers *of quality*.

Including a castellan.”

The announcement was greeted by a stunned silence.

“I realize this may be upsetting,” Eadric said, although he felt unusually unsympathetic, “but it may be that presently I will leave for some time. In the event that I do not return – which is entirely possible – I would like my affairs set in order. Be assured that I will appoint someone of gentle birth and fair mind to guard your interests in the meanwhile.” He knew that, as soon the news of his intentions became known, the younger brothers and second sons of dozens of nobles would clamour for the position.

Gossip spread like wildfire amongst Trempa’s aristocracy.

He turned again to Bocere. “How much of the endowment to the Temple remains to be paid?***”

Bocere coughed. “One hundred and thirty-thousand crowns.”

“I will sign over the deeds to Hernath.”

” *Ahma*...”

Eadric raised an eyebrow.

“Yes, *Ahma*.”

**

Ninit charged.

The red haze was upon her again, and she swung the spear *Rengh* around her head like a flail, whilst guiding Drût effortlessly with her knees. Her copper hair blazed in the wan sunlight, and her

bloodstained form rippled with power and restless purpose. The stallion’s hooves – bright with white fire – flashed to momentary incandescence as it reared and hammered down upon the creatures which

assailed her. As usual, she was alone: seeking alone, stalking alone, slaying alone. And in her madness, none of those who considered her an ally could approach her in any event: her anger was elemental, and best avoided by those who purposed to live.

The demons recoiled.

The goddess pressed forwards, and slew. And slew. And slew. And when she had slain them all, and

their grizzled, muscled forms lay in stinking, steaming heaps around her, the frenzy finally passed.

She spat, and cursed them. The ground shuddered, ripped open briefly, and swallowed their already

festering remains.

Ninit whispered to Drût, and they rode north across the plains to find more. The hairy ones which

jumped were easy prey – although not as easy as the fat, squat ones which drooled. The toad-like ones, and the ones with four arms were trickier – although they seemed comparatively rare. The ones with the hooks on their heads were sly and vicious, and she hated them most of all: they always seemed to slip away at the last minute. But however many she killed, there always seemed to be more. She

squinted.

Somewhat later, from the corner of her eye, she spied a bird winging towards her at great speed: a kestrel or falcon, although at a distance of more than a mile it was hard for the goddess to be sure. She wheeled Drût about, and waited for it to reach her: she saw that it was a peregrine. Which meant that it was Lai.

Ninit groaned, and swore. The goddess of magic assumed her natural shape nearby.

“What do *you* want?” Ninit grunted.

“Rhul has departed for the place called Wyre.”

“What do I care?”

“He seeks allies, Ninit.”

Ninit shrugged.

“Where are you riding?” Lai asked.

“North,” Ninit said through narrowed eyes.

“May I join you?”

“If you must,” Ninit sighed. “But stay out of my way, Lai.”

“If you were to return to Mulhuk...” Lai began.

“And shut up,” Ninit said.

**

Titivilus waited.

He was becoming impatient – he had been kept for five days in an antechamber of black steel high in the north face of the Iron Tower. A single aperture, three feet square, offered a restricted view of the endless city of Dis two miles below – in the rare moments when the infernal haze and acrid fog lifted sufficiently to permit it. Thousands of erinyes constantly

patrolled the airs outside – their vectors changing on every pass which they made.

When his summons finally came, a mixture of relief and foreboding replaced a feeling of paranoia and anxiety, and he followed a silent, scarred pit fiend through a tortuous maze of interconnecting chambers and corridors into a reception room of unfathomable height.

A conclave of powerful devils, arrayed in awful forms, awaited him. They sat grimly on carved iron sieges around an iron table etched with scenes which portrayed the Great Revolt.

Titivilus bowed suavely, whilst taking in their number, political allegiances, and relative dispositions in an instant. The fact that Neabaz, the Herald of Baalzebul, was present caused the convoluted mind of Titivilus to twist in a hundred new ways.

“Sit,” Dispater smiled.

Titivilus sat.

“Our objectives have changed,” Dispater said calmly.

Titivilus nodded. His mind raced. *What objectives? By ‘our’ does he mean ‘our’ or ‘my?’ Or maybe*

‘his?’

“The Chief Protagonist of our Cause has ordered that the *status quo* must be maintained,” Dispater said opaquely.

“Sire?” Titivilus asked. Evidently, he meant ‘his.’

“The force currently under Murmuur’s command will move to support Graz’zt in Afqithan,” Dispater explained. “Shomei’s petition to Bathym was quashed.”

Titivilus resisted the urge to allow a look of amazement to cross his face.

“You will bring seals to Azzagrat, and then return to Afqithan,” Dispater continued. “Take a group as suits your needs. When you do return to the demiplane, you will find that your precedence has been diminished. I advise that you do not attempt to undermine or subvert those who have been appointed to

the task: you will find them less lenient than I.”

“Who has been given this responsibility, Sire?” Titivilus inquired.

“Azazel,” Dispater smiled. “He will have three *Akesoli* with him.”

The Nuncio’s eyes flickered.

Dispater gave an inquisitive look. “Never before have I seen you evince genuine surprise, Titivilus.”

“Nor I, Sire,” Titivilus agreed.

“That is all.”

The Nuncio of Dis stood, bowed, and made to depart. But as he reached the doors to the chamber, his master spoke again.

“And Titivilus?”

He turned around.

“Your mandate for the temptation of Eadric of Deorham is hereby revoked.”

He bowed again, but showed no sign of his irritation. Inwardly he was livid.

“May I inquire why?” He asked.

“No,” Dispater smiled.

Titivilus departed in a calm fury.

**

A light dusting of snow – the first of that winter – lay upon the ground when Soneillon visited Eadric again: he sat alone in his library, reading by the light of an oil-lamp. It was late in the evening, and her appearance was foreshadowed by a feeling of darker anxiety which played across the *Ahma*’s already troubled thoughts. Her façade was, as always, entirely convincing: the demoness tilted her head, and began scanning the spines of books upon the shelves. She walked slowly, her footfall quieter than a cat.

He scowled. “Is there some purpose to your presence here, or are you merely making a social visit?”

“Does everything have to have a purpose?” She asked in response.

“Yes,” he answered.

“In that case,” Soneillon smiled, “I am merely making a social visit. You have an impressive library.

How many tomes do you possess?”

Eadric sighed. “Are you attempting to engage me in small-talk, Soneillon?”

“I thought you might appreciate some company, as your friends are otherwise occupied.” She walked towards him, and sat lightly upon the arm of his chair.

“And the Queen of Throile has no better way to spend her time?”

“Than seducing the Breath of God?” Soneillon laughed. “I think not. Some of the more interesting volumes in your collection are charred. Why?”

“Certain members of the Inquisition were over-zealous in their hunt for heretical books and manuscripts.”

“Ahh. Before the notion of heresy was itself deemed heretical. What were you reading, before I interrupted you?”

He silently handed her the book. Its cover, of heavy leather, was cracked and worn; the vellum pages, soft and well-thumbed:

Estates and Minor Houses of Trempa

“How dreary,” Soneillon sighed. “Do you occupy yourself with mundane affairs such as these, to avoid brooding on your experience of me?”

“In part. It is not a memory which I enjoy to recall.” He stood up.

She held out a soft hand. Her talons were conspicuously absent. “Come, Eadric. Dream with me. I will show you something sweeter. Gentle. Tender.”

“You are foul,” he said bitterly.

She raised an eyebrow. “I think perhaps you need lessons in the art of courtship.”

“When will you desist from this charade?” He hissed. “How can I speak more plainly? You are repellant. You disgust me. Everything that you are is antithetical to all that I value and hold true. You are an ally of circumstance: there *is* no commonality in our purpose, save by unhappy chance. You are base, vile, obscene. You are nothing but a manifestation of corruption.”

“No,” she said softly. “I am Soneillon. And you cannot see past a dogma which is outmoded in the philosophy which you purport to espouse. You do *Saizhan* a disservice.”

“That word has no place in your vocabulary. You degrade it by speaking it.”

She laughed. “You are a sanctimonious fool. Your moralism merely reveals your ignorance of the Truth. Tell me, Eadric, what does it really mean – *Demogorgon*? What use is *Saizhan* if it cannot reconcile Oronthon with *that* truth?”

Reality seemed to momentarily darken as she invoked the name of the Ancient – its power, when

spoken by her, was profound.

“Get out,” he said through gritted teeth.

“You close your eyes and ears, Eadric. You shrink in fear from the Real as much as you crave it.”

He cursed her. Power coursed through him, as he spoke a *holy word*.

She smiled, and pressed a finger to his lips.

Groping, Eadric drew Lukarn from where it hung in its scabbard on the back of the chair. Reality and memory collapsed to a single point in time, and he recalled another demoness standing in a similar position. Paradox and *déjà vu* almost overwhelmed him.

“Your desire for me has unbalanced you,” Soneillon scoffed. “You are wracked with guilt and confusion.”

“I will strike you down if you persist in this.”

“I am your *kios*, Eadric: your enlightenment lies in me.” She did not relent. “I am *that which you are not*. The Void shines, and you will not accept it: for do I not bring you closer to your God, *Ahma*?”

He *smote* her three times with all of his strength. Lukarn bit deep into her neck and shoulders, opening wounds which smoked and caused space to contort. Agony gripped her visage as the blade burned

through her. Ichor poured from her, evaporating into nothingness as it struck the wooden floor of the library. She seemed to stagger uncertainly.

She did not beg, or cajole or threaten. She did not flee, and spoke no spell, although Eadric knew that she could have extinguished him with a thought. Instead, she assumed her most malevolent aspect –

winged, naked, dark and terrible. Taint issued from her in potent waves.

“Remain ignorant then, Eadric. Finish me. I’ll make it easy for you,” her smile was that of a creature which exulted in evil and destruction.

He wavered.

“You are a coward,” she screamed, spitting black blood. “Slay me or bed me, Eadric: you will need to choose sooner or later, in any case. Do so now. Do I consume your every waking thought, or no? Do I remind you of her, *Ahma*, or did she maybe presage me? *Which do you think it is?* Can you even recollect her face?” Her words were cruel and barbed.

Barely, he thought. He felt nauseous: grief and remorse briefly threatened to overcome him. He swallowed, breathed, lowered his sword, and held out his hand to her.

“Come,” he said shakily. “You cannot mend those wounds.”

“Compassion is wasted on me, *Ahma*.” Her manner was ironic.

“I know. It is for my benefit, not yours.”

“You have quite a temper, Eadric. Perhaps you should meditate more often.”

The Demoness drew close, and he placed his hands on her neck. She hissed in pain and pleasure as his fingers probed the trauma.

“Do you never cease?” He sighed.

“I am what I am.”

He gingerly released a little of his power, uncertain of the effect that it might have, before flooding her with light and warmth. She seemed infinitely passive.

“The scars will remain,” Eadric said.

“I will bear them as a token of your high esteem,” she said drily.

“We have a very unhealthy relationship, Soneillon.”

“Do we? I can’t say that I’ve noticed. May I stay?”

He nodded.

*The basic, mechanical premise for Fillein-Jovol-Teppu was one of a self-incarnating entity with only one restriction: the ECL of its new incarnation could be no higher than the ECL of its previous

incarnation at death. All other variables are chosen by the incarnating entity as befits its new role and purpose.

**At this point in time, Eadric employed only eleven servants in Kyrtil’s Burh: two cooks, three maids, a stablehand, a butler, a mason/carpenter, a gatekeeper, a clerk, and a valet. Although there was no shortage of potential employees seeking work at the Burh,

Eadric was conscious of the fact that –

between Inquisitorial burnings and demonic incursions – working for the *Ahma* entailed a certain risk.

***Eadric had made a commitment to pay a 200,000 gp donation to the Temple coffers in order to

cover the debts incurred after the war.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 05-02-2004

Innocence

Shomei reclined into an enormous leather chair, and tilted her head inquisitively. She sipped slowly from a large silver goblet, imbibing a volatile liquid of unknown potency. The Infernalist seemed

unusually calm and languorous.

“Your dwelling is...beautiful,” Eadric said with surprise and genuine feeling. He was sat upon the edge of a similar chair, absorbing his surroundings. The room was exquisite – if somewhat bizarre – in its décor and furnishings. Purples and midnight blues predominated, and *things* hung upon walls or rested upon shelves. Crystal lamps emanated a soft, diffuse light, and a faint hint of incense hung within the air.

“Thank-you,” she smiled.

A spined devil flew past quietly, and glowered at Eadric.

Shomei gestured, and it flapped away, closing a door silently as it exited.

“Would you care for a drink?” She offered, refilling the goblet from a huge crystal decanter.

“What is it?” He asked.

“It is called *kschiff*,” she replied. “Do not consume too much – it will stupefy you. A little will relax you, however.”

“How much is too much?” Eadric had the impression that Shomei was fast approaching that point.

“I will tell you when to stop.”

The goblet floated gently towards him, and he caught it uncertainly. Its contents smelled faintly of orange blossoms, and the taste was astringent. But curiously agreeable.

“Thank-you for receiving me at such short notice,” Eadric said. “I know that the time of a wizard is precious.”

“That is particularly true in my case,” she half-smiled.

He swallowed. “Shomei, I...”

She held up a hand. “We will not speak of it.”

He sank back into the chair.

“You are here to talk about Soneillon,” Shomei said.

He nodded, wondering whether she had foreseen it, guessed it, or determined it through some other means.

“Am I being asked in the capacity of friend, spiritual advisor, or advocate for the antinomian perspective?” She asked.

“I’m not sure,” Eadric furrowed his brow. “Although the idea of you as a spiritual advisor is disturbing.

You are something of an authority on fiends, however, and I thought your perspective might be useful.”

“Have you considered speaking to the *Sela*?”

Eadric smiled. “I consider speaking to the *Sela* approximately once every three seconds.”

“That is probably a good thing,” Shomei ventured. “It would indicate that you are in touch with the source of your Truth. Your internal dialogue has not been compromised. May I ask a number of difficult questions?”

“Er, yes,” he said dubiously.

“If Nehael’s release is achieved, how do you think Soneillon will react to a rival?”

He shifted uncomfortably.

“Perhaps it would be better for you if somehow Soneillon were conveniently destroyed prior to liberating Nehael?”

“Shomei, that is most unfair.”

“These are practical considerations, Eadric.” She gestured, and the goblet floated back towards him again. He hadn’t noticed that, at some point, she had refilled it. “May I ask you another question?”

He nodded. He felt that he was beginning to relax.

“Have you entertained the possibility that Soneillon may be fertile? Succubi can enter the equivalent of oestrus at will, and the gestation is extremely fast – days, if I recall correctly. She may use this to exert leverage over you. How would you react if this transpired to be the case?”

His mind span.

“Let me posit another scenario,” Shomei said, reaching out as the goblet returned to her.

Eadric found that he was watching her lips move. Her voice seemed to drift slowly through his head.

“What if Nehael perishes? I am assuming that she is presently alive, of course – the *web of motes* indicated as much. Can you retain your integrity of purpose under those

circumstances? If Soneillon were to – for example – offer you a way out, would you accept it?”

He groaned.

“Because you *could* endure the Void, Eadric. I have no doubt on that count. I have seen the tendril of possibility.”

“It will not happen,” he said.

“Nor will Shomei the Infernal ever embrace *Saizhan*,” Shomei smiled ironically.

The goblet seemed to appear from nowhere, hovering in front of Eadric’s face. He grasped it, and set it down.

There was a brief silence.

“Why is the darkness so compelling, Shomei?” He asked.

She smiled. “Because it is dark, of course.”

“Do you think Ortwin was correct – when he suggested that my desire to overcome duality through any means is the source of my fascination? That it might prove my undoing?”

“The *hierosgamos*? Maybe. But I think there was no such moral judgment implicit in Ortwin’s words, merely that you inferred one. Are you inclined to symbolic microcosmic speculation?”

“I might be, if I knew what it was,” the goblet had appeared in front of him again. He sighed, and drank. He found his eyes resting on the curve of Shomei’s neck, and tore them away.

She raised an eyebrow. “Perhaps I should have warned you that *kschiff* also possesses aphrodisiac qualities. Don’t worry – I have no intention of seducing you. Your life is complicated enough already.”

She sighed. “I think you are teetering on the edge of oblivion, Eadric – this is a place rife with temptation, but it also possesses infinite spiritual possibility. Everything will become a paradox, and you will be forced to redefine who you are on a continual basis.”

” Now you begin to sound like an advocate for the short, steep path,” he said grimly.

“I think your role is ultimately Adversarial, Eadric.”

“The *Sela* once said something similar to me, regarding my place in the downfall of Orthodoxy.”

“Perhaps you should have listened to him,” she remarked wryly. “To avoid falling, all you must do is remain grounded in *Saizhan*. Everything else is superfluous.”

A longer silence followed.

“In the past I have misjudged you, Shomei,” Eadric sighed. “I’m sorry.”

She shrugged, and looked away.

“You are very defensive.”

“Yes,” she replied.

“I feel I’ve missed the opportunity of a good friendship.”

She swallowed, unwilling to meet his gaze.

“Bliss is not so bad, Shomei. If the weight of becoming is so heavy...”

She raised a hand, her eyes filling with tears. “There is no possibility that I have not considered, *Ahma*.”

He held her hand gently. It seemed tiny.

She wept.

*

After Eadric had returned to Deorham through the portal which Mostin had opened, Shomei sat alone

in reflection.

Somewhat before midnight, she renewed her *mind blank*, protected herself with other, sundry wards, grasped her rod, and opened a *gate* to Phlegethos. Soon thereafter she met with Bathym for their third –

and Shomei hoped last – series of negotiations.

She was furious to discover that the Duke of Hell had reneged on their agreement utterly, and would no longer be committing a single devil to the ‘situation’ in Afqithan. Nor would he explain why.

It made no sense. The reason for Shomei’s initial involvement in Afqithan had been because certain powerful devils had expressed a desire that Graz’zt be removed from the cosmic scheme of things. She wondered what had changed.

She returned to Wyre.

Mostin was awakened at two in the morning – from his usual bizarre dreams – by an incessant banging on his door.

*

The Alienist appeared in his *robe of eyes*. Shomei glared at him, and wondered whether he wore it to bed like a night-gown, to avoid being surprised by things which might otherwise surprise him.

“I’ve been f*cked over,” the Infernalist spat, barging in.

“I see the *kschiff* has worn off,” Mostin remarked.

“Bathym has backed out.”

Orolde arrived from his room in order to answer the door. Mostin sighed.

The two Wizards repaired to Mostin’s study, and the Alienist instructed that the Sprite bring them cakes and hot buttered firewine. He kindled a fire, and spent several moments adjusting the illumination such that it was *just so*.

Shomei fidgeted. She glanced around. Mostin’s workplace was uncharacteristically

cluttered and
disorganized.

“What are you working on?” She asked suspiciously.

“A pseudonatural summons,” he grumbled. “When I have the time and inclination – which seems seldom at present. What is happening, Shomei?”

“Bathym was on the verge of committing five legions of his devils. Belial had already sanctioned it.”

Mostin gaped. “Five *legions*? Shomei, how do you do it?”

“Well, I don’t – evidently. Support has been withdrawn. Presumably the interest has changed.”

“Have you considered petitioning Belial directly?”

“I suspect that he is responsible for the about-face.”

“Do you have any indication why?” Mostin inquired.

She shrugged. “Who knows, Mostin? Perhaps because of Rhyxali? Soneillon? Graz’zt? Tramst?

Kostchtchie? Eadric? Me? Nehael? A perceived pseudonatural threat? A celestial conspiracy? The

motives of a devil of Belial’s stature are too convoluted to even begin to penetrate.”

“I had not considered a sizable force of devils crucial to success,” Mostin said. “The *web of motes* offered a number of other scenarios.”

“Maybe not,” Shomei conceded. “But thirty thousand barbazu would have guaranteed it, and acted as a balance on Rhyxali at the very least.”

“I think that your perspective in this is flawed, Shomei – you are assuming that we can somehow retain sufficient control of this situation to actually *direct* the course of events. I have come to the conclusion that, at best, we can invoke a storm and let it blow as it will.”

“Mostin...”

“It is realistic,” he said. “We are dealing with entities of enormous power, any one of which can turn on us in an instant. We should be thinking in terms of self-preservation. *You* should be, at the very least.”

“I am not getting into this argument again,” she groaned.

“What other options remain open to you?”

“The glooms. Other Dukes. Possibly Murmuur: he is influential, commands a large force, and is –

importantly – *present*. Time is running out to make such arrangements, however. And I have no relationship with Malbolge, other than vicariously through Belial – and he hardly seems reliable in this at present. Besides, I mistrust the involvement of Titivilus.”

“You are still trying to control the situation,” Mostin sighed. “Our first goal is the

obliteration of Ainhorr's force in Afqithan – there is no need to be methodical about it. We can worry about Azzagrat afterwards.”

“What exactly are you saying, Mostin?”

“I can *dimensionally lock* an area two miles across, Shomei. Outside of the *quiescence* – where demons will be forced to manifest – I can invoke a total of seventeen – *seventeen* – *reality maelstroms* if necessary. Afqithan is not my world, Shomei. There are no holds barred there. If I rip the spatial fabric of the demiplane to shreds, I don't care. If I can call the Horror, and *bind* it – as long as I can get away before the spell ends, I don't care. Shomei, even if I *gate* in Carasch and invoke an apocalypse *I don't care*. Are we on the same page here, Shomei?”

She looked at him. “Thank-you, Mostin. For a while, I was beginning to lose my perspective. I think you may have restored it to me.”

“We are as gods, Shomei. Never forget it.”

“You truly are at your best when you're at your craziest,” she smiled.

**

She stood, and looked again at the tree for a long while.

It had an oddly compelling quality, which drew one's eyes to it and evoked a desire to run hands over soft, smooth bark. Its height and girth suggested that it was old, but it possessed a quality which seemed... *youthful*. Strange for a tree.

Around its base, bright flowers sprang between rocks and trailed into a pool fed by a small spring. The water moved, but she couldn't determine where it went, after it left the pool. *Curious*, she thought. She looked at the tree again.

Sometimes, she felt that it was watching her.

She gazed around, and wondered what else there was *out there*. Away from the tree. More than once, she had determined to leave – to walk away from the tree. To explore. But she never did.

Why leave the tree, after all? Whatever else there was, it couldn't be better than the tree.

She lay down against its warm bole, and it seemed to embrace her. She watched thoughts and memories pass through her mind, and wondered who had experienced them.

Bathe, she thought.

She vaguely recalled the fact that she liked to bathe. It seemed like a good idea – although she was unsure whether it had risen unbidden in her mind, or the tree had prompted the desire. She rose, walked the short distance over to the pool, and slid into the water. It was the perfect depth, and the perfect temperature. She immersed her head briefly – as that seemed the right thing to do – before leaning back and relaxing against a rock, which seemed to fit her head and neck very comfortably.

She suddenly noticed a small figure – maybe two thirds her own height – sitting on a branch of the tree, with its legs dangling freely. It wore grey hose and a leaf-green waistcoat.

“Hello,” she said.

“Hello,” the other replied. “Are you happy?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Good,” the other smiled.

“Where did you come from?” She asked. “I haven’t seen you before.”

“I came from the tree.”

“Ahh,” she nodded. She hauled herself easily from the water, and walked back towards the tree. She noticed that now she was covered in tiny flecks of silver – she rubbed them gently, but they seemed somehow part of her skin.

“They will not come off,” the other said.

“What are they?” She asked.

The other smiled sadly. “The memory of a great injustice.”

She cocked her head inquisitively.

“It would take too long to explain,” the other said. “Nor does it matter – the injustice never really happened now. Your transition is passed at last, and you have been finally surrendered: from one Truth to another. This place is two things: a prison hallowed by an angel, and a womb which has always been here. If sometimes the Truth that you chose seems cold and indifferent, then it is Her nature. Maybe She forgot you for a while. Don’t blame Her: She doesn’t love you any less.”

“You think too much,” she laughed. “What will happen now?”

“Something nobody expects,” the other replied.

“And what is that?” She asked.

“A Viridity,” the other said, his eyes blazing.

**

Nwm felt the snow and pine cones beneath his feet as he ran. The air was frigid, his breathing deep but measured. The smell of resin permeated everything, and his eyes streamed in the cold. His pulse was audible to him, above the noise of his passage, thumping through his skull.

His focus was perfect: he was meditating. No symbolism moved through his mind. No recollection of

memory, nor thought for the future. No expectation of revelation, nor seeking for something other than *moment* in its fullness. There was reflection, but it was dynamic and engaged – not introspective and divorced. Each moment was precious – but Nwm did not cherish it. He merely experienced it.

He ran until he finally dropped from exhaustion, and collapsed gasping. Still, he meditated. Whilst he slept naked in the snow, he meditated, and when he woke again with the pale winter sun, he meditated.

He came to a rock under an icy waterfall, and sat. Water cascaded over him as he gazed over a frozen pond for nine days. He neither ate, nor drank; nor did he crave warmth nor comfort. He needed nothing.

He meditated. He began to run again, and meditated.

After a week, he rested, and allowed himself to engage in discursive thought. After an hour, he got bored.

He meditated again.

In the *tuerns* of the Linna, Tunthi shamans said that some primaeval spirit had awakened, and come from the forests which nestled in the deep vales, south of the Heaped Thunders.

**

Several rumours – substantiated by more or less reliable evidence and witnesses – were current among the inhabitants of western Trempa and southern Tomur, and spreading rapidly through the rest of Wyre.

First, a group of twenty pilgrims to Kyrtil's Burh had, purportedly, undergone a terrifying ordeal wherein demonic or diabolic forces had manifested to them *within the castle*. The significance of this event was interpreted according to the various inclinations of those for whom it held an interest: a test of faith; a sign of the *Ahma*'s eccentricity, madness or evil; a cryptic revelation couched in terms which lesser mortals must strive to understand; or religious hysteria induced by too much privation and self-mortification – or perhaps the consumption of ergotized rye bread.

Second, Eadric, Earl of Deorham sought a steward for his castle and estates. This aroused much interest among various landless nobles, former church grandees who had surrendered estates at the end of the infeudation, as well as numerous unusual characters of mystical bent.

Third, in the face of the expectations of those who considered chastity a necessary prerequisite for the successful cultivation of *saizhan* – and there were many – the *Ahma* had taken a lover. She was seldom seen but was, by all accounts, beautiful and magnetic. Her lineage and credentials were unknown, and it was suspected that she was a peasant-girl. Or a foreigner. Or a celestial companion. Or a demoness. It depended on who you asked.

The *drip-drip* of pilgrims and mendicants to Kyrtil's Burh rapidly became a steady stream, and then a rushing torrent. It expanded to include potential retainers, philosophers eager to engage the *Ahma* in conversation and debate, Urgic and Irrenite ex-heretics who no longer felt the need to practice in secret, atoning Templars, and the merely curious. They lodged in Deorham – which had never seen so many

new faces – and occupied barns, fields and rooms in farmsteads for miles about. The Innkeeper of the *Twelve Elms* quickly became very rich.

Eadric closed the gates to the Burh, and returned to his impossibly circular, self-referential *kios*:

What is Soneillon, if both Saizhan and extinction are not unattainable?

But even as he sat in contemplation, she would come to him and any insight that he thought he might have gleaned would be dispelled. She would purposely arouse him, or drive him to distraction by her presence. Her heat never abated. There was no indication of artifice in her desire, only the need for continual and infinitely varied sensation: taboo did not exist, or existed only to be broken, and when they coupled violently on the shattered altar of the chapel, Eadric didn't know whether they had profaned it, or sanctified it.

Constructed reality was overturned so swiftly, so thoroughly, that it seemed as though the cosmos

disintegrated into its component atoms and they, in turn, evaporated into a Nothingness from which they were never unidentical.

This was the 'Path of Lightning' to which, he knew, Titivilus had referred – hard as a diamond, sharp as a razor, upon which only the mad could walk. But the Nuncio of Dis knew it by name only, and any

formulation that Titivilus had posited regarding its nature was shallow and vacuous. The Abyss loomed on both sides of Eadric, and if he missed a single step, it would claim him.

On the night of the full moon before the winter solstice, Mostin arrived with Ortwin, Shomei, and

Koilimilou at Kyrtil's Burh. Eadric ushered them into the great hall, and Ortwin raised an eyebrow: the place was as he had never before seen it.

A fire roared in the hearth, and wolf-hounds lounged before it. Lanterns hung from chains and torches burned in sconces: light was everywhere. Servants moved about busily. The smell of roasted game,

wine and fresh bread filled the air. The sound of a lute carried over the hubbub.

Music? Ortwin was incredulous. *At Kyrtil's Burh?* Played poorly, to be sure, but music nonetheless.

The tune faltered as the Satyr, sidhe-cambion, Mostin – with his lidless eyes – and Shomei the Infernal entered the hall. Silence and uncertainty descended upon those present.

Eadric clapped his hands. "Go about your business," he smiled. "These people may appear odd, but

there is no need for concern."

They went about their business, and soon the volume resumed its previous levels.*

The Satyr turned to Eadric. "So the rumours are true. You really have gone nuts. Where's the Queen of Darkness? Lurking in the crypt? Or embroidering a quilt in the drawing room?"

"I believe she Dreams. Why are you here?"

"You mean this is *normal*?" Ortwin gestured around. "I thought that you'd put it on for our benefit.

Who's that boy over there?" The Satyr pointed to a handsome nobleman in a fashionable doublet.

"His name is Canec. He is my steward."

"A Uediian?"

"He is Caur's maternal uncle. He marched on Morne with us. Do you not remember?"

"I have a poor memory for aristocrats," Ortwin said drily, pouring himself a cup of wine.

"Is everything alright, Ed? You're not schizo are you?"

"Yes. No. In that order."

"Is it true? Are you screwing her?"

Eadric groaned. "You have a foul mouth, Ortwin."

"Man, you're in *big* trouble," the Satyr grinned. "Let's get drunk."

"Will you always be a hedonist, Ortwin?"

"I hope so. But there again, I can. I have a supreme advantage over you."

"And what might that be?" Eadric sighed.

"I'm a fey, Ed. Sh*t doesn't stick to me."

Eadric smiled and shook his head. "Why *are* you here?" He asked.

"Mostin said something important is about to happen. A 'convergence of tendrils,' apparently. He had some flashback of a possible future that he'd seen. A kind of mini-nodality."

"Should I be nervous?" Eadric asked.

"Probably," Ortwin replied.

Within fifteen minutes, Soneillon returned: she had located the balor Irzho in an abandoned temple in the mountains of Bedesh, together with several succubi and the demonist Rimilin of the Skin. They

were willing to aid the cause against Ainhorr in Afqithan, provided that a price could be agreed.

Before the information had sunk in, the gate-ward entered, with news that a traveller stood outside who would not be turned away.

"What is his name?" Eadric asked.

"He says he is called Rhul. He...er...forgive me, *Ahma*. He claims to be a god."

Moments later, the hag Jetheeg and two Loquai knights arrived. Nhura was finally ready.

* This is one of the minor social advantages of possessing a +39 Diplomacy score.

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**

AFQITHAN: PROLOGUE (Part 1)

[Soneillon]: If you should happen to slay Ainhorr today, you should grieve for him.

[Eadric]: (Contempt.)

[Soneillon]: Arrogance! You, at least, should lament his passing. A great warrior. Ever loyal to the master he loves and despises.

[Eadric]: Loves? Love is never that ugly.

[Soneillon]: Love is often that ugly, Eadric.

[Eadric]: And if you should perish today? How should I then react?

[Soneillon]: Exult in your memory, Eadric. Because nothing will ever again compare to me.

[Eadric]: For that, at least, I will be thankful.

[Soneillon]: You will be diminished.

*

[Eadric]: What does Hell have to do with this?

[Shomei]: I don't know.

[Eadric]: I fear its agenda.

[Shomei]: That is wise. Many forget the single, overarching truth.

[Eadric] (Warily): And what might that be?

[Shomei]: Hell is merely a vehicle for expressing the Will of the Nameless Fiend. Despite all

appearances, it acts with one purpose.

[Eadric]: I had not forgotten.

[Shomei]: Do you believe the Will of Oronthon and the Will of the Adversary to be one and the same, *Ahma*?

[Eadric]: They are not unidentical.

[Shomei]: Do you believe that you are a focus through which the Will of the Adversary is expressed?

[Eadric]: Perhaps.

[Shomei]: Do you *trust* the Will of the Adversary?

[Eadric]: No.

[Shomei]: How do you resolve this paradox?

[Eadric]: I meditate to realize *Saizhan*.

[Shomei] (Exasperated): Must you always proselytize?

[Eadric] (Laughing): Do I? Good.

*

[Eadric]: Will you exercise restraint?

[Mostin]: I doubt it.

[Eadric]: *Can* you exercise restraint? Is it within your nature?

[Mostin]: I don't know. I've never tried, and have no plans to.

[Eadric]: Your lack of moral responsibility concerns me.

[Mostin]: A surfeit of it would concern me more. I abide by certain...axioms...Eadric, which you

cannot hope to comprehend. You can rest assured that within your own framework, I am completely

mad.

[Eadric]: And within yours?

[Mostin]: I am utterly pedestrian. There are things far madder than I.

*

[Eadric]: What of Iua?

[Ortwin]: She can look after herself.

[Eadric]: You have betrayed her.

[Ortwin]: Not so! Our arrangement made provision for outside interests.

[Eadric]: I am referring to *how* you went about this. Flaunting a lover in front of her is not discreet. You could have been more sensitive.

[Ortwin]: I have not lied to her. Are you suggesting that I should have?

[Eadric]: She is eighteen years old.

[Ortwin]: Life is full of hard lessons, Ed.

[Eadric]: That is facile. You have a duty towards her.

[Ortwin]: What can I say? I'm selfish.

[Eadric]: Koilimilou is a sidhe and a cambion, Ortwin. She venerates Rhyxali. She is without remorse or compassion. What can she offer you?

[Ortwin]: Inventiveness, and insatiability. Relief from the boredom of existence.

[Eadric]: Once you had principles, as much as you pretended not to.

[Ortwin]: Once, I was mortal. My perspective has changed.

[Eadric]: Your essential nature has changed.

[Ortwin]: No more than yours. And Eadric of Deorham is the one f*cking the Demon Queen of Throile.

[Eadric]: I remain conflicted in my actions, Ortwin. I am neither complacent nor fixated on sensation. I do what I must.

[Ortwin]: Oh, bullsh*t Ed. Grow up. You're just doing what we all have to do. It's biological. It's just been a long time coming for you, and you've decided to take an unconventional route. Guilt is an outdated emotion.

[Eadric]: Why are you even here, Ortwin?

[Ortwin]: I feel it in my blood, Eadric. I can smell it. Every tree whispers it to me.

[Eadric]: ?

[Ortwin]: Good things, Ed. Good things. Something stirs.

**

Why the Nameless Adversary acts in the way he does is a cosmic imponderable. His reasonings are so complex, his plots so byzantine, his vision so broad in its imagining, that no real hope exists in penetrating his motives.

The Irrenites – who had been generally sympathetic to the Adversarial paradigm – maintained the

position that if the Oronthon beyond Oronthon was utterly ineffable, then the Adversary was the

distillation of pure rationality. Every move that he made – to augment one incomprehensible factor, or to reduce another – was calculated with the utmost precision and played out within the framework of eternal potentiality. He nurtured tendrils of possibility which might not yield fruit for a billion years.

The nodality in Afqithan – although complex and multi-faceted – was itself only a minor aspect of a larger process of change: or so it could be interpreted, if one was inclined towards such speculation.

The mind of God – which, from an Urgic perspective, included every iota of consciousness in existence at any time and every possible combination thereof – was engaged in a reorganization of its own,

internal structure. This manifested in the World of Men in a number of ways: a resurgence in the cult of Cheshne, as concepts of Nothingness were articulated within the physical plane; long periods during which the *Sela* was engaged in intense meditation; and finally, the beginnings of a schism regarding the interpretation of the best way to implement and realize *Saizhan* itself.

Because Cheshne – who, if the cosmos possessed an objective truth, might be identical with

Demogorgon, and might not – had stirred. Or maybe she shifted slightly in her sleep. In any event, a torrent of contradictory truths were suddenly unleashed upon an already strained Dialectic, forcing an explosion of insights to occur. Cheshne was real again, and always had been.

The liaison between the *Ahma* and Soneillon – it was suspected – was merely a physical symptom of the articulation of Nothingness within the Ideal realm. Eadric did not know it,

but his relationship with the demoness was to have profound and far-reaching consequences for Oronthonian mysticism. Not

with respect to the *definition* of *Saizhan* – after all, how can a state devoid of all qualities be rendered in sensible terms? But as far as praxis was concerned – the *method* by which one came to the final realization which *Saizhan* claimed to be – the *Ahma* was blazing a path which would appeal to a particular minority: those of antinomian bent within the broad and complex set of perspectives which comprised Oronthonian religion.

Many who had been Irrenites – before such labels became superfluous – immediately understood what

Eadric of Deorham was attempting to do. They applauded his revolutionary vision, his rejection of

conventional mores, and his apparent transcendence of notions such as good and evil – although the matter was far from resolved within the *Ahma*'s own mind. Several adepts – including the thaumaturges Sineig and Wrohs* – went as far as to compact succubi in their exploration of *Saizhan*. Not so much in emulation of the *Ahma*, but in recognition that rapid deconstruction of conventional reality required radical tools, and demons were about as radical as it got.

The subschool which arose, *Skôhsldaúr* – the gate of demons – would produce works of extraordinary

genius and subtlety. Its validity as an authentic vehicle for *Saizhan* was doubted by few, but its suitability as a universal tool – which many of its proponents advocated – was regarded with dubiety by more conservative elements. It was too controversial. Too hazardous. Too *Adversarial* for the tastes of many. It was beyond even the most questionable of Goetic practices. It should be reserved only for those whom the *Sela* deemed ready.

Of course, the *Sela* himself declined to make such judgments.

It was in foreknowledge and anticipation of these events – and others beside – that the schemes of Hell were set into motion. To the amazement of the nobles Furcas and Murmuur, Azazel – and the Infernal Standard – arrived in Afqithan, together with three other devils of unusually wicked temperament.

Sachir, Zaare and Nahuzihis were *Akesoli*, serving the arch-fiend Amaimon, and dispensing pain upon powerful and intractable thralls both mortal and diabolic. There was no question of challenging

Azazel's authority in the demiplane by either of the entrenched Dukes. He needed neither seals nor letters of precedence to validate his assumption of command: he was *Azazel*. That was enough.

The presence of the *Akesoli* caused fearful speculation amongst Murmuur and his various captains and lieutenants – decorated narzugons high in the Order of the Fly. Murmuur was a straightforward soldier, and although subtle in the way that all Infernal aristocrats are subtle, he lacked the calculated finesse of intellectuals such as Furcas and Titivilus. He was not privy to the machinations of his liege in

Malbolge, nor of his liege's liege in Maladomini. It was evident that the *Akesoli*'s presence must have been authorized at the *highest* level: sanctioned by the Adversary himself, the Quatriumvirate, and possibly the silent council of the thirteen great Antagonists.**

Murmuur was, however, relieved that Azazel had been appointed the task of commanding the effort.

Azazel was – like himself – a warrior, with little interest in devious schemes. Although a harsh

taskmaster, Hell's standard-bearer recognized accomplishment upon the battlefield above all else, and Murmuur excelled in battle and deeds of martial prowess. The Duke mused drily whether Azazel's

arrival had been a strategic decision designed to make Murmuur himself more tractable, or whether it in some way reflected the involvement of the *Ahma*: although Agalierept might have been a more obvious choice, he would possess less *gravitas* as far as mortals were concerned.***

Murmuur waited impatiently, eager to simultaneously align the nine *gates* within his tower to

Malbolge, in order to permit his troops through: thirty legions, plus their auxiliaries. There were bearded devils, malebranche, horned devils and erinyes. And his knights, who numbered several

thousand, would lead the narzugon charge – if and when it came.

If it came. Murmuur realized that he still had no idea what was really happening. But unlike Furcus or Titivilus, his political ignorance was a source of comfort rather than distress.

He grunted. Spined devils flapped silently around him, strapping his breastplate and vambraces –

constructed of an unknown, greenish metal – over a fine mesh of infernal steel.

**

The galley – a vast, ponderous quadrieme from Shûth – lumbered at dusk into the bustling port of

Jashat, and moored close to the weathered marble of an ancient wharf, fast by a sleek Thalassine

jabeque. Her timbers groaned as she eclipsed the smaller ship, blotting out the sunset and irritating the dozen or so sailors who smoked and relaxed upon the jabeque's deck after a hard week's work. The

quayside – stretching below a vast plaza crammed with temples to a hundred gods – was a riot of

colour and activity.

The Gentleman from Thond – whose own preference for colour in his clothing was

understated at best, and muted at worst – stood in the cool evening air upon wide steps, below a timeworn shrine to the god Pe’ahj. Six retainers attended him. He squinted through the scented clouds exuded by temple censers in an effort to suppress the effect upon his humours. His humours exhibited a particularly delicate

balance. He was nervous, and agitated.

He watched impatiently as pulleys span and counterweights soared upon two great derricks near the

stern, and the galley lowered a gangway half as wide as the road to Fumaril. She began to unload

dozens of crates, chests and boxes from her hold, lugged by huge slaves who bore intricate brands upon their arms and shoulders: the Gentleman from Thond wondered they were a giant-breed from some

distant corner of Shûth. Before them, a company of guards – of similar type, but clad in dull

breastplates and wearing cloaks of sombre red – marched silently down the walkway and arrayed

themselves in a wide semicircle, blocking half the quayside and causing merchants and vendors to curse and grumble. Long, sharp glaives pointed outwards like a thicket, oblivious to the laws and

customs of Jashat.

A second gangplank – less massive than the first – was hauled into place and dropped by a hundred

muscled arms.

The Gentleman from Thond licked his lips apprehensively. A slow procession of magi began to issue

from the galley. Some were cowled and hooded, others bare-headed, yet more bore hair arranged in

long, intricate braids – all according to their station and function, at which the Gentleman could only guess. In the rear, a number of veiled palanquins – attended by servants or neophytes – swayed

rhythmically, in time with the steady footsteps of their muscled bearers.

He swallowed, and strode forwards. Several of the guards – each a cubit taller than himself –

immediately brought their weapons to bear on him. He smiled uncertainly, and coughed. Before he had the chance to speak, he heard another voice issue from behind them.

The wall of steel parted, to reveal a slender man with a terse manner dressed in a loose, silk robe of greenish-black.

“I have made the necessary arrangements, but...” the Gentleman from Thond began.

“Good,” the other interrupted. “I am Anumid. You will address me – and me only. Here is a list of our requirements.”

Anumid handed a long scroll to the Gentleman, who raised his eyes in surprise.

“The temple precinct has been cleared,” the Gentleman from Thond said. “Vagrants were...”

“The details are irrelevant,” Anumid interrupted again. “The site will be reconsecrated, in any case.”

“I have had to call in many favours and line many purses, to make this happen, Anumid. I have had numerous unforeseen expenses.”

“You will be recompensed,” Anumid smiled. “Do you wish to continue in the capacity of our agent?”

“Yes, but...”

“Will fifty thousand be sufficient to begin with?”

“Yes.” The Gentleman from Thond bowed perfunctorily.

As the train made its winding progress through the city of Jashat, they passed by two Wizards of

middling power: a local enchantress named Luthlul, and her recent acquaintance Menniz, a conjurer

who originally hailed from Lang Herath in Wyre.**** Luthlul gave Menniz a meaningful look.

“This is an unexpected development,” Menniz said uncomfortably, scratching his neck. “Do you think they’re genuine?”

Luthlul invoked her *arcane sight* and gaped.

“I assume from your expression that the answer is an unqualified yes,” Menniz said laconically.

“The four in the palanquins are off the scale,” Luthlul whispered. “I’m not getting anything from half a dozen others – they’re probably *mind blanked*.”

“Why aren’t they using a more conventional mode of transport? Is it a ritual thing?”

“Probably,” Luthlul nodded. “What should we do?”

“We can’t *do* anything, Luthlul. But I’ll issue a *sending* to Dauntun in a while: he should probably know. Frankly, if they’re staying here, I’m inclined to return to Wyre. At least it’s safer there.”

“From less than half of them,” Luthlul grimaced. “I wonder if any more are coming.”

“I doubt it. I’m surprised that there are that many in the whole of Shûth. What have they been doing for the past eight hundred years?”

“Preserving the tradition, apparently.”

After Dauntun received the *sending* in Gibirazen, news quickly became current among

those mages he knew – and subsequently, through his friend Prince Tagur, passed into both temporal and spiritual circles.

When it reached the ears of the *Sela*, Tramst evinced neither surprise nor concern.

Within a day more rumours were circulating, and Daunton determined to visit Jashat himself – none of his divinations were proving effective in the matter.

Three miles outside of the city, the temple of Cheshne – abandoned and overgrown for a millennium –

had risen again from its crumbling ruins. By their arts the magi – and now none doubted their

authenticity – had restored the compound overnight.

Towers soared skywards to giddy heights, icons and statues of tormented spirits – the *ugras* or

‘fierce protectors’ of the faith – adorned walls and bastions: they bore an uncanny resemblance to figures which, in the faith of Oronthon, were understood to be fallen celestials. In the beliefs of Shûth, however, their rôle was subtler and more complex. And far older. Embodiments of fear, lust or violence which must be both placated and overcome in order for reconciliation with Nothingness to be achieved.

Mostin – who had been inwardly concerned about the missing tendril in his convergence – received a *sending* from Daunton while he sat at the table in the Great Hall at Kyrtil’s Burh. His face remained impassive.

Queen Soneillon, who rested across from him in contemplative pose, looked into his eyes.

**

Iua’s defiance of her mother’s wishes was rooted in her need to refamiliarize herself with Fumaril –

from which she had been absent for a year – almost as much as her obstinacy when it came to obeying Mulissu’s commands. Despite her mother’s insistence that Iua remain inconspicuous and protected by the wards of faith, the Duelist’s own curiosity and wanderlust – traits for which Mulissu herself had once been renowned – found her in any number of dubious locales. She took to the streets with a mind to finding anything which might distract her from brooding upon her brief, eccentric and ultimately empty relationship with Ortwin.

Mulissu herself was cloistered within one of several small temples to Jeshi – into whose cult, in her youth, she had been initiated.***** Whilst the Savant had maintained a relatively low profile amongst wizardly circles in Wyre and beyond, her reputation amongst the clergy of Jeshi – who shared many of the same aerial contacts as the Elementalist – was somewhat different. Her progress had been watched: lauded by some, criticized by others, and, by more than a few, recognized as a potential source of revivification for the cult’s flagging fortunes.

Mulissu, who abhorred politics almost as much as organized religion, avoided all attempts

to convince her to renew her vows to Jeshi. But the *hallowed* ground of the temple was – from her perspective – too useful a defense to ignore, so she grudgingly acquiesced to the demands of the High Priestess to attend revels held in Jeshi's name. In return, the Elementalist was granted several perquisites: the use of the roof-space above the Chamber of Chimes, a feigned ignorance of any magic that she might work, and assurances that she would be otherwise left alone.

Mulissu's unique spirituality – cerebral in the extreme – had developed to regard devotional practices as bizarre and inexplicable. There was no reconnection with a deeper source, no feeling of unity or

succour, no camaraderie, and no appreciation of a symbolism which might – to an initiate – possess profound revelatory significance: to Mulissu, it appeared as an alphabet inaccurately scrawled by a toddler.

But in Fumaril – which lay beyond the purview of the Claviger – Mulissu could *summon*. She haggled *ad nauseum* with powerful djinns in an effort to replenish her diminished supply of spells, and co-opted the services of a novice called Naimha to act in the capacity of a broker. Naimha scoured every

marketplace and every hidden shop which dealt in oddities in an attempt to procure magical

paraphernalia – mostly without success. Mulissu opened lines of communication with Tozinak, whom she liked; with Jael, whom she distrusted; and with Waide, whom she found intolerable. She also

began to cultivate the friendship of Ehieu, a sorcerer from Pandicule whose flightiness made Mulissu seem positively stable. Ehieu roamed the seas south of Fumaril and – when not alternately vexing or aiding sailors – made infrequent visits to the Temple.

She pointedly – and somewhat petulantly – snubbed Shomei, who by virtue of close association with

Mostin, was considered an undesirable acquaintance. Shomei was, to some degree at least, responsible for the Elementalist's decline in fortunes.

She sighed. She should have known better than to deal with Alienists and Infernalists, even if they were among the handful of people whose intellects she actually respected.

When Mulissu therefore received a *sending* from Dauntun – who had been apprised of her presence on the Prime – her heart sunk:

Cult of Cheshne resurfaced in Jashat. Powerful necromancers and blood-magi. Suspect at least six first-order wizards and four transvalent hierophants. Will advise further. Dauntun.

Mulissu groaned, and wondered if it was related to the nonsense that Mostin had involved himself in.

She would keep all of her possessions on hand, in case a speedy exit from Fumaril proved necessary.

Jashat, after all, was only forty miles away.

She brooded briefly, and wondered whether relaying the information to Iua would be wise. Her daughter was brilliant, but her judgment frequently poor.

Iua herself did not return until the early hours of the next morning. She was flushed from a number of encounters – some involving crossed blades, others not – and moderately inebriated.

Mulissu sighed. Parenting was not her strong suit. She chided Iua inexpertly and gestured, vaguely conscious that this might be the correct way to address a child.

Iua ignored her, and her eyes widened: she seemed to be looking at something *behind* Mulissu. The Elementalists' hackles rose, and she wheeled about, prepared to unleash a powerful necromancy.

I see nothing

The thought passed through Mulissu's mind a fraction of a second before she experienced an acute,

stabbing agony, rapidly followed by a succession of further intense pains. Her eyes glazed over, and she glanced down to notice that around a foot of cold, slender steel was protruding from her stomach, and that blood was flowing freely from her. She felt Iua's blade withdraw from her, and as she collapsed and died, she idly wondered why her own daughter had slain her.

Thus passed Mulissu: counted among the greatest of evokers in Wyre's history, although she was not herself a native of that place. And this time, Mostin the Metagnostic experienced no feeling of

foreboding prior to the danger in which the Savant found herself, no presentiment of her demise. Not even the faintest inkling of prescience remained to him now, and some time would pass before news of her death reached him. Mulissu, whom he had loved in his own, strange fashion.

Her spirit fled, and was dispersed upon the winds.

Iua screamed silently from within the prison which her body had become, and watched, helpless, as her hands began to rifle her mother's still-warm corpse for items beyond worth. She grabbed rings from Mulissu's fingers, ripped an amulet from her breast, and pulled the *sapphire of mutable coruscations* from its collar around her throat. She smiled wickedly as she delved into a *glove of storing* and felt the *web of motes*, and something else. She pulled forth a small lump of obsidian, shaped like a horse.

How fortuitous, the thought manifested with savage irony within Iua's mind, although it was not her own.

Iua, and her possessor – a demon named Surab – *plane shifted* to the Abyss upon a fantastic steed.

*Although Orthodoxy had boasted few magically potent priests in its heyday – and many had been slain during the war with Trempa – the heretical Irrenite fringe sheltered a number of competent thaumaturges.

****Hell's hierarchy is, of course, immensely complex, and various devils exercise varying degrees of power in different areas. Governance is executed through Asmodeus, Astaroth, Baalzebul and Belial –**

amongst whom precedence is hotly contested. The Thirteen Great Antagonists are fallen seraphs who

have no place in the day-to-day administration of Hell, and concern themselves entirely with the war against Heaven. Many scholars of diabolic politics insist that the arrangement is purposely tense and ambiguous – a dynamism in the hierarchy enforced by the Adversary to prevent stagnation.

*****Agalierept is the commander of Hell's second legion and Grand General of Hell. Among Hell's**

foremost soldiers, his cruelty and vindictiveness are legendary. The armoured cornugons who serve him are likewise renowned for their ruthless brutality.

******After the Claviger's Injunction in Wyre, many wizards of more independent mind moved outside**

of the magically proscribed area. Of them, most found their way south to the Thalassine.

*******Mulissu's initial vocation – that of a priestess – had been quickly rejected. Jeshi is a Thalassine goddess of the winds, with a widespread but uninfluential following. The names *Jeshi* and *Jashat* are etymologically connected.**

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AFQITHAN: PROLOGUE (Part 2)

At least five infinities clashed in Afqithan. When forces collide in the metaphysical realm, it is only natural that this is reflected in our own.

- Orolde.

Rhul's case had been delivered with such eloquence and such poignancy that all those who listened to him, excepting perhaps Jetheeg – the lamia *cum* hag who possessed neither a moral conscience nor artistic sensibilities – had been moved.

He had spoken of Sisperi: its clans, and history and traditions; its wide grasslands and virgin forests; its towns and villages; the customs and the temperament of its peoples. He had evoked scenes of soaring mountains riven with deep canyons, and sun shining on a rolling surf, and mists rising over cold, still lakes. His speech had possessed a natural rhythm which made all constructed meter seem crass and

childish; his tone was mellifluous and enchanting.

And then he had spoken of death, and ruin, and the end of the world. Of the blight which consumed all things and turned them to filth and desolation. Of the razing of civilization, and the final extinction of sapience. Rhul's words had become a soft-spoken lament; there was no compromise in his description of the horror which had occurred, even until the bitter end. He had spoken of Mulhuk, and of Saes, and Lai, and the death of Hodh and other godlings besides. He had spoken of Ninit, and her wild,

unquenchable fury.

Ortwin had sat silently, his head in his hands. Mostin had stared blankly. Bile and anger had arisen in Eadric's throat.

And then Rhul had begged for aid. Eadric had felt as though his soul had been cut in half.

*

After he had left – and Rhul's message and entreaty had taken more than two hours to deliver – Eadric resumed his seat uncomfortably. He poured himself a large goblet of wine, and sat back in his chair.

The fire in the hearth had dwindled to a dull glow, and moonlight illuminated the Great Hall through the windows high in its south wall. The servants – disturbed by the company which the *Ahma* chose to keep – had long since retired.

"You cannot waver now," Mostin groaned. "We are so close. How many other worlds could tell a

similar tale?"

"The Wizard is right," Jetheeg scoffed. "Do not let your weakness and susceptibility to a well-spun story dictate your course of action in this. You have taken vows, and made assurances, *Ahma*. Would you add oathbreaking to your tally of crimes against your deity? The list gets longer every day, I hear."

The innuendo was hardly subtle.

Eadric sighed. "How many has Nhura gathered?"

"A thousand Loquai knights – virtually all of those who were exiled. Some few sidhe. Compactees.

More than a few slaadi may involve themselves."

"Slaadi?" Shomei gaped. "Is Nhura insane?" She furrowed her brow, and glanced at Mostin – who shrugged and scowled. Neither had foreseen the possibility.

"They are not waiting with her in Faerie or Shadow," Jetheeg snapped. "But several Anarchs have become aware of the situation. They have a vested interest, after all."

Realization crossed Mostin's face. "Heedless," he said.

Jetheeg nodded curtly.

Eadric swallowed. "Mostin, you've said many times that this will be no conventional war. That I need to think far beyond anything with which I am familiar. Do you have *any* idea how long this will take to resolve? Are we talking in terms of days? Weeks?"

Mostin laughed. "Eadric, if the situation in Afqithan is not decided within fifteen minutes, I will be surprised."

The *Ahma* nodded grimly. "Then I would ask you to issue a *sending* to Rhul: if I'm not in Sisperi in two days, it means I'm dead, and I'm not coming."

"You mean to go otherwise, then?"

“Yes.”

Mostin turned to Soneillon, who had thus far only observed. “You have been conspicuously silent. I am surprised that you have had nothing to contribute. What of your own force? And what of Rhyxali,

Soneillon? What *is* she sending?”

“Demons, dear Mostin. She is sending demons.”

“How *many*?” He asked irritably.

“Rhyxali is not predisposed to act often,” Soneillon smiled, “but when she does, she acts decisively.

She is sending nearly all of them, Mostin.”

Mostin’s jaw dropped.

Koilimilou smiled.

“I smell a rat,” Ortwin remarked.

**

Mostin dreamed of devils.

Powerful devils. Terrible devils. One bore a chain with many barbed hooks which dripped a black

venom; another had claws like scythes which clicked together as it flexed its fingers; a third wore a great hood, but Mostin knew that it was faceless beneath its cowl. The fourth devil was still an angel –

a Virtue, of sorts. It was tall and beautiful, and wore a breastplate which had been forged before the beginning of time. Strength and power and wisdom were in its hand – but so were lust and greed and evil. It stood beneath a vast banner which depicted a meteor streaking through oblivion.

When he awoke, the details eluded him, and he was left with a vague feeling of dread. Dream had claimed his last precognition, and Mostin, who was no Dreamer, could not recall it.

**

Magic coursed again through Mostin’s veins as he flew. Afqithan was wild, dark and potent.

This place, he thought. *Out of a quintillion possible worlds, why had they chosen this one? What forces had conspired to make this time and place what it was?* Mostin was no fatalist, but nor was he quite so arrogant to think that he had entirely mastered the cosmos.

He pondered whether Graz’zt would project himself to Afqithan, or whether he would choose to

exercise restraint – the latter seemed more likely, according to Mostin’s understanding of Graz’zt’s paranoia. A combination of the terms *silver cord* and *Heedless* had sprung to the

Alienist's mind –

Graz'zt would not be safe from a *vorpai* sword, even if he was otherwise warded or fortified. *Snip*, and it would all be over. Even if Graz'zt knew a spell which specifically protected his cord from dangerous slaadi blades – entirely possible given his age and dedication to sorcery – then it was one less *death impulse* or *desperate summons* that he would be casting. And Graz'zt had no doubt considered the unlikely possibility that one of his enemies acquire the sword. Or if Ainhorr lost control...

Gods, Mostin thought. *What happens if Ainhorr loses control of the sword? Who will he chop? What was the Sword's agenda?*

Kostchtchie was already in Afqithan: a 'visiting dignitary' who, in terms of power, was more-or-less matched with Ainhorr – certainly as long as *Heedless* remained in the Balor's possession. Kostchtchie's entourage was hardly diplomatic, however – armoured fiendish giant huscarls and sorcerers, white

wyrms, a winter-wight and countless bar-lgura. Except for the wight, they were, at present, situated some six hundred miles from their current position, near the fortress of Irknaan. But many could also move instantly across any distance, so it barely mattered. The undead monster was harrowing large

tracts of forest with no apparent rhyme or reason – the Alienist wondered whether it was even vaguely reliable as an ally of the Demon Lord.

According to Jetheeg, who had received news from Nhura, Graz'zt had opened a number of portals –

most likely of a limited duration than of permanent nature – between the planes. Afqithan was now

linked directly with Azzagrat in at least two other locations besides Irknaan's fortress, and also with the Ice Waste – presumably in the vicinity of Kostchtchie's force. The exact whereabouts of the new *gates* were uncertain: this was problematic.

The Alienist knew that most of Soneillon's faction would arrive the same way: through a portal opened by the demoness from one of Throile's "wrinkles," and assumed that Rhyxali's force would be similarly deployed. The little that Mostin *did* know about Rhyxali included the importance of the marilith Viractuth within the Shadow Princess's camp. Viractuth was a powerful sorceress who served in the

capacity of general and confidante. She would be capable of a magical feat which could transport an army.

Mostin fervently hoped that his *quiescence of the spheres* would not be anticipated. He cursed, because Nwm would have been an invaluable ally. He made a brief, unfelt prayer to any benign deities who

might be listening that Shomei should not die today – she was one of the few people with the wit to understand him. And he adjusted his hat – a huge affair, resembling a mortar-board, made from crimson silk, and boasting two-hundred cloth-of-gold tassels.

They had made the decision to split into two groups. The first contained Shomei, her

conjured minions, Eadric and the succubus Chaya – one of Soneillon’s ‘handmaidens.’ Chaya had a penchant for powerful necromantic spells. The second trio – Ortwin, Koilimilou, and the Alienist himself – was less of a concern for Mostin. As long as Rhyxali was on *their* side, then Koilimilou was not a tangible threat. If Rhyxali were to become their enemy, however – not entirely impossible, given the whims of powerful demonesses – then Koilimilou would be a dangerous adversary, with considerable tactical information useful to the Princess. Prompt elimination of the sidhe-cambion would be necessary.

Chaya, however, was a completely unknown factor. She was wild, bloodthirsty and crazy – *even for a demon*, Mostin ruefully considered. She had been instructed by Soneillon to guard the Queen of Throile’s current favourite – namely, Eadric – and to make her reservoir available to Shomei on

demand. Chaya was less than pleased. But she feared Soneillon.

A third group would consist of Soneillon herself (she *had* elected to become personally involved), the balor Irzho (who, by Soneillon’s magic, would be augmented to terrifying power), and Rimilin (*won’t it be delightful to see him again*, Mostin thought caustically). Rimilin’s craft had reportedly increased to the extent that Mostin wondered if he might be on the verge of transvalency, or even if he had already achieved it. Rimilin had mastered Irzho. *How?* Mostin thought. Irzho had a *mind blanking* ring. How does one master a *mind blanked* balor? The price for their involvement? For Irzho, *Heedless* – what balor wouldn’t like a huge, intelligent *anarchic vorpal* sword? For Rimilin, sinister pacts struck with Soneillon, and possibly Rhyxali. Mostin shuddered. The direct sponsorship of a wizard of Rimilin’s prestige by a demoness of Rhyxali’s power would place him on a par with Shomei in terms of fiendish clout. And Rimilin lacked Shomei’s – admittedly idiosyncratic – principles.

The Alienist smiled. Despite his loathing of the Acolyte of the Skin, it was not without a certain degree of pride that he recognized that Rimilin was part of one of the most formidable generation of

spellcasters that Wyre had yet produced. *Although, for a golden age of magic, it seems strangely dark and bleak.*

Mostin, Shomei, Ortwin and Eadric were all *telepathically bonded*, magically bolstered, and smothered with various wards. The Alienist lamented Nwm’s absence again: more would have been better. Mostin was charged up with *reality maelstroms* as well as various sonics, conjurations and auxiliary spells.

Shomei was loaded with necromancies, enchantments and conjurations.

Their greatest assets, however, were two spells: a protective dweomer devised by Shomei, and an

abjuration invoked by Soneillon herself prior to their arrival in Afqithan – Mostin had later learned that Rimilin, Irzho, Nhura and several others had been similarly warded by the Queen of Throile. They were virtually invulnerable to magic, and unless struck by multiple *disjunctions*, or unless Graz’zt himself were to come and target them with his *superb dispelling*, all were safe from an unfortunate evaporation of magical protections at

the hands of other spellcasters. Mostin knew that the succubus Adyell was capable of bringing down their wards, and hoped that Soneillon was correct in her assertion that her former handmaiden would not be present.

The Alienist circled nervously, and glanced downwards towards Shomei. He sighed. *She is glorious*, he had to admit to himself.

The Infernalist was flanked by four pit fiends, conjured via *planar bindings* and then subjected to the power of her Will, focused through her rod. And they were *Belial's* pit fiends – bound in deliberate defiance of the Lord of Hell's Fourth Circle. She was clad in her *robe of stars*, and while – as always –

she bore her rod, a globe now hung from her belt: a sphere of transparent adamant from which Nufrut's head leered. The marilith had passed into Shomei's possession, as previously agreed with Mostin.

Eadric sat nearby upon Contundor, and both steed and rider appeared impassive. The celestial charger had acquired a pair of huge *feathery* wings, which caused Mostin to feel nauseous every time he saw them: Mostin was profoundly thankful that he and the *Ahma* were not in the same team. Next to Eadric, in dark antiparallel, the succubus Chaya waited with her mount – a foul-tempered cauchemar which

champed restlessly. Mostin studied her briefly: the demoness was naked and scarred, almost bestial in appearance. She bore no weapon, and carried but a single item – a smoking black diamond the size of a fist which oozed necromantic power.

Somewhat removed, displaying his characteristic nonchalance, Ortwin laughed and twirled his scimitar confidently. Koilimilou, perched upon an ecalypse and surrounded by jariliths, ignored him. She

seemed even more introspective than normal, and Mostin watched her nervously: was she privy to

Rhyxali's plans (which were certain to be other than had been revealed)? Did she possess a measure of genuine affection for Ortwin? It seemed unlikely – neither demons nor sidhe were renowned for

warmth in their relations. Could Ortwin be trusted, anyway?

Except for Eadric, we are a gruesome, conceited and selfish bunch. Perhaps he is the moral glue which binds the feys, sociopaths and fiends together.

The Alienist shrugged, and descended. His thoughts reached out to Shomei.

[Mostin]: My fingers itch! How much longer?

[Shomei]: Three minutes, by my reckoning.

[Mostin]: Aren't your bodyguards restless?

[Shomei]: Devils are notoriously patient.

[Mostin]: I am having reservations.

[Shomei]: Good. Apparently your psychosis has limits.

[Mostin]: I am dubious about the *quiescence of the spheres*. I like retaining the option of instantaneous retreat.

[Shomei]: Mostin...

[Mostin]: Don't worry. I still intend to cast it.

[Shomei]: You'd damn well better, Mostin. Quite a lot hinges upon it. Still, you may have been better contriving the spell with yourself as a mobile locus, rather than designating a static one.

[Mostin]: And lose the opportunity to invoke *reality maelstroms*? Not bloody likely.

[Shomei]: I suspect that you won't get the chance in any case – you need to physically remove yourself two miles from your casting point.

[Mostin] (Grins): I've already thought of that. I will *summon* a pseudodjinn. We will *wind walk* together.

Shomei laughed. "You are ingenious." Then her manner suddenly became serious. "If I should die, Mostin..."

[Mostin]: Do *not* start this again.

[Shomei]: There are two *simulacra* at my mansion...

[Mostin]: !

[Shomei]: Together, they comprise most of what I am.

[Mostin]: They are lumps of ice, Shomei.

[Shomei]: You will need to find a way to reify them.

[Mostin]: That is not possible.

[Shomei]: Nonsense. It has merely never been accomplished before. It will be a task commensurate with your ability.

[Mostin]: They lack a Self, Shomei.

[Shomei]: I didn't say it would be easy. One is of me as I was – before Nwm *reincarnated* me. The other is of me as I am now. (Ironically) They are called *Sho* and *Mei*. You will tell them apart by their hair colour.

[Mostin]: This is distasteful!

[Shomei]: It will be your *magnum opus*, Mostin. The last challenge I set you. I would not leave the world bereft of my acquired knowledge.

[Mostin]: You are more than the sum of your learning. I wish you'd said something about this before.

[Shomei]: Do all creatures have multiple pseudonatural analogues, Mostin? If so, I would start with that premise.

[Mostin]: (Astonishment).

[Shomei]: I have left each with two contradictory impulses: *preserve thyself* and *transcend thyself*.

Hopefully, the seeds of dialectical consciousness have already been sown. They will aid you in your research – both are familiar with my library. Everything I have is yours, Mostin.

[Mostin]: (Utter amazement). Shomei...

[Shomei]: Sho possesses the key to my astral retreat. I have not used it in some time, for fear of assault.

If the current crisis is resolved favorably, it should be safe again. And try to establish a second Triune: three is a good number for productive magical inquiry. Consider Rimilin...

[Mostin]: You cannot be serious!

[Shomei]: You are the most powerful living wizard in Wyre, Mostin. You have a responsibility to act as a check on him.

[Mostin]: That is the Claviger's purpose.

[Shomei]: The Claviger acts within its own circumscribed limits.

[Mostin]: Mulissu...

[Shomei] (Sadly): Look no more to Mulissu for aid.

[SONEILLON]: NOW

Shomei smiled, unrolled a scroll, and opened a *teleportation circle* to a location previously *scried*.

Beneath a *screen*, in a small glade within sight of both the steep tor upon which Irknaan's palace stood, and of Murmuur's diabolic tower, Mostin – together with Shomei and Koilimilou – began to invoke the *quiescence of the spheres*.

A thought flickered through Mostin's mind: *Murmuur's tower is outside of the quiescence*. Had it moved? He couldn't recall its exact previous location.

Mere seconds before the spell was completed, tens of thousands of shadow demons began to manifest

as Viractuth – Rhyxali's lieutenant – folded a huge area of a distant Abyssal layer, and brought it into vibrational congruence with Afqithan; a massive *gate* opened to a demiplane abutting Throile, spewing forth Soneillon's horde; and Nhura and her knights and sorcerers – along with compactees and sidhe mercenaries – simultaneously translated *en masse* from the Plane of Shadow.

The keen-eyed spined devils who circled Murmuur's tower relayed the information to Azazel – their commander-in-chief. Hell's standard-bearer issued an immediate telepathic command to Murmuur:

Open the gates.

Titivilus – whose presence never failed to irk Azazel – now stood nearby. Dispater's Nuncio betrayed no sign of emotion

Azazel scowled, and his knights and captains quailed before him. He entered a brief, silent reverie, and *communed* with his master. He did not doubt that all contingencies had been anticipated.

[Azazel]: What is your command?

[.....]: We will not intervene yet: a measure of uncertainty still exists. Wait. Hold your position until instructed otherwise.

[Azazel]: Yes, Majesty.

*Mostin had originally assumed that Rimilin was Irzho's slave, rather than vice-versa.

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**

AFQITHAN - Part One

"Mulissu is dead," Daunton the Diviner announced to the assembled wizards.*

His words were greeted by a variety of reactions: by Troap, a look of stunned disbelief; by Tozinak – in the form of a sylph – with tears and a dramatic posture; by Waide, a smug grimace which conveyed the

words 'I told you so – it was inevitable.' Jael and Idro exhibited calm insouciance. A dozen other mages – and several of these were formidable in their own right – showed expressions which ranged

from anguish, through curiosity, to total ignorance of the reclusive Savant's identity.

"Thank-you, Daunton," Waide said with nasal condescension. "Although..."

"There is more," Daunton interrupted, shooting the transmuter a look of barely concealed contempt.

Waide surpassed him in terms of power, but Daunton enjoyed the respect of the entire magical

community and the friendship of several influential personages – including Prince Tagur – outside of it.

"An artifact bestowed upon her by Jovol has been stolen, along with other powerful items."

"She and Mostin were feuding, I hear," Waide ventured.

"Waide!" Daunton snapped. "There will be no rumourmongering and innuendo."

"It is hardly an idle thought," Waide persisted. "Mostin's assault upon Griel outside of the Claviger's domain is well known. Which *artifact* do you speak of?" Waide licked his lips.

"It is called the *web of motes*. It is potent."

"I have never heard of it," Waide sniffed.

“Nor I,” Jalael agreed. “What is its purpose?”

Daunton sighed. “Divination,” he said.

Waide laughed openly. “I think we can discern the purpose of your insistence upon this meeting, Daunton: you desire this item. And try telling me now that Mostin has no part in this.”

“I make no such claim,” the Diviner said dismissively. “But neither do I make the assertion that Mostin murdered Mulissu: he did not. Her own daughter, Iua, slew her. The priestesses of Jeshi confirm as much.”

“Matricide?” Jalael said drily. “This gets more interesting. Where is Iua now?”

“I do not know. I suspect she is *mind blanked*. I have tried to discern her whereabouts twice.”

“An accomplice?” Troap asked.

“Or a device,” Daunton nodded. “Naturally, you suspect the former, Waide, and you suspect that it is Mostin.”

“It is not his style,” Tozinak sobbed. “He would have killed her with much more *panache*. Was Iua under a compulsion?”

“Perhaps. Graz’zt certainly bore Mulissu a grudge. He may have *dominated* Iua, although it would have been a potent compound spell to circumvent the temple wards – especially from Azzagrat. But the

Prince had already personally assailed the Savant in her demiplane: hence her retreat to the Prime.”

Waide’s jaw dropped. “And she *survived*?”

Daunton nodded. “She was well prepared. Furthermore, Mostin anticipated the attack and provided a safe exit for her.”

Waide swallowed nervously. Once he and the Alienist had been peers. But now he realized – and the

knowledge caused him to grit his teeth in envy and frustration – that Mostin had utterly surpassed him.

“Had she other enemies?” Troap asked.

“Not to my knowledge – she carefully avoided making them, as a rule.”

“How kind of Mostin to lend her one of his,” Waide said snidely.

“It was Mulissu who invoked the cascade at Khu,” Troap said drily, “not Mostin. I think that is enough to warrant the enmity of any number of powerful fiends.”

“It was no doubt in response to Mostin’s nagging,” Waide replied.

“Because Mulissu was so weak-willed and impressionable, and Mostin so likes the company of celestials,” Troap retorted acidly. The Goblin turned to Daunton. “Do you think the emerging Cheshne faction may have had a hand? They are in geographical

proximity.”

“The possibility had occurred to me,” Daunton nodded. “Although a motive is harder to fathom.”

“Mulissu could have crystallized magical resistance in Wyrish and Thalassine spellcasters, if it became required,” Jalael suggested. “It may have been a preemptive strike.”

“The Cult of Cheshne has never exhibited an historical desire to dominate in that manner,” Daunton sighed. “Besides, why wait to remove her until *after* their arrival? And I am reluctant to pin every unfortunate event which transpires upon them – we do not *know* their agenda.”

” *Not good,*” Waide grumbled. “We know that much, at least. The Claviger may prove to be an aegis which we did not anticipate. Although maybe Jovol did.”

“Jovol was not omniscient,” Jalael grunted. “And his legacy has already stymied magical activity. It may yet deny us the ability to muster an effective defense.”

“You seem fixated on some impending conflict, Jalael,” Daunton scowled. “If it occurs – and I doubt that – it will likely be religious in nature, and will not concern us.”

“If the *ugras* are invoked, I doubt they will make the distinction,” Jalael smiled. “But the question remains: why now?”

“Nothing becomes,” Daunton said grimly. “We cannot know *why* or *where*. Which brings me to events in the demiplane of Afqithan. I trust that we are all aware of what passes there?”

Jalael groaned. Tozinak fidgeted nervously. The other wizards evinced either blank stares or, in the case of Waide – ever reluctant to reveal his ignorance in such matters – an expression which could be

interpreted as either inquisitiveness, or quiet understanding.

Daunton sighed. “I will tell you what I know – which is all that Mulissu related to me. Her information was, I don’t doubt, incomplete. And I think that even those who are embroiled in its troubles have only a partial perspective.”

“Mostin,” Tozinak sighed.

“And Shomei,” Daunton nodded. “But one could probably have inferred as much by their conspicuous absence from this meeting.”

“The great luminaries of our magical brotherhood,” Waide said snidely. “Do they even know of what has happened?”

“I issued a *sending* to Shomei,” Daunton replied, “and instructed her to inform Mostin.” The Diviner then proceeded to relate the tale of the *Ahma*, Graz’zt, Soneillon, and Afqithan.

After Daunton had completed his account, Tozinak – overly moved by the story – punctuated the

silence with a long sigh.

“And the *web of motes*?” The Illusionist asked. “What exactly does it *do*?”

“It illuminates connections,” Daunton explained. “Between people, places, thoughts, dreams, futures, and truths. It is the most potent object I have ever heard of.”

“If Mulissu wasn’t wildly exaggerating its power,” Waide quipped.

“Why Mulissu?” The Necromancer Creq inquired. “She wasn’t even Wyrish. Why did Jovol choose her?”

“Perhaps he liked her,” Daunton snapped. He relaxed before continuing. “She was not alone. Shomei received something, as did Mostin, and Hlioth, and you, Waide. And you, Tozinak. All of those who

took part in *binding* the Enforcer.”

“And you?” Waide asked archly.

“A minor curio,” Daunton answered. “I was the junior member, if you recall. Which, incidentally, leads me to another point: Jovol dwelt in the Thrumohars for fifty years, but where was his sanctum? There must still be a cache somewhere; a repository of knowledge and power.”

“I have pondered this question,” Jaelael admitted. “And what else, Daunton. Have you heard what I have? I am apt to converse with demons, but I wonder what your sources tell you?”

“Rimilin,” he nodded.

**

Nwm’s eyes flashed open. He had been sitting beneath a fir-tree, listening to the soft *pad, pad* of an arctic fox, when he heard its pattern change in response to a new stimulus. Something else was close by. He waited.

The Druid inhaled sharply as she approached. She was beautiful. And curiously familiar. She sat down in the snow before him, unabashed by her own nakedness, and smiled. Her skin

possessed a soft, silver sheen, and her eyes – no longer demonic – were green within green.

“This is an unexpected pleasure,” Nwm said wryly. “I should warn you: if my conversation seems stilted or awkward, it’s because I haven’t spoken for several months.”

“Your social ineptitude was never much of a concern,” she laughed.

“Can I assume that Eadric was successful in his efforts?” Nwm asked.

“Not yet.” She raised an eyebrow.

“I am unsure as to whether I should worship you or not.”

“That is your choice. It makes no difference to me. What were you doing?”

“You know, Nehael, I don’t really know. Waiting for you, I suppose. I don’t imagine that there’s a rational explanation for your presence here?”

“Certainly not.”

“And what happens now?” Nwm asked.

Nehael laughed. “I asked that very question myself.”

“And what answer did you receive?”

““A Viridity,”” she replied.

“That is suitably vague,” Nwm sighed.

“Strange,” Nehael said drily. “I had the same reaction. There is something that I would like to share with you, Nwm. A place.”

“What sort of place?” Nwm asked suspiciously.

“A sanctuary. An island of Green. An unassailable bastion. A womb.”

Nwm felt a frisson of excitement as she spoke, but his voice was sceptical. “In my experience, nowhere is unassailable.”

“Prepare to change your mind,” Nehael smiled. She held out her hand, and he took it. Stretching forwards, she lightly touched the bark of the tree.

“Step into the tree,” she said.

They dissolved into an ocean of jade, emerald and celadon. Another Tree, which was the same tree – it was, in fact, all trees – appeared.

*

Nwm quaked. His mind screamed in fear, and soared in awe. His breath became rapid and shallow. He

was dumbstruck, unwilling to believe, but knowing that it was there.

“Eadric’s forebears would have referred to it as the Tree- *ludja*,” Nehael said softly, touching the Tree.

“Yours would have called it *Derv*.**”

“What have you become?” Nwm asked her.

“You know what I am,” Nehael smiled. “I am merely Nehael. But now the way is open. You first showed it to me. She remembers. That is why it is Tree, and not Lake or Storm.”

Nwm swallowed. She alluded to things which made him feel distinctly uncomfortable. Gingerly, he

reached out.

Tree, he knew.

He looked out from the blackthorn in the courtyard of Kyrtil’s Burh; from a huge banyan in Afqithan, around which demons clashed furiously; from a hornbeam with white bark and silver leaves, beneath

which a goddess meditated; from a viper-tree amid a grove in Azzagrat, where acid rained and fire

burned; from a lonely olive-tree on a deserted island in Pandicule; from a celestial oak which rose, impossibly perfect, upon the Blessed Plain.

Nwm withdrew his perception, and looked at Nehael.

“How?” He asked.

This Way, she showed him.***

“Is there more?”

“Oh, yes. There is much more.”

“But to look into Hell? Oronthon’s Heaven? These places are not...”

“Of the Green?” She offered. “I think you need to revise your understanding, Nwm. The Viridity is a transcendental principle: it does not care for conventional labels. *Green* just became a lot bigger.”

“Who was the goddess beneath the tree?” He asked.

“Her name is Lai,” Nehael smiled. “You will meet her in due course.”

“What is her rôle?” He asked dubiously.

“She is a student. Of magic. Of nature. Her world is all but dead. You will like her – which is all to the good.”

Nwm gave a quizzical look.

“A student needs a teacher,” Nehael explained, “and a goddess needs a priest.”

**

The *quiescence of the spheres* began exactly five seconds after the Eye of Cheshne – a large, reddish star linked with ill-fortune, miscarriage and death – anticulminated at the necropolis of Khu in the World of Men.

Thus, when Soneillon and her host arrived in Afqithan – together with the Balor Irzho and the demonist Rimilin of the Skin – a mortal would have breathed but once, before she waxed to her full power again.

Her first act – before even Ainhorr had issued the telepathic command for his minions to descend upon the hordes of interlopers – was to utter an incantation which caused a shimmering wave to issue from her. Soneillon poured forth the void, transforming it, and buoying those hundreds who were closest to her with an ecstasy of negation.

The palrethees, succubi and other monsters – the half-fiendish lamias, medusae, harpies and hags

which swarmed in the sky around the Demoness – greedily drank of the essence which their mistress

lavished on them. Irzho and Rimilin – already bloated with Soneillon’s unlight – swelled yet further.

Koilimilou inhaled sharply as power coursed through her and her Will was sharpened and intensified, before she abruptly disappeared to sight. And Eadric watched in trepidation as

Chaya – the succubus appointed to him – threw back her head and exulted.

As the impulse washed through the *Ahma*, visions of unbeing passed through his tortured consciousness. A sweet, lingering taste, heavy with the promise of annihilation. He glanced at Shomei's devils, borne upon the invocation's wind and magnified. They terrified him. He terrified himself. And in his heart, he knew he was as potent as he had ever before been – save perhaps when he had fought at the Nund, where Grace had descended upon him. Now the darkest wards protected him. Blasphemy sustained him.

He drew his sword. At the limit of his vision, issuing in streams from Irknaan's citadel – unable to manifest closer, within the *quiescence of the spheres* – Ainhorr's demons were beginning to appear in ghastly flights and packs.

Fifteen minutes, Mostin had said. It would all be resolved within fifteen minutes. The mental clamour of the demons was already threatening to overwhelm him.

Mostin vanished. A *bound* pseudodjinn – a grotesque parody which made Eadric grateful that Iua was *not* there – bore the Alienist on a course which, for the sake of convenience, they had arbitrarily determined as 'west': in Afqithan, there were no cardinal directions. He sped towards a second

materializing force – Kostchtchie, mounted upon his wyrm, together with his bar-lgura. Mostin

purposed to eliminate the demon as quickly as possible. Ortwin and Koilimilou were with him. The

three were *invisible* and *mind blanked*.

The Alienist scowled. The air was rapidly becoming thick with varrangoin above Kostchtchie, pouring through a *teleportation circle*: they were a group whose presence he had not foreseen. Nhura and Jetheeg, together with hundreds of Loquai aristocrats and sidhe mercenaries mounted upon umbral

griffons, moved towards the Demon Lord. A vast, black cloud of shadow demons followed them. The

Alienist, Satyr and Cambion swiftly overtook them all.

[Ortwin]: How long, before we intercept?

[Mostin]: Ninety seconds, give or take. We need to be patient. We must stay *wind walking* until we reach the boundary of the *quiescence*. I will be far more effective at the interface.

Momentarily, he doubted. He feared that by the time they reached the invocation's limit, most of

Kostchtchie's force would already be *inside* the *dimensionally locked* area – many of the leaping demons were pressing forwards restlessly. More *teleportation circles* were opening outside of the *quiescence*. Abyssal giants – some riding white dragons – were arriving from wherever Kostchtchie's main force had been concentrated.

Mostin cursed. One of the sorcerers in the Demon Lord's train must possess an extremely

potent device

– there was no way that the spell could have been repeatedly cast in such short time. Doubtless, one of the *varrangoin*: they were not natural *teleporters*, and moving large numbers of them effectively would otherwise prove problematic.

As they sped onwards, the Alienist grinned: Kostchtchie himself was not moving inside the *quiescence*.

Evidently, the Ice Lord was reluctant to surrender his ability to instantly retreat.

[Mostin]: We must achieve the perfect position before the *wind walk* is dismissed. We should strike the Demon with everything we've got.

[Koilimilou]: Watch for the dragons. Their noses will catch us, even if their eyes can't.

*The assembly of wizards, called by Dauntun in his manse in Gibilrazen consisted of Dauntun himself (diviner 10/loremaster 5), an accomplished facilitator whose impartiality was renowned; *Waide*

(transmuter 17), generally conceded to be a supercilious pedant; *Tozinak* (illusionist 18), often hysterical, and in a semi-volitional state of morphic flux; the green hag *Jalael* (evoker 13/archmage 2), known to have devoured her lovers on several occasions; *Sarpin* (illusionist 5/shadow adept 7), a Shade, and Jalael's current concubine; the goblin *Troap* (enchanter 14); *Gholu* (generalist 8/loremaster 4), a pompous eunuch and hoarder of useless magical curios; *Muthollo* (abjurer 12), a Bedeshi newcomer regarded with suspicion by the other wizards; *Tullifer* (transmuter 7/master alchemist 5), who evidenced a vulgar interest in commerce; the sprite *Shuk* (illusionist 10); *Droom of Morne* (evoker 12), who stood in minor contempt of the Injunction, and had had his lips magically sealed for one year; *Creq* (necromancer 11), who helped to perpetrate the worst stereotypes regarding his magical lineage; *Idro* (generalist 12), intellectually stunted and now verging on senile; *Wigdryt* (transmuter 9/plane shifter4) – a smoke mephit who had recently reappeared from a thirty-year retreat; and *Poylu*

(enchantress 11), who dwelt in a well near the town of Banda in Ialde.

Ehieu (sorcerer 10/air savant 8), introduced to Dauntun by Mulissu, was also present – although he found the proceedings tedious at best.

**The Tree probably deserves some explanation. Before the rise of Oronthonianism, the migrant

Borchian tribes (from whom Eadric and his kin are descended) venerated nature spirits of various

kinds, manifestations of different aspects of the *Hahio* ("Interwoven [Green]"). These facets (" *ludjas* ") were numerous and diverse, and never fully systematized: for example there was a *ludja* for Stream, for Valley, for Gorse-bush, for Snow etc. etc. etc. Larger *ludjas* also subsumed smaller ones – e.g. the Stone- *ludja* superseded the Pebble- *ludja*, the Boulder- *ludja* etc. The three principal *ludjas* were considered to be Stone, Water and Tree.

Derv is a Crixu word meaning "[prototypical or archetypal] Tree." There was considerable

overlap and syncretism between early beliefs in the peoples who predated the foundation of Wyre, and certain

concepts were held to be parallels of one another – *Derv* and the Tree- *ludja* possessed an obvious identity. For *Derv* to be an actual *tree* however was almost nonsensical from Nwm's perspective: it is like being shown the Platonic ideal of "Tree", manifested and fully real.

***Several new spells would be revealed to Nwm by Nehael.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 11-28-2004

AFQITHAN - Part Two

"Show me more," Hlioth, the Green Witch demanded.

Teppu laughed, and stroked the ash-tree which they stood next to. It seemed to croon lovingly to him.

"It will involve a certain loss of individuality," he smiled. "Are you jealous of your discrete existence?

Your autonomy of perception and Will?"

"Certainly not," Hlioth answered. "If I hadn't determined all arguments regarding Will to be specious, then I would never have abandoned wizardry."

"You should blend all elements into a harmonious whole," Teppu said. "And your song will be different to mine. Give me your hand."

The Green Witch complied, and Teppu pressed it to the trunk of the tree. Within moments, a cascade of new impressions flooded into her mind. Multiple realities became apparent. Her breathing became

rapid and shallow.

"How many layers are there visible?" She gasped.

"They cannot be measured in numbers," Teppu laughed.

"I can see Faerie."

"I am surprised that you can distinguish it so readily. Although it is less sleepy than many of the others."

"Perhaps I am predisposed to easily apprehend it. One other seems close – within reach. What is it?"

"It is the half-hidden world of the Tunthi. Were you to go to Tun Hartha, you would see it more clearly.

It is closer there than here."

"It has recently stirred?" Hlioth asked.

"Twice. Great spirits were awakened. Echoes remain within the visible Green. It was roused from its torpor near Hrim Eorth, then again at Groba."

"I recall hearing of Hrim Eorth – the river became a dragon. But Groba?"

“Groba is more ancient than most know. Mesikämmi woke its *genius loci*.”

“To what purpose?”

Teppu smiled. “To swallow a sword, and keep it safe.”

Hlioth’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. “You have been following her activities?”

“Amongst others,” his eyes twinkled.

” *Which* others?”

“Nehael. Nwm.”

“What does the demoness have to do with this?”

Teppu threw back his head, and laughed. “Nehael is no demoness, nor was she ever one. The past is not immutable.”

Hlioth scowled. “What are you plotting, Teppu?”

“I do not plot,” Teppu replied sincerely. “I merely act according to need. There is a splinter of reality

which must be realigned: purged of its umbral infestation. In order to accomplish this, I will need the concerted effort of several selfless individuals.”

“I think perhaps you might explain a little more.”

“I mean to eradicate the seeds of taint from the demiplane of Afqithan: it will be the first manifestation of the burgeoning Viridity. Faerie must reclaim its own.”

Hlioth shrugged. “What is Afqithan, and why is it significant?”

Teppu sighed. “Your knowledge of current events is lamentably scant, Hlioth. This does not surprise me, but you cannot continue to view *Green* within the limited terms that you have previously described to yourself. Afqithan is a finite reality where demons, devils, tainted sidhe and various other monsters struggle to assert themselves: Oronthon’s *Ahma* is embroiled in its troubles, as is the creature Soneillon

– a demoness who has transcended her ontic state.

“I am dubious of your ability to manage such an act.”

“It will be simple: trust me.”

“And how do you propose to accomplish this?”

“Why,” Teppu laughed, “with magic, of course.”

“You *are* Jovol,” Hlioth sighed. ” *And Fillein*.”

“Yes – and no,” Teppu replied.

“I understand neither you nor your motives,” Hlioth groaned.

“Nor do I,” Teppu admitted.

**

Eadric and Shomei rode in the blazing trail carved by Irzho through the purple skies of Afqithan.

Before them, Rimilin – whose grotesque, sexless form rippled black and oily – and Soneillon – into whom all light vanished – flew within the great fume of smoke and fire which emanated from the balor.

Contundor was buffeted by the gale which issued from the pit fiends – *invisible* but the source of a palpable malice – who flanked them both. Demons, half-fiends and evil monsters of every conceivable hue surrounded them, jostling for space.

Ahead of the *Ahma*, Ainhorr's forces filled immensity, blackening the skies, their numbers still swelling as demons from across Afqithan heard the summons, and *teleported* to the unlocked areas beyond the *quiescence of the spheres*. From the towers of Irknaan's palace they gushed forth in a never-ending torrent, and below the flights of chasme, succubi and palrethees, the ground and treetops seethed with bar-Igura. Eadric scowled as the standards of the Mariliths in thrall to Ainhorr were being raised beyond the spell's limit. More demons flocked around them, and those Loquai who had thrown in their lot with Graz'zt.

[Eadric]: How so quickly?

[Shomei] (ruefully): I suspect that Ainhorr has my *stone of sendings*. He issues a command to a subordinate, they instantly relay the message to their subordinates, and within a few minutes nearly every demon in Afqithan will be here. Redeployment is seldom a problem for fiends.

[Eadric]: And Graz'zt?

[Shomei]: I don't doubt that he was the *first* to know.

[Eadric]: We should climb. How long will the *invisibility* last?

[Shomei]: We have time yet, but avoid any conflict for the moment. We need to retain the element of surprise for as long as possible. We must find Ainhorr.

[Eadric]: Within the palace.

[Shomei]: Doubtless. He will not commit himself personally yet. You will also notice that no

Nalfeshnees have appeared – they remain close by their master. There were thirty, at last count.

[Eadric]: Thirty is too many, Shomei.

[Shomei]: It is not. Just watch out for the sword.

[Eadric] (pointing with his mind): What is that? You didn't mention a dragon. I thought Mostin got the dragons.

A grotesque shape, the wings of which beat slowly and rhythmically, was moving through the demons

of Ainhorr's force towards them.

[Shomei]: That is Ilistet's Steed. Graz'zt's herald.

[Eadric]: His *herald*? Is he here himself?

[Shomei]: Not according to Mostin.

As if to punctuate the realization, a long, sonorous blast issued from Ilistet's horn, causing the ancient, twisted trees to shake, and the *Ahma*'s chest cavity to resonate.

Eadric, Chaya, Shomei and her quartet of devils peeled away from the main spearhead of demons, and began to climb rapidly. They were not alone: other fiends from both factions were attempting to assume positions which offered a higher vantage point.

Climb, he urged his mount.

Within one minute, they had reached nearly two thousand feet. Still, they needed to climb – flights of succubi and chasme, issuing from the tallest of the towers, had already reached that altitude. Eadric glanced downward and ahead of himself, and watched in fascination as Irzho ploughed into a mob of

invisible nycadaemons which slowly revealed themselves to his sight.

**

[Mostin]: We must finish him as quickly as possible. His focus lies upon Nhura, at present, although no doubt the probability of *invisible*, *mind-blanked* assailants has occurred to him. I'm hoping that the *wind-walking* hasn't. We have a chance, here: it is the nature of demonic enthusiasm for a cause to crumple if the Lord or Prince who binds them – in this case Kostchtchie – is eliminated. It's all

personality.

[Ortwin] (Drily): No doubt this is about *us* preventing *him* reaching *you*.

[Mostin]: In a nutshell, yes. The Djinn will remain nearby, *wind-walking*, in case you need to make a quick exit.

[Ortwin]: " *You*" need to make a quick exit? What's with the "You"? How will *you* escape?

[Mostin]: I will *teleport*. We will be outside of the *quiescence*.

[Ortwin]: So we're relying on some bitter, reluctant pseudoelemental?

[Mostin]: I have offered it suitable inducements. Do not be concerned.

[Ortwin]: Gods, Mostin. It's not just Kostchtchie. It's the dragon. And the other demons. And the other dragons. And that *thing*.

Mostin peered ahead. Close by the Demon Lord, shunned by demons but around whom fiendish giants

grouped clumsily, a gaunt figure stood. It was clearly visible between the warriors' legs: the trio were closing rapidly, now.

[Mostin]: Sh*t. The winterwight. It's not supposed to be here.

[Ortwin]: Feeling nervous yet?

[Mostin]: You may have a point. Keep flying.

Varrangoin were all about them – although oblivious to their presence - when they materialized outside the *quiescence*. Hovering five hundred feet from the limit of the *locked* area, Mostin invoked a *reality maelstrom*. It was centered around Kostchtchie, the wight, and the *teleportation circles*. The dimensional tempest raged incoherently, stretching away from the *quiescence* in a sphere from which a section had been cut: along the interface between the two spells, a null-space suffused with paradoxical magical energy crackled. For a fraction of a second, Mostin became visible before hiding himself again with another spell.

[Ortwin] (Grinning): That's more like it.

[Mostin]: Brace yourself.

The magical response to the Alienist's assault was immediate and would have overwhelmed them all,

had it not been for Soneillon's ward. *Horrid wiltings, fireballs, a meteor swarm* and numerous sonics blasted into them. The djinn was instantly vaporized, and Mostin's brief appearance had been sufficient to make him the target of three attempted *disintegrations* and numerous *enervations*. Rager varrangoin were all about him, attempting to rend his *invisible* form.

Centered on himself this time, as yet more spells struck them ineffectually, Mostin invoked a second *reality maelstrom*, content that their own wards would prevent their succumbing to it. This time, the Alienist remained *invisible*.

Ortwin swallowed as he stood poised on the verge of another reality. Mostin cackled, looking through the rent in space: a rift into Limbo.

[Mostin] (Madly): We're safe here.

[Ortwin]: Are you quite nuts?

Flying through the dimensional storm – and through hundreds of varrangoin being pulled helplessly to their fate – a huge white dragon powered its way purposefully towards them. It bore an ugly, squat, bandy-legged demon brandishing a great hammer.

Clinging to the flank of the dragon, of whose presence the wyrm seemed entirely oblivious, an arcanist varrangoin clung, drooling like a dog. It stretched out its hand, and delivered an empowered sonic *meteor swarm* to them.

Bad, Mostin thought, as several creatures nearby were disintegrated by the sound. The tassles on his hat swayed slightly. Two more dragons appeared behind the first: mounted upon each were giants wielding enormous axes.

Abruptly, the *reality maelstrom* vanished, struck by a *greater dispelling*. From the dragon's jaws a terrible cold washed over them, numbing them despite their wards.

Koilimilou, buoyant with Soneillon's power, retaliated with a soundless gaze. Black fire coursed over the wyrm, and it bellowed in agony for a second, before silently vanishing in a cloud of dark ash. The varrangoin sorcerer took to the air with its own wings, but Kostchtchie himself began to tumble

towards the ground.

[Ortwin] (Gaping): What the...?

[Mostin]: Kostchtchie can't fly.

[Ortwin]: (Hysterical laughter).

But in response to its master's telepathic command, one of the other dragons wheeled about and its rider climbed from his harness, and carelessly launched himself into the air.

Mostin anticipated that Kostchtchie would attempt to *teleport* into the vacant saddle. He opened a *gate*.

Koilimilou – a sidhe-cambion seldom prone to uncontrollable outbursts – screamed. The pseudonatural

Horror – simultaneously both a daemon, and a writhing thing possessed of appendages with an unknown purpose – slid through the portal.

[Symbol] = *Faces*.

[Mostin] (Pointing mentally at Kostchtchie): *His* face (and then at the dragons), *their* faces.

With a gusto which surprised Mostin, the Horror launched itself from the *gate* towards their enemies.

There had to be a catch, Mostin knew. There was always a catch. It was never that easy.

**

The demon Surab, together with his host – a half-mortal named Iua – rode upon an *obsidian steed* across a blasted Abyssal landscape. A great, flat, plain – riven by yawning chasms which led to the domains of a thousand different demonic magnates – stretched as far as the eye could see. Surab

relaxed into his new form – young, athletic, deadlier with the blade than any of the succubi mercenaries who served Graz'zt. He might keep her for a while – she seemed quiescent enough.

Through her eyes, he scanned the terrain ahead of him, eagerly seeking a familiar portal to Azzagrat where, he knew, its Lord would shower him with favour for his success in eliminating the Savant.

Although the plan had been swiftly devised, it had been flawless in its execution. Pure simplicity.

Surab congratulated himself upon his ingenuity.

After riding hard for around an hour, the Demon nudged his steed towards a pit filled with lurid green flames, entered it, and, within seconds, emerged from a *gate oven* in the midst of Zelatar.

The scene which greeted him was violent, chaotic, brutal and filled with seething hatred. In that regard, Azzagrat was entirely normal.

What marked the Triple Realm as changed, however, was the nature of many of the creatures present. A frenzied pack of Abyssal ghouls were feeding nearby, and a cadre of

death knights – mounted upon

cauchemars – thundered past with some dire purpose.

Because, acutely conscious of Graz'zt's denuded power and overextended forces, and perceiving the

chink in his usually impenetrable armour, Prince Orcus – acting on the gentle promptings of Rhyxali –

had determined to invest Azzagrat and test his rival's defenses with a lightning-quick assault.

Surab panicked. The Argent palace, under normal circumstances visible from all parts of Zelatar, had vanished: the demon guessed that Graz'zt had obscured it with a spell.

Commanding his steed to *plane shift*, Surab, his host and his mount vanished. Any forsaken realm between Hell and the Abyss was preferable to Azzagrat at that moment.

Upon his throne, Graz'zt himself reflected. The purpose of the embassy delivered by Titivilus now

seemed clear to him: the Nameless Adversary had, no doubt, known of the impending situation, and

chosen to maintain the existing balance of Abyssal politics by reinforcing the Prince's armies in

Afqithan. It had to be Afqithan: a diabolic presence in the Abyss would have caused outrage among the other Princes. Afqithan, because of the concentration of Graz'zt's force there; because that was where the *Ahma* had determined to start the war; because to *hold* Afqithan was yet another opportunity to defy the will of Oronthon. Afqithan had become an unlikely trophy in the Great Game. New impulses were

revealing themselves.

Graz'zt spat venom, and cursed. He knew he *would* have been overwhelmed in Afqithan. He *needed* the devils: in order to secure Azzagrat he was being forced to withdraw from dozens of worlds – including Yutuf, Tirche, Sisperi and Saraf – and redeploy tens of thousands of demons. And now he doubted that he held Throile: the sweet prize dearly bought with the life of one of his favourite generals. And bitterest of all, he realized that, despite all appearances to the contrary, he himself was *still* the pawn of the one who had sparked the Great Revolt.

VIRIDITY AND SAIZHAN

Mostin the Metagnostic walked slowly through the hallway, the sound of his passage muted by a thick, crimson carpet which possessed a texture akin to fine velvet. He was not alone: his *arcane sight* revealed several *unseen servants* as they went about their chores, and a spined devil – one of a dozen compacted by the mansion's former mistress years before – flapped silently past. Its contract with Mostin had been renewed for a further three decades, and it was cautious to avoid irritating the Alienist.

He entered a study, the curious furnishings of which – upon his explicit instruction – had remained unaltered since the Alienist had taken possession of the place. Closing the door

behind him, he walked to a ornate cabinet, opened its door, and removed a crystal decanter. Carefully, he poured himself a large goblet of *kschiff*. Taking a single sip – and briefly savouring its potency – Mostin sank into a large leather chair and introspected for an hour.

Thoughts of Shomei, the *simulacra* and Vhorzhe preoccupied him.

Finally, he stirred himself, removed a small stone from his robe, and issued a *sending* to his apprentice, Orolde: *No change, I assume?* .

None.

Mostin sighed. After so long, he would have expected at least some kind of revelation to be

forthcoming. Some kind of reaction. A threat. An assault. Anything.

Set a fire. I am coming.

Mostin stood, exited the study by another door, and passed through several reception chambers into an echoing corridor carved in intricate relief. Traversing its length, he reached a small wooden portal bound with polished brass. The door opened smoothly, and Mostin entered a huge library by way of an opening concealed behind heavy purple drapes. Purposefully, he retrieved an ancient tome from a pile of books stacked neatly upon a small desk, muttered, and *teleported* into the parlour of a rustic manse several hundred miles to the south.

In the hills of Scir Cellod on the borders of Wyre, twenty yards outside of the limit circumscribed by the Claviger – an entity of deific power which curbed the excesses of Wyrish arcanists through an

Enforcer of terrible power – Mostin had erected his *comfortable retreat*. His choice of locale – a wooded dell, through which an icy stream chattered noisily – had been inspired primarily by its

proximity to the intangible border, although it also offered a certain secluded charm which was not entirely lost on the Wizard.

Mostin wordlessly handed his cloak to Orolde – a maimed sprite who served the Alienist with eccentric devotion – sighed, and descended into his cellar. The area was replete with potent wards, the continual renewal of which occupied a not inconsiderable portion of Mostin's time and resources. A dim green light – testament to a *dimensional lock* – suffused the place.

“Greetings gentlemen. I trust you are all well?”

From thaumatugic diagrams etched in precious metals upon the floor of the summoning room, three

devils gazed impassively upon the Wizard: Titivilus, Murmuur and Furas – Infernal magnates of high bearing, wielding wide dominion. None answered him. Malice flowed from them all.

“Are any of you feeling talkative?” The Alienist asked.

None replied. A great irony, Mostin thought to himself: both Furcus and Titivilus were renowned for their loquacity.

“Let me know when you are,” Mostin said smoothly.

Silence penetrated the summoning room.

Mostin repaired to his study, and issued a number of *sendings*.

**

The Sidhe leaned upon a balcony of Irknaan’s Fortress in self-reflection. She considered her fortune with emotional detachment and cold, sharp precision. She could not rationalize her change: in previous transmigrations she had been bawdy; licentious almost without limit. Now, she was frigid, and

possessed of an eerie clarity which was so inherently *magickal* that reality itself had shifted, and become a dream in which she was the calm protagonist. Everything had become fey.

Ahead, to the horizon, there stretched a bubble of Otherworld: pure, uncontaminated, as fresh as when the first flower had bloomed, and the first sprite had sprung into being. Beyond, for uncounted miles, lay a Shadow which was slowly receding. But behind, hidden by the towering mass of the castle, in the space once occupied by Jetheeg’s range, potent magic had attached the bubble of Afqithan to Faerie proper. Many of the realm’s inhabitants were either stirring again, or – in the case of those whom the taint had overwhelmed – fleeing to safer, darker places. Others, entirely new to the former demiplane, had migrated in small numbers to what was – for them – an undiscovered corner of the world. It was a phenomenon that had occurred before: such intrusions were not uncommon in the scheme of things,

and Faerie continually spawned bastard demiplanes, or silently absorbed them. Troops of fauns, sprites and pucks of various persuasions – but with shared curiosity – found places beneath the great banyans.

Afqithan was a mezzanine between two worlds, and the Sidhe’s stronghold – although it had proven not unassailable – was a powerful bastion which straddled realities.

She had styled herself *Queen of Afqithan* like many before her had, and, no doubt, many after her would. She entertained great heroes, and ancient spirits, and minor gods of various kinds. She brooded on the deaths of past lovers, but wondered how she could have actually *felt* what she had once felt. At other times, musical invention obsessed her, and she would spend an hour composing a symphony, or a day contemplating a single cadence. Time froze, and raced past at breakneck speed.

Her subjects were, for the most part, accepting of her rule. To many, she had appeared in person, simply announcing “I am the Queen, now.” Those who had found this a difficult prospect – and there had been a few – she had roundly bested, either in combat, or magic, or in some artistic contest. Some had

become enamoured of her, others had been duped by her promises and intimations. But most had

simply acquiesced to her claim: it was obvious that no other could rival her, and what would Afqithan be without a tyrant? In the event, she transpired to be less than despotic, and made no particular

demand from her subjects at all, other than to be called *your majesty*.

She stood, and adjusted her harness: a soft leather coat with heavy studs, and a belt which bore a delicately curved blade. She wore a travel-stained cloak and boots – vestiges of her former self – and bore a light diadem cut from a gemstone. Her sudden self-awareness erupted as a cascade of chords

seeking to escape from her mind and into her harp. She grimaced, and began to play. It was bitter, brutal, and poignant; full of anger and loathing, tinged with a wry self-mockery which embraced the absurd. The irresistible fate of the fey: a timeless childhood, or a perpetual decline; the knowledge that *what was* is always better than *what is to come*.

Her music became dark and ominous. Below the throne room, in a deep chamber etched with powerful

runes, a *gate* to Azzagrat slumbered. It had been sealed at both ends: by Graz'zt himself, as he sabotaged a hundred portals into the Argent Palace from planes where he perceived a possible threat; and by Mostin the Metagnostic in the aftermath of the Great Confrontation. Its very presence troubled her: she seldom enjoyed a peace of mind. Most of the Castle's inhabitants – sprites of low stature –

were oblivious to its existence, although a few were not: gnomes and goblins who had eavesdropped on their former masters' conversations; or quickling spies, lulled into obedience by the new Queen's

glamoury.

The tune ceased. She turned, and entered the cavernous throne-room from the balcony. Great crystal lamps illuminated the hall, and hundreds of feys danced, sang and capered about. Gifts and curses were freely exchanged. Her mood lightened somewhat: association with her own kind, she observed, was

reassuring and gave her a sense of identity. And, as always, she was the focus of all attention. She ascended a dais of carved onyx, and relaxed into a small siege cast from precious metal and adorned with opals.

As she sat upon her throne, a feeling of deep satiation and langour overcame her.

It's good to be Queen, she thought.

She greeted the *sending* from the wizard with an expression of mild annoyance.

Not now, she thought. *You are interrupting a pavanne.*

I need you to pull the wool over my Dukes' eyes. Are you up to it?

Her interest was piqued, much to her annoyance, but her manner remained insouciant.

Let me think on it, she thought.

I think I may eliminate Murmuur in front of the other two. They might be more apt to talk.

Don't be a fool. I'll come in the morning.

Pay close heed to time. A year might pass before you realize it.

Enough! I will come. Now go.

The Queen sat briefly, but found further enjoyment of the revel impossible. She stood in irritation, cursed, and exited abruptly.

**

The *Sela* was clad in the armour once worn by Lord Rede of Dramore, a martial paragon from a previous era, when war had been the business of the Temple. At his waist, he bore a six-flanged mace, forged by the same celestial smiths who had hammered Enitharmon's sword from a shard of thought.

He was, at once, a perfect, unified consciousness, an awareness of everything that was, or is, or could be; but frail, mortal, imperfect. There was no 'he;' no observer, and nothing observed. There was a moving stillness. The potentiality of infinite bifurcation. An Adversary taunting him with a Green Void.

He sighed.

He knew little of the arts of war. Even when he had served the Temple, rather than *been* it, his role had been mainly oracular. The peculiar blending of the conventional and the Absolute – which Tramst

embodied – did not seem to preclude gaps in his knowledge of mundane things. Strategy in war –

amongst other things, such as royal tax protocols and the latest fashion in headwear – was one of those gaps.

For his captains he had picked Brey and Sercion – toward whom, since his ascension, he had payed

particular notice. Neither were ready for the task that he had appointed them: their training was far from complete, and each still expected and presumed more than either would admit, even to

themselves. Expectation and presumption were qualities which the *Sela* had striven to eliminate from those who had accepted him as their teacher. Nonetheless, Tramst was satisfied that their role was what it must be: he observed all action with calm understanding. Fatalism and free will were, to him, an empty duality, the refutation of which was amply testified by his very existence – at least for those who saw the truth.

The *Sela* observed ideas and emotions move through his mind: an unending torrent of desire, fear, concern, humour, regret and hope. He placed the tortuous ramblings of conventional thought to one

side – whilst still honouring them – and embraced his ground of being; and saw once again, that they were no different. Insight and compassion welled up within him. But, even there, his Adversary was with him: tempting him in that moment to mould reality, to shuck off his mortality, and with a passing thought reorder things as he knew they should be. Any limitation which the *Sela* possessed was self-imposed.

Consciously, he hung his mace upon a weapon stand and began to cast off his armour. Tramst struck a light, the dull glow of an oil-lamp suffused his tent, and he turned to observe a slender young man with olive skin sitting on his pallet. He had a tangled mass of hair, a face which rested with an impudent expression, and held a tray of candied chestnuts in his hand. He offered one to the *Sela* with a boyish grin.

“Want one?” He asked. “They’re from Bedesh. They’re good.”

The *Sela* sat next to the youth, took one of the sweets, and chewed thoughtfully.

“Another?”

“No, thank-you,” the *Sela* smiled. “One is enough. I’m glad you came: I miss you.”

The youth shrugged. “One has to make one’s own way. I don’t regret anything, you know.”

“I know,” the *Sela* laughed, “and I know that you aren’t here for the reason that I wish you were. You are merely curious. You wanted to *see*, rather than *See*.”

The youth nodded, and popped another chestnut into his mouth.

“You are feeling insecure?” Tramst asked.

“Somewhat,” the youth smiled.

“Your place in the scheme of things is assured. Do not be concerned. Although why I flatter your ego so is beyond me: it hardly needs inflating.”

“I seem to have caught you in a happy mood,” the youth grinned. “Which is all to the good. I was wondering if you might tell me..?”

“Ahh,” the *Sela* said drily. “Your name. Unfortunately, that information is still confidential. It can be bought, but I fear that the price might be too high for you.”

“I guessed as much, although I had to ask.”

“Of course you did, dear boy.”

The youth stood, and bowed rakishly. “I will take my leave, then. I look forward to events with great anticipation.”

“As do I,” Tramst smiled. “Remember that I love you.”

“I will try my hardest to forget,” the youth sighed. He vanished.

*

When the *Ahma* entered the tent an hour later, the taint was still so profound that it threatened to overwhelm him. His head reeled. Fear and concern possessed him.

“What happened here?” Eadric asked.

“I wavered for a moment,” Tramst smiled. “There can be no truth without doubt.”

Eadric scowled.

“You have my permission to go. Return within a fortnight.”

The *Ahma* cocked his head. “I don’t...”

Then he received the *sending* from Mostin.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 05-07-05

Bluff, Diplomacy, Intimidate and Sense Motive. Mostin still hadn't developed an epic spell to penetrate a *mind blank*. These skills enjoy a brief renaissance.

Execution and Parley.

"We should try again," Eadric groaned. He was exhausted: interrogating devils was tedious,

unrewarding work. He stared hard at Ortwin – now Ortwine – and shifted uncomfortably. His

adjustment to his (*former?*) friend's recent femininity continued to be difficult, and had proceeded in an intermittent fashion as revelations spasmodically shaped his perception. Her hauteur seemed genuine, even when directed towards him. Although prior manifestations of Ortwin had seldom been prone to

honestly emote, and had never revealed the true extent of his feelings on *any* matter, to the *Ahma's* recollection. Coupled with the scant contact that he and the Sidhe had had with one another, Eadric knew that he did not know this creature. At all.

She seemed asexual, which was the most bizarre and implausible change from Eadric's view. Overt

sexuality was not, apparently, Ortwin/e's defining characteristic. The essence was something else. An expression of some other truth, which Eadric could not grasp.

And her wit, Eadric quailed internally. *A little caustic, perhaps*, as Nwm had drily remarked. It was a snare; a wire with vicious hooks, which dripped contempt. So precise. So erudite. She seemed to know everything. She was *tapped in* to something much bigger, with which in every successive incarnation, Ortwine had become more identified. *What would she become next?* He wondered. What was more Fae than a Sidhe-Queen? He shuddered.

Ortwin had craved a kingdom, and Ortwine – now in possession of one – enjoyed her spoils with an

easy display of ancient majesty. A quality which might take half-a-century for a mortal ruler to develop, seemed to be her natural demeanour. It was impossible to determine whether it was an affectation, or not.

Every time she died, she returned with increasing potency. Nwm brought her back. He would always

bring her back. And if Nwm died, who would bring the Druid back? Teppu? Nehael? Mesikämme? If

any of them died, would they come back stronger? It was a truth, an aspect of the Viridity. *Absorb and transform. Deify the mundane. Death into life.* The perfect expression of the Green, which arose – or such was Nwm's contention – in inevitable response to other

influences. For *Saizhan*, it presented neither a conflict nor a congruence.

“Are the trolls of mysticism mustering for another attack on your enfeebled preconceptions, *Ahma*?”

Ortwine read his mood accurately. “Should we banish them with fly-swats?”

“I like you better as a goat,” Eadric replied.

“Then we must be grateful that you are not consulted in the matter,” Ortwine smiled.

“Time is precious to me, *Ahma*. I would prefer that dreary obligations are resolved quickly. We should simply kill one.”

Eadric nodded.

*

Eadric leaned on *Lukarn*, his gauntleted fists gripping the crosspiece, resting his whole weight upon the point of the blade. He stretched up onto his toes.

Next to him, Ortwine sat on a low wooden stool. She looked only mildly interested.

“Which paradigm will prove the ascendant, I wonder?” The *Ahma* mused.

Titivilus said nothing.

Eadric raised an eyebrow. “Your silence is unnerving. It seems to run counter to the natural order of things.”

“Which one?” Ortwine asked. “I confess that Titivilus is my favourite – his manner is smooth, and I appreciate the efforts he makes towards presenting an agreeable social face. Furcus is haughty, but I respect his mind. Murmuur is somewhat dull, and lacks any feature which deserves to be preserved; but he is a soldier, and the least conniving and manipulative. Is he the most *good*, do you think?”

Silence.

“I could cut you down,” Eadric sighed. He turned to Murmuur and Furcas. “Each of you in turn. It would bring the wards down, but still, none of you would survive long enough to react before your

deaths. Nor could you intervene in each other’s demise.”

Eadric stared at Murmuur: of the Dukes he alone, the *Ahma* knew, could be read. The glibness possessed by Furcas and Titivilus was impenetrable.

The possibility of an emotion passed across the devil’s eyes. Murmuur immediately knew that his

thought had been perceived. And he knew that Eadric was not lying.

“And it would be a just punishment,” Eadric continued. “I have the right to administer it.”

Murmuur sneered.

Ortwine sat, apparently nonplussed. “What happens to the estate of an Infernal Duke, while he is in captivity? Are his possessions redistributed amongst other devils in his absence, or held in fief by his master until his return? How much fear do you each feel,

now? Does the prospect of annihilation fill you with dread, or do you anticipate a blessed release from your miserable lot? Perhaps an iota of your essence will remain, tormented in some yet deeper Hell by fiends to whom you appear the merest of

shadows. Perhaps Oronthon will welcome the memory and remnant of your spirits back into his bosom.

Or will the ancient, formless evil of the Abyss swallow you in unbeing? These are questions which

intrigue me, and I have never before had the opportunity to voice them to any who might know.”

Murmuur’s spittle fizzled against the invisible barrier.

“You doubt my sincerity?” Eadric asked.

The *Ahma* turned, and with two swift strokes felled Furcas, advisor to the Archfiend Dispater, and respected for aeons as one of Hell’s most effective intellectual weapons. As the Duke crumpled,

Ortwine leapt forward with blinding speed and seized him by the neck. She quickly drew a dagger of purified silver, and thrust deep into the devil’s waiting throat. Ichor spilled over her. She tossed the corpse to the ground in a perfunctory manner.

“We are at war,” Eadric grimaced, ignoring Murmuur and turning to the Nuncio of Dis. “This is no longer a parlour game, Titivilus. Archetypes are slain in our times, and new ones born. And I am not benign, Titivilus. I am wrathful. I am the *Ahma*. Do you understand?”

“Given the circumstances, a certain degree of cooperation might prove sensible,” Titivilus conceded.

“But I require guarantee of my release after I have testified, and assurances that you will not subsequently harass me.”

Eadric furrowed his brow and stared hard at Titivilus. But his consciousness was turned towards

Murmuur, alert to signs which could be read.

“If I were to allow anything other than self-interest to inform my behaviour when my existence is threatened, I would be a traitor to my principles,” Titivilus smiled. “In the final analysis, survival is the preferable route, and the court of Pazuzu is quite welcoming, I hear. Do not be alarmed – I have fallen out of favour before; a millennium or two passes, and I wheedle my way back in again. My

eccentricities are forgiven in the face of my scheming brilliance.”

” *Forgiven?*” Eadric asked.

” *Overlooked* might be a better word for you,” Titivilus smiled. “Although, from my perspective, they amount to the same thing. I must also insist that you slay Murmuur before I co-operate. I can allow no witnesses to our exchange.”

Eadric shook his head. “I will retain Murmuur as a safeguard against your duplicity. If you

prove faithless, I will release him to inform your masters of your conduct, and to seek whatever revenge he deems appropriate.”

“You have grown cruel, Eadric,” Titivilus smirked. “There is hope for you yet.”

“Your attempts at badinage bore me, devil,” the *Ahma* sighed.

“The fiend has a point,” Ortwin said. “Or half-a-point.”

**

“This is intolerable,” Waide snapped. “You would abide beyond the Claviger’s purview, but seek aid therein when it is convenient for you? Any one of us could establish ourselves outside of Wyre, but by choosing not to, we demonstrate our solidarity. But you persist in your conjurations *on the very borders*.”

“I reside in Shomei’s former home...” Mostin began.

“Infrequently,” Waide objected.

“For once, I concur with Waide,” Daunton sighed. “Your contribution is greatly missed. Commit yourself to a shared enterprise, Mostin. Information is beginning to flow freely between us, for the first time in ten generations.”

“My present undertaking makes this an unlikely prospect,” Mostin glared. “The Enforcer would terminate me.”

“Your right to call an Assembly will not be universally recognized,” Daunton observed. “Many will not come, if only to irritate you.” He looked pointedly at Waide.

“Then I will speak to the Wyrish Wizards as an *outsider*,” Mostin said sourly. “An embassy, if you will.

You will issue the call, Daunton.”

“Do not indulge him,” Waide hissed. “Such an act would force me – and many others – to ignore you.

You would cause a rift, Daunton.”

“Waide,” Mostin almost screeched, “if you were anywhere else, anywhere within a billion other cosmoi, then I would blast you for your pig-ignorance and show you what *transmutation* really means.”

“But you cannot,” Daunton smiled. “Isn’t that, in itself, worth something to you?”

“Yes,” Mostin said, gesturing irritably, “but it is not worth *everything* to me. You must be reflexive, or what you have built will atrophy and die. I will make a concession, however, to demonstrate my

commitment to the Wyrish experiment.”

“I doubt there is anything which would impress,” Waide said.

“I will make Shomei’s library freely available,” Mostin replied. “On a reference-only basis, of course.

No tomes will be removed from the property. And I believe there is a clause regarding

theft between

wizards in the Injunction.”

“You are outrageous!” Waide said indignantly. “Your right to that inheritance is contested, in any case.”

“The library is mine, and I will vigorously defend it against any claim to the contrary,” Mostin said with narrowed eyes. “So it’s settled then? The bribe is sufficiently large?”

“From my perspective, more than adequate,” Daunton sighed pragmatically. “And I doubt any Wizard would decline your request in light of such an offer.”

“Waide?” Mostin asked drily. “I hope you don’t intend to abandon your magical peers on such a momentous occasion?”

“No,” Waide replied, “any more than you would seek to exclude Rimilin from such a gathering. I believe he also maintains a temporary residence in Morne.”

“Quite,” Mostin said through gritted teeth.

“Do I detect the stench of another rivalry, Mostin?” Waide asked sarcastically.

At that moment, Mostin considered whether to *disintegrate* Waide, although it would have meant his own, inevitable demise at the hands of the Enforcer. Turning red, he mastered himself with difficulty.

“Perhaps you are not the heir apparent, after all,” Waide added.

Mostin twitched, and smiled madly. “We can accomplish great things together Waide...”

” *NO!* ” Waide spat. “What you mean to say is ‘I, Mostin the Metagnostic can accomplish great things with your aid.’ You would attempt to corral every Wizard in Wyre into some ritual for *your* edification, not for the elevation of magic or understanding. I will not be your lackey in a cabal which serves your own, deranged agenda. Don’t think that I don’t understand your motive in this. You wish to bind

Graz’zt.”

“Amongst other things. And if we don’t do it first, he will be invoked by the Cult of Cheshne.”

“I will not be drawn into a religious conflict.”

“The distinction you seek to make is irrelevant,” Mostin retorted.

“It is the *Law of the Injunction*.”

“Within Wyre, yes. I do not suggest that we act within Wyre.”

“You would be a magical dictator, who acts without restraint beyond a sanctuary, and would cower in it when threatened? This is not acceptable to me.”

Mostin paused. Waide had a good point, although he didn’t see the bigger picture. He breathed slowly.

“If assurances were made – inviolable contracts which protected the interests of every wizard involved

– would you be philosophically opposed to participating in a ritual which could be demonstrated to...”

“With you at the helm? Never.”

“You are ignorant, Waide.”

“I suggest arbitration,” Daunton said slyly. “We could appeal to the Claviger.”

“This is beyond the Claviger’s purview,” Waide and Mostin said in chorus.

“Exactly,” Daunton smiled. “The Claviger has no interest in the outcome of this dispute. Hence, it would be the ideal arbiter.”

“You suggest asking for *advice* from the Claviger?” Waide laughed.

“In a manner of speaking,” Daunton nodded. “But its judgment would have to be binding.”

“But it could not use the Enforcer in pursuance of such an arrangement.”

“I am suggesting that you *abide* by its decision,” Daunton replied. “Nothing else. Or have we all forgotten the ability to act with civility unless threatened with annihilation?”

“It has been a long time since I have *not* been threatened with annihilation,” Mostin said sourly. “But I’m unsure if we could present a case in intelligible terms. Most of my conflict with Waide stems from the fact that he is loathsome.”

“Our mutual hatred transcends any rational compromise,” Waide nodded. “However, I will not be branded as the one who refused the advice of the Claviger. I will agree to its decision.”

“As will I,” Mostin quickly backtracked.

“It may demand certain concessions,” Daunton said carefully. “Are you sure that you are prepared to accept that possibility?”

“Naturally,” Mostin answered. *Concessions?* He thought. “But I would like to address the Assembly first, to see if some other route cannot be found.”

“Good luck,” Waide said snidely.

“Where, and when?” Daunton asked.

“In three days, at my manse outside of Morne,” Mostin replied smoothly. “In my library.”

Waide bristled silently.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 05-15-05

A shorter update. I’m trying to keep things to 1000 words or so.

Mostly backstory.

ORTWINE

Some millennia before – at a time when most of Wyre sat beneath hundreds of feet of ice – a sidhe-

cambion named Suoninguhol had ruled the demiplane of Afqithan.

His succession had been swift and brutal, and accompanied by all manner of atrocious acts – as was common in the history of the place. The previous tyrant – the Loquai sorceress Mileze – escaped to Azzagrat where, in Graz'zt's court, she plotted revenge. Mileze had enjoyed several powerful Abyssal sponsors – a fact which, in itself, testified to her ability – but was, at that time, sworn to Zelatar.

When Graz'zt inevitably moved demons into Afqithan – the Prince was notoriously possessive of

worlds he had annexed – most observers were shocked by the fact that Suoninguhol resisted all

attempts to displace him from his fortress. Over the course of a year, Graz'zt attempted in various ways to wrest the castle – which contained a strategically vital *gate* to Azzagrat* – from Suoninguhol's grasp.

Balors and mariliths were thrown against the stronghold, teams of kelvezu were dispatched to eliminate Suoninguhol, and powerful magics were invoked: the Prince even went so far as to manifest a body

within Afqithan in an effort to directly assail the barrier which the cambion had erected. Nothing was effective. To make matters worse, Mileze was ambushed and slain by Suoninguhol's sister, Koilimilou, forcing Graz'zt to identify a new instrument of his will.

Frustrated, Graz'zt retreated his spirit to the Argent Palace, and contrived a spell which would peel Suoninguhol's fortress away from Afqithan and fling it into some nameless Abyssal plane wracked by negative energy. Despite his prognostications to the contrary, Graz'zt's spell failed, sending the Prince into a violent rage.

When he finally emerged from his tirade, Graz'zt swallowed his immense pride and negotiated a

settlement with Suoninguhol – content to wait and extract his revenge at a more opportune time. He occupied himself with attempting to learn the identity the cambion's sponsor (the Prince had no doubt that Suoninguhol possessed one), and to groom his own chosen candidate – a Loquai named Irknaan –

in the duties expected of a loyal subject of Azzagrat.

Time passed. Graz'zt became distracted in wars with Orcus, Soneillon and Fraz Urb'luu. Suoninguhol entrenched himself yet further, tightening his grip on Afqithan and compacting hundreds of fiends from a variety of interested demonic parties. His ascendancy seemed assured until, abruptly and without warning, Suoninguhol vanished. News quickly found its way to Zelatar, prompting Graz'zt to again

invest the demiplane and, this time, successfully install Irknaan as king. Koilimilou was captured, but Irknaan chose to humiliate rather than eliminate her.

The *gate* was reopened and, for a while, Graz'zt was content. Afqithan's status was monitored by the Prince's demons, and Irknaan paid a hefty tribute for which he gained recognition in Azzagrat. Graz'zt's minions became favoured compactees of Loquai sorcerers; Loquai mercenaries found themselves

fighting in wars from Yutuf to Throile. Suoninguhol's abode became known as Irknaan's Fortress, and the new king was left to explore and expand the nineteen sub-levels below it.

*

When Irknaan's Fortress passed into Ortwine's possession, the Sidhe inherited something of a mixed fortune.

The castle was established upon a precipitous bastion of rock, unscalable from three sides, and reached by a narrow path cut into the sheer wall of the fourth; although assault from the ground was as an afterthought to its real defense. Its highest towers, which soared many hundreds of feet into the purple skies, were linked with bridges less than a foot wide: each hung like a strand of silk which glistened in the dusk. All of the fortress – except for a reception chamber to which a previous queen had

pactbonded a dozen of the largest jariliths – was *dimensionally locked* against unwanted intrusion, but demons could still be conjured and bound within. Its interior could not be *scried*. The outcrop itself was reinforced by a spell of tremendous power, wrought long before by a goddess named Shuae.

The art of the Loquai suffused the place, with moving murals and columns of shadow, fashioned by

magic over long centuries. The air whispered as one walked through the lofty and insubstantial upper halls, but the deep chambers seemed to have walls of impossible density: here all sound was muted, and light subdued. Carven reliefs, which displayed scenes of glorious hunts – or grotesque tortures –

writhed as their stories unfolded to the observer. Broad stairs led to a wide platform upon which were roosted the four remaining tenebrous griffons, and the evil specimen once owned by Duke Ytryn – a

chimaeric monster of unique form and singular foul disposition. Ortwine had tried, without success, to subdue the beast; it remained tethered by a two-hundred pound chain of adamant to a plinth of

unbreakable marble.

At its deepest point, in a cleft which had been hewn into the bedrock by some unknown force, lay the now-sealed *gate* to Azzagrat; above it lay the summoning rooms, with a jackal-headed arcanadaemon confined in a circle of *binding* by Mileze long before. There was a cavern in which eerie shades moved across still waters; a repository of tomes written in dead and forgotten languages; a forge, where Ainhorr had maintained a team of Azer smiths; quickling warrens, and chambers filled with torture

devices. An armory of Faerie weapons, in a vault which was guarded by a *symbol of insanity* placed by Mostin, now housed the ten-foot vorpal sword *Heedless*.

Gnome thralls moved silently and efficiently throughout the castle, and a handful of quicklings –

enchanted to obey Ortwine's desires – were still retained by the Queen. Gaggles of minor sprites

hovered and chattered continually, and bearded feys with cudgels and pipes sang and caroused with

nymphs and sylphs in the many small courtyards. Walled gardens, once home to bloodthorns and viper trees, now also contained more benign shrubbery – although Ortwine had allowed a few demonic

saplings to remain, mainly as a curiosity.

The Queen knew that Irknaan's Fortress sat upon a crossroad of realities, and for her, the World of Men was never more than a step away. Yet if one rode beyond the limit of burgeoning Faerie, the umbral taint of Afqithan still clung.** Invoked at the climax of the *incident*, as Mostin had wilyly dubbed it, the planar rift was a growing at an exceptional rate: it would take a mere two millennia for Afqithan to be entirely subsumed by Faerie. Understanding the cartography of the place had been Ortwine's first task to herself: mentally cataloging every *gate* and portal (there were many); identifying areas where other worlds were closest; understanding each nuance in Afqithan's planar symmetry. Knowing which paths

led to sylvan glades, and which led to haunted copses.

Her hegemony stretched into Faerie, across wide tracts of forest and heath-covered moorlands, within which were hidden deep, wooded ravines. Beyond them lay mountains, a wide river, and the courts of noble sidhe in realms which stretched through space and time. In Afqithan itself – where the remnants

of the Loquai numbered a few hundred – her rule was uncontested. Menicau, three times a turncoat, still dwelt in her citadel, but even she presented no threat, and had bowed her head in deference. A dozen other families retained estates with Ortwine's permission. But the Queen herself kept no Loquai, demon or cambion in her train.

Ortwine surveyed the land south of her walls. Trees which had sprung over the heaped corpses of

fiends; the great contusions in the ground – caused when Azazel smote Irzho from the sky, and the

balor had fallen like a black comet – now covered with green creepers. The chasm, caused by

Soneillon's final realization of nonexistence, become a deep pool to which mist clung, with an air only of deep sorrow. Nwm's hand, at work.

The Sidhe-Queen pulled a pair of leather gloves over her hands, shifted her scimitar, and tied her hair back. Her perception changed momentarily as she walked between worlds:

from Afqithan, to an area of grassy knolls in Methelhar, near the borders of Nizkur Forest. She retrieved a small, ornate box from her belt pouch, performed a complex manual operation, and whispered nine syllables of power.

A *shadow avenue* opened to Deorham. There, she would meet with Nwm, who would bear her to

Sisperi: the Goddess Lai had requested an audience with her, and Ortwine had grudgingly agreed.

*The *gate* to Azzagrat is of ancient origin. It is constructed, not natural: the result of an immensely potent spell. It cannot be freely *disjoined*, and the ward protecting it would require a large and powerful cabal to penetrate. It can be *sealed* – presumably the intention is to allow it to function as a door which can be locked from either side.

**The initial bubble of Faerie invoked by Teppu was four virtual miles in diameter, with Irknaan's Fortress at the dead centre.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 01-29-06, 12:51 AM

Recollection

Soneillon.

The name echoed in his mind, and caused his stomach to turn.

The *Ahma* stood alone upon the porch of Mostin's manse in the cold pre-dawn, mist rising from his mouth and nostrils. A waning moon, riding high in the West, illuminated the grassy hills of Scir Cellod on the borders of Wyre with a silver-blue sheen, and cast long, violet shadows.

Eadric brooded: he had dreamed of her again. Her shadow clung to him like an insubstantial mist,

gnawing at the corners of his awareness. For the hundredth time, he reenacted the events in Afqithan in his mind, searching for clues which may have eluded him, attempting to gain new perspectives.

"Her vestige remains in Dream," Teppu had assured him in the aftermath of the Confrontation. "She

will fade, if you allow it. If you permit her echo to intrude upon your consciousness, it will lend her memory substance. A semblance of *ens* will crystallize. Remember – *Nothing Becomes*. And you are the *Ahma*: your thought will become manifest before most others. Let her go. Let her remain cradled in the bosom of the Ancient."

Eadric's throat and chest tightened with the memory of what had gone before. A single, tiny, corner of reality, subject to the strain of so many competing Infinities. Graz'zt's main force crumpling under the assault of Soneillon and her horde of augmented monsters. The Horror, unleashed by Mostin, and its frenzy of destruction in the West, abruptly ended by a swift stroke of Kostchtchie's hammer. The

untimely evaporation of the *Quiescence of the Spheres*, and the onslaught of devils which had followed, sweeping everything before them. *Gates* opening, and rifts appearing, space buckling as demons fled to Azzagrat at their master's behest: Graz'zt working desperate

magic in his sanctum as the greater threat of Orcus overrode all other concerns.

Eadric had sought relentlessly for Ainhorr within Irknaan's Fortress, and as Chaya had invoked

gruesome necromancies, Shomei had hurled compacted devils at their foes and burned the lesser

demons away with a celestial fire which had caused him to gape in wonder. The *Ahma* had hewn his way through Nalfeshnee bodyguards to reach the Balor. But even in his moment of triumph, as he had struck Ainhorr down, an ecstatic scream of extinction had echoed in his mind, rushing in a wave across the battlefield. Soneillon had fallen.

His mind had darkened as a spell of terrific force settled upon them. Impotent, Eadric had watched as the *Akesoli* had descended upon Shomei, and, in a trice, flayed her body – stripping her essence away and binding it in a subtle net of Amaimon's devising. Infernal justice – for her numerous

misdeemeanours – swiftly served upon she who had broken compacts, and flouted the iron law of Dis.

The *Ahma*, burned and bloody, with armour rent and shield shattered, his strength all but spent, had nonetheless brandished *Lukarn* defiantly. But the devil Nahuzihis had raised a clawed hand.

"Stay," the word had issued like a foul breeze. "You have no authority here."

Despite his wards, their power had washed over him, and *Lukarn* had fallen limp at his side. The devils vanished, and as the glamour lifted, he had turned to face Chaya. She stood naked and scarred, her black gem smoking with the spirits of the fiends it had consumed. Her mistress vanquished, her hatred for him had suddenly become palpable.

Still, she was no match for him. She had withdrawn.

Briefly, the *Ahma* had stood alone in the wreck of the throne room, the mangled corpses of demons –

and Shomei's diabolic servitors – all about him. He had made his way uncertainly to a balcony, and gazed upon the blasted landscape below. Narzugon cavalry thundered through the glades, slaying at

will, their stained pennants bearing flies and mantises. Legions of bearded devils bearing hooked

glaives followed. Ahead of them, unassailable, the standard of Hell had moved with ruthless purpose.

And then, suddenly and without warning, the declamation issued by Nwm, within whose titanic mental voice were overlaid the soft tones of Nehael – *Nehael* – and Teppu, and Hlioth, and Mesikämmi, and Lai and her handmaidens. The voice which penetrated into every corner of Afqithan, stirring sprites in their tumps; buckawns and quicklings in dark places; and the genii of trees, pools, rocks and glades from their languor. Within the awareness of every woodland spirit in Afqithan, was conjured a vision of what could be. The Druid had forged an empathic continuum, embracing everything which contained a

vestige of Green, allowing energy to flow freely like water. Consciousness had unified and Goddess manifested.

If you be Fae, lend us now your strength.

It was both a command and a plea. The ancient inhabitants of the demiplane had answered. Teppu had gathered their power into himself, and a viridescent nova had purged Afqithan of interlopers, sealing every rip and fracture in the fabric of space.

As uncounted varieties of fiend and monster were expelled, so too were Eadric and Mostin: forced

violently and abruptly away from Afqithan and into the sphere of Man. A nightmare was suddenly

replaced with a cold, sick, wakefulness.

Alone, in the neatly tended fields of Hethio in Wyre, anger and frustration had utterly consumed the *Ahma*. He had screamed, and cursed Graz'zt, and Rhyxali, and the Adversary, and Soneillon.

"You are bewildered," the voice, soft and familiar, had spoken to him from the very soil. The blood had hammered in his temples. "Show yourself," he had said, trembling.

A sapling had broken through the earth nearby, and quickly gained height and girth: it grew into a young ash, with black buds cracking with fresh, delicate leaves. She had stepped out of the tree, and stood before him. There had been a lightness and ease about her that he did not remember; and a

confidence rooted in some other power which he could not know. No vestige of angel or demon

remained, and an aura of deep jade surrounded her. Her eroticism – free and guiltless and profound –

had somehow shamed him with its purity.

Madness had threatened to seize him.

"You teeter uncertainly," she had said softly.

He had nodded, and hung his head.

Gently, she had embraced him, caressing hair caked with venom, blood and ichor. As he wept, she had sung quietly.

But the voice – the voice of the other demoness – had stayed in his mind. Soft, seductive syllables which repeated in a circle without end.

Exult in your memory, Eadric. Because Nothing will ever again compare to me.

*

Eadric turned to see Orolde patiently standing close by, mindful to avoid intrusion upon his reverie.

The sprite, aware of the other's sudden perception of him, offered Eadric a goblet of

mulled firewine.

The *Ahma* nodded briefly and quickly drained it. In the East, the sky was brightening.

“Is Mostin abroad yet?” Eadric inquired.

“Yes,” Orolde replied. “But he is in his study. He finds the mornings most conducive to work. I will inform him, if you wish to speak?”

“It can wait.” *They* can wait. Titivilus and Murmuur were still bound with magic below, as the painful process of extracting information from the – now former – Nuncio of Dis continued.

“Can you feel it, Orolde?” Eadric asked the Sprite.

“What would that be, *Ahma*?”

“This... *Viridity*. ”

“Ah. Yes.” Orolde nodded.

“What is it like?”

“For me? I suppose it is like jumping into a lake, and then suddenly remembering that I can breathe underwater.”

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 02-01-06, 03:53 PM

She is magnificent, Nwm observed as the goddess rode down the babau. *Drengh* was a bloody blur, flashing red about her head. The Druid was in a state of perfect, dynamic meditation: they had honed their rapport to the point of a wordless, instinctive knowledge of intent, where Nwm had become the agent of her thought.

Their quarry were diminishing in numbers: their leaders, and the most war-hardened among them, had been redeployed to another arena – a distant, violent conflict between two old enemies. Those that remained were diminished, and lacking the discipline enforced by the direct agents of Graz’zt’s will, they had disintegrated into a violent rabble of clans, ruled by the most ruthless and cunning amongst them. They became easy prey for the bands of godlings and ancestors who rode forth to engage them.

Of the Nireem, Ninit had proven the most difficult to relate to. She seemed oblivious to the needs of Mulhuk, and countenanced no argument which conflicted with her desire. She was utterly impervious

to reason. Her passion was only to ride, and to hunt.

Immediately, Nwm had adored her.

He had allowed himself to become subsumed in her, and relinquished himself utterly. An act of

devotion inevitable, he wryly observed, when any aspect of *Goddess* presented itself to him. But the communion which Ninit provided for Nwm led to a reciprocity which The Rider had not anticipated.

She needed him in order to slay more effectively, and now she guarded and protected him. Ninit had grown accustomed to a lack of worship – her cult had been extinct for centuries.

Nwm's adoration –

when directed towards her – had stirred certain deific *needs* which had been suppressed for too long.

Ninit craved worship, once again. And the details of Nwm's broader henotheism were irrelevant to the goddess.

Nwm's mind reached out, connecting with the soil of Sisperi, and energy coursed through him. A

profound agony – familiar and reassuring – fired every nerve in his body. His skin cracked like the bark of an ancient tree and began to bleed, green fire coursed over him, and a necromantic impulse of

terrible potency exploded outwards from him in all directions. Demons dropped like flies.

In his thoughts, Ninit smiled savagely.

As the few remaining monsters winked out, Nwm *healed* himself of his self-inflicted trauma and mustered his strength again.

You are weary, Ninit's voice echoed in his mind. *Return to Mulhuk.*

Nwm bowed. He might have continued, but one did not gainsay The Rider. He would return to Mulhuk,

and then make his way to Wyre and his appointed meeting with Ortwine.

*

When not hunting, Nwm would spend long hours instructing Lai and her handmaidens in the arts he

had mastered. His favoured location was a courtyard graced with crystal trees, where a warm sun

always shone in the afternoon; demonstration was his preferred method. And the knowledge with

which Nehael had imbued him, he eagerly disseminated. His role was paradoxical: both mentor and

worshipper; teacher and priest.

At other times, he and Lai would leave Mulhuk, and walk beneath the trees in the region of Sisperi which had been called Soan, where the Werud – a confederation of tribes who had venerated the

Nireem – had once dwelt. The desolation was absolute, as all sapience had been extinguished by the tide of demons which had ravaged the world.

One cold morning, not far from where Eadric had slain the babau Uort,* Druid and Goddess had come

across the remains of a settlement, its inhabitants driven off or butchered a century before. The stench of death and decay still clung to the place; a pall of Abyssal misery, which

might take millennia to clear. Nwm sat upon a moss-covered outcrop – all that remained of an ancient granary.

“What of Saes?” He had sighed. “Little can proceed without her.”

“I have tried. She will not respond. The gate to Ruk is closed. She is mad. Bloated on Death.**”

“You must persist. She may, in time, be persuaded,”

Lai laughed drily. “You do not know her as I do. Another way must be found. But something else has occurred to you.”

“There may be alternatives,” Nwm said carefully. “There are tribes in the North of my world. Some

may be willing to undertake the journey here. To begin afresh. But I will not deceive them: demons lurk around every corner, and I suspect Sisperi will never be rid of *them* entirely. How would they even understand an entreaty made by you or Rhul? And they would bring their own gods with them, Lai. It might serve only to speed your demise.”

“A chance I am willing to take.”

Nwm shrugged. “Others can come, and when they die, Saes will claim them. Trees can be *awakened*, and when they die, Saes will claim them too. Saes is the key – all other solutions are merely

temporary.”

“If another could be persuaded to go and speak with her. Eadric perhaps?”

Nwm shook his head. “It is unlikely. He has discharged his vow, and other matters concern him. And Saes might entrap him: Graz’zt would trade a whole world for the *Ahma*. I lack the necessary tact – or guile. No, I think Ortwine might be the answer.”

Lai’s lip curled, and the sky darkened momentarily. “I will return to Afqithan, if I must. But I mistrust her.”

“And she, you. But her mendacity may be your ally.” He smiled grimly, and became serious. “She is no pawn, Lai. If she condescends to aid you, it will be on her terms.”

“I will send her a *dream*. It will be neutral territory.”

“It might be preferable if I speak to her,” Nwm suggested. “We have a bond that endures across four lifetimes, and she knows I will not deceive her.”

“If you deem it best,” the Goddess reluctantly agreed.

**

“I would like to extend my gratitude to the Assembly for allowing me to speak,” the Alienist began.

“My particular thanks to Daunton, for acting as my sponsor in this matter.”

They had convened at Mostin’s – formerly Shomei’s – estate outside of Morne: thirty-one mages

gathered in an audience hall around a great, oval table, carved from ebony and inlaid with scenes from Irrenite myth. Some sat. Some stood, or leaned on staves. Most were human. Rimilin of the Skin was there: he sat alone, shunned by all others.

Even Waide remained silent, aware that an untimely display of sarcasm might earn the ire of many of those present. Mostin – it was rumoured – was about to make some grand philanthropic gesture, and

most were concerned that the Alienist was sufficiently eccentric to change his mind for no other reason than mild annoyance. Nothing should jeopardize this improbable event.

Mostin's lidless eyes scanned those present as he fondled Mogus, the obscene, fist-sized pseudonatural which lived in a nondimensional space within his tunic. In sympathy, the orbs on his *robe of eyes* rotated in a disturbing fashion, fixing first one, and then another of those present.

"Mulissu and Shomei are gone," Mostin continued. "Two great lights have left us – to whichever fates they have chosen for themselves. We are diminished. I am left with the burden of being the greatest living Wizard in Wyre, although perhaps not on this plane – something I will come to in due course.

Many of you consider me both aloof and deranged, and I will deny neither. I am, however, indisputably, a genius."

Waide sighed.

Mostin ignored him. "Jovol's legacy remains with us, and if we dwell within the borders of Wyre, we must abide by it. For those of us with the resources – and I count myself fortunate in this regard – the option of continuing our conjurations is open, if we have another base from which to operate. I have erected my *portable manse* outside of Wyre's borders in order to facilitate this. This has proven controversial amongst some of you gathered here, as it might be claimed that it circumvents the spirit –

if not the letter – of the Second Injunction. I am not alone in this regard, however."

Mostin stared pointedly at the Hag Jalael, Rimilin, and Wigdryt – a smoke mephit.

"This is a testing time for us," Mostin continued, "but we must not waver in our faith in Jovol's

wisdom. His vision was more complete than we can appreciate, and he had access to methods which

are now lost to us."

A murmur rippled through the gathered mages. Rumour of the *web of motes* had been heard by all, although only a few knew of its true significance.

"I am about to make several assertions which may, on the surface, appear contradictory or paradoxical.

Let me posit a scenario," Mostin sighed. "As one who has experienced the power of the *web of motes* first-hand, this is not as improbable as it might sound. Jovol *knew* of the explosion of religious power which Tramst – the so-called *Sela* – exemplifies. He *knew* of

an impending conflict with the Cult of Cheshne. Furthermore, he chose death – *in violation of his own Injunction* – as a course preferable to allowing a second conjuration of Graz'zt. He knew that a renaissance in Uediian power would act as the best balance on all other concerns. The entity who was Fillein, then Jovol, has self-incarnated again, in the guise of a fey named Teppu.”

The revelation left all of those present – except for Rimilin – dumbstruck. The brief silence was quickly replaced by thirty chattering voices.

Mostin held up his hand, and a gong sounded.

“Please allow me to continue,” he smirked despite himself. An uneasy silence returned to the room.

“There will be time for questions after I have spoken, but there are a number of other issues I would like to address first.

“Most importantly, *Teppu is not Jovol*, at least in any meaningful sense, any more than Jovol was Fillein. I am unsure of the extent to which even his memories are retained. Teppu’s agenda is not Jovol’s agenda. He is driven by a different set of desires and philosophies, although there is, somehow –

perhaps hyperconsciously – a commonality of purpose. This higher purpose is related somehow to

Dream, and was partially illuminated by the oblique references that Jovol made to his understanding of the dialectical process.

“If we deal with Teppu – and I suspect we must – we should not expect to enjoy any kind of special rapport. Teppu is *Green*. His concern is a complex of energies involving feys, nature spirits, the goddess Uedii, and the natural world – something which he refers to as the *Viridity*: a burgeoning node of elemental power centered around these principles. The Viridity may be arising as some kind of

mediating effect to resolve the polarization of Oronthonian belief and the Cult of Nihilism from Shûth.

“Its effect in Afqithan *superseded the designs of Oronthon’s Adversary*. Accordingly, I have designated it a Greater Infinity. Its relationship with Oronthon himself is unclear, as is the relationship between the two foci – the *Sela* on one hand, and Nehael on the other. When I inspected the *web of motes* the sympathetic energy between the two was astounding, which leads me to suspect that a higher order of Intelligence is at work – perhaps the same order which drives Teppu, perhaps not. In any event, the final turn of the wheel in Afqithan revealed the Adversary as nothing more than a cog in some transcendental purpose. He had no inkling of the Viridity, and knowledge of it was – or is still –

shrouded from him.”

Waide could no longer contain himself. “Nehael is the succubus who started all this mess in the first place, am I correct?”

“Not exactly,” Mostin said smugly. “Nehael is no longer what she was. In fact, she may

have never

been what she formerly was – the Viridity is concerned primarily with the Now, the Moment. As such, what is past, and what is yet to come are in large measure irrelevant. According to that paradigm, all history is vacuous – and mutable.”

“This is mystical babble,” Jalael interjected. “I had expected more from you, Mostin.”

“Indulge me!” Mostin snapped. “And Waide, kindly allow me to speak without further interruption. I am trying to contextualize my actions, not justify current trends in religious thought.”

Daunton coughed. “Perhaps you might be a little more succinct, Mostin.”

“Oh very well,” the Alienist grumbled. He inhaled deeply, and thought for a moment.

“Let me speak of *artifacts*,” Mostin clearly enunciated the last word, and was not disappointed by the effect that it had on all of those present. “You have, doubtless, heard rumours regarding the *web of motes*. Its whereabouts is currently undetermined: its last known guardian was the demon Surab, who possessed Mulissu’s daughter, Iua, and was responsible for the death of the Savant. The *web of motes* itself is unlocatable by any means available to me. Surab is *mind blanked* by some device. It is of paramount importance that we retrieve this object. There is hope: I have made a *metagnostic inquiry* of a Pseudonatural entity named *Ghom* which dwells beyond the middle region. I believe that Surab is unaware of the true nature of the *web of motes*. I also believe that Iua is still alive – her form, which is young and nubile, may be pleasing to the demon. Surab may be unwilling – or unable – to reenter

Azzagrat, and has retreated to the unnamed regions between Hell and the Abyss.

“Also, the chthonic demoness Soneillon spoke of something named *Pharamne’s Urn* – an object of which she claimed ownership, but which had been appropriated by Prince Graz’zt at some point in the past. This item is of Aeonic potency: one in full possession of its powers – something which the Prince of Azzagrat *is not* – can *create universes*. Naturally, Graz’zt guards it jealously. Queen Soneillon could unlock it to a greater degree although, I suspect, she could not manifest its ultimate power: she was unusual for a demon in her command of ritual magic, something which is antithetical to the Abyssal mindset. She was also unique in many other ways.” An ironic smile crossed the Alienist’s face.

Mostin paused to take a sip of tea, and was mildly surprised – and gratified – to find his audience utterly enrapt.

“We are delicately poised,” Mostin continued. “Currently, as I am sure even the most politically

ignorant of you are aware, the *Sela*, Oronthon’s proxy, is on the field of battle, south of Wyre’s borders.

Whilst Prince Tagur attempts to rally support for the campaign in secular circles, the Temple – *and I trust we all recall that particular monolith* – has effectively reformed, albeit with a more thoughtful perspective and without the stigma attached to the name *Temple*. I’ll say the name again, for those of you who didn’t hear me: *Temple*. It is the

same band of lance-waving zealots as it was three years ago, and we must trust that Tramst has inculcated some measure of insight and tolerance in those involved.

“*This war is magical*. The initial skirmishes – which have proven inconclusive – have demonstrated that the *Sela* is fallible in this arena. His purview is enlightenment – whatever that means to an Oronthonian – and not conflict. We must decide – collectively – a policy in this matter. We are, of course, bound by the Injunction, *although we can act beyond Wyre’s borders*. But of the three main sects within the Cult of Cheshne, only one is technically subject to the law of the Claviger, and this has yet to be tested in practice.

“A friend once described such a conflict as *arcanoreligious* and I scoffed at the term. I am, however, beginning to think he – now she – was correct. It is fraught with legalistic complexity, which the Injunction must adapt to – although I have no doubt that the Claviger itself can anticipate many of the vagaries. If I am a theurge, and I conjure a demon within Wyre’s borders using arcane power, am I

subject to the same set of laws as I would be if I used a divinely granted boon to do the same? And we should not doubt that the devotees of Cheshne are both willing and able to do these things. Their vision is apocalyptic, in the extreme.

“This rather circuitous speech – and I apologize, Dauntion, if I was less *succinct* than you had hoped, brings me to the main thrust of my argument today: there are mages and hierophants within the Order of Cheshne who wield considerable power. Possibly more than me, even. Their exact names, numbers

and dispositions are hidden from us, but there are undoubtedly transvalent casters amongst them. We know only *Anumid*, who is their mouthpiece, and with whom Dauntion was granted a brief audience.

“Their veneration of Cheshne is absolute. They regard demons – even demonic nobility – in an entirely different light to those of us exposed to Oronthonian dogma. *Ugras* – fierce protectors – of ancient methods and teachings. This is their Truth, and who are we to gainsay it?

“We cannot hide from this. We must adopt a position – even if it is one of noninvolvement: something, incidentally, which I most emphatically discourage. I am not asking you to submit to my whim in this

matter, but I do request that my counsel is acknowledged, if nothing else. Waide distrusts and despises me – and the feeling is entirely mutual. But we have agreed to go to the Claviger for direction in our antipathy for one another, because both of us realize that our personal feelings for one another cannot be allowed to interfere with the larger picture.

“My appeal today is complex. First, I ask for help in recovering the *web of motes*. It is a tool which we can use to great effect – *let me finish, Waide*. Furthermore – as unlikely as this might seem – I owe it to Mulissu to see her daughter returned safely: I am rather fond of Iua.

“Second – and I will preempt cries of ‘foul’ before they are issued – I believe, for a variety of reasons, that it is within our mutual interest to confine the Demon Prince Graz’zt. He is one of the chief *Ugras* and we run the risk of him being conjured by our enemies and sent against us. The prize, if we can accomplish this, is *Pharamne’s Urn* – if we can get to it

before anyone else. I am in the possession of a transvalent spell bequeathed to me by Jovol which I believe can accomplish this infallibly *if I have the unqualified support of the Assembly in this matter*. The spell – which is outmoded, and I suspect against which Graz’zt has developed defenses – can be modified. Even a demon of Graz’zt’s stature cannot

withstand our combined power.

“Third, we must develop a coherent strategy to counter the threat from the Cult of Cheshne. We cannot be sidelined in this matter; neither can we allow ourselves to be overcome piecemeal, one-by-one. We must unite to address this danger. This runs counter to a thousand years of tradition, I know, but change is upon us. We live in a new world. We must adapt, or we *will* be broken. I have considered various possibilities as to how this can be accomplished, and I am willing to discuss them at length when the debate begins.”

Mostin took another sip of tea – which had gone cold – before continuing, He swallowed reflexively, as if in great doubt, and closed his eyes.

“Word has probably already spread that I am willing to make Shomei’s library available to the arcane community. This is so. But, in case any of you have doubts as to my earnestness in regard to the matters of which I have spoken – and my sense of urgency – I would like to go further. I have a well-deserved reputation for miserliness, I know, and this may come as something of a shock. So consider this as a display of enlightened self-interest.

“I would like to turn over Shomei’s entire estate *in perpetuity* to the Wizards of Wyre, as the starting point of a collective endeavour. I will donate my own library to the enterprise, and urge you all to do the same. I propose a repository of learning, and a testing ground for intellects as yet undiscovered. An *Academy*, if you will. We should embrace the Injunction, and display it above our gates as our Law, but also recognize it as our guiding principle. And I should like to nominate Daunton to be elected as our first President.”

Thirty-one jaws, including that of Rimilin of the Skin, dropped.

When Waide had recovered his composure, he smiled bitterly. He knew that Mostin had finally won,

and left his indelible mark on history.

* This story may have to wait for some time.

** Saes, the Nireem goddess concerned with death, had allied herself with Graz’zt when the demon

invested the plane, seeing an opportunity to augment her own power when the inevitable tide of

slaughter followed. She gathered the spirits of all dead things to herself, swelling her strength, and guarded her prizes jealously. When Graz’zt withdrew his main force to defend Azzagrat, Saes sealed the entrance to Ruk, the underworld. Nwm’s efforts to use remains he had discovered to *reincarnate* some of those who had died in the conflict, in order to repopulate Sisperi, were foiled: Saes refused to relinquish their souls.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 05-09-06

THE PROSPECT OF EMBASSIES

In the aftermath of the Confrontation in Afqithan, Nwm the Preceptor assumed the form of a great raven and took to the skies. He surveyed the scene below: had it been any ordinary battle, a glut of flesh would have been his for the taking. But amongst the heaped corpses of demons and monsters, all carrion was foul. Ichor, not blood, stained the glades beneath the towering trees.

Purposefully, he winged his way to where I lay dead upon the field: foes whom I had felled were scattered around. His pinions cracked once, and his talons came to rest upon a heap of varrangoin. I beheld him through lifeless eyes as he approached: my spirit lingered, unwilling to abandon my body.

“A third time will I restore you,” he cawed. “And a fourth and a fifth, if need be. We are in need of every ally which we can find. The seed must sprout. The shoot must be tended.”

Gently, he lifted me upwards, and screeched, invoking ancient goddesses who had slumbered for

millennia, and whose names he alone knew. With a violent passion, life returned to me again.

“How was death?” He asked.

“Cold,” I replied. I smiled, and exulted in my new form, relishing its power and subtlety. I cast my sight about, perceiving the interwoven lattice of life and magic which suffused the place. “This is your doing?” I asked.

“In part,” he answered, winging his way toward Irknaan’s Fortress. “What now?”

“I will remain here,” I answered. “Afqithan is mine, now.”

He cocked his head. “That is a bold claim. How will you enforce it?”

“With ruthless charm,” I replied.

Nwm stood beneath the sagging boughs of a great deodar, a tree not native to Trempe, but rather one of a dozen imported generations earlier, by an aristocrat with a taste for the exotic; some forebear of Eadric of Deorham, whose name the Druid could not recollect. The late afternoon sun shone warm

through the deep green of its canopy. He watched her approach, studying her carefully.

Her poise and grace were effortless, and her natural footfall, silent. She wore the same, tattered cloak and stained jerkin that she always had, but bore a buckler of sidhe metal strapped to her arm, won in Afqithan from one of the thousands who had perished there. Her face – breathtaking in its beauty –

displayed only the slightest hint of contempt.

“Will this take long?” She asked as she drew near.

“It may,” Nwm replied. “Lai has a favour to ask you.”

Ortwine’s eyes narrowed. “And what does your deific protégé require of me?”

“To embark upon a series of negotiations, with a goddess named Saes.” Nwm replied. He attempted to sound casual. “It is better if I say nothing else. I am merely the courier.”

“Somehow, I doubt that,” Ortwine replied. “Perhaps you think I might be less apt to view an old friend with suspicion?”

“There is no joy left in you, Ortwine.”

“Let’s just get this over with,” Ortwine sighed.

**

As Nwm and Ortwine travelled to Sisperi, and Mostin addressed the largest gathering of mages for a

century, Eadric sat confined with the devils Titivilus and Murmuur in the summoning room. It was the third day of the interrogation.

Mostin had been irked by the fact that Ortwine and the *Ahma* had caused Titivilus to crumple so quickly: the Alienist had expected a more protracted negotiation. He had attempted for months to

wheedle information from the confined Dukes, but had had neither the time nor the resources to

develop a spell which would reliably subdue them: if an unprepared magick were to have failed, and a Duke were to break free, things would have become very messy, very quickly. One free would have

become three free, and three of them together would have overwhelmed him. But the Wizard was

relieved that he could – for a while, at least – avoid the two remaining Devils. He was implicated in the assassination of an Infernal magnate, and would enjoy the enmity of Dis until the end of his days.

The *Ahma* and Titivilus had spoken of the Adversary’s role in Afqithan, of the deployment of Devils under Azazel, of Murmuur’s Tower – now abandoned on the demiplane and, apparently, inert. Titivilus had speculated at length regarding the Infernal decision made to support Azzagrat – a subtle balancing act, to prevent Orcus gaining supremacy in his war with Graz’zt in the Abyss itself.

Many of Graz’zt’s champions had perished, nonetheless, either in the Confrontation or shortly

thereafter. Ainhorr, Cemdrei, Uort and a slew of others were no more. Melihaen had abandoned her

master and fled to Throile, throwing in her lot with Adyell and the battered remnants of Soneillon’s horde. Others had joined with Rhyxali, or Kostchtchie, or slunk away to Yutuf or Terkunuteng to lick their wounds, as their individual whim or interest dictated.

In Zelatar itself, Ilistet had rallied Graz'zt's army and led a savage counterattack against the undead host of Orcus. The war ebbed and flowed, but a stagnant impasse – which suited Hell's designs – seemed

inevitable. The Prince of Azzagrat was fighting a defensive war which might last for millennia. His power had been curbed, and his ambition thwarted. Nehael was no longer captive. The *Ahma* had won, though the victory was bitter and empty.

Throughout the exchange with Titivilus, Murmuur had remained silent. Eadric regarded him with a

mixed feeling, which included a grudging admiration. Here was a soldier, pure and simple. Loyal,

steadfast, unwavering in his devotion to his beliefs, and utterly, irredeemably *evil*.

The *Ahma* sat, and laid *Lukarn* unsheathed across his knees.

"We have a few loose ends to tie up," Eadric sighed. "You may use surmise, but I will be alert to any attempted falsehood. If you try to mislead or prevaricate, I will annihilate you. Am I clear?"

"Yes," Titivilus grinned.

Eadric raised an eyebrow. The Devil already seemed cooperative. Did he think that Mostin's absence would make the *Ahma* more pliable, or was the prospect of his freedom causing him to be less opaque than normal? He grunted, and shifted his position.

"Tell me of Shomei. From your skewed perspective."

"Her soul is in a self-induced state of perdition. By rejecting *Saizhan* she made a conscious decision to consign herself to Hell. You have no authority in acts of individual volition."

"I have as much authority as I choose to assume," Eadric grimaced, "but I agree that it would be pointless to try to rectify the situation." He remembered his own conversation with Shomei too well, as well as the words and actions of the *Akesoli*.

"If you say so, *Ahma*."

"Is she in Dis?" Eadric asked, irritated.

"In Cania. Astaroth purchased her from the *Akesoli*. Perhaps neither Dispater nor Belial could meet their price: that is surmise, for the record."

"For what purpose?"

"She is a valuable prize," Titivilus smirked. "And the Grand Duke has an eye for the spirits of powerful mages."

"As currency?"

"To gloat over. Perhaps he will offer her unlife, for her immortal service. Pacts can extend beyond death, *Ahma*. Before you *smite* me, I should tell you that that is also surmise."

Eadric suppressed a shiver.

The Infernal Duke smiled. “The inducements offered by a Devil such as Astaroth are hard to resist,” he persisted.

“And the *web of motes*, Titivilus?” Eadric asked, ignoring the goad. “Where might that be?”

“Frankly, I’m disappointed that Mostin has not contrived a spell to locate it. Find Surab, and you’ll find the *web*. I do not know its location.”

Eadric thought for a moment.

Titivilus spoke. “There is other information that I would like to impart to you. It is freely given.”

“Or rather, the price is invisible,” Eadric said stonily.

“Quite. Do you wish to hear it or no?” Titivilus gloated.

“I suppose I must.”

“My mandate as your tempter was revoked some time ago. Before my embassy to Azzagrat, in fact.”

“Why?” Eadric was suspicious.

“I do not know.”

” *Surmise!* ” Eadric snapped.

.

“To make way for one whom my superiors felt more suited, I assume. Or perhaps it was an

abandonment of the task altogether.”

“You failed, then?”

“I thought I was doing rather well. No matter. Are we finished, now? Will you kindly release me?”

“I regret not. I fear that I have mislead you.”

The *Ahma* prayed briefly, buoying himself with Oronthon’s power. *Unholy auras* flickered in response within the thaumaturgic diagrams as the devils anticipated Eadric’s intention. *Lukarn* gained a silver sheen, and then the *Ahma* spoke a *holy word*. The devils’ confining circles were shattered under the assault. Titivilus screamed silently, transfixed, as light overwhelmed him, but Murmuur withstood the barrage.

Incoherently, Titivilus struck Eadric with a quickened *feeblemind* and attempted to dispel the *dimensional lock* placed by Mostin on the chamber, but failed. Murmuur lashed out with a rapid *meteor swarm* and leapt at Eadric, smiting him with as much vile power as he could muster.

Titivilus, paralyzed, fell quickly to a series of brutal strokes from *Lukarn*.

Eadric stared at Murmuur, who remained defiant. Unexpectedly, compassion welled up within the

Ahma. He had no choice but to act upon it.

“Yield!” Eadric’s voice thundered in the confines of the summoning room. “Submit to my mercy. You are no match for me.”

More blows were exchanged, and each hewed through the armour of the other. Murmuur staggered

uncertainly.

“Yield!” Eadric demanded.

“I cannot,” Murmuur smiled sadly. “We are forever lost, *Ahma*. Do you not yet understand?”

Lukarn fell three times, and the duke dropped to the floor.

Eadric closed his eyes as his mind contained the magnitude of his deed. The line had finally been

drawn. There would be no more negotiation.

**

Lai sat cross-legged before a fire pit, in which a ruddy flame flickered. Runes lay cast about her, and her handmaidens fussed nearby, pouring nectar into bowls of exquisitely carved wood. She regarded

Ortwine carefully, anxious to avoid a conflict.

Nwm, who stood nearby, was clad only in a simple green robe tied about his waist with a length of

rough hemp. He scratched the dirt at his feet with slender staff cut from a young hornbeam, and

avoided Ortwine’s glare. His beard and hair seemed inordinately long to the *sidhe*, as though their cultivation might somehow hold the key to the mysteries into which the Druid had been initiated. A faint aura of Green surrounded Nwm – the *dwimmerhame* which protected him from hostile magicks.

His hands and forearms were scarred from the massive backlash energies he routinely employed.

“You are welcome here as an honoured guest,” Lai said smoothly, “and what is ours, is yours. Please sit.”

Ortwine scowled, and lounged casually, resting on her left arm. Nwm coughed, and kneeled next to the goddess.

“Let’s get straight to the point,” Ortwine smiled coldly. “Nwm tells me that you wish me to act as your messenger. You wish me to enter the abode of the Goddess of Death – I have not forgotten who *Saes is*, Nwm – in order to strike some kind of bargain.”

“Yes,” Lai nodded. “To secure the release of the spirits which she has hoarded.”

“This is no small task.”

“Indeed,” Lai admitted.

“If I were to agree, it would require sizeable recompense. What do you think that such an endeavour –

if successful – is worth, Nwm?”

“I am gratified that you retain your mercenary tendencies,” Nwm said drily.

“Do you have a price in mind?” Lai inquired.

“Divinity is acceptable to me.”

Nwm guffawed. His expression changed to one of incredulity, when he saw that Ortwine was serious.

“You are a *sidhe*-queen, Ortwine! What more can you require?”

“Homage is pleasant, Nwm, but I think you’d agree that worship would be preferable.”

“It is not within the power of the Nireem to grant you what you seek...” Lai began.

“Then you’d better find a way, goddess, because until you do, there will be no deal.”

**

Eadric felt edgy. He looked from the highest window of the Steeple, casting his gaze south and east in the direction of the *Sela*’s forces – although they were two hundred leagues beyond the limit of his vision. Below, lights and campfires were kindling amid a sea of tents – not warriors and soldiers, but pilgrims who had made their way to Deorham in the hope of catching a glimpse of the *Ahma*, and to walk in holy places. He turned to Mostin, who sat preoccupied in thought. They had touched briefly upon the topic of the Cult of Cheshne, towards whom both now earnestly bent their will.

“What are they *doing*? Why do they not act?”

“The Hierophants are devising and casting spells,” Mostin grimaced. “Very potent spells. This takes time.”

“And then?”

“They unleash the storm.”

“Could you perhaps be a little more specific?” Eadric inquired.

“Opening a *gate* is child’s play to these mages, Eadric. They compact demonic nobility. *Bhítis* and *Ugras*.”

“How long do we have? Who will they send?”

“I don’t know. If it were me, I’d start with a few balors. Just to get things warmed up – pardon the pun.

When that happens, you’ll know that the big spells are ready – they won’t begin before they’re prepared.

I think we have a month or two, at least.”

“Can we counter it?”

“If we pool our resources. A grand alliance, so to speak.”

“And the Injunction?” Eadric looked sceptical.

“Only applies within Wyre’s borders.” Mostin’s eyes suddenly narrowed. “Which is why the Assembly

– which is demonstrating as much inertia as I expected – needs to come up with some solid offensive strategies. Fast. I would like to speak with your *Sela*. Can you arrange it?

“Er...yes,” the *Ahma* looked surprised. “I had intended to leave for the South in two days. Can you wait?”

“No,” Mostin shook his head vigorously. “How about now?”

“There is *áuda* tonight and tomorrow – blessings which I am duty-bound to bestow, when I can. And I’d like to speak to the thaumaturge, Sineig – Canec informed me earlier that he has made the journey here from Gibilrazen on foot.”

“The Irrenite? He is rather controversial, I hear.” Mostin seemed amused.

“And becoming increasingly popular. He has quite the following.”

“People like sex,” Mostin shrugged. “If you include it in your praxis, it’s bound to generate a lot of interest. And if you make intercourse with demons a central tenet, you will attract a certain kind of devotee.”

“He is treading a dangerous path,” Eadric sighed.

“But one not without precedent,” Mostin replied drily.

“My religion has been transformed beyond all recognition,” Eadric groaned. “And I am responsible for much of it. Most cannot grasp the teachings which Sineig presents. Many of those who follow his

example will be broken.”

“But a few will shine,” Mostin insisted. “They *choose*, Eadric.”

“Choice is overrated,” Eadric sighed.

“It is preferable to spiritual despotism.”

“Is that an ethical stance I detect, Mostin?”

“Only insofar as it applies to me. Now, can we leave?” Mostin nagged. “I’ll have you back within an hour.”

Eadric nodded.

**

“I require celestial sponsorship,” Mostin sniffed, looking at Tramst. “My pseudonatural servitors are not suited for routine defense, and require a great deal of effort to summon and control. I have alienated many fiendish allies, and lack a versatile pool of potential compactees. I also suspect that Dispaten may have placed a sizeable contract on my head, or will shortly. Can you help?”

Eadric gaped. The *Sela* seemed amused.

“How do you propose that I might do that?”

Mostin sighed. “Obviously, to sanction my *gating* of celestials and to waive any normal fees that I would otherwise incur for *planar bindings*. I don’t see what the problem is. We’re on the same side, here. I would stipulate only that celestials who serve me refrain from displaying their wings, or change them to something less offensive – those of bats or insects are acceptable.”

“It is not within my remit to make compacts.”

“That’s absurd,” Mostin waved a hand. “You’re Oronthon as well as Tramst, aren’t you? Just expand your remit.”

Eadric groaned. ” *Sela...*”

Tramst held up a hand. “I know.” He turned to Mostin. “I appreciate any agency that you might provide, Mostin, despite your motivation. But you need to adopt a more conventional approach in this.

I cannot *ease* your path to power, can I? How would that be of benefit to you? Perhaps you should speak to a celestial?”

“It is precisely in order to avoid their blinkered perspective that I am talking to you,” Mostin groaned.

“I do not require *moral instruction*.”

The *Ahma* coughed politely.

“Oh shut up, Eadric. So the answer is ‘no,’ then? Must I look to another source because the *Sela* is unwilling to help me help him?”

Eadric turned beet red, and opened his mouth to deliver an angry admonishment. Once again, the *Sela* raised his hand, staying his words.

We teach according to the wisdom of those who hear.

“I do not deal with the conventional, Mostin,” the *Sela* was imperturbable. “But allow me to speak for Enitharmon: if you demonstrate your commitment, I have no doubt that it will be regarded favourably by those high in the celestial host. I believe that Jovol and Rintrah enjoyed good relations.”

“Commitment?” Mostin asked suspiciously.

“You would need to refrain from routinely invoking fiends.”

“And their pseudonatural analogues?”

“The host would not recognize such a distinction,” Tramst smiled.

“And other pseudonaturals?”

“They would make no distinction there, either. As such, these entities would be acceptable.”

“I will abide by these terms for the nonce,” Mostin said grudgingly, “although giving up the daemons will be a wrench.”

“They are not *terms*, Mostin, and I am in no means acting as guarantor. But if you are seeking to curry

celestial support, it is traditional that one show willing in certain areas. You might also aid the *Ahma* in his coming task.”

Eadric cocked his head. “I have a task? That will be a refreshing change to determining my own fate.

What is it?”

“On Nehael’s initiative there will be a nonpartisan embassy which represents all Wyrish interests, spiritual and secular. You must parley with Anumid: we must attempt to resolve this peaceably, even if it is doomed to fail. Both Prince Tagur and Daunton have agreed to the effort.”

The *Ahma* swallowed reflexively. “And is my role to be religious or mundane?”

“Both. You are the *Ahma* and the Earl of Deorham.”

“One high in the Order – a former Templar – would be of aid to me. Sercion or Brey.”

“I can spare neither,” the *Sela* said simply. “Nor would I, if I could. They are too unformed for such a task.”

“There are no others,” Eadric grimaced.

“Amongst the living.”

Eadric was dumbstruck. *Must I break every rule?*

You are the Ahma. You do what needs to be done. If you cling to outdated dogma, then what hope do we have?

Must I slay you, as well?

Time will tell. The *Sela* smiled.

“And you also expect me to embark on this futile mission?” Mostin asked.

“Your presence would demonstrate a degree of cohesion; a unity of purpose.”

“Which we do not possess,” Mostin snapped.

“Yet,” Tramst replied. “I remain optimistic, however. I think it is fair to suggest that all desire it, but none are quite sure about how to realize it.”

**

The tomb and reliquary of Saint Tahl the Incorruptible were situated in a small chapel adjoining the Great Temple of Morne, and were reached from the main transept through a wrought iron gate which

always remained open: the faithful, who sought Tahl’s intercession, could at any time offer prayer to him.

When Eadric arrived, only a single petitioner kneeled in quiet contemplation. By her ascetic appearance

– she wore little more than rags, and her hair and nails were long and filthy – the *Ahma* judged her to be an Urgic pilgrim from eastern Trempe or Ardan. Or rather, she would have been one, before such

distinctions had become irrelevant. The air of the chapel was thick with incense, and slender candles burned steadily upon a small altar.

She gaped as Eadric lit a taper and kneeled next to her. ” *Ahma*, I...” she began to whisper.

“I’m sorry for disturbing you,” Eadric bowed. “What is your name?”

“Beka, *Ahma*.”

“I would have you be a witness, Beka. If the later interpretation of events becomes fraught with untruths and idle speculation, you will remember what happened here. You are charged with preserving an accurate account. Will you accept this responsibility?”

” *Ahma*, I...”

“If you wish to leave, you may. I would prefer that you stayed, however. Will you indulge me?”

The pilgrim nodded dumbly.

Eadric stood, and removed his gauntlets. Reaching out, he ran his hand over the face of the marble effigy of Tahl: a figure lying in quiet repose, hands clasped upon the quillons of a greatsword, upon the lid of a sarcophagus. He mustered as much strength as he could.

Eadric hefted the lid, pushed it sideways, and lowered it carefully, so that it rested against the side of the tomb. Inside were a scourge, a sword, and a wooden casket, almost pristine. Eadric prised it open, gagging at the stench which rose up to greet him.

Beka turned her head away, aghast, and held her breath.

“In these days, even the dead will have no rest,” he intoned.

There was a momentary flash, and Tahl’s decayed form changed abruptly. His eyes opened.

” *Ahma*?”

“My apologies for interrupting your bliss, Tahl. There is much to be done, and I need your help.”

“Of course,” Tahl smiled. “Where is my armour?”

“Sercion wears it,” Eadric laughed. Tears streamed down his face.

“Is the *Sela* here?”

“No. That meeting will have to wait.”

“I am the first?”



“You will not be the last.” Eadric nodded.

“Who is next?”

“Rede,” the *Ahma* looked pained.

“He has become wrathful. A spirit of vengeance.”

“So much the better,” Eadric smiled grimly.

**

She was waiting quietly for the Alienist when he returned to his manse. When he saw her, blood

hammered in his temples, and he briefly contemplated whether or not to flee. His *arcane sight* revealed no detail about her, impenetrable as she was to divination. Nonetheless, he knew her. Power radiated from her. The Claviger had magnified her.

“Am I to be arraigned?” He asked. “Eliminated?”

“You will make some tea,” Gihaahia said with a wicked smile. “And then we will discuss the finer points of the Injunction.”

“Do you take milk?” Mostin breathed a sigh of relief.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 05-23-06 at 2:25 am.

Untitled Update

Iua paced back and forth. Violent impulses crowded within her mind, and the recollection of fell deeds felt sweet in her mouth. But huge gaps remained in her memory.

She touched the pommel of her rapier lightly, feeling reassured by its presence. Through her gloved hand, a frisson of power from the weapon made her head spin, as though she had consumed too much

kschiff.

Egress from the chamber was impossible. As opulent as it might be, she was a prisoner there. The door to the place – if it was a door – showed no sign of lock or handle, and was constructed of some kind of adamant. She had attempted to *plane shift* without success, and even in a *gaseous form* she had been unable to pass through the embrasure – a spell prevented passage, and Iua lacked the means to counter it. Looking out, all she saw was a smoking slope which extended below her as far as she could see. At irregular intervals, the ground was wracked by convulsions and liquid fire erupted.

I am Iua. I am in some Hell or other. I have had an enchantment laid on me: my memory has been selectively erased. I am not dead. I don't think I am.

She knew that there were significant people and places in her life – Mulissu, Ortwin, Ulao, Fumaril, Magathei, Trempa – but she could not clearly remember any events connected with them. When she

tried to construct any memory associated with them, it would elude her, and remain tantalizingly

beyond her grasp.

She sat upon the bed and waited. She opened her bag – which contained a number of apparently potent items – and laid the contents before her again, as if they might hold the key to her past. A sapphire, rings, amulets, a tiny boat, a lump of dark stone, a sphere, a flat panel of curious design. She gazed at them for a long while, but became frustrated. She replaced them in her bag.

Time passed.

A sound – a low *click* – finally reached her ears. Iua leapt silently to the side of the portal, drawing her blade. As the door slid open, she dashed forth, intent on escape and slaying any in her way.

None stood there, but as her foot passed over the threshold to the chamber, her memory was suddenly restored to her in full.

She screamed.

**

It was the first time that the *Ahma* and Nehael had met since their brief exchange during the aftermath of Afqithan. Eadric had not so much purposefully shunned her, he told

himself as he walked to meet her, as been occupied with other, more pressing duties. As had she.

That must be why I feel like vomiting, he sighed.

She was sitting in a wicker chair in the same spot which Cynric had favoured; the place where Feezuu had blasted the Prelate into oblivion. The same place where Graz'zt himself had stood and spoken the dreadful syllables which had resulted in the greatest carnage in Morne's long history. Her presence seemed like a potent salve applied to an open wound.

She smiled when she saw him, causing his head to spin yet further. He sat shakily next to her, and noticed that she smelled like summer rain. He thought briefly.

"Do you retain a sense of irony?" He asked.

She raised an eyebrow.

"That's a good sign," he breathed tensely. "I'm sorry for avoiding you. Too much has passed. I didn't know where to begin. We are not what we were. Other clichés to that effect. I'm now being facetious to cover my discomfort."

Relax.

He relaxed a little.

"I would learn everything that has passed for you," Nehael said softly. "The totality of your experience.

It will help me understand better."

"That may take some time."

"You need not speak. You need not even articulate thoughts and memories that are too uncomfortable for you. First, I would share myself with you in the same manner. It is the only way to heal the trauma.

A perfect communion."

"Nehael, I..."

"Do not reject me now, *Ahma*."

He clenched his jaw, and nodded. "How?"

"Consider *Saizhan*, and what it teaches. Can you adopt a Sophist perspective for a moment? Allow that truth to assert itself?"

"How will that help?"

"It will contextualize your perceptions. Place them within a framework which is familiar."

Eadric groaned. "Others seem to alternate between religious truths far easier than I. My transitions are more fraught. But I will do as you ask."

"Are you ready?"

"Now?"

"Exactly," she smiled. "NOW."

A soft hand reached out, and gently touched his face. His eyelids became heavy.

“Do not close your eyes!” Nehael laughed.

Reality shattered into a billion fragments, and was replaced by Itself.

*

Eadric was possessed of a piercing clarity, in which the world astounded him with its vibrancy and beauty. He looked at Nehael. She was perfect. The oranges hanging nearby – yet to come to full

ripeness – were perfect. He listened to the conversation of Temple guards by the gates of the

compound, smelled the incense which burned upon the high altar, felt the breeze upon his face on the roof of the Great Fane. He tasted the salt on his lips which blew on the wind from the marshes to the south of Morne. He beheld an ant climbing a rose-bush in a garden in the Bevel. All was perfect.

Beyond all – or beneath all – was a vibration which was inaudible, invisible, and without form. Infinite, yet apprehended in its entirety.

Viridity, he knew. His breath was quick and shallow.

Nehael smiled. “Know me.”

The *Ahma* turned his consciousness – which had become all-encompassing – towards her.

In the space of a fleeting moment, he realized everything about her. Every thought, every memory,

every feeling she had ever experienced within her life since her rebirth through the Tree, and a myriad of other lives in cycles within cycles. But stretching back uncounted aeons to the beginning of time itself were another set of memories: impressions which were like dreams, and belonged to one who was no more. Past the Fall, until the Nehael who never was existed only as an unmanifest thought within the Mind of Oronthon. A gnostic ecstasy swept over him.

Abruptly, it ended as she withdrew her power from him. He quaked at the separation from the source.

As his ego emerged from the reverie and his persona recrystallized, his breathing slowed again. He focused his mind.

” *Saizho*,” he bowed.

He looked at her as her mind absorbed his own experience in its fullness. A single tear ran down her cheek: he watched, and as it fell and struck the floor of the orangery, a thousand tiny flowers erupted from the flagstones.

“You loved her,” she smiled.

“Very much,” he nodded.

“I am sorry for your loss.”

He sighed. “She was my *kius*. The shadow which brought the Good into sharp relief.”

“And now?”

“I see the light with clear eyes. Much doubt has passed.”

“But the dreams persist, *Ahma*. Her vestige has not abandoned you, and clings yet to your memories.

She exists in you most of all.”

**

Mostin fidgeted nervously, waiting for the tea to steep. He glanced sidelong at the Enforcer, who was examining a collection of infernal curios upon one of the shelves in his study. She had assumed a

black-clad humanoid shape, approximately female, with impossibly red hair. She turned to face him, and her eyes bored into him. Mostin quickly looked away, jerked his hand spasmodically, and promptly spilled the sugar.

“Sh*t,” he muttered.

“I relish the rare moments in which I am permitted to manifest a body,” Gihaahia said, smiling.

Gods, don’t smile. It’s too unnerving.

“And a discrete consciousness,” the Enforcer added, almost as an afterthought. She sat. “Two sugars, please.”

Mostin poured the tea shakily. Most of it found its way into the cup.

“You purport to champion the philosophical tenets which underpin the Injunction,” Gihaahia took the cup from the Alienist’s uncertain grasp. “Yet you evince a grudging literalism in your approach. As though it were a matter of convenience – or inconvenience – for you. I refer specifically, of course, to the fact that you have chosen to erect your abode *here* – less than a bowshot from the bounds of Wyre as defined in the nineteenth article. Some might view such a decision as purposely defiant and

inflammatory.”

“I think...”

“Shut up, Mostin. I haven’t finished, yet. You are forgiven for this quasi-infraction. The Claviger loves all of her children, even the wayward ones.”

Her? Children? Uedii’s teats. She’s deranged.

“You remain embroiled in political maneuvering – *shut your mouth, Mostin. I’m still talking.* Before you accuse me of arbitrariness, I have already determined to visit Dauntton with the same warning. He’s as bad as you are. Your *Académie* will sink before it has a chance to establish itself if you persist in this attitude. You are inciting other mages to violence. You are conspiring to conjure a demon prince – *yes, I know you don’t plan to bind him in Wyre.* You are a rabble-rouser, and a danger to the body magickal.

And as for Astaroth...”

Mostin gaped. Only hours before, a fleeting thought had passed through his mind regarding the Lord of Caina. The Alienist had mused – for all of two seconds – upon the possibility of *binding* the archdevil and forcing him to relinquish Shomei to him.

She has made her choice, Mostin.

Mostin scowled.

“I am sadistic and vindictive, Mostin,” Gihaahia’s eyes narrowed to burning slits. “And nothing would give me greater pleasure than to rend your body and hurl it into the Phlegethon. The Claviger is more reasonable, however – which is fortunate for you. You will desist forthwith from all political activity when you are within Wyre’s confines. This includes plotting to assault the Cult of Cheshne; associating in councils of war with the *Ahma*, the *Sela* or any other representative of Oronthon; offering advice to any of Wyre’s temporal leaders; or conspiring with other mages to summon demons. If you choose to engage in any of these activities, *let it be outside of Wyre*. If you violate these terms, you will be exiled for a period of one hundred years upon pain of obliteration if you re-enter the proscribed area. Am I clear?”

Mostin nodded dumbly.

“You would be well advised to reflect upon the spirit of the Injunction when making choices regarding these matters. Conjuring Graz’zt ten yards from Wyre’s borders will be regarded as insolent, at the very least. Continuing your plots and machinations in a *magnificent mansion* which abuts Shomei’s estate would be considered scandalous. Whilst neither would draw direct retribution, they would predispose the Claviger to a less lenient position if you were arraigned in the future. You may now speak. Be swift.

Do you have any questions?”

“Many. Does the Injunction apply to arcanists from Shûth?”

“Of course.”

“If I am assailed by a hierophant within Wyre, may I defend myself with impunity?”

” *Defend*, yes,” Gihaahia sighed.

“If I open a permanent portal from Shomei’s earthly demesne to her astral retreat and convene a council whose agenda is at odds with the Injunction, will it be held against me in the future?”

The threat of the Enforcer’s titanic mental grip loomed over Mostin. He knew that she could squash his psyche with a passing thought.

“These are practical considerations,” Mostin wailed. “Our existence is threatened.”

“Adhere to the Injunction, Mostin. In letter and spirit. The Claviger looks after her own. You will not be abandoned.”

“What do you mean?” Mostin asked.

“Precisely that,” Gihaahia smiled her evil smile.

“I need to...” Mostin began.

But the Enforcer had vanished, without warning. The Alienist cursed, and hurled the teapot against a bookcase in a fury. What was happening? What was this talk of *gender* and *maternity* in relation to the Claviger? It was grossly inappropriate.

Still, somehow, he felt oddly reassured.

He issued a *sending* to Daunton: *We need to talk. Where are you?*

The reply was laden with fear and apprehension: *Later, Mostin. I have an unexpected guest.*

Mostin frowned. His hands were still shaking. He stood, walked to a small cabinet, retrieved an antique bottle, and poured himself a generous draught of vintage firewine. The liquor burned his throat and made him sneeze.

He fondled the *stone of sendings* briefly, swallowed, and then sent a message to Rimilin.

**

“Will she not compromise?” Lai asked, her voice evincing as much irritation as Nwm had ever before heard.

“Perhaps,” the Druid replied. “She may have stated an unreasonably high bargaining position to begin with, with the intention of accepting other terms. But I think that she is genuine. Although it’s

impossible to tell.”

“One of us could relinquish our power,” Rhul suggested. “Although she would be bound to Mulhuk, much as we are.”

“Would you make such a concession?” Jaliere asked. Smoke bellowed from his nostrils.

“To ensure our survival? Certainly.”

“I suspect that Ortwine would find such a proposal unacceptable,” Nwm smiled drily.

“She wishes to take her divinity with her. Back to Afqithan.*”

“I find this entire conversation absurd,” Jaliere grunted. “There must be another way.”

” *There is not,*” Lai sighed emphatically. “We cannot assault Saes. We cannot coerce her. This fey – who

is unknown to her – may be able to achieve what we are incapable of.”

“I don’t see how.” The God of the Forge was becoming agitated, and his beard began to kindle.

“Please remain calm,” Lai’s tone changed as she tried to placate Jaliere. “Ortwine is a greater liar than any I have met. She is conniving and duplicitous to an extreme degree. Moreover, if she is *motivated* sufficiently – if the prize is great enough – she will find a way.”

“What of the *Ahma*?” Jaliere asked.

“His debt is paid to you,” Nwm shook his head. “Three times over. And he is preoccupied with other matters – which I am neglecting in order to be here.”

“But you had intended to accompany Ortwine?”

“Yes,” Nwm nodded.

Lai looked shocked. “Why have you said nothing of this to me?”

Nwm shrugged. “I cannot let Ortwine do this alone. I thought you understood that.”

“But this is...”

“Madness? Suicide?” Nwm suddenly became angry. “Then perhaps you should ask yourselves whether it is reasonable to ask this of her at all! Decide which this is Lai, because it was my impression that there was a possibility of success.”

“Watch your tone, mortal,” Jaliere threatened.

“Peace!” Lai raised her hand.

“All of this is moot,” Rhul observed, “if we cannot find a way to grant Ortwine what she demands.”

” *Ngaarh!* ” Jaliere slammed a gauntleted fist upon the stone table. He barked at two spectral warriors –

ancestral spirits who guarded the doors to the hallway.

“Bring in the Fey. This discussion is pointless without her presence.”

**

The island – which rose from the ocean west of Pandicule like a jagged tooth – had been chosen by the mage Kothchori for its isolation and its peculiar aesthetic. Mostin wondered whether, at some time in the distant past, some wind-sorcerer had raised it from the sea bed in order to serve as a base – although the Alienist had no evidence to support such a theory. It was too eccentric, he observed, to be altogether natural.

Rimilin had claimed it as his own and – with a characteristic panache which Mostin grudgingly

acknowledged – replaced the crumbling remains of Kothchori’s abode with a three-hundred foot tall

tower of red iron which pierced the sky like a great, bloody spearhead. The Alienist turned to Orolde.

“He has a certain style,” Mostin admitted. “Don’t you think?”

“I preferred it as it was,” Orolde replied sadly. “Kothchori felt no need for such phallic ostentation.”

“An interesting observation,” Mostin nodded. “Which may have some merit. The Ritual of Bonding requires certain sacrifices which most would be unable to endure. Come, Orolde! We shall see whether Rimilin observes those niceties of conduct which transcend even the forced peace of the Claviger. It would be wise to omit any references to genitalia, however. Even after so long, that may still be a sensitive subject.”

The duo ascended a hundred or so stone steps to arrive at the base of the tower, and stood

before an intricate portal of black adamant, inlaid with precious metals and carved with dire warnings. It ground open to reveal a narrow staircase, lit by lurid green smokeless flambeaux. Mostin sighed, and strode in.

Orolde scuttled in nervously behind. There was a brief sensation of dimension at once both stretching

and contracting, and Mostin found himself in an echoing hall of great height. He glanced behind quickly to observe Orolde, who still followed him.

The chamber was circular, and was illuminated by a firepit which sat in its dead centre, as well as by seven immense bronze sconces which jutted out of its walls at regular intervals in its periphery. It tapered to an apex perhaps thirty fathoms above, and around the walls a staircase wound, reaching

balconies and doors beyond which, presumably, other chambers lay.

“Welcome,” a foul voice issued from above the Alienist. Rimilin stood upon a wide mezzanine which extended for three quarters of the chamber’s circumference.

Mostin cleared his throat. “Thank-you. Should I come up, or will you come down?” His voice was louder than he had anticipated, as though some enchantment magnified the sound in the tower’s interior.

“Ascend if you dare,” Rimilin’s voice taunted him. “I promise to be good.”

Mostin scowled, and slowly climbed the staircase.

“Ahh, the hero of the hour,” Rimilin said acidly as Mostin gained the balcony. The walls were lined with bookcases crammed with thousands of ancient tomes. “Your coup with the Assembly will merit discussion ten generations hence – if it survives at all.”

Mostin stared hard at him. His hairless head and naked torso glistened with an oily black secretion, and he smelled rank.

“I have come to take counsel,” Mostin said simply. “Aside from Daunton and Jael, you are the only mage who openly advocates a proactive stance in our dealings with Shûth.”

“The inertia of Wyre’s wizards will be their undoing,” Rimilin spat. “They all deserve to perish.”

“It is incumbent upon us that we convince them to act in concert,” Mostin sighed.

Rimilin snorted, and sat in a siege of wrought Abyssal bronze. He motioned to Mostin to do the same.

Orolde fumbled nervously and produced a ledger and a quill pen – from which the feathers had been judiciously removed.

“Why did you insist to bring your scribe with you?” Rimilin’s brow furrowed. “Did you think that it would cause me to moderate my tone?”

“Not at all,” Mostin sat stiffly. He wasn’t even sure himself why he had commanded Orolde to attend him. Perhaps he needed the unqualified moral support. Perhaps he felt that it was high time that the Sprite was exposed to the inner counsels of Wyre’s most accomplished mages: Orolde’s aptitude for

magic was beginning to assert itself, and soon he would be faced with the choice of whether or not to remain with the Alienist. Mostin grimaced. Such was the way of things.

“Has the Enforcer paid you a visit, yet?” Mostin inquired.

Rimilin’s eyes narrowed. “Why?”

“There are those among us, myself and Daunton included, who tread close to the legal boundaries –

both physically and metaphorically – of the Injunction. Gihaahia was kind enough to point out the fact that sometimes my actions are questionable.”

“I have received no such warning. Perhaps you are more controversial than I,” Rimilin smiled.

Perhaps physical proximity to Wyre is more important than I suspected, Mostin thought.

“I have recently succoured the *Sela* for celestial aid,” Mostin tapped his fingers on the arm of his chair.

“You? An Enochian?” Rimilin’s voice oozed with contempt. “You have been reduced to a lowly estate, Mostin!”

“I am exploring every option!” Mostin hissed. “And I preclude nothing at this stage. I need reliable allies, not fickle compactees. Devils are out of the question.”

“I heard of Furcas,” Rimilin smiled. “That may prove a costly mistake.”

“I take it then that word has not yet reached you of Titivilus and Murmuur? They are also destroyed.”

” *Three Infernal Dukes?* ” Rimilin was visibly impressed. “That must be some kind of record.”

“It was Eadric, not I, who slew them.”

“I doubt that Dispater – or the Fly-Lords – will differentiate your complicity.”

“Indeed,” Mostin acknowledged.

“You might petition Belial for aid,” Rimilin suggested. “If you care to walk Shomei’s path.”

“I do not. And I do not have the resources to pursue pseudonatural servitors at this stage. I am in danger of further exhausting my reservoir if I do. My options are limited. And in the field of rapidly polarizing allegiances, I must side *against Cheshne*. That is the biggest threat to me, and to Wyre.”

“You risk a great deal in telling me this,” Rimilin was suspicious. “Why?”

“Because, despite your depravity, you are no nihilist, and you understand *necessity*.”

“You seek to act as the catalyst for a Cascade,” Rimilin realized. “You think that you can force the hand of the celestial host, if Enitharmon perceives a large enough threat? Those days are over, Mostin. The demise of the Temple ended that paradigm, and both the *Ahma* and the *Sela* sealed that door when they chose mysticism over Orthodoxy.”

“For themselves, maybe. Personally, I will use whatever tools I need to. Think on that.”

**

Ortwine strode slowly into the council chamber in Mulhuk. Rhul gazed at her in wonder as she

approached: her beauty was undeniable, though cold, and her very presence seemed more profound than any there – who bore the title of *god* or *goddess* – could claim.

“Have you found a way?” She asked calmly.

“No,” Lai admitted.

The Sidhe turned, and began to walk away.

“Ortwine, please,” Rhul implored. “We are at a loss. If we could grant this freely, we would. We are but little gods,” his voice was ironic. “You know this. You ask the impossible.”

She turned to face them, and thought for a long moment.

“Very well,” she finally said. “The payment can wait. As it depends upon my success in any event, here are the terms that I propose: Upon release of the spirits of the dead – assuming that such a deed can be accomplished – you will admit me nominally to your ranks. When Lai and Nwm *reincarnate* the disembodied *en masse*, my worship will be actively encouraged by your agents. As your power begins to wax again, as surely it will; you will, after all, have a monopoly on religion,” sarcasm dripped from Ortwine’s tongue, “then I will claim my divinity along with an equal – which is to say twenty percent – share of the veneration from Sisperi’s burgeoning population. Which brings me to my portfolio.”

Nwm gaped. Ortwine had some truly outrageous ideas.

“I choose lies and trickery. I have observed that you lack a suitable exemplar in these areas. *But* – and here is where you make a concession to me now, before we begin – Jaliere must first perform a task for me.”

“Must he indeed?” Jaliere thundered.

Ortwine drew *Githla*, and handed it to the God of the Forge. “This blade was forged by the Azer Jodrumu, before he went mad.”

Jaliere brandished it, feeling its balance and judging its temper with his mind’s eye. “This is a fine weapon. Jodrumu – whoever he was – was a gifted smith.”

“Just so,” Ortwine agreed.

“You wish it reforged by Jaliere?” Lai asked.

“Not exactly,” Ortwine smiled slowly. “I wish it married with another blade. If such a task is within his abilities.”

Jaliere guffawed. “If not I, then who? Which is this other weapon?”

But Nwm already knew. Just as he knew that Ortwine alone was most likely to succeed in

deceiving

Saes, because the Sidhe had played him – and the Nireem – already.

The Druid grimaced. “The sword is named *Heedless*. And I strongly advise against this course of action, Ortwine.”

“Your concern is duly noted,” Ortwine nodded. “And ignored. If I am to be a goddess, Nwm, I must have a blade worthy of me.”

* The Chiefs of the Nireem (except Ninit) retain a divine rank of 1 only when within Mulhuk, the

minor heaven which abuts Sisperi. Outside of its confines, they are treated as DR0 quasi-deities.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II at 12:25 pm on 06-25-06

Tahl was first, and Rede was second.

When the *Ahma* brought the former Master of the Temple back, he found that Tahl’s assessment had been correct: a righteous wrath had been Oronthon’s gift to Rede of Dramore, whose realization of the truth had come too late.

Eadric had descended together with Tahl into the catacombs, and they had smashed sarcophagi open.

Saint Tahl prayed as the *Ahma*, who alone of Oronthon’s mortal servants possessed the power,* had called them back, breathing life into them: Tuan Muat, an Inquisitor of singular determination; Kustus of Mord; Wurz, the founder of the Mission; Moda the Exorcist; Tarpion the Rash; Anaqiss Twice-Apostate, who had briefly supported both the Irrenites and the Sophics before recanting his heresies; Haubi of Thahan. Former grandees and luminaries in the Magistratum, some of whom had been dead

for two centuries or more. All had perished violently: in war, or at the hands of demons or assassins, or through acts of betrayal by those who sought to supplant them. Unquiet spirits who – gifted with new life and vigour – pledged themselves both to Eadric and to the teachings of *Saizhan*, body and soul.

Tahl called steeds to serve them: a brood of ancient celestial griffons of prodigious size, whose names were buried in forgotten temple tomes.** Eadric took Hauthuts, hot-tempered and proud, whose

feathered mane bore a silver sheen. He knew that before the Fall, Murmuur’s steed had been kin to

them, and mused how many had descended with their masters into damnation: their adherence to virtue seemed already precarious. Within a week, there were twenty of them. They consumed horses more

quickly than Eadric could have imagined possible.

The date of the embassy drew near, and Eadric considered his possibilities. After agonizing over the choices, he opted to retain Rede and Tarpion, deploying the others – including Kustus, who possessed great strategic insight – to order the *Sela*’s position south

of Wyre. Tuan Muat, Wurz, Moda and Anaqiss were powerful spellcasters whose presence was sorely needed in the Temple camp; Tahl, he would not spare.

Nehael's initiative would be formally ratified by the Small Council in the august presence of King Tiuhan, a political move organized by Prince Tagur: Tiuhan approached his fourteenth birthday, and his majority. But Mostin and Daunton would join the party later, beyond Wyre's borders. Mostin had

indicated that there were *diplomatic considerations* that should not be overlooked which prevented his official involvement.

Ugh. Politics, Eadric thought.

"Will you seize power, if a time comes where it seems necessary?" Tahl inquired archly of him. "There are rules you have yet to break."

The *Ahma* sighed. "Probably, knowing my luck."

"Do you think if they get us all in one place, they will try to overwhelm us with one, swift stroke?"

"Maybe," Eadric nodded. "But I think they'll fail if they do. They are not yet prepared. And we aren't so helpless. Now uncertainty vexes them, and it may be we can force their hand. Time is no longer on their side."

Tahl nodded. There were nine hundred sarcophagi in the Temple catacombs.

**

The fortress, which perched upon an island of matter, drifted in a haphazard fashion through a grey, featureless astral planescape.

Sho stood in the courtyard and gazed up at the expanses above her. She felt no desire. No fear. No joy.

But neither did she feel *nothing*: oblivion was a state denied to her. She experienced only a perpetual, mild discomfort, as her incomplete psyche attempted to balance two irreconcilable commands:

Preserve what you are. Become other than what you are.

Her creator's gift to her – other than a semblance of life – had been a perpetual existential malaise. She sighed – because that is what she understood was appropriate – and entered the keep: a round bastion pierced with narrow windows, from which issued the bluish-green light of a *dimensional lock*. She made her way by a narrow staircase into a chamber in the bedrock, where the Alienist was closeted.

Potent wards protected the place. Mostin paced back and forth, irritated. Within a thaumaturgic diagram, a solar – Taruz – stood in glorious, radiant, blissful meditation. Captured by a *superior planar binding* – a spell developed by Shomei – the celestial had refused point-blank to deal with Mostin until it was released. Events were not transpiring as the Alienist had hoped.

Mostin glanced sidelong at Sho, but refused to meet her gaze. He would not look at her directly –

something which Sho knew should make her feel upset. She decided to pout, but the expression was

lost on Mostin.

Orolde – who sat on a low stool – smiled at her, and raised his stump. He hopped down, and scurried over.

“The celestial is being less than accommodating,” the Sprite whispered. “Where is Mei?”

“She still reads,” Sho answered. Orolde was kind to her. She felt that she should like him.

She coughed, in an effort to attract Mostin’s attention.

The Alienist scowled.

“I should like to explore,” Sho asserted. “May I leave the keep?”

Mostin raised an eyebrow. “I think you might find the landscape hereabouts rather dull – although I would advise caution nonetheless. But I am not your master. Do what you will. Perhaps Orolde will

accompany you.”

The Alienist watched as they departed. His clumsy efforts to nudge the simulacra towards self-

realization had, thus far, had negligible results; they had demonstrated nothing which could be

described as genuine individuation. It would take time, and magic of a magnitude he could barely begin to comprehend, to effect that change. And there was never enough time.

He dwelt briefly on the possibilities offered by Shomei’s infinity of pseudoanalogues, before dismissing them from his mind.

After invoking powerful protections, Mostin turned to Taruz. “Don’t try any funny business. Don’t try to intimidate me – it won’t work. And spare me your moralizing.”

He waved his hand, and a little of the powdered silver which formed the protective circle around the celestial blew away. Taruz stepped forth.

“I know you have a very good reason for this, Mostin,” the Solar’s eyes bored into him.

**

The Arcanaloth, Tholhaluk, gazed into the *scrying* mirror, observing Iua’s endless progress through the maze within his basalt fortress with an expression of malicious curiosity. At whiles, she would stop to regain her bearings; or, alternatively collapse for an hour in uncontrolled bursts of tears as memories cascaded through her mind. She was perched precariously on the edge of sanity. The Daemon smiled –

it was important that she not be pushed *too* far if she were to be effectively harnessed, and not utterly broken.

Surab, who had moved into her rapier, prompted her as necessary. Always in proximity to Iua, he could reinhabit her at need – should her actions become too suspicious or threatening. He played masterfully on her wild, impulsive nature; the instinctual chaos which was her elemental self. She had taken to the corruption which he lavished on her, greedily absorbing the taint whilst simultaneously rejecting it in disgust. Angst raged through her: she was empowered and violated; stripped of her will, yet granted boons which no mortal could hope for. She found it increasingly difficult to separate her own identity from the evil which drove a dark desire to maim, rape and kill.

Sensing her own damnation, she wept spasmodically in despair, all the while exulting.

Within the shifting walls of the maze – from which, it was becoming apparent to Iua, there was no real exit – Tholhaluk had placed a number of conundrums. Perverse scenarios wrought of shadowstuff, in

which Iua was forced to act as the protagonist in a play whose choices always dealt misery, pain and

death – but, for her, granted an ecstatic release which left her calm and sated. But only for a little while.

Eadric – the *Ahma* – might have fared better, she mused as she watched fiendish trolls idly butcher children and gorge on their flesh. Her spirits soared as her body heaved in revulsion.

But I am not Eadric. What hope do I have? They are breaking me.

She laughed maniacally. She knew that the pain would finally end, when she could recall her own

mother's murder with delicious satisfaction.

*

Even after abandoning Graz'zt – a decision which Tholhaluk wryly observed he might later come to

regret – the daemon remained on favorable terms with a number of Azzagrat's proxies. The initial

assault upon Zelatar by death knights, blood fiends and Abyssal ghouls had seemed, at first,

overwhelming. Tholhaluk had panicked; bursting free from the sealed palace with a powerful

disjunction which had ripped a hole through defenses erected by Graz'zt; for which, the Arcanaloath knew, he had gained the everlasting enmity of the Dark Prince. However, Tholhaluk believed –

correctly – that he was low on the list of Graz'zt's priorities as far as potential targets for revenge were concerned. He would have a few centuries, at least, before his former sponsor's eye was turned towards him: if Azzagrat endured at all through the current crisis.

Yaugot – the fearsome king of Terkenutung – still paid for the services of thugs provided by Tholhaluk, and the daemon had seized upon the vacuum of opportunity left by the withdrawal Graz'zt's troops

from that world. Mazikreen – one of the few succubi to have successfully disentangled herself from the webs of Queen Alrunes to forge a kingdom of her own – had graced him with a visit in his citadel soon after Orcus had invested Azzagrat. Suudjut – a balor who rivalled Ainhorr in his power – had also made overtures to Tholhaluk; apparently eager for trade in souls but, in fact, the daemon knew, anxious to procure the sword *Heedless*, which was reported to be still in Afqithan. Tholhaluk, who had lost a veritable host of mercenaries in the Confrontation, was understandably reluctant to pursue any enterprise there. And now the heart of Afqithan was in Faerie: woe betide any fiend who roused the Sidhe-Lords from their languor.

Tholhaluk was, as always, treading carefully. But Iua was an opportunity. He would work with Surab for as long as it took for one of them to destroy the other. With grim appreciation, Tholhaluk knew that he wouldn't be the corpse at the end of it.

**

“What would you require of me, in order to secure unqualified celestial aid?” Mostin asked bluntly. “If, for example, I needed a handful of cherubs to aid me in casting a spell?”

The solar's eyes went blank for a moment.

The bastard is communing with his superiors, Mostin knew. *Don't they ever think for themselves?*

“A genuine recantation of your prior crimes,” Taruz smiled beatifically. “That you wholeheartedly embrace Oronthon, and demonstrate – through your deeds and words – a dedication to His cause. If

you achieved such a state of grace, however, I suspect that the likelihood of you *wanting* to cast such a spell would be zero.”

Mostin groaned. “Who are you speaking with? Enitharmon? You're certainly towing the Orthodox line, aren't you?”

“Your dealings with fiends have not endeared you to the celestial host.”

Mostin held his tongue, as mentioning the name *Soneillon* would have merely elicited rhetoric from Taruz regarding the mission of the *Ahma* which the Alienist was in no mood to hear.

“The fact that I am in a position to defend Wyre – and the faithful – from an inevitable demonic assault, and that you show reluctance in aiding me in my efforts might be construed as rather short-sighted, don't you agree?”

“Your lack of faith in the vision of the *Sela* merely demonstrates your unworthiness in this area,” Taruz

observed.

“It was the *Sela* who suggested that I contact the host!” Mostin was becoming increasingly frustrated.

“That is known,” Taruz nodded. “As is your participation in the coming mission to the Cheshnite sect.

Hence, I am demonstrating a greater tolerance of your *binding* me than I might otherwise.”

Oh, for Shomei’s rod, Mostin lamented, and cursed the *Akesoli*. He thought deeply for a long while.

“I need allies, Taruz. Powerful, effective allies who can be trusted, and who will not bleed me dry in the coming months. Allies whose agendas are not entirely at odds with my own. But my spirit is mine, and you may not lay claim to it: I have transcended, and I am beyond your grasp. I will not recant my sins, for in my judgment – the only judgment to which I am beholden – I have committed none. I propose a *mutually beneficial arrangement*. Is that so hard to wrap your feathery head around?”

“The thought of looking to the obvious has come late to you.”

“Don’t be so damned smug!”

“There will be no cascade,” Taruz said firmly, “unless Enitharmon so decrees it. Nor will the celestial host aid or in any way condone your efforts to bind Graz’zt – or any other fiend for that matter. You will not subject celestials to *bindings*: it is inappropriate.”

” *Inappropriate*? And why no cascade? You were willing enough at Khu.”

“Why does Oronthon choose to incarnate himself? Why does he not reorder creation so that it is more to his liking?”

“Trust me,” Mostin scowled. “You do *not* want to have this conversation with me. Go on.”

“If you open a *gate* to call archons or devas you will find them well-disposed towards you. Payment will be waived and reciprocal service will be considered rendered if they are deployed in a manner consonant with the will of the *Ahma* and the *Sela*. I should also point out that your options are running out.”

“Thank-you for your keen observation. I accept the terms – with one caveat. Under no circumstances are celestials called by me to trespass within the borders of Wyre as defined under article nineteen-point-zero of the Injunction. The Enforcer would have my head on a stick for such an infringement.”

“That is understood.”

“I also reserve the right to summon any fiend, in the knowledge that our agreement will expire at the moment that I do. I expect no retribution if this occurs.”

“I can make no such promise.”

“I’ll take my chances,” Mostin said drily.

**

The sword *Heedless* was brought to Jaliere – the smith of the gods – with great pomp and ceremony, as befitted Ortwine’s whimsy. Nwm had opened a doorway between two great trees – a banyan in

Afqithan and a fir in Sisperi – through which a procession of gnomes bearing the weapon appeared

with great solemnity. They were followed by dancing nymphs and flights of portunes – the tiniest of sprites, each no bigger than a thumbnail. Satyrs blew copper horns. Sundry minor feys capered and

applauded.

Ortwine signalled for quiet, and an excited hush fell upon the assembled throng. As *Heedless* was rendered to Jaliere’s apprentices, one satyr could restrain himself no longer, and began blowing a raucous note on his horn. Ortwine quickly *silenced* the offender, and smiled benignly. Her expression changed to a scowl as the doors to the smithy were closed and locked tight; Jaliere would admit his secrets to none.

As the feys cavorted through the roads and courtyards of Mulhuk, Nwm turned to Ortwine.

“How did you make the sword quiescent?”

“I *charmed* it, of course. I have utterly seduced it. It adores me.”

“It may come to resent its bondage.”

“I predict an uneasy relationship,” Ortwine agreed. “Nonetheless, at present, *Heedless* and I are newlyweds. We should bask in the first flush of romance.”

“I suspect that it may harbor less good feeling towards you after its shape has been contorted and bound to another blade.”

“Love is pain, Nwm.”

“How long will you be remaining?” Nwm asked. “Jaliere may take a month to complete his work.”

“How long does the *gate* remain open?”

“The portal is permanent,” Nwm replied calmly.

” *What?* ” Ortwine screamed. A fury crossed her face.

“It is not the first.”

” *How dare you!* ” She was still screaming. Evidently, Ortwine valued her isolation more than Nwm had anticipated.

“Not just to Afqithan, but to other areas in Faerie, to Nizkur, to places which you are not worthy to behold. I forge connections, Ortwine. It is *my* fee to you and the Nireem. Call it a finder’s fee.”

“Contact me in a month, or whenever the thing is ready,” Ortwine hissed.

“Trust my foresight!” Nwm snapped. “I do what I must; that includes squeezing my

friends for their debts: if you think you can unravel yourself from your past deeds, you may not find it so easy.”

“I will have it *dispelled*.”

“Afqithan is in Faerie now, and you do not own Faerie,” Nwm sighed. “Your direct hegemony is limited, whatever title you choose to assume. Do not thwart me, Ortwine, but accept that my vision is sound. Return with me to Wyre. Events transpire in which we should be part.”

“Wyre bores me.”

“Annihilation threatens.”

“So what? You tell me this when I have no weapon?”

“I’m sure Eadric has a spare.”

Ortwine glowered.

**

Anumid, the mouthpiece of Cheshne, knelt in supplication before his eleven masters – hierophants,

necromancers and blood magi. Some were living, some were dead. Some were human – or had once

been. All were immortal. His voice sounded as a dirge, as he recounted the disposition of the Wyrish embassy.

“The *Ahma*, and three of those whom he has *resurrected* – Tahl the Incorruptible, Rede and Tarpion; also Nwm the Preceptor, Mesikammi the Shamaness and the witch Hlioth; Prince Tagur of Einir, and

twelve of the finest knights in Wyre; Ortwine the Sidhe, usurper of the throne of Afqithan; Daunton and Mostin, champions of Wyre’s fledgeling collegiate system of wizardry.”

“Ahh, the heralds of the new order,” Sibud spoke. His inflection was two thousand years old, but well-known to those there: Sibud was a primal vampire of ancient pedigree, the sire of many masters.

“Daunton insists upon a *dimensional lock*. Mostin has enough magical support to invoke his *quiescence of the spheres*, and will likely do so.”

“So be it,” Yeshe the Binder nodded. “Let them spend their strength thus. I will go: I should like to meet the *Ahma*.”

“And I,” Naatha purred.

“As would I,” Sibud smiled. “Set the meeting for midnight.”

“At Galda?” Anumid inquired.

“If Mostin requires that it be outside of Wyre’s borders, we should indulge him,” the lich Choach rasped. “I will also attend.”

“Anumid will accompany us, and Visuit,” Yeshe decreed. “Let the remainder of the

company, to the number of two dozen, be chosen as each of we four see fit.”

*Long ago I house-ruled *raise dead* to be a 7th-level spell and (true) *resurrection* to be 9th-level. In the Temple’s history, *raise dead* has only been cast a handful of times. Before Eadric, no *resurrection* had ever been made. Prior to the advent of *Saizhan*, there was a necromantic taboo associated with both

spells.

**The griffons are advanced (10 HD) celestial monsters of legend with the haste and spell-turning

special abilities. I rule that when templated creatures are called with *planar ally* spells, each +1CR of a template counts as 2HD for purposes of determining whether a creature is subject to it.

N.B.: Contundor got smushed by Nalfeshnees in Afqithan, something which I neglected to mention

previously.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 12-24-06

The Letter

They are not nameless, Eadric thought, although the fact provided no measure of comfort to him.

He had requested that Tahl divine the information; a direct communion with the Source would reveal their purpose and number. There were ancient names amongst them, to which rumours in only the

earliest of temple chronicles alluded. Tahl issued a *sending* to Mostin.

Unsurprisingly, the Alienist knew of their identities, and the myths associated with them. Orolde

teleported to see Eadric in Morne; the *Ahma* was in temporary residence in the Temple compound, and it was uncharacteristically quiet: many of the devoted had taken up arms again, and accompanied the *Sela* to Wyre's Southern march.

Orolde appeared bearing a scroll: he was nervous, his head twitching and his eyes flickering restlessly, as though every shadow might prove a lurking place for the Enforcer or one of her agents. The sprite was sure that he was trespassing in an area of dubious legality regarding the Injunction, and Eadric smiled benignly, in a vain effort to assuage Orolde's paranoia. The fey quickly handed the letter over, *teleported* back to Mostin's manse, and breathed a sigh of relief when he realized that all of his faculties remained to him.

Eadric immediately broke the seal, and read the letter. Mostin had adopted an elegant script: evidently,

the Alienist had been experimenting with a new calligraphic style.

To the Ahma in Morne, greetings:

The names with which you have furnished me are a source of some concern. I have arranged them in what I deem the most likely order of precedence, although I should make it clear that my information is likely outmoded: note, then, a certain amount of conjecture follows.

Temenun is a demonic spirit of primeval strain, native to the jungles of Utter Shuth. His form is feline.

He was master of a wide dominion before the Sleeping Gods withdrew from the World of Men; a reign of sacrifice and terror, the memory of which still endures in the occult lore of nomadic wise-women.

Wyre was still beneath two hundred feet of ice when Temenun was deposed and – purportedly – slain. I suspect Temenun may, in fact, have been subject to some form of imprisonment – only to have been recently freed (the same may be true of others amongst the Cheshnite sect). Temenun's prophetic ability is said to be unrivalled.

Yeshe the Binder is at least five thousand years old; she is mentioned in cryptograms from the era of Shuth's First Empire, preserved in Siir Traag. Twenty-one centuries ago, Yeshe

conjured Pazuzu at Khu and unleashed the demon upon the desert kingdom of Durjan, destroying it. Fifty years later, she razed the port of Triptah through the depredations of a demon named Narake – possibly a Chthonic. In times past, she built massive edifices – sites of profane power – the wrecks of which still litter the ancient erg. Her bloodline – or those who boast descent from her – still exercise power in Shuth. It is of note that both Kothchori and Feezuu were scions of her house, or at least made claim to be. The source of her immortality is unknown, but she lacks the pretensions typical of divinity, and has no cult.

Idyam exists now in mostly unmanifest form; his consciousness was transferred to his remains, which were preserved in the Temple of Tejobih – a somnolent Power who absented himself even before the rest of Shuth's gods entered hibernation. Idyam was held to have ascended to godhood, although his contempt for those who supplicated him was well-known. Idyam is no deity, I suggest, but a demilich.

This may prove the worse for us.

Sibud is a vampire – a progenitor from outside the World of Man; an abomination, birthed in some

other cycle of being – he arrived in Shuth two millennia ago. His countless spawn have infested the deep desert for centuries, and have visited ruin upon many tribes. Sibud's mastery of the necromantic arts was once surpassed, and his bloodlust insatiable: his downfall is recorded in a document known as the Kash-haya (Shomei possessed a copy; if you wish to inspect her library, I can arrange it). His command of ritual magic was legendary; for a while, Urm-Nahat was his apprentice. Together they devised a spell known as the storm of blood, which slew the armies of a rival warlord, Kumaari.

It is highly likely that Sibud can still convoke a respectable assembly of spellcasters; we can hope that he has not yet fully returned to his former power. If he can manifest his storm of blood, then we may be in trouble: I would advise against deploying any temple troops en masse until we find out – a fragment recounts that 'sixty thousand warriors of renown perished' when it was last invoked.

Jahi is a demigoddess, who appears as a marasmic child. Little is known of her, save her sparktheft –

she is credited with stealing the divinity from a number of minor godlings in order to swell her own potency; some accounts refer to her as Jeshi's half-sister, who, unlike her sibling, 'suckled at Cheshne's teat'. The lack of other information is worrying; I advise utmost caution in any dealings with this entity.

Although such advice is hardly necessary.

Naatha is a succubus of bestial mien, kin to Chaya and Chepez (but not Nathi). Ironically, she is likely to be one of our most direct antagonists. Naatha was once an Ugra – a fierce protector – but she disliked any form of contractual obligation, preferring to bind rather than be bound. What else I can write on the subject of succubi which is not already known to you?

Dhatri was once human – she appears now in the form of a bloated mass of undead flesh. She is gluttonous, and rumoured to savour the corpses of those she has slain. Her title

translates as ‘nurse’ or

‘midwife’ – it is safe to assume that her nurturing urge is not directed toward the living. She has mastery over ghouls, ghosts, and other necrophages. She is venerated by several death-cults in Analah in southern Shuth.

Prahar is a great warrior, an Ur-Priest, and a undead psychotic. He ruled in Danhaan before his elevation by Orcus to the stewardship of another world – a lush plane known as Veddekeh. After several centuries as the incumbent despot – a dark age overwhelmed Veddekeh, if accounts are correct

– Prahar rebelled against Orcus and shrugged off his yoke. This part is important:

Prahar bound Orcus with a spell, and forced the Prince to meet his demands.

This is no small accomplishment. Knowledge of this event is obscure – Orcus made a great effort to eliminate any witnesses and records after his quick release. I believe Orcus made an immediate, absolute concession to Prahar’s demands – whatever they were. Veddekeh became unreachable

thereafter, and it’s reasonable to assume the events are connected.

Rishih is a Theurge and a Thaumaturge. He specializes in compacting middle-ranking demonic nobility – powerful mariliths and balors, and lords such as Ahazu and Munkir have submitted to him in the past.

Guho Is an aberrant, festering heap of corruption – even by my liberal standards. She is a worm that walks . This is such a grubby method of transcendence. She was a Blood-Mage of high credentials before seizing her immortality – I’m sure she’s considerably more dangerous after a thousand years.

Choach – favoured by the dark gods – embraced unlife some eight centuries ago. He might be considered the ‘junior member’ of the sect’s leadership, although doubtless none amongst Wyre’s wizards – excepting possibly myself – can rival his power. Choach was renowned for his unbridled sadism, his perverse sense of humour, and, like Feezue – according to the literature upon the subject –

a preference for acid evocations.

These are the eleven leaders, according to Tahl’s information. All equal or exceed me in their command of magic. Teppu may be more powerful than any of them, or he may not – the sprite’s potency is hard to gauge, and focussed in a narrow area. His exact agenda is not known in any case, so he cannot be considered a reliable ally.

If my calculations are correct, a spell synergy by these eleven alone – not including the cabals and priesthood – could achieve a result in the region of the three-thousandth order. I appreciate that this number means little to you, but it might help if I tell you that the wave of hate – from which Morne will likely never recover – was approximately a two-hundredth order effect.

I will expect you in two days.

Mostin.

The four of them – Eadric, Ortwine, Mostin and Nwm – finally met at the Alienist’s retreat. Orolde had absented himself. Sho languished on the porch in a manner which made Eadric feel uncomfortable:

some of her mannerisms were uncannily similar to her maker’s.

Mostin immediately grabbed Nwm’s arm, and drew him aside. The Alienist whispered in an agitated

manner.

“So what exactly do you *know* about Hlioth. Is she safe? What’s her agenda? Did she say anything about releasing Graz’zt after Fillein bound him?”

Nwm groaned. “I know as much about her as you do, Mostin. She does what she does. At present, she is an ally. I don’t know if that relationship will persist. And no, she made no comment regarding Graz’zt

– although I am sympathetic to her action. It must have been a hard choice, but Fillein’s behaviour was arrogant in the extreme.”

“What have they been *doing*? Her and Teppu and Nehael? And you? What have *you* been doing?”

“It would take too long to explain,” Nwm sighed.

“Then *summarize*,” Mostin hissed.

“I making *gates*,” Nwm smiled. “Teppu mysterious. Mesikammi rousing earth spirits. Hlioth weaving powerful magic in Nizkur. Nehael facilitates. Understand?”

Mostin twitched. “What magic?”

“I’m not entirely sure,” Nwm confessed. “I suspect nothing too controversial. Hlioth is bound – at least in part – by the Injunction.”

“Actually, Nizkur is beyond the Wyrish border – as far as the Claviger is concerned, at any rate.

Besides, everything that Hlioth does is controversial. Tell me of the *gates*.”

“I have opened a number of *tree portals*,” Nwm nodded. “Connecting Afqithan, Sisperi, Nizkur, Groba, the receding Tunthi realm of spirit, the Shrine of Three Storrs in Ialde, Deorham, and several discrete regions of Faerie. They pass through the primordial Tree-*ludja*.”

“You *have* been busy,” Mostin remarked drily. He raised his eyebrows. “From *Deorham* to Sisperi? You don’t seem afraid of stepping on your friends’ toes. Aren’t you concerned about unwanted traffic?”

“Any traffic is good. That is the purpose. To enable the movement of energy within the matrix of the Interwoven Green.”

“Your concepts are curiously archaic,” Mostin observed. “I predict that your *gates* will become bottlenecks. Petty lords will try to control them.”

“These are *feys* and nature spirits we’re talking about,” Nwm sighed. “Not demons – or

men for that matter. You can't ascribe such emotions as *desire to rule* to most of them."

"To most of them, maybe not. But to enough of them to cause a problem, I say yes. Ten thousand gold says that you have an incident within a month. Where something, maybe a *wicked greedy fey* – such things exist, you know – tries to take strategic control of one of your *gates*. It's a resource. Trust me."

"I have no money, Mostin. Alas, I cannot meet your wager."

"I'll take a *reincarnation* on credit."

Nwm laughed. "Really? I would think you already have some unspeakable contingency."

"That was my big plan," Mostin nodded. He sighed. "Unfortunately, it never seems to get any closer. I

also had the notion to spellwarp myself. And bind Graz'zt. And locate the *web of motes*. And to evolve the consciousnesses of the *simulacra*. Frankly, there is too much to do, and too little time. I'm bogged down."

"If you were to look to a more natural solution to the *simulacra*, I might help..."

"Shomei directed me to her pseudoanalogues."

"For what? You think you can attempt some kind of *synthesis*? Why? Do you really want two pseudo-Shomeis running loose? Besides, you would need the most powerful cabal ever assembled in Wyre.

You do not command that kind of respect – consider your efforts to gather even a half-dozen mages to aid you: they aren't interested in your desire to capture the Demon, and ascribe your idea to

megalomania. Although I hardly blame them. Can you even honestly say that it's relevant to the current situation?"

Mostin stared hard at Nwm. "I don't know," he admitted. "It's mostly so that I can gloat. What do you suggest with regard to the *simulacra*?"

"A natural solution, naturally. Or Dream-vestiges. Shomei has echoes in other places."

"I am no Dreamer," Mostin sniffed dismissively.

"Nor am I," Nwm smiled. "You would have to *learn*. Is that so abhorrent to you? Ask Teppu. He might advise you."

"And he might not," Mostin scowled.

Nwm sighed. "Whatever they become, the *simulacra* will *not be Shomei*, Mostin."

"I know that," Mostin snapped. "This is no adolescent fixation, Nwm. I am merely trying to find a solution within the terms Shomei asserted."

"Did she specify a pseudonatural synthesis?"

"Not exactly," Mostin said. "Or at least, I don't think so."

"What precisely *did* she say?"

"Begin with the premise that all creatures have multiple pseudonatural analogues."

Nwm laughed loudly, causing Ortwine – who stood nearby in conversation with Eadric – to glare at him.

Mostin seemed mildly offended. “I fail to see what is funny.”

“What other premise would Mostin the Metagnostic bring to bear upon any problem?”

“You may have a point,” the Alienist shrugged. “But she said that it would be my *magnum opus*. I can’t see what other direction it could take.”

“Just reify them with a *wish*, and let them develop in whichever direction *they* choose to go, Mostin.

Surely she would have wanted that? To have you *determine* their course of unfolding would surely be antithetical to everything she believed. Besides, Shomei never exhibited any particular aptitude in the prescient arts – what makes you think that she possessed any special insight into the subsequent

evolution of her *simulacra*?”

“The *web of motes*, you dummy. She saw it in the *web of motes*.”

“You are overanalyzing an off-hand comment made by someone you cared about and affording it too much significance,” Nwm sighed.

“Shomei *never* made off-hand comments.”

“And you are idealizing her in your memory,” Nwm continued relentlessly. “She was no less fallible than you or I. Goddess, Mostin. How old was she? Twenty-five? How much wisdom and experience

can one of her age really have acquired?”

“More than most,” Mostin snapped, his nostrils flaring. “And more than I, certainly. I was still chasing sylphs when I was twenty-five, and Vhorzhe had only recently apprenticed me. Shomei was

summoning glooms and compacting with Belial. We are talking orders of magnitude here, Nwm.”

“Fine. Have it your way. But you can’t break Hell open, Mostin. If you meet her again, she will likely be your enemy: I assume Eadric spoke to you of Titivilus’s veiled threats? That Astaroth could offer her some kind of deal?”

“Titivilus was full of sh*t,” Mostin snorted. “And if Ed hadn’t killed him, I think I probably would have by now. I’ve had it with fiends. They’re too much work to keep in line. I’ve gone Enochian – for a while, at least.”

“Celestials are no better,” Nwm grumbled.

“Agreed,” Mostin smiled. “But they’re cheaper. The Host cut me a special deal, based on my connections.”

*

“Aid me in this,” Ortwine pleaded. “I need you.”

“There are other matters, far more pressing.” Eadric was unyielding.

She seized him by his pauldrons, pushed him backwards, and stared him in the face. Eadric noticed that she was as tall as he was.

“I’m coming out of this a *goddess*, Eadric. I can bring a *lot* of weight to bear on a situation if that happens. In the idiom of my former self: when I get my newly divine ass on the battlefield and I’ve got a *vorpai* sword in my hand, who’s gonna try it on, eh? Right – *no-one*.”

“Gods are plentiful, these days.” Eadric smiled.

“True. And they’re not all on your side,” Ortwine retorted. “*I* will be. If you help me. You know it makes sense.” She flashed a smile.

“I think not,” the *Ahma* sighed. “Your apotheosis is not my first concern. Did you just use a *suggestion* on me?”

“Certainly not. The defense of Wyre and the Temple is a complex strategy, Eadric,” Ortwine changed tack. “Consider your moves carefully. At least hear me out.”

“Go on,” he grumbled. “Try to be quick.”

“I have to convince an insane death-goddess to relinquish a million or so souls so that life can begin again in Sisperi. As lunatic an enterprise as this might sound, I think I have a good chance of doing it. If I can get to her. That’s where you come in.”

“I have no desire to fight my way through some pagan underworld at present.”

“Gaining entrance will be the tricky part. The entrance – Saivo – is a double-bottomed lake. It’s...

upside-down on the other side...for want of a better description.”

“I assume it’s guarded?”

“Naturally.”

“A dragon? A huge dog?”

“No,” Ortwine said brightly. “Neither of those. Demons left by Graz’zt, in fact. If you recall, Saes was allied with him for some time. His minions have...gone native...if you catch my meaning.”

“I’m not sure that I do.”

“Saes has changed them.”

“How do you mean, *changed*?”

“Augmented. Infused.”

“With what?”

“Well, with *death* of course. That is her portfolio, after all.”

“Which means what, exactly?”

“The details are hazy,” Ortwine admitted. “After we pass the vestibule, we enter Ruk proper. If the reports are correct.”

” *If.* ” The *Ahma* said acidly. “Whose reports are these, Ortwine?”

“You know. Rumours. Speculation.”

Eadric looked exasperated. “Is there any concrete information?”

“No.”

“Why do you think that is, Ortwine? Perhaps because nobody has ever returned from this underworld alive?”

“That is the consensus amongst the Nireem. I plan to be the first, however.”

“Let’s assume that you get to Saes,” Eadric sighed, “but your powers of persuasion fail to move her: I would deem this likely, if she is insane. What then? Do you plan to kill her?”

“I would prefer not to. Admittedly, she is a minor goddess in the grand scheme of things, but her role in the natural balance of Sisperi must be respected. Eadric we are talking about *returning life to a world*

raped by Graz’zt. However selfish my interest is, yours should not be. Remember your vow to Rhul...”

“Aye,” the *Ahma* glowered. “I remember it, and it is discharged. Uort is slain; the babau purged from Soan. I cannot leave Wyre at present.”

“Rhul and Lai won’t ask you. I am less reticent, however. In a month or so, when my weapon is complete. A queen begs you, Eadric. Forty-eight hours: that’s all I ask of you.”

“You are optimistic.”

“I am motivated.”

“If anything happens in my absence; if I get stuck there: by Oronthon I will make you pay, Ortwine.”

Ortwine bowed her head. “I will take your oath as testament to your seriousness.”

“I will consider the terms of service which I would require from you in return,” Eadric gazed stonily at her.

Ortwine stepped back. “I am no man’s vassal.”

“You will do what is necessary, Ortwine. Like you said, you need me.”

“I can shower you with gifts. Would you care for some gnomes?”

“I do not want your *slaves*.”

“They adore me!”

“Service in kind, Ortwine.”

*

“Mostin mentioned the enemy using *big spells*,” Eadric looked at Nwm. “He seemed reluctant to expand on the topic – other than make mention of an invocation known as the

storm of blood, which seems worrying enough. And numbers which seemed distressingly large, if somewhat unfathomable.”

“He was probably sparing you the stress that would ensue.”

“You think he has an idea of what might be involved?”

“I’m sure he does. Or has at least speculated. I have. The names that Tahl divined, Eadric – suffice to say that Mostin is more concerned than I have seen him before.”

“And you are not?”

“The names themselves mean little to me,” Nwm shrugged. “But the fact that it has Mostin worried has *me* worried. ‘Eleven transvalent casters,’ he keeps mumbling.”

“And what do *you* think they can do?”

“If they can bring a large group of spellcasters to bear in invoking a single spell, I’d say pretty much anything. They could waste a few hundred square miles with a single dweomer.”

“Is that likely?”

“I don’t know,” Nwm admitted. “I’m hoping that enough distrust exists amongst the leadership that they wouldn’t be willing to pool their resources thus.”

“I think their unity of purpose is apparent,” Eadric sighed.

“And it’s only ‘apparent.’ We, in fact, know nothing of their purpose.”

“It is malign,” Eadric grunted. “Let me rephrase. What would *you* do if you were assaulting Wyre.”

“Why is their purpose to assault Wyre?”

“Perhaps some kind of divine edict?”

“Let me posit another theory,” Nwm grimaced. “What has arisen in Shuth, and subsequently established itself in the Thalassine, has done so in direct response to the principle of Annihilation being invoked in the World of Men. By the *Ahma*. In other words, your *sin* caused this. Understand that I am framing this concept within terms familiar to you: I do not personally subscribe to the notion of *sin*.”

“Are you serious?”

“Why have you not fallen? Because you are the *Ahma*. The rules are different for you. But what you do

– how you *act* – this is reflected in the world around you.”

“That’s something of a stretch,” Eadric was dubious.

“I would think that it was manifestly true, from a certain point of view: such truth is the cause of your veneration by thousands of people. I am not the first to take this perspective.”

Eadric raised an eyebrow.

Nwm smiled, and assumed a voice of mock piety. “The *Ahma* has invoked the

apocalypse. He has fornicated with demons, and betrayed us.’”

“They’re saying that?”

“Some of them,” Nwm nodded.

“I am the Breath of God, not the body of the world. It sounds like misunderstood Irrenite dogma.”

“Even your flaws are perfect, Eadric. You need not worry.”

“What an odd thing to say.”

“Perhaps *God can breathe darkness* would suit better.”

“That is brutal, Nwm.”

“Are you the chief agent of the Adversary, Eadric?”

“Perhaps,” the *Ahma* slowly exhaled. “The thought had occurred to me.”

**

At midnight, Eadric received a *sending* from Tahl. He looked nervously at Mostin.

“What now?” The Alienist sighed.

“I will be invested as Earl Marshal by King Tiuhan tomorrow. All of the Small Council have ratified it.

It will consolidate the Temple battalions and secular armies under my leadership. I fought a war in pursuit of disestablishment, and what do they do?”

“Can you refuse?” Nwm asked.

“No,” Eadric said simply. “Nor would I, if I could. At least I won’t step on any toes this way – Tahl intimated that I might have to take command at some point otherwise. I imagine that he leaned on

Tagur.”

“It’s just a formality, then?”

“Right.” The *Ahma* seemed unconvinced.

“Believe it,” Mostin scoffed. “Ten thousand knights will do you about as much good as ten thousand

monkeys with sticks at present.”

“Every little helps,” Nwm stroked his beard. “And don’t knock the monkeys.”

Eadric’s face went blank as another *sending* reached him.

“What now?” Mostin sighed.

The *Ahma* was unsure whether to laugh.

“It was from Tahl: *Sela informs Mostin that Mulissu has reincarnated.*”

“Is she *Green*?” Mostin looked horrified at the prospect.

Eadric shrugged.

Mostin fussed, and drew his *robe of eyes* about himself. Lids opened, and orbs rotated in woven sockets in a disconcerting manner. Mogus emerged briefly from a *dimensional pocket*.

“You still have that thing, then,” Ortwine’s expression was one of mild distaste.

Mostin ignored her, and unrolled a scroll.

“Mostin?” Eadric asked nervously.

Potent syllables rolled from the Alienist’s lips. A *gate* opened. Madness flowed from it.

“I am journeying to the middle region of *Uzzhin* and beyond,” Mostin announced. “to confer with the entity *Ghom*. If any of you wish to accompany me, you may; it might entail certain risks, for the...”

“Sane?” Ortwine offered. “No, thank-you.”

Mostin stepped through the *gate*, and reappeared a split second later.

“Were you gone long?” Ortwine inquired. “I see you have a new hat.”

But the length and colour of Mostin’s beard – which seemed strangely animated – and the appendage

which issued from his *robe of eyes* in place of an arm, testified to the duration of his stay Outside.

“Longer than I expected,” he nodded.

“What did you uncover?” Eadric asked with trepidation.

“Many things,” the Alienist evinced a sage madness. “Including the location of the *web of motes* – and Iua. We have to go immediately. There is no choice, and no time for preparation. Do you understand?”

“Mostin...” Eadric began.

Mostin opened another *gate*. “Follow me,” he said, stepping through.

“But I want my *vorpai* sword,” Ortwine complained.

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Given his oft-voiced concerns, Cheiromancer will appreciate the irony of two particular spells. The double-whammy of Mostin casting a *disjunction* and Eadric speaking a *holy word* would become a staple opening gambit in combat. Nwm preferred spontaneous epic [death] effects, or to *shapechange* into a dragon or phoenix.

*

Mostin’s Moment in Time was devised by the Alienist during his tutelage under the entity Ghom, who dwells beyond the middle-region.

Its premise is simple – to look inside when one is Outside is to observe the bounded cosmos transfixed in time, as though one were under the effect of a time stop. Or it can be, which is all that matters for the type of magic that Mostin practices.

In any event, imagine, for a moment, that you are Outside. You turn your consciousness inside to observe the Moment, while you perceive time passing normally for you – or as normally as it does when one is Outside.

Your target – Surab-Iua – is warded by a mind blank, the web of motes is undetectable by any magic, and the only other name with which you have been furnished by your metagnostic inquiry – a daemon named Tholhaluk – is likewise impenetrable to your divination.

But you have your Moment. You use a limited wish to commune with pseudodeities of terrible knowledge, and invoke visions. You determine the location of Tholhaluk's stronghold, and discover that he has severed his link with the Demon Graz'zt. The fact that Tholhaluk's chief henchman is the arcanadaemon Xufu is also revealed to you. You learn of the garden of mind – a magical locus which is controlled by Tholhaluk.

You scry Xufu and are delighted to find that your spell penetrates his ward. Moreover, he is in an audience chamber, kneeling before an empty throne – whoever sits upon it is doubtless mind blanked, and hence cannot be perceived by you. Daemonic mercenaries throng about. You inspect their gazes, and the hidden messages which lie behind them: with your insight you infer the location of another presence in the room, also invisible to your spell.

With successive divinations, you determine the protections which ward the chamber, and the areas which abut it. A hundred feet below, you locate an abandoned cyst once home to a pack of barghests. It is outside of the dimensional lock.

You meditate, and gather your strength. Once you are inside again, you must act quickly. Your Moment will have passed.

- Orolde's Third Temporal Treatise.

That they were in some kind of Hell was immediately apparent.

The evil was palpable, seeping from the floors and walls of a hewn chamber. Distant screams from

damned souls echoed disturbingly. The air seemed ruddy.

The Ahma invoked a *holy aura*, and Lukarn kindled. As he watched Mostin mumble spells, Eadric was aghast at the transformation that the Alienist had undergone.

"I understand your awe at my beauty," Mostin said earnestly. His visage resumed its more familiar cast, and his organ became a hand. "I will spare you the spiritual conflict that it must evoke in you."

"Indeed," Eadric agreed diplomatically.

Mostin scowled sharply, and pointed. "What is *she* doing here?"

Sho stood behind Nwm. She had followed him through the *gate*.

"I am here for my edification," Sho remarked calmly.

“You are a blank slate, begging to be possessed,” Mostin was agitated. “There is no time for this nonsense. Return at once.”

“Can you not...?”

Eadric warded her.

The Alienist scowled again. “Listen carefully. We are about to assault a jackal-daemon, an arcanaloth named *Tholhaluk*. He is a powerful sorcerer; currently we are below his throne-room, which is

dimensionally locked. We must kill or drive off the fiend as quickly as possible – he has yagnodaemon guards, but they should prove reasonably easy to overcome. Iua will be there: her weapon is inhabited by the demon Surab, and she is quite mad. Try not to kill her. Notice the direction in which I face: the daemon will be fifty feet, dead ahead, when we gain the chamber. When I *scried*, there was a gap between two yagnoloths...”

Ortwine sighed. It would be her – she was the fastest.

“How did you...” Nwm began.

“There is no time,” Mostin opened a *passwall* directly above their heads. Then three more, each delving a shaft deeper and higher into the rock above them. The Alienist bestowed the power of flight upon them all.

They ascended the shaft swiftly, and Mostin removed their last obstacle – the three feet of magically reinforced adamantine which was the floor of Tholhaluk’s sanctum – with a quickened *disintegrate*. A lurid, red-green light immediately illuminated the shaft, vying with Lukarn’s brilliance.

Mostin, followed by Eadric, Nwm and Sho, shot upwards into the centre of a tall chamber wherein

hundreds of fiends were gathered. The Alienist unleashed a *disjunction* immediately. Space buckled as Eadric spoke a *holy word*: a swathe of grossly misshapen daemons burned away in a wide circle, instantly turned to ash by his power. Nwm invoked a spell: great metallic barbs, like spiked lances, erupted from the floor, impaling dozens.

Fiends fled away from them in every direction.

Eadric glanced toward where Mostin’s *disjunction* had fallen: the *Eye of Palamabron* revealed an unweaving cloth of impossible colours, which rapidly evaporated into nothingness.

Ortwine’s *invisible* form flashed through the demagicked area at breakneck speed towards a group of daemons who were gathered on a low dais. The *Ahma* observed that the Sidhe bore the scimitar won from the succubus Cemdrei in Afqithan, and hoped it would prove equal to the task. Iua also stood there.

Her reactions were undiminished.

Even as Ortwine’s scimitar found its mark, Iua had leapt the distance between them and was about her in a fury, stabbing with uncanny speed.

Ortwine glanced toward Iua and caught her eye for a split second, *hypnotizing* her.

“Tholhaluk presents far more of a threat to you than I,” Ortwine spoke quite reasonably as she proceeded to tear into Tholhaluk with her scimitar, slashing wildly; the daemon smote her with a

destruction but it seemed to slide off of her. She deftly avoided the blows of two yagnodaemons as they struck the floor with their *tol kendars*, sending sparks flying into the air.

Tholhaluk disappeared in an instant.

Surab abandoned Iua’s rapier and likewise vanished. But Iua’s assault on Ortwine was just as

determined.

She froze, as Mostin *dominated* her. The Alienist gestured again, opening another *gate*.

“Why the *disjunction*?” Eadric inquired.

“I know he’s got one,” Mostin replied. “I had to get mine in first. Quick. Before they return.”

**

I have the web of motes Mostin’s head span. He sat in a comfortable chair in his study, fondling it with his pseudopod.

“Are you keeping it?” Eadric asked pointedly, trying not to look too closely at the Alienist’s appendage.

“Is Mulissu still its steward? What is the protocol?”

“Finders keepers,” Mostin cackled. He sighed. “Oh, I don’t know. I must first confer with Mulissu: she has returned as a fey. Teppu persuaded her. Although I suspect that she is less *Green* than Teppu would have liked: that, at least, should be some comfort.”

Nwm guffawed. “Are you serious?”

“How delicious,” Ortwine smiled. “One point to the *Viridity*, I say. You’d better get *resurrecting*, Eadric or you’ll lose the race. Are you edified, Sho?”

The *simulacrum* stared at her, and then looked at Mostin. “Nwm informs me that you plan to combine me with a pseudonatural analogue of my maker. Is this correct?”

“Yes,” Mostin nodded, glaring briefly at Nwm. “It is your destiny. Shomei predicted it.”

“She may have,” Nwm interrupted. “And she may not have. It’s all a matter of interpretation.”

“Don’t start trying to seduce my students with your *green-ness*,” Mostin barked. He turned again to Sho. “Nwm thinks I should reify you with a *wish*. Would you wish for such a mundane noogenesis?

One should start on the highest available rung of the ladder of consciousness.”

“I have no preference in this regard,” Sho admitted.

“And therein lies the dilemma,” Nwm sighed. “How can one best determine the mode of one’s being when one is not empowered with an existential appreciation of the choice?”

“Do not let Nwm mislead you into thinking he is any saner than Mostin,” Ortwine poured herself a glass of *kschiff*, sniffed it, and placed it on the table with a look of distaste.

“Although I would still recommend against Mostin’s preferred course of action: if you possessed an ethical locus, you would feel the same way.”

Sho stood uncertainly, and looked at Eadric. “You are the *Ahma* – and are thus bound up in Shomei’s world-view. What is your advice?”

“You lack the capacity for reflective thought,” Eadric smiled sadly. “I’m not sure I have a position.”

“I can *awaken* you,” Nwm said. “What’s more, I can do it *now*. It will contextualize your perception.”

“You will be choosing an inferior state of being,” Mostin was rapidly becoming agitated.

“When will this pseudosynthesis be possible?” She asked Mostin.

“It is some time distant,” the Alienist admitted. “It has not been foremost in my thoughts.”

“I am at a higher risk of annihilation as a *simulacrum*.”

Mostin nodded dumbly. He knew what was coming next.

Sho spoke clearly. “I invoke both governing axioms, *preserve thyself* and *transcend thyself*, and choose Nwm’s *awakening* as the best way to satisfy both. Is my logic flawed?”

“No,” Mostin sighed. “But let me say this: what I have to offer, you will fear when your consciousness is so confined. A limitless ocean of possibility will appear beyond your ken, and you will be repelled by it. If you assume such a mundane state, try to recall the fact that at this moment you feel no abhorrence and no trepidation. Your natural aptitude will be for conjuration – much as your maker. I will teach you the secret method, if you are so inclined.”

“And what of Mei?” Eadric asked.

“She can make her own choice,” Nwm rose up. “Come. Don’t be disturbed at the sight of my skin boiling away – I recover quickly.”

*

When they returned, an hour later, Sho was silent. Mostin looked long at her.

“Is this the weight of being?” She asked.

“Yes,” Mostin said enthusiastically. “You must strive to overcome it! Destroy yourself a hundred million times.”

“And then?”

“The gods will fear you.”

“This philosophy sits well with me.”

“It should. I suspect you are rather predisposed to appreciate it. But you should contemplate your paradigm carefully.”

“Unnecessary. I choose Goetia as my vehicle,” Sho announced.

Nwm groaned. Eadric hung his head. Mostin sighed.

“You are choosing a lesser infinity,” Mostin had a pained expression.

“I find your theories untenable,” Sho replied.

The Alienist sat back, and pondered briefly. “Very well. My summoning room is at your disposal. Use the *mirror* as much as you need. Any spell in my collection is yours for the transcription. Please refrain from using my scrolls. Study the Injunction carefully, especially article nineteen.”

“Thank-you,” Sho nodded.

“Where will you start?” Mostin inquired.

“With Erinyes.”

“Beware of Dispater! I would choose an unaffiliated duke, away from the main axes of power. Seere counts Erinyes in his train.” Mostin silently unclasped the mantle which first Irknaan, and then Nhura, had worn before him, and handed it to Sho. “Consider this an indefinite loan.”

Eadric raised an eyebrow. It was a fabulously extravagant gesture.*

“Mei is still considering her options,” Nwm was exhausted. “But she is an impression from a later epoch of Shomei’s consciousness, after her *reincarnation*. Her decision may surprise us.”

**

The inauguration of the *Ahma* as Earl Marshal of Wyre was a subdued and informal affair, as Eadric had requested. It was silently ratified by the small council, each magnate witnessing in succession, and approved by the King.

Ortwine and Nwm were present in no specific capacity; Tahl, Rede and Tarpion – a saint and two

vengeful spirits – also came in the *Ahma*’s train. Mostin had absented himself to avoid being politically compromised, and had instead travelled with Daunton to open a dialogue with Mulissu.

It came after the first major spells of the conflict had been cast; not the destructive magicks and compacted demons which Eadric had feared and anticipated, but a series of massive enchantments

which had fired the uncertain masses of a dozen Thalassine cities into a bellicose fervour. Daunton’s spies reported bizarre behaviour among the aristocrats of Jeshat, and a notable increase in anti-Wyrish rhetoric. The diviner ascribed the change to dozens of strategically-placed compulsions, which would prove difficult to locate – much less counteract.

After the ceremony, Eadric took counsel with Prince Tagur, Attar, and Sihu. Foide left on 'urgent

business,' the nature of which, Tahl guessed, involved putting as great a distance between himself and the *Ahma* as was practical.

"Until the threat has been properly assessed, we will deploy troops in cadres of no more than one hundred," Eadric removed his gauntlets and sank into a carved siege. "Any more is inviting disaster.

Twenty knights, plus infantry and outrider support. They will adopt a defensive strategy – there will be no heroic charges.

"Each cell will have a number of Templars attached to it. I have authorized the full use of the scrolls from the vaults below the Temple scriptorium: now I regret that so many were squandered during

Trempe's secession. Certain more independently-minded mages have expressed an interest in joining

the effort, as long as the conflict remains south of Hrim Eorth and the remit of the Claviger: their contribution should be welcomed.

"Orders will be simple: harass the enemy where possible; stay alive at all costs. Gallant dead knights are no use to me. Adopt a guerilla style of warfare. Strike and flee. Burn baggage trains. Poison enemy wells. Kill them in their sleep. Use whatever means necessary. Keep moving. This is about survival.

Make them bleed for every inch they advance.

"As *Ahma*, I take the moral burden of the atrocities to be committed entirely upon myself. Make it clear that all who join us are absolved of all sin. This is a Holy War: their entry to paradise is assured. Are there any questions?"

*

"Where is she?" The Alienist complained. "And why did you choose this locale?"

Daunton and Mostin stood upon a jagged pylon of rock; the ocean crashed at its base.

"I am here, idiot." Mulissu was aerial, manifesting before them in a blue haze.

"I trust your transmigration was satisfactory?"

"What choice did I have? Teppu was unwavering in the weight of *guilt* which he applied to me."

"Are you sympathetic to his cause?"

"Oh, broadly, I suppose," Mulissu seemed distracted. "But I am still Mulissu and he is no longer Jovol."

"Hlioth traces the continuity."

"Hlioth is deranged. I bear no comparison with that crone."

"I have secured Iua," Mostin said.

“I know. You suddenly felt it necessary after many months – lest my ire descend upon you, I suppose?”

“Quite so. She is currently *dominated*.”

“That is a wise precaution,” Mulissu nodded. “I would suggest returning her to the Temple of Jeshi, but the Thalassine is rife with unrest. Magathei will be safer.”

“To *Ulaio*?” Mostin asked. “Is that wise?”

“Perhaps not. But I cannot guard her,”

“There is a demon. Surab...”

“Can you deal with it?” Mulissu asked.

“Regrettably, I cannot,” Mostin looked apologetic. “I am under Empyreal contract, and must abstain from Goetic practices for the nonce.”

“Must I do everything?” Mulissu scowled.

“I recommend a *finger of death*. He is warded against enchantments, and your evocations won’t even tickle him.”

“How long is this bizarre Enochian phase likely to last?”

“A few more weeks, at least,” Mostin grinned.

“Don’t get too comfortable, Mostin. Death has not lessened my anger towards you. And what have you *done* to yourself?”

“Evolved,” Mostin nodded.

*This apparent act of generosity belies the fact that Mostin already had high SR and groovy spell

absorption powers. His tenure in Uzzhin (which served as a useful way to advance the plot) had gained him the Pseudonatural (CA) and Spellwarped (MMIII) templates. They brought him up to ECL 30 or

so, on par with Ortwine and Eadric.

Nwm was 28th-level, with a revised VOP and two powerful permanent epic wards on him: *dwimmerhame* (which grants SR 38) and *anathema ward* which prevents bodily contact with outsiders.

I should probably update the rogues’ gallery at some point.

Sho’s Awakening looks like this:

Instantaneous DC=0 epic spell. Seed: *animate* (DC 25), *life* (DC27), *fortify* (DC17); Mitigating: 11-min casting time (-10 DC), 50d6 backlash (-50 DC), burn 900 XP (-9 DC).

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 09-08-07

The Road to Galda

WYRE, to the furthest extent of its ancient bounds, stretched from the Ocean of Iarn in the east, to the rocky slopes of Harland in the west. Its northern frontiers were marked by the Thrumohar Mountains –

the Heaped Thunders beyond which the frigid and inhospitable plateau of Tun Hartha stretched. In the south, it marched upon the cities which bustled around the warm and shallow waters of the Thalassine, where the winters were mild, and olive and almond trees grew in great profusion. For more than six hundred years, Wyre – in more determined fashion than its precursor, Borchiea – had dominated the

political landscape of the subcontinent.

It was, for the most part, a fertile and well-watered land, strewn with numerous lakes in its inner regions, and hilly or mountainous at its margins. The forests which had once covered Wyre's landscape had, by the diligent effort of fifty generations of farmers, been first contained, and then forced into retreat; save for the vast tracts of Nizkur in the west, where feys and older spirits still held sway. Wyre enjoyed the seasons in roughly equal measure, although the snows of winter had a tendency to linger.

Wyre lacked the ancient pedigree of the civilizations far to the south, or the enthusiastic dynamism of its closer neighbours in the Thalassine, but possessed a middle-aged dignity which had not been

entirely leached of youthful vigour. Its stability, like most feodalities, was tenuous at best, and Wyre was often beset by internal strife. In its worst guise this manifested as open warfare between its grasping nobles but, more frequently, the internecine squabbles of Wyre's aristocracy were resolved through the more elegant and precise medium of assassination. Millennia of history – mostly forgotten

– underpinned Wyre's traditions, but without the decadent self-obsession of Shûth, or the ponderous grandeur of Bedesh. The Wyrish, whether of noble or common birth, were not a people preoccupied

with tradition and ceremony; although, in matters of faith and philosophy, opinions tended to be more jealously guarded – and more passionately voiced – than elsewhere.

Whilst power ebbed and flowed between great noble houses, its reins held by first one, and then

another branch of the same huge family, the Orthodox Church of Oronthon prospered. By the

beginning of the seventh century since Wyre's foundation, the Temple – as it had become known in all of its guises – had firmly quashed any rivals to its supremacy, and sat, gross and distended, at the center of matters both spiritual and mundane. The plethora of heterodox philosophies which it had once

tolerated had been reduced to the state of heretical cults by the Temple, and their adherents forced to Wyre's geographical periphery.

The Temple levied its own taxes, dispensed its own justice, maintained its own army, and prosecuted its own wars – albeit with the sanction of whichever monarch happened to sit upon the throne in Wyre’s capital, Morne. The boundaries of ecclesiastical and temporal law became so blurred that an exclusive class of barrister had evolved in order to negotiate this perilous field – where a charge of heresy was often the price for failing in the defense of one under the scrutiny of the Inquisition. Nonetheless, despite its cumbersome bureaucracy and dubious methods, the Temple retained an attraction for those whose motives were pure and selfless. And, provided they could endure the stagnation and inertia which Orthodoxy routinely presented to them, such individuals would find that, near the centre, was a kernel of truth, and a light which had not yet gone out.

At odds with the Temple, subject to higher taxes and frequent harassment – and occasional open

persecution – an older faith persisted. It concerned itself with the cycles of growth and death and decay, with the rocks, the rivers and trees, and the numerous spirits which dwelled therein. It lacked a formal body of dogma, was not graced (or burdened) by an organized priesthood, and boasted no central locus of power. In fact, its practices were so diffuse and various that to call it one name would be to do an injustice to the diversity of perspectives which comprised it. Less ecumenically inclined members of the Temple simply dubbed the practice *pagan* or *heathen*, and identified the woodland demigods and spirits venerated by the older faith with outcast members of their own hierarchy of celestial beings.

Those clergy in Morne who adopted a more tolerant stance – often at some risk to themselves – called the other faith *Uediiian*, after an earth-goddess whose cult had flourished in southern and eastern Wyre prior to the Temple’s ascendancy. The term, although simplistic, was deemed politer and was even

adopted by members of the faith themselves. It was a name which simply identified them as ‘those who do not worship Oronthon,’ although *downtrodden* might have been more apt. The interface between the two faiths, tense and dynamic, bred several interesting schools of inquiry, all of which were considered heretical by the prelacy.

In contrast to both religious movements, a third group existed. It had evolved from the undisciplined arcanism practiced before Wyre’s emergence. Its members concerned themselves with the pursuit of

knowledge and understanding, and their methods and language were esoteric and complex. They

shunned involvement in politics and regarded the desire for temporal power as aberrant and bizarre, seeking only to deepen their own understanding of obscure and hidden lore. They worked alone or,

occasionally, in small cabals. They were mysterious, furtive and utterly obsessed with their own, elite

clique: the raw talent required to become apprenticed to one of them precluded all but one in ten thousand of Wyre’s inhabitants. The Temple loathed and feared them, the Uediiians distrusted them, and the temporal rulers of Wyre begged them for favours – often to be

rejected on the grounds of some

mysterious Injunction, the terms of which, when cited, made no sense to those who were not initiated.

They dealt with feys, elementals, and all manner of more sinister entities, in a seemingly undiscerning manner. They were the Wizards.

Each of these three traditions had, in recent times, undergone a transformation.

The Temple, beset by internal strife, had disestablished; its hierarchy was dissolved, and its structure became cellular: the meditational practice known as *Saizhan* became emphasized above all else.

Involvement in temporal matters was frowned upon, although not expressly forbidden. Simultaneously fragmenting and synthesizing, the Temple underwent an explosive renaissance in philosophy.

The ancient cults of Wyre which venerated Nature and Goddess were striving to coalesce into a single world-view which held that a *Viridity* – a “Greenification” of the world – was underway. Some viewed this phenomenon as a periodic awakening in the cycle of the Goddess herself.

The Wizards – finally frustrated by their own isolating paranoia – had relinquished the proctorship of matters arcane to the mysterious entity known as the Claviger, and, in an atmosphere of suspicious camaraderie, information had begun to flow more freely between them.

It was against this backdrop of revolution in philosophy and praxis that a fourth perspective – ancient and sinister – was revealed. It was foreign to Wyre, and the cause of its re-emergence after centuries of brooding silence, the source of much speculation. Its exoteric teachings were of nihilism and death, although its true purpose was impenetrable to all rational scrutiny; its appeal was visceral in the extreme.

*

Mesikammi flitted as an insubstantial mist through the night sky. A swift breeze bore her southwards with Hlioth to their appointed rendezvous with Mostin and Daunton. It was cloudless, and the young moon had already set; low in the east, the ruddy Eye of Cheshne – Soneillon’s star – hung with her

daughters. As Mesikammi gazed at it, it seemed to pulse with a menace which caused the shamaness to shiver; she shifted her perception rapidly, and concentrated instead on the rolling hills of Scir Cellod. A light frost clung to the ground below.

Hlioth spied a light and gestured. Both descended to where the Alienist had, in an effort to make

himself comfortable, magically erected a small pavillion and a *secure shelter* on a hilltop, and conjured a number of minor pseudoelementals to do his bidding. Daunton sat, cross-legged on the ground,

staring into a *crystal ball*. Flambeaux burned in a wide circle about them.

“Perhaps you could make yourself even more conspicuous?” Hlioth snidely remarked as

she

corporeated. She assumed the form of an alluring woman of early middle-age, which may or may not

have been authentic.

Mostin ignored her. They were warded against magical observation, and that was all that mattered to him.

Daunton barely raised his head. “The appointed area is nineteen miles West. We can *screen* this location if it makes you more comfortable, but I doubt that any scouts are trying to pinpoint us visually. We should also make a move soon: we need to be outside of the *quiescence* again an hour before the meeting begins. We will be entering on foot or on horseback.”

“How quaint,” Hlioth grumbled.

“Eadric says that it would be ‘proper form’ for a diplomatic party. For what it’s worth, I’ve got no issue with it – I don’t anticipate crossed swords just yet.”

“You are optimistic,” Hlioth said caustically.

Mostin handed her a scroll, with arcane glyphs smothered across it. “Here is the formula.”

Hlioth glanced at it. “You require a transvalent contribution? And ten gallons of my psyche,

apparently.”

“I have modified the spell. It is more robust.”

“It better be.”

“What have you been doing, Hlioth?” Mostin inquired. “In Nizkur?”

“The Forest will be our last defense. It must be secure.”

A chill went down Mostin’s spine. Daunton glanced upwards. “If you have some prescience which you wish to share, Hlioth...”

“I am not the one with the *web of motes*,” Hlioth gazed at Mostin.

“And I’ve not yet had the time and resources to inspect it,” Mostin snapped. “Were others than I committed to Wyre’s defense; if I were to benefit a modicum of *support* from the body magickal...”

“You lack the ability to rouse conviction in others, Mostin. When will you realize this?”

“As soon as any other takes responsibility,” the Alienist retorted. “Something which, thus far, none have had the spine to do.”

“Perhaps Mulissu is the prophet you are waiting for?”

“Perhaps *you* are,” the Alienist replied drily. “Although being chased by fauns is more to your liking.”

“Do not denigrate simplicity, Mostin.”

“Nor should you overlook the collective. You have become too selfish, Hlioth.”

Hlioth laughed. “You know nothing of me or my means. I see wider and deeper than you, Mostin.”

” *Then share your insight,*” Mostin hissed.

“Not yet; but soon, maybe.”

“You are arrogant beyond belief!”

“I am a cog in a larger wheel, which is turning through more dimensions than you can readily apprehend.”

Mostin raised an eyebrow. “Now that, I most sincerely doubt.”

**

They moved at fantastic speed, phantoms of fear from which all that lived, fled.

Before they reached the limit of the *quiescence*, the stars seemed to wink out and, for a moment, utter darkness prevailed. The ground shook as in some terrible impact ahead of them. Space warped briefly.

Gihaahia stood before them: her aspect was gigantic; winged and wrathful, and magnified to terrifying proportions. Flames kindled about her.

Choach invoked a shimmering ward which encapsulated them all, stretching the fabric of reality into a semipermeable interface of null-magic. It crackled darkly.

The Enforcer shattered it with a contemptuous glance. The lich reeled.

“You act beyond your purview,” Yeshe was undaunted. “We are outside of Wyre and no transgression has occurred.”

Silence your tongue. Speak not to me of my responsibility.

“Sister...” Naatha began.

And you, lest I deem your head unsuited to your body.

Naatha promptly closed her mouth.

From a huge, clawed hand, Gihaahia let a tablet drop with a *thud*. She sneered – evidently she preserved her sense of humour.

The Rules Have Changed. I suggest you read them before you proceed. Consider this a polite

warning.

The Enforcer vanished.

Yeshe cursed. She didn't need to be told what the tablet was.

"She was three times thrice..." Choach began.

"I know it," Yeshe replied dismissively, waving a hand.*

"Need I remind you of..."

"*I know it!*" Yeshe screamed, her face contorting. Her calm – whether mood or façade – reasserted itself in an instant. "We have underestimated the Claviger. That could prove problematic."

"It is a strategy devised to allow the *Ahma* time to prepare," Sibud grimaced. "Jovol's prescience should not be underestimated. Who can tell how his negotiations with the Claviger proceeded? Jovol's

Oronthonian sympathies were well attested to."

"As is your paranoia," Yeshe replied.

Sibud remained silent.

"My apologies, brother," Yeshe gave a curt bow. "Forgive my words – they were spoken in haste.

Please continue."

"Thank-you," Sibud smiled. "If the Claviger..."

Yeshe pretended to listen, but her own head span. She waited for a suitable length of time as the Vampire spoke – *his power should not be underestimated* - before gesturing. The tablets rose from the ground and hung before her. She inspected them swiftly for any revisions: prudence had demanded her own familiarity with the Wyrish Injunction.

As her eyes scanned the engraved text, her face contorted in anger and disbelief.

"... *dispensation to the Enforcer to act unilaterally...*"

"... *extension of the Injunction's remit to include aspects of Shûthite theurgy within the ...*"

"... *the preservation of the Wyrish Collegium...*"

Yeshe closed her eyes, and brooded silently. Sibud might be right: maybe it was an Oronthonian

conspiracy, after all. She issued a *sending* to Temenun.

The Tiger-Who-Waits was nonchalant.

She is still finite. Let her flap her wings.

**

It was twilight. The company rode south to Galda.

“One wonders what would have happened, had you slain Despina,” Nwm remarked drily. He rode bareback – and expertly – upon a charger lent him by Prince Tagur. The horse had seemed absorbed in an ecstatic trance since its temporary adoption by the Druid.

Eadric shrugged. He felt uncomfortable.

“Perhaps reality would not have unravelled to quite such a degree,” Nwm continued. “Sparing her was an ambiguous act, wouldn’t you agree? Rooted as much in lust as in compassion.”

Tarpion scowled. Nwm smiled back.

Eadric sighed. “My conscience is fraught enough as is, Nwm. Why add more to my misery? I’ve

thought long on this – and Nehael’s rejection of Oronthon. I know it well.”

“She asked me to remind you,” Nwm grinned.

Eadric squinted.

“She said other things, do you wish to hear them?”

“I’m not sure,” the *Ahma* shifted in his saddle. “Will they depress me?”

“Perhaps they can wait.”

Eadric shook his head ironically.

“I can quote her verbatim, if you wish?”

“Spit it out, Nwm,” Eadric groaned.

“Enjoin the *Ahma* to recall that moment, and to reflect upon his motivation at that point – before his awareness had expanded to embrace a larger reality, when his concerns were more human and less

divine. The seed of discord in his mind – the tension between his desire and his mercy – has been the source of his strength. The root of the Path of Lightning, which has unshackled him from morality. For a while, that path and the Middle Way were congruent, but no longer; if the antinomian view becomes dogmatic, he will fall as surely as the Adversary.

‘The Viridity arises in response to the ontological paradox. It grounds the abstract in the present.

Notions of *ens* and *non-ens* are abandoned in the face of the Now, and when the *Sela* apprehends the Viridity through *Saizhan*, he is pleased: the vibrancy of life crushes all philosophy.’”

Eadric reflected for a while, and scowled. “She has become no less opaque.”

Nwm drew to a halt, and called out to Tagur, who led the company. “We will rest here for one hour. The *Ahma* and I will return shortly.” The Druid began riding towards a lone cypress, a hundred yards from the roadside.

Eadric paused uncertainly for a long moment, and then spurred his mount to follow.

“Where are we going?” He called to Nwm.

“To Afqithan,” Nwm replied.

Eadric immediately reined his steed in, and shook his head. “I have no desire to return there.”

Nwm wheeled about and stared hard at him.

“Oh, very well,” Eadric grumbled.

**

The pool was black as pitch, and utterly still. Tendrils of dark mist clung to its surface.

“Welcome to the source of your nightmares.”

“I am past grieving, Nwm.”

“You are disconnected from your humanity,” Nwm opined.

“So you bring me to the grave of the demoness? This serves little purpose.”

“Your reluctance to be here would suggest otherwise.”

“I am wary of invoking her: her memory yet resides.”

“She is merely a phantom which clings to the *real*.”

“What is the purpose of this excursion, Nwm?” The *Ahma* was wary.

“Consider the Viridity, Eadric. Aside from the truth of it – and you have *experienced* that, so you cannot deny it – your words can sway thousands.

If you were to adopt a reconciliatory perspective, you could effect the synthesis and flowering of religious thought for generations to come. An end to ethnic strife in Wyre. The *Sela* must surely agree...”

“The *Sela* would express no opinion, I’m sure,” Eadric smiled wily.

” *It must happen*,” Nwm seemed adamant. “It is only a matter of *how* and *when*. You have a responsibility to posterity: you must exercise it wisely.”

“The weight of history is not mine to bear.”

“I do not shirk my duty thus,” Nwm was acid. “I still strive to effect change for the better. My concerns are human.”

“When you are not pursuing the elusive Goddess.”

Nwm smiled. “My perspective is balanced. But if you wish to speak of the devouring feminine, Eadric, I’m all ears.”

The *Ahma* pondered briefly.

“There is much common ground here, Ed. You know it. A mystic is a mystic, after all.”

” *I do not determine doctrine*, ” Eadric groaned. “And I will not be drawn into a debate involving comparative mysticism. At least, not until I’ve eaten. And I will not make sweeping religious reforms.”

“Why not? Who says you can’t? Or shouldn’t? You say that the *Sela* would have no opinion on the matter, and why should he? But you can. You are the *Ahma*. You are not the ‘gnostic intellect of God.’ If not you, then who?”

“Bah! Perhaps. But it is not my immediate concern. And even as we stand here, hours fly past in the World.”

“There is something you should see. Please indulge me!”

“Be quick!”

Nwm shifted into the form of a raven with a thirty-foot wingspan, and made an odd clicking sound,

indicating that Eadric should climb onto his back. He powered upwards through the canopy, into the violet and saffron gloaming of Afqithan’s sky, and bore off in a direction away from Ortwine’s Fortress.

“Look through the *Eye of Palamabron*,” Nwm croaked.

Eadric did so, and gaped. Nearby, soaring above the treetops, was Murmuur’s tower, abandoned. Coiled about its upper quarter was a linnorm of dreadful size, dark with shadowy power – some ancient

vestige from the umbral fringe of Afqithan. Teppu had bound it, and set it about the place in guard, before hiding the tower itself from all but the most penetrating sight.

“Hlioth is of the opinion that Mostin, were he to use the *web of motes* in his inquiry, could determine the mode of operation of this device.”

“I think that Mostin owning a planar nexus to the Hells is a *bad* idea,” Eadric said.

“Besides, why has it not been retrieved?”

“Devils do not step here. They have no place now.”

“Nor do I.”

“Ah, but you are here by *invitation*. My question is precisely this: *should* we tell Mostin?”

“I suspect we have to, now,” Eadric said glumly. “Can you imagine how he’d react if he found out that we knew about it, and had said nothing?”

Nwm nodded his avian head. “There is one other thing...”

“How many other ‘one other things’ are there likely to be?”

“No more. I am wary of your reaction to this, however.”

“Thank-you for the warning.”

Nwm squawked. “Around now, Mulissu has seized control of the City of Fumaril.”

Eadric was aghast. “You cannot be serious!”

“The Temple of Jeshi has endorsed her coup, and a dozen wind-sorcerers are backing her. She is erecting a barrier – similar to Soneillon’s paling – around the city.”

“The Injunction?”

“She is outside it.”

“But the other Wyrish Wizards...this is a massive breach of etiquette.”

“Who cares? She’s Mulissu. No-one dare challenge her. Especially if they know that Mostin would jump to her aid.”

“It seems most unlike her,” Eadric mused.

“Teppu is persuasive. And Jovol was the only Wizard that Mulissu ever deferred to.”

“And you support this course of action?”

“I’m not sure,” Nwm admitted. “It risks a great deal – it is a response to the compulsions which were laid down by the Cheshnite cabals, and ups the ante more than I’m altogether comfortable with. But she will bring order to the city very quickly, either by persuasion or by *domination*.”

“Does she intend for this to be a permanent arrangement?”

“She is styling herself *Tyrant of Fumaril*, so one would assume so.”

“At least she makes no pretence as to her role. I wish I could say the same. Is this the *same* Mulissu? I mean, has her reincarnation changed her?”

“It always does,” Nwm seemed matter-of-fact.

“But how much?”

“Enough that she has stepped into the political arena. But I think the integrity of her ego has remained intact.” Nwm landed upon the ground, and resumed his human form.

“Unlike Jovol-Teppu?”

“Unlike Ortwin-Ortwine,” Nwm smiled. “Teppu is...well, who knows, really?”

**

Eadric drew alongside Prince Tagur. “Highness, if I might have a word?”

Tagur scowled. *Highness*? This man – if such he still was – retained an odd respect for conventional forms. Or perhaps he was simply the consummate diplomat. There was no particular need for the *Ahma* to address him at all – Tagur was under no illusion that his presence was anything other than

ceremonial. There was nothing that Tagur could actually *do* to influence the course of events. He

sighed, and nodded.

“I should like to speak with you regarding the possibility of things...ah...coming to blows, shall we say.”

“I’m sure I shall die very quickly,” Tagur smiled.

“I suspect you will have as good a chance as I,” Eadric said wily, “considering I will be their principal target.”

“Ah, yes,” Tagur half-apologized. “There is that.”

“Before we meet them, there will be a period of *preparation*.”

Tagur raised an eyebrow.

“It is customary to fortify oneself as best as possible before this kind of parley – the kind that can degenerate quickly into a bloodbath. Especially if Mostin is present.”

“Are you quite serious? Why is this madman even involved?”

“I wish I knew,” Eadric groaned. “In any event, do not be concerned that you will be ineffective. You will be bolstered with numerous spells, and will prove quite handy. I suspect you’ll find things more evenly-matched than you fear.”

“You may spare my pride in this matter, *Ahma*.”

“Trust me. A large part of me hopes that it does come to swords. When I get the opportunity to hit something in the head, the odds tend to favour me.”

“Have you considered simply striking first?”

“Oh yes,” Eadric nodded. “I consider it all the time.”

**

Ortwine rode on ahead, utterly self-absorbed.

I want my sword. My Heedless Githla. She realized that her desire for the weapon bordered on obsession, and shrugged.

Ripples in consciousness, to which Ortwine seemed to be becoming increasingly sensitive, spoke to the sidhe of the Green in motion: Nizkur was awakening, the ancient spirits of the land stirring. In the south, feys and elementals were agitating.

Despite herself, Ortwine felt the Viridity drawing her in. The lure was impossible to resist, as much because she felt it was stemming *from* her as calling *to* her. It made her uncomfortable.

What do I want? It was the perennial question for her. Her existence was so often a jaded malaise. An ennui which had persisted through four successive incarnations. A sword? A throne? Divinity? All was empty. Ortwine turned her head, and gazed over her shoulder.

Nwm, who rode behind her, stared impassively at her.

Ortwine’s eyes narrowed. “Your religious machinations will not determine my purpose,” she said acidly.

“I seek only to inform it,” Nwm smiled.

Ortwine glowered. “Fine. But I want my sword, first.”

**

Mulissu floated above the balcony before an immense throng; they screamed in frenzied adulation.

Redemptrix, they called her. *Goddess*. The euphoria was intoxicating.

Temporal power is dangerous, she observed silently. *Still, I will not have my city tampered with.* The savant raised a hand, and an excited hush fell.

“I am Mulissu, your new Tyrant,” Mulissu announced. The proclamation was greeted with rapturous applause. The witch waited for it to subside.

“My apologies to any council members present for the inconvenience of your displacement; rest assured that you will remain unharmed, and your mundane duties will be mostly unaffected.

“You will find me largely benign, if somewhat aloof; my occasional fits of pique seldom result in malicious transmogrifications. Please refrain from engaging in civil uprisings, as such would be

doomed to failure. Your day-to day activities are of no concern to me, and I have no interest in

managing your affairs beyond providing you with protection. Continue to pay your taxes. Put your

children to bed at the normal time. For the moment, you are *safe*.”

*The numerological significance of the Enforcer’s magnification was not lost on members of the

Cheshnite delegation. Enitharmon was said to have been *three times thrice* magnified – i.e. to have been bestowed with nine divine ranks – for the purpose of expelling Oronthon’s Adversary from

heaven.



Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 02-18-08

Galda I

The boy with the olive skin and tousled hair smiled, pulled up a chair, and sat. His appearance was as one scarce out of adolescence. He looked hard at Shomei, and absorbed every detail surrounding her in an instant. Except one.

“Why did you reject *Saizhan*?” He asked. “Forgive my abruptness. But, frankly, this question still puzzles me. It was a bold gambit; I only wish I knew what prize it was that you sought. You may

refrain from using honorifics when addressing me; I am already surrounded by sycophants. Please

speak openly; treat me as any you would any other in conversation.”

“I am not sure of my motive,” Shomei admitted, her mind reeling. “It wasn’t rational, and may have simply been an act of perversity. Do you think my choice was wrong?”

“No. I suspect that your Will directed you to act without the permission of your mind.”

“To precipitate this meeting?”

“How should I know?” The other asked. “It is your Will, not mine. In any case, you are now *here*.

Outcast with the rest of us.”

“Might I inquire where *here* is, precisely?”

“In Caïna, for the time being. Astaroth purchased you from Amaimon – but at my instruction. Actually, the *Akesoli* were also dispatched at my instruction.”

“I have been treated well,” Shomei remarked, “aside from the initial flaying, of course. I had assumed that I would already be enduring unending tortures. When you say ‘for the time being,’ am I to be

moved elsewhere?”

The boy nodded. “To the library, in Cocytus. If you so wish.”

If I so wish?

“I would never stifle your potential, Shomei. You have earned rights that few others have won. Your loyalty has been unwavering; not to me, but to the *idea*. This is rare, and precious.”

Her pulse hammered in her head. “I fear duplicity,” she said.

“Your honesty is likewise remarkable,” the other seemed amused. “Perhaps the *Sela* has been a positive influence on you.”

Shomei glanced down at her hand, and gripped the skin between her thumb and index finger. “This form is...”

“Infernal,” the youth nodded. “You cannot go back now, unless called. You must abide by

the terms of the Interdict and the Accord.”

Suddenly, everything she had foreseen in the *web of motes* made sense.

He stood. “Seek out the devils Agei and Ugales; you will discover their temperaments are reflective, not unlike your own. I suspect you will find discourse with them productive. Avoid the petty squabbles of the Dukes; you are above them. Hell is what you make of it, Shomei.”

“I think I fear your mercy more than your wrath,” Shomei remarked wily.

The Adversary raised an eyebrow. “And so you should. I am the Left Hand of God, after all.”

*

After he had departed, she sat in contemplation for a long while before rising and exiting the chamber.

The corridor beyond was empty and echoing; she turned left, and walked past open embrasures: they

looked out upon a vast glacier beneath a sky which crackled darkly. The air was frigid, so much so that even her newly-endowed flesh began to feel numb: away from the strongholds, she knew few devils

could endure Caïna for long. Below, the damned wailed, immersed in ice.

Shomei turned left again, and descended a flight of many thousand steps; she noticed that the darkness was absolute, although her sight was unimpeded. Finally, she reached the chamber at the bottom.

Devils abased themselves. A mirror stood before her.

As they draped her cloak over her shoulders, slid her bracelet over her wrist, and pressed her rod into her hand, Shomei gazed at her reflection: aside from a complex device upon her forehead – which she knew marked her as *His* – it seemed unchanged. She touched the brand, but felt nothing unusual. She knew its import, a dire message to those who could read such things: *Do not interfere with this one.*

She passed swiftly through the mirror, and the fires of Nessus welled around her.

An ancient stone circle on a low hill west of Galda – a small village which nestled in a valley at the southernmost tip of Scir Cellod – bore the uncertain honour of being the meeting point between the Cheshnite delegation and the Wyrish embassy. It was technically outside of the borders of Wyre proper, within the fief of a Marchioness named Siliste; the noblewoman’s family had rendered a hefty annual tribute to Morne for more than a hundred years in order to retain their precarious right of self-government. The markland sat upon Hynt Coched, the main artery which ran south to Jashat, and enjoyed healthy tax perquisites from the trade which passed through it.

Outside of the *quiescence of the spheres* – hardened now by Mostin to resist *disjunctions* and *superb dispellings* – the Aethers sang with the horns of archons, and battalions of

devas were massing to the north. Messengers from interested parties reconnoitered the edge of the *quiescence*; temporary ethereal presidios were quickly established nearby by several *Ugras* of terrible power bringing blackness: the vomit of Cheshne.

Inside, the Green writhed, potent and oblivious.

Eadric's stomach was turning. Mostin, attuned to his spell, felt ripples along its periphery.

In his time, the *Ahma* had engaged in more than a few parleys with demons, devils and other monstrosities. For the sake of his sanity, he carefully censored his awareness of those present at Galda.

None conformed to the images which he had formed in his mind – despite his best efforts to limit his expectations in that regard.

They manifested themselves at first as a great, dark cloud which billowed around a lone rider – Anumid the Mouthpiece – before relaxing into more choate forms which intimated at distinct personalities: demons, gods, godlings, undead, hierophants, theurges, great warriors of unguessable age.

As the two parties gazed at one another, a long silence endured: a furious exchange of thought,

speculation and surmise consumed each group at once.

Mostin reflected. It was all about the reservoirs, he was beginning to realize. And the divinations. Each transvalent spell which would be cast – and they would shake the world; of that, Mostin had no doubt –

was drawn against limited resources. They would need to be played carefully to maximum effect, like pieces in some vast strategic game. And to do that required foreknowledge. And Mostin had the *web of motes*. But they had the cabals. It was a strange, asymmetric balance.

The Alienist scowled. Their wards were utterly inscrutable, although Mostin had no doubt that each was vastly augmented, laden with protective magics. Whilst he had expected no less, it made gauging their strength impossible; the insight of Hlioth and the gut of Eadric were their best tools in reading any purpose in the Cheshnites. He hoped that his own party was as veiled. A nagging suspicion in him was that they were not. Transvalent divinations employed by the other might break through. How secure

was the *quiescence*? He was sure that he could feel things testing its potency. Mostin was feeling acutely paranoid. His fingers were getting twitchy.

The *Ahma*'s gaze was drawn first to Yeshe, who had entered the world when magic was young and

abundant. With each breath she drew there seemed fused the threat of explosion. Clad in adamant and black iron, and bearing ancient weapons of destructive potency, Eadric quickly estimated her mettle in battle as *formidable*. And her magical art, he knew, surpassed that of Mostin, by the Alienist's own admission. She seemed youthful and hale; dynamic and energized. *Each new act of annihilation is fresh and exciting to you.* The

Void – and Eadric knew its signs well now – rested easily upon her; an undertow of black despair which grasped at frail sanity. All seemed cowed by her.

[Mostin]: (Concern). She is no arcanist; I willfully misconstrued. This woman is a High Priestess, so to speak. I didn't realize that her agenda was fuelled by such zeal.

[Ortwine]: Perhaps Eadric can seduce her? She seems his type.

[Eadric]: Perhaps Ortwine could refrain from sarcasm for a moment?

[Ortwine]: I am here under duress. Permit me at least my wit.

[Hlioth]: Silence, imbeciles!

Sibud – who did not breathe – emanated corruption and decadence in waves, and life wilted around

him. His skin, grey and cracked, resembled shrivelled leather which moulted a fine dust; obscene black fingernails dripped a caustic venom, which smoked as it struck the withering grass at his feet. As Eadric's vision rested upon his form, he knew that only the vampire's resolute will maintained his quiddity, preventing his dissolution into a cloud of atoms. But into Sibud's face, the *Ahma* could not bring himself to look; it haunted the margin of his sight as the memory of his own death.

For Nwm, the vampire in particular was anathema. Only Threxu, the Wasted Nymph had before evoked

that magnitude of revulsion. Despite it, Nwm seemed genuinely calm and confident; Eadric could not guess the reason why, but Mostin sensed subtle shiftings in magical attitudes with his *arcane sight*.

Nwm and Hlioth and Mesikammi had prepared some contingency, no doubt.

[Mostin]: Evocation?

[Nwm]: And Necromancy.

[Mostin]:!? Are you mad? What good will that do? Half of them are dead already.

[Nwm]: You might be surprised. Uedii thinks dead things should stay properly *dead*. I'm not about to violate the truce, but I'm going to blast them all if they try anything, even if it kills us stone dead.

[Mesikammi]: (Clapping) Supernova! It will be beautiful! I will reincarnate as an unfettered wyrd; I have already chosen.

[Eadric]: Is she serious?

[Nwm]: Of course.

[Mostin]: If you die, stay within the *quiescence*! There are things beyond it which might eat your soul.

[Hlioth]: Let them try. They'll get indigestion.

The presences of Naatha and Choach – as foul and potent as they might be – Eadric could accept and absorb. Then the *Ahma* beheld another, behind Yeshe. A rider in similar

harness to the Binder, but who sat sufficiently removed from the others within the group to indicate a disdain for the proceedings. An image of fear and bloodshed contrived in the mind of War itself. His first urge was to throw himself on the ground, and weep.

[Eadric]: Who is *he*?

[Mostin]: *She*. Visuit.

[Eadric]: We cannot prevail against such as her. We are overmatched. Why is she here?

[Daunton]: She brings war. She *is* war.

[Nwm]: (Smiling)

[Eadric]: I fail to see the humour, and sometimes I wonder who amongst us is the most unhinged.

[Nwm]: Her horse regards you with hope.

[Eadric]: That is small...

But the *Ahma* caught the animal's eye, and immediately fell in love.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 02-18-08

Galda II

Anumid spoke first. His suavity was effortless.

“The Oronthonians. The local fertility goddess also seems well represented. As do your nascent magi.

What of Oronthon’s Adversary? Does the *Ahma* speak for him also?”

“I am the Breath of God,” Eadric stated calmly. “I speak for all present; and for the *Sela*, and for the Celestial Host, and for Oronthon. If the Adversary has elected me his representative also, he has not informed me of my appointment.”

“Your claims may be tested,” Anumid smiled.

Ortwine sighed. “You’re already boring me. Make your case, and go. I have better things to do.”

“Silence, sprite!” Sibud revealed himself from shadow. “Your immortal pretensions are pathetic! The slaadi already gather to reclaim *Heedless*. ”

“I think not. Afqithan is now inviolate. But these are facts: I will soon be a goddess, the *vorpai* sword is mine, and you are a vampire. To fear me would be prudent.”

“The Ancient One does not regard divinity as a particularly noteworthy achievement,” Yeshe’s tone was conciliatory but didactic as she stepped forward; somehow she avoided condescension. “It is one path among many, and carries its own limitations, as you will discover if your quest proves fruitful.

Immortality is merely immortality. Power is merely power.”

Whether by the term *Ancient One* Yeshe meant Sibud, or Temenun, or Cheshne – or perhaps

Demogorgon – was not clear.

“As to making cases,” Yeshe continued, “it was you who arranged this meeting, not we. State the Wyrish argument, if you please. I am anxious to hear it.”

“Why does the Tiger absent himself?” Eadric asked.

“Perhaps he is secretly trysting with Nehael,” Yeshe smiled. “Or your *Sela*. None of us here are so deluded to think that this represents the sum of relevant interests, *Ahma*, so why pretend otherwise?

Unlocking the morass of paradigms is central to this issue.”

“You demonstrate an appreciation of a larger process,” Nwm was surprised.

“Tell me more of my understanding, mortal. Your wisdom overwhelms me.”

[Ortwine]: I’ll admit, I’m starting to rather like this one.

“Enough!” Anumid interrupted. “Mistress, the Mouthpiece demands your silence. Lord Sibud, a little respect if you please.”

Both immortals withdrew.

Eadric – guileless – could not help but evince surprise. *What is the relationship here?* Evidently more complex than he had first assumed. Or was this some ruse to deflect his attention?

Anumid smiled. “I speak with Cheshne’s Voice, and broker the power of the convocations; do not underestimate me.”

“You have much to learn in the art of dissemblance,” Ortwine observed.

[Eadric]: No, he lies almost as well as you.

Anumid ignored her, and addressed the *Ahma*. “Why did you solicit this meeting?”

“To see for myself, first-hand,” Eadric answered honestly. “And in the vain hope that, if I asked politely, you might quietly depart from this continent.”

“Doubtless, you consider us very wicked, *Ahma*,” Anumid smiled grimly.

Eadric was cold. “The Thalassine states. Do you intend to send them to war against Wyre?”

Anumid was unreadable. “You must *deal* with the reality of us as you see fit, *Ahma*. I think you already know the answer to that question, but forgive me if I don’t make you privvy to our counsels.”

“Are we negotiating?” Eadric asked gruffly. “If so, then a statement of purpose would seem in order.”

Yeshe gestured, and Anumid nodded and withdrew. Her manner was starkly different, her arrogance

self-contained, as though she needed no external referents. “The South will be mobilizing for war soon.

Wyre is large, but sparsely populated in comparison. Your wizards have censored themselves. Your

Claviger has lapsed into a coma, and invested its power in its thug.”

Eadric realized that she spoke the truth.

The Alienist sensed something akin to a *moment of prescience* flicker over Yeshe, but far deeper. Raw power she had, in abundance. Millennia of honing her magical skills. Mostin swallowed.

“And apparently, I am better informed than you on the subject,” She read them all in an instant.

[Nehael]: The Claviger has recently entered a state of somnolence. Gihaahia has been fully activated.

[Mostin]: ?! What the...?

She wasn’t anywhere near.

[Nehael]: Yeshe inadvertently invoked me.

Mostin scowled. Yeshe withdrew again.

“War is never inevitable,” Anumid smiled. “It is a waste of resources, and if it can be avoided, we should be the happier.”

Visuit snorted in contempt.

“For the most part,” the Voice of Cheshne shot a look toward The Butcher before continuing. “If Wyre’s mobilization is halted, and the Wyrish extend the same courtesy to the Cheshnites as they do other faiths – since the disestablishment of Orthodoxy – then a compromise is within reach.”

[Hlioth]: They wish to establish temples within Wyre’s borders.

[Eadric]: (Incredulous) *Why?*

[Nwm]: Why does anyone seek to further the cause of their religion, Ed? They think that they have the right answer, and you do not.

Eadric laughed aloud, to the surprise of many present. Layers of deceptions, threats and counterthreats suddenly seemed vacuous and irrelevant. “I was under the impression that the Cult of Cheshne had no missionary aspirations; the Mysteries are not for the cattle, as it were. What has changed? And why in the North? Shûth is a more fertile ground in every conceivable way.”

In his gut, he already knew the answer: to arrest the spread of *Saizhan*.

Anumid smiled. “Consider the proposal. It will be you who chooses in the end, *Ahma*. The *Sela* is too passive; your grandees too tractable, and dependent on you. Your word is law.”

Fumaril, although settled since ancient times, had only in the last generation risen to pre-eminence amongst the Thalassine cities. Sturdy merchantmen from its three harbours – clinker-built and lateen-rigged – plied the seas with oils, glassware, amygdala firewines, and all manner of more exotic goods.

They sailed to Harland to procure fur and ivory; to Bedesh for silks, and the exquisite confections in demand amongst the Thalassine nobility; and to Shûth for its gems and gold, its secrets, and for *kschiff*.

Mulissu – together with her clutch of wind-sorcerers and elemental priestesses – had evoked an

impenetrable barrier, four miles in diameter, completely isolating the city. It rapidly became clear that, for many, ‘going about one’s business’ might prove difficult or impossible. The witch’s solution was pragmatic and unburdened by ethical sentiment: she pacified much of the population with a powerful enchantment, succoured Ulao for aid, and instructed dozens of indentured djinn to fulfill any needs the citizenry might have for food, shelter and entertainment.

The holiday would continue until further notice.

With the burden of governance eased, Mulissu and her council turned their attention to devising a

concrete strategy to deal with the Temple of Cheshne. The defenses would demand much of her energy: her wards against intrusion would need to be renewed every few days, and each casting would diminish her own reservoir. She wondered how long she could keep it up.

Jashat was a mere forty miles distant, and the Shûthite cabals – as best she could estimate – might invoke magicks a full order of magnitude greater than her own. Her aery charisma lent a dubious

cohesion to the unlikely band: mages from Pandicule, clergy of Jeshi within Fumaril, two sylphs –

Zimodee and Vouve – prior acquaintances of the eccentric sorcerer, Ehieu. She wooed a number of

renegade Wyrish wizards – conjurers who had left the aegis of the Claviger to continue their practice –

with the promise of an increased spell repertoire, and access to the names of obscure but accommodating elemental allies.

Upon due reflection, the savant herself began devising a spell which would conjure Ha’uh – an air

primal of unimaginable power – to defend the city if it were assailed.

Ortwine kneeled, bowed her head, and lifted her palms upwards. She felt the weight of the blade as it came to rest in her hands: it was light and delicate; so wieldy, she knew. Gingerly, she raised her eyes to meet it: it was exquisite, with traceries of gold etched into black adamant. The hilt was replete with corundum and perfect moonstones.

Jaliere, God of the Forge scowled. “The weapon is accursed; it may be my finest work, but it’s also the one I deplore the most. The intelligence which inhabits it is warped and schizoid.”

Ortwine stood, brandished the scimitar with a flourish, and slid it into its scabbard. She bowed

perfunctorily. “My thanks, Jaliere. I will take better care of it than...”

“It will betray you; it despises you.”

“I understand it better than you think,” Ortwine smiled coldly.

“You understand nothing!” Jaliere snorted.

“You are becoming tedious, Jaliere.”

The god acted quicker than lightning. In an instant he dwarfed Ortwine, and with titanic strength, grabbed the fey by the neck and hurled her against a stone column. She struck it with such force that it cracked.

“Fool,” Jaliere bellowed. Flame issued from him in roaring sheets. “This sword screams its agony to the spheres. It will demand much of your energy to keep it subdued.”

Ortwine rose slowly and easily, dusting herself. “Your deific tantrums do not move me. As I say, I understand *Heedless* better than you think.” She sighed. “Jaliere, I appreciate your work, and Sisperi would be impoverished were you to leave it, but I will cut you down if ever you lay a finger on me again, be you god or no. This is a weapon worthy of my cause; I have no doubt I will never see its peer again.”

“Cause?” Jaliere thundered. “You are your only cause.”

“That is quite true,” Ortwine nodded. “But in some things – as in this case, for instance – I also honor my word: I am perverse like that. I am departing for the underworld forthwith.”

“It pains me that the future of my kin rests in your hands.”

“And I am aggrieved by your lack of faith,” Ortwine sighed. “We are speaking of *my* divinity, here.

Whether earned or stolen, believe me when I say it is utmost in my thought. Consider, if you admitted Ninit to your pantheon, why am I such a terrible prospect?”

“Ninit is more ancient than any of us; you and she hardly bear comparison.”

“And I will be the youngest amongst you: make way for new blood, Jaliere. The Nireem need

revitalizing; I might prove more of an asset than you think. Perhaps I can stir you from your apathy.”

“The apathy you perceive is the weariness of ten millennia of war,” Lai entered unannounced. “Still, you may have a point. Do not fail us, Ortwine. And heed Jaliere: beware the sword. Its moods are more opaque than you guess.”

Ilistet’s armour was rent. The succubus bled smoking ichor from a dozen minor wounds and her perfect

skin, where exposed, was shredded and raw – lacerated by powerful sonics. Around her, maimed

demons mewed pitifully: hundreds of bar-Igura, amid a seething ocean of dretch. She cursed them, and screamed at them to hold as the maurezhi and abyssal ghouls tore into their disordered ranks. From above, varrangoin rained down spells and darts: the same mercenaries, Ilistet noted ruefully, alongside whom she had fought only a few months before.

Graz’zt should have paid them more, or at least promised it.

The battle was already lost, the succubus observed. Air superiority was everything, and – predictably –

her chasme had scattered like flies. She prepared to flee.

Abruptly, a *gate* opened next to her. She was drawn through irresistibly, into a chamber thick with yellow smoke, which issued from a dozen censers.

“Greetings,” Rimilin smiled. He wore a long ceremonial robe of scarlet and gold, and bore

a staff of ivory which Ilistet viewed suspiciously.

“State your terms, eunuch,” the demoness growled.

The Acolyte of the Skin said nothing. His ego swollen by potent magic, Rimilin *dominated* the Herald of Azzagrat with a transvalent compulsion.

The night before their departure for Ruk, the *Ahma* dreamed. It was altogether lucid, and thoroughly uncomfortable.

It was a warm afternoon, and the sun was hazy. He sat upon a grey destrier, the flanks of which

glistened with sweat, and trotted in a wide circle; inside a heavy casque, he felt beads of his own perspiration trickle down his cheeks. Glancing down, he noticed that he wore full harness, enamelled with gold and serpentine. Nearby, a knight lay upon the ground; Eadric knew that he had recently

unhorsed him. Spectators were clapping; the applause was muted and genteel. He glanced up toward a box, where two indistinct figures sat in conversation, and urged his mount forward.

Eadric presented his lance, and a lady whose features he could not discern grasped its shaft, tying a scarf of black silk below its head. She tossed a garland of black flowers to him. Despite the vagueness of her features, he knew who she was.

Why do you vex me, still? He wanted to ask. Instead, he turned and prepared to joust with another opponent.

A dozen bouts later, and he was still unbeaten. Throughout, he had remained conscious of the shapes in

the booth, but had averted his eyes. Now she sat alone. Wearily, Eadric dismounted and pulled off his gauntlets and helm, handing them to a squire who stood waiting for him; dust and grime caked his face and hands. He ascended a flight of wooden steps into the box and sat upon a chair which creaked under his weight. It was cooler there and shaded; a breeze stirred as if in further response to his thoughts. She silently handed him a glass of iced tea. A long moment passed.

“Is this all that remains of you?” Eadric finally asked.

Soneillon smiled her maddening smile. Her features had crystallized. The *Ahma* had the distinct impression that, even by acknowledging her existence, he had lent her a little more substance.

“I am Void; without form. You perceive an echo.”

“You gnaw at the edges of my mind,” he sighed. “And many of those considered wiser than I have advised me to release myself from you.”

“Your reluctance to do so is revealing. Perhaps your prescience runs deeper than theirs.”

Eadric felt a chill; the merest hint of a veiled threat.

Soneillon spoke grimly. “Yeshe is searching for me in Dream; I cannot elude her for long. She wishes to send me against you. She believes I am your weakness. A chink in your armour.”

“You are no more,” Eadric grimaced. “You cannot harm me.”

“Annihilation is no obstacle to me, Eadric. I am birthed and rebirthed in Nothingness. That much at least should be clear to you by now.” Her voice carried a note of desperation, and she forced the scarf into his hand, closing his fist tight about it. “I do not wish thralldom, to be bound as an *Ugra*.

Remember me: I would be your strength, not your enemy. Invoke me. Breathe into me, *Ahma*. Bring me back, before she does.”

He awoke clutching the scarf, and vomited.



Shortly afterwards, Nwm entered and viewed him suspiciously. “Perhaps your returning to Afqithan was a mistake, after all.”

Eadric stared back. “Things are more complex than you suspect.”

Nwm smiled sympathetically. “That is how I prefer it. Come. We are ready. Rhul will accompany us.”

“Before we depart, I need to contact Canec. I am changing my colours, and my device.”

Nwm cocked his head.

“Green and gold,” Eadric explained. “Tree and Sun. Viridity and *Saizhan*.”

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 02-25-08

The overland passage to the *Saivo* – the entrance from Sisperi to its gloomy underworld, Rûk – was across a frigid and despoiled land filled with twisted trees, many of which had come to harbour malign intelligence. They *wind walked*, and although the *Ahma* was sure that they might have sped there immediately, he suspected that impressing the full magnitude of the corruption was important to Nwm.

Or perhaps manifesting through one of the blighted trees was not an experience which Nwm wished to endure.

Ortwine’s demeanour was serene and composed. Many strategies for dealing with Saes had crossed her mind, none of which seemed entirely satisfactory. Prior to her current state of insanity, the death-goddess had not been one apt to casual interaction with the other Nireem. As with most underworld

deities, she had been content to dwell in morbid isolation with her shades, grudgingly releasing an annual quota of discarnate spirits so that the cycle of transmigration could continue in Sisperi.

Whatever inducements Graz’zt had offered her to ally herself with him – and the sidhe could only

speculate as to what those might be – Saes had become unbalanced. Before he had been slain, Uort, the ferocious babau who had led the demonic legions in Sisperi, had intimated

that Graz'zt himself had laid some curse on the goddess. The truth of the matter had yet to be discovered.

They descended, crossing over a steep arête; below them, a still tarn glistened darkly in the wan sun.

Other lakes nearby were frozen. Not so the *Saivo*; its supernatural nature was immediately apparent.

They corporeated a hundred yards from the lakeside within a copse of stunted black birch trees. Fungi of an unusual variety grew nearby, somehow inured to the cold.

"This place is truly miserable," Eadric remarked. "Was it always thus?"

Rhul nodded. "I am well-travelled, by any account. Few places are as desolate."

Ortwine hitched *Heedless* across her back and tied back her hair in a businesslike fashion. She seemed nonplussed, although whether her mood was genuine or not was, as usual, impossible to tell.

"We will get wet," she observed. "Fortunately, none of us will freeze. If there were another way in, naturally I would suggest we take it. Unfortunately, there is not: Rûk is an isolated bubble of reality, with no other entrance, and the whole plane is locked by deific power. There may be other *exits* though

– at least Mostin seems to think so. If there are, then Saes controls them. Once we pass through this way, we have to find another way out."

Eadric twitched. "May be? *If*? Ortwine, I would feel more comfortable in this endeavour, had you done your research more carefully."

"Time is a constraint we have all experienced recently," Ortwine snapped. "I am no different. It is logical surmise: prior to her current episode of covetousness, Saes must have had some means to

liberate souls within her guardianship. In any event, *there will be demons*. Lai says *in* the inverse of the lake, as well as within the vestibule beyond. The *Saivo* is deep – maybe a quarter mile. Its magic is such that the pressure will not crush us, however. When down becomes up, we will be half way to the other side; up will remain up thereafter, there is no going back down. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly," Nwm said. "May we proceed, now?"

Ortwine nodded.

Nwm transformed himself into a black dragon of enormous proportions, and bestowed *water breathing* upon them.

"Grab onto a horn or something; we're going down fast. If you're struck by a *dispelling*, hold your breath: I'll get to you as soon as I can."

**

Daunton looked worried. He sat in a plush chair in Mostin's drawing room, and poured himself another drink. "How long is this state of torpor likely to last? Is the Enforcer even *safe*, without the Claviger's direction?"

The Alienist stared blankly at him. “The Claviger cannot *act* directly, hence it needs an agent.

Gihaahia’s empowerment is for her own protection, in this regard; unmagnified, she would be

vulnerable. I suspect it will last for as long as the current crisis persists.”

Orolde entered apologetically, clearing his throat. “Rimilin is without. He wishes to take counsel.”

“To pry, more like,” Mostin scowled. “I suppose I can’t fault him for wanting to keep abreast of events; virtually every other Wizard I know is hiding under a rock.” The Alienist sighed. “Show him in.”

“He is not alone,” Orolde added.

Mostin eyed the sprite suspiciously.

“He has a succubus with him. She seems docile enough.”

The Alienist tilted his head. Rimilin was not renowned for compacting fiendish lemans, given his

particular circumstances. Perhaps he would *shapechange* himself...Best not to go there.

“Did he give a name?”

“Ilistet,” Orolde replied calmly.

In the name of all that is unholy Mostin’s eyes widened to obscene green orbs. His pseudopod twitched involuntarily, scattering candied fruit across the floor.

“Are you a complete simpleton?” He hissed at Orolde. “Do you know who she *is*?”

“She is Graz’zt’s herald,” Orolde was unfazed. “What does it matter? Rimilin has her under a compulsion.”

“He damn well better have her *mind blanked* as well, and more,” Mostin screeched. “I do not want the eye of Azzagrat turning here at the moment.”

“Should I show him in?”

“Ngaarh! Yes!” He glared at Orolde, who left hastily.

Daunton stood. “I think perhaps it is time I...”

“Siddown!” Mostin barked. “We’re in this together, remember?”

Daunton readied a *teleport*. “I will remain temporarily. We are also outside of the proscribed area, if you recall.”

*

Rimilin barely nodded in greeting to Mostin and Daunton, and made even that gesture appear as though he were delivering some kind of benediction. His smile was as unctuous as usual, and he was laden

with protective wards. The Acolyte began it: the negotiated exchange of information.

“My sources inform me that you plan to begin conjuring celestials tomorrow, is that true?”

“They are my new lackeys,” Mostin decided to brag. “They will have bat wings, if their conventional form distresses you: it is their purpose which you should consider. I have been restricted to devas and archons; naturally I interpret that to include exemplars and episemes as well, as they were never

specifically excluded. There will be no cascade; I am therefore relying on conventional tools.”

“You mean to conjure the Princes of the Choirs? You believe they will come?” Rimilin couldn’t help but appreciate the literalist manipulation of the contract. “Exalted celestials in the World of Men may serve to escalate the situation.”

“We’re playing catch-up. You have a demonic magnate *dominated* in my drawing-room; violating Goetic etiquette regarding compacts seems no taboo for you.”

“I am establishing a temporal power base,” Rimilin smiled. “It seems vogueish; I didn’t want to get left behind by the fashionable set. And who cares if I anger Graz’zt? He’s in no position to assault anybody at the moment. His popularity as an *ugra* is waning amongst the convocations.”

“You have walked among them?”

Rimilin merely smiled.

“They wish to establish a religious base in Wyre,” Mostin reluctantly volunteered. It was valuable information, but would soon be common knowledge. “The Injunction does not apply to divine

thaumaturgy. Eadric is understandably reluctant.”

“He would rather send a continent to war?” Rimilin narrowed his eyes. “I suppose I will benefit, either way. Tell me of Visuit. Did she speak?”

“She grunted a few times. She is potent. She bore the sword.”

“Yeshe is preparing to bind Pazuzu.”

“How do you know this?” Mostin whispered fiercely. “How reliable is your information?”

“Very. She is wooing the convocations intently. Her rivalry with Sibud drives her.”

Mostin’s mind raced. Legend maintained that it was only at the very climax of the war with Durjan that Yeshe had conjured Pazuzu before. If she intended to make it her opening gambit in this one...

“What else do you know, Mostin? What of Prahar?”

“He was not present,” the Alienist replied.

“That is not what I meant.”

Mostin remained silent.

“Mostin? Fair trade, now.” Rimilin’s tone was unbearably condescending.

“He bound Orcus previously. So far he has remained silent.”

Rimilin smiled.

“Do you wish to go higher?” Mostin asked. “There is one other piece of information: I set a tall price on it. Do you have something to match?”

“Perhaps,” Rimilin answered carefully.

“Mine involves the Enforcer.”

“Her magnification is already well-known...” Rimilin began.

“Not that,” Mostin said. “Nehael says she appeared to the Cheshnite delegation and issued a warning.

Certain articles in the Injunction have been amended.”

“The theurges are excluded, then? That is news, I’ll admit. Although not entirely unexpected. I know something of which may be of particular interest to you: it involves an Infernalist of your prior acquaintance.”

Mostin twitched.

“Do you wish to hear more?”

“Speak, lest our relationship grow rapidly sour,” Mostin hissed.

“The schemes of the Nameless Fiend, Mostin. Perhaps he is nervous that the eschaton is upon us and is drawing contingencies against the possibility. Shomei is in Cocytus. She is most *recherché*.” The hint of envy in Rimilin’s voice left little doubt that the Acolyte of the Skin was speaking the truth.

Mostin sighed. The wizardly ego would always abandon discretion in favour of the need to appear

better informed. It was why they made such terrible politicians.

Throughout the exchange, Ilistet remained silent; seething with ill-concealed hatred, but unable to act.

Her presence was an overt statement of power by Rimilin, and the Alienist wondered if the Acolyte

could break her to his Will; *domination* was an effective temporary measure, but Ilistet was unfathomably loyal to Graz’zt. He shrugged. It wasn’t his problem. Mostin felt immensely relieved that he didn’t have to deal with conjured fiends on an ongoing basis.

**

The wastrilith slid through the water surrounded by an oily blackness. It was a creature of prodigious size, plucked from a watery abysm by Graz’zt and deposited at the entrance to Sisperi’s underworld. A school of bestial fish-demons surrounded it, ravenous for flesh, deranged by their captivity within the *Saivo*; all were victims of false promises offered by the Prince of Azzagrat a millennium before. They were prisoners as much as the souls which Saes had gathered to herself.

Nwm, alerted to their presence with his *true seeing*, gyred in the water as they closed and increased his

speed further; Ortwine, who clutched a bony protrusion from his draconic neck, was struck by the elegance and efficiency of the movement.

Nwm turned his head casually, discharging a great gout of acid. He was powering towards some

unknown surface now: down had become up, and there was no turning back. Eadric invoked *daylight* on himself, illuminating their surroundings; a mire of darkness encroached upon it, and was closing quickly. *Faster*, Ortwine drew *Heedless* and a wave of venomous hatred surged through her. She quickly mastered it, but Eadric shot her a suspicious glance.

Nwm *shapechanged* again, deciding to avoid conflict if possible. Reaching their goal unharmed was his primary goal; distractions such as these would only denude their energy. His form liquefied into that of an elemental, and cradling Eadric, Ortwine and Rhul in a torrent of churning water, he began to race upwards at breakneck speed. The demon – disinclined to let its quarry escape – paused and caused the water above them to suddenly freeze: it cracked and groaned as tendrils of ice rapidly formed into a solid mass. Nwm maneuvered around it easily, although in a motion which caused Eadric’s stomach to somersault. As they outpaced their pursuers, Nwm felt a weak tugging sensation – a last, desperate effort to drag them down again – but one easily eluded. A mental scream of hatred and frustration

followed it.

They broke the surface, and Nwm resumed his draconic shape, launching himself into the air. The

vestibule of Rûk was a vast cavern; a single unsupported dome which reached two hundred fathoms

above black water. The light emanating from Eadric was like a candle held within a geode, and sparked glistering veins of gold and gems within the walls.

Ortwine gasped despite herself. It was staggeringly beautiful.

Rhul spat water and raised an eyebrow. “It seems that our sister has kept more than a few secrets – and more than just souls – to herself.”

**

Prince Tagur paced restlessly through the winding corridors and halls of the royal palace in Morne. It was two hours before dawn, and torches guttered in sconces. Sentries, posted at every doorway and at



thirty-foot intervals between, eyed him cautiously as he passed. He had been unrelenting in his

insistence that the palace guard remain alert and fully mobilized at all times; everythane of the royal household had been ordered to sleep in a mail shirt. Tagur had bolstered the

defenses with another hundred hand-picked knights, and assigned stern taskmasters from amongst his own retinue to oversee them.

All utterly pointless, he knew. If the enemy decided to strike, what could they do to resist? The Prince passed the doors to the royal bedchamber and sighed inwardly. Now was the time for a warrior-king; instead Wyre had a fourteen-year old boy, cajoled by a group of greedy relatives who *still* didn't understand the magnitude of the threat.

At the *Ahma's* insistence, key areas had been *hallowed* by Tahl, and wards of *forbiddance* laid upon them; nothing could manifest directly within the inner donjon. But Eadric had been honest with Tagur, contrary to the perceived security which he had allowed other members of the aristocracy to enjoy: *If they come for the king – I mean really come – it will not be enough. We can only hope that they deem it an inefficient investment of resources.* Tagur had drawn some small comfort from that argument, at least. In many ways, it was to the benefit of the enemy that an untested boy remain on the throne.

The Prince made his way to his own chambers, and sat at his desk. Sleep still eluded him, something which an hour of administrative tedium might cure. He reached for his papers and froze; atop a pile of legal pleas, aristocratic nuptial agreements, warrants, and proposed exchanges of lands and properties, lay a single note in handwritten scrawl:

Beware. There are already tigers amongst you.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 08-04-08

Mostin stood within the summoning room in his cellar at dusk, and considered his peculiar circumstances. He was an unlikely Enochian: driven by necessity, rather than any philosophical

sympathy with the celestial agenda, which he viewed just as suspiciously as the fiendish one.

Prior to the endeavour, he had made a brief journey to the cave of the Claviger in the hills of Mord, *just to be sure* that he had overlooked no detail regarding the Injunction. And to ensure that the Enforcer had not, in some perverse fit of humour, extended the proscribed area to encompass the locale of his manse. The chamber had seemed unchanged, except that – perhaps – the aura emanating from the tablets was somehow subdued.

As he had prepared to leave, *She* had appeared to him, and smiled wickedly.

“Be careful, Mostin. If one of your new friends places even a feathered toe within Wyre, I will take you. And there is no hiding from me.”

Despite his terror – because now Gihaahia was suffused with godlike power – Mostin had clung tight to his own will, and forced himself to remain calm.

“Would you follow me *Outside*, even? Somehow, I doubt that.” It had been an empty but necessary act of braggadocio; he knew that she would likely know of any violation *before* it happened, and certainly before he could react.

“Place your trust in the Claviger,” Gihaahia had said unexpectedly. “I/She cares for you.”

Mostin had departed feeling sick. Apparently, the infernal had now thoroughly conflated her own

identity with that of the entity she served.

Now he stood with Sho, who wished to witness the conjuration despite her own inclinations; and

Orolde, the maimed sprite; and Mei, still devoid of true sapience. He sighed. *My esteemed cabal*, he thought ironically. He stared at Shomei's lesser analogues; news of their creator's infernal assumption could wait. He suspected that neither would care anyway; Sho was rapidly individuating, and Mei was dead to any feelings.

Mostin turned, and inspected a mildewed tome which rested on a carved lectern, flicking through its pages with his appendage. Taruz, the captain of the Host with whom Mostin had struck his deal, had indicated that celestials of a stature greater than that of a deva or an archon were not suitable candidates for his conjurations, and had required that he not use *planar bindings* in order to secure aid from the Empyrean realms. Mostin had grumbled inwardly; opening a number of *gates* would be a massive drain on his psychic resources, even if no subsequent fee were involved. And for *devas*?

The Alienist had brooded on the situation, and finally decided that he would pressure the host to

renegotiate the terms of the deal. He would conjure Oraios, an exalted movanic; one of the Twelve

Princes of the Eighth Choir. Technically a deva, yes. The fact that Oraios packed as much punch as a half-dozen solars was neither here nor there. But Mostin was nervous; *spirit* and *letter* were very different things, and he was dealing with celestials here, not devils. And few had dared to invoke an episeme before.

Orolde coughed.

"Well?" Sho asked. "Are we to stand here all day? I had hoped to use the summoning room later."

"Very well," Mostin steeled himself. *Stay focussed on the face. Do not look at the wings. And then: Screw the Host. It's my reservoir, and I damn well expect my money's worth.*

*

In wheeling mansions of light, high in the Seraphic Sphere, a *gate* opened. After pausing for a moment's thought, during which he *communed* with the Marshal of the Host, Oraios passed through.

*

Beneath a tree on the southern marches of Wyre, the *Sela* sat cross-legged, surrounded by saints and talions, delivering a lesson to a wide circle of armored knights and templars. He paused briefly and smiled enigmatically, shaking his head at the wizard's audacity, before continuing.

*

In Nizkur, Nehael glanced at Teppu in the twilight. “Look what Mostin just did,” she said, presenting him with a mental image.

The sprite sat on a tump, inspecting the petals of a flower. “Jovol would have half-approved,” he said archly. “His relations with the Host were always good.”

“And you?” She inquired.

“I defer to your authority,” Teppu replied. “How do *you* feel about it?”

“I suppose I must tolerate it,” she sighed. “Enitharmon is treading carefully; perhaps he doesn’t wish to anger me. That much I appreciate, at least.”

“I doubt he fully understands,” Teppu grinned. “Celestials will never comprehend *Saizhan*: they are relics of a previous era of consciousness.”

” *Potent* relics, nonetheless,” Nehael smiled. “And atavisms have a habit of resurfacing after a millennium or two.”

“Are you worried?”

“I will weep for those who suffer,” Nehael replied. “But worry for myself and my charge? No. Nizkur is grounded in the Tree- *ludja*. I am unconquerable. This is a reassuring fact.”

“Unless the Nameless Fiend comes,” the sprite observed.

“I fear no Hellfire,” Nehael laughed.

“And his rhetoric?”

“That has yet to be tested,” Nehael conceded.

**

Mostin quailed. Its feathers were *terrible*, and its radiance was almost as bad. Mogus crooned eerily.

“No wrath, then?” Mostin inquired gingerly. The Alienist had amplified his own powers to the point where he believed he had a good chance if it came to blows, but would rather it not prove necessary.

“You abide by the contract,” Oraios replied stonily, looking down at the Alienist.

Mostin scowled. Exalted celestials acted according to their special remit – whatever that was. They were beyond normal hierarchic status. This celestial specimen appeared particularly warlike.

“Then I may deploy you in a manner consonant with the will of the *Ahma* or the *Sela*. I also imagine that you regard yourself as better informed as to what that might be, and thus feel in no way, in

actuality, beholden to me.”

“That would a wise interpretation,” Oraios affirmed.

“I think that it is *contestable*,” Mostin said coolly. “I would also like you to consider this: my capacity to open *gates* is limited by my reservoir; my ability to use *planar bindings* is

not. I...”

The celestial gave Mostin an unreadable look. “You may use *planar bindings*. I abide by the rules at this point. I will remain for one month.

Mostin frowned. He hadn’t expected the monster to submit as quickly. “You must not trespass within Wyre’s boundaries.”

“I am fully conversant with the Injunction,” Oraios said drily. “I try to stay abreast of current events.”

Mostin scowled. This celestial had a *sense of humour*?

“I should like to make an *observation*,” the deva said unexpectedly, purposefully emphasizing the last word.

Mostin fidgeted nervously. This was highly irregular. “Go on.”

“If you were to continue *gating* my peers, you would find them no less accommodating than I.”

Mostin tilted his head and fixed his unblinking eyes on Oraios. “That information is duly noted. You may now be about your business.”

The celestial looked at Mostin as it disincorporated. “Thank-you, Mostin.”

Mostin shivered. Its light still clung to him; the promise of something true and wholesome. It made the Alienist feel dirty.

“What now?” Orolde asked.

Mostin thought silently for a few minutes, before raising his head. “Tomorrow, we shall conjure the deva Irel, who has the quaint title ‘he who smites.’”

“Don’t pull your punches, Mostin,” Sho remarked.

“And also the archon Hemah, and the deva Shokad.” Mostin added. “And a dozen or so minor devas.”

Sho raised an eyebrow. “You will gain a reputation as Oronthon’s bitch.”

“I don’t see arch-devils coming this cheap,” Mostin replied.

“I don’t see you *in control* here, either.”

“You forget that I am a personal friend of the Breath of God,” Mostin smiled. “That carries special benefits, and relieves me of certain concerns.”

“And imposes certain others.”

Mostin shrugged. He was interested in the broad canvas, not the details. And a penny saved here and there could help toward that pot of very purple paint, which he could then throw all over it.

He observed Sho. Her urge to overcome any limits was as pronounced as her creator’s. Following her endowment by Nwm, she had quickly compacted several erinyes and – after procuring a scroll from an

unrevealed source – a cornugon in the service of Seere, a disgraced infernal count who

dwelt in

Avernus. Now she courted pit fiends in Seere's bodyguard. Her rise had been predictably meteoric; in it, the cloak lent to her by Mostin, and the *Mirror of Urm-Nahat* had been instrumental. Mostin envied her: *to have those tools with which to begin one's career.*

He regarded her approvingly, regretting only that she did not have another eye, or a maw.

Nwm alighted upon a wide platform of rock, thirty feet above the mere. He deposited Ortwine, Eadric

and Rhul, and resumed his natural shape in a slick instant.

"No demons?" Nwm inquired.

"I suspect that this is only the beginning of the vestibule," Rhul pointed through an opening into another, massive cavern. "We have a long descent to make; the Underworld is deep, you know." He sounded wry.

"Forty-eight hours, Ortwine," Eadric scowled at the sidhe. He turned to Nwm, "Should we *wind-walk?*."

"We must trudge," Rhul observed. "Those are the rules."

*

As they trod, Eadric handed Nwm a scarf of black silk.

Nwm looked dubious. "What is its significance?"

"It is Soneillon's; she gave it to me in a dream." Eadric proceeded to explain his dilemma regarding the demoness; he could revive her, or Yeshe would find her first.

"Ah," Nwm said.

"Do you have a solution?" Eadric asked.

"Not really."

"I had considered imprisoning her..."

"Confinement would preclude her conjuration," Nwm was hesitant. "But I would be reluctant to condemn any location, anywhere, to such a fate."

"Could you do it?"

"*Could?* . I suppose so." Nwm acknowledged. "But not alone."

"She need not be confined within the World of Men," the *Ahma* ventured. "If some forsaken Limbo could be found..."

"One man's Limbo is another's Paradise," Nwm observed drily. "Still. Some locations would be less offensive than others."

"There is a place," Eadric spoke carefully. "It seems apt. The lake. It would resonate. It would require Ortwine's permission, at the very least. She owns that stretch of Faerie. Or at least has a better claim on it than any other. That wouldn't be so hard to obtain. She

owes me.”

“I think you underestimate the degree of control that Ortwine prefers to exert over her hegemony. She was livid when I revealed that I had opened portals to Afqithan. That said, despite the protestations of

the sidhe, I think the very notion of ownership is absurd when speaking of Faerie.”

“If I asked you, would you do it?”

“Perhaps,” Nwm answered after a brief pause.

“Somehow, I had expected a flat *no*.”

“Often, one must look at the bigger picture. And how *best* to protect. I remember her: I know how dangerous she is. But understand this, Ed: If I were to would lay a compulsion upon her, I’d drain every drop from your psyche to do it. And mine. And probably Ortwine’s – which I think she’d be less than enthusiastic about. It would need to be robust. And it sits uncomfortably with me. It would be an act of hypocrisy; a violation of something I am sworn to protect.”

“How long would such a confinement last?” Eadric inquired.

Nwm grimaced. “Until one more powerful than I came and broke it. Which might be tomorrow, or

might be never. Goetia is hardly my speciality, Eadric. I can accomplish a great deal, but my power is raw; I lack the finesse of a wizard. Mostin would be a better choice.”

“Mostin is under Empyrean contract. He’s not really an option at this point.”

Nwm stared at the *Ahma*. “You need to think hard about this, Eadric. You are compromised in more ways than you know; I’m not just talking about your romantic attachment to this particular fiend. You need to question every possible motive that you might have before acting. And an investment of my

power in this would mean that it is *not* deployed elsewhere – and that concerns me as much as anything.”

“Demons such as her don’t *die*, Nwm. They have already been unmade. They merely *arise* from Nothingness into Being, and return to oblivion a while. *Nothing Becomes*.”

“That is a perversion of *Saizhan*, and you know it. I can’t believe I’m telling *you* this, of all people.”

“It’s the other side of the coin,” Eadric shrugged. “Perhaps it’s also an act of symbolic necessity; the *Ahma* must re-embody the Void; the Preceptor must confine its essence within The Green. It is a point of commonality.”

“You suddenly seem well informed regarding my religious duties,” Nwm said acidly. “You also posit a Hierarchy of Truths that I’m not altogether comfortable with.”

Eadric stopped walking. “You were the one who was passionate about my taking a stance. About a reconciliation of ideals. Don’t get upset at me if my interpretation is one you find you don’t like; something which makes you uncomfortable because of what it might actually materially entail. *I do not shirk my duty, thus?* Remember? You’re going to need

to give a little, here.”

Nwm scowled. “Point,” he finally said. “Although if you’re going to start establishing dogma, you’d better damn well make sure this time that it’s clear that this is *not an act to be emulated*. News would get out; it always does. You would need to consider the ramifications of knowledge of the event

amongst the ‘faithful,’ or whatever they are these days. And you need to decide if it’s the Adversary who’s driving your agenda.”

Eadric glared. “You just had to get that one in, didn’t you.”

Nwm sighed. “It is a consideration.”

“The alternative is that you *reincarnate* her into a more benign form.”

“Absolutely not,” Nwm replied. “I have no jurisdiction over immortal abominations. Or celestials, for that matter. Nor do I wish any.”

“I do. And I recall that once you were less reluctant to step outside of your remit regarding another succubus.”

“Hardly comparable,” Nwm snapped. “Accepting an act of submission by one repentant individual –

for the sake of expedience – is not the same as purposely *incarnating a manifestation of evil*. You would have me unleash this thing in the world? You have no idea what you’re suggesting.”

“Then enlighten me, Nwm,” Eadric said grimly. “I am merely exploring possibilities. Could you bring her back Green?”

“No.”

“Why not?” Eadric asked. “Ortwine. Mulissu. Teppu. *Nehael*. If I’ve learned anything, it’s that the *Viridity can absorb anything*. You *awakened a simulacrum*, Nwm.”

“She would bring a blackness with her. A corruption.”

” *The Viridity arises in response to the ontological paradox. It grounds the abstract in the present.*

Notions of ens and non-ens are abandoned in the face of the Now. Your words, Nwm.”

“Nehael’s words,” Nwm corrected him.

“So ask the Goddess,” Eadric replied.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Ask Nehael if either solution is acceptable: imprisonment or incarnation. Or neither. We will abide by her decision.”

Nwm squinted and cocked his head. “Very well.”

“In any event, it will require Soneillon’s consent.”

Nwm stood stock still. ” *What?* ”

“I will not lie to her, Nwm,” Eadric said simply. “I owe her that much, at least.”

Nwm sighed.

Ahead, Ortwine stopped. They had entered a tall cavern. Great bronze doors lay beyond.

“Demons,” she calmly observed.

*

The sidhe had been walking with Rhul, apparently in casual conversation, but in fact probing him for information, and wooing the godling toward her camp. Her interrogation was too skillful for Rhul to discern, and the subtlety of her intellectual seduction – which targeted his aesthetic sensibilities with deadly precision – was more than Rhul was equipped to deal with, despite his own sophistication.

Ortwine had the uncanny knack of presenting ideas to a subject of her willful manipulation as *exactly as I would have thought* in the mind of the listener. Her sexuality was a razor which she wielded with cool detachment, and could accommodate allusions to either coyness or abandon, but in innuendos so ethereal that they merely left a vague feeling of discomfort in those whom she targeted.

All must adore me, she knew. In that, her purpose was unchanged. *Thus, can I brood better.*

Rhul himself had admitted that the exact method of Ortwine’s apotheosis was still in doubt, but the sidhe had developed a number of theories – or rather entertained a variety of notions – as to how it might be best effected. Outside of Mulhuk, the Nireem were diminished in stature, although that had not always been the case; in their heyday, when Sisperi had flourished, they had enjoyed the worship which that world’s natives had lavished upon them.

Central to Ortwine’s plans were the series of massive *reincarnations* – planned by Nwm and Lai – each of which would facilitate the simultaneous transmigration of thousands of disembodied spirits into new forms. For Nwm, this would be an act of metaphysical audacity which he had barely even begun to

address; the ethical responsibility involved was truly staggering. Ortwine’s view was more pragmatic; she needed a base of worshippers upon whom to draw to fuel her divinity, and who would venerate her based on her chosen role.

But the sidhe herself was not entirely without scruples. She understood the reciprocity demanded by the agreement and, at present at least, recognized her obligation. She would remain *fey*, of course, and that

presented her with a good deal of leeway; Afqithan was already bound to Mulhuk through Nwm’s conduits. Sisperi itself would become infused with Faerie – the *Enchantment* – as Ortwine had come to regard it in her mind. Not in some mundane wizardly fashion, but in a deep, abiding occult manner

which she was beginning to understand.

The leaders of the Nireem – Lai, Rhul and Jaliere – had sworn solemn oaths regarding Ortwine’s

ascension. Ninit, who preferred to remain marginal to the dealings of Mulhuk, had expressed no

opinion other than her usual disdain. Ortwine had decided that some rite must exist where each godling could invest her with a portion of their own strength, and that such might be a possibility. At the last, the death of Saes at her own hands might be an option, although Ortwine was nervous that such an act would mean that she herself would inherit Ruk, and its dismal responsibilities.

Ortwine drew *Heedless* and felt the blade's malign power course through her.

*

They had once been demons but – by through instillation of morbid power by Saes in her delerium –

had assumed a darker status. Blood fiends which fed on each other, and disgorged shadows of

themselves in an unending cycle of consumption and regurgitation. They descended upon the party like a rabid pack, their thin screams echoing in the tall chambers of the vestibule.

Nwm swallowed. There were too many to count. He unleashed a sonic which ripped a swathe through

them; the acoustic resonance shattered diamonds in the walls of the cavern. *Lukarn* flared; brilliant sunlight exploded. Their numbers seemed barely diminished.

Nwm invoked potent wards. “Keep them at bay for a moment. Then we cut our way forward,” he said.

It was their only option: they had to trudge. He shot two parallel walls of green fire across the chamber, a narrow path between them. The blistering heat caused the undead to recoil for an instant, before they hurled themselves oblivious through the burning curtains, immolating themselves in a frenzy in order to attack the group.

“After you,” Nwm said to Eadric.

The *Ahma* began to hew his way through the monsters. The others followed him.

**

Graz'zt stood within the Gate Room, a labyrinth of hallways containing many thousands of portals, all of which were sealed. The Prince had assumed the size and shape of a human of dark aspect, and was outfitted as a gentleman prepared for travel; an extra digit on each gloved hand remained to indicate his true nature, a vanity which Graz'zt always indulged.

He was accompanied by a dozen other demons of note, including Chepez the Vicious – a succubus

whose animal nature Graz'zt trusted – and Hejiel, whose grasp of planar geography was unrivalled.

Megual, a kelvezu assassin renowned for his subtlety, rode upon the Prince's right. The marilith Hirmis, a loyal general who in the past had delivered numerous victories to

Graz'zt in his wars against

Yeenoghu, had also joined him. Twenty metamorphosed cauchemars served as steeds, or as armor and

baggage carriers for the troupe; their possessions included all of Zelatar's most portable wealth, stowed in a variety of extradimensional bags. Their façade might have been a squad of mercenary knights and their squires.

Above them, the hooves of nightmares bearing the undead cavalry of Orcus thundered through the halls of the Argent Palace. Ten hours before, their chiefs had come; every minute detail of the palace

defenses had been known to them, and Graz'zt's walls had been *disjoined* in three different places at once. To the astonishment of those closest to him, the Prince had at once calmly opted to abandon his stronghold, but at a leisurely pace which allowed him to collect his thoughts and make arrangements first. The bulk of his court, he had dispatched to the Ice Waste of Kostchchie; were he to arrive in person, Graz'zt could assume control of that miserable, backward layer at any time. Others had been sent to the few remaining proxies which remained loyal to Azzagrat during tumultuous times.

A select group, he had kept to himself; the Prince had taken a fancy to the idea of *a-wanderin'*, perhaps with the notion of wreaking a little havoc. Distraction in destruction was what he needed now. Ilistet could wait – he would rend her body and spirit for the secrets she must have divulged. Compacted by now, no doubt; eyewitnesses had reported his herald's abrupt disappearance through a *gate*. Inscrutable to his divinations, the Prince suspected Rimilin of the Skin, and information sold to Thanatos. He cursed them all.

With a gesture, Graz'zt dispelled the wards which held the portals closed, and hundreds of vistas –

mostly terrible – opened up before them. A few other doorways remained blank and closed; gates

sealed from the other side.

Graz'zt ignored them all, and with a small device instead opened a portal to yet another world. With his party, he passed swiftly through into a dreary wasteland named Suluvda, and into exile. The *gate* flashed closed behind him.

The death knights never reached the Gate Room. More than a few of the portals had been shut for good reason.

*

In his meditations, Temenun knew that many chthonics had erupted into the forty-fifth abyss, and

that the *ugra* named Angula had vacated his demesne. Void was buoyant, pushing closer to the surface.

Temenun bade the other immortals attend him.

Angula flirts with us. He dares one of us to conjure him. Who will raise his pavillion?

Choach bowed. "My brother, Draab, has already made pact with him."

Sibud sneered. "We do not observe outside arrangements."

Choach gave a ghastly smile. "Neither does Draab."

"I bring Baramh," Yeshe announced. "His pavillion can be raised in three days. I plan to conjure the *Gu Kaama* shortly afterwards." Rumours already abounded; the Binder merely confirmed them. It was a goad directed at Prahar, who ignored it and slavered silently.

Temenun turned his gaze upon Anumid. "What does the Mouthpiece say?"

"Angula is currently unbalanced. Nonetheless, it will not be I who decides; I am authorized to offer five

hundred to begin: you may bid on them as you will."

A furious haggling began.

Yeshe smiled. She had the advantage: she was wealthier than anybody else.

**

Eadric, Ortwine, Nwm and Rhul finally gained the gates: massive bronze valves, twenty feet high,

replete with ornate scenes depicting the passage of souls through various spiritual ordeals. The press of fiends around them was unrelenting.

Eadric brandished *Lukarn* and invoked another *sunburst*. Nwm sealed the area immediately before the portals with a *wall of stone*. For a brief moment, an eery silence descended upon the group, before a hideous scraping – the sound of hundreds of claws and maws upon granite – filled the encysted space.

"What now?" Eadric asked.

Ortwine pushed lightly upon the doors. They opened noiselessly.

"We trudge," the sidhe said drily.

Wearily, they continued their descent.

**

"I must do it *now!*" Yeshe hissed.

"The bids are not yet closed, Lady," Anumid replied calmly.

"I need the first and third cabals of the *Anantam*," Yeshe pressed on regardless.

"Then you need to up your tender," Anumid smiled.

"You owe me much, Anumid," Yeshe turned her scorn on the Mouthpiece. "I will offer you two *analahs* and a dozen *gomukhs* for one month. It is a royal price.*"

"It is a *fair* price," Anumid answered. "And must be split any number of ways."

"I need three hundred by nightfall. I must build fast."

"And I would remind you that you will have an advantage in future negotiations if your

circle is made.”

“The cabals may retain ownership of the circle,” Yeshe immediately conceded. “Anumid, we need to act. Many *enemies* will soon come. We are losing the initiative. We must be prepared.”

Anumid’s eyes narrowed. “I will advocate for you. But at three *analahs* and thirty *gomukhs*.”

Yeshe’s face contorted into a snarl.

“And I will get you your three hundred. But know that the *Anantam* are dubious of angering the Wyrish Enforcer.”

“Gihaahia will not come here. She cannot overcome us on this ground, and she knows it. You may vouchsafe for me. I swear it on my name.”

Anumid nodded, and departed.

*

An hour passed, and Anumid returned. “They accept.”

*

Three hours later, the demon prince Pazuzu and six armored balors stood within the confines of the inner precinct.

Yeshe knelt before them, but her supplication was ceremonial. They were already enslaved to her.

**

The cavern was vast and approximately conical; its apex, a swirling vortex without colour, which –

Ortwine knew instinctively – led *out of there*. They entered warily, upon a solid surface which reflected like still water, but within the depths of which, a maelstrom of tormented souls raged.

It was not what they had expected.

On an island of rock in the dead centre was slouched the figure of a slender woman on a throne of bone and bronze, apparently insensible. She was possessed of great beauty, but her eyes were glazed and vacant.

Ortwine cautiously moved closer, drew *Heedless* and poked Saes lightly in the ribs. The figure was unresponsive. A trickle of divine blood from a tiny cut stained Saes’s white robe. Ortwine gazed at it, fascinated. *Heedless* moved restlessly in her hand.

She turned to Nwm. “What now?”

“She needs to be healed,” the Preceptor observed. “That is all.”

Eadric raised an eyebrow. “Can you do that? Return sanity to a deity?”

Nwm shot the *Ahma* a glance. “Healing is what I do best, Eadric. Ortwine, be prepared to negotiate. Be warned: *sane* and *nice* should not be confused.”

The sidhe paused. “Wait a...”

But Nwm had already touched Saes upon the forehead, flooding the goddess with green light, even as traces of jade fire crawled over him, charring his own flesh and causing him to writhe in pain. He reeled, and coughed blood upon the polished floor.

The malice which was Saes awoke from its stupor. Black eyes opened and regarded the quartet before her.

“You presume much,” the goddess smiled thinly. Her consciousness rapidly expanded to embrace her domain, dwarfing the psyches of those others present. “You I know,” she looked coldly at Rhul. “What are these?”

Ortwine lowered herself to one knee, and pointedly averted her eyes. “On behalf of your brothers and sisters, we beg for aid,” she said simply.

Inwardly, Eadric relaxed a little. They were in the realm of negotiation. Ortwine could handle it alone from here.

**

I need to know. Mostin’s voice echoed in Eadric’s mind. The wizard was many worlds distant.

Deploy them. Eadric replied.

Against whom?

We should target the cabals. Destroy their power base.

Good in principle. But assaulting the main precinct would be futile. It would take half a myriad to accomplish.

Do you have a better suggestion? The Ahma was irritable.

An army musters outside of Thond’s walls.

Mortal thralls? Many who are innocent will perish.

It is the doom of mortals to perish. Mostin replied.

There will be enough blood on my hands. I would rather my opening move be less ignoble.

You have always lacked the pragmatism necessary to be an effective tyrant. Mostin’s voice was scornful. *Attack the vulnerable pieces first.*

How many are gathered at Thond? Eadric was grim.

So far, around eleven thousand. Including bombards, battalions of condottieri, and the flower of Thond’s chivalry.

Their composition was irrelevant. Eadric knew that they would stand no chance, and all would be

quickly slain unless the Cheshnite spellcasters stopped to intervene directly.

And retaliation? Shouldn’t I be concerned that a counterstrike will be just as indiscriminate?

Eadric, if you think that moderating your actions will somehow cause the Hierophants to reconsider theirs...

In the throne-room of Ruk, the underworld of Sisperi, the *Ahma* stood quietly and considered.

Unleash them. He finally commanded. *But they must withdraw if Visuit or any other immortal appears in person at Thond.*

*

Princes, attend me! Mostin issued a mass *sending*.

The four exalted celestials, who had assumed the metaphysical stewardship of Wyre's cardinal

directions, manifested before the Alienist, bathed in radiance.

"I have a task consonant with the Will of the *Ahma*."

Graz'zt has vanished. Ur-fiends stalk Zelatar's byways, and Orcus cannot hold the plane. Carasch and his ilk have risen to the forty-fifth deep.

Jalael considered the *sending* which Daunton had issued an hour before. She sat within a booth in the library of the Academy; tomes containing the names and sigils of many demons surrounded her.

Celestial dignitaries had assumed the ethereal guardianship of Wyre. The Claviger had magnified the Enforcer. Fumaril was inaccessible, isolated by Mulissu's magicks. *Something* was awakening in Nizkur. Pazuzu had erected a temple south of Jashat: the olive groves were already stained black with the blood and smoke of sacrifice. And now madness and annihilation were spewing forth their effluvia into the middle Abyss.

Where to throw her lot? She reflected upon her position carefully for an hour, considering the merits of allegiance with the various axes which had formed. She contacted her occasional patron – a

Pandemonic Hag named Kreta – whose agenda was opaque at best.

Jalael brooded long upon the whereabouts of *Pharamne's Urn*.

Finally, in a small refectory, she took counsel with the wizards Troap and Muthollo – together, these three formed an unbalanced triad which nonetheless might yield remarkable results in the future.

Jalael's *accelerando* was already underway. She knew that if she survived the current crisis, she would be a major player in the New Order.

She cursed Mostin for encumbering her with notions of commitment to posterity.

"We are fragmenting into triptychs, as Shomei foresaw," Jalael observed. "Ours is the most potent. Are we to take a proactive stance?"

"I suddenly have a deep appreciation for the magical economy of the Cheshnites," Troap smiled wily.

“It is a model which we might seek to adopt.”

“It has its merits,” Jalael agreed. “Locs are forming around Waide, Tullifer and Idro; around Tozinak, Shuk and Poylu; and around Creq, Droom and Gholu. Others remain marginal, although quadruplicities seem popular among the less accomplished. Mostin, Rimilin and Daunton are the unintegrated pinnacle,”

“Is Daunton transvalent?” Muthollo asked. “He is enigmatic.”

“He is spineless,” Jalael replied. “And yes, I believe so. And Tozinak is close. And so is Waide. I suspect Jovol engineered the whole situation.”

“Jovol-who-is-Teppu,” Troap hissed. “I vote for the Green camp. I may be biased.” He smiled broadly.

“I am inclined to retain our autonomy at present,” Muthollo seemed sceptical. “The goblin has viridescent urges which are clouding his vision.”

“I am pragmatic,” Jalael opined. “I say we back Mostin.”

“Because insanity is recently fashionable?” Muthollo inquired.

“We need to deflate his Enochian bubble. We should offer to help him bind Graz’zt. The Dark Prince is abroad, and lacks the protections of his sanctum.”

Troap inclined his head. “Mostin needs a bigger cabal.”

Jalael shrugged. “He can reconfigure the spell. His use of celestials is becoming indiscriminate, and must be ended.”

Note

Angula (“Fingers”), *Baramh* (“Peacock Feathers”) and *Aja* (“The Goat”) refer to Graz’zt, Pazuzu and Orcus respectively. *Gu-Kaama* is Soneillon, “Darkness-Lust.”

“Raising the Pavillion” of a demon lord occurs after it is thoroughly subjugated. After the initial *domination* expires, a longer-term compulsion kicks in. I’ve assumed that it is possible to coerce a *dominated* creature to surrender (voluntarily fail its save / lower its SR) to a subsequently targeted long-term epic compulsion.

*Service rendered by two balors and twelve babau.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 09-23-08

Mostin Plays His Hand

The dim light before dawn. In Soan, in the world of Sisperi, Nwm stood with the goddess Lai and her twelve handmaidens in a shallow bowl in the earth. The depression had once been a temple. Untended for more than a century, now it was overgrown with creepers; the roots of trees which had since

sprouted and matured there had cracked the dressed stonework, obscuring the site’s former purpose.

Nwm had *hallowed* the remains, washing away memories of the blasphemies which had occurred

during the last, futile defense of the temple against demons sent by Graz'zt. Now, all was still, but the air was heavy with anticipation. The group was arranged in a wide circle, with Nwm and Lai in the

centre.

The Preceptor, breathing slowly and easily in the chill air, lifted a flint knife, and began to chant. The

echoing whispers of the handmaidens were barely audible.

Lai stretched out her arms, her palms upward. With two swift, brutal cuts, Nwm opened up the veins of the goddess from elbow to wrist. Lai began to bleed profusely. Nwm held her forearms and looked into her face; her blood flowed over him, and soaked into the ground at their feet. He continued to chant. A breeze began to stir.

The wind quickly grew to a tempest which raged around them, flinging leaves and debris into the air.

Nwm's breathing became rapid, and his mind reached out into the storm.

Arise, he silently commanded. Green fire consumed him; a cyclone of viridescence erupted, and whirled for the briefest of moments. Abruptly, the storm ceased. Life kindled.

He caught Lai as she collapsed, although he himself was pale and shaking. He spoke more words, and strength flowed back into both of them.

Dawn broke in Sisperi, and the sun leapt into the sky, exulting. Many hundreds of souls, graced with new forms, stood around them and gazed at them in silence and wonder: those who had perished within the confines of the temple. Over the course of hours, thousands more – who had awakened in the

surrounding countryside – made their way to the site. Ninit and the ancestors led them in long columns into the bowl.

Finally, when all had gathered – and now the sun rode high in the sky – the Nireem assembled together in the centre of the ruins. Saes was conspicuously absent, but with Jaliere's grudging acceptance, Ortwine had already taken her place amongst them.

Rhul stood upon a mound of rubble which had once been an altar, and began to tell a long, bitter story.

As he recited, Lai drew Nwm aside and spoke in hushed tones.

"Stay," she implored. "Return to Mulhuk with us."

"In time," Nwm smiled. "But I have other duties." He reached out, grasped a nearby sapling, and vanished.

Ninit, who had observed the exchange, scowled.

**

Mostin floated amongst the smoking wreck of the encampment, his features impassive.

Hours before, at his direction, the four exalted celestials – Oraios, Irel, Hemah and Shokad – had descended in a fire of ruin upon the army gathered outside of Thond’s walls, and slain upwards of ten thousand soldiers in a matter of minutes. The Alienist had observed the carnage from a discreet

distance, impressed with the efficiency of the destruction.

Mulissu corporeated next to him. She raised an eyebrow.

“What a mess,” she sighed. “We have become politicians, Mostin. We demean ourselves.”

“We do what we must,” Mostin shrugged. “I have no regrets.”

“Well spoken,” a voice spoke unexpectedly from behind them.

Mostin turned rapidly, prepared to unleash a barrage of *disintegrates*. Mulissu’s power surged.

“Peace.” It was a statement of profound simplicity, uttered with such power that the cosmos might bend to see it done. A youth stood there, offering his palm. He seemed wholly unperturbed.

“Who the hell are you?” Mostin asked.

“A many-layered question,” the other replied. “I regret that I cannot share that information with you at this time.” The boy – who from his complexion may have been a native of the area – seemed oddly amused.

Mostin furrowed his brow. “Why are you here?”

The youth cracked his knuckles casually. “To witness the handiwork of Oronthon’s servants. You have done *good* work today, Mostin.”

Mostin became nervous. *Who is this?* Mulissu’s eyes narrowed.

The youth touched his nose. “You should know that the demon Pazuzu has begun to ravage Eastern Trempe; other demons are starting to infest Ardan. Many *Ushabam* thaumaturges accompany them.”

Mostin was irritated, but could not help but be intrigued.

“Yeshe’s nihilist fanatics,” the youth explained.

“What is your interest in this situation?” Mulissu asked directly.

“At the risk of seeming evasive, that is also a more complex question than it might first appear. I would prefer not to go into it.”

“You say little to engender trust,” Mostin sighed.

“A fair observation; fortunately, I do not require your trust. But I do need you to convey a message to the *Ahma* for me. Tell him this exactly: ‘Remember what the *Sela* said, regarding your place in the downfall of Orthodoxy.’”

Mostin was about to say *Tell him yourself*, but thought better of it. “Perhaps if...” he began.

But the youth had vanished.

Mostin turned to Mulissu and scowled. “This is disturbing. Could you read anything about him?”

“Not a whit.”

“Nor I,” Mostin concurred. “And I dislike being elected to communicate messages by unknown entities.”

“And Pazuzu?”

“I should inform Eadric, if he doesn’t know already. I cannot dispatch celestials within Wyre proper, anyway: this is up to him.”

“Mostin, we need to talk. I can’t hold the piling around Fumaril for much longer.”

“Don’t worry,” Mostin appeared unconcerned. “The gears are shifting. Everything will happen quickly now.”

“How comforting,” Mulissu said.

**

“Graz’zt has abandoned the Argent Palace and unleashed a chthonic tide centered on Zelatar. You should be proud, Mostin. You were complicit in reducing him to such a desperate strategy.” Rimilin seemed genuinely impressed, though no less condescending than usual.

“I had heard,” Mostin replied smoothly.

“I will aid you in *binding* him. For a price.”

“Strange. Jalael made a similar offer with her clique of wizards. I sense a renewed interest in the whereabouts of a certain urn.”

“Every mage in Wyre has consulted Shomei’s library in an attempt to glean tidbits of information regarding that pot, Mostin.”

“Not I, alas,” Mostin sighed.

“Nor I,” Rimilin admitted. “There has been no time for scholarly research. Do I *want* the urn? Of course! How can there be any doubt on that count? I will find out how it works after I get it.”

Not just the urn. This bastard wants Azzagrat. Graz’zt’s throne. The arrogance. Mostin smiled, and shook his head. “You’ll never do it.”

“We’ll see,” Rimilin said smugly. “It’s time: bring him in, Mostin. You won’t have a better chance. I will aid you. As will Mulissu, I’ve no doubt: she holds onto a grudge, that one. Your sprite and your

Shomeiette can contribute. Jalael, Troap, Muthollo. You have your cabal, Alienist.”

“What is your price?”

“Access to the *web of motes*.”

Mostin considered briefly. “Let us assume, for the moment, that I agree.”

“It leaves the question of what to do with said bound Prince,” Rimilin observed, somewhat surprised.

“Imprisonment, extortion, *domination* or termination are all viable options; nor are they necessarily mutually exclusive choices.”

“I cannot *dominate* him.”

“I could, with help,” Rimilin suggested.

“I would sooner cut off my pseudopod, than hand Graz’zt over to Rimilin of the Skin,” Mostin snorted.

“So what do you suggest?”

“A very precise coordination of efforts,” Mostin replied carefully. “It is rather risky; if it fails, we will need to flee or eliminate him immediately.”

Rimilin looked at the Alienist suspiciously. “You have my attention.”

“Understand that I have long pondered this question, Rimilin. It requires a certain spell synchrony.

Graz’zt must be struck by a *superb dispelling* only a fraction of a second before he is subjected to a *minimus containment*. He will not have the opportunity to re-erect his *mind blank* before he is captured.”

Rimilin gawked. “Ingenious, Mostin. I must admit it. Such a strategy would not have occurred to me.”

“His receptacle will eventually need to be protected by a *disjunction ward*, although if due care is taken with it, such a precaution can wait for a little while.”

“And when you have your Graz’zt-in-a-Jar? What then?”

“Your involvement in the process will end at that point,” Mostin smiled. “You need not be concerned on that count.”

“I wish to be present during any interrogation regarding the urn.”

“I will convoke an assembly to discuss the urn,” Mostin spoke calmly. “Any interrogation will be conducted under the full auspices of the Academy.”

“Touché, Mostin. I will accompany you when you deliver it to Daunton. I do not trust you.”

“Nor I, you. And Rimilin,” Mostin stared madly, “if you do decide to betray me, you had better be sure that you are thorough in your efforts, and overlook no contingencies. I have dealt with you with due civility. You might rue it, were our relationship to change.”

*

Mostin tried to grasp the mote again. It was elusive, and kept slipping into the region of space and time which Mostin had come to realize approximated to the Region of Dreams.

The remnant of Murmuur was impossible to isolate, his memory fading rapidly.

Mostin spun another arc, this time for Azazel, and observed a convoluted knot of

resonances. One radicle drew him onward and backwards, to a time when rebel smiths hammered furiously in forges

upon the Blessed Plain, contriving engines of destruction to assault the Empyrean.

Murmuur's mote hovered nearby, as if attempting to taunt the Alienist. Mostin ignored it, concentrating instead on Sekabin, a proto-devil of immense cunning, who oversaw the construction of devices which breathed unholy fire, and artifacts whose purpose was otherwise long-forgotten. Sekabin, it had been, who had wrought the doors of Murmuur's Tower, and helped anchor it to unnamed worlds which would

later be revealed to the rebels as the prison from which they could never escape.

He would need to conjure the devil, and extract the key to activating the Tower from it. A task well within his abilities. In his mind, he weighed the benefits of a return to Goetia against the practical reality of already having celestials on the ground.

The Alienist relaxed his thoughts and returned his perception to the present. The echoes of the deceased Dukes – Murmuur, Titivilus and Furcus – drifted on the edge of comprehension. Deeper in dream,

Soneillon's mote flickered in and out of being; taut radicles bound it to familiar nodes: Graz'zt, Eadric, Rimilin, Yeshe. With a colossal effort of will, Mostin generated a connection between the demoness, his own significator, and the Prince of Azzagrat. A plethora of possible futures exploded into being, and he seized immediately upon one of them. *Pharamne's Urn*.

He gasped as new infinities were born to his inner sight.

The decision by Mostin to end his Enochian phase was made in a heartbeat.

**

An hour before midnight, the *Ahma* – together with Tahl, Tarpion and a number of other *resurrected* temple grandees – assembled beneath a canopy on a conical hill twenty miles south of Hrim Eorth in the Wyrish Marklands. Above them, flapping noisily in the wind, a massive banner stretched: a rising sun cradled within the outstretched boughs of a great tree. The green field of the standard appeared

black in the torchlight; its device was a ruddy gold.

In the valleys below, thousands of campfires flickered. Against the *Ahma's* better judgment many companies were mustered together, but he felt powerless to deny the faithful proximity to the *Sela*.

Those cadres which had been dispatched beyond the Claviger's remit were small, mobile, and bolstered with protective magicks.

Nehael's farspoken words still echoed in Eadric's mind. They had been less than reassuring:

She is what she is, Ahma. If you want her back, then just do it: you have the power and authority. It is your decision to make.

Which was to say that Nwm's assessment of the situation – that Soneillon would bring a

corruption

with her, were the Preceptor to *reincarnate* her – might be correct, after all. Nehael herself had surrendered to the Green, and had been relinquished by one Truth to another; on reflection, Eadric realized that perhaps the Ancient Void – which *owned* Soneillon – might be less accommodating than Oronthon in that regard. He stared at the Eye of Cheshne, which brooded on the horizon, pregnant with power.

As they waited, Tahl regarded the *Ahma* carefully. The saint's divinations had revealed that, in all likelihood, Yeshe would now move to embody the demoness within a day. Eadric had wavered, as

though he were waiting for some other sign; none had been forthcoming. Furthermore, rumour of

demonic depredations in the East had agitated Eadric's captains: all were restless, waiting for the *Ahma* to act.

Finally, Nwm appeared, sprouting upwards from the ground. He was shaky and haggard.

"You look awful," Eadric observed. "I take it you were successful?"

"Thank-you," Nwm replied drily. "And yes. We have made a beginning. How is your current moral quandary progressing?"

"Very nicely, thank-you." Eadric sat unceremoniously in his armor. "Everything is messed up, Nwm.

There are too many overlapping paradigms; things are becoming confusing."

"And the massacre at Thond?"

"A miserable reality."

"I sympathize," Nwm said earnestly. "Being an agent of retribution carries a certain weight with it.

There was no intervention by the Hierophants?"

"If there had been, it might have allayed some of my reservations. I think the Cheshnite leadership would rather have me wallow in remorse."

"And do you?"

"I have no inkling to indulge my conscience: we are at war. Things are about to get much worse."

"Apparently you have a bright mood upon you. What of the demoness?"

"I see no future in such a liaison," Eadric said drily.

"A divorce, then?" Nwm inquired.

"Yes. And I foresee acrimony."

"I will be tactful," Nwm smiled. "So. Yeshe gets Soneillon. Is that wise?"

Eadric looked desperate. "Nwm! I thought you opposed her revival?"

“And so I do. I would oppose Yeshe’s efforts no less than I would yours. She appears driven.”

“The memory of the cascade at Khu propels her,” Eadric explained. “In her mind, it was the greatest blasphemy which could have been visited upon the holiest of sites.”

“Feeling sympathetic?”

“Hardly. I would still prefer her dead.”

“Then you will be relieved to hear that I have a solution,” Nwm said. “Mostin has expressed an interest in conjuring your demoness; he was reluctant to divulge his agenda precisely.”

Eadric looked suspicious. “He said nothing to me earlier.”

“You’ve spoken?”

Eadric nodded dumbly.

“Something is wrong?”

“He passed a message to me, from an ‘interested party.’ *Remember what the Sela said, regarding your place in the downfall of Orthodoxy.* ‘

“That is all?” Nwm was baffled.

“It is sufficient. I understand its context well enough.” Eadric swallowed.

“And the ‘interested party?’”

The *Ahma* stared at the Preceptor, and raised his eyebrows.

“Oh.” Nwm breathed. “Sh*t.”

“Verily,” Eadric agreed.

“Does Mostin know who it was?”

“I don’t think so. And I’d prefer that it remain between you and I for now. I also find it interesting to

note that after even the briefest exchange with said entity, during which no mention of fiendish allies was even mentioned, Mostin suddenly seems willing to renounce his Empyrean contract. In addition to the Exalted, he has conjured *thirty* celestials in two days, Nwm.”

“Mostin is playing his hand,” Nwm nodded.

“Except he keeps all his cards hidden.”

Nwm laughed. “Whichever trumpet Mostin hears, it is not yours, Ed. Is that all?”

Eadric laughed bitterly. “No indeed. Get some rest, Nwm. You’re going to need it. Tomorrow, we hunt demons.”

“What kind?”

“The Pazuzu kind.”

“Where?” The Preceptor groaned.

“In Trempa and Ardan.”

“A strangely marginal choice for assault.”

“Yes and no,” the *Ahma* sighed. “It is also the spiritual homeland of *Saizhan*. Bring whatever allies you can, Nwm. I mean *anybody*. We need heavy firepower.”

“Is there a plan?”

“We find him. The Saints use their power, so he can’t slip away. I take him down.”

“Is there a better plan?”

“Only if you can scry him. He is emanating a massive *nondetection* and we only know his general whereabouts.”

“How hard can it be to locate a rampaging horde of demons?”

“More of a *troupe* than a *horde*, Nwm. And harder than you might think. He’s slippery, this one. And he’s in no rush. He’s having fun at the moment. He’s also beating us over the head with the arcane Injunction. His presence is a religious matter.”

“Is it?” Nwm asked. “Then hand out the acorns. You will all assist me in a spell.”

**

Temenun pondered.

In Zelatar, the eruption continued uninterrupted, and Ancient Darkness consumed Azzagrat. Prince

Orcus quickly retreated what remained of his armies, fortified himself against conjurations by the Hierophants at Jashat, and gave thought to the tide of unbeing which might reach him in half a

millennium. Companies of Death Knights – together with squads of kelvezu – were dispatched to a

hundred likely worlds in search of Graz’zt.

Pazuzu – now joined by vrocks, succubi and flocks of fiendish corvids – razed villages on the shores of lakes in the Wyrish hinterland, crucifying the inhabitants for his amusement; balors were busy tearing down Urgic monasteries.

Yeshe was preparing to bind the first chthonic, *Gu-Kaama*: the apple of Cheshne’s eye; Soneillon, Queen of Throile. She had intimated that the monster Arhuz would follow. The Binder cursed silently as Prahar – who had struck a deal with the *Anantam* – made use of the circle she had erected to enslave several middle-ranking demomic magnates in quick succession, including Dhenu, a bull-faced fierce

protector. Three more pavillions had been raised. The *ugras* had been dispatched defensively in the neighbourhood of the Temple and reinforced with squadrons of goristros and succubi. Prahar’s unlikely choice to play a more cautious game had won him

the backing of three cabals of blood-magi who were otherwise subject to the Wyrish Injunction.

Idyam, Rishih and Choach courted the *Kesha-Dirghaa* – theurges who formed the bulk of the ritual pool – but whose activities had been curtailed by Gihaahia. The compound – impregnable as it was –

had been further garrisoned with dozens of glabrezu. Choach had invoked massive *screens* over subject Thalassine cities, and called a general mobilization of magically compelled allies. Idyam surrounded himself with malign spirits.

Sibud – whose tools extended beyond magic – had unleashed a ferocious tide of vampirism upon Jashat and Iea which threatened to consume the cities, and was rapidly spreading to the surrounding

countryside. The creatures sired by Sibud were bestial and voracious. Temenun also knew that the

vampire was wooing key spellcasters to aid him in his *storm of blood*.

Naatha made envoys to unaligned powers to seduce or coerce them, and it was known that she had

spoken with several Wyrish mages. It was also rumoured that she had fled from Mulissu's wrath when attempting to gain access to Fumaril. Rimilin, she shunned, for fear of being *dominated*.

Jahi plotted in the dark. Dhatri prepared for her procession.

**

Princes, attend me. Mostin issued the command again. Part of him regretted that it was already the final time; a far larger part was relieved that he would no longer be required to deal with their noisome feathers and light.

“Gather the lesser devas,” Mostin instructed, shielding his eyes with his appendage. “You will aid the *Ahma* in his efforts: seek out demons on Wyre's periphery – *outside* of the circumscribed area, in case I need to remind you – and eliminate them. When the threat is expunged from Ardan, set a watch upon

the monastery at Esoc. Six devas and an archon should be sufficient.

“Take your remaining minions, and harry the demons in the vicinity of the Cheshnite temple at Jashat.

Destroy as many as you can, but do not attempt to invest the main compound. You may continue this activity intermittently for the remaining duration of our compact; otherwise, resume your patrols of Wyre's borders. I leave the exact details to you.”

“Mostin,” Irel-Who-Smites spoke, fixing the Alienist with his gaze. “These are not the *Ahma*'s explicit instructoins.”

“Not exactly,” Mostin admitted. “But I must be permitted a certain amount of leeway in interpreting his wishes. My celestial alliance will soon end, and this will be the last command I will give you; you are still bound to carry it out.”

“I must strongly advise against the conjuration of fiends,” Oraios said sternly.

“That is because you don’t have all of the information,” Mostin gave an insane grin.

“Thank-you, gentlemen. That is all. Enjoy your eternity, and I will enjoy mine.”

*

It was utterly dark in the summoning room, and the smell of incense lingered in the air. Mostin was intimately conscious of his surroundings, his augmented perception penetrating the blackness around him. Nearby, there was a void within a void.

“Thank-you for the courtesy of manifesting as yourself,” Mostin said drily. He was weary: the effort of invoking a *metagnostic inquiry* followed by a *wish* and a *superb planar binding* had left him dizzy.

A girl appeared. “Do not presume,” Soneillon said. “Is this how the *Ahma* has chosen to deal with the situation?”

“I want *Pharamne’s urn*, Soneillon. You are its former mistress. You have information.”

Soneillon raised an eyebrow. “So I have something you want? That makes for an altogether more interesting discussion.”

Mostin sighed.

“I would prefer a more relaxed environment,” Soneillon suggested.

“I do not feel my *Goetic Dunce* hat on my head.”

“This circle won’t hold me for more than a day, Mostin.”

“I pray that this doesn’t take that long,” Mostin groaned.

“I would overwhelm you in a contest of magic,” Soneillon smiled. “I sense your reservoir is almost depleted.”

Mostin stared at her, “Maybe,” he finally said. “Although I doubt it. And I think you might be reluctant to risk being unmade again. I believe I have the advantage.”

” *Unmade*? Mostin, you have much to learn regarding the Truth.”

“I am less interested in the truth, than the urn,” Mostin was unfazed. “How far did your control over it extend?”

“Are we bargaining now? Good. I will answer that question if you answer mine.”

Mostin gave a shrug. “Very well.”

“The demiplanes which abut Throile were made with the urn. With it, I have drained oceans. Levelled mountain ranges. Generated worlds.”

“That sounds delightful,” Mostin nodded. “Did your cabal participate in your efforts to control the urn?”

“Why must you always be so functional, Mostin? Pragmatic. In any event, it is my turn to pose a

question. You have been consorting with Seraphim: I smell it. The stakes are higher than I suspected.

Which demons have the immortals bound already, Mostin?”

“Pazuzu. Alrunes. Baphomet. Munkir. A dozen balors. Many more.”

“Do you plan to conjure Graz’zt?”

“I believe it is my turn,” Mostin gave a ghastly grin. “I will rephrase my last question: which of your cabal members were party to your use of the urn?”

“If I agree to answer, you must issue a *sending* for me immediately.”

“That would depend upon to whom it should be delivered,” Mostin said carefully, “and the exact wording of the message.”

“To Chaya. The message is this: *This is Mostin the Metagnostic. I have a message from Soneillon: Prepare for my return.*”

Mostin’s eyes widened. “You are optimistic regarding the outcome of our exchange then?”

“I’m confident I’ll walk out of this summoning room,” Soneillon said lightly. “Do you agree to communicate this message?”

Mostin considered. “I agree to your stipulation, on the condition that I may pose an additional question.”

Soneillon sighed. “Fine. The names are: Adyell, Helitihai, Orychne, Chaya, Lehurze; the principal members only.”

“Thank-you. That wasn’t so hard, was it? How quickly could you generate a demiplane – by which I mean how soon did it reach its full extent – and to what degree did you deplete your collective psychic resources?”

“I perceive at least two questions, Mostin. Which would you like me to answer?”

Mostin scowled. “The latter is more germane.”

“Each of my handmaidens was emptied of power; I myself suffered no such debilitating effects.”

Implicit in the answer was the reminder: *I am chthonic. You would do well to remember it.*

Mostin paused to consider, swiftly making a series of magical calculations in his mind.

“The *sending*, Mostin?” Soneillon raised an eyebrow.

Grudgingly, Mostin retrieved his stone and issued the message.

“What are you planning, Mostin?”

“Now *that* information would involve a year of servitude.”

Soneillon smiled innocently. “Let me reverse the question. What is a year of my submission to you worth?”

Mostin gawked. “You cannot be serious.”

“I am deadly serious, Mostin. What is access to my reservoir worth to you?”

Mostin rocked back and forth on his heels. “A lot,” he finally conceded. *Especially if it*

means I can snub Rimilin. “What do you want?”

“Give me Graz’zt, Mostin. Of all creatures which hate him, I despise him the most.”

Mostin invoked a *moment of prescience*.

“You are also anxious to avoid a compact with Yeshe,” the Alienist observed drily, “whose terms might be more demanding than mine. No, Soneillon. I think that to have Prince Graz’zt delivered as a gift – to

do with as one will – that is worth more than a year of thralldom to me.”

“And to Rimilin? What might my submission be worth to him?” Soneillon asked pointedly.

“Might I remind you that it is *my* thaumaturgic circle which holds you, not Rimilin’s?”

Soneillon stretched lazily. “You could secure my confinement, Mostin. You *could* invest a great deal of energy in binding me to your will. It is my guess that you don’t *want* to, however, as your limited resources are better deployed elsewhere.”

“True. But I am stubborn, and I will not be foiled; even against my better judgment I would coerce you, just to make the point. Give me one year of service, and freely share all knowledge that you have of the *urn*. Give me names of the chthonics. Give me your reservoir. And I will deliver Graz’zt to you within a week.”

“Out of generosity, and for aesthetic reasons, I will extend the bargain to a year and a day, Mostin. But I will consider the pact to have begun when he is mine.”

“Which leaves us an uncomfortable honor period,” Mostin scowled. “Might I suggest a less demanding contract to tide us over, until the main agreement takes effect?”

“State your terms,” Soneillon breathed.

“You will protect me with your *ecstasy of negation*. You will aid me in retrieving Murmuur’s tower from Afqithan.”

“These are no small tasks, Mostin...”

“I will give you Adyell.”

Soneillon smiled graciously. “Thank-you, Mostin. Adyell will be a useful asset.”

“You would exact no vengeance?” Mostin seemed surprised.

“No, Mostin. I can spare none.”

**

In Jashat, Yeshe fumed. The ritual had been ineffective, despite her prognostications to the contrary.

Fate had shifted course whimsically. She stormed from the circle, and confronted Temenun in the

sanctum.

” *I am thwarted. Did you foresee this?* ” She barked the question at him.

“No,” Temenun purred.

“Do you have an explanation?”

“Our enemy has superior prolepsis.” The Tiger remained calm.

“Mostin.” Yeshe said. “Sibud must annihilate him.”

“Feel free to argue that point with your Brother,” Temenun replied. “My focus lies elsewhere. Yeshe, I will demonstrate the art of binding to you.”

*

Yeshe watched from her tower and chewed her lip thoughtfully.

Below in the courtyard, within the circle and near it, demons were gathered. In four hours, Temenun had conjured twenty mariliths. Robed in purple and black and bearing his iron coronet upon his brow, he had foregone the usual niceties of compacting the demons, and simply *dominated* them all. Only now, he tapped his reservoir and spoke a powerful summons.

A void which burned – one of the kin of Carasch – erupted onto the edge of being. It emanated terrible power. Seconds later, another manifested.

Yeshe’s eyes narrowed. Temenun knew primeval magic, and remembered names forgotten by all others.

He raised his hand and wove a dream rapidly. Abruptly, the courtyard was empty.

Yeshe paced briefly, before descending into the deep caverns below the compound. Here most of the

Cheshnite forces were marshalling: demons conjured by the favored souls of the *Naganam*; desert-dwelling spirits of ill temper; companies of half-giants in enamelled armor, drawn through

teleportation circles from the jungles of Utter Shûth.

Within an unlit chapel filled with death, Yeshe approached Visuit, who sat in meditation amongst the corpses.

Yeshe bowed. “The Tiger-who-Waits has pounced. He has had some prescience, which he has not shared.”

“The Mouthpiece has not approached me,” Visuit growled.

“Leave Anumid to me,” Yeshe replied. “You’ll get your war by nightfall.”

*

In the early morning – after the *Ahma* and his party had passed through a tree into Trempa – Temenun struck the Wyrish encampment. While he himself remained in Dream, the Tiger’s demons arrived a

furlong distant from the *Sela*’s tent.

A barrage of dispelling magic followed from the chthonics; zones of *forbiddance*

crumpled. *Unholy auras* flickered on, and *blade barriers* ripped through unwary Temple troops.

As Urqual sat in *Saizhan*, observing thought pass through Mind, he was aware that nearby Templars moved; his empty eyes followed them as though he watched them.

There was a sound like a roaring hurricane.

And death.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on Nov 17, 2008

Demonstrating the Prophetic Advantage

An hour before dawn, Nwm roused Eadric from prayer.

“Gather your Saints,” he told him.

The air was chill. Esquires of the temple clad the *Ahma* in his armour and girt him with his sword.

Adepts invoked protective magicks upon him.

The Saints assembled. The Preceptor instructed them all in a brief rite, and gathered their energy into him, staggering from its frequency. So bright. So unearthly. So much of it. It spilled out of him, incinerating trees in the vicinity and transporting their essence to the Blessed Plain.

Nwm discarnated and soared upwards on a torrent of light, all the while gazing down upon Wyre.

Behind him, the Sun hung amid the Void. Warm. Beckoning. He turned to face it. It illuminated billions of devas.

Nwm swallowed.

He turned back, and his sight ranged across Trempa, quickly locating the disturbance which he knew to be Pazuzu and his troupe; violent perturbations in the otherwise harmonious whole. He brushed aside the Prince’s screen and pinpointed him exactly.

Nwm rematerialized. “I have him. I can open a tree nearby.”

Eadric nodded. “Then please do. But not *too* near. I’d rather not be thrown straight into combat.”

Quickly, they made their preparations.

Tahl issued a *sending*, and Eadric summoned Ortwine. A brief remote conversation with Mostin ensued.

[Eadric]: We’re preparing to strike Pazuzu.

[Mostin]: I have instructed the Episemes to purge demons outside of Wyre, but I was otherwise less than specific.

[Eadric]: They can be recalled if a particular task awaits them.

[Mostin]: Unfortunately not. I am investigating other avenues.

[Eadric]: Ah. Yes. Your glorious return to Goetia.

[Mostin]: The potential of that avenue is also exhausted.

[Eadric]: Your allegiances are more fleeting than those of Ortwine!

[Mostin]: But far more effective. I am returning to Afqithan in order to secure my new tower.

[Eadric]: You have penetrated its mysteries, then?

[Mostin]: The tower is indestructible, impervious to *scrying* and astral attack, may *plane shift* at the whim of the one who controls it, and may spin a *gate* to each and every Hell. It is opened by a password known to but a handful of devils. Its exterior demonstrates an extreme mutability of

appearance, at the owner's discretion. Its interior is extradimensional and opulent. One has to admire the antique Infernal aesthetic.

[Eadric]: And your manse?

[Mostin]: I must have a summer retreat!

[Eadric]: You have acquired the passwords?

[Mostin]: From the devil Sekabin. And knowledge of the sigils to open the *gates*. I didn't even need to resort to *torment*; he seemed quite willing to impart the information. I imagine his superiors simply wish to see the tower active again; it is inert in Afqithan. I *dismissed* him forthwith; I have no desire for further enmity with Hell.

[Eadric]: Fear not. I'm sure Dis has forgiven you.

[Mostin]: You are unusually droll today.

[Eadric]: The Adversary is moving, Mostin. He is a player you cannot outclass. Be wary. How did he appear to you?

[Mostin]: !

[Eadric]: Well?

[Mostin]: Hmph. So that was he. Enigmatic. A tanned youth, with unruly black curls. Lean of frame.

Suave, but somewhat understated. For Ego Incarnate, he seemed very restrained. My initial impressions were largely favorable.

[Eadric]: !?

[Mostin]: He was less overbearing than certain celestials of my recent acquaintance.

[Eadric]: And as *Evil* Incarnate?

[Mostin]: That question has no meaning. Our definitions of Evil are not altogether congruent in this

regard. He is no mere *devil*, Eadric. He is the *Adversary*. His plan is hidden to all but himself and your glowing despot, of whom he is a function in any case:
$$\text{complex, meaningless formula}$$

[Eadric]: Ahh.

[Mostin]: I do not expect you to understand the proof.

[Eadric]: That is fortunate.

[Mostin]: These minor infinities are of no particular concern to me, in any case.

[Eadric]: What else?

[Mostin]: I will use Soneillon's reservoir to allow me to *bind* Graz'zt in three days. Other mages have expressed an interest in aiding me.

[Eadric]: This egomaniacal nonsense again?

[Mostin]: Apparently my taste for vendetta runs deeper than yours, *Ahma*. He has wounded me deep, more than once. I am a wizard with a reputation to maintain: I do not forget a slight.

[Eadric]: Touché, Mostin. That I cannot deny you.

Abruptly, Ortwine issued from a shadowy portal. She seemed unusually pensive.

"Is the happy band ready?" Mesikammi asked with apparent innocence. Behind her there was a huge confusion of Temple troops; they were parting to allow the progress of five enormous golden boars.

The ground shook as they approached.

Yet more gods, Ortwine observed silently.

**

Two Saints, four Talions, eleven Penitents, Mesikammi, five boars, Ortwine, and Nwm accompanied Eadric in his attack upon Pazuzu and his troupe. Many of the templar grandees – past and present –

were riding celestial griffons of prodigious size. Ortwine *veiled* them all. Transformed into an unkindness of ravens, their approach was unnoticed; appearing to hug the ground, they passed below the mobs of fiendish crows which wheeled in the sky over Pazuzu's train. The *Ahma* felt distinctly uneasy at the sidhe's burgeoning power.

They descended on the demons, who were busy levelling a quaint Trempan village and visiting

grotesque horrors upon its inhabitants. Nearby, a large group of *ushabam* conjurers gathered. Some were making sacrifices; some were conjuring more demons; some raved, or experienced religious

ecstasies.

Nwm evoked a powerful wind which suddenly propelled them toward the demon prince's position; as

they plunged, one of the balors noted them with its *true seeing* and gave telepathic warning. Saint Tahl, Tuan Muat and Moda the Exorcist simultaneously dropped *dimensional locks* centered on Pazuzu.

Ortwine's glamour evaporated, and the sidhe pounced, *vorpai* sword in hand. *Heedless* was screeching in telepathic jubilation as it bit home; the *Ahma* raised *Lukarn* and smote Pazuzu with all his power.

Ichor sprayed, and the demon reeled. Talions and penitents descended on balors and nalfeshnees. Five-ton boars trampled through vrock like they were grass.

Ortwine moved faster than thought and was already about the demon prince again, effortlessly slicing in a perfectly executed pattern.

[Mostin]: I guess you are engaging Pazuzu's force?

[Eadric]: This may not be the best time, Mostin.

The *dimensional locks* hadn't contained the arch-fiend. The Prince of the Lower Aerial Kingdoms dilated time, vanished, instantly reappeared a quarter of a mile above, and unleashed a tempest of eldritch power centered on the *Ahma*; a purple lightning penetrated everything. Griffons, vrock, and

Penitents perished. Eadric was scarred and blasted. Otwine somehow avoided the storm.

The few remaining vrock launched themselves into the air. Mesikammi whistled. The boars – smoking but otherwise unfazed by the violet discharge – turned towards the gathered thaumaturges, and charged.

[Mostin]: Nonsense. A little multitasking is no great ordeal. Your strike is premature. You...

[Eadric]: *Later*, Mostin.

Nwm struck Pazuzu with a peal of thunder accompanied by an explosion of green fire.

Two more *gates* opened; two more balors manifested. Several of the *ushabam* were already taking to flight, speaking *words of recall*.

Eadric groaned. This had to stop. He leapt forward thirty yards and struck, instantly felling one the demons; the explosion flung him backwards and burned him through his armour.

[Mostin] (Frustrated): I can't see what's going on! What's happening?

[Eadric] (Resigned): I hate it when they blow up. These priests must be eliminated before the numbers of demons can be swollen further. Where are you, anyway?

[Mostin]: At home. Preparing to depart. I have been monitoring the activities of celestials; they have destroyed three balors. Unfortunately, those remaining have fled to join Pazuzu.

[Eadric]: I had noticed.

Two armored balors now assailed Saint Tahl the Incorruptible. He weathered their blows and

pronounced a *dictum*, instantly banishing one of them to the Abyss. The other, uncowed, uttered *blasphemy* in retort. Tahl was unscathed, but two of the Penitents combusted and vanished.

Outside of the *dimensional lock*, two more *gates* opened; two more balors appeared. The boars thundered into the remaining *ushabam*, quickly trampling them to death.

Five balors and Pazuzu now remained.

Ortwine reappraised the situation in an instant. She turned her mind and quickly *dominated* the demon closest to Eadric; two of the others, she knew already, were protected by *mind blanking rings*.

Straightaway, she instructed it to *teleport* and attack Pazuzu.

Pazuzu, climbing rapidly beyond range, issued a thin wail which made the *Ahma*'s blood curdle. Space began to bubble and warp in the demon prince's vicinity. In response, Mesikammi began to cast another spell.

Eadric bounded forwards again, this time pronouncing a *holy word*, simultaneously expelling and obliterating the two most recently arrived demons. Two more *holy words*, spoken by Tahl and Moda, rang across the wreck of the village. The demons were being driven away.

Nwm, considering whether to unleash a terrible necromancy upon Pazuzu, suddenly received a

communication from Daunton the Diviner.

He paused, made a swift judgment, stepped into a tree, and vanished.

Eadric's jaw dropped.

[Mostin]: What now?

[Eadric]: If you happen across Nwm, send him in this direction.

But the Preceptor's appraisal of the situation had been accurate; the two remaining demons vanished.

Pazuzu also elected to slip away, but not before an immense, grizzled balor had appeared below him.

Will they never stop, the *Ahma* was exasperated. He *healed* himself, steeled himself, and prepared for the onrush.

A tide of *blasphemy* washed over him, leaving him momentarily senseless; his wards protected him.

Ortwine flung the *dominated* demon against the newcomer, and with a battered Rede, prosecuted a well-coordinated aerial attack at speed.

An air monolith, conjured by Mesikammi, encompassed the balor and forced it to the ground. Its whip and blade flailed ineffectively, as the boars thundered into it. Their tusks ripped it open; there was another explosion; their hooves trampled its remains into the steaming mire of ichor.

Eadric glanced around: smoke; entrails; blood. Six penitents and two Talions – including Rede, caught in the final explosion – had fallen. He, Tahl, Moda, Tarpion and Tuan Muat were blasted in varying degrees. Ortwine was largely unscathed; Mesikammi, descending from the sky had escaped all injury.

The *Ahma* walked to the mangled wreck of Rede's corpse, removed a gauntlet, and touched the erstwhile Grand Master upon the forehead, instantly *resurrecting* him. Rede arose grimly.

You don't get off that easily, Eadric thought. The others might be returned at a later time, if he needed them. Nervously, he looked toward the shamaness. The elemental hung in the sky above her; ancient

boar-spirits attended her.

Abyssal slime evaporated as the area was *hallowed* by Saint Moda. Ortwine moved purposefully through the remains of the fallen, looking for items to plunder.

Eadric approached the nearest beast: nine feet at the shoulder and covered with a fur which glistened like gold. Whatever wounds it had received, they had already healed.

He abased himself. “Thank-you.”

Mesikammi clapped. “Yes. Good. Very respectful. Three miracles I had to work to wake them. The Wyrish Royal House are an ancient lineage; they should look more to their roots.”

The beast snorted.

**

The camp was in chaos.

The chthonics uttered *blasphemies* which caused even the most devout to reel in shock, and obliterated less robust souls. Mariliths tore into squadrons of Temple troops who were hastily attempting to

interpose themselves between the fiends and the most direct line to the *Sela*’s tent.

Saint Kustus – who had been slain by demons some two hundred years previously – took stock and

rapidly gauged the level of the threat.

Those. The *Ahma* had warned him about them.

The attack was well-timed, as only minutes before the *Ahma* had departed with many of the more potent warriors within the Temple ranks. Kustus knew that it was a direct probe, to make a practical test of the defenses around the *Sela* and to demonstrate a prophetic advantage. Whoever had launched the attack had avoided the Aethers altogether and had out-dreamed the planetars which had been set to

intercept any oneiric assault.

Still, thirty-six concentric rings of *forbiddance* surrounded the *Sela*’s tabernacle and a full celestial company was waiting in proximity; the Saints and the adepts had not been idle, and had covenanted

with many devas within the host. A huge net of *blasting glyphs* and *symbols* encompassed the camp.

Kustus immediately summoned his celestial destrier and charged into the fray.

Closer to the impact point, Wurz was inciting New Temple zealots into a frenzy. Holy fire surrounded them. Saint Anaqiss the Apostate engaged the demons with his mace, grown to twice his height and

wearing a *crown of glory*.

As Brey *wind-walked* beyond the zone of *forbiddance*, half of the celestials moved in

ethereal tandem with him.

” *Manifest*,” he commanded. Sixty devas appeared.

“Bring down the chthonics,” he instructed them.

**

Daunton stood on the balcony of his suite at Prince Tagur’s fortified palace at Gibilrazen, and gazed skywards. He had remained silent for days. His divinations preoccupied him, and he avoided any

situation which might compromise his position with regard to the Injunction: that meant shunning

anyone with a political interest, and that entailed *everyone* at present.

Clouds were beginning to gather. Greys and ochres; beyond lay hints of vermillion. A wind was rising.

Unnatural, he knew immediately. Daunton’s worst fear gripped him, and he invoked *prescience*. His magical perceptions soared.

It was the *storm of blood*.

What to do? His mind reached out.

Nwm: Daunton. The storm of blood is coming.

How long?

Not long.

*Sh*t. Your timing couldn’t be worse.*

Or Sibud’s better.

Daunton’s stomach turned as he watched the quickening clouds. He felt old and weary; the twists and turns of the world – and the powers which were now manifesting – were beyond his capacity to

anticipate, much less deal with. He leaned heavily on his staff for a moment, and turned to reenter his

apartments.

She was standing directly behind him, silent, and their eyes met with barely eighteen inches between them. Her crimson hair stirred in the breeze and brushed his face, the scent of imminent death filled his nostrils.

He froze and tried to speak, but no sound issued from his mouth. No magic lay on him, but terror

overcame him.

The Enforcer smiled. She seemed almost benign; a fact which troubled the arch-mage more than her

usual overt malice.

“I have committed no violation,” Daunton finally said, shaking. “But I need to know where my limits lie. Nwm will come here soon; may I aid him?”

“You are being assailed,” Gihaahia said in a matter-of-fact way. “You may take reasonable precautions to counteract the threat. But you lack the power to foil this spell.”

She reached out towards him, and Dauton barely resisted the urge to vomit and cower.

The Infernal touched his forehead with a burning palm, and the diviner’s mind twisted as though

suddenly caught in a vice. Reality altered. One of his highest valences vanished and was immediately replaced by a hitherto unknown configuration.

“I am the Claviger also,” the Enforcer breathed. “I am entrusted with the articles, and the protection of the Wyrish Collegium. You are its president; demonstrate your authority.”

She vanished.

Dauton, still shaking, examined the dweomer. Curiously, the language was utterly familiar to him, as though he himself might have contrived it. He found himself wondering if it had somehow been

appropriated from a future iteration of himself.

With care and effort, he spoke the words and gestured, for the first time invoking *Daunton’s Instant Convocation*.

Within moments, eleven other mages – including Jalael, Waide and Tozinak – stood in close proximity to him. As many had declined the invitation, and neither Mostin nor Rimilin had answered.

The Hag scowled. “Explain yourself, Daunton.”

“It would seem I have been empowered,” Daunton observed. “Note the clouds above.”

Tozinak, manifesting as an ugly mannikin, looked upwards at the sky and wailed.

Creq looked aghast. “Do you have some means to counteract this Daunton, or did you simply bring us all here to die?”

Nwm the Preceptor emerged from an ornamental lime tree in the courtyard below, and leaped up onto

the balcony.

“We have a minute yet,” he sighed in relief. “Open your reservoirs to me.”

A chorus of objections began.

” *All of you!*” Nwm screeched.

For a second time that same day, Nwm channeled the power of magic alien to his understanding, and it caused him discomfort. His sensitivity to such things, he noted wily as he wrought the spell, had increased substantially.

Voices mumbled in his head. Formulae floated past his vision, distracting him.

He focussed, and his perception became titanic; coterminous with the extent of the storm,

which

writhed in his conscious mind like an ungraspable idea.

He caught it, stilled it, snuffed it out. There was no struggle.

Suddenly, the sky was clear. The balcony was bathed in warm sunlight.

“I am spent,” Nwm muttered.

The wizards were busy congratulating themselves on their ingenuity.

**

Mostin ignored Dauton’s appeal; his prescience had already alerted him to the outcome.

Now he stood on his porch, dressed for travel. His higher valences were crammed with powerful spells which jostled with one another for space. His intellect was amplified to an improbable size. He had entrusted a number of scrolls to Orolde and Mei, in the event that the manse was attacked in his

absence. Sho – in the company of several other wizards of dubious repute – had entrenched herself in the astral hold, which she had magically fortified.

“Remove the *comfortable retreat* to another location,” Mostin intoned. “Take it deep into Nizkur forest, but beyond the bounds of the Injunction. Employ your best obfuscatory magicks; always have a

teleport on hand: these are the golden rules of survival. Do not interfere with the *symbols of insanity*.

Refrain from thaumaturgies beyond your certain ability to control.

“Be wary of the local feys, they are ancient and cunning; especially the trolls. Pay no heed to Hlioth’s bluster if confronted with it; she is not the only witch living in Nizkur, merely the loudest. Hew no living wood. I will contact you in due course.”

Mostin made a final adjustment to his hat and examined his plans for flaws. In dealing with Soneillon, the Alienist had protected himself as best he could from the Arcane Injunction. He made no formal

compact; she would perform specific services only when conjured. As a dreamer, or a chthonic, or

both, he already knew that she could slip under the Celestial Interdict and manifest freely within the

World of Men. A measure of trust was required in their arrangement: Soneillon’s desire to exact pain upon Graz’zt was the glue which bound it. The alternative – making a Goetic pact with a clause which required that Soneillon did not trespass within Wyre – seemed even more dubious to the Alienist, as culpability might be his were she to violate it.

He had conjured the devil Sekabin and the succubus Adyell – Soneillon’s rebellious lieutenant – with *superior planar bindings*. Sekabin, he interrogated. Adyell, he released immediately from his service, and delivered to the demon queen. Soneillon quickly subdued her former protégé to her will, and

returned her to Throile as her agent. Intelligence began to flow to Mostin regarding the current state of demonic politics.

Now she corporeated on the porch of the manse, appearing as a slender girl dressed in austere black; her child-like face conveyed gravity and seriousness.

Mostin considered the strategy of her façade.

“Carasch has already ascended to the Plain of Infinite Portals,” Soneillon smiled. “He is close now. Two steps away. Blackness sweeps through the upper Abyss, but the Ice Waste remains unmolested.

Curious, given the fact that most of Azzagrat’s nobility have chosen exile there.”

“The speed of this phenomenon is disturbing.”

“Graz’zt has uncapped his *Gate Hall*.”

“Is that all?”

“Temenun struck the Oronthonist command and retreated to Dream,” Soneillon replied. “He has exhausted himself and must rest; he is vulnerable to the other immortals until he regains his strength.

He will hide for a while. He is wise. ”

Mostin sighed and shrugged. There was nothing he could do about it.

Augmented by her *ecstasy of negation*, the Alienist *plane shifted* with Soneillon to Afqithan.

**

Yeshe – warned of Mostin’s intentions through a dark haruspicy performed on a living subject – had acted immediately, and with the recklessness she often occasioned to display at such critical junctures.

She *gated* the *ugra* called Angola.

The Fierce Protector condescended to appear, armor-clad and bearing a shield of unblazoned darkness.

His eyes were slits of green fire; his visage was beautiful, but upon it aeons of cruelty were etched. He regarded her coolly. Yeshe looked up at him, undaunted.

“Supplication is customary, Binder,” Angola smiled, “If I am to remain unbound.” He drew his brand, and placed it at Yeshe’s neck. Her skin smoked as the acid from the blade burned her.

“I require nothing.” Yeshe maintained a steady gaze. “You may do as you will. I will conjure others, if you require it.”

Angula scowled. She was ancient and potent, this one; coercion would not be possible. Still, a little humilty might become her.

Yeshe recognized his mood, and gave a nod which might be interpreted as either cursory or deferential.

Angula recited a long list of names, each with many syllables. “First bring me the steed *Tandava*. We will consider all debts payed.”

Yeshe opened another *gate*, through which a monstrous cauchemar careened.

“One of the Wyrish Wizards is preparing a cabal to *bind* you,” Yeshe said drily. “Baramh and Dhenu are already abroad. The gates of the Temple open at midnight, and Dhatri’s procession begins: Anumid the Mouthpiece has ordained it. Will you ride with Visuit?”

Angula mounted Tandava and smiled wickedly. “Perhaps, for a while.”

**

That should have been tigr *esses*, Prince Tagur mused as he attempted to rally the Household Knights of Morne.

He had no idea how many there were altogether. The terror visited on those within the palace in the last hour had been unrelenting; appearing from the shadows, they slew and vanished, and their butchery

seemed utterly indiscriminate. Their strike was not pre-emptive; they acted in retaliation to one of their own being discovered. An error on their part, or a betrayal.

Now, in a small banquet chamber of the great castle, one Naztharune confronted sixty heavily armed Wyrish aristocrats, including knights of renown from the king’s hearthguard. She moved with

incredible speed; appearing, slitting a throat, and vanishing again. The tigress toyed with them

masterfully, delighting in the slaughter; twice, she moved past Tagur and brushed his cheek before gutting one who stood close to him. His rapier had flashed out, but she was too fast.

Tagur hurled a glass vial upon the marble floor, and brilliant daylight illuminated the hall.

For a split second, she was revealed: a sleek black hunting cat, to which tendrils of shadowy mist clung.

She hissed and became *invisible*. For a while, matters worsened considerably.

Finally, somehow, they grappled her and pinned her down. Six burly knights could barely contain her slippery contortions.

She purred. “I am resigned to my death; are you to yours?”

Tagur squinted. A stiffening breeze outside had suddenly grown strong. Shutters strained, broke, and

wind rushed in. A great agony ensued.

Prince Tagur screamed, as a fine mist of blood – his own – erupted from his skin and was carried away.

Other screams rose all around him. Some cowered, but there was nowhere to hide, nowhere which

granted surcease; the wind penetrated everything. Some fled from the chamber, the most robust running as far as the courtyard or the cellars before they succumbed.

The scene was repeated across all of Morne, and the countryside around. Every living creature within twenty miles died.

Sibud had invoked a second *storm of blood*.

**

Irel, who Smites, beat his wings with slow grace, resting in the skies above Jashat. At an altitude of five miles, the Aethers were quiet. He cast his celestial gaze in a great arc; his eyes penetrated everything.

Far to the north, horror was unfolding; he could do nothing to prevent it. Westward, locked in its shining bubble, Fumaril endured.

Below, closer to the north and east and south, a rotten plague of blackness centered on the great Temple of Cheshne stretched. Pyres smouldered and blood congealed. The southern cities sat beneath brooding clouds, their leaders *dominated* or possessed, their legions succumbing to vampirism, lycanthropy, or all manner of similar afflictions. Unquiet spirits prowled the land.

He *communed*.

[Irel]: I would still beseech intercession.

[Enitharmon]: And it would still be denied.

[Irel]: I beg of you, Marshal.

[Enitharmon]: And it is still denied. But your compassion magnifies. You are much loved. Know this always.

Irel signalled to the other celestials. They would start at the periphery. They wreathed themselves in holy fire and descended upon one of the more remote pavillions.

Before they could begin their assault, time slowed to a halt. Within arm's reach of Irel, a youth

appeared in the sky. He munched casually on an apple. Seeming to notice the archon Prince Hemah, he gave a look of mock surprise.

"Why, you remind me so much of my own herald," he smiled. "So, before you proceed, I thought I'd offer you a different *perspective*. Relax. Don't feel rushed or compromised; we have as much time as we need for you to understand my central argument."

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on Nov 27, 2008

Reversal

Mostin stood with Queen Soneillon in the dusk of Afqithan. The demoness was subdued; whether

reflecting on the site of her prior demise, or merely hatching some other plot, Mostin could not tell.

Around them, Faerie balked at their presence; fortunately, the local sidhe-lord was occupied elsewhere.

Before them, Murmuur's tower reared; about it, a vast umbral drake slowly slithered, its eyes

penetrating the shadows nearby. The Alienist – shrouded to all perception – eyed it suspiciously. The thing was an atavism; a corpse tearer imbued with darkness and evil. Against any but the most potent magicks, it was utterly immune.

Mostin had determined to keep it. He quickly *dominated* it and commanded it to assume a less imposing size; it became a seven-foot wyrmling which coiled itself neatly at the base of the tower.

Mostin approached, giving a sidelong glance to the linnorm, before looking at the structure's circumference.

Within the black outer face of the wall – smoother and stronger than cut diamond – faint tracteries of dormant *gates* were visible, accessible to those who knew the correct combinations of syllables and glyphs. The tower rose hundreds of feet above him, and Mostin gazed in wonder; its perfect magical geometry, he knew, spoke of symmetries accurate to the width of an atom. This was its true shape, if such it possessed; Murmuur's tower was an artifact of deception, as well as war.

The Alienist ran his appendage over the outside at a height of five feet, and whispered powerful words; a small door appeared, between the portals to Maladomini and Caïna. It opened soundlessly; beyond, a great reception hall stretched. The walls were panelled with ebony; couches were festooned with plush silks and velvets. Great sconces burned ruddily. Mostin stopped momentarily.

“There may still be menial devils present,” he said in a low voice. “They will not be hostile; they are bound to the service of the tower, and may not leave it. Please do not annihilate them.”

They continued. Soneillon paused by the entrance: bound in a *temporal stasis*, likely as a decoration, a solar stood in a striking pose, its sword raised as though ready to decapitate a foe of similar stature.

Mostin shivered and walked forward into the centre of the space, and slowly they began their

exploration. Chamber upon chamber. Balcony upon balcony. Hall upon hall. The décor ranged from the austere to the fantastic; Mostin found himself generally agreeable to the

various modes and themes present. Occasionally, spined devils would flap past, occupied with sundry tasks.

After an hour, when he had charted over two hundred rooms, including parlours, offices, torture

chambers, conservatories, drawing rooms and private apartments, Mostin finally found his way to the conference hall where the Infernal Duke Murmuur had once held court.

With his ego amplified by Soneillon's magic, Mostin sat on a carved ivory chair at the head of a long table. Murmuur's ducal throne, but also – in a manner of speaking – the helm by which the tower was steered.

He wrestled with it briefly, before asserting his will and attuning the tower's resonances to himself.

With a passing thought, Mostin translated the entire edifice and its contents to the borders of Wyre where his manse had once stood. He disguised it as a rustic, overgrown keep of the late Borchian

period.

**

Ortwine brandished *Heedless* lazily. Ichor covered her; her eyes blazed with an old greed. In her left hand, she clutched a soft leather case containing a dozen black *candles of invocation*, won from the corpses of the *Ushabam* in the ruin of the Trempan village. Nearby, a *dominated* balor brooded like a black stormcloud, its skin intermittently flaring. Reverberations in the Green impinged upon the sidhe's mind; she tried to shake them off, but to no avail.

As he meditated amidst the carnage, Eadric felt a low vibration. An archon, He'el, appeared before him, wordlessly communicating.

[He'el]: Hail, *Ahma*. Much evil transpires. Three *storms of blood* have been unleashed. The Adversary is abroad. The *Sela* is assailed; Sercion supplicates you.

Eadric rose immediately, addressing Tahl and Moda. "Get to the encampment as fast as you can."

The *Ahma* invoked a *holy aura*, drew *Lukarn*, and retrieved from beneath his breastplate a necklace upon which clay images of various adepts hung. He crushed a tiny icon of Sercion between his thumb and forefinger.

Instantly, he was transported into a nightmare.

Heaps of Templars and devas lay about him, their faces contorted in expressions of agony; *blasphemies* had slain them. Thirty yards away loomed two great shapes of burning void, emanating death. Only the Saints and the doughtiest of the celestials could withstand them. Kustus, Wurz and Anaqiss endured a

storm of magic and blows. Sercion lay close by, stunned but still breathing.

Immediately aware of the presence of the *Ahma*, the chthonics turned their attention to him.

Eadric leapt at them.

**

Teppu scowled at the sky: clouds gathered above him. He waved his hand dismissively. A calm, clear morning reasserted itself.

Around him, Nizkur brooded and waited. The sprite looked into a pool of water, inspecting his

appearance, and adjusted an eyebrow minutely. New tenants had taken up residence in an elm-grove

situated in a deep vale some thirty miles away: a sprite and a *simulacrum* who made a peculiar couple.

He would pay a visit and greet them formally, before Nodri – an ancient redcap who dwelled nearby –

began to make mischief on them.

Teppu made his way through veils and glamours into a world which was both that and the other, and

arrived before Nehael, who sat contemplating a leaf beneath the primeval Tree.

“Thank-you for dealing with the storm,” she said. “I would’ve gotten to it.”

“The vampire has made a statement of intent, even if he knew it was doomed to fail,” Teppu observed.

“I am planning on visiting Mostin’s apprentices, who have commandeered an obscure nook of the forest. I’ve asked Hlioth not to threaten them.”

Nehael raised an eyebrow. “Somehow I suspect your motives.”

“They present an interesting conundrum,” Teppu grinned. “One is a fey and the other lacks a persona entirely.”

Nehael nodded. “Mostin was wise to secret them within Nizkur; there is nowhere now more secure.”

“He takes great efforts to protect them.”

“His actions are not always selfish,” Nehael smiled. “Mostin possesses a peculiar loyalty.”

“And you?” Teppu inquired. “Did your phyllomancy resolve your dilemma?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Nehael sighed. “I feel the need to go and look at the Sun for a while.”

“Mind your eyes,” Teppu said wily.

**

To an outside observer – one who could observe *invisible*, *mind blanked* celestials at any rate – the descent of Irel, Shokad, Hemah and Oraios and the two dozen devas who accompanied them would

have made a magnificent spectacle.

Wings folded, plummeting, with swords drawn and auras blazing, their vibration was fundamentally

changed at a height of around two hundred feet; a great fume of smoke arose around them, ruddy fire kindled, and their aspect became terrible.

The conversation which had elapsed between the exalted celestials and the olive-skinned youth had

taken the merest fraction of a second to transpire in the World of Men. In the demiplane which the Adversary had generated around the company, any length of time may have elapsed. Patient beyond all measure, perhaps the Nameless Fiend – after aeons of debate – finally swayed the four celestial princes with his relentless logic. Or he might, after a century, have become bored and simply coerced them to his irresistible Will.

In any event, before their attack began, the angels might be said to have become devils, although in fact their status was rather more ambiguous; as yet fully undescended, they retained all their beauty and

nobility. A dark choir, their evil was fresh as virgin snow. The Adversary endowed them, and wrought about them wards of surpassing potency.

But they were still pactbonded with Mostin, and three weeks had yet to pass before their agreement expired. Their descent continued, and they crashed like meteors through the apex of a ziggurat; an explosion of rubble accompanied their entrance into the chamber below. Irel raised his mace and smote the retainers of the demon Munkir, exulting in his awareness, his power, his lust for battle. His spirit soared.

I am free, he knew. And, if thereafter, he were condemned to an eternity of torture, he knew that for that one moment – to experience it in its fullness – it would still be worth it. He *was*.

**

First came swarms of insects and vermin, sicknesses and poisonings.

At midnight, a plague of shadows and spectres then heralded Dhatri's procession from the Temple of Cheshne at Jashat. In the van, Visuit led a group of godlings, demonic nobility, undead knights, and an immense cavalry of half-giants from the far South; hideous beasts of every stripe followed. In the main battle, Dhatri's vast bulk was hauled in a great palanquin, and numberless ghasts surrounded her. A steady stream of sacrifice was brought to her; her hunger remained insatiable.

As she passed the threshold of the Temple, a gloom enshrouded the land. From Galda to northern

Pandicule – encompassing the entire Thalassine region including Fumaril – all light was suddenly

extinguished. The spell – the *Pall of Dhatri* – was far more potent than any that had yet been wrought: Anumid had commanded each of the five cabals of the *Anantam* and all of the *Kesha-Dirghaa* to participate. Within the darkness, creatures otherwise vulnerable to

daylight might roam.

The company turned northeast, toward Thond and Jompa, once bustling towns but now living hells for the mortals who still abode there: these were the closest source of food for Dhatri.

Soon afterwards, Sibud – who also hungered – veiled himself with magic and flew out into the shadows.

**

They were already at Rimilin's doors, by the time that the Acolyte of the Skin perceived them; a

function of his abode, which acted as an extension of his own consciousness in that regard. Eight

demons – mariliths and succubi, but including a kelvezu assassin of high standing – riding great

nightmares. To mundane perception, they had assumed the form of gallant knights; Rimilin found it

curious that they persisted in the guise: surely they knew who they were dealing with?

"Where is Graz'zt?" Rimilin's voice echoed in the stones at the base of the tower. "Is he skulking nearby, or does he absent himself out of shyness?"

Megual dismounted. "The Prince has other debts to settle, of greater enormity. May we speak?"

"And so we are," the disembodied voice replied drily. "You will excuse me if I am reluctant to allow you ingress; I am generally suspicious of kelvezu. And your reputation precedes you, Megual. What

message are you here to convey? If a threat, then begone; if I hear it I will quickly grow tired and blast you all. If a bribe, then proceed; I am eminently corruptible."

Megual smiled. "I wish for news: of Mostin the Metagnostic, Eadric of Deorham, the demoness

Soneillon, and the plot to conjure Graz'zt. You may consider yourself pardoned in complicity, if of such you are guilty, if you render useful information. Graz'zt will reward you richly."

There was a brief silence, as Rimilin considered his response.

He manifested before Megual, bearing a rod of ivory bound with steel. Impenetrable wards surrounded him. "In fact, you hold no fear for me; we should be clear on that count, before we continue. Tell Graz'zt that we will speak more on this matter when he renders *Pharamne's urn* to me. If my price seems outrageous, tell him to find another informant. Tell him also that Ilistet is mine, now; I have

broken her to my will: there will be no negotiation on this point. If you or he – with his tawdry band –

wish to assail me, feel free to try, but in all conscience I must advise you against such a course of action. You may go now.”

Megual remained expressionless. If they attacked, Rimilin would quickly *dominate* one or more of them; no good would come of that. And if Ilistet were nearby...Megual wondered what other monsters

Rimilin had bound. He bowed politely, and turned to leave.

Rimilin smiled. “Wise choice.”

**

Through stiffening winds, Prince Graz’zt rode west with Chepez and Queen Mazikreen: succubi

infamous for their fierceness and slipperiness respectively. The landscape between Jashat and Fumaril –

in more settled times rich with vineyards and olive groves – was become a blighted, poisonous waste, stalked by demons and phantoms.

“The World bends easily to Darkness,” the Prince observed. “All of the signs are here. The Celestial Era is over; soon the Interdict will be in shreds.”

They reached Mulissu’s Paling and reined in their steeds; about them, tornados raged. Graz’zt and

Mazikreen dismounted quickly, and – screaming – the Prince invoked powerful sorceries upon the succubus.

Silently, Queen Mazikreen vanished and strode through the winds – denser than iron – which surrounded Fumaril.

**

Eadric stood with Ortwine in the nave of the Great Fane in Morne. A curious detachment possessed him: heaps of bones shrouded in leathery skin lay around, and every surface was covered with a thin film of congealed blood. An iron reek filled the air.

The mind cannot contain the enormity of this, but also I am the Ahma. This is the eschaton. I should hardly be surprised. Everything in Morne which had walked, or crawled or flew was dead.

He brooded on the conversation he had had with Nwm only an hour before; the Preceptor had made a

journey to Sisperi, to engage the help of Lai and her handmaidens. There was a precedent: with the Saints and Oronthonist adepts, Nwm had said that he could *resurrect* every single victim of the *storm of blood*.

The *Ahma* had acquiesced, but his heart felt heavy. This was madness: it seemed too massive. Still, he would cede all authority and trust Nwm on this count: this must be

quickly undone, and the Viridity must manifest; heal the wound. Death means nothing: this must be demonstrated.

Tahl had offered to be the sacrifice.

“I will bleed,” Eadric had said. It was proper. He was the *Ahma*. He wondered if the slain would even return; most now basked in Radiance: such had been his pronouncement upon the Faithful who

suffered in this war.

Dare I command them back? Who am I to deny bliss to any? But then It is not I, but Nwm who issues the plea. By whatever power.

After an hour, the Preceptor instructed the *Ahma* to attend an altar he had erected beneath an orange tree; the same spot upon which Feezuu had annihilated Cynric, and Graz’zt had pronounced his curse upon Morne. The wound was deepest there. There were assembled Saints and Talions, many flamines

and scrollbearers of the Temple, Lai, Mesikammi and a half-dozen Uediiian priestesses.

For the first time in his life, Nwm invoked the Sun-god; he offered the blood of the *Ahma* as sacrifice and named Nehael as his intercessor. He supplicated Uedii in her aspect as Wisdom, and evoked the

full power of the Viridity. The same flint knife he had used to cut Lai, he now employed upon Eadric,

opening gaping wounds upon his arms. His face became pale.

A great pneuma arose, and a vibrancy permeated everything. The rivers were suddenly rich with fish; life returned to the woods and fields; flocks of birds appeared in the skies above.

The two hundred thousand souls who were recalled by Nwm from the Serenities were not untouched by

their tenure in the upper altitudes of the Empyrean. Each of them brought a little of it back with them.

As Tahl arrested the flow of blood from his arms, it dawned on Eadric suddenly; an irrefutable truth.

They could win.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 01-03-09

Urbs Cœlestis

The Sun was at its zenith when Tiuhan Gultheins, the boy-king of Wyre, awoke within his own

chambers. He recalled a brief, hideous nightmare of great violence, followed by a glorious ecstasy which lay outside of time; a brilliance which persisted for uncounted aeons.

His choice to forego bliss – for such he had made – had issued from an ethical centre which Tiuhan had not known he possessed. A necessary selfless action, he knew, in

response to a request which had arisen from the Ocean of Fire and Light, the memory of which filled him with warmth and fortified his soul.

He recalled that golden boars – archaic protectors of the royal house – had borne him away from it; once again, his spirit was housed in flesh.

He felt unusually peaceful; an urge to meditate and pray settled on him before even the fog of waking departed. He arose and gazed at himself in the mirror.

The Empyrean filled his face, in both memory and anticipation. There was no fear in him; he laughed and cried for joy. He could return again at any time; his abiding in this crude form would pass as the blink of an eye in eternity. He washed and dressed himself, and departed from his suite; it was noon,

and others were also only just starting to go about their business.

Standing on the parapet, he noticed a calm industry and purpose seemed to possess the citizens of

Morne, as though each were pursuing a task both ordained and well-practiced. Household knights and men-at-arms were beginning to assemble in the baileys beneath the inner walls of the palace; masons were loading the cranes around the Great Fane with cut marble. Servants toiled contentedly. Gardeners were pruning with particular attention to detail. There were no raised voices. No beatings. Light

suffused everything.

Tiuhan gazed at the Temple compound. In a quiet corner, an old, bent yew-tree; it had taken root a thousand years before, but Tiuhan also recalled that before today, no such tree had stood there. He pondered its significance, as did another his own age or a little older: a youth stood near to it and inspected it, his arms folded.

The great bell in the tower of the Fane began to ring; a slow, steady note of enormous depth, with complex overtones. The campaniles around the city swiftly took up its cue, and a music at once both spontaneous and perfectly orchestrated suddenly flourished.

King Tiuhan stood and listened for a while, before tearing himself away. He had a vast administrative backlog which he had been neglecting, and the Small Council was meeting in an hour.

**

In shadow, Mazikreen slipped unseen with great speed through the streets of Fumaril; its inhabitants were still milling in the streets, speculating as to the import of the darkness which covered the city. The succubus must locate and dispatch five targets: two priestesses of the goddess Jeshi, and three Pand Wind-Sorcerers who had taken up residence in the Tyrant's palace. They were pivotal members of

Mulissu's cabal, and the ceremony for the reinvigoration of the Paling – which required their

contribution – was due to take place in half an hour.

She moved along the waterfront, leaving a trail of corpses and *charmed* informants who directed her to

the temple of the wind-goddess – a modest affair by Thalassine standards – and thence to the palace courtyards.

She discharged her mission efficiently, avoiding detection by the slow-witted djinn who acted as

sentries, and eliminating all of her targets quickly; Mazikreen felt a touch of annoyance that her last –

the sorcerer Ehieu – had noticed her presence before dying.

Alarms were being raised as she slid back over the city wall, and vanished like a shade into the

unnatural night.

**

Mulissu immediately issued an appeal to Mostin, Daunton, and a half-dozen other Wyrish mages for

aid: *I need help. The Paling must go up in fifteen minutes, or Fumaril is doomed: make your choice.*

Mostin cursed. He was due to convoke his cabal in three hours, but could hardly refuse.

Mulissu conveyed the coordinates of a temporary exempt bubble within the lock of the Paling, and

Mostin *teleported* to it forthwith.

Jalael and Troap – two of those whom Mostin had previously suborned – were already present.

He fixed Mulissu stonily. “I trust the drain on our collective reservoirs will be of small amplitude?”

“Your generosity overwhelms,” Mulissu said drily. “It will be negligible. You did not predict this event?”

“No,” Mostin confessed. “Or not exactly. But I knew that it would be an inopportune time to request your direct inclusion in the cabal; hence you will make the transference. Also, I trust no other wizard to be able to effectively *dominate* Graz’zt.”

“Can I have him?”

“Sorry, Mulissu. I have already promised him to Soneillon. I have a year of informal compact with her, or six remaining discrete services, whichever passes first.”

“If you were anyone else, that would mean other than it does.”

“I am not oblivious to the existence of certain baser urges,” Mostin explained, “but I have utterly transcended the notion of coitus. Nor do I any longer require the use of a latrine.”

Daunton appeared.

“About time,” the Savant said.

Once again, the Paling was erected. Mulissu sighed. She couldn’t take much more of this.

**

“Infernal is very last epoch, Mostin,” Jalael gazed around the tower’s reception hall. “How much for the solar?”

“He is not for sale. He’s an antique. Captured during the Fall.”

“You need to develop an alternate strategy, Mostin,” Soneillon was visibly irked. “One cannot conjure a demon who has already been called.”

Mostin scowled. “I have anticipated the possibility. Do you think I’m a fool? He is unbound. The ritual proceeds as scheduled. He is outside his sanctum; his *foresight* will not avail him, nor his *mind blank*.

He has erected another protection: a ward which will discharge upon contact with a hostile conjuration.

That will fail also. I will bind him in the Astral.”

Jalael’s hideous face screwed up. Doubt now possessed her. The Hag’s offer to aid Mostin had been

made to head off what she had considered to be a celestial threat; events had since transpired to make the situation far more complex.

Mostin, sensing her ambivalence, fixed her with his uncanny gaze.

“I am not about to back out of this, and neither are you,” he said.

“No,” Jalael growled. “I’m not. But nor will I let you forget this. Had I known that you had switched your allegiance anyway, I might have been more reticent in rendering aid.”

“It takes a quick mind to anticipate me,” Mostin nodded sagely. “But had *I* known that the celestials themselves were about to reconsider their programming, I might not have been so eager to relinquish direct control. Still, what is done is done. Their orders remain the same; although the implementation may be rather more inventive. I trust that the rest of you are as good as your word?”

Muthollo nodded resentfully; Troap seemed unfazed: he liked Mostin and – for a wizard, at least – the goblin was unusually generous in his dealings with others. In the final configuration of spells which Mostin had opted for, only six mages – including Sho – would be required; Soneillon would cover the not insubstantial magickal deficit. Orolde would remain as an observer.

Mostin *plane shifted* his tower to a remote island of astral matter, where it abutted an already existing stronghold, merging seamlessly with its architecture. He removed himself to an obsidian binding

chamber, and began to inscribe a thaumaturgic diagram from powdered celestial metals.

**

The *Ahma* was present when the Small Council convened: a dozen of Wyre’s leading temporal

magnates, amongst whom were Tagur, Sihü, Jholion of Methelhar and Attar the Warden.

Six, including the Lord Chamberlain Foide and Skett of Mord, were absent, and remained in their own demesnes:

nobles who had been subject to neither the *storm of blood* nor the subsequent Reversal. Saints and Talions sat upon the episcopal thrones which the Lords Spiritual of Wyre – whose bishoprics had been

dissolved after the accession of the *Sela* – had once occupied.

“I will try to explain circumstances as best I understand them,” Eadric sat in his armour on a low stool next to the king, which creaked under the weight. “First, the greatest of the Cheshnite spellcasters have already unleashed many of their most potent spells. A certain arcanist of my acquaintance – whose

methods of garnering intelligence are dubious, but the accuracy of which is generally high – posits the following situation:

“Yeshe is depleted, and will for some time have to content herself with *binding* nothing more significant than powerful balors – *depletion* is a relative term. Sibud has exhausted his credit – which was poor – with the Cheshnite cabals, and hopefully we can expect no more *storms of blood* for the time being. Temenun may have drawn a cupful of power from his reservoir, and remains strong; his

armamentarium is already replenished.

“Guho, Choach and Rishih have been engaged in the solidifying of the Cheshnite defense, the erection of *teleportation circles*, and the subjugation of the Thalassine nobility, but it is likely that their *real* power has yet to be manifested. Rishih has also been active in conjuring demons: he has restricted himself to lesser nobility. Furthermore, he enjoys prestige amongst certain of the cabals; in general, his more conservative approach is well-received.

“The goddess Dhatri has invoked a blanket of darkness, and has set forth from Jashat in what is known as her *Procession*, an event which might be said to mark the formal beginning of hostilities. With her are Prahar, a number of evil godlings, and Visuit the Butcher, against whom we cannot yet stand. And many tens of thousands of lesser minions.

“The demons Graz’zt, Pazuzu, Alrunes, Ahazu and Baphomet are at large. Pazuzu is pactbonded with Yeshe and acts as the instrument of her will; Baphomet is enslaved by Prahar. Graz’zt is a wild card whose activities we cannot anticipate. Ahazu and Alrunes have yet to show themselves beyond their

pavillions.

“Four celestial princes – those covenanted by Mostin the Metagnostic – have *Fallen*. The Adversary has seduced them. The motivations of the Nameless Fiend are unguessable. At present, the actions of the debased celestials have proven to be not antithetical to our own needs: they have eliminated the

demon lord Munkir, and are disrupting affairs beneath the *Pall of Dhatri*. This congruence of purpose may or may not last.”

Prince Tagur looked uncomfortable. “Then what do we do?”

Eadric sighed. “We find ourselves in a curious position. I suggest we move half of Morne’s garrison –

including all of the royal knights – immediately south to join the main Temple force; those who

experienced the Reversal have become amongst our most formidable soldiers.

Furthermore, we have to move outside of Wyre proper; the active participation of Wyre’s wizards is more appealing than the incidental protection which the Enforcer offers us.”

“Wizards are not trustworthy,” Saint Anaqiss observed.

“You are correct,” the *Ahma* agreed. “Still, that is the plan. We break camp tomorrow.”

“So we march on the Thalassine?” Sihuh inquired.

“Yes.”

“All men will flock to your banner,” Wurzh declared.

I sincerely hope not, Eadric thought. *I will have enough blood on my hands as it is.*

“Which wizards have sworn oaths to Oronthon?” Saint Wurzh asked.

“As yet, none,” Eadric smiled at the naïveté of the question. “Nor do I expect any to. We may depend on Daunton almost definitely, and on Mostin probably, although any aid which he lends will doubtless be viewed dimly by the pious. Mulissu, perhaps; although Fumaril’s concerns preoccupy her. Hlioth is an unlikely candidate, but I suspect she might prove the most useful of any of them were she to act.

“At present, our best defense may be offered by Nwm the Preceptor, who is capable of coordinating diverse magical energies. Currently, with the adepts, he is engaged in protecting the Temple

encampment more thoroughly from attack: I wish no repeat of the assault launched by Temenun’s

demons. I have asked him to invoke a mobile defense; it will move as the *Sela*’s tabernacle moves.

“Lastly, we can expect a period of quiescence while the Cheshnites adjust to the fact that death might be no particular obstacle to us. Mostin anticipates that they will change tack.”

Tagur gave an inquiring look.

“They’ll try to imprison souls,” the *Ahma* explained.

King Tiuhan swallowed. “I will take to the field. I will need guidance.”

Sihuh looked dubious. “Your Majesty...”

Saint Tahl interrupted her. “I agree with the King. There is nowhere safer. That has been amply demonstrated.”

**

Nwm watched as the *Sela* gave a lesson. There was no sense that Oronthon’s proxy was in

any way unsettled by events; being invested by the Supernal apparently granted one a certain perspective to which ordinary mortals were not privy.

But ordinary mortals are a dwindling breed, Nwm observed.

The Preceptor felt uncomfortable. He had struck compromises which – prior to current events – he

would not have even considered. Although, having counselled the *Ahma* to adopt a Reconciliationist position, he could hardly do less himself.

But Nwm alone knew that – at the climax of the rite to revivify Morne – his designs had been shifted; agents of the Sun-god had interfered with the pattern. The massive matrix of magical energy which

Nwm had created had been reordered to better suit the celestial agenda. The Illumination of Morne's

citizenry had certainly not been his original intention.

As the lesson concluded and the devotees dispersed, Nwm approached the *Sela*, who sat in *Saizhan*.

"You are perturbed," the *Sela* observed.

"No, I'm pissed off," Nwm replied.

"The Host does not answer to me. I understand your anger, but I cannot offer redress."

"Your passivity is impossible," Nwm groaned.

"If you think so. I would gladly receive any wisdom in these matters." Tramst was ironic, yet perfectly earnest. "The Host is attempting to interpret Oronthon's will, and is sometimes fallible in its judgments, according to its own standards. Oronthon is utterly ineffable: celestials are not. The fact that four archfiends were recently born might be viewed as a cosmic blunder on the part of Enitharmon."

Nwm raised an eyebrow. "An opinion?"

"It is not within my purview; hence I make efforts to remove myself."

"You remain open," Nwm observed. "Your feelings may be changed in that regard."

Tramst smiled softly. "I mean no disrespect, Preceptor, but one rather more skillful than you views this as his ongoing project. I cannot become embroiled in politics. That is why there is an *Ahma*."

"And Oronthon's eschaton? How do you relate to that?"

"*Saizhan* is the disintegration of all previously held conception. The Viridity can be understood as a reflex; an inevitable rebirth. *Saizhan* itself is the eschaton, symbolically speaking."

Nwm gaped. "This is your belief?"

"Indeed, no," the *Sela* smiled. "I make no metaphysical assertions. On doctrinal matters, I also suggest consulting the *Ahma*."

“Ngaargh!” Nwm threw up his hands. “Can you not make one categorical statement of truth? Or at least posit an opinion which is your own?”

“Regarding what?”

“Regarding anything,” Nwm groaned.

“Certainly,” the *Sela* answered. “Nehael is the Supreme Empathy.”

Nwm squinted. “There is a lot of Urgic baggage attached to that term, and its implicit philosophical gravity is lost on me.”

“Then you have a chance to understand it,” the *Sela* smiled broadly.

**

Several hundred tapers burned steadily within the chamber.

Mostin had opted for a triangle in preference to a pentacle. The symbolic apex – where the Alienist would stand – was aligned with the Empyrean; Troap and Sho stood at either other trine, dexter and sinister as seen from the Throne of Oronthon; behind them were Muthollo and Jaelael, respectively. A complex motif of overlapping symbols connected an ideogram within the circle’s outer ring to a second diagram of more modest dimension, wherein Soneillon was positioned, opposed to Mostin. Here, a

brazier of silver also stood, upon which exotic incense burned.

Mulissu waited outside of the pattern. Pungent smoke billowed around her as she floated.

As Ashva rose in Jashat, Mostin began to mutter and gesticulate, weaving a net of little subtlety but

great potency. Salt, silver and cold iron were flung generously in all directions. Magic flowed; Soneillon opened her reservoir. Reality bent.

Graz’zt manifested, incredulous, and flung himself impotently against the barrier which contained him.

Even as the first wave of ritual energy around the room dissipated, the Alienist had already begun to cast another spell of tremendous power. Mulissu gathered her energies in synchrony.

Mostin unleashed a *dispelling*; *death wards* and *mind blanks* crashed, a hundred dweomered items became comatose. Soneillon flickered on the edge of being. Graz’zt became vulnerable.

At precisely that moment, Mulissu *dominated* the demon with a transvalent spell.

YOUR MIND BLANK STAYS DOWN. INVOKE NO POWER. DO ONLY AS I COMMAND.

The Savant turned to Mostin. “I have him.”

*

Orolde stepped forward, and, in a trice, magically divested Prince Graz’zt of all of his personal effects.

The next minute – which was the time it took Mostin to complete the *binding* ritual – was the longest of his life. At several junctures, acute paranoia threatened to overcome him, but at the end of it, naked and humiliated, Graz'zt was confined within a ten-inch globe of adamant.

Immediately, Soneillon proffered her upturned palm to receive the sphere. As he watched his

pseudopod – which was wrapped around the captured demon prince – move toward her, a sudden

prescience of indefinable quality but great surety passed through the Alienist's mind.

Instead of giving it to her, Mostin spoke two powerful syllables, and Soneillon vanished.

Sho gaped.

Jalael, in anticipation of attack from Mostin, immediately erected a *mind blank*.

"She would have betrayed me," Mostin explained, holding up his hand in a gesture of appeasement.

"Goetic protocols just don't command the respect that they used to."

"Where did you send her?"

"Outside. She will need to find a way to come back through Dream. It will take her some time."

Mulissu looked at him suspiciously. "What are you up to Mostin?"

But Mostin's eyes – and those of the other wizards – were turned toward Orolde.

"There are *portable holes* here," the sprite said. "There are a number of *cubic gates* also. And this."

Orolde held up Graz'zt's amulet.

"And this."

A small key.

Jalael cursed impatiently. "Open the holes. Empty everything out."

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 03-07-09

Teppu strode up to the ramshackle building, and ascended the three steps onto its porch.

It was somewhat more than a cottage, but rather less than a mansion; its three levels boasted no more than twenty rooms, all told. Although the sprite perceived that two dozen extradimensional spaces –

ranging in size from hidden cubby holes to a suite of dedicated summoning chambers – abutted it; its total internal volume might be four times larger. It occurred to Teppu that Mostin might possess a particular attachment to the notion of *space*.

Teppu adjusted his hat, coughed, and rapped upon the door. He placed his hands behind

his back,

whistled softly, and glanced around approvingly. The nymph who dwelt nearby had been persuaded to

bring forth numerous wildflowers around the manse: sorrel and stitchwort; purslanes, bluebells and wood-anemones. The veranda had been situated for the perfect dappled shade beneath an ancient elm.

A slender fey – perhaps five-feet tall, with nut-brown skin and an impudent smile – opened the door.

Teppu raised an eyebrow. This was neither Orolde nor Mei. Who else lived here? A servant?

“Greetings,” Teppu doffed his cap. “I was not expecting you.”

The other seemed unfazed. “Teppu,” he said warmly. “Please come in. Orolde is presently indisposed.”

“You have me at a disadvantage,” the sprite replied suspiciously.

“Do not concern yourself. I know of only One to whom that does not apply.”

“Then inquiring as to your name would be pointless,” Teppu nodded. “Is your manifestation as a fey for my benefit? Have you taken up residence here?”

“Temporarily,” The Adversary nodded affably. “Although I’ve been spending a good deal of time in Morne. As to my chosen form, I attempt to remain unobtrusive in my actions. I have rather a reputation in that regard.”

“And the *simulacrum*?” Teppu cocked his head.

“Is accepting of my presence. But I find this place quite charming; I also confess that my lodging here has a certain symmetry to it, given the owner’s current choice of abode.”

“That is an eloquent premise for circumventing Nehael’s fence,” Teppu bowed politely.

“I am gratified that you appreciate it,” the other replied. His tone was self-mocking. “I boldly straddle paradigms. Now. Will you remain on the porch?”

Teppu shrugged, and followed him in, closing the door behind him. He glanced around; the place was cluttered but comfortable. Teppu suspected that Orolde had already begun to arrange things more to his liking.

“Would you care for tea?” The Adversary inquired.

“Certainly,” Teppu nodded, sitting at Mostin’s kitchen table.

“Where should we begin?”

“I think one should always warm the pot,” Teppu replied drily.

“An argument? I would contend that the extra labor does not contribute to the quality of the brew.”

Teppu nodded. “That may be so. But I find the ritual reinforces the experience.”

The Adversary smiled, and sat opposite. “In my cosmic capacity – as the Embodiment of

Pure Will –

you will probably appreciate the limited use of ritual to me. However, I will follow your instruction; let it not be said that I am insensitive to others' observances."

Teppu sighed. "Allow me to gird my intellect, if you would; I suspect nuances to this exchange which will otherwise elude me."

"As you wish," the Adversary waved a hand casually. "Everyone is always so suspicious."

**

Screaming, inchoate rage. A desire to rend, profane and destroy all that was not he. But also a furious plotting which followed a thousand permutations simultaneously.

He was Graz'zt. He had been caught before; he had escaped before.

Mostin's face loomed above him, filling immensity.

"Your Highness," the idiot drawled like deranged sky-god. "We can be civil about this: you divulge information which I require, and I spare you from unimaginable tortures."

Graz'zt's intuition told him that the Alienist had no coercive spells available to him.

He remained silent.

*

Mostin rattled the three *cubic gates* together in his closed palm and stared into the blank sphere. The treasure of Azzagrat lay heaped around him.

Inside the globe – although apparently shy at revealing his countenance on its surface – was trapped the demon prince Graz'zt. Mostin – who experienced a state of disappointed anticlimax with regard to the contained fiend – was presently unprepared to *torment* the Prince into a more receptive mood.

There was no damn urn. Just a key.

"Well?" Mulissu asked.

Mostin grimaced, and shook his pseudopod in a gesture which Mulissu interpreted as irritation.

"You think you can face them down?"

"I *know* I can. I have foreseen it; but other futures might hold better prospects."

"Choose swiftly," Mulissu groaned. "News travels fast. Divinations will be cast regarding Graz'zt's whereabouts and disposition. Inferences will be drawn. The truth will be quickly determined."

"Silence," Mostin snapped. "I know this."

"And if your temper gets the better of you, and you *disintegrate* Waide, you will make enemies."

"Are you deranged?" Mostin asked. "No. We're going back to Wyre, for this. I want the Enforcer watching *my* back on this one."

“You cannot take Graz’zt into Wyre,” Jalael observed.

“We’re in an extradimensional space,” Mostin said. “It’ll be fine.”

“Gihaahia will permit this?”

“She did nothing about the solar; or the spined devils who do the cleaning. I assume so. Also, Graz’zt himself is removed from the continuum proper. I perceive no breach of the Injunction.”

“Then neither will she intervene if things go awry,” Jalael said drily.

“I will stand on the threshold,” Mostin said.

“She must appreciate your pedantry if nothing else,” the Hag growled.

“We are settled then?”

Mostin grumbled and nodded.

They translated back to Scir Cellod, but within the Enforcer’s remit. Mulissu issued a *sending* to Daunton, and the wizard arrived presently. Mostin apprised him of the situation, and in his official capacity Daunton called a convocation.

Sixteen mages attended, including Rimilin, Waide, Tozinak and – to the surprise of all present – the witch Hlioth.

Mostin, standing in the open doorway to Murmuur’s Tower and brandishing the globe containing

Graz’zt, sighed. He was tired.

Tozinak – whose present form included a number of disturbing insectoid features – clicked his

mandibles together in excitement.

“I have captured Graz’zt,” the Alienist announced boldly, although his fatigue was evident. “I am informing you of this myself, before the rumors begin to fly.”

“Bravo, Mostin,” Rimilin said drily, with more than a hint of resentment in his voice.

Mostin smiled eerily. “I purpose to seek for Pharamne’s urn. Who will join me?”

Voices began to chatter excitedly.

Rimilin raised his eyebrows at the vulgar display.

*

“You are lucky I came,” Hlioth later snapped, after the others had dispersed. “Rimilin would have launched an assault, were it not for me.”

“In Wyre? I hardly think so.”

“In your tower.”

“He cannot penetrate it.” Mostin sighed

“He *can*, you fool. The *quiescence of the spheres* must necessarily provoke a counter-

argument.

Rimilin can bypass *dimensional locks*. Do not think to exclude him that way.”

“I don’t need nannying, you mad old hag,” Mostin hissed. “Let him try.”

“And how now do you purpose to penetrate Azzagrat? The planar flux is impossible. Your devilish artifact is not adequate to the task.”

“I will conjure one of Ghom’s servitors and equip it with a magical howdah.”

“I? Mad?”

“Quite so,” Mostin replied.

“I wish to speak with Graz’zt,” Hlioth growled.

“Feel free to try,” Mostin tossed her the globe. “I must reattune. If you release him again, brains may begin to disappear inexplicably in Nizkur. I take it you understand my meaning?”

Hlioth scowled, and gestured the Alienist away.

**

Ortwine – in the guise of a Thalassine gentleman-turned-vampire – walked with easy confidence

through the dark promenades of Thond, impervious to scrutiny; whimsy informed her choice of

apparent gender. The damned cowered behind barricaded doors as Abyssal ghouls prowled the streets.

Things went ill for Thond. The greatest of the town’s remaining noble families – the Truzha – had

undergone a collective transformation which had resulted in a haemophagic aristocracy being foisted upon Thond’s hapless citizens. Under the auspices of the aging family matriarch, a dozen first cousins –

and scores further removed – had enthusiastically embraced unlife as a useful tool to advance their power and interests. Initiation had become *de rigueur* amongst the fashionable set.

They counted Naatha, Sibud and Rishih as their sponsors; the immortals had invested heavily in the organization and defense of Thond subsequent to the annihilation of its armies. Naatha had lent Jariliths to sorcerers who pledged themselves to her; Rishih had erected a number of potent magical wards

around the city; Sibud had bestowed a rare vampiric pedigree.

Ortwine entered a den where unspeakable tortures were inflicted on mortals by many-limbed demons.

She drew *Heedless* and slew the closest fiend immediately. The others began to hastily disperse, but Ortwine arrested one before it could flee, pinned it to the wall, and

dominated it.

“You are compacted by House Truzha. Inform your masters that Ortwine wants to talk to them.”

The demon moved to oblige her.

Ortwine liked this game.

**

“Were you aware that the Adversary is squatting in Mostin’s Manse not fifty miles from here?” Teppu asked.

“No,” Nehael smiled. “I sense you had an exchange. Was it illuminating?”

“Disturbingly so,” Teppu admitted. “He’s even more disarming than you. He confused me utterly.”

Nehael nodded. “That is his nature: to refute that which is.”

“That is a generous assessment,” Teppu was wry. “Others have been less forgiving. What can you anticipate of his actions?”

“Little or nothing,” Nehael shook her head. “And try not to analyze his words. You will never guess his

motives. Accept this; you will be happier.”

“This is sound advice. He also requests an introduction,” Teppu raised his eyebrows.

“That much, at least, I predicted.”

“And you will indulge him?”

Nehael shrugged. “Why not? Do you fear he might successfully woo me to his cause?”

“Precisely thus,” Teppu confessed. “What is your strategy?”

“That which I apply to you, so do I equally to myself. There is no strategy. I will play it by ear.”

**

The *Ahma* stood with Tahl and Rede beneath a canopy south of Wyre’s marches, receiving news of events which gave him pause for wonder. Orolde intoned as though reading from an altogether

mundane inventory.

“One amulet; one suit of baroque plate armor; one large shield of fearsome aspect; one glaive; a greatsword which drips acid...”

“Bastard sword,” Eadric interrupted.

“One sacrificial dagger,” Orolde continued, “three *cubic gates*; three *portable holes*; one *amulet of the planes*; one *crystal ball* with several special applications; twenty-eight *ioun stones* of various function; one *iron flask*, determined to be the prison of the devil Sirchade; around one hundred books of spells –

including those of Kothchori – which have yet to be translated and fully catalogued...”

Orolde paused sadly.

“A scroll collection which I will not begin to bore you with: Mostin has suggested to tender to you those scribed by Oronthonist sympathizers, and there are more than a few; material wealth in jewels, gold and adamant which might best be described as *incomprehensibly large*. The inventory was witnessed by all of the mages present. *Pharamne’s urn* was noticeably absent. Mostin believes that the small key found on Graz’zt’s person unlocks whichever space holds the urn – presumably somewhere in one of Azzagrat’s nested demiplanes – but he needs to employ divinations of some magnitude in order to determine the exact truth.”

Eadric raised an eyebrow. Mostin having the *web of motes* in his possession was bad enough. Mostin with *Murmuur’s tower* was something which filled the *Ahma* with trepidation. Now the Alienist sought a generative power which was so far beyond his ability to safely manipulate, that Eadric experienced pure dread.

“I suspect that Mostin has become instrumental in the designs of the Adversary,” the *Ahma* sighed, smiling grimly at Orolde.

“As to that, I could not say,” the sprite bowed. “I do not concern myself with the machinations of entities within the Oronthonian pleroma.”

“Has Shomei shown herself yet?” Eadric asked.

A look of discomfort crossed Orolde’s face. “No. Is this something you anticipate?”

The *Ahma* shrugged. “Anticipate? No. But many patterns have been laid; this much is clear to me. I was there when Sacir dragged Shomei to Hell. I was impotent to prevent it. The *Akesoli* are the agents of Amaimon, perhaps, but there a greater mandate drove them. Mostin informed me of her current

situation; do not be concerned as to a breach of confidence.”

Orolde smiled. “I am not. I cannot match Mostin’s prescience; hence, there is no reason to anticipate that his reaction to anything I might divulge will be unpremeditated. My own status is somewhere

between apprentice and journeyman, if you understand my meaning: no proscriptions have been placed upon me; nor do I shy from the truth, as I perceive it.”

“And what is your perception, Orolde?”

The sprite looked nonplussed. “That question is quite impossible. I cannot communicate the totality of my apprehension effectively; we have no common frame of reference.”

The *Ahma* thought for a moment. “Do you ever seek solace, Orolde? And if so, where?”

“In whatever fashion seems appropriate at the time.”

“And your stump – magic might have replaced your hand. Why?”

“I will grow a pseudopod in due course,” Orolde said drily.

Eadric gave a thin smile. “Tell Mostin that the *Ahma* thinks he’s way out of his depth. He

can't now go to Azzagrat to retrieve the urn, in any case."

Orolde shifted slightly.

"You cannot be serious?" Eadric asked.

"His energies are now concentrated on accomplishing this task," Orolde admitted. "And as to Shomei, if you wish to speak with her she must be invoked; her nature is now Infernal."

"Foci are aligning sharply," Eadric said.

"Yes," Orolde replied.

**

The van – which contained the banners of the *Ahma*, the Talions and the Penitents – crawled south

along the Hynt Coched in the direction of Jompa. Griffons wheeled and gyred in the skies above them.

In the main battle, the *Sela* rode surrounded by Saints and many of the recently Illuminated of Morne, whose numbers continued to swell as companies *wind walked* from the capital. Hundreds of wagons churned up the road behind into deep mud, through which resentful Wyrish aristocrats and their

retainers doggedly toiled. Eadric had stiffened the rearguard and reserve brigades with a battalion of Templars under Brey's command, in the event they were actually attacked: the King, his household

knights, and the boars had yet to arrive. In all, the columns trailed for six miles through the low, rolling hills.

Ahead, bisecting reality at an indeterminable distance, a wall of night loomed. On a low knoll by the side of the road – beneath a tall finger of carved granite – a crimson-haired figure stood and observed the passing of Wyre's armies.

As the *Ahma* approached, she stared at him; his sight informed him that this one was not all she appeared to be: her ontology was complex. She said nothing, but her presence was significant: this was the edge of her remit. Beyond here, she exerted no influence.

As soon as Eadric passed a point due west of the menhir, the sky above seemed to crack open briefly and a squadron of celestials flashed into view. They shone darkly.

The *Ahma* remained expressionless. He had anticipated this – or something similar – but had hoped for a period of quietude before they showed themselves. They were already sworn to him; a powerful tool to execute his will in the world. Using them entailed a price he was reluctant to meet.

The wards which Nwm had erected around the column discouraged their close approach, and Eadric

called a general halt to the vanguard's progress. He rode with Tahl through a detachment of Ardanese mercenaries and across a hundred yards of open ground, to where they stood or floated gently.

Eadric reined in and dismounted. Saint Tahl remained in his saddle.

“Hail, *Ahma*,” the archfiend Irel bowed. “We finally meet, although under circumstances which few guessed likely. The covenant undertaken still holds. You may instruct us as you see fit; alternately, we must interpret your will to the best of our ability.”

“Neither option thrills me,” Eadric said, gazing at up Irel, who stood head and shoulders above him.

Taint emanated from the Fallen in palpable waves but their nobility was all-too-apparent. Thus it might remain. These were a new breed.

Eadric gazed at them and sighed, and resigned himself to the inevitable. He turned to Tahl.

“Let it be known that the *Ahma* has perforce acquired a Left Hand,” he said, “his right alone being inadequate to the task which our current predicament presents.”

“They are loyal?”

“Absolutely,” Eadric admitted. They were. He could still speak into their minds; know their thoughts.

He suspected that Irren was smiling smugly in some Nessian Beatitude.

But against Visuit, how would they fare?

So the wheel turned.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 4-16-09

Visuit

The warm spring sun, filtered through the canopy of the forest, lent a greenish hue to the still air.

Nehael smiled as she approached.

Behind the manse, above a small stream which gurgled enthusiastically, a figure lounged in a wicker hammock suspended between two young birch trees, chewing thoughtfully on a long blade of cooch-grass. He wore one of Mostin's favorite hats: an ochre felt, sporting a wide brim, and suitable for lazy afternoons.

Through many perceptions, the goddess apprehended him in a thousand guises: a fey; a mortal youth;

an emperor, resplendent and dreadful; incandescence – a sliver of the Sun; the Will to Become. Here was the great *Antinomos*; the Nameless Fiend, exempt from the Law of Oronthon. Space and time warped in his vicinity: he was a singularity around whom cosmoii turned. Still, his totality eluded her.

Deceiver.

The Adversary opened an eye as she drew closer. "You were never Nehael. What are you?" He asked, half-amused.

Nehael tilted her head. "Am I so opaque to you?"

"Oh, yes," he answered.

"There is much I might show you," Nehael suggested.

"You are empowered to realize the full potential of the *urn*?"

"Yes," Nehael replied.

"I suspected as much."

"Thank-you for letting Rintrah pass," Nehael nodded politely. "Will you trust me?"

"Let me think about it," the Adversary replied. He pulled Mostin's hat down over his eyes.

"Do you fear me?" Nehael inquired directly.

The Adversary gave a shrug. "Perhaps. I haven't yet decided as to whether I ought, or no."

"I should like to offer some advice," Nehael smiled.

"Feel free," the Adversary smiled drowsily.

"Read me. I am open to you."

"I cannot. That is my dilemma. But thank-you for your consideration."

"You *cannot*?"

"Humility becomes you, Who-Were-Never-Nehael. As does your genuine lack of guile.
The Tree

weaves a net around you so subtle that even you can't perceive it."

"And you can?"

"No," the Nameless Fiend sighed. "But I can infer it. I am in Nizkur. I have no power here, save by your grace. Or that of the Tree. Or Uedii. The puzzle intrigues me: I am an inquisitive sort."

"Why would you reveal these things to me? They diminish you and empower me. That is contrary to your nature."

"My Nature – normally my preferred topic of discussion – is of no consequence in this matter. Because I am not *your* Adversary. Do you doubt your invulnerability here?"

"I had not, until you asked me that very question," Nehael admitted.

"Touché," the Adversary tipped the brim of Mostin's hat. "Observe."

Without warning, he struck her with enough power to raze a continent.

Nehael merely witnessed him scattering a handful of acorns.

"What of the Claviger?" She asked.

"I'm wholly ignorant," the Adversary sighed.

"I cannot believe anything you say."

"Well, naturally," the Adversary smiled. "And there's the great irony, of course."

"Decide what you want to do," Nehael turned and walked away.

"Think of a name for me," he called after her. "Maybe I'll like it."

**

Nwm's interdiction, as Mostin dubbed the spell – although the Preceptor himself had not thought to name it – was a compound ward which excluded certain creatures of the unnatural order from

proximity to the *Sela*. It was less comprehensive than Nwm would have secretly preferred, but – given that the bulk of the power required to evoke it was derived from Temple Adepts and Flamines – it

would have been less than gracious of Nwm to exclude celestials from its zone of effect.

Nwm refused to relax the primary ward to allow the nascent devils of the Dark Choir access, regardless of their professed loyalty. This vexed many of the Irrenites present, who entertained notions of

discourse with the fallen celestials.

"I'll not have them within a league of me. Nor will you unless you think that you're immune to subterfuge."

Nwm had a point, Eadric conceded.

The *interdiction* was quickly followed by a *Nwm's mantle* which settled upon those marching south –

necromancies would henceforth prove ineffective against the Wyrish forces – and a *Nwm*'s *quicken*ing which bestowed miraculous regenerative powers.

The primary ward moved as Wyre's armies moved, encapsulating an oblate hemisphere some six miles

in diameter, and invisible to mortal perception. It was potent, but demanded a renewal at dawn every day: a substantial investment of time, and an effort of magic to effect; the *mantle* and *quicken*ing required less frequent reinforcement. Although bolstered to withstand *disjunction*s, to contrive a *superb*

dispelling of sufficient magnitude to counter the *interdiction* was certainly within the ability of the Cheshnite leadership, were one or more of them to set their mind to it.

Nwm's concerns were justified, and Anumid initially approached Idyam with the task of devising a

spell for such a purpose. The demilich – feeling such a chore was beneath him – ignored the request and continued his necromancies. Idyam felt in no hurry. Malign spirits attended him now:

deathshriekers spawned by the horrors visited upon Jashat. Nwm's ward could not be used offensively; they would effectively need to cut a swathe forward for it at some point.

Choach accepted Anumid's offer, although with a counterbid for two hundred which made the

Mouthpiece glower. Still, resources were plentiful: all of the *Anantam* were now able to act without fear of retaliation from the Claviger. Anumid felt pressure from the increasingly frenzied politicking of certain cliques within the cabals. It was only a matter of time before the assassinations began in earnest.

For four hundred, Choach offered to eliminate Fumaril's defense as well.

"How quickly can the spell be ready?"

"In twelve hours."

"I will give a provisional yes," Anumid grimaced.

The Mouthpiece subsequently gave thought to assailing Fumaril. Although the host which had set forth with Dhatri was immense, the chambers below the Temple of Cheshne were far from empty; Naatha

and Guho – otherwise uncommitted – might be persuaded to undertake the magical leaguer of Fumaril

if offered sufficient inducements.

The balance of power between the greatest of the Cheshnite immortals and the cabals was beginning to shift, Anumid observed. He found himself thankful that his own position until that point had been one of reserve; *over-caution* as Yeshe had preferred it.

*

Yeshe anointed herself with blood beside her pavillion and prepared to *commune*.

Something was evading her notice, and she was determined to find out *what*.

Her divinations were interrupted by Visuit.

“We strike immediately. My instinct tells me the time is now,” the Butcher growled.

“We must bring down the ward first,” Yeshe retorted.

Dreadful runes kindled about Visuit as her mood darkened. Mortals nearby ran screaming. The goddess drew her weapon: a huge curved sword. “Do not seek to instruct me in the art of war.”

“Your bloodlust must wait,” Yeshe snapped. She was rapidly losing her temper.

Without warning, with a peal of thunder, the goddess smote Yeshe; a single blow which would have

slain any mortal and many a godling. The Binder’s armor, titan-forged, buckled but did not break.

Yeshe staggered back, insensible.

Visuit thrust out an arm and caught her by the throat. The goddess kicked Yeshe’s legs from beneath her, and pushed the immortal to her knees.

Still, Yeshe could not make her limbs respond.

“You would presume?” Visuit threatened to break her neck.

Incapacity. The Binder crumpled to the ground.

“I am making a sortie,” Visuit boomed; her voice carried for a mile, drowning all other sound. “Those who wish to accompany me, may.”

“You will serve me,” she hissed to the form at her feet.

“Goddess.” Choking, Yeshe abased herself.

Visuit focused momentarily.

The enemy would be breaking camp soon. She reached out with her mind, searching for purchase: a

place in proximity to the *Sela*, where she might recently have been invoked by word or deed. An anchor in space. Her deific perception penetrated every ward erected by the Temple Adepts.

At the last, a green veil, supple but unyielding: Nehael’s blessing. Her concentration evaporated, and her thought retreated.

Visuit cursed. Several of the *Ushabam* who pressed too close went mad.

Holding her dark blade aloft, she clove open a *gate*.

“Follow!” War demanded utter obedience.

She mounted Narh; steed and rider leaped through the rift.

A great press of demons and undead clamored behind her. After Yeshe, Prahar – unhinged as he already was – was the first to follow. On the Plain of Infinite Portals, the

Sorrowsworn mustered hungrily.

**

Tensions ran high in Mostin's Infernal tower.

Eleven mages, in addition to Mostin and Orolde, were now ensconced in various chambers – *some of them all-too-comfortably*, Mostin ruefully considered. And Hlioth remained, which made Mostin suspicious and more than a little nervous: she had appropriated a stone courtyard, and modified it –

greenified it – to her satisfaction and Mostin's chagrin.

Inevitably, the habits of certain of the Wizards – and all were guilty of odd behaviours of one kind or another – had come into conflict. Creq exuded a charnel reek which many found distasteful. Daunton pestered the Alienist constantly for use of the *web of motes*. Tozinak transmogrified various mundane objects for no apparent reason. Waide – who maintained a disciplined hauteur – insisted on an

afternoon nap in one of Mostin's preferred spots: a conservatory in which various Hellish fruits grew on thorny trees. Mulissu's mephits and Jalael's quasits were on the verge of open warfare: spined devils ineffectively policed an uneasy truce between the two groups, until the Alienist conjured a barbazou to act as a more effective deterrent to hostilities.

Mostin himself sat poring over formulae, performing impossible contortions upon immutable laws of

magic in his head. Graz'zt's jar sat before him on the desk. Upon it, placid, the *dominated*, *polymorphed* linnorm rested, coiled in miniscule.

Mostin's prolepsis had generated a number of uncomfortable arcs, which involved the scorned Queen

Soneillon, the Region of Dreams and *Uzzhin* combining in some dreadful resonance. He tapped upon the sphere with his quill until the demonic countenance of Prince Graz'zt appeared.

"What is your intuition?" Mostin asked.

"Thou hast exceeded thy authority, and made something unholy," Graz'zt replied, sneering.

"Be more specific!" Mostin snapped.

Graz'zt's face vanished.

Mostin cursed him for his willfulness and *tormented* the captive demon, finally forcing his visage to reappear. Graz'zt's intractability seemed only moderately diminished; his hatred was palpable.

"Answer the question," Mostin groaned. "And dispense with the archaisms: they are tedious."

"You have sent What-is-Not to Where-it-Cannot-Be. As though realities do not bleed freely enough, Mostin the Metagnostic punches holes in continua to turn drips into

torrents.”

“You speak of Soneillon’s pilgrimage?” the Alienist hissed.

“Vhorzhe made the same mistake,” Graz’zt smiled wickedly. “Except it was no *chthonic* he sent hurtling into Delirium.”

“Your terminology is outmoded,” Mostin corrected him. “And the analogy is inexact, in any case. I have demonstrated this!”

“Rimilin will bring her back, for all your prattle.” Graz’zt was obviously taking some pleasure in his words.

“Rimilin does not concern me,” Mostin sighed.

“Then you will lose the race for Azzagrat.”

Mostin scowled, and waved Graz’zt away irritably.

The demon remained, glowering at him.

“Bugger off.” Mostin shoved the linnorm off its perch, picked up the globe, and dropped it in a drawer, slamming it shut.

He returned to his problem.

*

An hour later, Mostin announced his plan.

The mages were to accompany him to a location *within* what had been the Argent Palace in Azzagrat, after the Alienist had established a modicum of stability on the planar flux in its vicinity. Thereupon, Mostin would invoke his *quiescence of the spheres*.

They must next *disjoin* the chthonic *gates*, to permanently arrest the upwelling; subsequently, the *quiescence* could be *dispelled*, and the offending *gates* would be gone.

After *Pharamne’s urn* was recovered – Mostin purported to know its exact location, now – the Alienist would hold a splendid party in celebration.

Various concerns were voiced: Would chthonics in manifest form still be nearby? Would the *gates* even be present after the *reality maelstrom* had been suppressed? How many demiplanes removed from Azzagrat was the *urn* in any event?

“And how many *gates* are there Mostin?”

“I have calculated twenty-two,” Mostin confessed. “But their usage has diminished considerably; a new equilibrium has already been established.”

“You require twenty-two *disjunctions*? ” Hlioth laughed.

“Certainly. This can be achieved with single-minded purpose.”

“And the predicted length of our tenure in these regions?” Tozinak inquired, sniffing dismally.

“Around thirty minutes, if all goes to plan,” Mostin grinned eagerly.

“Alas!” Tozinak wailed. “I may not live to see my egg hatch!”

**

“I am perplexed,” Teppu admitted, looking at Neheal. “The exchange would indicate that you have him at a gnostic disadvantage – so to speak.”

“He was thwarted in Afqithan; his prescience failed. This is a new experience for him. He claims the

Viridity is inscrutable to him.”

“And *Saizhan*?” Teppu inquired.

“That relationship is more complex. I don’t profess to understand it. I suspect that he is somehow instrumental.”

**

They manifested in the fading half-light, within a bowshot of the *interdiction*, and within plain sight of the celestial guards who policed the perimeter. A ragged hole in the fabric of reality, slashed open by Visuit, through which a stream of demons poured.

The Dark Choir was upon them in an instant, wreaking havoc with maces and flaming swords; within

Nwm’s presidio, news spread like lightning, and clarions sounded: knights and Templars sprang to

arms.

Visuit, who trusted her instincts, smiled. In the Aethers below, something stirred. To those who were sensitive – adepts and celestials – a ripple of Darkness ran across the still waters of Mind.

The Butcher gestured with her clenched fist.

Chthonics manifested.

The proto-devils cautiously withdrew to consider their options.

Visuit sliced open another *gate*, and vanished.

The rent in space remained open; through it, yet more demons and monsters began to rush.

*

As the alarm spread, Nwm – who was stationed in the centre of the encampment with most of the

spellcasters – reached out his mind to Eadric, whose tents were closer to the periphery.

[Nwm]: She is opening a *gate* every thirty seconds or so; they at appearing at apparently random locations around the circumference. *Teleportation circles* are also now beginning to open. The strongest has predictably asserted herself.

[Eadric]: I had hoped she might be more direct. Still, they cannot penetrate the ward. Something very dark just came.

[Nwm]: It is called *Narake*.

[Eadric]: How do you *know*?

[Nwm]: Uedii whispers it to me.

[Eadric]: What is our best recourse?

[Nwm]: Fortification.

[Tahl]: We are ready.

[Mesikammi]: As are we.

[Lai]: And we.

[Brey]: And we.

“I will brook no celestial interference!” Nwm hissed through gritted teeth.

“There will be none,” the *Ahma* vowed. The words emerged from the mouths of all within the

communion.

Nwm evoked a spell.

The *Green Benediction* settled upon Eadric and those nearest him.

**

Lying in Mostin’s hammock, the Adversary opened an eye. Now *that* was impressive, by any standards.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 05-10-09

Eadric

The Goddess inhaled sharply; her head span in an ecstasy. Her communion became perfect, and her

form blazed as the Viridity flowed through her. Nwm had invoked her again as the conduit for a spell of staggering power.

Trees nearby erupted briefly into spontaneous sapience. Teppu capered madly. “Excellent,” he clapped his hands.

Nehael’s consciousness was immediately drawn to focus on Eadric and the thousand or so most stalwart knights in the Wyrish encampment; those whose tents were in proximity to those of the *Ahma*. Thence it extended to settle upon every griffon, every horse, every dog, every bird, every ant.

Nehael shook her head. “It will not be enough. Nwm must try harder. I hope he knows this.”

**

Eadric’s head hummed, as though he had imbibed some heady green wine which evoked an urge to

pure *enjoyment*. Around his core, a warmth which nourished and sustained him. The *Eye of Palamabron* revealed the Aethers thick with archons and devas; myriads dispatched by Enitharmon to intercept the Chthonic threat and prevent further bleed into the World of Men.

Here and now, the twilight tasted fresh and new. Eadric’s skin tingled. He mounted the griffon *Hauhuts* and took to the skies. Below him the camp stretched, many fires were burning; casting his eyes around, he noticed that three main fronts had opened, all to the east of the *Interdiction*, which – thankfully –

still held.

Northernmost, a cluster of *gates* through which Prahar’s undead cavalry poured, swiftly and repeatedly

dispersing and reforming in cadres. Their movements seemed in execution of a long-prepared plan, although maybe the phenomenon was spontaneous; formations rippled like schools of black fish

beyond the protective walls of the spell. They were followed by blood fiends, abyssal ghouls, and other things which ate flesh.

In the centre, Yeshe, Pazuzu, and the violet banners of the *Ushabam* held by their giant bodyguards; their leaders were burning dozens of *candles of invocation*, and balors were appearing in the skies above them. Others were conjuring lesser demons, as their ability permitted. Still more demons were simply manifesting.

To the south, in an arc, the chthonic menace. Narake, evoked last of all, was easternmost.

Irel had determined his reaction quickly: more than half of the Dark Choir – under the archon Hemah –

remained in the fight with Yeshe and her minions, and were attempting to eliminate the spellcasters.

Shokad, Oraios and Irel himself – with a smaller number of former celestial stalwarts – moved to

intercept the chthonics.

Knights and Templars under the effects of the *Benediction* were already materializing within the ranks of the enemy, immolating with green fire and quickly routing the half-giants, whilst enduring a barrage of *blasphemies* from the *Ushabam* themselves. In response, demons were being invoked even more rapidly; the balors were being flung against them.

From above, Eadric's vision rested on a heaving mass of nullity shaped like a demon, which emanated a destroying fire. All other creatures shunned it.

Narake, Nwm confirmed.

Bathed in green radiance, Eadric grunted and urged his steed to a dive; his plummet brushed aside a flight of chthonic succubi which strove to block his path, burning many from the sky. His task was simple: he should strive to slay as many as he could. He smote *Narake* a great blow as he wheeled past, only to have *Hauhuts* plucked in turn from the sky by a fiery tendril. Griffon and rider were flung to the ground; the earth shook as he struck it.

Visuit thundered past, slaying *Hauhuts* with a single blow which continued on to Eadric, striking *Lukarn* and causing the blade to shiver powerfully along its length.

A death spell spoken by *Narake* slid over him, dissipating harmlessly. In a trice, the demon – dwarfing the *Ahma* – leapt upon him, striking him with an object shaped like a mace and forged out of malice. In the vicinity of the chthonic, matter was beginning to smoke and evaporate.

Eadric fended the blow easily with his shield, and the sledge carved a hole in the earth next to him.

Four more strikes he turned or withstood; black fire engulfed him, but nothing adhered.

By instinct, he moved his form subtly; or maybe the World shifted around him, reordering itself in response to some impulse of Uedii which he could not articulate. He followed invisible green tracheids, emerging instantly from the grass on the other side of the demon. He launched a powerful assault.

Lukarn opened huge, gaping wounds; Light poured into naked Void. *Narake* vanished from sight; whether destroyed or fled, Eadric could not tell: and perhaps it made no difference.

Before he could even draw breath, Visuit sped past again upon *Narh* and struck a great blow upon his shield, shearing the celestial metal from edge to edge, cleaving it cleanly in two. Her curved sword – if such it was – continued through the rerebrace on his shield-

arm into sinew. Visions of carnage passed through his mind, and voices called to him from unnamed hells. He felt warm blood flow over his elbow and down to his wrist.

Sixty yards past Eadric, Visuit leapt from her saddle and – with surprising elegance – twisted in the air like a cat, landing firmly to face him. She smiled. Life withered.

Casting off the remains of *Melimpur's Shield*, the *Ahma* gripped his weapon in both hands and materialized immediately in front of the goddess, hewing at her ferociously with every ounce of

strength he could muster, and burning her with green flames which issued from him in sheets. *Lukarn* fulminated, illuminating the battlefield as he smote her. She struck back, and with terrible speed.

Raining blows down hard upon him, hammering him through helm and armor and forcing him

backwards. He bled profusely.

Thus they exchanged buffets. Visuit had quickly gained the upper hand.

The *Ahma* prudently withdrew. He followed a strand of Green and appeared instantly before Nwm.

“I need more,” he said simply.

“There is no more. Try harder,” Nwm scowled as he *healed* him.

“Nwm...”

“My resources are not infinite!” Nwm snapped. “And a new front is about to open. And there will be others. Timing is critical. Do not be distracted. *Now keep them at bay.*”

The *Ahma* nodded, understanding.

Moments later, the lich Choach – together with a large number of *Anantam* magi – arrived a league to the west, collapsing Nwm's *Interdiction*.

Demons began *teleporting*: probing unlocked areas closer to the centre of the camp. Every plant whispered; green ripples moved across the ground, as hundreds of Templars rapidly transported

themselves back from the now-vanished periphery.

Two hundred yards from Eadric and Nwm, Narake reappeared.

Nwm vomited as the demon invoked a spell, enveloping everything within a mile in a maelstrom of

black fire. Thousands died. Though many – adequately warded – survived, all plant matter was turned to ash.

Nwm coughed, regaining his composure. It has to be *Now*.

[Tahl]: We are ready.

[Mesikammi]: As are we.

[Lai]: And we.

[Brey]: And we.

A silent green nova.

Eadric knew it: he had felt it before in Afqithan. This was of more modest scope, but subtler. A

frequency attuned to a specific vibration, married to a wave of banishment. Every demon, every

chthonic vanished. Pazuzu and Visuit, vanished. Each expunged; shunted away to its proper place.

Yeshe cursed. *Gating* Visuit again would not be possible until the prescribed length of time had elapsed. The thirty-or-so balors who had been interposed between the dark celestials and the *Ushabam* had disappeared; Hemah and his brethren were already in their midst, sweeping their fiery swords in great arcs, and hewing them down.

Ablaze with her own magic, she emptied her reservoir and struck the former episeme with a pillar of blackness, slaying him. Wearily, the Binder opened yet another *gate*, and another; she drew now on a rod of ancient potency to fuel her magic.

She staggered. Exhausted, she vanished with a *word of recall*. Those amongst the *Ushabam* who were able, followed her lead.

**

The earth was black in the gathering night: Narake's carnage was ugly. Outside of the wasted area, the Temple forces were assembling.

Eadric stared at the body of Hemah; he had expected it to vaporize, or at least to smoulder. The great archon seemed serene in extinction. The devil's expression might have been one of mild perplexity.

They were one and the same.

Irel alighted silently next to the *Ahma*.

Whither? Eadric wondered.

"To a lake of fire," the fallen deva replied.

"Or to an Ocean?"

"If you decree it."

"Let it be so."

Eadric heard a soft hoof-fall approaching; he turned to observe the stallion *Narh* pacing gently toward him. Somewhat behind, a lone figure wearing a worn studded jack and spattered with ichor.

Ortwine gave a hint of a smile as she approached, and tossed Sibud's head to the ground at the *Ahma*'s feet.

"One for me," she said.

Eadric gaped.

“In order to write lays of one’s exploits, it is necessary to first perform them,” she explained.

[Nwm]: It must wait.

A magical wind was rising: the slightest breeze, invoked by Prahar, but tenacious: it rendered all flight impossible. Those who remained aloft across the battlefield found themselves without purchase, and plummeted.

Ortwine gazed north and east. Night had now fallen fully, but the sky – through Mesikammi’s arts –

was clear as crystal and the stars were bright. A tremor pulsed through the ground. Ancient carynxes

were sounding brazenly, as evil godlings ordered their undead ranks.

“Prahar is preparing to charge with his death knights,” the sidhe observed drily. “By lucky happenstance, the greatest horse ever sired is your eager steed.”

The *Ahma* muttered an earnest prayer of thanks to Uedii.

“You may also thank me. You may not criticize me for my gnomes again,” Ortwine smiled coldly.

“Thank-you,” Eadric nodded. “And agreed. What will you do?”

Ortwine reached into her vest and withdrew a talisman which reeked utterly of evil. “I plan to sow discord – which appears to be my forte.”

*Unfortunately for Eadric, Visuit resolves her melee attacks as touch attacks. DR 50/- helped *a lot*.

DevCrits didn’t work for either of them as they were both *fortified*. At this point, they were pretty evenly matched. *Don’t let her charge* was the informed consensus.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 05-23-2009

Mostin Ex Machina

Temenun meditated in Dream. His ancient consciousness – elevated by powerful magics and attuned to destructive urges – rapidly took stock of the changing situation. Prescient impulses crowded his mind, each seeking to assert its own augury as truth.

Sibud had fallen; the Vampire had been an arrogant fool, and the Tiger felt only contempt. To taunt vindictive sidhe-queens entailed certain risks, and departing one’s own fortifications to slake an urge as

base as *feeding* brought the consequences it deserved. Masquerading as an agent hired by herself, Ortwine had infiltrated Thond, gained news of Sibud’s whereabouts, and penetrated the spirits which attended him during his glut. A dirty, ignoble assassination.

Temenun smiled. Eventually, his Naztharunes would have accomplished the same task. But the sidhe

had also succeeded in instigating a bloody feud between two opposing factions within the Truzha

leadership; Thond's cohesion would soon be lost. Part of Dhatri's main force – bent on Jompa, where mortals were more abundant – would have to divert to Thond and resecure it.

Yeshe had vanished, presumably departing to a hidden sanctum to recoup. As many as half of the

Ushabam were destroyed, and her authority was now questionable at best. But not her power; Temenun would not underestimate *that*.

The Tiger considered Idyam now the greatest threat to his own supremacy; the demilich, virtually

indestructible, had been quietly extending his power base. Temenun knew through his spies that

Anumid had spoken with him at least three times, but Idyam played a cool courtship and patiently

bided his time.

Imperceptible to the oneiric guard which the Servants of the Sun had set in defense, Temenun dreamed his way in darkness to Scir Cellod to watch events as they unfolded.

**

Choach, and the thirty *Anantam* who accompanied him, were entrenching quickly. They had cordoned a half-acre with *walls of force* and fortified their position with *dimensional locks, symbols* and a complex pattern of selective antimagic, overlayed by the lich himself. In unlocked areas, *teleportation circles* were opened; a quartet of compacted balors herded goristros through with goads of adamant. A ruddy glow illuminated the magical beachhead.

Perched on a skeletal dragon, Choach gazed across the dark of the rising plain, bending his thought north and east. *Sunbursts* strobed on the horizon over a low rise. He reached out with his mind to

observe the main conflict, almost four miles away. Lacking adequate aerial support of his own, Prahar had pinned down the devas and griffons and forced a ground engagement.

By now, Choach knew, the nature-priest must be spent. The lich contacted Anumid.

The situation is precarious. You will need to send reinforcements if you deem victory important.

In Jashat, the Mouthpiece pondered. This might have been an ill-advised sortie, but one could hardly gainsay Visuit.

With exquisite timing, Temenun's voice purred into his mind. *I am also here, Anumid. I can strike the decisive blow.*

"How much?" Anumid asked aloud through gritted teeth.

Two thousand.

Anumid almost laughed. It was a preposterous sum; almost two thirds of the liquid assets of the

convocations. “Even were your solution watertight, I could not persuade the cabals to invest so much.”

Shvar Choryati, was Temenun’s response.

The blood left Anumid’s face. “I will communicate your offer.”

Do not tarry in your deliberations. You have less than an hour before Nashhte sets.

Anumid swore, and commanded a dozen babau to ring the gongs and summon the remaining *Anantam*

and as many of the *Kesha-Dirghaa* as could be persuaded. He sent entreaties to Naatha and Rishih to reinforce Choach with their compactees as soon as they might.

**

In the chill night air, Ortwine soared undetected above the melee, ignoring Prahar’s spell of impeded flight, and gazed at the spectacle below.

The enemy’s initial charge had been brutal, and backed by a magical impetus which had broken the

half-ordered Temple ranks. Now three great *kanistas*, led by the Penitents and the Illuminated, had rallied and penetrated the Cheshnite front. Ahead of them all, the goddess Ninit rode with the five Boars, cutting a swathe through everything in her path. Magical and supernatural detonations echoed across battlefield. Devas of varying moral persuasions acted as bulwarks around which Wyrish knights rallied.

Nwm had dismantled the ritual configuration; the saints, priests and adepts who had been involved

were now free to engage the enemy: a task which they undertook with predictable gusto. Lai was

reordering her handmaidens with Mesikammi; the shamaness was readying another rite.

Ortwine descended behind the Cheshnite lines, and wrought a powerful glamour: what was to pass here must go undetected, for a little while at least. She reached into a soft leather pouch and withdrew a slender black taper. Igniting it with a cantrip, she held the candle as it burned rapidly.

A balor appeared in a cloud of fire and smoke. It looked around suspiciously, its *true seeing* unable to pinpoint Ortwine.

“Wait there for a while,” the sidhe commanded, her voice issuing from somewhere close by. “I will have further instructions for you presently.”

Her eyes penetrated the darkness ahead to observe Mesikammi as she invoked a massive *resurrection*: hundreds of corpses sprang to life again; those who had been *disintegrated* incarnated in pristine forms.

Ortwine raised an eyebrow; even the *death knights* had been afforded random living bodies. Clothed in flesh again, some rejoiced, some wept, others fled or waxed furious; their variety was utterly

bewildering: strange goblins and sprites; satyrs, mephits, nymphs and sylphs; animal spirits of every conceivable type. Other spirits for which Ortwine had no names.

I have decided that I like your style, Ortwine spoke with deific benevolence into Mesikammi's mind. *If you wish it, I will sponsor you.*

Power is power, and I accept; although I fear I might be too fickle a priestess.

You may come to realize the absurdity of that sentiment.

Refocusing, Ortwine reached into her pouch and withdrew another candle.

*

The *Ahma* fought upon *Narh*; on his left arm he bore a light buckler lent by Ortwine. The stallion seemed to anticipate his thought even before he did, and moved with a deadly, fluid grace. Already brimming with primal energy, *Narh* had been infused yet further with Green power by Nwm. Sundry wards and both the *Mantle* and the *Quickening* protected Eadric still, but the ecstasy of the *Benediction* had passed, and the grim reality of the conflict had returned to him.

It was a confused riot: cadres of dismounted knights formed protective rings around Flamines as they worked magic; Abyssal blasts issued from death knights, penetrating the Temple ranks. Celestials

moved amongst the Wyrish troops, bringing respite wherever they showed themselves; Temple

Scrollbearers were evoking *flame strikes* and *sunbursts*, wasting squadrons of undead cavalry. A hundred other magical lights had been struck. Protected by Nwm's *Quickening*, the Templars were proving exceptionally hard to kill. The Dark Choir slew everything in its path.

Overhead, the stars winked as the fume generated by lesser magics was dispersed by the persistent

breeze of Prahar's spell. Hyne winded Hemah's horn, a piercing call which echoed across the

battlefield.

Striking down the enemy rapidly, the *Ahma* attempted to run a gauntlet of undead knights with Rede, Tarpion and Tahl in order to reach Prahar's standard; he hewed his way forwards until the press became so thick he could no longer move; the reek of the Cheshnite horses – drawn from demonic stock – was suffocating. He spoke a *holy word*, burning away the knights ahead and allowing him to push forward

another twenty yards. Tarpion and Rede flanked him, pronouncing *dicta* and rendering the enemy insensible. Behind, Saint Tahl – grown ten feet tall – now fought on foot.

Prahar, also in the thick of combat but a furlong distant, uttered a profanity and struck

Eadric and his company with a *horrid wilting*, which the *Mantle* deflected easily. As the *Ahma* fended the blows from some petty godling, he caught glimpses of Prahar's manner in battle. It made him more than a little nervous.

The undead warrior exhibited a slaving rage whilst raining down magical fire. And when any came

within reach of his sword, he killed them instantly, with one stroke. Always.

Eadric cursed as he cut down his opponent, looking past him; now another *gate* was opening near Prahar.

The *Ahma* groaned as a great *Ugra*, hugely muscled and bearing a massive rod lurched through, smashing everything in his path. A distended gut hung over grotesque genitalia; vast horns curved

down, then up, then out. Rank hair covered him. *Aja*, the Great Goat.

Eadric knew him as Orcus.

Matters worsened.

*

Ortwine clapped her hands. Twelve balors – suitably *screened* and *veiled* – now attended her. All were *dominated*.

“Your primary target – with whom I am sure you are all familiar – is *Prince Orcus*. Perhaps some of you may have been waiting for this opportunity for a long time. Kill Orcus. Kill Prahar. Kill Choach.

Kill any other members of the Cheshnite faction. Then return here.”

Ortwine waved a hand dismissively. The twelve balors *teleported* away.

And bring me trophies, she reminded them.

**

The Tiger dreamed his way back to Jashat; he would evoke his spell from a safe distance. Proximity to such a thing as this was never advisable. Beneath a great dome, the assembled magi were waiting for him.

Gathering his energies, Temenun reached out through Dream. Drawing on the pattern generated by the *Anantam*, he penetrated layers of veils, deep into ancient nightmares. His mind rested, still, within the primordial Dark. He breathed deeply.

Shvar Choryati, he whispered, and turned his thought back two hundred miles to the north.

**

The meticulous preparations for the Abyssal descent were nearing completion.

Thirteen Wizards now worked magic furiously. They conjured allies and warded themselves, haggling

over access to one another's spells like children at a fig stand.

Mostin had been forced to revise his plan; yet another delay, but one insisted upon by a

vocal minority led by Waide and Tozinak. They must first target the entire area in Azzagrat with the largest expulsive spell they could muster, *before* the *Quiescence* was evoked, ridding the area of chthonic nuisances before proceeding.

Mostin had been forced to reconfigure another spell, a process which took valuable time.

When he was finally ready, the Alienist consulted the *web of motes* again. Soneillon's signifier was

beginning a resonance with Rimilin; the wizard would soon bind her, as Graz'zt had indicated. Mostin felt uneasy. He hated it when demons told the truth; it made things so much more complicated.

Even as he observed, possibilities multiplied; an area of flux was causing dozens of motes to swerve along unlikely catenaries. Mostin swore profusely.

No! Not now! Why was it always now? Why couldn't it wait?

Eadric's mote suddenly careened towards him at breakneck speed, engulfing him.

Mostin snapped out of his reverie as he was struck by a desperate *sending* issued by Tahl.

Mostin. Help. Please.

"This is a most unfair choice," Mostin protested.

*

Scenes of battle passed across the surface of the *Mirror of Urm-Nahat*. A ravenous darkness, rolling across the conflict, appeared to be consuming Wyrish troops by the company.

"It's simple," Daunton sighed. "Do you know nothing of committees? We vote; and quickly.

Abstentions must also abide by the majority decision. Mostin, as host, must vote last. In the event of a tie, I have the casting vote. My vote is for a return to Wyre."

"To Azzagrat," Jalael said immediately.

"No vote," Tozinak sighed. "I simply cannot. I am overwrought."

"To Azzagrat," Muthollo concurred.

"To Azzagrat," Hlioth nodded.

Mostin cocked his head. Now *that* was unexpected.

"No vote," said Creq. "I have a mortuary in southern Hethio, and I would be loath to see it despoiled.

But I am greedy, and wish to increase my power. I am genuinely conflicted."

"I cast no vote," Mulissu waved her hand dismissively. "I do not recognize the authority of the Wyrish Collegium, and reserve the right to ignore any decisions the committee reaches."

"To Wyre," Sho said unexpectedly. Mostin wondered which sentiment moved her; an inkling suggested it might be some sense of obligation to Nwm, but he had no evidence to

support the theory.

“To Wyre, also,” Troap nodded. “I am a mundane sort, by nature. Which makes me wonder as to which voice Hlioth is responding.”

“Now is not the time to analyze motivation.” Daunton groaned.

“To Wyre,” Orolde answered.

“No vote,” Waide growled. “At the moment, neither choice appeals. I am hungry, and I am late to bed.”

“To Azzagrat,” Droom of Morne spoke. “I would hate more to see the vote so uncontested.”

Mostin glared at him.

Daunton looked desperately at the Alienist.

“Wyre,” Mostin nodded. “Although I feel bound to point out that the target area is not actually *in* Wyre, either politically or magically. Ladies and gentlemen, we are *unconstrained*.”

“If you insist on this course of action,” Hlioth sighed wearily, “you must first neutralize Choach, before he disperses his demons and becomes a further nuisance.”

“An opinion or a prophecy?” Mostin asked acidly.

“Quiet your ego!” Hlioth snapped. “And for once, do as I say. I will be busy dying elsewhere. Do not mourn. I will be back ere sunrise.”

“Hence, I mourn.”

“After you have eliminated Choach, evacuate as many as you can,” Hlioth sighed. “You cannot overcome this darkness.”

**

Daunton pinpointed one of the gaps in Choach’s protective net with a potent divination.

The *Infernal Tower* appeared, unmasked by any illusion, within the lich’s rapidly deploying force. The Collegiate mages stood on a wide balcony which Mostin had caused to be projected from the tower’s

wall at a height of fifty feet. The Alienist smashed the lattice of antimagic protecting the Cheshnite magi with a powerful *dispelling*.

A barrage of *disjunctions* – previously prepared by the Wyrish wizards for the purpose of sealing the twenty-two chthonic *gates* of Azzagrat – instead rained upon Choach and the *Anantam*, stripping them of protections, collapsing *walls of force* and rendering *teleportation circles* inert.

Mulissu struck Choach with a *Glance of Thunder*; before he could *teleport*, she struck with another.

Mostin detonated a massive sonic.

“Take out the balors, you idiots!” Mostin barked at the other wizards, who seemed to be

targeting groups of demons indiscriminately.

Tozinak grew wings and hovered excitedly. “My egg has hatched! My egg has hatched!”

Mulissu collapsed unconscious, blood pouring from her nose.

Deprived of his physical form, Choach fled back to his phylactery.

Five miles away, Eadric was alerted to the presence of the wizards by a peal of distant thunder.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 05-30-09

Moonrise

Hlioth appeared before Nwm. The Preceptor looked haggard.

“Go to Mostin and sort things out,” she instructed. “Then start thinking of a way to get rid of *that*.” The witch gestured irritably to a billowing void which absorbed everything in its path.

“I am spent,” Nwm shook his head.

“But you cannot be!” Hlioth groaned. “Mostin is missing me from his ritual; I had elected you my substitute.”

Nwm glared at her. He *was* spent; aside from a few restorative spells, he had almost nothing left.

“Work something out,” Hlioth said irritably. “Is this all there is?” She glanced around: Lai and her handmaidens, a few Uediiian priests and priestesses. Most seemed exhausted; at least Lai retained some of her power.

“You are late to the party,” Nwm smiled stonily.

“It will have to do. Give me what you’ve got.”

Hlioth drew on their magic, invoked a powerful ward – on herself alone – and then vanished.

“Charming,” Nwm sighed. He looked at Lai.

“I’ll go,” the goddess said. She vanished into the earth.

*

Eadric was closer to it: an inky darkness which slithered across the ground like malign fog. It emanated terror; those which it touched, it snuffed out. Everything recoiled from it; it seemed bent only on destroying vibrancy and life. The telepathic screams issued by celestials which had encountered it still echoed in the *Ahma*’s mind.

He had no time to muse on such things. Orcus’s mace slammed into his buckler, numbing his left arm; a sting like a wyvern’s tail punched through a gap in his armor and potent venom threatened to

overwhelm him. Horns, a maw, claws. A foul, rank, cloying smell. *Aja* was a bastion around which all evil things rallied and from which all that was good was moved to flee. *Lukarn* was impotent against the demon’s defenses; the Prince of the Undead had erected a ward of indomitability about himself.

Orcus spoke a dark *blasphemy*. Eadric endured it; Rede and Tarpion reeled. Others nearby exploded into dust.

Eadric groaned. Balors were now manifesting all around him.

They’re on your side, Ortwine’s voice echoed in his head.

Your timing is a little tight. Orcus is warded.

Noted.

The *dominated* balors targeted *Aja* with *dispellings*.

**

The stars shone brighter still.

Mesikammi had now waxed to her full power; the spell which she had wrought an hour before came

into effect.

Reaching skywards, she plucked a meteor from the heavens and pulled it to the earth; the light as it struck the ground illuminated the countryside for miles around. Its impact vaporized an entire company of undead mercenaries, and left a smoking hole a hundred feet wide.

Nwm glanced upwards. More stars seemed to be shifting.

“How many more do you have?” He asked.

“Three,” Mesikammi smiled.

“Make ‘em count,” Nwm cautioned her.

Mind my balors, Ortwine’s voice carried to the shamaness.

**

The *Ahma* enjoyed a brief lacuna in the combat; everything within a hundred feet was dead. Orcus had fled or obscured himself – a dozen balors was enough to cause even him pause for thought. Prahar had done the same, although Eadric anticipated that either or both would soon reappear.

In their absence, the demons had set upon the enemy knights.

Ortwine became visible and descended to the ground, her hand upon the pommel of her weapon. Eadric leaned heavily on *Lukarn*, and spat blood.

She gave a cool smile, and bowed. “I should apologize for doubting your capacity to keep me entertained. I have burned all but one of my candles; unfortunately, those fellows cannot linger too long. Still we’re not doing so badly.”

Eadric gestured with *Lukarn* towards the consuming Void.

“There is that,” Ortwine conceded. Her face became deadly serious. “You should consider sounding a general retreat. ”

Eadric nodded. He knew it.

**

Hlioth materialized within a translucent jade sphere atop a precipice; below her, waves crashed at its base, the foam catching starlight. The moon was still a rumor on the eastern horizon. Nearby, an iron tower reared high into the sky.

You. Rimilin spoke into her mind.

As demons materialized around her, the Green Witch struck her staff upon the rock, sending forth a massive vibration which caused the ground to heave and ripple. Like a rising bore, it rapidly carried the tower and its contents over the edge of the cliff, toppling it into ocean below. The air around her was suddenly thick with fiends *teleporting* away from the collapsing structure, hurling magic and bodies against her.

Unperturbed, Hlioth pronounced a swift *banishment* of great power; green light flashed. Abruptly, all was quiet.

Rimilin arose from the wreck of his abode and alighted on the cliff-top twenty yards away.

“Are you done?” He asked. He struck her with a *disjunction* and blasted her with arcane fire.

Hlioth smiled. The spell she cast – possessed of immense penetrative power – could not be turned.

Rimilin knew that it had been crafted just for him.

A look of mild astonishment crossed his face; he had not expected another of that magnitude. And not this...

Rimilin vanished.

Hlioth sighed. The presence of another. A void with many tendrils. She saw Queen Soneillon quietly walking towards her, even as an annihilating fire consumed her.

“You have seen too much,” the witch whispered, as she expired.

**

Mostin grumbled. Goristros were hurling themselves at the base of the tower, and palrethees were

appearing before him. The threat of the balors had – fortunately – been eliminated in quick measure: Jalael had *dominated* one and hurled it at another; the two remaining had wisely chosen to avoid the same fate, and vanished.

The Alienist sighed. They were probably loose in the world. Somewhere. Tracking them and

dispatching them was not a chore which concerned him.

Mostin invoked a chained *polymorph*; the demons directly ahead were transformed into trout and dropped to the ground. Those who were fortunate enough to avoid the hooves of the goristros flapped briefly before dying.

Creq was administering some necromantic elixir to Mulissu in order to revive her. Tozinak made

encouraging sounds.

“Can’t you *do* something?” Mostin asked of Tozinak, incredulous. “Even Waide is *doing* something.”

The other transmuter had reversed gravity, causing three of the enormous demons to bob in the air

unceremoniously.

Tozinak pursed his lip – Mostin had no doubt that he had taken genuine offense – and pointed. A

goristro began to dance.

Lai sprang out of the ground, assumed the form of a falcon, shot upwards, dived, and landed on the balcony, resuming her normal shape in a single, seamless movement.

Mostin blanched.

“Hlioth indicated that you need another for your spell,” Lai explained. She reached down and *healed* Mulissu, saving her from Creq’s dubious ministrations.

Mostin’s prolepsis warned him of an impending explosion of planar conduits. Naatha and Rishih, with their allies. Too many; the force previously gathered to assault Fumaril. More *teleportation circles* began to appear, a quarter-mile to the north. Three *gates* flashed open. Demons, giants, magi.

Immortals. Mostin knew they were loaded with magic. They were coming through fast.

“Sh*t,” the Alienist cursed.

“Well?” Mulissu asked groggily.

“We have to,” Mostin nodded glumly.

Drawing on the cabal, he invoked a massive *Quiescence of the Spheres*. The air became still, and all dimensional traffic within ten miles was stifled. Silence.

An acidic storm struck the tower. Orolde, Troap, Creq and Daunton perished.

“That it should come to this,” Mulissu erected an *antimagic field*.

“Deploy the compactees,” Mostin screamed, skin hanging from his nose like molten wax.

A portal to the tower – no small postern, but a great gate – was opened. Dozens of compacted daemons, devils, hags and elementals – retained as security against Abyssal entanglements – poured forth.

Quasits and mephits bickered in the air above them.

“After we get out of the vacuum, please tell me you can *wind walk*?” Mostin asked Lai.

“Only to a certain point,” Lai said. “Prahar has forbidden flight beyond it.”

Mostin groaned.

An old moon – a slender sickle, the colour of deep rust – finally arose from behind distant hills, casting morbid rays across the field.

**

Prahar had invoked a pitch darkness which defied all attempts to *dispel* it. It encapsulated an area of fierce combat, where a great mob of undead horsemen were attempting to push through to a heavily

defended Temple centre. Within the shadow, the void – famished and profane – rolled

forward and

consumed. Hysteria descended on the Wyrish forces. Their enemy – seemingly unaffected – struck at

them ruthlessly. Tahl, separated from the others and finally surrounded and overwhelmed, self-

immolated in a swirling column of fire and vanished, burning the enemy in a wide circle.

Nwm stumbled blindly toward the *Sela*'s redoubt, where he knew many of the hardest knights were stationed; even his supernatural vision had been subdued. He cursed himself, assumed the shape of a wolf, and sniffed his way forwards. More than a few hacked at him in panic as he moved, mistaking

him for the enemy; he shrugged off their blows.

Behind him, *it* was coming. He could feel it; Green was buckling like a warped plank to accommodate it.

*

Shvar Choryati encroched. Now it phased nearby in contempt of the *Quiescence of the Spheres*, first here and then there, slaying hundreds each time it appeared; half at random, but always *closer*, as if some instinct drew it obliquely inwards.

Nwm stilled his thought and considered his options. He observed its pattern, and pondered.

"You will not escape it," Nwm spoke to the *Sela*. "No magic can speed you fast enough now; all has been stilled. It hungers for you, albeit circuitously; it does not perceive the route to you in linear fashion. Many are dying as it seeks you; we may never recover them. It will eat everything near you.

Will you trust me and do as I say?" Nwm asked.

"Yes," Tramst replied. Even in the darkness, Nwm knew that his expression was open.

Nwm reached out and felt the *Sela*'s helm, and placed a hand on either side.

"Invoke her," the Preceptor said.

"Nehael," Tramst whispered. A supplication.

"Rest until the morning. I will wake you at sunrise." With a strong twist, Nwm snapped the *Sela*'s neck.

His death passed unnoticed by all except the Darkness.

Become an enormous hunting cat, Nwm bounded north and west. Two minutes later, beyond the range

of Prahar's invocation, he assumed the form of a great eagle, and powered his way away, in search of a likely refuge.

Meanwhile, the void turned its attention to the brightest remaining source of light.

**

Lai led six wizards – Mostin, Mulissu, Jalael, Tozinak, Waide, and Droom – north and west across the battlefield in vaporous form. Sho and Muthollo had retreated into the Tower, in the event that one amongst the Cheshnite immortals was to prove intent upon – and capable of – breaching it. *Disjoining* the wards upon the solar in the vestibule had been the Alienist's suggestion as to their first line of defense.

As Mostin sped away from his fortress, he noticed that a number of large nozzles had emerged at

intervals around the tower, and were projecting some kind of hellfire at the advancing demons.

Evidently, Sho had been referencing more obscure tomes than he; this function was unknown to him.

To hasten their passage, Mulissu had evoked a roaring wind which verged on agonizing to ride. Only moments later, Naatha, Guho and a group of *Kesha-Dirghaa* theurges were in swift pursuit, employing similar tactics. The savant immediately conjured elementals to delay them.

Below, isolated skirmishes persisted between death knights and paladins; ahead, a blank hemisphere a half-mile in diameter had sprung up. Around it – and presumably within it – the main conflict surged to and fro.

[Mostin]: What is your evacuation plan?

[Mulissu]: I?

[Jalael]: He means any but he.

[Mostin]: I am not equipped to move large numbers of mundanes. What do we have left? (Tally of spells).

[Jalael]: Were that we were better configured for offense.

[Mostin]: We will be next time.

[Waide]: There will be no 'next time.' I might also observe that the stress of our current predicament is having a deleterious effect upon Tozinak's delicate psyche.

[Tozinak]: Do not speak of me as though I am not here!

[Jalael]: The fat transmuter fears stress, Tozinak. Pay him no heed. Somehow, you have stumbled your way into transvalency.

[Tozinak] (emboldened): Quite so!

[Mostin]: A month previous would have been preferable.

[Tozinak]: I have a spell already at hand!

[Waide]: He is clearly deranged.

[Tozinak]: Preparation will take only a few moments. I must corporeate and study my petroglyphs.

[Mostin + Mulissu]: What do you speak of?

[Tozinak]: My slab, bequeathed by Jovol. His last work.

[Mostin]: What is it titled, idiot?

[Tozinak]: There is no need for rudeness, Mostin.

[Mostin]: *Its name!*

[Tozinak]: *A Flame Precedes the Aeon*

[Mulissu] (exasperated): Just show us the pattern.

(A pause for inspection)

[Mostin]: A Grand Enochia? A conjuration, or a transmutation? It makes no sense. The spell is scribed in terms of Urgic Altitudes. It needs thirteen...

[Jalael]: Tozinak! You imbecile!

Mostin groaned as he saw. The focus required was *Pharamne's Urn*.

Ortwine's voice suddenly echoed in his head. *Mostin! You made it! How delightful!*

As they began to descend, Mostin looked down and sighed. The sidhe was waltzing with a balor upon a heap of the slain.

From without the magical darkness, the insatiable void now lurched uncertainly; but away from the

conflict, south and east towards Jompa.

Ahead of it, drawing it onwards, a streak of brilliant light; Eadric brandishing *Lukarn* and riding upon *Narh*.

**

In Nizkur, the appeal reached her.

Teppu immediately stopped time.

"Thank-you," Nehael acknowledged. A moment to reflect was never a bad thing.

"It is an eventful night," Teppu observed. "And I am losing track. Has Nwm overstepped the mark, I

wonder?"

"Frankly, I find Hlioth's play more outrageous."

"Enitharmon will be in flap," Teppu pointed out.

Nehael nodded. "I anticipate he will send episemes to penetrate the *Hahio*. I might need to have words with them."

"Be gentle with them," Teppu said wryly.

"I will invite them to stay," Nehael smiled. "I can be very accommodating. If you would..."

Time resumed its normal flow.

The goddess reached out to Tramst; Her grace enfolded his spirit, and kept him safe.

** **

By the light of a dim oil lamp, the Adversary relaxed in the study of Mostin's manse, sipping firewine and playing a game of chance with Mei.

"Alas," he remarked wily to the *simulacrum*. "I fear that you have no ego and I have no name. We should each borrow a little from the other."

Mei was confused. She still didn't know why this sprite was here. He seemed pleasant enough, and his manners were always impeccable; although she could never tell if he was being serious.

"No, thank-you. I await my pseudogenesis," she answered, playing a red token with three sphinxes graven on it.

"Might I inquire why?" The Adversary asked.

"I must weigh transcendence against preservation; I favor a high ratio of the former to the latter."

"Your sister seems content enough." The Adversary carefully placed two white tokens – each bearing a yellow trifoil – on the table. "Hers is a rapid path."

"I wish for a greater leap," Mei shrugged.

"Ahh," the Adversary nodded. "I face a similar dilemma. Although mine is rather the reverse."

"I do not comprehend."

"The certitude of *diminishment*, or the high likelihood of *extinction*. You may remove that token from beneath your hand; you must learn more finesse if you are going to cheat at this game." He played another yellow trifoil.

"And if you choose to risk extinction, and yet persist?" Mei inquired, unabashed that her subterfuge was revealed.

"I fear I might be *forgiven*. From my perspective, this is the worst possible outcome."

"Diminishment is so untenable a proposition?"

"My circumstances are rather unique," the Adversary smiled.

"And extinction?"

"I speak metaphorically, of course."

Mei gave a puzzled look. "I can no longer follow this argument."

The Adversary sighed. "It is complex. I also regret to inform you that I have won the game."

He placed a blue tile bearing a pomegranate before him.

"You already played that token!" Mei objected.

"I'm sure I didn't. Perhaps you are mistaking the previous game with this."

“This game bores me,” Mei remarked. “I never win.”

“I have another,” the Adversary suggested. “If you would prefer. It is called *Requite*.”

“Are there more tokens?”

“Of a sort,” the Adversary admitted. “But of a more abstract kind. We pretend to dispense judgement upon our devilish minions, pronouncing terrible dooms; their humiliation and subjugation serves to magnify us. We must maneuver our pieces cunningly; our minions are apt to squabble amongst themselves.”

“It sounds involved.”

“It is,” the Adversary nodded. “But I am well-practiced, and I can teach you. Would you care to learn?”

Mei shrugged. It was something to pass the time.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 06-12-09

Interpenetration (Mostin *In Machinam*)

The air rushed past the *Ahma* as he rode along the sward above the Hynt Coched. As *Shvar Choryati* had made its first dimensional lurch toward him, Eadric knew that its attention had become focused on him. Having considered that he would be able to draw it away and outpace it, the *Ahma* had veered sharply south. It quickly became apparent that he had miscalculated.

Some distance away, Mostin turned his *arcane sight* around him.

Wild magic danced intermittently in the air; auroras generated by the interplay of a half-dozen potent spells. Nearby, the wall of Prahar’s *Utterdark* loomed, impenetrable to his vision; south, the vastness of the *Pall of Dhatri* was now visible in the moonlight. He gazed west: Naatha, Guho and the hierophants were almost upon them.

Eastward, where the plain rose away, Eadric blazed a path faster than any *wind walker*, opening a gap of over two miles between himself and the consuming blackness. The phenomenon shuddered forward

again – and a little east – ripping the fabric of reality and stretching the *Quiescence of the Spheres* until it squeezed through, and the dimensional lock snapped back into place.

In an instant, the void sprang forwards almost mile. Mostin’s *foresight* informed him that the *Ahma* wasn’t going to make it. A series of presentiments impacted on his mind.

Mostin cursed, dismissed the *Quiescence*, and invoked a *time stop*. He *teleported* to a point immediately ahead of Eadric, opened a *gate*, and hopped through. It was a strategy which the Alienist had previously used to extricate Mulissu from Graz’zt’s clutches.

Time recommenced.

Eadric blinked, saw Mostin beckoning toward a serene vista, and was instantly transported.

The *Ahma*, sat astride *Narh*, was high on a mountain; a narrow path wound downwards and away from him. Monasteries clung to the wooded lower slopes; isolated hermitages were perched on bare, snowy shoulders higher up. Below, wide vistas stretched to blue. It was an idyll, as if stolen from a dream he had once had in an innocent youth: a view of the Blessed Plain from the Beatitudes. Now, he seemed to be awakening from a nightmare; he removed his battered helm and breathed. The air was sweet and

sharp and full with energy. All was pristine. The sky seemed composed of tiny motes which danced

before his eyes, until he focused his sight.

High above, uncounted myriads of archons and devas whirled in the sky. Spheres of increasing brilliance seemed to issue up and away from him, defying laws of distance and perception. Beyond, the Magnitudes pulsed. The light – refracted through the planes of four interposing heavens – was still too overwhelming to gaze upon.

Ahma, the celestials sighed into his mind with one voice.

The massive vibration made Eadric shake.

Mostin stood looking back through the *gate* into the darkness of *Shvar Choryati* as it oozed around the portal, unable to penetrate. His pseudopod flexed nervously.

“Mostin...”

“I know they’re above me,” the Alienist said through gritted teeth. “That’s why I’m not turning around and looking up. ”

“No. How did you...”

“We had to come a long way in. It might have followed you anywhere else. Believe me when I say I can think of more agreeable locales.”

“I need to get back to the fight.”

Mostin sighed. “That’s precisely what you *don’t* want to do, Eadric. It wants to eat your ‘soul’ – or whatever you term it. You need Nwm. This is out of your league.”

“But the *Sela*...”

Sela! A pulse which made the mountain tremble.

“Tramst is dead,” a familiar voice said.

Eadric turned to face Rintrah, Oronthon’s Messenger. He was clad in a simple white gown.

“For the time being,” the celestial added. “He is in transit, under Nehael’s protection. There is some disagreement amongst the Host whether he is safe or not.”

“Disagreement?” Mostin asked, averting his eyes. The notion amongst celestials was a novel one.

“Do you believe him safe?” The *Ahma* asked directly.

“Yes. But I am in the minority, and my opinion matters little.”

“Ah, a demonstration of Empyrean initiative,” Mostin sneered. He continued to look

through the *gate*; the blackness had passed over, and was gravitating back to a more reliable source of light. There

seemed to be no activity in the immediate vicinity; *Shvar Choryati* had scoured all bare. A ruddy moonlight had returned to the battlefield.

“I am fallible,” Rintrah answered, unfazed. “Enitharmon, less so. How could I deny this basic fact?”

Mostin groaned, and turned to face the celestial, his expression one of nausea. “You are trite. You appeal to hierarchy to avoid responsibility: you are fundamentally disingenuous.”

“I wish you were capable of understanding otherwise, Mostin...”

The Alienist became red and twitched. “Would it avoid the World being wracked because Oronthogorgon is having another existential crisis?”

“Enough!” Eadric’s eyes flashed. “You forget where you are.”

Wrath! Thunder echoed in the spheres above.

Mostin quailed – an expression which quickly became a pout – and turned back to look through the

gate, positioning himself again so as not to observe Rintrah directly. Evidently, Eadric possessed some

kind of home ground advantage.

Things seemed to be quiet through the portal.

“I’m done here,” Mostin announced. “I’m going back through. As you’re staying for a while, Eadric, maybe you can ask...”

“I can tell you nothing of the Aeon,” Rintrah anticipated him.

“Whatever,” Mostin grumbled. “I’m assuming you can figure out a way back. Mulissu was just as appreciative when I did the same for her.”

Mostin vanished and the *gate* snapped shut.

“We should go this way,” Rintrah smiled to Eadric. “The view is good.”

“Rintrah, I cannot stay...”

“Certainly, you can – for a while. Mostin is correct in one thing; you can no longer meaningfully influence the outcome of this battle.”

Gone.

“Gone? Who is gone?” Eadric asked.

Rintrah raised an eyebrow. Evidently, this was also news to the Messenger. “The seven seraphs who entered Viridescence.”

” *Seraphim*?” Aside from Enitharmon, none among the highest choir had left their Altitude since the Fall.

“These are eventful times,” Rintrah nodded. “It would appear that Nehael has appropriated them.”

(A Migration of Light).

Eadric was dumbfounded. Apparently, others amongst the Host were inclined to join them. A few –

perhaps too eager – fell catastrophically, striking the plains below and vanishing.

Rintrah smiled. “Stay focused on the path ahead, and don’t be distracted by what transpires above. Do not *concern* yourself too much; in Consciousness, all events are allegory. Let us walk a little way further; there is a tree I would like you to see.”

“In the face of calamity, you seem in no hurry to act.”

“I sense no diminishment in the quality of the light,” Rintrah said wryly. “It is a prodigal spark which counsels action as the only means to induce motion. I am not here at Enitharmon’s behest: I am His Messenger.”

“Forgive me,” Eadric nodded.

**

As the *Quiescence of the Spheres* dissolved and Mostin vanished, Ortwine, Lai and the remaining wizards found themselves in something of a predicament. The sidhe had quickly *screened* them, and Jalael had immediately *disjoined* Prahar’s darkness in order to gain a better appreciation of the tactical situation. It was bad.

Temple units, who had been unable to endure the presence of *Shvar Choryati*, were routing to the north and west: great, curved swathes of lifeless corpses marked the passage of the Eater of Light.

Prince Tagur, who commanded the rearguard, had deployed a screen of knights to cover the retreat.

Prahar led a vicious pursuit. Squadrons of death knights roamed and slew at will, cutting down

stragglers and hurling themselves against any remaining pockets of resistance. Three large knots of Templars and their allies remained, but many of the doughtiest warriors – those in whom the light

shone brightest – had been greedily devoured by the enemy.

Some distance away, outside of the zone where flight had been dampened, what remained of the Dark

Choir – the arch-devas Irel and Shokad – gyred in the sky, locked in furious but inconclusive combat with Prince Orcus and a number of lesser demons.

Ortwine’s perception identified Naatha, Guho and their *wind-walking* cabal half-a-minute distant. A hundred yards away, a demon materialized. And another. Rishih was active, and the *teleportation circles* were opening again. The consuming darkness – distracted momentarily a mile to the southeast –

was moving back towards them. News of the disappearance of both the *Ahma* and the *Sela* was beginning to spread.

The sidhe turned to Mulissu.

“Remind me why it is exactly that you’re here again?” She asked.

“Hlioth seems to think that some kind of evacuation is both possible and desirable.”

Ortwine raised an eyebrow. “The witch?”

Mulissu nodded. “Her foresight is erratic, but occasionally inspired.”

“I suppose so. I will negotiate some breathing space.” She handed Mulissu her *box of shades*.

“You seek to parley?” Mulissu was incredulous. “At this juncture? Why would they listen to you? And why do you pay heed to *Hlioth*, of all people?”

Ortwine laughed.

Prahar, she spoke directly into his mind, but also into the thoughts of those other immortals who were present. *I’ve got Sibud’s talisman. Call off your dogs. I’m willing to make a deal.*

[Guho + Rishih + Naatha]: Wait!

**

The Alienist glanced around nervously and licked his lips. He was nearing the point where he was

becoming vulnerable; a decidedly undesirable situation. He reached out with his mind to contact Sho.

Moments later, the *Infernal Tower* appeared immediately before Mostin, rearing above him with its gate facing him.

[Sho]: I recommend that you embark quickly.

Mostin didn’t need telling twice.

[Mulissu]: Mostin! Where the hell have you been? Never mind. Get to Kustus and what’s left of the

Flamines. Get them out of here.

[Mostin]: Why the hiatus?

[Jalael]: Ortwine is ceding the field and negotiating the safe recovery of casualties.

[Mostin] (Mad Laughter): Safe? I notice a certain chthonic void seems undistracted by any diplomatic protocols. And since when did Ortwine become the chief ambassador of Wyre?

[Mulissu] (Irritated): Since she could lie better than anyone else! Now make haste!

**

“A weregild, so to speak,” Ortwine smiled easily. “Or reparations if you prefer. Or simply bribery, if we can speak more directly.”

Her apparent nonchalance belied her caution, and she was ready to sidestep into Faerie at the first sign of treachery, or if any magical energies were suddenly gathered. Before her, four great Cheshnite

immortals – Prahar, Guho, Rishih and Naatha – were arrayed, surrounded by dozens of undead and

demonic retainers.

Ortwine was alone. She was also surprised to find that Sibud's token was attracting this much attention, and lamented the fact that she might be grossly *underestimating* its value. The sidhe scanned the opposition.

Naatha, she had encountered before, but the others were new to her. Guho writhed, a festering heap of corruption; larvae – which seemed to comprise her entirety – shifted and flowed in shapes which

paused at times to resemble that of a mortal visage.

Prahar was mounted on a black monster of approximately equine shape; he was clad in full harness, but his raised visor displayed a shrivelled countenance; one which indicated both a malice and a madness of unguessable depth. From his jaws – punctuated by rows of razor-sharp teeth – a sticky secretion dripped. He raved and slavered, and seemed barely in control of his faculties.

Rishih – who stood slightly to one side, with obvious distaste for his peers – appeared human; albeit one ancient and wicked. A weight of being afflicted him, as though he craved annihilation; he wore only an ascetic's garb, but bore a staff of tremendous power.

Before them all stood Anumid, grudgingly invoked by the immortals as arbiter. His veneer of civility was thin.

"But to which oaths can I bind you?" Ortwine continued. "I suspect that each of you is as inclined to malfeasance as I in contractual matters. The answer is none, of course; hence I continue to speak."

"We give you one hour," Anumid spat. "I do not speak for *Shvar Choryati*. Give me the talisman. There are no assurances."

"Prahar should first dismiss his spell," Ortwine said reasonably. Within range of her deific sight,

Mostin's tower had materialized again. "It will expedite our retreat."

Naatha, also sensing the relocation of the infernal device, immediately assumed treachery and targeted Ortwine with chains of *antimagic*.

The sidhe had vanished before she had even raised her hand.

Too bad, Ortwine's voice echoed in their minds, moments later.

Prahar became enraged. The others withdrew from him.

"Fortify your position before sunrise," Anumid hissed to Rishih and Naatha. "Let the maniac be concerned with any pursuit. Consolidate. The field is ours."

Anumid scowled, but felt an inward relief that Sibud's token was not in Prahar's hands. At least his own presence had averted the immortals coming to blows with one another. That had to be worth something.

For the moment, at least.

*

Jalael had conjured a *teleportation circle* – the only one available to any of the remaining collegiate mages – through which the remnants of the Temple centre were fleeing. Tozinak had opened a *gate*; Mulissu a *shadow avenue*. Temple scrollbearers and flamines were being ushered into the *Infernal Tower* against their better judgement. At Mostin's suggestion, egress from the battlefield was being offered first to spellcasters; others – who weren't as strategically important – would have to make their own arrangements.

Demons harried them in droves; *banishments* were discharged.

**

As the very first light of dawn stole over the battlefield, a pillar of flame appeared amid the slaughter, at the same spot where Saint Tahl the Incorruptible had self-immolated. Fiery wings – briefly appearing and then vanishing – cradled Tahl as he corporeated again. Looking around him, he wept.

"Come," Hlioth said, appearing from nowhere. "Before they do. We have lost much tonight."

In her hand, she held *Drengh*, Ninit's spear.

*

Eighty miles to the north, perched on a rocky crag, Nwm – in the form of an eagle with a battered

aspect – awoke and screeched. His head hurt. He remembered little of his exhausted journey to his roost.

As he stretched his wings, he started. Squatting motionless on her haunches above him, perched upon an outcrop and staring southwards at the *Pall of Dhatri*, a lean figure; sable-clad, with scarlet hair flapping in the wind. She said nothing.

In his mind, another voice.

[Nehael]: About time. You have a busy day ahead.

Nwm groaned.

**

Temenun relaxed in his suites at Jashat. A victory, to be certain. He apprised a Naztharune servant that he had a visitor, and to admit Yeshe the Binder. She entered calmly.

"What do you know of the *Urn*?" She asked.

"It reaches beyond the Veils," he replied.

“You incited Visuit to interrupt my meditation?”

“Her instinct for war needs no prompting,” Temenun purred.

“And the *Urn*?”

“Is safely buried in the deep again. *Gu-Kaama* has recovered it. Mostin inadvertently empowered her.”

” *Shvar Choryati* is out of control. It drives northwards now toward Wyre. The Enforcer will eliminate the *Anantam* who are implicated in its conjuration if it passes her threshold. I assume that you have some contingency in mind?”

“I have a while yet to consider,” the Tiger said smoothly. “And always time to indulge your curiosity, Yeshe.”

“You are most gracious, brother,” Yeshe smiled insincerely.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 08-30-2009

TREE

[SKADDING]: What happened when the *Sela* died?

[BREY]: Mind does not die.

[SKADDING]: But *Tramst* died. The *kas* was destroyed.

[BREY]: Nwm the Preceptor afforded him another.

[SKADDING]: But the *Sela*? At this juncture – what was its nature?

[BREY]: Why would it be other than it is? Your mind is too focused on doctrinal questions. Apprehend the Moment and eschew theology.

[SKADDING]: You evade the question.

[BREY]: And will continue to do so! You must be flexible in your understanding of hypostases; rigid dogma in this area – more than any other – is detrimental to the cultivation of *Saizhan*.

[SKADDING]: Please, indulge me. Sineig suggests that the *ahmasaljan* was the only component to traverse the *Hahio*. He said that a Flame of Oronthon was present; that it lingered, and he perceived it.

[BREY]: Perhaps such chose to reveal itself to him: how else could Sineig sense the imperceptible?

The Sublime Essence. He posits a quincunx of natures in *Tramst*; others a quaternity. They can argue until the end of time and it will avail nothing. The Irrenite tendency to formulate mystery is apparent in this; I feel duty bound to point out that certain dubious thaumaturgic practices also accompany his point of view.

[SKADDING]: I had, in fact, considered *Skohsldaur*.

[BREY]: I would advise against it.

[SKADDING]: My father has voiced a similar opinion. My argument is solid.

[BREY]: And what might that be?

[SKADDING]: I have been to Heaven; you have not. I have a perspective which is difficult to communicate.

[BREY] (Warily): So spake the Nameless Fiend! This experience must surely carry weight. Still, I find the prospect of such tension disagreeable. Who will look to my bees if I choose such a demanding vehicle?

[SKADDING]: And devotion is for old men...

[BREY]: Wise old men, Skadding. Both *wise* and *old*.

[SKADDING]: You cling to life! I knew it!

[BREY]: Cling? Not I. To me, life is a dream both surreal and utterly poignant; I have faced certain death more times than I care to count, yet still I stand here. This also affords a certain perspective; one difficult to communicate...

[SKADDING]: *Saizho*.

[BREY]: No. This is mundane wisdom.

[SKADDING]: Is there such a thing?

[BREY]: All Wisdom is Mundane. *Saizha*?

**

They reached the crest of a hill, and Eadric found himself gazing into a deep ravine. It seemed utterly wild; a virgin corner of the mountain. An ancient yew dominated the chasm, by virtue of its presence rather than its stature. They began to descend towards it, and Eadric noticed celestials in its vicinity.

“It is profoundly sapient,” Rintrah explained. “More so than any in the Host. And benign – for the most part. Many devas have been drawn to it. And some former Masters. It is the Yew- *ludja*; the tree in the courtyard of the Temple in Morne is one of its scions.”

“Are there others in the Heavens?”

“Yes and no. Yew is the only *ludja* here – it was invoked at the Reversal. One of Oak’s scions rises on the Blessed Plain; and a Beech also – these are still profound, although of less magnitude. Others are in other places: and not all are kind. All emanate from the great Tree- *ludja* in Nizkur.

“They are rapidly awakening,” Rintrah continued. “Tree in Nizkur seeks to generate a new *axis mundi*, so to speak. Nwm’s portals between planes serve to mark channels for the roots of its scions. And

Hlioth’s efforts also. Certain magicks which have been invoked have carved paths more vigorously;

transiting entities have left wakes which Tree has been quick to exploit. You might tell Nwm that his fears were unjustified: the celestial case was not asserted without cost.”

“Then some kind of equilibrium is being established.” The *Ahma* slowed his steed to a halt.

“Mind precedes, but its workings may be more subtle than you perceive in this case. And the motion of the Adversary also speeds the differentiation. Descend. I will wait here for you.”

The *Ahma* dismounted from *Narh* and approached Yew quietly; an emotional state which seemed to come naturally, yet as though responding to some external demand. He walked a slow circuit around it.

That it was cognizant of his thoughts and feelings – to a far greater extent than he himself was – Eadric had no doubt. The sheer weight of its consciousness was palpable.

He turned to observe Rintrah, but the great celestial was a blurred figure now receded from his mind.

From a source deeper than Yew, Eadric knew, the Primordial Tree itself was generating a continuum

around the *ludja*. A resonance which transformed that which was around it.

Devas moved aside to let him pass, whispering *Ahma* into his thoughts. They had acquired a quality of indefinable measure, which had set them apart from others in the Host. *Taint* was not the correct word, but a transformative effect of equal significance, and one to which he was sensitive. Were they now viridescent? An imprecise terminology bothered him; yet why systematize?

Viridescent, they whispered. Apparently, a point of doctrine had been made.

The boughs stretched up high above him; they seemed to bask in the Radiance pouring down from the

Magnitudes. Silence, as the tree breathed Wisdom of impossible depth.

If this is Heaven, then it pleases me, Eadric thought.

He sat and prayed for the safe passage of the *Sela*.

**

The *reincarnation* of Tramst by Nwm in Nizkur was a quiet event, untroubled by any fanfare or ceremony.

Nwm proceeded to recall the wizards, affording Dauntun the Diviner a far younger body than the one which the wizard had previously enjoyed. Dauntun's mood improved considerably with a more

youthful and dashing aspect, and a general limberness. Two massive *reincarnations*, followed by dozens more; invoked by Mesikammi, Lai, the Uediians, Temple Adepts sympathetic to the

Reconciliation.

The roll of those who could not be recovered was long and depressing: Ninit and the boars; eight of Lai's twelve handmaidens; Temple grandees, penitents and scrollbearers; common soldiers too

numerous to count.

Afterwards, Nwm arranged a meeting between Nehael and Mostin. An encounter which the Preceptor dreaded.

*

Mostin breathed with conscious measure and attempted to remain focused.

Nwm had referred to this place as *Kilthei* or *Kinthei* or *Qinthei* or some such: the air was pregnant with a power which Mostin had never before experienced; all seemed doused in an abundant, fertile energy.

The walls which separated any number of worlds were gossamer-thin; Faerie and its primordial

analogues; unnamed spirit dimensions, inhabited by monstrous animal-deities; the forgotten heavens of shamans who had been dead for a hundred generations. All were contained within the Green hollow.

Each merely a step away.

A tree – the pivotal node through which Tree manifested, Mostin realized – stood above a small pond possessed of unusual clarity, upon the surface of which tiny motes of silver-green danced or floated.

His own presence seemed to go unheeded. Surely not unnoticed. Dwarfed, in fact, beyond imagining.

Yet it seemed merely a tree...

Nearby, Rimilin of the Skin sat cross-legged upon a flat stone, examining patterns within a leaf which the Tree had shed. He had been encysted or *subsumed* in some way; his Will erased, or captured and redirected. Unexpectedly, Mostin experienced a upwelling of profound empathy for the Acolyte. He

turned to Nehael; her power was veiled, but still perceivable.

“Divinity becomes you,” Mostin doffed his hat with his pseudopod. “Will you be taking a more proactive stance in the war?”

Nwm, standing to one side, sighed. This would be just too irritating. Ortwine observed lazily.

Nehael smiled. “I assert my inscrutability. You are here because of the *Urn*, Mostin. I also notice that you have Graz’zt in your robe pocket. Were I a vengeful goddess...but alas, I have no use for him. The *Urn*...”

“Soneillon has it.”

“Yes,” Teppu nodded. “This much I have determined. And for that, the prior I must assume some responsibility. Jovol’s foresight was imperfect. I believe he laid a variety of other contingencies according to other possible futures.”

“What are you?” Mostin fixed him with a stare.

“I have no idea,” Teppu confessed. “I’ll remember when I die.”

“He is an agent of the Aeon,” Nehael said.

“That is a *theory*,” Teppu observed. “I have no evidence to support it. I am certainly *Green*; the question remains as to whether I can be both.”

Nehael shrugged. “As far as culpability goes, the principal offender stands before us. Why did you send her *Outside*, Mostin?”

“Your judgements do not concern me,” Mostin said haughtily.

“Four times Fallen now. She has escaped. Had you considered that she might build an Infinity around her?”

“You are familiar with my theories?” The Alienist was pleasantly surprised.

“I speak in a language you understand,” Nehael said evenly. “I regret that the facts of the matter are incommunicable.”

Mostin twitched.

“Do not mistake the truth for deific condescension,” Nehael anticipated him.

“Or foresight, for that matter,” she added before he could speak. “I know you well, Mostin.”

“You’ve made your point,” Mostin grumbled.

“The Viridity unfolds. The *ludjas* bind worlds together, but where will the remaining scions sprout?

Tree is silent in this; all watch with anticipation. You should not berate yourself for abandoning the race for Azzagrat; you acted in good faith.”

“I blame only Tozinak’s stupidity,” Mostin waved his appendage dismissively. “And his inappropriate use of oological metaphor when attempting to communicate. Nehael. What of the Aeon?”

“It is beyond my scrutiny,” Nehael said. “I can offer you no advice. But I would ask you to reconsider your original plan.”

Mostin cocked his head.

“The *gates* in Azzagrat, Mostin. You could still close them.”

Mostin scowled. “Why? There is no longer any purpose.”

“One single selfless act? *A Flame Precedes the Aeon*. What does it do, Mostin?”

“Ask your friend. He scribed it.”

“My memory is poor,” Teppu admitted. “You are better informed than I.”

“It uncorks the *Urn*,” Mostin explained. “In a manner of speaking. But the opportunity is passed. Did Jovol lay some kind of *geas* on Tozinak?”

Teppu sighed. “It is possible. He may also have been manipulated by another agent. I suspect that frustration with the imperfect game of prescience led to my abandoning it; I would urge you to do the same.”

“I think not,” Mostin smiled.

Nehael closed her eyes and exhaled.

Mostin condescended to give an inquiring look.

“Scions. An Oak and an Elm, north of Galda. Direct the Wyrish retreat towards them. And in response to your original question, yes.”

“Reflexive is not pro-active.”

“We have different methods,” Nehael whispered. “Didn’t you know? You may remain in Nizkur for now; I grant permission. Please refrain from disruptive activities.”

“Permission?”

“Necessarily, when at war, a wise dictator invokes martial law,” Nehael said drily.

“I also understand that you have seduced a clutch of Seraphim?”

Ortwine raised an eyebrow.

“News travels fast,” Teppu sighed. “Or your sources are remarkably well-informed. And I have not even spoken with them. Tree has already dispatched them on various errands.”

“The nature of which you are inclined to reveal?” The Alienist asked.

“If I knew what they were, I might.”

Abruptly, the hairs on Ortwine’s neck stood on end. Mostin’s eyes bulged. A crescendo of magical

energy which became almost deafening.

A pulse of tremendous power emanated from Tree. Dimension waxed sharp or retreated. A cascade of

fortifying waves. Impregnability. Afterwards, silence. Somehow, the matrix possessed a pattern familiar

to Mostin.

“What just happened?” Ortwine asked.

“NonGreen forms of interplanar travel have been discontinued,” Teppu clapped.

” *What?* ” Mostin’s jaw dropped.

“Where?” Ortwine asked.

“Just this world,” Nehael smiled. “Dreamers are unaffected.”

“I do not *dream*,” Mostin spoke the word as though it were an unsavory habit. “Is this a permanent imposition?”

“I would rather see it as a means to end other, temporary, impositions,” Nwm grinned broadly.

Mostin flailed. “Well, you would. Your tree just *dimensionally locked* the whole damn planet. And what about my tower? What am I going to do now?”

“I recommend *tree stride*,” Nwm said earnestly.

Mostin glared at Nehael. “And closing the *gates*? Recovering the *Urn*? How do you suggest I accomplish this?”

“Nwm. Hlioth. Or you could petition Cherry directly. Be careful – Cherry is a tricky one. And my instinct is that this is a temporary measure, if that is any consolation.”

“If temporary means ‘one billion years’ then no, not particularly,” the Alienist glared.

“And exempting dreamers leaves a lot of big holes.”

“Dream will be monitored,” Nehael smiled.

The Seraphim, Mostin knew.

“A number of myriads have also joined them,” Nehael caught the thought.

“The other scions?” Ortwine peered at her. “Are they all...sprouting? Do you know where they are?”

“Not all,” Nehael shook her head. “Some will remain hidden.”

“Restricting traffic is wise,” Ortwine nodded. “How do I get to Afqithan?”

“I believe previous portals will remain open,” Nwm answered. “You should have asked me where they were earlier.”

“Evidently,” Ortwine raised an eyebrow.

“This is intolerable,” Mostin spat. “I will find a way to circumvent this.”

“No, Mostin, you will not,” Nehael regarded him gravely. “For a little while, be patient. There are things specifically excluded or trapped here now against their will which dwarf you in significance.

Perhaps it is better that you are restrained, or at least monitored.”

“I?” He was incredulous.

“Mostin,” she drew close. All notion of sophistry had vanished from her demeanour; she spoke into the core of his being. “Believe me when I say that I honour you and love you, Mostin, because such is my nature; but you must recognize that what you *are* – how you *see* and what you *do* – these things are anathema to me. You possess a potential for horror which disturbs me.

“And this,” Nehael smiled as a clump of moss and sod grew in her hand. “This is Mine, Mostin. All of it. You are a guest. Don’t forget it.”

“Currently, I am a prisoner,” Mostin seethed.

“If you wish egress, petition one who can transport you; I will do it if you request. I will take you outside – but not Outside. You will need to negotiate at a Green concursion if you wish to return inside.

Unless you wish to dream.”

“Bah!” Mostin grunted. “And what is a ‘concursion’ supposed to be?”

“A node. Interface. Gate.”

“And how might I recognize these?”

“The *scions*, Mostin,” Nehael smiled wily. “Or in some cases, the *ludjas* themselves.”

“I need to appeal to *trees* to be allowed to go about my normal business? Many of which, by your own admission, ‘will remain hidden?’”

“Essentially, yes. Or one of we five.”

Mostin looked around. Nehael. Teppu. Hlioth. Nwm. Mesikammi.

Ah. *Those* five.

“Where are the *ludjas* themselves?” the Alienist demanded. “Assuming that you can be at least that forthcoming.”

“Here in Nizkur: Oak, Elm and Ash. Others in the Beatitudes, Throile, Azzagrat. On Avernus; in Faerie.

In Mulhuk. In the Hidden Realm. Five have yet to manifest themselves...”

“Hidden Realm?”

“I can show you,” Mesikammi offered.

” *Your* reality?” Mostin groaned. “You’re as mad as I am. And what is this talk of Trees in Hell?”

“Some equilibria must be forced,” Nehael smiled.

**

They gathered at Mostin’s manse in the Forest of Nizkur; the building had acquired an eccentric turret of modest proportions, oddly at ease with the prevailing aesthetic and comfortable in the sylvan

surroundings. The *Infernal Tower*’s now-inaccessible extradimensional interior – like that of much of the manse itself – meant that Mostin had a much reduced living space. Nwm, and a number of

goddesses, saints and wizards crowded around the Alienist’s kitchen table.

Mostin had considered the significance of the *Inertia of the Spheres* – as he had scathingly termed Tree’s reordering of planar reality – and determined that it was, in fact, utterly beyond his ability to bypass. He sighed, handing Nwm a piece of paper with many numbers and symbols scrawled upon it. It meant nothing to the Preceptor, whose magic was instinctive; the Alienist explained with forced patience.

“Half of the flamines have been consumed: tasty morsels, I’m sure. Many reservoirs are drained. The *Pall of Dhatri* is out of reach, and will likely remain so in any case. You can banish the Eater of Light; if you do, then you can say good-bye to those whom it ate. If you were to destroy it, they would be liberated: this would be preferable. *Slay* it. It’ll hurt, but you’ve got enough juice at a stretch. Let me configure the spell, as I am otherwise now at a loose end.” More than a hint of bitterness was present in Mostin’s voice.

Nwm nodded.

Ortwine smiled coolly, and turned to Nwm. “I have a question. Did you really need to kill the *Sela*, or were you just making a point?”

“It seemed like a good idea at the time.”

“I’m glad that you’re carefully considering the ramifications of your actions,” Mostin said acidly. “It’s

not like you’ve caused any problems so far.”

“I approve of Tree’s interdiction,” Tahl spoke wearily. “The progress of *Shvar Choryati*

has been slowed drastically. All enemy movements must also now occur conventionally.”

Mulissu nodded. “I no longer need to invest more than half of my energy simply to maintain Fumaril’s defense. We are in a better position than we were twelve hours ago.”

“And elementals are considered sufficiently ‘Green’ to pass muster,” Mostin complained.

“And I am tired of your incessant whining,” Mulissu sighed. “Do you have nothing useful to contribute?”

“No,” Mostin replied, staring at Nwm. “But I have a good many questions. What is Gihaahia’s role in this? Why did you wake up with her looming over you?”

“I don’t know that she has one,” Nwm answered. “Her mandate is ... not incompatible ... with the exclusion. Perhaps Nehael has spoken with her.”

“The succubus in her is exerting its charms,” Ortwine said approvingly. “You can’t keep a good demon down. She’ll snare them all.”

“Not all.”

Ortwine shrugged. “Tree is acquiring an exciting variety of thralls. I believe I chose the right side.”

“I have no doubt that you’ll be on the *winning* side,” Nwm remarked drily. “As to information which I possess to which you are not privy – yes, in a manner of speaking. Insofar as that nothing which has happened *surprises* me, although I wouldn’t exactly say I’ve *anticipated* anything, either.”

Tahl stood abruptly. “The *Ahma* has returned. He is at Galda, ordering the defense.

“Splendid. Assemble the minions,” Ortwine waved her hand.

“And none of the other *Great Wyrish Wizards* have anything to contribute?” Mostin inquired.

“Not especially,” Daunton said vaguely. “Do you think I should keep the beard?”

“Your hospitality is diminished,” Waide grumbled. “Where are your fruit teas gone? And those little cakes? Your *simulacrum* is less attentive to replenishing your pantry than Orolde; she spends the day reclining, reading your insane scrawl.”

Mostin had to agree. “I need a new apprentice.”

“I have gnomes,” Ortwine suggested.

Mostin’s head bobbed. Gnomes were agreeable enough.

**

**

Shomei the Infernal exited the trance and pondered. It was as Ugales had described: two zones within Qematiel’s range, in close proximity to one another, were inscrutable. None save the Adversary might have screened areas of such size from her spell, yet Shomei doubted it was his doing. She determined to investigate the first node: she suspected it was a Power, the presence of which could only be inferred obliquely.

Qematiel – an atavistic hellfire wyrm – abode within the realm of Mahazael Amaimon, King of the

Fourth Quarter. An infernal monarch whose exact mandate – other than the reprobation of delinquent devils and distinguished wicked mortals – was hidden to all save the Nameless Fiend, Amaimon was

unguessably powerful. He removed himself from Hell’s routine workings altogether, and concerned

himself with philosophical struggles on a more rarefied level.

Shomei herself had enjoyed the arch-fiend’s hospitality for a brief while, after her abduction by the *Akesoli* in Afqithan. The outcasts and detritus of a hundred unnamed hells and abysms found their way to his demesnes, and were tolerated or punished for unknown reasons; Wyre’s Enforcer had made her

abode nearby, until she had been plucked to serve as the Claviger’s slave.

Shomei armed herself with magic and opened a *gate*; she passed through into a blasted defile.

Lightning wracked the dark skies. Descending carefully, she crossed poisonous rills and found herself in a wide, flat-bottomed canyon. A great thicket – an untended hazel coppice of willful aspect – filled much of it. It murmured power to her; Shomei paused suspiciously, unsure if it was a deific illusion or an empty lure set as some test.

Without warning, fire overwhelmed her and a great claw pushed her a hundred yards through the air, pinning her to the wall of the ravine. A vast, horned head reared before her; ancient draconic eyes – full of wisdom and malice – regarded her briefly, absorbing a thousand details in a glance. They rested on the sigils which the Infernalist bore upon her forehead.

“An Exempt.” Qematiel snorted. “I am still inclined to break your body; the Tree recognizes you. It would have otherwise.”

Shomei managed to scowl even as she writhed in pain. A *ludja*? Here? By whose permission?

Tree needs no permissions, Hazel whispered into her mind.

But which was the other? The second un-scryable area?

A brief, unendurable pain as barbs seemed to sink into Shomei’s mind: evidently the other *ludja* was also fully aware of her thoughts. There was the looming threat of an execration so powerful that it would extinguish her.

Holly, she knew. She breathed deeply, mustered her will, and stared straight into Qematiel’s eyes.

“What passes here?” Shomei the Infernal asked. The question was possessed of terrific power.

Qematiel regarded her quizzically; none before had ever been audacious enough to attempt to *dominate* her. It was a fair effort.

“You amuse me. I am not sure. But my role in it – after an eternity of preparation – is not the one I had anticipated.”

“And the *I*?”

“It has migrated,” the Wyrn replied. “As will I. Hell is receding.”

**

In a dark abysm, Soneillon reflected on her circumstances. Events had not transpired as she might have preferred.

Atop her palace – a vast ziggurat which rose a mile into the skies above dense jungle – a tree had sprouted in a garden, sinking roots through marble and adamant, and fruiting in an instant: an event which coincided exactly with the return of the demoness – bearing *Pharamne's Urn* – from the wreck of Zelatar. It bore huge, ripe cherries which exuded an irresistible odor.

The demoness had warded herself in a heartbeat and retreated to a remote fastness, even as the tree had reached out to her mind and urged her to descend. She felt its consciousness pursue her, and she

transported herself again. And again. She could not elude it.

Soneillon cursed, fled deep into a chthonic dream - a delirium of unbeing - and brooded.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 10-17-2009

“Are We Ready?”

**

Two miles to the north of Galda, the Sun was rising as squadrons of Templars hurried about their

business. Mostin – floating inches above the ground - bent his thought northwest whilst eyeing the nearby Nwm suspiciously. The Preceptor stood before him, ankle-deep in mud and horsedung, and

apparently enjoying the experience. A night of heavy rainfall and twenty thousand cavalry had turned the fields into a morass.

An hour before, Mostin – closeted within a *secure shelter* – had emerged from a reverie of motes with too many contradictors to even begin to make sense of. It was as though the universe – several

universes, in fact – were being turned on their heads. And something had seemed to reach *toward* him through the *Web*. As if its ineffable divination had been somehow perceived. Impossible. He glanced around.

The Temple forces – swollen by more of the Illuminated of Morne, as well as Foide's skeptical vassals and the northern aristocracy of Ialde and Dramore – had entrenched at the southern end of the hills of Scir Cellod. In an ancient wood in a nearby valley, two scions – an Oak and an Elm – generated a

power which encompassed the entire camp and a wide area beyond, excluding the enemy.

The site was

outside of Gihaahia's remit, but overlooked the Hynt Coched, the main artery which connected

southern Wyre with the Thalassine cities.

Nwm had transported refugees who had fled to Nizkur or who had been *reincarnated* within its bounds; another ritual had opened a Green highway, speeding thousands – including the Wyrish Magi and many Temple grandees – straight into the midst of Eadric's already swollen camp. Mostin had found the ego dissociation which accompanied the trip unsettling.

Galda – a town of some eighteen hundred which lay beneath the aegis of the scions – was now visible in the dawn, and its campaniles, rooftops and walls thronged with armed sentries. Picquets and

outriders were spread in a wide arc to the limit of the Trees' protection and about the town.

Beyond was subject to the depredations of two demonic magnates – Orcus and Pazuzu – and those

amongst the remaining fiendish population which they had gathered about them. Both were operating

without reference to their respective invokers, Prahar and Yeshe; they skirmished continually with both each other and with archons and devas under the command of two more archfiends, Irel and Shokad:

episeme princes who had recently adopted a more Adversarial view. In the absence of any extradimensional movement, *wind walking* had become the preferred means of travel amongst all; despite their inferior numbers, in this the celestials possessed a distinct advantage.

Cirone, another quaint walled settlement some twenty miles further south, had been utterly consumed by *Shvar Choryati*, and it was near its wreck that Prahar had elected to establish his camp: a hemisphere of darkness which defied the attempts of both Mostin and Daunton to penetrate with their sight. In a separate bubble – warded with even more potent defenses – Rishih and Naatha had raised a magical beachhead with a large contingent of *Anantam* magi, supported by compactees and

bodyguards, the armored Giants of Danhaan. Against the backdrop of both, loomed the unpierceable

wall of night which was the *Pall of Dhatri*: somewhere within *that* was the unguessably vast main Cheshnite force.

Shvar Choryati had eaten its way approximately north, on an eccentric path which made frequent detours to annihilate farming communities. It would reach Galda in three days and the Wyrish border in five, assuming a stimulus of light didn't draw it directly towards the Temple encampment. How it

would interact with the scions would hopefully not be tested: Nwm planned to eliminate it before it advanced so far. It persisted on the edge of his perception like a cancer which

infected the World.

*

Mostin scowled. "Yet another power is rising in Nizkur. What do you know of it?"

Nwm shook his head. "Nothing."

"A fey; most ancient." The Alienist studied his face minutely; Mostin's paranoia was becoming more acute and more evident by the hour. He was beginning to remind Nwm of a caged animal.

"*Nothing*," Nwm reiterated. "But the Green is moving in torrents everywhere, so I can't say I'm surprised."

"Go on," Ortwine turned her head. "Fey rivals hold an interest for me."

"You flatter yourself," Mostin sniffed. "You pose as much threat as a gnat to one such as this."

"I prefer the gadfly metaphor. And no sidhe stands so far above me."

"I mentioned nothing of sidhe," Mostin sighed. "You are such a parochial queen."

"Currently, my parish is rather larger than yours," Ortwine smiled. "Speak more of this fey: do not let my witty quips distract you."

"That you are both so ignorant of events which reference your paradigm is a source of continual amazement to me," the Alienist grumbled. "This is no woodland sprite. It is rather... *wild*, in the instinctual, primal sense. The fact that it is *present* suggests massive change. It is masculine. It does not rise from the Tree-matrix, although its catenary is parallel."

"That sounds fine," Nwm nodded, distracted. Hlioth and Mulissu were becoming impatient.

Mesikammi had already departed. "Are we ready?"

*

All but one of the demons – a babau lurking behind a ruined pillar – fled as the five entities manifested amid a green surge. Perhaps deities recently awakened from some hibernation, the power of their

arrival caused the tiles in the courtyard to crack with a sudden growth of moss and lichen.

One, covered in a hundred rolling eyes, spied the babau and *dominated* it quickly.

Another, ragged and scarred, gestured toward a pomegranate tree which had long since been reduced to a stump. It immediately regrew its limbs and sprouted tender green leaves.

The third – an opaque, sylph-like creature who floated above the ground – swore profusely as she

looked at the wreck of her former home. A number of obscene execrations were directed toward the

eye-covered entity.

A fourth – apparently a female human of middling years – waited with a sour face. After a pause, during which the others collected their thoughts, she struck her staff upon the flags with a resounding *crack*. A brief but massive flurry of magical energy followed.

The last – a goddess with a curved sword – stared at the the artificial heaven above her, watching it shift and writhe like a thing alive. A wave radiated visibly out and away from the group, reordering the matrix of the real into a new form. Crumbled masonry flew back into place, and debris of all kinds vanished.

Mulissu's demiplane, restored to a pristine state, rested peacefully again beneath its blue vault.

"Do you want the demon?" Mostin asked.

Mulissu struck it with a spell, petrifying it.

"I'll take the statue," she said.

Nwm glanced around. "Again. Are we ready?"

Grumbles of assent.

Nwm evoked a spell, causing four more trees – an almond, an olive, a cypress and a deodar – to spring up within the courtyard. Within the trunk of each – and the pomegranate also – was a small wooden

door, perhaps five feet high and two wide.

"Which is which?" Ortwine inquired.

Nwm sighed. "The olive leads to one in the palace at Fumaril; the almond to the elm at *Mostin's cramped retreat*; the pomegranate to a banyan in the garden of the Academy outside of Morne; the deodar to one similar near Deorham; the cypress to a tree near the entrance to the Claviger's cave.

Mesikammi is accomplishing *spirit bindings* with genii at the terminal locations, to prevent passage for those who are not permitted. Here, I have chosen species most familiar to Mulissu, based on her

childhood experience."

"And it is appreciated," the savant nodded. "Although I find it rather shady, and may need to adjust the illumination."

"And from here Mostin can reach outside of your miniverse?" Ortwine asked.

The Alienist laughed bitterly. "No. Hlioth annexed the plane. This is now a Green node."

"Then why else are we here?"

Mostin scowled, and gestured with his appendage toward Mulissu.

The savant smiled savagely. "I've come for my spellbooks."

**

"It is as wicked as I, or I'm no judge of character. Still, I like this not one jot."

Standing on a high balcony, Yeshe the Binder regarded Temenun carefully. The Tiger, in turn, was

gazing down at a blackthorn which had sprung overnight to full height, next to a likeness of the

disgraced *Ugra*, Angula.

“If this is Nwm’s doing,” Yeshe continued, “then it appears we have underestimated him.”

Temenun remained sanguine. The Blackthorn, impenetrable to divination, was silent.

“What else?” The Tiger asked.

“Its parent tree has...annexed a large swathe of what was *Angula*’s realm in the forty-fifth abysm. Gu-

Analas which have entered its presidio have not exited. Planar breaches and *reality maelstroms* still rage around it, but it has established a quiescence in its immediate vicinity. Deeper, the Great *Bhitis* are assembling at the Veils. What is your intuition?”

Temenun smiled and bared his fangs. “If Carasch avoids the streets of Azzagrat – or what is left of it –

for fear of a Tree, then the fact that we are not all dead is cause for celebration.”

“This thing is so potent?”

“It is. But it deals in generalities; it is not concerned with the specifics of our actions. We’re playing by its rules. For the time being.”

Yeshe was grim. “We are outmaneuvered. My dreams are full of *avalam jvalats**. Still, Dream is our best recourse. The weak link.”

“I will give it some thought,” Temenun purred. “In the meantime, we should abandon the compound.

Mobilize all reserves. Relocate to Thond.”

“Are you mad?”

“I foresee.”

“I will take Fumaril first,” Yeshe spoke steadily. “I won’t have it sitting on my flank.”

“Then be swift!” Temenun’s eyes narrowed. “I anticipate their counterattack will be furious, and soon.

First, they must deal with *Shvar Choryati*. That will require much of their strength.”

“It will be an easy test.”

“We shall see. I have yet to invoke the ward.”

“There is a good deal which you keep hidden,” Yeshe observed. “Now is not the time to remain jealous of your prescience.”

The Tiger said nothing. Temenun was of Utter Shûth: twenty thousand years he could recollect. To him, the ascendancy of the Sun was but a recent phenomenon; he had

witnessed far stranger and more

ancient things. Ebony had been an ally for a while, long before, during the Ice in the North.

The Trees of the South held a greater power, he recalled. Or perhaps age and distance clouded his memory. All of Shûth had been jungle then; rich and verdant, and malign as Throile.

Yeshe turned her head, and a discordant clash of gongs sounded from deep within the Temple,

signalling that Idyam, the demilich, was finally deigning to take counsel.

As if in response, Anumid's voice echoed in the minds of every immortal.

The Tree is no threat: I have seen beyond the Veils. In her mercy Cheshne spares the interlopers on her threshold, but she exacts a price: one will return; one other will join her. A Great One. Kaala-anala demands that you raise her pavillion. Henceforth, the Fires of Death will abide in the Temple. Visuit will attend her. Jahi and Yeshe may remain. The rest of you will continue your removal to Thond: you will pay homage.

"Indeed?" Temenun spoke softly, but those a hundred miles distant still heard him.

In this I am the Mouthpiece of Cheshne. I may not be gainsayed.

"Of course," the Tiger purred.

**

Eadric drew a heavy fur across the opening to his tent and turned to sit on a crude stool. An oil-lamp dimly lit the space: a ten-foot circle with spartan furnishings. There was no pallet; although he found the experience refreshing on occasion, the *Ahma* did not require sleep. Only privacy.

In his left hand, he held a sphere of adamant, upon the surface of which color might occasionally move; in his right, *Lukarn*, its light currently subdued.

He tapped the former with the latter, eliciting brief flashes of total illumination.

Show Yourself, the *Ahma* commanded.

The face of Prince Graz'zt appeared.

Eadric resisted the urge to smash the globe with his weapon and cut down the demon as he materialized. Instead, he breathed and slowly mastered himself.

"Times change. This will be our one and only conversation, *Angula*; or rather, you will remain silent and simply listen, as dialogue holds no interest for me: if you attempt to speak, I will annihilate you.

That which you were is no more; you have exhausted your possibilities. You are no longer *relevant*.

"Now, I have a quandary; one you can probably appreciate. As the *Ahma*, I have pronounced death upon you: this judgment is infallible. Yet, at present, you persist; due in

no small part to my being distracted by other, more pressing concerns. As you are also currently the property of Mostin the

Metagnostic, it might be considered an act of legal trespass were I to smite you as you so richly deserve.

“Still, I am not inclined to commute this sentence, but merely suspend it on the basis of my friendship with the wizard and the fact that he recently saved my life again. Ironically, there are few others I would entrust you to: I am secure in the knowledge that Mostin can always out-think you, and that he cannot use you for anything that he couldn’t find another way of doing anyway. This decision is pragmatic.

“This is your predicament: until such time as Mostin grows weary of your novelty and dispossesses himself of you, your continued existence is relatively assured; at that point, your future becomes more uncertain. I will not exchange good Temple money to procure you, but moral persuasion might be

brought to bear upon any subsequent owner to render you into the custody of the righteous. Assuming Mostin himself experiences no such urges. Here, then, are my words to you:

“First, as your moral instructor: use your remaining time to reflect on the eternity of suffering you have caused, and seek to experience one single iota of remorse: a task I deem at the very limit of your ability to achieve. I remind you of this out of duty, more than from any expectation that you will actually follow my advice.

“Second, as your judge and executioner: even were I persuaded of your contrition and moved to mercy, Prince Tagur reminds me that you are still eligible for the death penalty under *Wyrish* law, which makes no exception for your demonic status. I would, of course, enforce the decision of any secular court in this matter. This knowledge will make your moral quest more achievable as possible notions of reward or release will not distract you from your purpose.

“Third, as one injured personally: my forgiveness, or lack thereof, is inconsequential. I am one of countless wronged, and to forgive is not my function – I am the *Ahma*. Nonetheless, I will cite my father’s murder, the assassination of Cynric of Morne, and the abduction and torture of Nehael as those crimes which wounded me most grievously. If that knowledge stirs some measure of satisfaction in

you, I refer you back to my first article of advice.

“If you have words, you may now speak. Please be concise in your delivery: I have many matters to attend to.”

From his prison, the demon Graz’zt stared impassively at Eadric.

**

From a vantage point where Dream and Void and Madness met, a place where apparitions strove to

manifest, and tendrils of unknown purpose writhed in the dreams of chthonic deities, the demoness

Soneillon watched, and waited. Few immortal psychoses could reach so deep.

Black fire had kindled at the Veils of Oblivion, ascending in liquid sheets which incinerated all vestige

of Being to reveal a vast, glorious emptiness. An ocean of nothingness which promised a final end to all suffering.

After what may have been eternities, on its margin a terrible shape began to form. In revulsion, it twisted at its own substance: a forced reification, effluxed by Unbeing itself, or its shadow to some unknown degree. Flame and death surrounded it. It demanded obedience.

The demoness abased herself.

With a passing thought, Kaalaanala – the Primordial Fear of Destruction – annihilated Soneillon in an agony of unguessable magnitude; moments later, the demoness arose again from the Void. The passage had left her sated and subdued. Soneillon swayed drowsily; she was permitted to enjoy the sensation only briefly.

A thought which was a command was turned toward her. Soneillon hurried to obey: locate the goddess Visuit in Dream and bring her to Azzagrat.

**

Nehael stood beside the Tree, feeling the texture of its bark with her fingertips. Nearby, Rimilin of the Skin slept with his face pressed to the moss. The goddess looked up to Teppu, who sat in the Tree's lower branches.

The sprite grinned. "A great *Bhiti* is coming. Do Uedii and Cheshne send ambassadors or exchange hostages?"

"Is there a distinction?" Nehael asked. "Some equilibria must be bought dearly. She will remain in the Temple in Jashat. Her actions are circumscribed."

"Within which bounds?" Teppu inquired archly.

Nehael sighed. "She cannot leave the Temple. She may act to the limit of her natural senses."

"With impunity?"

"With impunity."

"Then Jashat cannot be assailed."

"Realistically? No. At least, not at present."

"You might want to inform Eadric of this tidbit."

"The *Ahma* has achieved his objective to a large extent thus far: *keep Wyre safe*. This is his principal charge. He will make no ill-informed assaults beneath the *Pall of Dhatri*."

"And the Wild God?"

“Has yet to show himself.”

“Does he have a name?”

” *Hummaz.* ”

“I like it. Did you choose it?”

“No. He did.”

“Can you placate him, should his mood become violent?”

“I doubt it,” Nehael smiled grimly.

**

Nwm groaned wearily, and looked around him. Sixty spellcasters, including the wizards. Waiting.

Mostin had called proceedings to a halt. That odd cluster of pinkish-brown motes he had previously observed had suddenly made sense.

“You’ll have to try something different,” Mostin said. “Temenun has warded *Shvar Choryati*”

“All other divinations run to the contrary,” Nwm sighed. “Why must you always be so special?”

[Mostin]: Because Temenun is considerably more subtle than the Temple oracles. Fortunately, I am

subtler still. You cannot stage a direct magical attack of any kind.

“Ngarh!” Nwm snarled. “Find me a meteoroid. Not too big.”

“Not so big,” Mesikammi nodded sagely. “They go very fast.”

The Alienist scowled and concentrated. Ten minutes elapsed.

[Mostin]: Here’s one.

Nwm exhaled. “Alright. Are we ready?”

Mostin had expected more preparation from Nwm; at least an *idea*. Vectors. Something. There was a huge surge of magical power and a sense that his reservoir might be sucked dry, accompanied by

another dissociation which Mostin found disturbingly euphoric. A backlash of green lightning coursed over all present, arcing between them and burning them.

There was bright flash on the horizon. Silence. Even those who were otherwise insensitive to such

things felt a breath of release as millions of souls were liberated: all of those whom the Eater of Life had consumed in its unguessably long history.

Around a minute passed before the noise of the impact struck them: a growl like distant thunder. A breeze began to stir, and quickly stiffened.

“Very impressive,” Mostin conceded.** “That almost counts as deicide.”

Nwm groaned, and shook his head.

Even as he had erased *Shvar Choryati*, the very source of that shadow – or so it seemed to the Preceptor – had announced its arrival within the Interwoven Green with an expurgative necromancy: a spell which slew everything which remained alive within two leagues of Jashat which was not sworn in body and soul to the Dark Goddess.

Kaalaanala, the Fire of Death, abode in the Temple of Cheshne.

*“Those which glow abominably,” a term for powerful celestials.

**Epic conjuration/400d20 bludgeoning damage! Yay!

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 10-22-09

Mini-Update

Which was to have been part of a longer update, but it seemed apt to post it now.

**

[Jalael]: Observe.

The imp appeared with a *pop!* . It bowed.

[Mostin]: That was not a conjuration. That was a fly.

[Jalael]: In a small world, transmutation is the future. What you cannot conjure, you can transform and coerce: functionally, they equate to the same thing – one *dispel* and they’re gone.

[Mostin]: I am no mere *summoner*. I am the binder of the Horror. I have mastered Celestial Princes.

Dukes of Hell quail at the very mention of my name.

[Jalael]: You need to move with the times. Think about it: [equation].

[Mostin]: !

[Shomei]: Greetings.

[Mostin]: Finally, you condescend. What transpires?

[Shomei]: In the last hour? Agalaierpt has seized the throne room and the citadel with the second legion. Chamosh is backing his bid, citing the need to maintain order; Astaroth manipulates both of them. Belial has crowned himself emperor in Abriymoch. Azazel is undeclared *but has moved the*

standard and two hundred legions to Avernus, including Bune and his malebranche shock troops. The Iron City is locked tighter than...no cosmic superlative is possible. None of the Antagonists are

condescending to involve themselves. Yet. When that happens, things will really heat up.

[Mostin]: And you?

[Shomei]: I remain in the library, observing all with wry detachment. Hell needs a good war, in any case; cull the weak and eliminate some bureaucrats, I say. Can’t be bad. The

Ludjas, Mostin. Two of them, a Hazel and a Holly: they are incredibly potent. Hazel's Will...Azazel understands where the real locus of power now lies.

[Mostin]: You are advising him?

[Shomei]: I admit I have a soft spot for him.

[Mostin]: You still play the same game, Shomei.

[Shomei]: Fear not. I play well.

[Mostin] (Wrily): And who pulls your strings? A Tree?

[Shomei]: Actually, I suspect Amaimon.

[Mostin]: I saw a wyrm in the *Web*. Why?

[Shomei]: Qematiel is on the Prime.

[Mostin]: *What?* How?

[Shomei]: Hazel has taken a liking to her.

[Mostin]: What has happened, Shomei?

[Shomei]: The *I* has shifted Its paradigm. It has incarnated as a deity in Nizkur.

[Mostin]: Ah. More of a fey primal, really. Do you believe this is an artifice?

[Shomei]: On balance, no. But nor do I think it's permanent.

Mostin opened his wine cabinet, and poured himself a large glass of *kschiff*. This news would require some readjustment.

**

"What news?" Eadric asked with mock enthusiasm.

Nwm sat, and gestured toward another stool. "I suggest you do the same. Those whom *Shvar Choryati* ate are gone."

"Gone?" Eadric asked.

"As in not recoverable. *Reincarnation* is not an option. They were...snatched. As it were. They have already been afforded new forms."

" *By whom?* "

"The principal suspect is a fey entity named *Hummaz*. Mostin equates him with 'Oronthon's Adversary in the diminishing Infinity.' Mostin's terminology is odd, but I understand his gist. The transition might be likened to Teppu's; or perhaps more akin to Nehael's."

Time seemed to slow to a crawl for the *Ahma*. He cocked his head and looked at Nwm.

"You are telling me..."

"There is no Adversary."

There is no Adversary.

"And...this...Hummaz?" The *Ahma* inquired.

“That is a relationship you must negotiate. He is wild; fickle; violent; passionate. And prurient.”

“I think I preferred the prior iteration,” Eadric sighed. “Ethics? Morals? An opposition thereto?”

“None. More accurately, such concepts are not germane. Will has become Instinct.”

“Magic?” The *Ahma* asked tentatively.

Nwm stretched his arms apart.

Eadric groaned.

“He’s laid claim to a substantial tract of forest. He has a number of servitors around him.”
” *Servitors?*”

“But I do not believe him to be overtly *political*,” Nwm added hastily. “He is innocent of such matters –

and yes, I choose my language carefully. Eadric, if you have any remaining notions of sin, you would do best to divest yourself of them. The Axes have shifted. Wherever they’re going, it’s not back.”

“I have only one question,” Eadric spoke steadily. “Is it possible that Oronthon’s Adversary – whom, lest we forget, possesses a not undeserved reputation for being *the most conniving and deceitful entity in existence* – has somehow duped the Tree- *ludja*?”

Nwm considered briefly, and nodded. “That is a good question. I suppose time will tell.”

“Do you bring other good news?”

“Oh yes,” Nwm nodded. “Plenty. Remain seated. A chthonic deity named *Kaalaanala* has taken up residence in Jashat. Orcus has withdrawn from the front: he fled from Irel over Ardan, and could be anywhere. Dhatri has settled in Thond – for the time being; she is hungry, after being carried around for so long. Two hosts have left the Temple compound: Visuit and Yeshe lead the smaller, and it will reach Fumaril in four days. The larger is bound for Thond: the demilich is moving with his deathshriekers and, I suspect, Temenun also. Aside from the goddess in residence and a few dozen priests, the Temple of Cheshne is *empty*.”

“How do you *know* this?”

“Certain stones gossip too much.”

“Are you suggesting an assault?” The *Ahma* asked.

Nwm shook his head fervently. “Quite the opposite. She would kill us all. Avoid going within ten miles, at all costs.”

“We should move to intercept the smaller host. How many are there?”

“Twelve thousand, half of whom are cavalry. Plus light aerial support – succubi, mainly. And goristros

– but only a few dozen: most of the temple defense is with the larger army. But Guho has

joined them and there are lots of the longhairs in Visuit's train. They are currently grounded: Mulissu has made the weather uncomfortable. They are devising sorceries to counteract her spell."

"And Pazuzu?"

"Ortwine hunts him."

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 12-13-2009

*

Storm Sorceries; Demons' Amulets.

Nwm had described the weather as *uncomfortable*.

Mulissu had generated a windstorm thirty miles in diameter over the warm waters north of Pandicule, and moved it to occupy a position between Fumaril and Jashat; ahead of it, a derecho had formed

through which tornados churned with distressing frequency.

Eadric sat upon *Narh* on a low rise in the darkness beneath the *Pall of Dhatri*, gazing southward at a large enemy host. Eastwards, the haunted city of Jashat and the soaring pinnacles of the Temple of Cheshne were a blot of corruption on his perception. The *Ahma* was magically concealed and his sight had been supernaturally enhanced to penetrate all shadows; still, his vision compared nothing to Lai's, who balanced easily in hawk-shape upon his helm. The noise of the wind was deafening.

The enemy had erected a defense against the storm, creating a smaller bubble of calmer weather which mitigated – but did not altogether counter – the magicks invoked by Mulissu and her cabal. Conjured allies – monoliths, storm-drakes, djinn and lesser elementals – skirmished continually with the

Cheshnite outriders and van: clouds formed, discharged lightning and dissipated, and downdrafts

erupted and vanished as a dozen competing sorcerous demands were placed on the local weather

system.

Visuit was less than a mile away, hewing her way through everything in her path.

[Lai]: You study your enemy?

[Eadric]: Yes.

[Lai]: Do you see any weakness?

[Eadric]: None. She is the perfect warrior.

[Lai]: And what is your strategy?

[Eadric]: Prayer. The adepts are exhausted; Nwm is almost empty of power.

An urge. The goddess paused in her butchery.

A feeling of quietude.

“She senses something is amiss. That she is being observed.” Lai hissed and squawked through the roaring wind.

“I thought we were inscrutable.”

“And so we are,” Lai nodded. “Warded from her sight, sound, touch, smell and all her divine faculties.

But not from her instincts.”

“If that is the case...”

Before he could finish his sentence, a cloud passed over his consciousness, numbing his soul.

Kaalaanala, he knew. Visuit had invoked the great *Bhiti*’s name; the Fires of Death had instantly located him.

” **Enemy Captain. I know you’re there.** ” Visuit’s voice, and the urge to unimaginable violence, carried to all across the battlefield.

The Butcher began to move towards them. She gestured with her hand: an invitation to combat.

And now the ravenous perception of the Dark Goddess in Jashat was a terrible presence in the *Ahma*’s mind.

Get out of my head!

...

Get out!

...

Nehael!

(I am powerless).

[**YOU WILL DIE.**]

“We have to get out of here,” Lai said.

Eadric nodded.

The Green was warm as their forms dissolved into it. Annihilation became a memory.

**

Ortwine corporeated from *wind walking* and floated, *invisible* and *mind blanked* a mile above the water.

The air was cold and clear. *Heedless* stirred restlessly in her hand.

She had chased a vaporous Pazuzu around the cape of Nivorn, across the hills of Ardan, and for more than a thousand miles over open ocean. The pursuit had lasted thirty-three hours, and had demanded a focus more than she thought herself capable of maintaining. Never losing sense of him. And he was

more slippery than an eel; her initial attempts to *dominate* him had proven utterly futile. Finally, convinced that he had eluded any pursuit, the demon gyred and turned towards the west.

Ortwine waited patiently. She sheathed *Heedless*; it writhed as she forced it back into its scabbard, and then projected silent telepathic anger at the sidhe.

Pazuzu materialized and began to work magic; Ortwine cursed, and began to fly silently towards him at speed. She had no notion of his intention; she had no need: demon princes casting spells never boded well. She carefully scrutinized his shape as she closed, scanning him minutely.

Pazuzu – who had begun to invoke a ward of some complexity – stopped abruptly as he perceived the

slightest breeze waft past him, and felt something snap. He began to scream with incredulity and rage and groped wildly at his throat.

Ortwine materialized a hundred yards ahead of him.

“You want this?” In her hand, she held his amulet.

He struck her, full force, with an eldritch thunderbolt. It dissipated upon contact with her.

Ortwine laughed.

He raised his hand as if to strike her again.

And instead became vaporous and vanished.

Ortwine scowled, and followed him with her Sight. She tied Pazuzu’s amulet around her own neck.

Oh, that’s *good*, she thought.

The chase resumed.

**

“What you seem to fail to appreciate,” Mostin said to Nwm through gritted teeth, “Is the *power* of this dragon.”

“She is a hellfire wyrm.”

“Yes. No. Of sorts,” the Alienist gave an irritated gesture. “She predates them. She may even predate the Fall. And she has not migrated in the sense of Hummaz. Not even in the sense of Mulissu – which is to say very little. She has been *seduced* by the Hazel- *ludja*; which apparently has connotations of magickal Will.”

“Apparently so,” Nwm nodded. “Although this is hardly a surprising correspondence.”

“The *Urn* could...”

“Ngarh! You and your damned urn.”

“It is pivotal,” Mostin sighed. “If you think the Tree- *ludja* is omnipotent, think again. It is compromised by this admission of the Cheshnite *Bhiti*; and from the outset by permitting the *I* to remain here in any form. I use the Antinomian descriptor for Hummaz – which

stands, according to Shomei, and she is

reasonably well informed in such matters – because there are many infinities at work here invisible to you.”

“And not to you?”

“Correct,” Mostin nodded. “They are merely opaque. Many correspondences: Kaalaanala – Ancient Hellfire – the Wyrms – the Aeons.”

“Why the Aeons?” Nwm asked suspiciously.

“I have concurred that it was the Aeon which...lurched...at me through the *web of motes*.”
[Formula]

“Why do you persist in...”

“It is my contention that the Aeon is fundamentally draconic,” Mostin stared madly. “It was Qematiel who...lurched...at me through the *web of motes*.”

“Wait!” Nwm held up his hand. “I am lost. Which is it?”

Mostin stopped speaking, and considered. “Infinities are bleeding. It makes divination complex. In any event, I don’t have the *Urn*, and the reason I don’t have the *Urn* was because I was saving your sorry skins from annihilation; a service for which I am rewarded by a massive curtailment of magical power.

“How fortunate for us that you are so selfless,” Nwm said drily.

“Do you understand that *Qematiel is Ancient Hellfire. The wyrm which the Adversary will ride to the Oronthonist eschaton?*” Mostin asked steadily.

“That reality is dead.”

“Maybe. But Qematiel is not. This assumes, of course, the Adversary himself is not making some cosmic play. I have a plan...”

Nwm groaned.

“Hear me out,” Mostin raised his appendage. “I need to convene a cabal. And I need your help...”

“Why?”

“I have an inkling. I will conjure Soneillon again as I need to talk to her. Outside of your loop. You have to get me there.”

“You’re insane. How *far* outside?”

“I don’t care. Just far enough. Then I’ll make my way to the astral retreat. But give me a couple of days.

There are tomes in Ardanese monasteries which I need to consult.”

“You have twenty-four hours. I plan on being in Fumaril thereafter.”

Mostin scowled. “Can you get me to Esoc?”

“You can get there yourself,” Nwm answered. “You’ll have to walk the last mile, but it’s

generally polite to approach on foot, in any case.” [Look: oak -> oak -> beech -> oak -> rowan]

“How many of these things have you made?”

“A few dozen,” he shrugged. “It’s getting hard to remember where they all are. Hlioth has fashioned many more.”

**

[Ortwine]: *Priestess!*

[Mesikammi]: Your largeness?

[Ortwine]: Mesi, now is not the time for banter. My foe will not turn to let me kill him. I bore of this chase.

[Mesikammi]: You wish for my help?

[Ortwine]: I am issuing a divine command. Conjure a storm and force him down.

[Mesikammi]: Such an effect would be tiring at this distance.

[Ortwine]: There is kelp nearby; you can manifest yourself closer.

[Mesikammi]: I must also get wet?

[Ortwine]: I will grant you a boon, as befits faithful service.

[Mesikammi]: Perhaps a pretty bauble, recently won?

[Ortwine]: Mesi, do you spy on me? Truly, you are a worthy servant.

[Mesikammi]: An image of your holiness appears in my mind.

[Ortwine]: Such devotion should not go unrewarded. The amulet is a delight, I confess; I will bestow a different bounty, if you show a little patience.

[Mesikammi]: I can spare a little, but not too much.

Close by, the shamaness appeared. A wind began to gather.

**

Voicing her name was enough to invoke her; Nehael could offer no protection against her. This boded ill.

Presently, Oak and Elm shielded the Wyrish encampment with their power – not just the scions in the nearby vale, but the *ludjas* themselves, from deep within Nizkur. But this was not an effect which the *Ahma* was comfortable relying on – trees having their own, peculiar agenda. Nor was it of much use beyond the zone of the *ludjas*’ perception. And Eadric had no intention of entrenching permanently at Galda, despite the rapidly completed fortification of the site.

The *Ahma* therefore issued an edict, announced by archons who attended him. Trumpets rang, and the voices of celestials carried the proclamation to all within the Wyrish camp:

The name of the enemy in Jashat is anathema and may not be spoken: likewise, the name of the enemy war-goddess, and any of the abhorred names of Ancient Darkness.

All iconography, all material representation, all literature containing reference to any such entities is forthwith deemed blasphemous and must be surrendered immediately.

Practice Saizhan.

Eadric summoned Tuan Muat, a Talion whose prior acts had denied him bliss, and anointed him. The

Inquisition was formally revived.

“Start with the aristocracy,” Eadric motioned. “Refrain from physical coercion until they’ve had a chance to think about it.”

” *Ahma*,” the Inquisitor began. “Many of the most ancient Temple texts...”

“Impound them,” Eadric said. “In fact, confiscate them first, *then* start on the aristocracy. We need to set a good example, after all. This is a practical measure, not a philosophical one.”

“The Irrenites aren’t going to like this,” Tuan Muat observed.

“Bring me Sineig.” Eadric sighed.

“And the wizards?”

Eadric groaned. “Be *politic*, Inquisitor. A little pragmatic hypocrisy is no bad thing. My concern is with the ignorant; wizards must monitor themselves.”

“And if one articulates these forbidden names or concepts in one’s thoughts?” Tagur asked.

“Then they must be demonstrated to be un-True,” the *Ahma* nodded. “Hence, we practice *Saizhan*. We must move. I need a sizeable force before noon tomorrow: I plan to relieve Fumaril.”

“How many?”

“Two thousand horse and eight thousand foot – half pike and half archers. Illuminated and Templars.

I’ll take whatever Thalassine bombards you have, as well. With cold iron shot.”

“A little more notice would be appreciated,” Prince Tagur sighed.

“Just get them together in one place. Nwm will do the rest.”

“I understand the principle,” Tagur said. “And a little more notice would be appreciated.”

“Noted,” the *Ahma* nodded. “You have my apology, your Highness. Your tenure in the Serenities does not seem to have diminished your acidity.”

“Oh,” Prince Tagur sounded mildly disappointed. “I had rather hoped that it had.”

**

At midnight, in Nizkur, all was darkness.

In a certain set of glades named Raithin Gabro, to the south of the forest and not too far from the marches of Tyndur, a power accumulated around an ancient stone named the

Cleta; one of the many erratics or *storrs* which dotted the valleys nearby.

The area was a wild one: bare hilltops thrust above dense stands of pine. Further west, a forlorn strand stretched beneath rearing cliffs. Those tracts had a reputation for savage and malicious feys of every hue. It was here that Hummaz had elected to establish his realm: an area, to all intents and purposes, of Faerie proper.

From the bole of the Tree, a hundred miles to the north, Nehael's perception ranged wide over the land, absorbing all.

"What do you see?" Teppu asked excitedly. "He makes no efforts to impede your sight?"

"None," Nehael sighed. "Faerie awakens. I see areas of dusk and gloam and magic, and quicklings moving in the shadows. I see *sidhe* fortresses perched on windy crags, and hoary hunters preparing to

ride. There are eight scions..."

"Eight?"

"Holly and Hazel, obviously. A Willow. Others. Curiously, also a Yew. Ninit. The Boars. They have *reincarnated*. And those whom the Eater of Light consumed; the forest is alive."

"I sense no Awakening."

"I speak figuratively. The trees remain dormant, for the most part. But all of the most robust who were taken by *Shvar Choryati* have transmigrated. They have lost none of their potency; they are now fey."

"Sidhe?"

"Many. And tree-wyrds and other genii. And nymphs and satyrs. The latter revel as we speak. Hummaz is drunk."

"One hopes that this is not a prelude to some rampage," Teppu sighed.

"His mood seems amiable enough. He smiles drowsily at me."

**

Mostin augmented and warded himself with powerful spells, and *plane shifted* to an area where *reality maelstroms* churned through Void. Mile-long shards of matter span slowly on their axes, flickering on the edge of annihilation.

A *telepathic bond* connected him to Jalael, Troap and Daunton, who were ensconced in the astral retreat, forty-seven shattered dimensions distant. Mostin's sensory experience was conveyed directly into the other wizards' minds.

[Daunton]: Pan left. Up a little.

Mostin scowled.

In the far distance, dominating all, a redoubt of substance which the Blackthorn- *ludja* had gathered around itself. Like a vast mountain floating capsized in space, fragments of Zelatar – complete with minarets, domes and viper groves – comprised its inverted flanks. About its base, a fence of lesser peaks thrust upwards to surround a forested bowl twenty

miles wide, at the centre of which, Mostin knew, the malign Blackthorn brooded. Flights of chthonics – which erupted spontaneously and vanished as quickly – avoided proximity to the great Tree.

Mostin wrought magic, and brought his will to bear upon the planar flux near him. In a previous cycle, Graz'zt had made spells of his own for the same purpose: vast in scope, and taking millennia to

complete. Strands of plasm flowed; matter quickly agglomerated, assuming shapes and angles

possessed of a disturbing quality. The aesthetic was peculiar in the extreme.

The Alienist drew a rod of cold iron two feet long from a *portable hole*, and scratched a wide circle about himself quickly. Within it, he scribed a set of complex runes and glyphs with uncanny speed and precision, pausing occasionally to recollect. With a motion, the rod vanished and the scrawl became a perfectly engraved tracery of iron.

Mostin stood inside the circle, muttered, and made a brief gesture.

A *gate* opened, and Soneillon appeared without duress.

Mostin recoiled, and reflexively assumed his pseudonatural shape as a churning vortex of darkness

attempted to engulf him. It failed – barely – to penetrate a hemisphere which had sprung into existence around the wizard. Mostin swallowed with many mouths: he had thought to err in his protective ward with a wide margin of safety.

Soneillon withdrew and immediately became a demure child with wide eyes.

“Mostin. How delightful to see you again. Forgive my enthusiasm to embrace you.”

Mostin remained in tentacled form, a thousand eyes directed suspiciously at the demoness. He knew

that she could endure any magic he presently had at his command: in *Uzzhin*, it appeared, she had not only undergone a powerful pseudogenesis, but had taken tutelage with one of the elder horrors;

spellwarp clung heavily to her. A number of transvalent spells protected her.

“Let’s negotiate,” the Alienist said wisely.

” *A Flame Precedes the Aeon*, Mostin. It troubles my dreams. What does it mean?”

Mostin resumed his humanoid shape, looked at his hand, and cocked his head quizzically. “Why do we find such forms necessary?”

“For you, sentimentality; for me, habit. Mostin, your evasiveness needs much work: the question still stands.”

“You might volunteer a little first,” the Alienist smiled. “Given the level of mutual distrust which we must first overcome. Note that I have conjured you without compulsion in a locale which is suitably secure for you.”

“I have accepted an invitation; that hardly qualifies as grounds for debt. And good luck in your efforts to bind me. Still, I will tell you this: Carasch gathers darkness to himself; he prepares an oneiric assault.

It will come in three days.”

Mostin raised his eyebrows. “He is bold to move against the Seraphim. The Tree may swat him for his insolence.”

“Or ignore him, as a fly. The fence has holes for those who know where to look. Only the great *bhitis* dream deeper than Carasch. *A Flame Precedes the Aeon?* ”

“An opportunity to actualize the *Urn*, now passed,” Mostin sighed.

“Which Flame?”

“In the Urgic sense; an iota of Perfect Radiance. Manifested when the *Sela* transmigrated.”

“But you lost the Flame,” Soneillon understood. “You search for another. Still, you withhold much; some component of the equation is absent.”

“This is to be expected,” Mostin nodded. “You are my enemy.”

“I am/not what I am/not,” Soneillon snorted. “And you I bear no more malice than the rest of Creation, Mostin. If I were to proffer a little more, would you bite?”

“In this case, I regret I must decline. There is no article of knowledge which you possess which might be of equivalent value. You can surrender the *Urn*, to be privy.”

Soneillon smiled sweetly. “Unlikely. But I am also reminded that *analas* – which is to say *flames* –

come in a variety of colors. Perhaps ruddy or black? One might ask why there is a Hellfire Atavism lurking in the woods? Or would Carasch burn with sufficient heat, I wonder? Or the goddess in Jashat, the Death- *Anala* herself?”

Mostin shifted uncomfortably.

“You see,” Soneillon placed her palms together. “The Void has opened, Mostin. It draws other forms spiralling into it. My power waxes.”

“A Tree sits atop your palace and has enslaved your cabal,” Mostin sneered. “You have no foundation.”

Soneillon drew close to the circle’s edge, placing childlike hands upon the invisible barrier. “The Cherry can wait. Chthonic axes will hew its roots in due course. Understand me, Mostin: I have been *Outside* and I have returned. I know what you know; I’ve seen what you have seen. Is there no potential for productive discourse?”

“Certainly. That is why I called you. Some topics must presently remain taboo, however. With which

did you apprentice when you were *Outside*?”

Soneillon laughed. “You would not believe me if I told you.”

“An entity of some reputation, I assume?”

“Something hidden, Mostin.”

“Then this I must know,” Mostin said wryly.

“Vhorzhe,” Soneillon whispered. “My sponsor is Vhorzhe, Mostin.”

The Alienist gaped at her.

“I told you that you wouldn’t believe me.”

“No,” Mostin said grimly; the solutions to a number of nagging equations had already presented themselves in his mind. “I believe you well enough. You found a Pseudodaemonic Infinity.”

“You should be more careful when targeting your *banishments*, Mostin. I didn’t even have to look.”

“The spell is named *Pilgrimage*,” Mostin said bitterly. “An apt descriptor in your case, or so it would appear. Trust me Soneillon, were necromancy within my purview, I’d have happily obliterated you instead.”

She smiled coyly. “Mostin, sometimes you speak such charming words.”

“Nor did I name any particular pseudolocus for the spell. I find the prospect of coincidence improbable.”

“To discover that one has been manipulated by an unknown agent is never a happy moment,”

Soneillon’s eyes narrowed.

[Daunton]: *Vhorzhe*?

[Troap]: Enlighten me?

[Jalael]: Mostin was apprenticed to him. A disagreeable sort, by all accounts. Shomei knew him.

Mostin’s over-hyped Horror abducted him previously.

Mostin scowled. A wizard’s dirty laundry was seldom a pleasant sight.

[Mostin]: Enough! Begone! I will relate the shabby details in Fumaril.

The Alienist summarily dismissed the other wizards from his mind.

In a chamber of the astral retreat, Jalael looked hard at Daunton. “He is so damnably arrogant. Will he now strike some deal without our knowledge? Why do we endure this tyrannical lunatic as our spokesman?”

Daunton raised an eyebrow, and glanced at Graz’zt’s token, which hung around the Hag’s neck; her

greatest treasure gained from the *binding* of the demon prince.

“Profit,” the diviner replied sagely.

**

Ortwine swore. Divine blood erupted in a cloud from delicate fey skin as a sonic of great magnitude struck her. *Heedless* was a blur in her hand. It screamed ecstatically.

The Demon had gone to ground on an unnamed island; ancient olive groves, long abandoned by some

ocean-going culture, clung to the steep slopes of a dormant volcanic peak. The trees were being ripped from their roots and hurled into the sky from the force of the wind which Mesikammi had conjured.

Pazuzu spat a gout of corrupted acid over Ortwine; she saw the droplets spin through the air towards her and somehow avoided each. The wind carried the black vapor harmlessly away.

“This.”

Ortwine opened a gashing wound across the demon’s chest.

“Is.”

And another.

“Just.”

And another.

“Too.”

And another.

“Easy.”

And another.

It was. The cornered demon prince screamed in rage and frustration. His remaining magic was

impotent against her; his claws could find no purchase to inject their ineffectual venom. She outpaced him. Out-fought him. Out-thought him. He was stuck in this accursed *place*.

“I yield,” Pazuzu screeched above the wind. It was a violation of his pact with Yeshe, but he cared nothing for that any longer; all of the old rules had been overturned.

“Thanks,” Ortwine cut his head off.

The gale subsided abruptly.

Reaching down, the sidhe-goddess retrieved a rod of intricate design ending in a golden claw. She plucked a long feather from the fallen demon’s wing.

“For Mostin,” she smiled to Mesikammi.

The clouds parted: for a moment, the Sun shone brighter; a great bird seemed to pass across its disc.

Upon the ground, the broken remains of the Prince of the Lower Aerial Kingdoms burned

swiftly; ash was carried away on a gentle breeze.

Ortwine made a rude gesture towards the Luminary. "I didn't ask for your opinion. I'd have taken another feather, if I'd known."

**

The *Ahma* retired grimly to his tent. As he entered, a movement within it prompted him to draw *Lukarn* in a flash.

He found himself gazing at his own reflection and swallowed. Resting on a stand, not a mirror but a round shield, burnished to perfection. Once *Melimpor's shield*, hammered fresh by celestial smiths, then cloven by Visuit; it had been cast yet again. A delicate device of Tree-and-Sun was etched upon it.

Around its circle, between its rim and wide boss, phoenixes took flight; they seemed to wheel

incessantly as the observer moved this way and that. *Lukarn's* light was reflected as with a green and gold fire.

"Strike it," a voice said from behind him. It was Jaliere.

"I..."

"*Strike it!*" The god demanded. "Hew at it with all your strength. Smash it. Shiver it."

The *Ahma* gathered his power and dealt a terrific blow with his weapon, two-handed, striking the shield's upper rim. The stand shattered. The shield sank into the dirt floor under the force of the assault, but otherwise bore no mark.

"Good," Jaliere nodded.

"I..."

"Don't bother," the god of the forge grunted. "Your account is still firmly in the black."

"There is no debt. I have never expected payment." Eadric shook his head.

"Hence, you deserve it," Jaliere replied. The god regarded him. " *Ahma*, in Soan they build a great temple to you."

"No!" Eadric stepped back and his face contorted. "I cannot be worshipped."

"Then you must disabuse your worshippers of their prayerful notions," Jaliere sighed. "I wish you all the best in that endeavour."

"And why are they building temples? A few thousands; barely returned from death. They must feed themselves. Clothe themselves. Build shelter."

Jaliere laughed. "The gods and ancestors are not idle in Sisperi, *Ahma*. And it has already been five years."

"Five years?"

"In Sisperi. Saes changed the passage of time; increased the pace of mortality – if only for a little while.

The negotiation between her and Ortwine? Were you not present?"

“In body only,” the *Ahma* smiled.

Eadric lifted the shield, and wiped the dirt from its rim. The tree in its design was – unmistakeably – a yew.

“How did you know it was a Yew?” He asked.

“Lai sees much,” Jaliere replied.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 12-25-2009

Fumaril – Part 1.

The *Ahma* stood on the balcony of the Tyrant’s palace and gazed eastwards. Tents now crowded the baileys below, but all was gloomy and indistinct, save the throne room behind him; in that narrow

space alone, Mulissu had found enough power to counteract the oppressive darkness of the *Pall of Dhatri*. It was the only light for a hundred miles.

Nwm – who rested after the transportation of many companies of Wyrish troops – had resolved to

counter the spell locally, at least to a mile or two beyond Fumaril’s walls. Mostin – unusually animated

– had made calculations which made the Preceptor groan. To do so would be a massive drain on their already stretched magical resources.

Initially, Mostin had been sceptical; news of vampires and spectres had caused him to reconsider. “You need get the timing right. Fry as many as you can. And you need to start conserving resources. Squeeze every drop. I have it. Look: [Formula].”

“You may use plain speak.”

” *Lukarn*,” Mostin said. “As the focus. Gather them up and perform the ritual now. Then you take a rest.

Be fresh later.

Nwm stared blankly.

” *Limited resources*,” Mostin reminded him. “Visuit will be knocking on the doors in less than twelve hours.”

“Very well. Limited resources. You’re in. Help spread the pain around.”

Eadric remained solemn throughout, brooding upon the strategic situation. As he handed *Lukarn* to Nwm for the purpose of the spell; a general presentiment of unease possessed him.

Visuit’s maneuver with the multiple *gates* and chthonic summons at Cirone had demonstrated to the *Ahma* that the goddess – while relishing direct, bloody conflict – had a number of other tools at her disposal. Her assault would be fast, brutal, and extraordinarily well-coordinated. No chthonic

intervention could tip the scales this time; in that regard, the threat was at least more

quantifiable.

Mostin had observed that *banishing* her again was also not possible as long as the Tree's interdict held.

She must therefore be killed; Eadric's preferred solution, certainly, but not one which was obviously achievable.

The hairs of the back of his neck stood abruptly, and his eyes widened.

She was.

Here.

"Nwm!" He screamed. "Sword!"

The Preceptor tossed him back his weapon.

**

In the courtyard directly below the balcony there was an eruption of earth and rock which hurled

flagstones fifty feet into the air; the ground heaved and rippled like liquid. Guho had conjured an earth-

spirit – a dao prince of considerable prestige – and negotiated a terrene passage for four travellers. The Worm-that-Walks was accompanied by the goddess Visuit, Yeshe the Binder, and Choach, manifesting

a fresh form from his hidden phylactery.

Upon his arrival, the lich immediately scoured all trace of life from the courtyard with a massive acid evocation. Yeshe struck the façade of the palace with a powerful vibration which caused it to collapse.

The *Ahma* and Nwm were borne away in an avalanche of rubble. The Alienist – alerted by a moment of prescience – had hopped onto a more secure foundation, now a pilon of masonry extending from the

stricken building.

Mostin stopped time.

*

He considered, and many eyes absorbed many details; his mind processed perception rapidly. Why this moment? What was the qualifier which had divined this point in time for their attack? The *Ahma* parted momentarily from *Lukarn*? Their foresight was subtle, or the synchronicity apt.

Visuit was in mid-leap, her monstrous weapon raised above her head and ready to fall; whether her

target was Nwm or Eadric was impossible to say: it was likely that the goddess herself had not yet made that determination.

Guho was in the act of casting another transvalent spell; the accretion of magic around her

revealed much. It was an enchantment; a bad one, designed to punch through *mind blanks*. And her attention was turned in his direction.

Choach and Yeshe were both gathering their power again, but their specific intention was unknown.

Furthermore, a complex lattice of unidirectional antimagic protected both; a network of fine gaps in Mostin's arcane perception. That would be a problem.

Behind him, in the throne-room, Mesikammi was conjuring...something. Mulissu was fortifying

herself: air crackled; the metallic reek of ozone reached his nose. Daunton had begun to protect himself as best he could. Tahl was roaring *Get Out!* at everyone else.

Ortwine's location was unknown.

Mostin augmented his consciousness to godlike proportions and refocused. Backlash cascaded over

him.

*

As time recommenced, he targeted Guho with the *Mhuerh Resonance*, a sonic of terrific power. The aberration exploded into a million pieces.

The Alienst launched a *disjunction* at Yeshe and Choach, but it slithered off of their protective shells.

From nowhere, *Heedless*, flying through the air, bit into Visuit's gorget but was turned by the hammered layers of black adamant. Her armor pulsed with death runes in anger.

Mostin experienced a brief dissonance: in an unrealized future, the goddess had brought her weapon down upon Nwm, slaying him instantly, and cleaving into Eadric, smashing through his armor; in the realized, Ortwine had used a spell to avert the possibility at the last moment. Instead, Visuit's sword opened a wound from the Preceptor's shoulder to his belly and left him senseless.

The *Ahma* smote her with all his power. She leered at him.

At the behest of the goddess, Choach sealed the area surrounding Nwm, Eadric and Visuit with a

transvalent spell: a spherical *wall of force* which encapsulated a bubble of antimagic. All dweomers failed within it, but Ortwine did not manifest; Mostin guessed that she had somehow jumped free.

Visuit smiled. As potent as her own artifacts might be, in an area of dead magic she had a huge

advantage.

Yeshe struck Mostin with a spell contrived to imprison souls; his spellwarp absorbed it, energizing him.

She followed with a quickened *superb dispelling*, divesting him of most of his magical

protections.

Mulissu stopped time.

*

Mostin was poised upon the remains of the balcony at the very edge of illumination. Below, in shadow, Yeshe's contorted face was caught in the act of voicing an execration. Mulissu considered the bubble around Eadric and Visuit, and glanced at Yeshe and Choach. It would be one or the other.

She erected a *prismatic wall* directly in front of Mostin, sealing off three-quarters of the opening in the blasted façade, and preventing Choach from targeting either the Alienist or Daunton. Next, she

conjured an air monolith, which remained in a paradoxical stasis, its unmoving-churning base

threatening Yeshe and the lich. The savant gathered her thoughts.

Time recommenced.

*

Mulissu darted into the air and targeted the encysted antimagic surrounding the *Ahma* with a *superb dispelling*, evaporating it instantly. Simultaneously, the monolith was a churning vortex which sucked Choach into it.

With a thought, Mulissu stopped time again.

*

The savant scowled at Visuit. The Butcher was nigh-invulnerable to her magic, and her options with regard to the goddess were limited. She quickly scanned Yeshe with a powerful spell and raised an eyebrow.

You stupid, arrogant bitch, Mulissu thought. *You have no idea*

She invoked a *mantle of egregious might*, and concentrated.

Time recommenced.

*

Mulissu struck Yeshe with an *antimagic ray* and conjured two spheres of ball lightning which blazed as they hammered into the immortal. Yeshe gaped in pain and amazement. Tendrils of lightning wrapped around her.

Choach uttered a swift *destruction*, causing the elemental around him to disintegrate in an explosion of black fire, and directed an empowered *energy drain* at Mulissu which failed to pierce her wards.

Mostin stopped time.

*

The Alienist was shaken; his most potent defenses were stripped from him. He granted himself the

power of flight, moved out from behind the *prismatic wall*, and briefly surveyed the scene. His magical sight had also been suppressed; shapes were blurry and vague.

Mulissu was floating above the courtyard, trceries of static lightning surrounding her. Choach was below her. Yeshe's power was muted by *antimagic*.

Mostin descended, conjured a *prismatic sphere* directly in front of Choach, and refocused.

Time recommenced.

*

Mostin became a hideous *thing*. A barbed tentacle lashed out and dragged the lich through the seven layers of shimmering light which surrounded the Alienist. Undaunted and unaffected, Choach dropped another *superb dispelling* – this time on the entire area below the *prismatic wall*.

All magic ceased, save for the *Pall of Dhatri* only. The pervasive gloom reasserted itself in the perception of all present; suddenly, everything became real, and shadowy.

For a brief moment, all eyes turned to Mostin.

His form remained the same.

*

From nowhere, a subdued *Heedless* was about Yeshe: Ortwine – now visible as a swift shadow – was finding gaps within the Binder's armor. Yeshe staggered under the assault.

Visuit glowered at the insensible Nwm and cut him down in an instant. She continued with a ferocious attack upon Eadric, dealing huge punishment to him and forcing him backwards. He could barely stand, much less focus; *Lukarn* dropped from his hand; his strength ebbed away.

A boar – one of the enormous *Gultheins*, conjured by Mesikammi – burst out of the throne-room and ploughed into Visuit, carrying her thirty feet into a balustrade with an explosion of rubble. Yeshe became insubstantial and flitted away as Mulissu targeted her with a barrage of lightning orbs. Tahl leapt down to Nwm's side, and revived him.

Mostin, a writhing mass of appendages, ripped Choach apart and flung skeletal remains in all

directions.

Magic surged as a score of artifacts reawakened.

*

Visuit slew the boar with a single, great swipe of her sword. Power coursed through her again now. She turned her attention back to Eadric.

In a heartbeat, Ortwine closed the distance, scooped up *Lukarn* and pressed it into the *Ahma*'s gauntleted fist. The weapon stirred; Eadric's faculties returned abruptly.

“That way,” Ortwine said, orienting him. “You’re doing fine.”

Daunton erected a *wall of force* in front of the Butcher, sealing her into a corner.

“How long do we have?” Eadric asked.

“I’d guess about six seconds,” Ortwine replied.

“Did I miss much?” Nwm asked. Tahl had *healed* him.

Another spell from Daunton facilitated a *telepathic bond* amongst all present.

**

[Mostin]: Ignore Yeshe. Target Visuit.

[Mulissu]: Forget it. I’ve got nothing. We need to take out her goon.

Yeshe – vaporous and hidden somewhere nearby in the gloom – used *telekinesis* to lift Visuit into the air over the *wall of force* and deposited her directly in front of Eadric, Nwm and Ortwine.

Mulissu – aware only of the Binder’s approximate location – blasted the area around Yeshe and Mostin with a string of powerful electrical evocations. The Alienist – happily immune to lightning, and

realizing the wisdom of Mulissu’s words – followed suit with a sonic barrage.

[Nwm]: I’ll take whatever you’ve got.

[Eadric + Mesikammi + Tahl]: Ready.

[Ortwine]: You’d better finish this.

A pillar of green fire consumed Visuit. She screamed in agony; a sound which rocked the foundations of Fumaril. Thundering forwards in a rage, she slew Nwm for a second time, her great, curved sword, cutting him limb from limb in a flurry of deadly strokes.

Daunton struck the goddess with a *dispelling*; momentarily, her armor subsided into quiescence.

Yeshe had vanished into the darkness.

Mostin smote Visuit with a sonic *meteor swarm* – his last remaining big evocation.

Mulissu began to conjure another elemental.

Ortwine, sensing opportunity, attacked in earnest; all of her focus was directed at parting Visuit’s head from her shoulders. From the opposite side, Eadric hewed into her with *Lukarn*.

With three mighty strokes, Visuit dropped the *Ahma* like a stone, whirled her blade over her head, and clove into Ortwine, driving her backwards in a daze. With a back-handed swipe she slew Tahl the

Incorruptible – who was moving to *revivify* Eadric – as an afterthought. Mostin had resorted to *magic missiles* which pulsed into the goddess.

Another boar crashed into Visuit, a great tusk impaling her through her armor and forcing her back yet again.

Yeshe corporeated for an instant beside Visuit before both dissolved into mist.

Mulissu cursed.

Mostin experienced it as a shiver; the subtlest aethers were singing in resonance.

Mesikammi gaped. She saw and heard, although no other might. The radiance was overwhelming; the

sonority, perfect. She danced and clapped. “Beautiful Flames! Beautiful Flames!”

In the darkness, Mostin assumed a humanoid shape and considered. Nwm would self-incarnate in a few hours. The lich would slink away to his phylactery. Guho had more than a few worms hidden, no doubt.

But Eadric of Deorham had passed. He would be presented with a variety of choices.

*

Ortwine’s senses returned to her and she wiped the blood from her eyes. Her faculties reached out

through the shadows, groping in search of Visuit and Yeshe. Nothing.

Next time, Faerie. Visuit’s voice, echoing in Ortwine’s mind.

The sidhe focused.

Lai. Get here now. We need you.

Mulissu turned to Dauntun. “You will convoke the Wyrish Academy.”

Dauntun protested. “We are not in Wyre. And the Collegium is not Mulissu’s to command. And the Interdict prevents the spell, in any case. Mostin?”

“Do as she says,” Mostin nodded. “Tell them to get here as fast as they can, by whatever means they can.”

**

I’ve been avoiding footnotes. But:

*Mulissu’s main attack spells are electrically-substituted energy orbs with a variety of secondary (entangling, sickening etc.) and metamagic effects attached; I ruled that energy conjurations logically penetrate antimagic as well as ignore SR. Sketchy, but there you go. Yeshe had native resistance to electricity as well, but not much. She botched two DC 50 Fort saves.

*Mostin gets 9 tentacle attacks at +44 (2d8+14).

*Devastating Critical is the most broken feat *ever*.

*DM Note: I may have underestimated Visuit’s CR for this encounter.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 03-23-10

Between

Aeon.

Wyrn? Eadric wonders. Not so much by its shape; dimension is not, in fact, a concept which is altogether appropriate. Nor by its nature, a notion which is entirely moot. It is made of and contains all color. Potentiality focused at a single point, awaiting time to commence. It is poised upon the

interstices Between.

Even it has a shadow. The never-realized; that-which-cannot-be. An Apparition.

Eadric turns his thoughts to the World. Within Finitude, a torrent of Flames has already descended in anticipation of the Aeon. They are hidden, save those few which might reveal themselves to the blessed or the mad. In his mind, Eadric smiles. Despite his protestations to the contrary, Nwm had invoked the Sun-God. An inpouring of light and fire; a divine immanence carried by those resurrected at the

Reversal. What exactly did the Preceptor expect?

The Urn. The Moment. The Spell. The Flame. One thrice-transcended? Thrice-fallen? Thrice reborn; or remade?

Nehael? Soneillon? Teppu? Ortwin(e)? Hummaz? *Mostin*?

If Wyre survives, the Illuminated of Morne and their descendants will dominate history for fifty

millennia.

In Dream, Darkness moves; Carasch prepares to assail the Viridescent Seraphim.

Moment. It must be at an appropriate moment.

The Dragon coils around the Tree.

There is an awareness that this perspective is impossible, and Eadric returns to Finitude.

Reality commences.

**

**

“Fumaril is not built to withstand conventional siege,” Mulissu explained, “much less *earthquakes* and goristros. Visuit can and must press the attack; she may petition for more magical help – possibly another immortal, or more than one. Yeshe has yet to gather the ritual power of her cabals; even if her

reservoir is dry, she is not toothless.

“When this storm blows out, I will not conjure another; nor will the *Paling* go up again. I lack further patience for these delaying tactics. Mostin has therefore devised a plan...”

Waide groaned. “Are you now the charismatic face of Mostin’s deranged schemes?”

“Precisely,” Mulissu smiled.

“I am nervous around deities,” Tozinak sniffed.

“Our advantage is in versatility,” Mostin’s entrance, although flamboyant in his own eyes, was accompanied by such a distortion of normality in the senses of those others present that it caused heads to spin and stomachs to heave.

“We can adapt our strategy much more effectively than they,” the Alienist continued. “We have greater spell resources. We have regained the prescient edge. They have outmoded spellcasting techniques and their repertoire is limited. Choach is gone again, for a while; Yeshe is exhausted. Guho is recovered, and still potent, *but she is only one.*”

“As has been said, Visuit must press on. I foresee that Rishih will join them, but under duress. The Cheshnite leadership is fragmenting; or rather, the illusion of unity is finally being dispelled. Powerful warlords who are effectively vassals of K—laan—la. Those few demons which remain – by few I mean

few thousand – are the last of their kind. We may not see their like again. We should consider

preserving some specimens.

“But I digress. Ladies and gentlemen, *imprisonments* and *disjunctions* are your friends. Sonics – if available to you – are good friends. Transmutations are of limited utility; *time stops*, yes! Necromancies and enchantments, useless.

“We will approach *mind blanked* and under *superior invisibility*...”

“This strategy did not work for Eadric,” Jalael observed.

“Visuit is less likely to experience abject nausea when we approach her,” Mostin said sagely.

“How much of this did you learn from Soneillon, and at what cost?” Jalael’s irritation was apparent.

“Much. And none to you. If I may continue? *Prismatic walls* and spheres...”

[Mulissu]: Enough speak! Whether you invoke her or no, her gaze is turned upon us again.

[Daunton]: It matters not. As has been pointed out to me, we are all figments of Mostin’s imagination in any case.

**

Ortwine galloped northwest upon *Narh* through Nizkur Forest. Eadric’s steed bore her faster than she could *wind walk*; the trees parted for the sidhe as she rode. Blood and ichor still clung to her and caked her hair; her cloak was a billowing shadow, distorting perception around her.

Her course led her toward Kinthei and the Tree. Her instinct cautiously probed those tracts to the west of her as she rode; the limits of Hummaz’s realm, if such notions as *limit* meant anything to the enigmatic fey.

Abruptly, shadow passed across her mind; a vast, dark fire impinging on her

consciousness at a

distance of a mile. Ortwine cursed, and veered east, spurring *Narh* to an incredible pace. Too slow. The shape hurtled towards her with uncanny speed, and within three seconds had manifested itself directly in front of her; a raging inferno of black flames surrounding a great, sinuous wyrm. Qematiel.

The forest ignited. The fire burned her and Ortwine drew *Heedless*, but backed up upon *Narh*. "I am about the Tree's business. You would be ill-advised to thwart me."

With such power and confidence did the sidhe speak, that the wyrm paused uncertainly. Then she

remembered her mission.

"My, you are a suave one. Do not attribute your continued existence to anything other than my whimsy," Qematiel smiled wickedly, displaying many hundred teeth.

Inwardly, Ortwine sighed. This fact was undeniable.

Her aura extinguished itself and the dragon assumed the shape of a female devil of not-inconsiderable allure. She held a tiny hazel twig, barely longer than a splinter, between thumb and forefinger; she proffered it to the sidhe with an arched eyebrow.

Ortwine looked sceptical. "I am generally reluctant to accept gifts from powerful entities with opaque agendas."

Qematiel smiled again; in diabolic form, the expression seemed even more malign.

"I don't believe I gave you a choice," the wyrm said. "And the Hazel certainly hasn't."

"What is it?" Ortwine took the twig in a resigned fashion. She screamed as it buried itself into her left palm.

"Power," Qematiel replied.

**

He is a boy of ten again, standing in the courtyard of the keep below the Steeple. His father tosses him the sword. He feels its weight in his hands.

"It is too heavy," Eadric complains.

"They need to feed you more meat and less scripture in the Temple," his father says without sympathy.

"The men of Kyrtil's clan are large; hence we use large swords. Be about you!"

Orm is sitting nearby. He jeers.

"Shut up!" The boy shouts. "You're just jealous because they wouldn't take you."

"I was," Orm admits calmly. "Now I am relieved. I do not require a syllabus censored by the Inquisition."

"Father?" Eadric pleads.

"As I love you both, shut up and learn how to fight. This is eminently practical advice: if you are dead, you are of no use to anyone."

**

“Where is Nwm?” Ortwine inquired.

“He has not returned yet,” Nehael answered. “He is assessing the situation from a different perspective before he commits. You wear Hazel’s mark; that may have been a rash promise of fealty.”

“I am confused, and my fealty – which is to myself – has not changed. What does the dragon have to do with this?”

Teppu sighed. “She is a useful agent.”

“A useful agent for whom? For Hazel? Or for the Tree? For you? For Hummaz?”

“This has yet to be demonstrated,” Teppu conceded. “She is also a liability; Kaalaanala now plots to break Hazel’s spell on her and unleash the wyrm’s destructive potential. Which is considerable.”

“Many balances have been struck,” Nehael sat upon the ground. “Energy has become diffuse. This is natural.”

“Mine has not,” Ortwine said dismissively. “What of Hummaz? Have you made contact with him?”

“No,” Nehael shook her head. “And I would advise you likewise avoid him. If we are fortunate, he may revel blissfully for a thousand years before he awakens one morning in a bad mood. Or he may stub his toe whilst chasing a nymph, and become enraged. These things are hard to predict. Nonetheless, I feel a certain maternity toward him; it is hard to explain.”

“Adopting the Adversary is a bold undertaking,” Ortwine said drily. “I’m not persuaded that his new clothes will fit to his liking.”

“You would know better than I,” Nehael nodded. “You demonstrate many convergences.”

Ortwine scowled.

“What is your purpose here, Ortwine?” Nehael sighed. Even her intuition could not penetrate the sidhe’s motivation.

“I have come to ask for your help.”

“I have no authority beyond Nizkur,” Nehael shook her head.

“No, but you have great *power* beyond Nizkur. In any event, I require your intercession not your intervention: Kaalaanala sees everything which transpires in Fumaril. A Tree could veil us...”

“There is no scion there; a *ludja* feels protective only toward its scions.”

“Hence I require your intercession. If...”

Nehael held up her hand. “I will do what I can.”

She *communed* momentarily.

“The answer is no,” Nehael said plainly.

“But...”

“No,” Nehael repeated. “Neither Oak, not Elm nor Ash will lend you aid, as you now bear Hazel’s mark. In other words, Hazel has pre-empted your efforts; you must petition it directly.”

“But Hazel is in Hell.”

“You are marked. You need merely invoke her by name. A votive offering to a scion would place you in better standing.”

“And where might I find a Hazel scion?” Ortwine asked, exasperated.

“Unless you wish to enter the realm of Hummaz, the only one is in the gardens of the Wyrish Academy.

Shomei’s abode.”

“Somehow, I’m not surprised,” Ortwine said. “And I’m sure the wizards will be thrilled. Is this *ludja* feminine or neuter? You have implied both.”

“It is not masculine,” Nehael nodded.

“And when do I receive this *power* that I am promised? The wyrm was vague.”

“It is already bestowed. In the Forest, you must fight left-handed.”

Ortwine narrowed her eyes. “This is an odd restriction.” She moved to draw her weapon, but froze involuntarily.

“No!” Nehael hissed. A celadon light flared around her. “Not here. You will not unsheath that *thing* here. This is a holy place.”

The Image of Uedii. The sidhe’s façade collapsed entirely, and she backed away, her countenance full of righteous dread.

Her opacity suddenly made utterly transparent, Ortwine wavered, turned, and fled.

When she reached *Narh*, the sidhe encountered Nehael again. The goddess stood before the great horse, which nuzzled her affectionately. Her palm was offered outward; her expression was benign.

“Kindly step aside,” Ortwine said. She still shook.

“You will need a *votive offering*,” Nehael emphasized.

“I have something in mind,” Ortwine said through gritted teeth.

“I am what I am, and you must decide how you relate to that. Your insecurities are your own.”

Nehael vanished.

**

Eadric sat beneath the Yew in *Saizhan*. Viridescent devas surrounded him. He experienced a subtle tugging: Lai and Mesikammi were beckoning him to return, and he merely need reach out and touch

the gnarled trunk...

He felt their entreaty, but did not act upon it.

He watched as Tramst, the *Sela*, quietly approached and sat opposite. There was a long silence.

Eadric breathed deeply – a chill, forest-mountain air scented with resin – and looked into the *Sela*'s face.

"I have seen a little of what you see," Eadric finally said dubiously. "If only for a moment, or was it an eternity? I marvel that Tramst – who is a fragile vessel – can contain the magnitude of the *Sela*, although this truth is also somehow quite mundane. I am conflicted. I should return, of course. But this is a fine spot; the light is of a perfect, blended quality. The air is crisp and clear."

Tramst laughed. "This is your Heaven; are you surprised that you like it?"

"Not entirely. *Sela*, I cannot overcome Visuit. Twice, I've faced her now. She is beyond me."

"Yet overcome her you must," Tramst nodded. "And Kaalaanala also. Visuit is but a minor test.

Observe."

A light sprang into being within the *Sela*'s palm. At first, it seemed perfect and undivided, but on closer inspection, differentiation existed – or at least Eadric inferred as much. Motes whirled about in a cloud; around each mote, yet more motes span, and around them, yet more. The light shone upon the face of the *Sela* – a visage both empty and complete.

"Radiance illuminates Mind," Tramst smiled. "And Mind reflects upon Radiance. But what is behind me?"

Oblivion. A terror so complete and all-consuming that Eadric's thought was utterly paralyzed. He

teetered on the brink of annihilation.

"Look beyond Nothingness," the *Sela* said calmly.

The Darkness called to him. He could not rest his gaze there.

The *Sela* sighed. "Beyond, not into. Stare not at Apparitions of Demogorgon; merely practice *Saizhan*.

Tools I offer you. How many motes do you see?"

They span wildly. To observe one was to lose its identity to perception. A grand cosmic uncertainty.

"Seven," Eadric replied. "And seven times seven unnumbered times." His knowledge was oblique, but the intuition certain.

"You may choose two."

Slowly, an action which itself seemed aeons long, the *Sela* moved his hand toward him;

Eadric stared into the maelstrom of light – for such it had become – until it overwhelmed him entirely. It asserted *ens* with such ferocity that it threatened to extinguish all other notions of being. Its magnitude was

unguessably vast. It *was* Magnitude.

Silence.

“Which did you choose?” The *Sela* asked wily. As though he might not know.

” *This* and *That*,” Eadric laughed.

“They are called *Fultum* and *Anto*,” the *Sela* nodded. “Or Steadfastness and Wrath; or Vigilance and Requite; or Succour and Renewal. You choose well. Share these meditations with those whom you trust and who might understand. Look now beyond Unbeing. What do you See?”

Eadric wept. The Void shone.

“Thus,” the *Sela* smiled. He held Eadric’s head in his hands and breathed gently.

The *Ahma* entered him.

He awoke beneath the Yew beside the Great Fane in Morne.

“You took your time,” Nwm said.

The Preceptor watched silently as a vast, aquiline shape receded towards a setting Sun.

*

In the gathering dark, *Narh* walked steadily through the wide grounds of the Academy southwest of Morne. Ortwine’s eyes moved suspiciously; any number of the trees there possessed a rudimentary

sentience, and most were malign. Now a far more sinister Intelligence – that of a Hazel scion – held banyans, viper trees and night twists in thrall away from the main trail. Ortwine scowled. The Hazel itself was remaining elusive. She knew she was being toyed with.

A familiar sensation came upon the *sidhe*, the quality of which was reminiscent of a prior incarnation.

Ahead of her, the barest rumour of a path had appeared, winding its way through dense briars. She

drew *Heedless* and progressed cautiously, at first upon *Narh*, and then – due to some internal impulse which she felt obligated to heed – on foot. Through the foliage, a light flickered through the gloam.

Ortwine wrapped her cloak around her and moved towards it, silent and unseen.

It was a stone cottage – a *coppicer*’s cottage, of all things, as evidenced by a number of tools which rested neatly against the wall by its open door. Outside, a lone devil of thoughtful and melancholic aspect sat upon a stool carving a slender hazel switch. He was in a state of deep concentration, and seemed oblivious to the *sidhe*’s presence. Despite her efforts, Ortwine’s deific sense could not reach within the structure itself. Unperceived, the

sidhe slipped past the devil and entered.

Ortwine raised an invisible eyebrow. In seeming contradiction to the Tree's limitation on such spatial manipulation, it was larger within than without, and scrolls and codices crowded shelves upon the

walls. Stacks of tomes reached the ceiling; in places, there was barely room to move. Ancient books.

Forbidden books. Books bound in the hides of unknown creatures, and whispering secrets best left

untold. Accursed books. Thousands of them. Through dark doorways, stairs led up or down: to rooms

filled with yet more books.

She moved towards a space where a pair of plush chairs flanked a large hearth, within which a fire crackled merrily. In a large wicker basket, neatly stacked, half a stère of cut hazel. Hints of cinnamon hung within the air; on a small table by the fireside, an unstoppered bottle of *kschiff* stood.

Above the mantelpiece, framed within crystal, was a large parchment of impossible antiquity bearing

one hundred and sixty-nine signatures. Below the names – Infernal appellations which themselves made the sidhe's head reel – the Empyrean seal, as borne by Enitharmon himself. Below that, an empty rune which held no meaning; it could not, in fact, be said to exist beyond the context of the document itself. The endorsement of Oronthon's Nameless Adversary. The Accord.

"Take a seat," Shomei's voice reached her from a nearby room. "Have a drink. I'll be with you in a moment."

Ortwine glanced around.

"Check the small cabinet," Shomei added. "I have several bottles of Loquai vintage, liberated from Menicau's estate should you prefer."

Ortwine relaxed. She loathed the taste of *kschiff* and found its particular psychotropic effects disagreed with her.

Shomei the Infernal appeared presently. She smiled, poured herself a generous goblet of liquor, and sank into one of the chairs. Ortwine regarded her closely; upon her forehead, Shomei bore a faint mark not unlike that which ratified the document above the mantle.

"You have become a devil," Ortwine observed.

"Of sorts," Shomei nodded.

"And I suspect that you have a particular relationship with the Hazel which is germane to my current situation," Ortwine added. "What is this place?"

"A concursion," Shomei said carefully. "You are already within Hazel's domain. The coppice itself is behind the cottage."

“You have...permission...to cut wood? *Hazel’s* wood?”

“Will must be tended, lest it become unfocused,” Shomei the Infernal nodded.

“Then you are in thrall?”

“No. The arrangement is reciprocal. I am Exempt.”

“Then you are paid for your work?” Ortwine asked slyly.

Shomei laughed, and gestured. “Look around you!”

“Books?”

Shomei narrowed her eyes, and lifted a large, weighty volume from a stack nearby. She handed it to the sidhe, who wiped grime and dust from its cover to read its title in the ancient Infernal tongue:

Two Hundred Discourses on the Nature of Depravity

“This particular volume was scribed by a devil named Enaia,” Shomei explained. “Her seductive accomplishments rival those of the most notorious of succubi. Alas, she is no more; her subterfuge was unmasked by diviners sixteen epochs past: she was bound in *dimensional shackles*, and buried in a silver salt, gathered from the shores of a celestial ocean.”

Ortwine cast her gaze through the dark doorways nearby which led to other chambers.

“You have sequestered a portion of Hell’s library?”

“I have sequestered the *entirety* of Hell’s library,” Shomei the Infernal smiled.

Ortwine looked dubious. “Moving countless million books would seem the occupation of many

lifetimes. I assume that certain planar boundaries have been redrawn?”

“From this perspective,” Shomei nodded. “Hell as it was is no more. It has been ejected from the continuum, so to speak. Forced Outside, or retreated into Dream might be alternate descriptors, were one inclined to view things in such a way. In any event, its influence will no longer be felt as directly. I have preserved its legacy and its wisdom. A quartet of great once-devils remain within what was

Avernus, but which is now a great forest dominated by two of the darker *ludjas*.”

“And these once-devils – which are now presumably Green – fill which roles in this new continuum?”

“That will depend on the Aeon,” Shomei poured herself another goblet of *kschiff*.

“Then devils have become a scarce commodity.”

“Not so scarce,” the Infernalist smiled. “Merely transformed. And Azazel’s legions wisely removed themselves and placed themselves under Holly’s protection.”

Ortwine’s hackles rose.

“You are wise to fear Holly,” Shomei nodded. She was becoming inebriated: apparently *kschiff* retained its potency with regard to her diabolic metabolism. “She is quite the bitch.

The Kings of the Four Quarters, now Four Kings amid the Thickets: this movement was inevitable, even as the Adversary

migrated. In a prior reality they were also of He; before a Fall which now never happened. Perhaps half of his Regents in the Undivided Sphere: the half which fell, even as half perished altogether? Each of the others lost one; sixty-four became forty-nine. This was necessary. The *I* is necessary to *ens*. For Radiance to penetrate beyond *Tamasah*.”

The sidhe barely followed her. “And what is beyond *Tamasah*? ”

“Truth,” Shomei smiled lazily.

“And what might that be?”

Shomei laughed heartily. “Ask the *Ahma*, for he has seen it. I care not for the Unmanifest, Ortwine.

Hence, I do not practice *Saizhan*.”

The sidhe-goddess sighed and raised her glass. “I’ll drink to that.”

“You may leave both rod and talisman when you depart. I will ensure they are buried at Hazel’s roots.”

Ortwine scowled. Sibud’s talisman, she had marked for an offering; Pazuzu’s rod she had intended for Mesikammi.

Shomei raised an unsympathetic eyebrow. “Will is bought dearly.”

*

Six hundred miles to the south, as the Wizards of Wyre made their preparations within Mulissu’s throne room, Mostin noticed a subtle but irresistible reorganization of intangible membranes around Fumaril.

Saint Tahl the Incorruptible – recently *resurrected* by Lai, and who led a number of Flamines in meditation and vigil – felt the oppressive presence of Kaalaanala’s scrutiny depart from his

consciousness. It was immediately replaced by a cold, steely focus, which seemed barely less malign.

In Jashat, fires erupted in violence and anger, annihilating the priests who tended the altars. The *Bhiti*’s perception had been forced into retreat.

Fumaril: Part 2

Within a fortified palace of marble and serpentine – which the demilich Idyam had caused to rise

between Jashat and Thond – three powerful Cheshnite immortals gathered together: Idyam himself; the Ak’Chazar, Temenun; and Naatha, an ambassador of the now firmly-entrenched northern party.

Godlings, Death Knights, Naztharunes and compacted fiends were gathered nearby. Many legions were

encamped about them.

The topic of debate was strategy on the largest scale, including the pressing question of *how to deal with Kaalaanala*, which was necessarily addressed obliquely. None of the immortals had been directly suborned by the Dark Goddess, and her terrible will could not act directly *on* them as they were beyond the geographical limit imposed by the Tree. Nonetheless, the concern which consumed each was *how do I react if she summons me?* In this, it was desirable to seek consensus. Hours passed as a variety of strategems were outlined. Throughout, Temenun listened, but did not speak.

Finally, the Tiger-Who-Waits stood, and silence fell. His tone was at once contemptuous and magnetic.

His position, bordering on heretical and schismatic. He smiled.

“I am an ancient spirit, not like you others: corrupt abominations, skeletons, demons, sad remnants of former selves. I am noble and cruel; born of fear and hatred. And I know the Green. I am *of this world*.”

“I see possibilities you do not; I apprehend truths you barely glimpse. This is fact; to deny it would be futile. We must position ourselves carefully in this emerging disorder if we are to realize *Tamasah*.”

“The Fires of Death abide in Jashat now. Through diligence, we have helped accomplish this task. A great *Bhiti* dwells among us. And what now? Should we turn our attention to breaking this net which the Tree has cast between us and the Truth? I am patient. We should admit that some tasks are beyond our ability to immediately accomplish.”

“Another spirit arises in the Forest. Some monstrous priapic expression of *Aliikaghana** which acts only from instinct to satisfy its immediate desires. Again, it is demonstrated that *ens* merely hinders its own devices. We should avoid premature conflict with this entity at all costs; if an understanding can be reached which will hasten the downfall of the Wyrish theocracy, so much the better.”

“Our sister Guho strikes compacts with the *avanim*; necessity now forces our hand. Powerful *analas* move within Dream, but I foresee a stalemate with those celestials in thrall to the Tree. Other agencies are now moving.”

“Which brings us to an impasse...” Temenun paused. Impulses were intruding on his unconscious. His prescience rippled through a host of Nows.

Incredulity.

No! How DARE you!

His message, carried on a *sending*, reached the Claviger’s unruffled perception.

**

Bells rang within the palace compound at Fumaril, signalling another invisible dawn beneath the *Pall of Dhatri*.

The *Ahma* stood with Nwm and Lai upon a tall minaret, staring into the gloom. The Butcher’s main force had still to deploy, although spectres, outriders and flights of succubi – acting in the capacity of aerial scouts – had been encountered by his own piquets in an

area of low hills ten miles to the east.

Eadric watched nervously as Mostin floated upwards from the courtyard below and alighted before them.

“What is keeping them?” The *Ahma* inquired.

“I can only infer,” Mostin replied. “Visuit’s mote is coming into sharp resonance with that of the Dark Goddess. As the latter cannot act substantively beyond a certain area, this probably means that the Butcher has returned to Jashat temporarily.”

“By which you infer what, exactly?”

“Kaalaanala is warding her champion,” Nwm replied.

“That would be my reading,” Mostin nodded.

“Sh*t,” Eadric muttered.

“That would also be my reading,” Mostin concurred.

“How long before she rejoins her army?” Nwm asked.

“An hour? Two at most.” The Alienist shrugged. “I am assuming she will try to *wind walk* back to her encampment. Mulissu can make the weather uncomfortable and may be able to pin her down for a

while. But if more Dao nobility have been co-opted, she may go... *earthy*...and be there in an instant.”

The word *earthy* was pronounced with considerable distaste.

Eadric pondered for a moment before issuing a silent mental command. A quartet of devas appeared presently.

“Muster all of the celestials, all of the Flamines, and any amongst the Templars and the Illuminated who are already in harness. Nwm, I need everyone *flying, wind walking, mind blanked, invisible* and warded against *blasphemies* and the consumptive attacks of undead. We are making a sortie. We have thirty minutes.”

Nwm sighed.

Eadric considered briefly. “As soon as we break out beyond the limit of the Tree’s ward, Kaalaanala will perceive us; at that point Visuit will rush back from Jashat, assuming she is not already *en route*.

The goddess will inform those in the camp of our imminent arrival – I am assuming Yeshe will be in command.”

Ortwine, who was apparently with them but *invisible*, whispered softly.

Nwm – sensitive to such sudden changes – immediately scowled suspiciously. He looked around,

attempting to pinpoint the fey. “How did you do that?”

Ortwine allowed herself to manifest and looked vaguely puzzled. “Do what?”

“She invoked the Hazel- *ludja*,” Mostin seemed distracted by some elusive thought. “This is substantially to our advantage.”

Ortwine felt irked that Mostin knew of her activities, but remained outwardly calm.

“Would you care to explain?” The *Ahma* asked. “But swiftly. Time is not now best spent in idle conversation.”

“Kaala-anala is effectively blind,” Nwm replied. “Hazel just suffocated her divine vision in a number of different locations, including the Cheshnite camp ahead.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that. What is the cost, Ortwine?”

“Potent artifacts seem to work just fine,” the sidhe replied drily. “Do you have a problem with that?”

“I have none,” Nwm smiled. “You are an agent of the Tree. If *you* find you have a problem, then I offer my counselling services. I understand these matters far better than you.”

“I doubt it.”

“You have debts yet to pay to Mesikammi,” Nwm sighed.

“My High Priestess trusts in my capacity to deliver benefactions.”

The *Ahma* unbuckled *Lukarn* and handed it to Nwm. “Let’s try this again.”

“You have high expectations for a thirty minute window,” the Preceptor grumbled and departed.

Eadric inquired gingerly. “I assume a fully warded Visuit is likely to be invulnerable?”

“Not if we can drop a couple of big ones on her,” the Alienist replied.

[Nwm]: Mostin. Mulissu. Tozinak. Jalael. Daunton. Waide. Get down here now. I need your reservoirs: everything else is empty.

“This better work,” the Alienist scowled.

[Hlioth]: Snap! Snap!

[Mostin]: That’s all we need.

**

**

Gihaahia, the Enforcer of the Great Injunction, stood within a low chamber. It was the *sanctum sanctorum* of Wyrish Wizardry, the abode of the Claviger: that mysterious entity which governed the moral conduct of Wyre’s arcanists. Before her, the great slab bearing the Articles: itself a gateway connecting the Claviger’s awareness to the primal Dream of which it was an aspect. A Dream of Magic.

The Infernal was waiting. The Claviger meditated, its processes isometric with rational

thought. It had been dreaming Spells.

It was absorbed in a particular, nightmarish substrate; one of those several which comprised the

impending confrontation between Carasch and the Viridescent Seraphim. After an indeterminable time, the Claviger finally emoted an aesthetic appreciation which caused a frisson of excitement in Gihaahia.

Quickly, the Claviger reconfigured the Enforcer and transposed her into the dreamscape, asserting a hegemony which threw the chthonics into violent rages and discomfited the episemes.

The Claviger cast the Spell, and quickly retreated into an idle waking fantasy.

Manipulating unconscious vestiges emanated by every dormant mind from Harland to Ardan, as far

south as the blight which afflicted the Thalassine, the Claviger swiftly span a new dream, using magic of tremendous power. A net which might have encapsulated an area far greater than that of the Wyrish Injunction had its real dimensions been spatial.

In Nizkur, Hummaz – abruptly subject to the superimposition – grunted in his wine-soaked sleep.

Nymphs nearby became suddenly histrionic.

The Claviger emoted surprise. Carasch, alone of the chthonics, had somehow eluded the dream-lure and had incorporated himself into the new substrate. The hypoabyssal connection was maintained.

Do not presume. I yet Dream

The thought – directed from beyond the Veils – almost erased the Claviger in its intensity.

**

The Collegiate Wizards corporeated briefly in the darkness as the Temple forces flowed around them like a swift breeze. The Alienist reached out with his thoughts to contact an unseen spy high above the Cheshnite camp.

[Mostin]: Well?

[Ortwine]: I believe Visuit is still absent. The *Anantam* are gathered [here] and [here], but they are few.

Guho is [here]. There are *many* of the *Keshaa-Dirghaa* [here]. Spectres and wraiths move around the periphery in unguessable numbers; they appear as a screen of fog.

[Eadric]: Where is Yeshe?

[Ortwine]: I would guess within the focal *utterdark*. There are other defensive magics. They are potent.

[Mostin]: Show me.

[Ortwine]: [These].

[Mulissu]: Transvalents. Ortwine, do not enter the presidio.

[Mostin]: [*Moment of Prescience*]. They are four-hundredth order. As soon as we pass the screen, we will be precipitated out of *wind walking* and all our wards will be collapsed.

[Nwm]: I can bring them down. It will leave only one for Visuit.

[Mostin]: Two would be better.

[Eadric]: Then we strike fast and eliminate Yeshe, Guho and as many of the magi as we can. Then we get the Hell out, and worry about Visuit later.

[Ortwine]: I believe Rishih to be [here]. And more *Anantam*.

[Eadric]: That complicates matters.

[Ortwine]: Leave him to me.

[Hlioth]: Three immortals will perish today. I will not be one of them.

[Ortwine]: Thanks for that.

[Mostin]: We have to take Visuit.

[Eadric + Nwm + Ortwine]:?

[Mostin]: We must. She won't be getting any weaker from here on in. Her wards will last for months, and may become compounded. Kaalaanala will just keep augmenting her.

**

In the *Garden of Mind*, in the fortress recently appropriated from the daemon Tholhaluk, Soneillon awoke to physicality, sank into a throne of flesh, and considered.

Events were not transpiring to her liking. Energies were moving too subtly to comprehend. Her

prescience had grown; her understanding of *formlessness* deepened. But not enough.

She considered her essential inessence.

Tendrils of impossibility reinforced her now; her emptiness might be seen to writhe with a palpable insanity. Old paradoxes had crumbled away. She was the Void in which the *Urn* was hid. But whether Soneillon dreamed or woke, or became another Nothing or a mad parody thereof, she might not act

within the world without the permission of some *other*. In so doing, she would necessarily compromise her position unfavorably.

And Soneillon pondered a question: Why had Kaalaanala not stripped her of the *Urn* when she had manifested *ex nihilo*? She must have known of it; how could she have failed to apprehend its presence and significance in an instant? How could she not *want* it, having known of it? Had she chosen to let it remain with Soneillon for some other purpose? Did she fear it?

Or was the *Urn* somehow inscrutable to the Fires of Death?

The exiled queen of Throile pulled the jug from its hiding place on her person, and felt its weight.

You serve only to neuter me, she directed her resentment toward the vessel. It seemed to observe her impassively.

She would have to make a choice. An alliance. Concessions. Carasch was too dangerous; Vhorzhe too

mad; the Cherry too unpredictable – its agenda was utterly opaque to her. It seemed to want the *Urn*. Or her.

Briefly – and ironically – Soneillon considered that Graz'zt's counsel would have been useful.

A sound like thunder, echoing through a million imaginings.

The ripples in Dream were subsiding when the magnitude of the Claviger's act became apparent to her.

Squabbling seraphs and chthonics had been swept away, lost in conflict in all but the darkest of long-forgotten nightmares. The Claviger had replaced the dreamstuff with a no-less convoluted matrix of

color, texture, smell and substance; of correspondences and hierarchies, symmetries and order. A new arcane rationale. To *Wizardry*, and its subset – the emergent *Wyrish High Arcanie* – it granted an assured ascendancy.

The demoness cursed.

A whisper reached her from a distant grove: Tree's Own Shadow. Unwarded – as no magic she

possessed would be effective in any event – Soneillon transported herself to what had once been

Azzagrat.

The maelstroms had subsided, and matter had been reordered. A vast Blackthorn, with barbs ten inches long reared a hundred fathoms into a ruddy sky; about it, swathes of viper-trees glowered menacingly.

Chthonics roosted in its upper branches.

The great *ludja* regarded her as it might an aphid.

"I desire ingress." Soneillon announced undaunted.

Echoes rippled beyond the Veils.

The Blackthorn silently opened a path.

Soneillon appeared in the courtyard at Kyrtil's Burh, stepping from beneath what she knew must be a Scion; that tree once raised by Nwm in defiance of the chthonic threat, now serving as a tendril of the darkest of Tree's facets. As with its sibling in Jashat – the Blackthorn within the Cheshnite inner temple itself – it seemed dormant. But its sleep was more troubled, and if it would soon strive to awaken.

Clasping the *Urn*, Soneillon glanced over her shoulder. The way back was closed. And

something else was here.

The demoness observed the devas patrolling the skies around the keep: they were of small magnitude, and could not perceive her. A middle-aged man – one whose resemblance to Eadric informed Soneillon that he must be close kin – exited the door from the chapel nearby and peered in her direction.

“So what are you going to do with it?” He asked her, nodding his head towards the *Urn*.

“Ah, the heretical Brother makes a pilgrimage.” Soneillon stared at him through narrowed eyes. He made her uncomfortable. “I haven’t decided. But whatever it is, it has to be *in here* and not *out there*.”

“Well that much is obvious,” Orm said.

“You should probably leave,” Soneillon smiled. “I’m staying, and celibates are too easy. I’ll be making some renovations, and inviting some friends over to play.”

“I had anticipated a painful and degrading death.”

“If you desire. When I have devised one suitable, I will come and find you.”

“My anticipation is not wishful,” Orm explained.

“Tastes differ,” Soneillon shrugged.

“What of the others within the Burh? And the village?”

“They may stay or leave, as they will,” the demoness replied easily. “Let them make their own choice.

They know who I am. Or they have seen me in their dreams.”

“Your presence here may be less enduring than you imagine,” Orm suggested.

“Ignorance!” Soneillon snapped. “I have apprehended that chapel in a Moment. Can you claim the same? Do not speak to me of tenacity, nor the length of my own shadow. Now begone!”

She issued a massive *sending*. It echoed across Wyre.

“I suggest you hasten,” Soneillon added. “I cannot speak to the courtesy of my fellows. If you stumble across your anointed sibling or his friend Mostin the Metagnostic, tell him I want Graz’zt back.”

Orm hurried to raise a warning and begin the evacuation of Kyrtil’s Burh, Deorham, and the surrounding countryside: for those who would listen.

Soneillon turned her eyes skyward, and solemnly regarded the celestials. Inexplicably, they darted away as though alerted to her presence.

She glowered after Orm. There had been not one iota of fear in him. She knew a Flame was with him: a visceral unease was her only inkling, as her senses were otherwise incapable of perceiving it.

Awaken she willed desperately toward the Blackthorn.

It remained quiescent.

I need allies, she thought to herself. Soneillon watched as one of the devas *teleported* away.

Teleported? She smiled widely.

Around her, demons were appearing.

**

Mostin felt it coursing through him: first a rumour, then a vibration, and finally a roaring noise which vanished suddenly into silence.

His skin tingled. It reminded him of *Afqithan*. But more cogent; more focused.

Mulissu looked at him. “What now?”

“I think the Claviger just changed the Arcane Morphic,” Mostin said.

“The Claviger *acted?*”

“It dreamed,” Hlioth replied. “It is much the same.”

Another pulse, of great depth and profundity, as though in response to the first.

“What the...” Mostin’s eyes widened grotesquely.

This time, Nizkur was its source. A surge of power which unlocked the Interdiction which lay across the world, finalizing boundaries. The Tree described its own limit; the cosmos reshaped itself in

accordance. All was Tree. The Alienist knew that it moderated all prior infinities now: neither demon nor celestial might tread here again without passing through it; without itself becoming Green, and other than that which it previously was. Those that were stranded here were here to stay.

But Mostin’s surprise was that the new shape permitted a path Outside. And that Outside was really *Outside*.

From a great distance, Nehael touched his mind: *Please exercise restraint*.

Mostin’s response was wry. *Had I had warning, then my answer should have been “not bloody likely.”*

Unfortunately, I did not.

Ahead, Nwm had materialized and was gathering the power necessary to collapse the wards which

protected the Cheshnite camp.

Around them, demons were suddenly appearing, *teleporting* as an apprehension that the lock had ended spread through their ranks.

“Things will now become confused,” Mostin sighed.

“I suppose one must take the bad with the good,” Mulissu remarked drily.

“Fortunately, their numbers are limited.” Mostin issued a *sending* to Sho: *Bring the Tower*.

And then, another *sending* to Shomei herself: *I told you my Infinity was bigger*.

Power surged as Nwm struck the defensive spells below, shattering them. The *wind walkers* descended rapidly, materializing with lances lowered.

In Rishih's pavillion, Ortwine cursed. The Thaumaturge had vanished, although not before the sidhe had opened his chest and belly with *Heedless*. Now she found herself surrounded by his retainers. She smiled: still, they could not see her.

Outside, the massive edifice of the *Infernal Tower*, piloted by Sho, suddenly appeared.

As *Narh*'s hooves touched the ground, Eadric unsheathed *Lukarn* and a great light sprang forth. Wraiths and shadows turned to vapour; vampires dessicated. For a little while, the darkness of the *Pall of Dhatri* was banished; the morning Sun shone warm upon the field.

*The Cloud of False Wisdom. Construed as a feminine aspect of the Abominable Light.

Fumaril - Part 3

North of the *Pall of Dhatri* stretches the march of Scir Cellod; further north still, Mord, Hethio and the Wyrish heartlands

At the junction of three wide feodalities, beneath the aegis of a Yew scion, stands Morne, the celestial city. Its resurrected craftsmen – possessed of a sudden inventiveness and aesthetic genius – are

beginning to contrive works so far unrivalled in the course of human history. Teams of masons, acting in unconscious unison, work unceasingly to perfect some grand architectural design. The devout throng

about the Temple courtyard; within Morne's baileys, companies of the Illuminated muster.

It is the six-hundred and ninety-second year as measured since the foundation of Wyre upon the ruins of Old Borchia; the six-hundred and thirtieth since the consecration of the Temple in Morne; the third year of *Saizhan*. Midwinter is fast approaching, but in Wyre it is unseasonably mild, and no snow has yet fallen.

In the South, in the Thalassine, it is as warm as a late spring day. A great tract of land lies in darkness, suffocated of light by Dhatri's magic: a hemisphere of tenacious night with a diameter of two hundred miles. Beneath, vampires and phantoms rove at will. From the city of Thond, a blighted wasteland

extends to Cirone, Jompa, Jashat and the walls of Fumaril, as well as a score of smaller towns and cities. Of them all, only Fumaril endures.

The Cheshnite forces are concentrated at four locations within this arena. Jashat itself is empty, save for Kaalaanala, her priesthood, and the marasmic demigoddess Jahi. Other vestiges of life have been

scorched from the city; its once-abundant olive groves and peach orchards are reduced to an ashen

plain.

The largest group – the main host – is at Thond with Dhatri. Hordes of undead of diverse types

accompany her; the most numerous – her crawling ghoulish minions – have scoured the

city of all

carrion, and begin to hunger again.

Thirty leagues to the Northwest – at the edge of the *Pall* – the Cheshnite vanguard is locked in an interminable skirmish with celestials, Illuminated, and Wyrish Templars. They strike or are struck, before their enemies scuttle back to Galda and the protection of the Trees. Here, the immortals Prahar, Rishih and Naatha have established a precarious alliance. Most of the remaining *Anantam* – the blood magi once loyal to Sibud – are entrenched with them, as well as blood fiends, compacted demons, and the three thousand death knights under Prahar's command.

Further from the front, straddling the Hynt Coched – the concourse which runs north from Jashat – are situated those legions which attend Temenun and Idyam. The demilich has erected an impregnable jade palace, and fortified an encampment about it. Armored Giants of Danhaan stand guard; the largest

goristros are emplaced here. The remaining theurges and Deathshriekers accompany Idyam; unknown

numbers of Naztharunes – the servants of Temenun – lurk nearby. These two immortals – most subtle amongst the Cheshnite camp – prefer a slow game. Each acts prudently, and their magical reservoirs are still largely untapped.

The last group – the smallest, most mobile, and most reckless – is led by Yeshe and Guho, and

accompanies Visuit. It is bent upon the destruction of Fumaril, which has remained a thorn in the flank of Cheshnite expansion.

**

**

Precedence amongst the spirits of the Green? Why must you impose hierarchy on everything?

The *anime* of the world should come first; of these, the great *ludjas* are the foremost, and, of these, the Trees are awake and hence most relevant: *at present*. Next, those servants of the *ludjas* which abide by their appointed Trees, or in Dream; these constitute a diverse group of sublimated entities, and I do not pretend to understand them all. Elementals are third; whether one arranges them in some particular order is rather a matter of personal taste than cosmic truth. Feys fourth – cataloguing these alone should take you several lifetimes. Fabulous beasts of no specific kind, I suppose, should be cited last: this would include griffons, unicorns, and the like.

And animals? Plants? Men? Giants? What of dragons? How wide one casts one's net is a lesson in

discretion. But dragons prefer not to be categorized, and it is generally wise to respect their wishes.

**

**

Qematiel – most ancient and cunning of wyrms – powered her way through the skies above the forest.

Dawn was kindling, and mist was rising from the ancient trees.

Something new was afoot. These were exciting times.

The dragon turned her gaze southwestward. Here, a distortion in space intimated at the wide extent of the range of Hummaz. Encroaching on rural Hethio, it encompassed almost all of the great southern

lobe of Nizkur; five thousand square miles of enchanted forest which merged seamlessly into a wild Faerie of unguessable limit on its western bounds.

Hummaz – apparently now satisfied with the extent of his private domain – had ceased his annexation.

A sixty-mile net of magic – the great central triplicity of the Oak, Ash and Elm- *ludjas* from Nizkur –

defied his power, and defined the northern interface of his sylvan realm. Here, the very air seemed to crackle with a vibrant green potency.

Qematiel gyred gracefully and launched herself away from the mingled energies of the intersection, skirting the eaves of the forest and bearing across the green pastures and wheatfields below. Hethio was the garden of Wyre; its breadbasket, and its richest province.

Resisting the urge to tarry and obliterate a sleepy town which nestled within a wooded vale, the wyrm rapidly approached the duchy's expansive central woodlands: here, wide tracts of deer and boar forest stood around Groba, a site of ancient power. She glanced down and hissed at a great Beech which grew there; an entry into whatever shamanic awareness Groba had once – and apparently now again –

embodied. As she dived, and then sped away, the ground shuddered from her passage and a wave of

sound shook leaves from trees.*

Other Trees would also be waking; with Carash lurking upon the threshold of Dream and Soneillon

fully reifying – the final grounding of the Chthonic in the matrix of reality – Qematiel knew that the Blackthorn and the Cherry must perforce be next. A reign of destruction and desire would begin; her mistress, Will itself, must accommodate and direct these unfocused energies.

The city appeared in the distance, white marble basking in the early morning sunshine. A low range of hills rolling westwards from it was soon below, dotted with large estates: previously, the country villas of Morne's fashionable bourgeoisie; now monastic cells in the care of a variety of contemplative orders.

Within a wide bowl, the Wyrish Academy, Hellish trees and a Hazel scion.

Qematiel plummeted, and appeared in a tumult of fire which caused the earth to shake

beneath the tiny figure of Shomei the Infernal, who stood alone, rod in hand.

“You presume much, small one; I may not be invoked, nor invited, nor conjured.” The wyrm’s voice threatened death.

“I tend Will,” Shomei smiled. As she spoke, a great, spiked trammel of adamant coiled onto the ground from her left hand. “And at this moment, I am it. It is time for service, and I accept no scutage. You will be my steed. Or be chained. The choice is yours.”

Qematiel raged furiously, the violence of her temper erupting as molten annihilation.

“I have no patience for this,” Shomei sighed. “This is the Hazel’s mandate. Cease your petulance, and retain some dignity. When your tantrum has abated, the choice will remain the same.”

**

Yeshe was not unprepared when she met the onslaught of the *Ahma*, and had girded herself with powerful magic. As well as her goristros, two armored balors – maybe the last of *Baramh*’s train – still attended her; she had fortified them with spells.

To no avail. His glare dazzled her. His weapon was an incandescent blur which seemed to burn

everything around it; a radiant violence committed against Void’s quietude. The steed *Narh* trampled demons and immortals in its path. Unease gripped Yeshe; the Great *Bhiti* in Jashat was deaf to her entreaties.

Pain consumed her briefly as she struck him with a *dispelling*; her reservoir was empty and Yeshe was forced to channel the spell through her own body. It could not overcome the *Green Benediction* and was insufficient to quell the light of *Lukarn* by an order of magnitude; other items on the *Ahma* and sundry wards were suppressed. Not enough. The Binder moved to speak a *word of recall* and spirit

herself to a hidden retreat south of Siir Traag in Shûth. It was too late.

Her enemy held his palm aloft and spoke a single syllable: a blasphemy of light. Her servants burned away to atoms. Yeshe was overwhelmed; blinded and deafened, she could not move her limbs.

Goddess, her supplication was a silent, visceral scream. Ever have I been thy faithful servant. Now full earnest do I beseech thee!

The entreaty echoed through the Green.

**

In Jashat, the altars burned with black fires: an essence of Nothingness contrived by Kaalaanala.

Visuit the Butcher sat cross-legged, gazing into oblivion. Unsheathed, across her knees, that dreadful weapon which had wrought countless suffering. About her, the Fires of Death moved, formless, as a

whirling maelstrom, imbuing Visuit with dark energies. Priests and supplicants chanted unceasingly.

Kaalaanala's formidable will reached out, seeking to grip the world. Trees were active everywhere, obscuring her vision. But that Yeshe's camp was under assault, the Dark Goddess had no doubt.

The flames coalesced into a tall hooded form, its visage awful and unknowable. It stood before Visuit, touching the forehead of the war-goddess to bestow some dark blessing.

The Butcher rose. With a growl, she hefted her weapon and carved open a hole in the Green, passing through into a shadowy region with eerie trees where distance and perception were twisted.

**

Mostin's mind raced. He knew they possessed a precarious advantage which might evaporate in an instant.

Prudently, he stopped time.

Lukarn cast a light which illuminated the despoiled countryside for a league around; brighter than the midday sun, causing fear and consternation amongst the Cheshnite forces arrayed against them.

Columns of smoke hung static in the air from conflagrations started by Mulissu's lightning; whatever primal storm the savant had tapped, its eddies were potent: demons seemed no less subject to her

discharges than anything else.

With the removal – in fact, the final demarcation – of the Tree's Interdiction, extradimensional travel was again possible. But in his stomach, the Alienist knew that all methods of such movement were

contained in terms which were thoroughly *Green*. If he *plane shifted*, it would necessarily be to somewhere *Green*; if he *teleported*, the medium through which he moved would be somehow *Green*. If he opened a *gate*, Mostin had no doubt that something disagreeably *Green* would step through it.

Except for *Uzzhin*; Outside; the Other. Glancing at Nwm, the Alienist understood that the Preceptor was – in fact – now very firmly identified with the principal source of his own limitation. The struggle which had begun between them so long before might soon become unpleasant if not carefully managed.

Mostin sighed. Now political necessity moved him, and he despised politics. Still, it behoved one to bargain from a position of strength, and he would pay with his own ichor if it meant asserting his continued freedom to conjure pseudonaturals.

So he made a choice. In a matter of seconds, Mostin emptied his reservoir utterly. First, he invoked a *wish* to reconfigure his transvalent armamentarium.

"It is time," the Alienist intoned. "Horrors will befall them."

Mostin cackled, and a huge amorphous [concept] appeared. It flailed [concepts], and more [things]. It was something more obscene than any there before – living or dead, mortal or immortal; saint, demon or celestial – had ever even imagined. Contact with its mind, if such it possessed, challenged the Alienist's already tenuous grasp on reality.

[Mostin]: Slay enemies in this order [equation]

He made a *dimension door* to Guho's position and focused a most potent spell. She was gathering energy for a ritual.

Time began again; reality buckled as Mostin caused to occur a sound which should not be heard. Guho

– the Worm that Walks – dissociated into a combination of color, noise and more obscure elements.

This time, he had struck at her *essence*; a powerful coercive impulse, unmaking her mind from the inside, dissolving the quiddity of her form. Mostin shook from the exertion; ichor dripped from his maws, and two pseudopodia caught fire.

In the space of a moment, four more temporal discontinuities passed across his consciousness; other mages using *time stops* and unleashing deadly combinations of spells.

He turned to observe the *Ú*; the monstrosity he had conjured from beyond the Periphery of Ghom. It had set about the *Kesha-Dirghaa* – the ritual theurges. It wrought such carnage amongst the enemy that he knew that it, and it alone, was sufficient to guarantee domination of any battlefield – barring, perhaps, the arrival of a vastly augmented Visuit.

Many of the demons were simply vanishing. Others were fleeing as best they could. In the event, the Butcher was occupied elsewhere.

**

After Rishih had fled, Ortwine cut her way through the remains of his guard, and assumed a position near Nwm. Despite his disgust at the thing which Mostin had conjured, the Preceptor gazed in

fascination as it annihilated the enemy.

A message reached the sidhe; sent by Rhul on the scream of a dying ancestor: the Butcher was in

Mulhuk, wreaking bloody havoc. Jaliere had barricaded himself into his forge; Rhul himself had eluded

her.

She looked at Nwm. Then at Lai.

The Preceptor nodded wearily, and opened a path.

[Nwm]: We are going to contain Visuit. Join us at your earliest convenience.

“What?” Eadric yelled.

*

In Nizkur, Nehael stood silently, her hand resting upon the bark of the Tree, observing a half-dozen events with her mind's eye. Soneillon had seized Deorham and demons were flocking to her; Temenun

was about to embark on some venture of his own without regard to either Kaalaanala or the other

immortals – or at least so Nehael surmised; the Claviger had *adjusted* certain aspects of the underlying morphic, sending the practice of Sorcery into a generational decline; Visuit was loose in the Bole of Shades, and about to wreak havoc.

And now Yeshe made an appeal. She relayed the information in an instant to Teppu.

“It is not to you,” the fey sighed.

“Do you mind...”

He stopped time.

Nehael continued. “Then to whom? Or what? To impotence?”

“To the Void.”

“To a Goddess.”

“You are considering intervention?” Teppu sighed. “I admit, sometimes your actions confound me.”

“Things are simpler than you might imagine,” Nehael shrugged. “In any event I do not intervene; rather, as Ortwine rightly observed, I intercede.”

“And is the face you present to her your dark one? I do not believe I have seen that.”

“You might find yourself less well-disposed toward me. But she will apprehend it whether I will it or no.” As time recommenced, she turned pale.

Mostin.

**

**

All was silent, and motionless.

The *Ahma* glanced down, and saw himself nearby. *Lukarn* was poised to strike down his foe.

Inwardly, he scowled.

“Let me have her,” it was Nehael’s voice. She was here; potent. She seemed to draw on the full power of the Tree; he felt she could break the world in an instant and remake it with a thought.

“A command?” He asked wily.

“An entreaty. I beg mercy.”

“What will you do with her?”

“Do? Nothing. I do not need to do.”

“Are there others whom I should expect you to abduct to safety?”

She sighed. “A prayer was offered. What would you have me say? Do you hate her so?”

“I am the *Ahma*, not Nehael; I can hate heartily. What will *happen* to her?”

“She will have an opportunity to reevaluate.”

He had the urge to laugh. “This scene is reminiscent of more than one prior. The answer is still yes, I imagine. Your reasons are your own, but I am curious.”

“I am invoked. Consider it restitution for your violation at Khu.”

Violation?

“It is not a perspective you will find easy to appreciate.”

“I imagine not.”

**

**

Yeshe waited, powerless, as the blade descended and her enemy *smote* her; a burning agony; black fire sprang from her helm. Her immortal body did not break, but she crumpled to her knees from the

strength of his blow. Now, even her inner sight began to fail. Ancient blood flowed, and she felt her life ebb out of her.

Prama-Adhyaapikaa, apraapya pralayah Taamaseva anuman; Great Preceptress, if I am denied

extinction permit me to persist only in the mode of Darkness.

She knew he would finish her. She fancied that she felt the wind which ran before his blade as it cut the air.

The blow never came; an eternity might have passed.

Slowly, impressions began to form; first in her mind, then through her eyes: vague shadows. A greenish light.

A tree.

No: The Tree.

Praartha! I beg you! *Taamaseva, praartha!* .

“That is denied you,” a voice said firmly. “And would be in any case. You are in the Womb of Qinthei.

You stand before the Tree. I am Nehael.”

“You presume to judge me?” Yeshe smiled weakly as her senses returned. “Or suborn me to your cause?”

“You invoked me. I interceded: I asked the *Ahma* to stay his blow. He indulged me. Had you died with my name on your lips, you would have been mine for a while ere I released you again into the world, or kept you here: I spared myself the dilemma. Did you not know? I am the Image of Uedii. The World is Mine.”

Yeshe cursed Nehael roundly: the Binder felt her strength was quickly returning to her;

this place bestowed some remarkable regenerative power.

“You are welcome,” Nehael said easily. “I will not trouble you further. You may stay or go, as you please. Nothing threatens you here; more importantly, nothing is threatened by you.”

The Goddess vanished from Yeshe’s perception.

Yeshe stared at the Tree.

A rustle behind her made her hurl a death spell instinctively: its power manifested as a barely audible hiss.

“That doesn’t work,” the voice contained an air of condescension. “Rumor has it that Oronthon’s Adversary managed acorns.” Its owner’s hide was dry and leathery, almost wooden. As tall as a man, it might have been some forest spirit. It had restless power; Yeshe could feel it.

“What is your agenda?” Yeshe demanded.

“To dominate.”

“You were Rimilin,” Yeshe intuited.

“I am still very much Rimilin,” Rimilin bowed with exquisite sarcasm. “Although, for a while I was not. I have acquired a new skin. I am adapting to circumstances.”

This one I can deal with, Yeshe knew.

“Gu- *analas* yet abide near the Blackthorn,” Rimilin ventured. “The *ludja* will soon awaken. When it does; deeper shades of Green – more perylene – will be revealed. The Ak’Chazar knows this.”

“What else?” Yeshe demanded.

“In Wyre, we have a custom regarding the exchange of information; I will forego it on this occasion, as a courtesy: the *Urn* is here. At the *Ahma*’s principal abode in Western Trempa. Soneillon has it.”

The Urn. “And why is Rimilin still *here*?” She asked, suspiciously.

The wizard nodded toward the Tree. “I have yet to discover a compelling reason to leave.”

The Binder snorted. “You are weak. Trapped.”

“Certainly not; at least, no more than you – as you will discover. You merely need to find a compelling reason to leave.”

**

The *Ahma* watched on in horror as the *Ú* acted upon the shattered Cheshnite ranks. It neither entirely devoured, nor tore asunder, nor engulfed those whom it touched; hideous transformations overcame

some of them. His own knights recoiled from it.

A great, basso profundo noise emanated from it, flattening the enemy troops in a wide swathe for a furlong ahead. Others were routing away from it now; what had been

intended – or at least, Eadric had foreseen – as a quick, hit-and-run attack, was turning into a decisive victory, and in a matter of moments.

As he offered a prayer of thanks to both Tree and Sun, an ominous shadow rolled across his mind. He glanced around. Where was Nwm? And for that matter, Ortwine?

Mostin alighted next to him in human form, but still appearing to Eadric through the *Eye of*

Palamabron as a writhing mass of tentacles. Nearby, Hlioth looked at the Alienist and his conjured servant with utter revulsion.

“Get used to it,” Mostin smiled wearily. “Next time there will be three of them.”

[Mazikreen]: I seek audience with the *Ahma*.

Eadric groaned. What now?

**

Queen Soneillon was occupying Kyrtil’s Burh. Many hundred demons had joined her.

Eadric received the news by saying nothing, and squinting.

The succubus who brought it – Mazikreen – was alluring even by the standards of her species, and

possessed a grace of movement which rivalled that of Ortwine. Eadric did not know it, but she had

once herself been Queen of a dismal realm which no longer existed. Wielding wide dominion, Graz’zt had tried – and failed – to seduce her. He had bribed her with more success.

“What of Caur, and Hawi, and the others?” Eadric finally asked.

“They remain unmolested, by command of Soneillon.”

The *Ahma* examined Mazikreen’s face. The Queen of Throile, he knew, played a slow game.

[Mostin]: Do not presume to understand her. She has achieved a great rapture.

Mostin was mad; Eadric had no idea what he meant.

[Mostin]: Soneillon, not this one.

[Eadric]: I still fail to understand.

[Mostin]: There are some facts regarding Soneillon of which I have not yet had the opportunity to

apprise you.

Mazikreen smiled. “Soneillon thanks the *Ahma* for his continued hospitality. She asks me to remind him that he has always been a gracious host, and that she has always acted with restraint and decorum when lodging with him. She assures him that his servants, the townsfolk of Deorham, and the

numerous pilgrims nearby are currently quite safe.”

“Tell her they had better remain so,” Eadric growled. “I will hold her personally responsible for every last bad dream experienced during her presence.”

[Mostin]: You are willing to suffer this indignity?

[Eadric]: What choice do I have? I cannot open another front at present. And something remains

unspoken.

The Blackthorn, he knew.

**

**

In the shades of the courtyard, hard beside the *sanctum sanctorum* which Kaalaanala had taken to herself, a Tree stirred. A single shoot unfurled upon a slender, thorned twig. Eight hundred miles away, near Deorham, another whispered in response. At Kyrtil's Burh, the Sun seemed to dim. Standing atop the Steeple, clad in protective darkness, Soneillon stiffened and felt a frisson run through her. *At last*.

In Jashat, Kaalaanala vomited black fire. Her effluvia took form, and sped westward towards Fumaril in an orgy of fiery destruction, heedless of the limit which had previously circumscribed her.

**

**

Beneath Mostin's *Infernal Tower*, amidst the dead and stricken, Eadric prepared to mount *Narh* again.

Something was encroaching at the limit of *Lukarn*'s light. It was coming from Jashat, moving at terrible speed; molten earth was being churned a thousand feet into the air above it, where it evaporated in a disintegrating fire.

“No.” Mostin guessed the *Ahma*'s intent.

“Then what? What is it?”

“We fly,” Mulissu said. “Get everyone *wind walking*. I will give the order to evacuate Fumaril.”

She vanished. A number of other mages – including Daunton – took the opportunity to absent

themselves.

” *Huhng*,” Mostin groaned. “There are others.”

“Other *whats*?”

“Effluxions. Avatars. It would appear that Kaalaanala is feeling a little less coy than previously.”

“I must return to Fumaril.”

“Forget Fumaril. There is no time. We go north, to Galda.”

“I will not yield Fumaril,” Eadric thundered. “We return. You think of something. And where the hell are Nwm and Ortwine?”

“Not in this world,” Mostin snapped. “I should have told Daunton to do an interplanar version. Alas, I cannot think of everything.” He forced a calm upon himself, and spoke slowly, as though to a child.

“Eadric: we have to go. Fumaril is lost. Mulissu understands this. Even if you could get there in time, you could not organize the defense; even if you could do that, it would be swept away. Eadric:

Kaalaanala’s avatar. Do you understand?”

” *Ortwine!* ” The *Ahma* screamed.

I hear your prayer. We are in Sisperi; in Mulhuk. With Visuit. Actually, a little help might be useful; her

mood is terse. I have tried winning her with banter, but she does not seem amenable. Go [here].

Mostin jerked his head; a great gate in his tower opened. “Come on.”

Eadric cursed. He quickly despatched devas as messengers to the garrison at Fumaril and to the main camp at Galda: respectively, *flee* and *fortify*.

He gave the order, and a swift mist flowed inside the tower. The *Ahma* himself was last, gazing at the torrent of dark fire as it drove down on them. As *Lukarn* was sheathed and borne within, the light dimmed and all was again gloom and shadow.

The tower vanished.

Inside, the illumination was ruddy; a great marshalling hall beneath a lofty, vaulted ceiling. Mostin was in human form.

“I am feeling uneasy,” Eadric said.

“This will be tricky,” Mostin conceded. “But I have a strategy.”

“And that would be?”

“We stay alive for twenty-four hours more,” the Alienist replied. “Tomorrow Mostin the Metagnostic will be fully rested.”

The gates of the tower swung open.

Eadric inhaled sharply. Before him, a slender Aspen reared; surely the most elegant tree he had ever seen. An exuberant joy possessed him.

“Don’t get too carried away,” Nwm said drily. “It isn’t helping any.”

“I have lost Fumaril.”

“Fumaril was a feint,” Nwm spoke through gritted teeth. “Visuit is here.”

“Fumaril was no feint. Where is Ortwine?”

“With Lai. Attempting to draw the Butcher away from Jaliere’s forge; he has sealed himself in with his smiths. Rhul is seeking aid from Saes; I do not rate his chances. Ortwine appears to be demonstrating loyalty.”

A sensation impacted on Eadric’s perception; then another; then another.

Akma..kma..Akma

“What?”

“Your priests are invoking you for protection,” Nwm nodded. “I hope you don’t disappoint them.”

“What are my chances?”

“Dismal,” Nwm smiled sympathetically.

* Qematiel is the swiftest of all wyrms, and may be the fastest of all flying creatures (barring some pseudonatural aberrations, which might not exactly “fly”). She can move up to 7500ft in one round at full speed: Qematiel can fly about as fast as an F-16.

Sovereignty

Qematiel approached Morne through the air from the west, the morning sun lending a golden

adumbration to black and scarlet scales. She plummeted a thousand feet and alighted in an explosion of Hellfire within the Temple courtyard, her rider taking pains to avoid any area where

the Faithful were gathered. Hallowed ground hissed and smoked, and all fled screaming from the

wyrm’s presence, save a quartet of the Anointed only: young paladins with glowing faces charged

with guarding the gate to the precinct.

“Begone, you idiots,” Shomei gestured as she slid from Qematiel’s neck. They obeyed without hesitation. She whispered, and vanished beyond perception.

Shomei paced softly but rapidly across a lawn toward the Yew. Pulling off a glove, she stretched out her palm, and placed it on gnarled bark. Awareness was boundless. The universe seemed to breathe

with a slow, measured pace. The scion itself was a tunnel of green light, leading to a heaven of

limitless wisdom.

She inhaled sharply, withdrew her hand, and glanced about; her eyes now resting on an unremarkable patch of grass in the shade of the transept. There, the *I* had stood. Shomei walked over toward the place, and knelt upon the ground. Pulling away turf in clods, she dug down eight

inches into soft earth with her fingers. Next, she carefully retrieved a wrapped canvas from within her robe, untied it, and withdrew a cutting.

She placed the seedling in the hole she had dug, and even before she had packed the earth back in

place, she felt it stretch, twist and slide in her hand: radicles quickly sought moisture; twigs grew upon a slender sapling.

Power surged.

Dozens of other trunks shot up around her; wrapped in their own glamour, she knew they were

imperceptible to all mortal senses. A coppice of Hazel within the compound of the Temple of

Oronthon in Morne. Shomei conjured a once-devil, Haril, and tasked him with the maintenance of

the grove; she then became visible again to sight.

Guards were moving around the periphery of the courtyard; Shomei was aware of others beginning

to gather upon the enclosing walls.

The wizard ignored all present, made her way around to the great, carved valves which led into the Fane, and gestured; they swung inward noisily. Within, light glowed warmly and incense hung

heavy in the air. Those at morning prayer or in meditation were roused.

Kicking off her slippers, Shomei the Infernal – to the curiosity of those present – strode down the nave. She handed her rod and robe to a bewildered scrollbearer who quaked beneath their power,

and reverently – or perhaps cautiously – approached the apse. Before her, the vacant archiepiscopal throne and the great altar of Oronthon. She made a single, fluid ritual prostration, and rose

smoothly.

In an act later viewed as blasphemy, reconciliation or rededication – depending on one's point of

view – Shomei proceeded to swiftly burn characters in Old High Borchian into the arch above the

exedra which contained Oronthon's Holy of Holies, in a script both elegant and precise. Her

revelation itself was by no means unambiguous, and was the cause of much subsequent speculation; the grammatical vagaries of Borchian lending additional uncertainty to her words:

Gáirn Spâhidan Omnisapient Will [is Mine]

Waírdan Kanist Wistim [I am] Becoming [is] the Refuge of Being

And then, upon the great solar orb, as if in refutation of the central transmetaphysic of *Saizhan* itself:

ÍM

SAIZHO

WAÍRTH

I AM. I SEE. I BECOME.

She muttered irritably to the priest as she took back her artefacts, turned, and cleared her throat. She spoke in a clear voice to those within the Fane: a bold declamation which echoed in the vaulted

ceilings:

” *Swah Qith Oronthon*. I am reiterating your credo, not denying it.* You are in danger of falling into dogmatic nihilism; a perennial hazard if you emphasize negatory dialectics. I am offering a

cataphatic serum for your malady. Don’t worry: the irony isn’t lost on me. Cease your solipsisms!

Your praxis is insufficient by itself; *the Truth is not enough*: you lack agency.”

Shomei departed without ceremony, her slippers chasing her and returning to her feet as she exited the Fane.

Reconsidering, she turned on the threshold, and subjected the golden eagle which reared above the

newly-engraved orb to a powerful transmutation. Its talons retracted, its wings became elevated as though about to take flight, its head drew back and gazed directly upwards. She then *disintegrated* the throne.

Better, she thought.

Outside, a crowd gathered. The wyrm Qematiel had coiled herself about the Yew and clung tightly

to it, her annihilating fires subdued. The dragon’s eyes – though they still retained their vast and ancient malice – seemed to possess a certain peace; she was permitted to remain until nightfall.

The Infernalist gazed at those assembled: in her mind’s eye, they became a conflagration of light.

Flames of Oronthon, returned from the Serenities, threatening to overwhelm her with radiance.

“Do you even know?” She asked them. “I think it’s time someone told you.”

The light smiled, and was occulted again.

Shomei scowled. With profound effort of Will – and the extent to which she recognized it as other

than her own perplexed her – Shomei turned her thought upon them. She groped as through the

flimsiest of veils; a subtle vapor concealed the apprehension of rarest truth. It eluded her.

“Become what You Are!” She hissed at them in frustration.

Silence.

Shomei considered her options. It would seem that more pressure must be applied.

Pausing for a

moment to gather her focus, she tapped her reservoir and reality shifted. She then issued a *sending*: *I invite you to join me. There will be no compulsion, but I will remain the senior partner. Our association may end whenever you choose.*

Instantly, Irel, Who Smites – the last and greatest of the dark episemes – appeared before her.

Shomei – a connoisseur of the Infernal aesthetic – gaped at his beauty despite herself. Here was a perfect being: fallen without sin; cradled by the Green, not imprisoned within it. *Oh, Mostin. I owe you for this.*

She considered briefly, grasped her rod, and struck the ground. A peal of thunder sounded as a *gate* opened. “Come,” she raised an eyebrow and gave a sidelong glance. “We go to visit Azazel first.”

Shomei’s estimate of diabolic forces previously deployed on Avernus amounted to four hundred and

thirty-four legions, including those of the independent magnates. Azazel had brought more than two hundred more – mostly pit fiends and horned devils – from Nessus itself, immediately subsequent to the *I*’s translation. Their current status intrigued Shomei; the extent to which they retained their infernality in varying degrees was curious: some – including the rulers of the Quarters – had

become powerful feys. Others – such as Azazel himself and those accompanying him – seemed to

enjoy a more protected status. Regardless, the general structure of their hierarchies remained intact: they represented a potential for power; perhaps the greatest and certainly the most coherent

anywhere within the bounded cosmos.

Shomei and Irel vanished through the *gate* into dark verdancies: the Thickets of the Four Kings where the Hazel and Holly- *ludjas* held sway.

**

The witch floated in the air, a half-mile above the eastern gates of the city. Bells and alarms were ringing frantically; the air around was thick with *wind walking* djinn and whichever fortunates they had managed to take with them. Below her, in shadow, the masses teemed in the streets and sought

to flee the encroaching fire. All available magical aid had been lent to speed the evacuation; it

remained woefully inadequate to the task.

Mulissu silently lamented. There was no time for anything, even to conjure *Ha'uh* – which might have at least forestalled the shape which now bore down upon the city. It was as though a great

plough were being dragged at uncanny speed across the dark land toward Fumaril; the furrow it left was an open wound in the earth, the sides of which smoked and vitrified. At its approach, a

vibration caused the foundations of the city to shudder; the sound rapidly became deafening, and

houses began to topple.

There is no scion at Fumaril, Mulissu grimly observed.

The gate below her exploded into molten rubble.

As her subjects – those whom she had sworn to protect – began to perish by the thousand, she

pushed all sense of grief and horror from her mind lest it overwhelm her; not one jot of remorse

would she let herself feel. The Tyrant of Fumaril gazed on, expressionless.

She studied her enemy with implacable calm.

**

Kyrtill's Burh darkened as clouds gathered in the sky above it. Within two leagues – an area which included both the town of Deorham and many outlying farms – animals were transformed into

misshapen, brooding things by the awakening Blackthorn scion. The land seemed to drift; shadows

erupted and passed without warning. Buildings stretched and twisted. Trees grew shaggy and

thorned. Of feys, all but the most wicked and insane fled.

In the public lounge of the *Twelve Elms*, Soneillon sat and pondered. Her demons were growing restless – most were currently contained in a demiplane of her devising, and only a handful attended her directly. Ilistet, she had promised a steed; Mazikreen had taken a liking to Afqithan, and Megual would need to be bought off. The Goat was remaining hidden and inscrutable; probably making

magic. She must somehow seek to either placate or compel them all, but she could not afford to

anger the *Ahma* quite yet, and loosing them on eastern Wyre would surely incur his wrath.

She motioned with her mind and gestured to the barkeep to bring her more wine. It seemed to be

affecting her; Soneillon wondered as to whether she had acquired some measure of mundanity.

When the bottle arrived – delivered by a flabby boy with an apish gait and an empty look - the

demoness smiled languidly.

Soneillon made herself receptive. From far beyond the known – such as it now was – an impression

reached her; concepts superimposed upon disquieting sound.

:: Beware of Shomei. We know her. She seeks to coerce the *I* with the Hazel. She will seek the *Urn*:: The demoness entered a potent divinatory fugue. To her, the world – all that is the case, and that had been a great deal – had changed into a small and unfamiliar but nonetheless exciting finitude. Much was new again and unexplored, with possibilities untapped. And now the Fires of Death in Jashat

had erupted in fourfold manifestation, spewing Void into reality.

The first and most violent effluxion was in the process of ravaging Fumaril: of the eighty thousand inhabitants, some fifteen hundreds had escaped. Much of the city was already gone, and burning

rivers now ran between mounds of ash and slag; clouds of steam rose from the harbors. Soon,

Soneillon knew, the abomination would tire of its revels and sink down through the mantle to

become a dark fire at the heart of the world.

A second manifestation, Kaalaanala had leaked into Dream; the Claviger would tolerate it but must

necessarily move to contain it. Carasch and other Chthonics raced along a great bough of the

Blackthorn into the nightmares which surrounded it. Soneillon sensed them as they brushed

Delirium; the urge to join them was almost irresistible.

The Third Effluxion, a winged infernal shrouded in unlight, took flight. It sped to an island in

Pandicule, a place far beyond the Claviger's purview, there to enlist powerful spirits – things now neither entirely demon nor fey – which had been seduced by the Blackthorn-*ludja*. At that same moment, within the Grotto of the Articles, Gihaahia manifested, even as the Claviger itself

plummeted into Dream. Taking stock as consciousness recrystallized, the Enforcer's perception

reached out toward the southern boundaries of her remit. Soneillon felt the awareness pass through her and test the limit of the Blackthorn's ward; the *ludja* itself flexed, repelling Gihaahia's efforts.

The Fourth and last – an image of the dark and hooded form of the goddess, wreathed in corrupting

flames – stood momentarily before the altar of itself in meditation. Its senses probed reality.

Without word or gesture, it caused space to fragment and dragged forth a great Chthonic *anala*, binding it into the shape of a fiery steed. Faster than a hurricane, it then rode north, an emissary.

Soneillon scowled. *That bitch better not come here.*

A pulse. The demoness started. It was emanated by the scion at the nearby keep. To soothe her?

Allay her concerns? She tasted an exquisite anguish; a sudden satiation of unbecoming. It struck her as a heady ecstasy of the utmost purity.

Immediately, a presence in her mind. Her mental defenses slammed into place; Soneillon transformed herself and arose in might, clutching the *Urn*. A shockwave blew a hole in the roof of the inn as she launched herself skywards: protective void blossomed around her; tendrils of

madness lashed the air wildly.

All of her hatred, the entirety of her, focused into an execration directed at this interloper in her field of apprehension. There was a brief mental silence.

[Nehael]: As you wish. But take care where your senses roam.

Soneillon cursed.

**

Hummaz lolled, wine-soaked, upon a great stone chair. Nymphs slept nearby in exhausted bliss. The

Wild God of the Woods raised an eyebrow as something flitted across his vision four leagues

distant.

What's this?

He reached out, grabbing a diminutive fey and dragging it toward himself. The creature was dressed strangely, possessed of one arm, and had an unwinking eye in the middle of its forehead. Hummaz

absorbed its thoughts and history in a trice. An enigma.

Hummaz grunted and replaced the odd creature. He was thirsty, and his head pounded.

Where was

the wine?

Wine?

“*Wine!*” He bellowed. His temper was rising.

Every fey within a mile instantly heeded his call. Wine began to arrive; in bottles, cups, flasks and kegs.

Hummaz drank eight deep draughts and relaxed again. But not entirely.

Something wasn't quite right.

**

In Northern Soan, in the world of Sisperi, it was known that the gods warred in the Heaven of

Mulhuk. At first, Lai's priests blamed the machinations of Saes, the goddess of death; the truth was later revealed by oracles to be otherwise: a foreign war-goddess – Visuit – was attacking the

Nireem.

Dark spirits – awakened by the passage of the interloper through the Bole of Shades – now stalked

the fields of Soan. Steadings were attacked by evil sprites; gentler woodland spirits fled. Crofters barred their doors and nailed their shutters. Prayers were fervently offered: to Ortwine, Rhul, Lai and Akma. A few invoked Ninit, but the Rider was oblivious, galloping wildly along Faerie strands

west of Nizkur.

Akma sent his furies to intercede; winged avengers with great maces and flaming swords drove fell

monsters back into shadow. The faithful rejoiced.

In Mulhuk itself, events were less happy.

**

[Eadric]: You cannot suppress her wards?

[Mostin]: No

[Eadric]: Conjure a...whatever that was?

[Mostin]: No

[Eadric]: Open a *gate*?

[Mostin]: There are no celestials or devils to invoke. I will not call a Horror using something as vulgar as a *gate*: anything of any use to us would simply ignore my commands and pursue its own trajectory.

[Nwm]: Invoke Nehael.

[Mostin]: I most certainly will not. Besides, there's no point. She doesn't ever *do* anything, anyway.

[Eadric]: She owes me for Yeshe.

[Mostin]: And what exactly did she *do* with Yeshe?

[Hlioth]: Do? Nothing. She left her with Rimilin.

[Eadric]: *What?*

[Hlioth]: Neither Rimilin nor Yeshe will leave the presence of the Tree until their time. I suspect that whether they are “alive” or “dead” is not necessarily germane from the Tree’s perspective.

But Cherry will not snatch them. This is good.

[Eadric]: The Cherry is waking?

[Nwm]: Amongst others. Big trouble. It won’t be long. The Aspen here is still sleepy.

[Eadric]: And Nehael *knew* this?

[Hlioth]: As the Image of Uedii. Nehael is, herself, merely an agent: an echo of an aspect. That is worth remembering.

“I am confused,” Eadric sighed.

“As am I,” Mostin confessed.

“Cherry and Blackthorn.” Nwm explained. “These are the moot of Cheshne and Uedii: the Abysmal *ludjas*, so to speak; negotiations are tense. My bowels register it uncomfortably.”

“You *feel* this? And yet Nehael is somehow blind to it?”

“Eadric,” Nwm sighed, “Unlike the *Ahma*, I am wise: I see little purpose in burdening objective reality with my internal processes. I have occasional intuitions; Nehael is more empathic: perhaps she is too close to it. Visuit. Kaalaanala. Goddess grows darker.”

[Ortwine]: Yes she does. And a little help would be appreciated here.

[Lai]: Soon.

“But Nehael is an echo of *what?*” Eadric asked, exasperated. “And to which *ludja* is she inclined?

Hlioth, with all respect, please speak more directly.”

“Of her own Sovereign Viridescence: her higher octave, which is still not Uedii. If we prevail, you may see. As to loyalty? To all and none. The Tree is there for Nehael, not vice versa.” Hlioth glowered at him, and considered. “Imagine this picture: Tree in its entirety as an aegis bequeathed by Uedii to protect Nehael from the Apparition of Demogorgon. The surface of the shield, facing

outward, carries a veneer of cherry and blackthorn: the wood is weak and apt to splinter and ablate under violent passion or disintegrative fire. Nonetheless, it dissipates the shock of an attack.

Beneath, lacquered bands of hardwoods - oak, elm and ash – lend strength, flexibility and hardness.

In all, twenty varieties of wood comprise the shield; taken as a whole, the construction is impenetrable.”

“And how long must this shield endure?”

“An aeon or a moment, what does it matter? It will last for as long as it needs to. Thinking big is nice, but none of it helps us deal with Visuit,” Hlioth observed. “Or the Blackthorn’s waxing power.

Our troubles are just beginning. Effects are no longer preceded by causes; Cheshne moves in

tandem with Tree’s shadow, seeking to Apparate. Yes, the Tree itself is indestructible; Nehael,

unassailable. Unfortunately, this is not true of the rest of the world. We neglected to quickly plug a

certain cosmic hole.”

She scowled at Mostin. It irritated him – mostly because she seemed to know more than him. But

also because it made him feel guilty: it had been within his power to greatly curtail the menace. Had they only returned to Azzagrat, and sealed the *gates*. But that was now the prior reality.

“Where are the Blackthorn scions, Hlioth?” Eadric sighed.

“In Jashat and at Deorham, you know. One now grows northeast of Cirone, at the place where

Shvar Choryati was ended: its roots sink into the crater floor.”

Nwm groaned. “That scar should have been healed but there was no time; the landscape is blasted; trees flattened for a mile.”

Hlioth ignored him and continued. “The scion at Cirone remains dormant for the time being, but will likely not long remain so. One – as with each – is in the vicinity of the Great *Ludja* itself: each of those scions is subdued; dwarfed in significance, but each *ludja* is thus ever-present. One is as yet unaccounted for.”

“None in the realm of Hummaz?” Eadric seemed suspicious.

“No, no, no,” Hlioth shook her head. “Pine, Linden, Willow; Hazel and Holly; Hawthorne and a Cherry – yes. And a Yew. But there is no place for the principle of elimination in relation to

Hummaz; he is too fecund.”

“I suspect it will be Fumaril,” Nwm grumbled. “Or Afqithan. There are already powerful resonances there.”

[Ortwine]: It damn well better not be. Now?

[Lai]: A little more patience.

[Eadric]: Do we have a plan?

[Mostin]: I’m thinking.

[Ortwine]: Hurry up!

[Mostin]: You need a nine hundred. I have it. It's ugly.

**

This gnat was becoming annoying. Visuit stood upon the heaped bodies of minor godlings and revered ancestors.

Purposely vexing the augmented war-goddess was not an activity which Ortwine undertook lightly.

Lai had been with her to begin with, but as soon as news had reached them that Mostin's tower had

arrived, the goddess of magic had vanished to organize the ritual which Nwm must inevitably lead.

Ortwine – swifter and more elusive than a zephyr – had succeeded in briefly distracting Visuit from

her main purpose: the Butcher was intent upon smashing her way into the forge of Jaliere. However, Visuit's attention could not be captured for long: when it became clear that she could not engage

Ortwine at her own choosing, but her enemy could inflict no harm upon her, Visuit simply returned

her focus to the divinely barred portals.

They would not yield.

Visuit cursed, her spittle smoking like acid. Runes flared; the flower gardens nearby wilted. She

turned her attention to the black rock around the doors: it was harder than adamant. With a titanic effort, she hewed a great shard away from the wall.

Ortwine hurled *Heedless*; it clattered noisily off of Visuit's helm. The war-goddess bellowed in fury, leaped a hundred feet, and brought her hideous weapon smashing down; her enemy was not where

she was should have been. But had she been...The sidhe raised an invisible eyebrow.

Ortwine taunted her. Visuit, unperturbed, sliced reality open with her weapon; darkness emanated

from a *gate* into a dismal realm.

Ortwine groaned. Through the rift, dark feys now poured, each raised to a wicked eminence in the

presence of the Blackthorn. Many had once been sidhe. Now they were much worse.

She began to charm or dominate those that she might, in an effort to turn them against one another.

Visuit resumed her assault upon the rock.

**

Nwm observed that there were only twenty-three spellcasters amongst the flamines and scrollbearers. Spells were all but spent. Every reservoir – including his own – was exhausted. He

considered Mostin's solution.

"You will give me everything. I am going to burn as hot as I can," he said to them. "This means that you will burn as well. As I am more practiced at burning than you are, all of you will die

immediately. You will enjoy a brief spell in Rûk: a relatively agreeable underworld, as underworlds go. Sombre, quiet self-reflection is the order of the day. Some of you may be temperamentally

inclined to remain there; otherwise, I will return you at the *Ahma*'s request. In any event, the experience of burning will embed itself on your souls and permanently traumatize you. If any of

you now wish to reconsider your contribution, I advise you to speak up."

The predictable silence which ensued reassured Mostin of the utility of religious fanaticism. Nwm

turned to those who would not participate in the ritual, and would therefore survive it.

"It is impossible to say how long we will have; I am hoping for twenty seconds before Visuit's protections reassert themselves. Please be assured that speedy action is of great importance."

The rite which then followed was an horrific scene: Nwm screaming; an inferno of green fire which

consumed all but he.

The Preceptor perceived her. Energy moved from him; a tendril of green power, suffused with

magic, rupturing space. Distance was meaningless. He struck the Butcher remotely with a *dispelling*, sealing the *gate* near her and suppressing the Voidwrought wards erected by Kaalaanala.

Simultaneously, as though grasping a rope with his own awareness, Nwm dragged those present

through a green vortex, directly into Visuit's presence.

In those next few moments – a matter of seconds, which passed as though they might be years –

Eadric finally came to grasp an appreciation of the raw power which Mostin now possessed. Almost

entirely bereft of spells, the Alienist became instead a formidable physical opponent, a dozen

hideous tentacles setting about Visuit, pinning her arms, legs, head. With all of her augmentations subdued, the wizard now outmatched the war-goddess.

Lukarn ignited as it sprang from its scabbard.

Her plight was impossible. Mostin grappled her; tentacles crushing the goddess through her armor

and pinning her. She growled in fury as the others set about her, and hacked at her.

Butchered her.

“Take her,” Eadric invoked Nehael as Visuit fell. Now he understood.

War had passed. But at hideous cost. And he had broken a vow; demonstrated his own limit. He

knew in his heart that not all of those who had perished in Nwm’s immolating spell would fly to the Serenities. Not every martyr would find his reward. And each of those which might would be

nonetheless diminished.

**

Rimilin observed the Tree. Its leaves whispered in a gathering wind. The World changed again.

**

**

Tozinak – appearing as a hook-nosed creature of medium stature with tufted feet and silky wings –

returned to his island manse with a sense of profound relief. Mostin’s insane schemes had almost

rendered him dead again. The wizard understood in a moment of clarity that, although a coward, he

was possessed of a genuine peaceful demeanor: the Alienist’s actions never failed to perturb him on any number of levels simultaneously. Daunton had insisted on a drink; Tozinak had been inclined to agree. The afternoon had been spent regaining a semblance of calm.

As he shuffled into his cluttered study – a large space with a lofty ceiling, crowded with papers, alembics, and other apparatus of unguessable purpose – his skin tingled and his nose turned blue in alarm.

A succubus of extraordinary presence relaxed, supine, on his favorite couch. Tozinak froze, emitting a high-pitched squeak.

“I believe you can guess who I am,” Soneillon smiled, lifting her head.

Tozinak nodded meekly.

“I’m just across the lake there,” the demoness sat up and pointed with her wingtip. “At

Deorham.

We're practically neighbours."

Tozinak swallowed.

"Which is nice. I'll be stopping by. To see how you're progressing on inscribing *A Flame Precedes the Aeon* for me."

"Ah," Tozinak finally said.

"What is your price?" Soneillon asked unexpectedly.

"Oh." Tozinak half-exclaimed. "I-I had assumed..."

"That this was extortion? Consider what you desire. I will grant it. I will return tomorrow. But you may begin the inscription at your earliest convenience." Soneillon vanished

The wizard retired, flustered and palpitating, to his herbaceous borders. What did he desire? Really, nothing which he did not already have; or simply to be left alone. This was Mostin's fault: Tozinak had previously shunned contact with all conjured entities; he judged that none were possessed of a facility which outweighed their price.

As he descended a small, uneven set of steps and rounded a corner, he began to hyperventilate. A

tree where none had stood prior. Suspended, before his face, on a branch laden with their weight.

Cherries.

Tozinak reached out and smiled as he picked one and popped it in his mouth. It was exquisite; his

mind seemed to melt. He yearned impossibly, although his longing had no discernible target.

Cherries. He knew he was safe. She would not come back. She was scared of the cherries. He would

have to go to her. Bring her his spell. And cherries.

**

**

Dusk fell.

Nehael, the Image of Uedii, manifested discreetly in the Temple precinct in Morne: she had been

invoked by no few of those present for protection. She wore only a simple robe of green, and

melded effortlessly into the throng; now the courtyard was packed with many hundreds. Lamps

were being lit; vigils set: the wyrm was a portent of unknown significance.

As the sun sank behind the western hills, the dragon stirred. Unseen, Nehael approached, laying her hand upon Qematiel's great snout; the calm which emanated from the goddess was irresistible. An

impulse. Immediately, the crowd began to disperse – the attention of each suddenly drawn to some minor elsewhere.

Shomei appeared, unnoticed by the mortals present.

"You are mustering an army," Nehael observed. "For what purpose? Who is your enemy?"

"Always myself," Shomei smiled as she mounted the dragon.

"I did not foresee the union of these scions; you will make the Holly- *ludja* jealous."

"I am the Archivist of Hell; the two seemed a natural fit. As for the Holly, it hates enough already: it needs no prompting."

"There is no Hell."

"There is for me."

"Exercise compassion," Nehael advised.

"It is not my fort ," Shomei admitted. "But I am not unprincipled."

Nehael fixed her with a look. "Answer me a question: what do you know of the *I*'s translation?"

"What is there to say? Will has been ceded to the Hazel; the *I* now acts from Instinct."

"I think we both understand that things are a little more complicated," Nehael seemed unimpressed.

"Truth is always so," Shomei was ironic.

"A piece of the *I* is unrevealed," Nehael said. "It is disguised as something else; or the *I* is hedging its bets."

"Such is the instinct for Self-preservation," Shomei agreed. "But whatever it is, it is here by the grace of the Tree; its nature is necessarily mixed."

"It is a Flame," Nehael remained impassive. "An Iota. Oronthon's memory of the Nameless Fiend, so to speak; or his preconception of *Antinomos*. The Flame which must, perforce, become Itself. It is a paradox: a Flame is pure; it cannot Fall. You seek it. And which laws will you set yourself against if you find it?"

"Not all laws are unequal," Shomei smiled grimly. "The only *Law* which presently matters is that of the Claviger. Its oneiric whimsies are too much to endure. Other laws may be subject to scrutiny in due course."

"You would look to assume this role?"

"This is already my role," Shomei sighed. "I am Exempt; the Agent of Will. Who else is better qualified?"

"You are not exempt from the Enforcer's mandate."

"The devil sitting by the Hazel begs to differ."

“He is not entirely a devil, nor was he entirely *Outside*. The World is changed.”

“Outside? So Gihaahia now protects Wyre only from Mostin?” Shomei said archly. “That, at least, is reassuring.”

“And Vhorzhe.”

“Yes. And from Vhorzhe. I am beginning to believe that she may need some help.”

Nehael was exasperated. “The [I]I[I]’s nature is now a visceral urge for satiation. You cannot contain Hummaz.”

“I will subdue him.”

“Shomei...”

“Will you trust me, or not?”

Nehael was silent: the memory of the *Antinomus*, reflected back at her. She approached the Yew, laid her hands on it. Its bark was warm, but from its own, inner heat; no trace of the wyrm’s fire remained on the tree.

“You are sincere, but I am sceptical,” Nehael remained in contact with the scion. “If you fail, and enrage Hummaz, things will go ill.”

“I am no fool. I am not yet ready for this task, nor shall I attempt it until I am. *I am not the Adversary, Nehael*. But I might become what he should have been. Think on it.”

Wreathed in Hellfire, Qematiel took to the skies and thundered away to the southwest.

The Goddess turned. Nehael grasped a living stave of Hazel and willed after Shomei as she

departed.

Compassion!

The impulse echoed through a hundred worlds; Nehael blazed, and for a fleeting instant, the Aeon

manifested: an eleos. A sigh rippled through the Green as the Butcher fell in Mulhuk.

[Nehael]: She is mine. I claim her.

All of significance heard her. Hummaz, maybe the only one who might, did not contest her. A

naked, powerless spirit, Visuit fled briefly through the underworld of Rûk and into the presence of the Great Tree- *ludja* in the Womb of Qinthei.

At the Veils, the Mistresses screeched in hateful impotence.

*“Thus Spake Oronthon [to me],” words which were typically only uttered by Oronthon’s divine oracles in the heyday of Orthodoxy; her “reiteration” may also be interpreted as a rebuttal of *Nothing Is, Nothing Is Not, Nothing Becomes*. Shomei’s assertions are unequivocally outrageous in all regards.

Midwinter Goddess

After the fall of Visuit the Butcher, Nwm lingered for a day in Sisperi in order to aid Lai with the *resurrections*. Mostin removed his tower to eastern Nizkur, attaching it again to his manse – now the home of Orolde and Mei. Rhul and Mesikammi travelled to Afqithan to assess the danger in that

realm with Ortwine. Eadric returned with Hlioth, his saints and remaining knights to Galda, there to receive mixed news.

Prahar had withdrawn his cavalry – their raids had been punishing for both sides in the conflict –

and established a more distant perimeter. Obfuscatory magicks prevented Temple scribes from

penetrating the Cheshnite ranks and determining their exact movements, but it was known that the

main host was again marching, taking many hours to pass through the gates at Thond.

“She can be no worse than Visuit.”

“You should not underestimate Dhatri,” Hlioth cautioned. “She is a symbol. An all-consuming mouth and gullet. She has had long to prepare; she must time her momentum precisely. The *Pall* is more than half expired, and there are too few now amongst the cabals to renew it: many have died;

some have moved to new centers of power. But she has had a month to work her necromancy

uninterrupted. And a million ravenous undead accompany her. Sheer numbers may prevail.”

“And when they meet the perimeter established by the scions?” Eadric asked.

“A test occurs.”

“Then our lever must be at this point.”

“We have a brief lacuna,” Hlioth advised him. “Use the time wisely.”

**

Mulissu sat in Mostin’s – now Orolde’s – study, brooding. A fire burned steadily in the hearth, and the smell of musty books and burned toast filled the air. Outside, snow piled heavily against the

window, diffusing the afternoon light as it streamed in. The savant had been absorbed in her own

thoughts since witnessing the destruction of the city she had sworn to protect. Mostin could not

determine whether it was guilt, rage, or some other emotion which consumed her and had

caused

her fugue.

“Crumpet?” The Alienist asked, proudly presenting a long fork which displayed an over-charred circle of dough.

Mulissu sighed, and took the proffered dainty, scraping off carbon before smothering it with butter and jam.

“We need to find a way to eliminate the effluxia,” she remarked distractedly.

“That would involve *finding* and *confronting*,” Mostin observed. “I suspect that our energies would be better deployed elsewhere.”

“I assume that you are speaking of your *Ú* s”

“I am,” Mostin nodded sagely. “I am also of a mind to reengineer the *Quiescence* to allow for selective *teleportations* amongst those whom I designate. Furthermore, Daunton informs me that a number of wizards are willing to demonstrate a more unified front in the face of the latest events.”

“Which?” Mulissu sounded suspicious. “Why this sudden reversal?”

“The threat is now more imminent. Daunton himself, Hlioth, Jalael, Wigdryt, Gholu, Creq, Droom, Poylu, Troap, Muthollo, Sarpin. Even Waide. Tozinak appears to be sulking, and refuses to answer

Daunton’s *sendings*.”

“And Shomei?”

“Her path, as always, is her own,” Mostin sighed. “But Sho is willing to participate.”

“And her sibling?”

“Still awaits her pseudogenesis: as to that, I have given thought to a spell.”

“What did you have in mind as a basis?”

[Mostin]: Look: $A_N = \int D\mu \int D[X] \exp \left(-\frac{1}{4\pi\alpha} \int \partial_z X_\mu(z, \overline{z}) \partial_{\overline{z}} X^\mu(z, \overline{z}) \, dz^2 + i \sum_{i=1}^N \right.$

$k_{i\mu} X^\mu(z_i, \overline{z}_i) \left. \right)$

[Mulissu]: You can reduce it to this: $A_N = \int D\mu \prod_{0 < i < j < N+1} |z_i - z_j|^{2\alpha k_{i.k_j}}$

[Gihaahia]: You are both idiots. Use this: $\int_{-\infty}^{\infty} \exp(\{a x^4 + b x^3 + c x^2 + d$

$x + f\}) \, dx = e^f \sum_{n,m,p=0}^{\infty} \frac{b^{\{4n\}} \{(4n)!\}}{(4n)!} \frac{c^{\{2m\}} \{(2m)!\}}{(2m)!} \frac{d^{\{4p\}} \{(4p)!\}}{(4p)!} \frac{\Gamma(3n+m+p+\frac{1}{4})}{\Gamma(3n+m+p+\frac{1}{4})} \{a^{\{3n+m+p+\frac{1}{4}\}} \}$

[Mostin]:!! (Gratitude)

[Mulissu]: Eleven dimensions works for me. I suppose that’s as good a place to start as

any.

[Gihaahia]: Don't disappoint me, Mostin.

"What is her involvement in this?" Mulissu asked, confused.

"I have no idea," Mostin was dubious. "She has never evinced any interest in my work prior to now.

Although, she reconfigured Daunton's transvalent repertoire, and bestowed the *Instant Convocation* on him. Perhaps she will do the same for me?" [Inquiry?]

...

"Apparently not," Mulissu said drily. "Still, you have something to work with. What will you need?"

(Calculation).

"You, me, Sho, Orolde...and Mei herself. That is all." Mostin was dumbfounded.

"Where is Mei?"

"In the parlour," the Alienist said intensely, his eyes rotating in excitement. "I will inform her immediately. Her time is close...two or three days will be enough."

"Can we afford even that much?"

"Mei has placed her trust in me without question!" Mostin was aghast. "I won't fail her now."

"You are an odd one," Mulissu sighed. "I don't believe I'll ever understand you."

**

The errand-runner was beside himself with terror. Only moments before, archons had apprised

Eadric telepathically.

"*Ahma*, a messenger from Shomei the Infernal. He purports to be one Yeqon; he styles himself the Fifth Prosecutor."

Hlioth scowled. Shomei was making a point. No Goetia so grand as the binding of one such as this

had ever before been accomplished. Prosecutors, Antagonists – among the greatest of fiends and the most recondite. Signatories to the pact. Now atavisms, whom Shomei alone possessed the power to

conjure and coerce. The Agent of Will had dispatched him as an errand-boy.

Oronthon! Eadric swore silently and reflexively upon encountering the devil.

Yeqon towered above him, and – saving Hlioth – none others amongst those present might even

approach the devil, such was the magnitude of his presence. A fallen seraph, close kin to Enitharmon: vast, dark wings shrouded his form. The Fifth Prosecutor had been brooding

in grim

obscurity for an aeon, hatching impossible schemes for the renewed assault upon Heaven.
A Heaven

which might be no more; or one so far removed from thought and knowledge that it might
as well

no longer be.

Yeqon knelt and sat upon his heels, his eyes meeting the *Ahma*'s.

"What do you want?" Eadric sighed.

The Fifth Prosecutor briefly pressed his forehead to the ground at the *Ahma*'s feet.

"*Saizhan*," the devil replied.

Eadric squinted suspiciously. "Then it is to the *Sela* you must speak, not I."

"In due course," Yeqon's voice was calm and mellifluous. "But what I want and why I am
here are two separate questions. My mistress has sent me as an ambassador; she is
reconvening the Dark

Choir. Bolstering its numbers. She asks that you remember your prior words to her, and
that you

continue to trust her."

"Pah!" Hlioth spat.

Eadric raised his hand, and addressed the Prosecutor. "*Reconvening?* With what? Only
Irel remains."

"No devil is lost to Shomei the Infernal," Yeqon replied. "But some are more freshly-
fallen. Did you not stand with Rintrah above the Blessed Plain?"

The *Ahma* recalled the Migration of Light he had witnessed; that some of the Host, in their
haste to enter the burgeoning Viridescence, had crashed in smoking ruin. But to *where*?

"Into the Thickets of the Four Kings," Yeqon read his face precisely.

"Nets cast by the Hazel?"

"Yes," the Fifth Prosecutor answered. "And the Holly."

[Hlioth]: Beware this devil, *Ahma*. Blackthorn may rot and putrefy and eliminate; Hazel
dominate and involute; Cherry lust and crave. But, for sheer wickedness, none can match
Holly.

"And which words would Shomei have me remember?" Eadric asked wryly.

"That you need not miss the opportunity of a good friendship," Yeqon replied.

"And I assume that some demonstration of my friendship is asked for?"

"Those arms and armor which you have under guard. Of Visuit the Butcher; Yeshe the
Binder;

Prince Graz'zt."

“She suggests I release these items to her?” The *Ahma* was incredulous. “Is there even any savage enough to bear Visuit’s sword?”

“I, for one,” the devil said steadily.

Eadric scowled. “I would speak with her directly.”

“She is presently indisposed, but I will convey your request,” Yeqon bowed, and departed in a pillar of dark fire.

“Indisposed?” Eadric turned to Hlioth.

“Shomei conjures,” the Green Witch replied. “Goddess help us all.”

He issued a mental summons to his steed.

“Wherever you are going, I can get you there faster,” Hlioth observed.

“I need to ride,” Eadric replied.

Straddling *Narh*, he sped away.

*

As he rode northwards, winter began to assert itself: not merely by virtue of latitude, he noted, but because of distance from the unnatural energies which lay over the whole of the Thalassine and

Wyre’s southern marches. He reached Hrim Eorth by mid-morning; by noon he had passed Groba

and was galloping over frosty fields in Hethio. In the wan sunlight, Nizkur loomed.

Narh knew the route well, and required no prompting from Eadric. The forest – although quiescent by season – seemed unusually subdued. With barely a faltering of pace, the stallion ran through

webs and thickets impenetrable to those without permission: the Green bulwark which surrounded

Qinthei, the Womb of the Goddess. Snow blanketed the ground; the air was frigid. A slender figure

stood waiting beneath the Tree. Eadric reined in before her. Nebulous figures – the barely perceptible shades of vanquished foes – moved like mist in some adjacent world, but did not seem

to register his presence.

Steam rose from *Narh*’s flanks and nostrils; Nehael extended her hand, rubbing the horse’s muzzle, tugging at his forelock, and sending him into an ecstasy.

“I come for counsel,” Eadric dismounted and bowed.

“Come,” she said. “Walk with me.”

*

“The thing which destroyed Fumaril – Kaalaanala’s avatar – what has become of it?”

Nehael paused and pointed at the frozen earth beneath her feet. “It is below us. A cancer at the heart of the world. It will irrupt again if the goddess at Jashat becomes sufficiently angry.”

“Mostin said there were others,” Eadric grimaced.

Nehael nodded. “One rages amid nightmares; another has set itself up in mockery of the Enforcer; the last...may prove the most dangerous.”

“You offer little reassurance,” the *Ahma* said bleakly. “This last – what can you tell me of it?”

“It is *her*,” Nehael spoke carefully. “The Fires of Death. Or as close as you will come to encountering her without actually meeting her. She may bring cohesion to the remaining hierophants amongst the Cheshnite sect. She is abroad, but I do not know *where*, or exactly *why*.

Powerful magic obscures her.”

“Even from you?”

“Especially from me.”

“And there are no limits imposed upon her actions? Why was I led to believe that Kaalaanala was *confined*; her remit strictly curtailed?”

“So it is,” Nehael scowled. “Or all of Wyre should burn.”

“Then is it as Nwm asserts? That the Goddess grows dark?”

“Our mood is various,” Nehael observed laconically. “Or had this fact escaped you?”

“The movement is chaotic. I cannot find purchase,” Eadric stopped walking.

A long silence followed.

“What of Soneillon?” Nehael inquired archly. Her gaze penetrated him.

Eadric replied with a pointed look. “It is a meeting which I am content to forestall for as long as possible.”

“I ask because you should expect her. She perceives your Flame, albeit indirectly; she knows how bright it burns. She covets it, or is drawn to it like a moth. And it is Midwinter; the Sun is weakest.”

“Your words are not comforting. Mostin informs me that she has undergone a ‘great rapture.’”

“Her power is formidable,” Nehael said plainly. “She is her own locus: of Dream, Oblivion, Delirium – imbued by the Blackthorn. Trace her passage, Eadric: she has been celestial, infernal,

demonic; unbecome, a nightmare; something impossible, now perylene. More infinities collide in

her than can be counted. She may be insane – psychotic – by your standards, but to characterize her as *evil* would be to reduce her complexity to a single dimension. Although

I believe you already know this.”

“You sound sympathetic.”

“That would be natural: it is who I am. She is as I, maybe, on a different path. Perhaps we run contraparallel; each anathema to the other. Force cannot overcome her now, unless some sovereign

strength is invoked. And it is she who is in possession of the *Urn*.”

“Then how would you suggest that I deal with her?” He groaned.

“Naturally,” Nehael laughed, “...naturally. But I see this prospect somehow disturbs you?”

“She remains my greatest weakness,” Eadric acknowledged. “Or one of them.”

“Maybe less than you are hers. And what of Shomei?”

“Must you always be so perceptive?”

“Goddess is manifold,” Nehael smiled. “And little escapes my notice. Perhaps you understand Nwm’s dilemma a little better.”

“Shomei makes inquiries in my direction to gauge my disposition.”

“You sound sympathetic,” Nehael remarked drily.

“I am,” Eadric admitted. “Insofar as I *trust* her; I understand her.”

“As she was, maybe. But as she is?”

Eadric considered. “Shomei is always in process; I think she would reject any static characterization.”

“I have spoken with her,” Nehael’s voice was subdued. “She has set herself tasks which are suitably unattainable. My concern is that she may drag the World into ruin in her effort toward self-mastery.

Her revelation within the Fane at Morne: what is your reaction to *that*? ”

“I am unsure,” Eadric said apprehensively. “Although I find myself in a state of at least partial agreement with the Irrenite faction, and how they have chosen to interpret it.”

Nehael raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

“They are calling it the *Third Turning of Saizhan*.”

“The Third?” A look of mild puzzlement crossed the face of the goddess. “Did I miss one?”

” *Skôhslðaúr*, the Gate of Demons,” Eadric explained. “I am designated as its unfortunate patron and exemplar. And there are enough demons left in the World. *Faheth*, any advice you have to offer on how to proceed would be appreciated.”

“You choose now to name me thus?”

“It is how I would relate to you.”

Nehael sighed. “Somehow you must impress the notion of compassion upon Shomei. She

still

conflates it with sentiment; she needs to understand that it is rational.”

“I was unable when she was mortal; how am I to believe that it will be possible now that she is a devil?”

“I didn’t say it would be easy,” Nehael smiled. “I, for one, have met with little success. But, as you have pointed out, she is in process.”

“And otherwise?”

“Exercise compassion yourself. You cannot teach what you do not demonstrate.”

**

Nivorn – a rocky peninsula eighty miles long, extending into the sea to the east of the conflict – was attached to Wyre by a broad isthmus and boasted impressive natural defenses. Much of its coast was sheer cliff, pierced by a handful of protected harbors. An encircling row of peaks enclosing a high plateau, cloven by a wide, deep lake comprised Nivorn’s interior.

Successive Wyrish kings had attempted to annex the foreland; all had met with failure. By their own vows, the lairds were bound in tribute to Morne. In practice, it had not been exacted for generations from most: like the inhabitants of Ardan – to whom they were related – the Nivornese were

generally considered intractable, often maniacal, and best left to their own devices. They feuded interminably amongst themselves; vendettas a thousand years old still raged. A previous king,

Tulgus – regarded as the greatest of the Gultheins – had established a line of border forts in

southern Wyre to prevent major incursions; drunken raids to abduct womenfolk and livestock still

occasionally occurred, but were immediately met with fierce punitive strikes. An uneasy truce

prevailed.

It was upon a densely wooded island within the lake – called Sooile by the natives – that Temenun

had elected to establish a stronghold, placing himself under the protection of the Cherry which now grew there.

The Tiger’s choice to defy the other immortals – and the Fires of Death herself – was not made

lightly. But Temenun was ever his own master; he would not bow now, even to a *Bhiti* such as Kaalaanala, and throwing himself at the mercy of the Cherry – on the surface a highly risky

proposition – was made in full consciousness: whatever dark prolepsis had served the

Ak'Chazar

for twenty millennia and had prompted him to his action, was the same faculty – the only thing, in fact – that he had come to trust.

His Naztharunes, who may have numbered in the dozens or in the thousands, accompanied their

overlord without question. A clique of *Anantam* magi – those most uncomfortable with the current political climate and the direction offered by Anumid – also joined him. His armored legions, for

the most part half-giants from Danhaan, the Tiger had left to whatever fate might befall them – such were the vicissitudes of service to an immortal such as Temenun.

Only hours after he had established his redoubt – a region of twisted vines and briars, from the

center of which the Cherry scion itself emanated invisible lures across the island – news reached the Tiger of Kaalaanala's fourfold effluxion, and he breathed a silent sigh of relief. Here, at least, he was now safe from the Embassy; the last, most potent, most deadly of the avatars. The one which

might force him to do the bidding of the Fires of Death. The others – even Idyam – would necessarily capitulate to whatever demands were imposed upon them.

Thoughts of Void, of *Tamasah* – the final darkness – he allowed to slip from his mind. Nothing was so pressing; or rather, Nothing now seemed less pressing. The poisoned fruits which grew nearby –

familiar fruits, from beyond the southern deserts – were a source of comfort to him. And, finally, it was *warm*.

Temenun relaxed. Throile was but a footstep away. Perhaps he would pay a visit: the jungles there

held many secrets. And Soneillon's cabal – now that their mistress had abandoned them – might

prove amenable if offered sufficient inducements.

**

It was dark when Eadric returned to Galda. Wearily, he dismounted and gave an ironic smile: *Narh* was tireless, and despite having been ridden hard for six hundred miles that day, the steed seemed fresh as though led from a month's pasturing. He realized that he himself had had no real rest for weeks – since long prior to his own *reincarnation*. Eadric unharnessed the stallion, bade him run free until dawn, and trudged through the camp on foot, his saddle cast over his shoulder. Bestowing nodding blessings upon sentries as he went, and a glare in the direction of rowdy Ardanese

mercenaries celebrating the winter *Tagamuos*, he made his way to his pavillion.

He pulled the heavy fur drape closed across the opening to the tent, and illumination was dimmed; canvas filtered the light of campfires to a dull, flickering glow. Eadric unbuckled

Lukarn, set his shield upon its stand, threw off begrimed armor, and sat for an hour in *saizhan* before entering the *Fultum* meditation: a steadfastness in the face of all doubt, and a protection against forces – or impulses – which might otherwise assail him.

He lit a narrow taper and placed it on a simple altar with a winter garland, and offered prayers to the *Eleos*: for the protection of the souls around him; for the safe passage of those lost at Fumaril; for mercy upon those within the orbit of the scion at Deorham; for the succour of his servants and those within his own household. Finally, he arose, extinguished the light, and cast himself, exhausted,

onto his pallet. As visions and half-remembered ideas played across his consciousness, for a fleeting moment, the recollection of an insight which had been instrumental in shaping his understanding of the World.

Immediately, the familiar scent of lotus and sandalwood as lips and hair brushed his cheek; a soft body pressed eagerly against him. An oval face. Eyes, like pits of ravenous darkness. Power, as he had never before sensed. Somehow, Eadric wondered whether he had himself, in fact, invoked her.

“This tack will not be effective,” he said plainly.

“May I stay?” Her whisper conveyed urgent need.

“I am in no mood to argue, Soneillon. I am tired. Let me sleep.”

Fingernails briefly threatened to become talons – or something far worse – and then relaxed.

“As you wish, *Ahma*.” Her eyelids closed; a fuliginous wing cracked open and encompassed him, settling over him like a blanket.

“Your egregiousness would seem undiminished,” Eadric sighed. “Although I see you are not otherwise as you were. What do you hope to achieve by this? Do you really expect me to trust any

façade which you present to me? That I can say with surety that you have not previously placed a

spell on me? Perhaps I’m now to believe that I am the last thread of sanity to which you cling?”

But the demoness was silent; she was already enmeshed in some chthonic nightmare.

Or do not. Again, as always, her passivity – her apparent vulnerability – confounded him. In the dim light he studied her, touching her neck and shoulders uncertainly and tracing brutal scars: the legacy of wounds bestowed by his own hand. After so long, were they real, or an artifice? Was she?

Did it matter? And what reason did he actually *have* to doubt her? Had she ever been anything other than entirely honest with him? No, he was obliged to concede. *Saizha*, *Ahma*?

One must encounter the Void on its own terms.

She stirred uneasily.

He closed his eyes, and slept.

*

Midwinter Goddess - Part 2 (and 3)

“How many is that?” Teppu asked.

Nehael groaned. “Too many. She is out of her mind. I make three Antagonists; six others who were

once episemes; around fifty recently-migrated devas – most of whom were exemplars. She began

conjuring pit fiends and malebranche – presumably for heavy lifting tasks – but would appear to be taking a break. She seems to be avoiding magnates from the traditional order – for the time being, at least.”

“Does she have a purpose? What did she reveal to you?”

“Little,” Nehael shrugged. “She will be hard-pressed to control them all.”

“Do you believe that she will make an immediate bid for the *Urn*?”

“Shomei is not one for procrastination,” Nehael sighed. “But nor is she ignorant of the difficulty of the task. She will weigh probabilities carefully.”

**

**

When he awoke, it was light. Her face was inches away. He groaned.

An eyelid flickered open. Void bored into him.

“Why are you here?” He asked.

She stood slowly and stretched, her wings unfurling to their maximum extent – and briefly darkening reality – before retracting. She turned to face him.

“I get lonely,” she smiled, tilting her head. “Sometimes, cold.”

“And how did you circumvent the wards?”

She laughed. “I *dream*, Eadric.”

Casting her eyes around the interior of the tent, her gaze settled on *Lukarn*. She raised an eyebrow.

Before he could mouth an objection – faster, even than he could articulate the thought to do so – she had moved and drawn the weapon from its scabbard. She seemed to absorb its light effortlessly.

“I remember you,” she whispered to the sword, running a forefinger along its fuller. “You don’t like me very much, do you?”

“I notice that your scars seem to have vanished,” Eadric observed without humour.

“They come and go,” she replied vaguely. She brandished *Lukarn* deftly, flipped the blade

over and caught it by the tip between two fingers, presenting him with its hilt. “Did you wish to cause more?”

“No.” He set the sword down firmly next to him. “And I doubt this weapon is adequate to the task, in any case.”

“Move up,” she kicked his feet. “It is time you understood a few things.”

He drew his knees in, and she sat, cross-legged upon the narrow pallet, sable wings drawn around

her like a bat. From beneath them, her hand appeared holding a plain clay jug. She placed it

squarely between them.

“It is unremarkable, would you not say?”

Eadric was silent; his perception twisted and span.

“For a long while,” the demoness continued, “I wondered why Kaalaanala did not simply *take* it from me. I was there when she reified, Eadric: it was glorious; something to behold. At any rate, the question puzzled me: I know that *I* would have certainly taken it from *her*, had our roles been reversed.”

“And have you determined an answer?”

“No,” she shrugged. “I gave up looking for one. There comes a point where one must concede that

there are things which cannot be known; and there are too many plausible *theories*: the Aeon forbade it; Cheshne forbade it; a deal was struck between Uedii and Cheshne – are they different, in any case? And so on, and so forth. The *Urn* has great power, Eadric – of that there can be no doubt.

In the hands of a goddess such as the Fires of Death, its destructive – which is to say its *generative* potential focused toward an absence of matter and energy – would be great. But her remit is limited: she cannot leave Jashat, nor her direct influence extend beyond it: she is the black dart, stuck in Uedii’s green shield. Aggravating, unbalancing, but ultimately unmoving. And she lacks a certain

perspective required to realize the *Urn* in full. Perhaps a deeper Void perceived this truth. I cannot say.”

“And this *perspective* is something which you possess, I presume?”

“Not exactly,” Soneillon replied unexpectedly. “I aberrate, Eadric. My path is not *conventional*, as you may have noticed. The *Urn* is a great boon to me, but I also lack a certain something. The demiplanes which I created which abut Throile – which still persist, incidentally – were the labor of many years. Entities with more...wherewithal...in this regard are empowered to make more

effective use of the *Urn*’s generative power.”

Eadric gave an inquiring look.

“That would be your other girlfriend,” Soneillon smiled innocently.

*

“It becomes more complicated,” Soneillon continued.

“I had a feeling it might.”

“What do you know of the *I*?”

“I dislike the direction of this conversation already,” Eadric sighed. “Enough to know that it would be foolish to be complacent regarding its motivation.”

“The *I* is tenacious,” Soneillon nodded, “and will seek to survive despite all other indicators to the contrary. It fragmented in order to preserve itself, with a notion to recombine at a later time. And a vehicle – something *exempt* from the normal rules – to allow this to occur.”

“Shomei?”

“Yes. Your other other girlfriend.” Soneillon said lightly.

Eadric grunted. “I am tired of hearing this. Nehael also accused me of as much.”

“Then the green bitch is not entirely stupid,” Soneillon gave a sweet smile. “Not everything is about sex, Eadric. At least, not in the beginning.”

“I do not regard Shomei in this fashion.”

“Yet you evince a particular sympathy for her perspective?”

“She is complex. As to our philosophical differences, we reached...an understanding. I care for her wellbeing.”

“And you find her attractive?”

“She is comely enough, I would say.”

“And she, you?” Soneillon pressed on, evidently enjoying the line of questioning. “How does

Shomei the Infernal relate to the *Ahma*, who is – or at least *was* – central to her paradigm?”

“I cannot speak to that,” Eadric sighed. “She has never demonstrated anything other than...” He

paused, and considered.

“A measure of doubt crosses your face.”

“I had simply not considered that she is even capable of being driven erotically. It seems somehow... beneath her.”

Soneillon laughed, and it seemed warm and heartfelt. “Ah, *Ahma*. No wonder you interested me so: you are truly guileless. And you attach such *virtue* to chastity; a line of examination which we might pursue at some later time. Shomei is fired by deep passions,

Eadric, and to suggest that she is

somehow asexual or frigid is to misunderstand her absolutely. But her lovers have been – and

remain – devilish, for the most part; I realize that these are not the social circles in which you are wont to move. And her façade is well-practiced: she is discreet; no brazen harlot.”

“Where is this leading, Soneillon?”

“Consider your subsequent interactions with her in the light of this perspective, and form your own judgment.”

“But why do you speak of Shomei at all?”

The demoness cast her eyes downward, toward the amphora which sat between them.

“Shomei wants the *Urn*?”

“That girl always had ideas above her station,” Soneillon sighed. “The devils which she currently

conjures will be deployed against me. She will make her move in due course.”

Eadric was aghast. “Deorham...”

“Will likely be a violent and unpleasant locale. By the way, I have done nothing to harm your thralls

– I’m sorry, you’d prefer a euphemism – although many have been *altered* by the scion. But my own demons are becoming impatient: at some point, I will need to either deploy them or disband

them. Think on this, and we’ll come back to it. May I go on?”

Eadric nodded grimly.

“Shomei needs the power offered by the *Urn* in order to master Hummaz,” Soneillon continued. “To consolidate the various components of the *I*; to make herself whole. I’m disappointed that Nehael did not share this information with you; still we each have our own agenda.”

Eadric scowled. “It was Nehael who suggested that I remain open to discourse with you.”

“I despise her less already,” the demoness raised her eyebrows.

“You are not seriously suggesting that Nehael is manipulating me against my best interests?”

“Of course. To promulgate empathy is her *agenda*. That may involve a lack of full disclosure.”

“As your agenda is to sow dissension and madness?” Eadric smiled, and shook his head.

“No. But we’ll come to that.”

*

“It gets more complicated,” Soneillon warned.

“This should be good.”

“There is a spell – *A Flame Precedes the Aeon*. It was dictated by Rintrah the Messenger to Jovol the Grey; the wizard Tozinak currently has it in his possession. It is conceptualized in terms of

Urgic altitudes, and requires that a naked iota of Radiance be present, and the *Urn* also, and one who has shaken off their reality – several times, in fact. Its timing is also crucial – certain

astrological windows must be observed.

“I see that you were not aware of the origin of this spell,” Soneillon sighed, and continued. “Nor, indeed is Tozinak. The Regents of the Purifying Wind bestowed it upon Rintrah – episemes lack

aptitude for this kind of magic; it was, in fact, formulated in the Sovereign Sphere. But it was

contrived in the Infinitudes; in the Mind of God – your God. Or your previous god; your bent would seem more theocentric of late: a tendency I am obliged to commend.”

A look of sheer bewilderment crossed the *Ahma*’s face.

“You have a question?” Soneillon seemed amused.

“This spell can somehow be used to create a set of circumstances which allow the wielder of the

Urn greater latitude in exercising its generative power?”

“No,” Soneillon smiled. “The spell summons Pharamne. At which point all other considerations are moot.”

“The Dragon coils around the Tree...”

“Where have you been, I wonder?” Her surprise seemed genuine.

“What else do you know of this spell? How do you know so much? Mostin spoke of it.”

“It has preoccupied my thoughts for some time; I made inquiries. Mostin has seen the pattern in the broadest sense, but does not understand the specifics of the language. I have asked Tozinak to

transcribe it for me. But there has been a complication. In the form of the Cherry.”

“And why, precisely, are you telling me all of this?” Eadric’s head throbbed. “It would seem to be contrary to your interests in all regards.”

“Because you are the *Ahma*, *Ahma*. You are incandescent: I see you with clear eyes. I am mad –

didn’t you know?”

“And you trust that I will not somehow use this information against you?”

“Dear Eadric,” Soneillon touched his face. “Trust has nothing to do with it. Do you not

understand?

You cannot *hurt* me unless I allow it – which I might, in a certain context, if it gave you pleasure. At least, you cannot hurt me *yet*. I am beyond your power. You still insist on seeing things in terms of good and evil; we and they; this and that: you need to put these notions behind you. There are

simply *factions* in the World: they move; interact; communicate. But the World itself is an innocent playground, Eadric. Things are as they are.”

“And what is your *agenda* with regard to this spell?”

“It is through me that the shadow of Cheshne seeks to manifest; and thence, through the *Urn*, to bring an end to reality. But there is something which you need to understand.”

“Why do I get the feeling that this is the crux of your argument?”

“It is not *my* agenda. I do not *want* this, Eadric. I have no *desire* to be the architect of the annihilation of the World. I do not *wish* to marry the Cherry to the Blackthorn in myself; to invoke the Apparition and bring an end to all things. I have avoided the Cherry for that reason, amongst

others. ”

“Then what do you want, Soneillon?”

“I want to play, *Ahma*. I just want to play. I like things just as they are.”

“You are beyond mad, Soneillon. And you intimate at ‘truths’ which I can barely begin to comprehend, much less accept. Tell me this, and this simply: *why should I believe you?* ”

“Cheshne is not her shadow, Eadric. Nor is she her cult. And, as I said some time ago – and had you been paying attention, and less intent on smiting me, you might have heard it – *The Void Shines*; still, I would not deny you your passions. I precipitate both pain and joy, Eadric, and in bliss

transcend both. I am the Fruit in the Void; the Mango in Cheshne’s Mouth.”

*

“You may be the most dangerous entity I have ever encountered.”

“I am flattered, and will not argue the point. But you answer me *this*,” Soneillon fixed him with her gaze – and he knew that it alone might deprive him of his very existence, were she so to choose.

“Have I ever, to your certain knowledge, either directly or indirectly, caused an innocent to come to harm? Unless you count Hlioth amongst the innocent, which would mark you as an idiot in my mind.”

“There are tales...”

“There are many tales, Eadric. Answer the question.”

“No,” he groaned. He knew that whatever the Blackthorn had caused to pass, was beyond

her power

to control.

“And if not by my action, then how will you judge me?”

“I cannot,” he conceded.

“Thank-you,” she said. She rose and replaced the *Urn* in its hiding place. Her humour seemed to have left her.

“Soneillon...”

“Think on it, Eadric. In some ways, it was a disappointing night; in others, it was all I needed.

Besides, I am patient. I should probably leave, now – I would hate to cause a scene.”

“Why do I...”

[Shomei]: You asked to speak with me directly, *Ahma*. May I translate to your location?

[Eadric]: Very well. Give me a minute. Come alone.

“Eadric,” Soneillon spoke swiftly and earnestly, “if you come to Deorham, I will act as guarantor of your safety. You need not fear the scion; I can ward you from its influence. I have not interfered with the chapel; it is no less holy to me than to you: something which was difficult to impress upon your brother. Also, the mattress there is larger and more comfortable.”

She dissolved into mist.

Orm? He sat for a moment in a state of utter confusion.

“Another devil to see you, *Ahma*,” the voice of a messenger spoke presently from outside of the tent.

He closed his eyes, and breathed deeply. “Show her in.”

**

**

“Sandalwood?” Shomei caught the scent in the air. She glanced around, absorbing the minutest

detail of the tent’s interior in an instant. It seemed barren; her host was half-clad.

Eadric looked at her. He had not seen her since that fateful day in Afqithan when three of the

Akesoli had dragged her screaming, dissociate form into Hell. Ortwine had encountered her since, but Eadric found the sidhe’s description – however eloquent – did not do Shomei justice.

A robe of purple so dark as to be almost black shrouded her slight frame; within it, fields of stars seemed to fall in perpetual torrents. Upon her forehead, she bore the intimation of a mark or brand which, if observed directly, faded from view. Her features were otherwise her own – although in

some fashion she blended the qualities of her two *simulacra*, as though they were her precursors and not her magical progeny. Infernal now by nature, without question, but also much more; she

was at ease with her own power in a way which he had never before thought possible. Something

about her – and recently, Eadric knew – had simply *ignited*. She was sheer, dynamic force.

“You cannot trust her,” Shomei said directly.

“Perhaps not. Questions of trust seem to preoccupy me of late. You do not bear your rod.”

“I am not here to coerce you, *Ahma*.” She retrieved *Lukarn* from the pallet, slid it into its scabbard, and handed it to him with a raised eyebrow.

“No,” Eadric took the weapon. “You are here to ask for my permission – my *blessing* if you will –

for an assault upon Soneillon. I cannot grant it, Shomei. It would mean the destruction of all of

western Trempa.”

“She sits on an army of demons; I cannot believe that you would simply endure this imposition.”

“Demons which have yet to demonstrate any ill-will toward my....subjects... on the part of their

mistress.”

Shomei looked sceptical. “If she has found her way back into your bed, *Ahma*, you might also consider that your judgment is impaired.”

“Ngaarh!” Eadric groaned.

She inspected her surroundings, looking for a place to sit.

“*Ahma*,” Shomei ventured, choosing to redirect the conversation, “your accommodations are

spartan and unwelcoming. If I might...?”

“I had not given thought to it; I require little. Do as you wish, if you would prefer more easement.”

She made the briefest gesture, and the interior of the tent transformed into an opulent pavillion, festooned with deep blues and vermillions. A table lay replete with exquisite wines and confections;

sumptuous leather chairs, chests, wardrobes and velvet couches appeared; his pallet became a wide bed, draped with furs. Eadric’s armor sprang from the ground onto a stand, perfectly burnished.

Exotic rugs from Bedesh carpeted the floor, and incense burned upon a small altar; the scent of

cinnamon hung heavy in the air. A purplish light – with no discernible source – suffused the place.

“I confess, I like my creature comforts,” Shomei smiled, seeming to relax. She poured a goblet of

kschiff and handed it to him.

Eadric took it suspiciously, then downed the liquor in a single draught. His head span.

“Whatever she said to you, *Ahma*,” Shomei continued, offering him a candied chestnut, “it would be unwise to afford it too much credence, until you have had time to reflect. I don’t doubt that she

evoked some compelling vision of the World, with disparaging – and highly plausible – remarks

made regarding my disposition and motivation.”

She opened a dresser, and presented him with a heavy robe of ermine.

“That is an accurate assertion,” Eadric nodded in gratitude, drawing the vestment about himself, and sinking into a chair. “Shomei, I should like to ask you some questions.”

“Of course,” she sat opposite, hands folded lightly in her lap.

“How do you propose to overcome Hummaz, Shomei?”

“You have spoken with Nehael, then?”

“No – yes. But it was Soneillon who informed me of your plan.”

“I do not have a *plan* yet, *Ahma*. Merely a direction; a course which I must inevitably chart. There are signs along the way – I write them myself.”

“And *Pharamne’s Urn* is one of these signs?”

“Indeed,” Shomei nodded. “I would venture to suggest that this artifact is also far *safer* in my hands than most others.”

“Others such as Soneillon?”

“Soneillon is advised by Vhorzhe, *Ahma* – a monster who was once Mostin’s mentor, and who now persists in a state of pseudodaemonic insanity. *Uzzhin* penetrates every aspect of her mind and her formless form. Would it be correct for me to assume that she did not evince this particular aspect of her psychology – nor her *physiology*, in fact – in your recent exchange?”

“She did not,” Eadric admitted. “Presumably in order to spare me undue stress.”

“That would be one way of explaining her motivation,” Shomei gave a small smile.

“Soneillon is fully conscious of her own psychosis, Shomei.”

“Yes, *Ahma*. She is. Doesn’t that fact concern you?”

She held the flask of *kschiff* above his glass and gave an inquiring look.

He nodded.

*

“Your *intervention* in the Temple is causing a stir,” Eadric remarked. “The Irrenites are already enshrining your words as doctrine.”

“In which case they are missing the point entirely,” Shomei sighed.

“Your revelation is rather opaque.”

“I should hope so. The principal point of revelation is to make people *think*.”

“And you do not believe your act was rather...presumptuous?” Eadric inquired.

“Yes. And necessarily so. Many of those who practice *Saizhan* are slipping into a kind of existential torpor. They need to wake up.”

“Is it your understanding that Oronthon inspired you to this course of action?” Eadric asked.

“In a manner of speaking; although I do not locate Oronthon external to myself after the fashion of Orthodoxy.”

“I understand,” Eadric nodded.

“Let me ask you, *Ahma*: has the *Sela* made comment on my actions?”

“He inquired as to the aesthetics of your inscription.” Eadric smiled.

“And?”

Eadric laughed. “Upon hearing that your script was in keeping with the prevailing design of the

Temple interior, seemed satisfied.”

“Good,” she poured more *kschiff*.

*

“Do you have an erotic interest in me, Shomei?”

“You are drunk, *Ahma*, and it is not even mid-morning. Perhaps you should stop.”

“No, pour me another. The question stands.”

She sighed, and refilled his goblet. “I see things primarily in terms of alliances, *Ahma*; I am rational, and eminently practical. I enjoy physical recreation as much as the next devil, but I am not driven by my carnality, insofar as I do not let it dictate my choices.”

“Not dictate,” Eadric suggested, “but inform?”

“Perhaps,” she acknowledged. “But I have no need of a lover, *Ahma*, if that is what you are

suggesting.”

“I am not. You have infernal servants who fulfill this role?”

“Yes.”

“And as to a spouse?”

She set her glass down. “That, *Ahma*, is an entirely different proposition. Marriage is an *alliance*.

Connubial duties must be taken very seriously, especially amongst immortals – where a dispute can

last for decades, and the results of a spat be felt for a millennium. Is this interrogation leading somewhere specific?”

“No,” Eadric said hastily. “I am merely attempting to ascertain your motives with regard to me.

Both Nehael and Soneillon have suggested that our association goes beyond conventional friendship.”

“You are the *Ahma* and I am Shomei the Infernal. We are both agents of cosmic change. How could it not?”

“The old order has vanished, Shomei, and I am still unsure of my place in the new. What is my role in your reality? What is the *Ahma* to you?”

She pondered briefly. “A few days ago, I etched words into the archway in the Great Fane in Morne; I burned yet more into the solar orb. I planted a Hazel scion within the Temple precinct...”

“You did *what*? ”

“A Hazel, *Ahma*. I assumed you would have heard. Regardless, my acts and words describe a vision

– my vision – of *how things should be*. When I stood upon the threshold, a great force moved through me; it was of me, and yet not: Will was manifest in its fullest form. It was directed at the Illuminated who were gathered there, and sought to enkindle them; to bring their Flames to

realization. It was inadequate to the task. I revised my strategy, in the light of something which I already knew to be fact: my energies must be devoted toward my Self. If I deviate from this Truth, I will fail.”

“And now you have set this fire in yourself,” Eadric observed. “It is immediately apparent.”

“It is a beginning,” Shomei said softly. “And I am always beginning, *Ahma*. As to your role, consider those of Morne who returned from the Serenities. Because when *your* Flame ignites, *Ahma*, you will illuminate all of Wyre – and beyond. It will induce a torrent of Radiance which will make the cascade at Khu appear as a child’s squib in comparison. God will breathe into them all.”

Eadric stared at her, incredulous.

“And yes, I would consider an alliance with one such as that desirable.”

He swallowed.

“As for *compassion*,” Shomei added, “a topic which I am grateful you have avoided to this

point: I believe that it is something which I would be willing to learn to practice, in the interests of

preserving good relations.”

She smiled, and took a long sip of *kschiff*.

*

Midwinter Goddess – Final Part

There was a barely audible sound; a persistent hum, which suffused perception.

Are you asleep again already? The peasant-girl from Trempa looked up at him. *Ah, but I know this dreamscape well: you have been drinking kasshiv.*

The flat of his sword lay across her shoulder, two feet from the quillons. She smiled and raised an eyebrow as she turned the weapon slowly upon its edge with her fingertips; its weight broke her

skin, causing her to hiss. A trickle of blood stained her white tunic.

His hands shook. She reached forward and clasped them, steadying them.

Like this. She drew the blade toward herself, gradually opening a wound; cold iron sank down into muscle and sinew. Her breath became rapid, and she clenched her teeth. Blood flowed freely over

her. He moved to pull his hands free, but her grasp tightened. *Do not stop.*

He felt the blade bite into bone, and turned his face away from her. His stomach churned and

heaved.

Look at me. Eadric...please...

He forced his gaze back to meet her eyes, and her grip threatened to crush his wrists.

Press. He drove down hard, shearing through her collar-bone. She sighed, and shuddered gently; Void glazed

over, and she collapsed in convulsion. Blood pooled rapidly around her.

This is too much, he thought.

No. It is the same. She crawled forward, insensible, and clung to him.

Eadric awoke at two in the afternoon in a cold sweat. His head pounded.

*

“In Shûth,” Nwm handed him a glass of mint tea, “*kschiff* was originally considered a sacrament. It is unfortunate that it has achieved the status of an inebriant amongst wealthy aristocrats in the

Thalassine and further north.”

The Preceptor poured himself a small glass of the astringent liquor, savored its aroma, took a sip, and placed it aside.

“I might add,” he continued, “that attempting to match Shomei’s prolific consumption is a losing

proposition – this would have been true even before her recent metamorphosis.”

Eadric moaned and sat up, shivering. He pulled his ermine robe around himself.

Nwm gave a wry smile. “But I am glad to see that the worldly goods which she bestowed upon you

are also functional.”

Eadric groaned and lay back down again.

“And how goes the dialogue with Cheshne, *Ahma*?”

Eadric gestured him away.

**

“Ah, the *Goddess*,” Nwm’s eyes twinkled merrily. “What can one say? She is elusive, yet ever present; demanding and forgiving; cold and passionate. Mother, lover, sister, daughter. She is

flirting with you; presenting her many faces. You should feel blessed.”

Eadric grumbled. His face was still pale. “Since when have you included Soneillon – or Shomei, for that matter – in your ever-expanding category of *Goddess*?”

Nwm smiled, and popped a fig into his mouth. “I am not the *Ahma*.”

“And Gihaahia?” Eadric asked. “Do you include her too?”

“I am not a wizard,” Nwm shrugged.

“Shomei’s taste in furnishings cannot be faulted,” Ortwine observed calmly, uncoiling her hair and relaxing into a couch. “And you have an excellent selection of wines and victuals – some of these

are the finest diabolic vintages and are no longer available. I think it’s time you placed this childish desire for frugality firmly in your past; and I see no particular need for abstemiousness whilst you are campaigning.”

“The chestnuts are rather good,” Nwm agreed. “And these little pistachio confections are simply

delightful.”

“For an ascetic, you have expensive tastes,” Eadric said sourly. “Also, you seem overly eager to

deify any female who crosses your path.”

“Not I,” Nwm laughed. “This conversation will inevitably lead to an examination of the *Ahma*’s psyche. Do you still wish to proceed?”

Eadric grunted.

“Shomei’s case is well-made,” Ortwine seemed serious. “And it is high time you began to

look to

marriage as a means of securing power, Eadric. You are an eligible bachelor-godling; you are

saintly, with impeccable credentials. You have your pick of any number of immortals and goddesses

as a potential mate – most of whom are admittedly depraved or mad. Or of poor estate, such as Lai.

Shomei is a fine prospect, in comparison.”

“Indeed,” Eadric stood abruptly and opened a dresser, pulling out a doublet and hastily donning it.

“She has a superb sense of style,” Ortwine looked on approvingly. “And someone certainly needs to

manage your wardrobe.”

Eadric turned. “It is an article of clothing, Ortwine. Or perhaps you’d like to marry me and see to my fashion needs?”

“I am haughty and aloof. I am also fastidious in matters of personal hygiene. We would make an

unhappy couple.”

“Of that, I have no doubt.”

“Consider the military leverage offered by the Wyrn, Eadric,” Ortwine continued. “As well as

Shomei’s conjurations. They would bring a massive strategic advantage in any dealings with the

Cheshnites. You said yourself that Shomei would take any matrimonial duties seriously; as your

wife there is no question that she would lend her full support to your cause. Hell is no mean dowry.”

“Keep talking, Ortwine,” Eadric pulled *Lukarn* over his shoulder, fastening his baldric.

“I am not persuaded that you are really listening,” the sidhe sighed. “What is this sudden urgency about?”

Eadric exited the tent. Dusk was falling, and hundreds of campfires had already been lit. *Narh* was waiting for him; he flung his saddle over the stallion’s back, and swiftly tightened the cinches.

Ortwine followed. “Where are you going, *Ahma*?”

“Home,” Eadric replied.

“Do I really need to point out to you that *home* is the arbor of a highly questionable scion? Eadric.

Use your head."

He mounted *Narh* and rode away.

"He is unstable," the *sidhe* remarked.

Nwm smiled. "The thought of her gnaws at him. Or have you altogether forgotten what it's like?"

"To be ruled by irrational, seething passions? Of course not. But he, of all men, needs to master

them. His political responsibilities far outweigh all other considerations. And she can't be *that* good."

Nwm guffawed, and slapped Ortwine across her back. "*Responsibilities?* A word I thought I'd never hear pass your lips in a hundred incarnations; the World is truly on its head. Come: while Eadric

seeks annihilation we should avail ourselves of his wines; I fancy that I spied a bottle of almond liqueur. And as an *ascetic*, I am dependent upon the largesse of my feudal master."

"Will you make no effort to intervene in this absurdity? He'll listen to you."

"No," Nwm replied. "He won't."

"Very well," Ortwine sighed. "Just don't *touch* me again."

**

[*Faheth*]: Are you then set on this course of action?

[*Ahma*]: Yes.

[*Faheth*]: I would say that you are one who experiences pleasure from bestowing it; from seeing and knowing that it is felt. That you do not derive satisfaction from causing suffering.

[*Ahma*]: I would certainly hope that to be the case.

[*Faheth*]: And when inflicting pain also elicits joy? Can you still feel happiness in the same measure?

[*Ahma*]: I do not know.

[*Faheth*]: And can you tell the difference between deriving pleasure through causing suffering, and deriving pleasure from evoking bliss which is caused through suffering?

[*Ahma*]: That would seem to be the pertinent question.

[*Faheth*]: This is no parlour game, *Ahma*, practiced by the bored wife of some thane from Hethio for her idle amusement; nor a wanton thrill offered by a drunken streetwalker. No brand of

masochism is so extreme: she will ask you to do great violence to her; to push her repeatedly to

death and beyond. It may break your mind.

[*Ahma*]: You dubbed her insane and evil, yet still you asked me to find a way to her.

[*Faheth*]: She is insane by your standards, not mine; as to evil, who can even say what that means anymore? And I ask and have asked for nothing; but whatever you ask, I will grant it to the extent of my power. The Eye of Cheshne will be blinded by the Sun for a few days more; but understand

that *the Sun is weak*: place your trust in the *Eleos*.

[*Ahma*]: And if my efforts prove inadequate, what then? Nothing is lost. She has her demons to look to.

[*Faheth*]: Demons are sadistic, *Ahma*. It is not the same thing at all. And Nothing *will* be lost.

**

Narh reached the Blackwater Meadow and crossed the Nund two hours before midnight. The road to Trempea was thronged with tents and makeshift hovels; those displaced from Deorham and

Hernath. A sickness had descended on them: Urgic mendicants moved amongst them, administering

aid where they could. They implored him; Eadric remained for the best part of an hour, emptying

himself, before resuming his journey.

Ten miles from Kyrtil's Burh, and reality darkened; not yet within the inner ambit of the scion, but beneath a wider compass which the *ludja* itself had set around its sapling. The presence of Nehael vanished from his mind; he knew that she was now blind to what transpired, unless the Blackthorn

itself were to grant her vision.

He cast around for some sign; his eyes were drawn to The Follower, a star considered auspicious

and which – in marriage with the Sun – marked the fullness of spring. It shone, steady and calm,

close to its zenith. He took it as a portent, even as a glamour settled over him: a mantle of darkness

– bequeathed, he knew, by Soneillon – to protect him from the warp which emanated from the scion

at the keep.

His gaze penetrated the night, and he entered a twisted phantasmagoria, where angle and distance

seemed meaningless; things crawled and festered and rotted: the Blackthorn was the quintessence of putrefaction. The town of Deorham had become a shadowy parody of itself, and although shapes

and rumors intimated that many of its inhabitants remained there, all, the *Ahma* knew, were *changed*. He shunned it, and spurred straight for the Burh. For home.

As he crossed the bridge, *Narh*'s hoof fall seemed muted and empty. The shadow of the Steeple fell on Eadric and the stallion shook, unwilling to go further: a vast shape roosted there, a guardian of terrible power recently bound by the mistress of the *Urn* for her protection. *Carasch*, he knew, for what other could it be? The great chthonic was crouched in silent vigil; the *Ahma* felt the demon's scrutiny settle upon him as a lance of pure malice. He dismounted, whispering words of reassurance, and slowly led *Narh* forward.

At the gate, Mazikreen stood waiting. Eadric said nothing, but fixed her with his gaze as he pressed the steed's reins into her hand. She lowered her eyes. The courtyard beyond was dim and hazy; all

sound was subdued. He passed beneath the arch and trod swiftly to the keep proper, averting his

eyes from the place outside of the chapel where he knew the scion reared. Opening the heavy door,

he made his way through the hall, up the companionway, and to his rooms.

All within was darkness: profane, silent and absolute. At the centre, a naked singularity churned in space; a deeper void into which *ens* vanished, and around which madness accreted in tendrils. It contorted, seeming to fold outwards from within, assuming more apprehensible form.

"Welcome home, dear." Soneillon manifested in the shape of the peasant-girl, and struck a light. A fire ignited in the hearth. His chambers seemed unchanged since his last visit, many months prior.

She smiled. "I notice you did not bring your cherub's eye: is there something which you did not

wish to see?"

"I was not sure what you'd want to show."

"That is considerate of you. Are you here to play, then?"

"No, I am here to reach you."

She cocked her head and raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Well...the *Ahma* is bold; perhaps he has been drinking *kasshiv* again. That is no trivial undertaking, by any measure. She – the first one, that is – knows that you have come, of course?"

"Yes."

"And she offered some kind of *blessing*, I presume; an article of empathy and compassion, couched

in terms of my *need*?"

"Soneillon, does it matter?" Eadric asked. "That is a perspective which I must hold true in

any

event. You know this.”

“From you, I will endure it – at least, provisionally. But not from her: she understands me better than you. And consider your supplication to Cheshne and the Void, because make no mistake: that is what this is. If you have doubts or would prefer lighter fare tonight, now would be the time to

articulate these feelings.”

He remained silent.

“Will you then do as I beseech of you?” She inquired.

“Yes.”

“And will you *trust* me?” She asked archly.

“I must.”

“You need not sound so enthused, Eadric. Do you speak out of feeling, or from some misplaced

sense of obligation?”

“It is a *choice*, Soneillon.”

“Very well, then.” Her mood became at once both serious and playful. She approached, drew a thin

stiletto fashioned of cold iron, and pressed it into his hand.

*

At Deorham, the Sun reached its nadir on Midwinter’s night, even as, at Khu, the Eye of Cheshne

did likewise and Soneillon waxed to power. Above, The Follower – the star of the *Eleos* – shone serenely at the midheaven, and the Dragon coiled yet tighter around the Tree.

In Nizkur, Nehael awoke to her full potential; to Sovereignty. Her sight penetrated the World.

**

Perspective (Midwinter Goddess: Epilogue)

[Nehael/ *Eleos*]: Shomei...

[Shomei]: Piss off.

**

Mostin stood upon the veranda with Mulissu, watching as the shape approached at incredible speed

from the south through the swagging winter skies.

Qematiel landed in an inferno, obliterating trees within a swathe a hundred yards across,

and setting many more ablaze. A great gout of steam erupted as snow melted and boiled, blown outward by a

shockwave of ionizing gas. Shomei leaped down, and strode towards them; the frozen earth

shuddered and ignited at her passage. A gale of hellfire preceded her.

“She is upset,” the Alienist observed.

“I should probably go,” Mulissu said.

“That might be best,” Mostin agreed.

The savant discreetly absented herself.

Shomei paused at the bottom of the steps, closing her eyes tightly and clenching her fists. She

slowly mastered her rage. The flames subsided.

“Would you like tea?” Mostin asked.

She glared at him. His hat began to smoulder.

“Enough!” Mostin thundered, casting off his headgear and stamping on it. “I will tolerate the

damage to my shrubbery, but this is my favorite felt. Control yourself. And don’t think you can

intimidate me with your dragon; have you ever seen an *Ú*?” The vowel was pronounced with undue length, and accompanied a tilted head and a mad stare.

The fire left her. She suddenly seemed exhausted.

“Gooood...” Mostin said. “Now. Perhaps you should slow down; I think you might be pushing

yourself too hard.”

“I want the *Urn*, Mostin,” she sighed.

“Well, yes dear. We all want the *Urn*, don’t we?”

**

“Marriage?” Mostin scoffed. “Don’t be absurd. Wizards don’t get *married*; matrimony is for

inferior beings. You are letting your infernality dictate your actions above your proper calling. And your social graces are also suffering.”

“He is the *Ahma*. It would be a sound alliance.” Shomei lounged. She was intoxicated.

“But

Soneillon has him all confused and irrational again. I even offered to practice compassion.”

“You are too *religious*, Shomei,” the Alienist grumbled. “That’s your problem. It’s always

been your problem. All of this nonsense about God and now compassion. Interfering with their doctrine

because you think that their mystical claptrap needs reformulating. And planting trees? Your

automagnification is all very well, but you'll end madder than Hlioth at this rate."

"Nehael is manipulating him," Shomei sighed. "He seems oblivious; he's elevated her to the status

of Oronthon's empathic function because of some off-the-cuff remark which the *Sela* made to Nwm. And he has such *potential*, Mostin. Meanwhile, he empowers her instead; she just sits back and waits for him to bring her the *Urn*. Her lack of agency – or rather her persistent need to act through him – is beginning to annoy me. She is so *disingenuous*."

"She would be the first to admit to her own inertia," Mostin nodded. "Have you considered

approaching Soneillon non-violently?"

"She is unlikely to surrender the *Urn* willingly, Mostin. The *Ahma* is of the opinion that an assault is unwarranted; Soneillon's demons have yet to wreak havoc. And now he is at Deorham, indulging

her whims and demonstrating *compassion*; which Nehael sucks out of him like some green vampire.

I can't stage an assault while he's there."

"Why ever not?" Mostin inquired. "Not that I'd like to see any harm come to Eadric." He hastily added.

"He is the *Ahma*, Mostin."

"I do not understand," the Alienist sighed.

"It is a *religious* thing, Mostin. You wouldn't."

"Well, no. I suppose not. Would you like to stay for supper? I plan to infuse Mei with pseudostuff tomorrow, and would like your opinion on the formula."

"Sorry, Mostin," she stood uncertainly. "I should probably go; I have more devils to conjure. And

I'm sorry about the hat," she dusted it off, and placed it on her head. "Do you think it suits me?"

"Yes," Mostin replied. "But you can't have it."

"A shame. Thank-you, Mostin. You're a good influence on me."

"Yes. I am."

She walked unsteadily towards the door.

"And Shomei?"

She turned to face him.

“If you set yourself against the Claviger, I will be forced to protect the Articles. Just so we’re clear.”

*

Obsession – Part 1

Mostin stood with Hlioth in what remained of his rose garden the day after Shomei’s passage. He

had surprised himself by the fact that he had contacted her – a signifier in the *Web of Motes* had prompted him. He had been astonished when she had actually accepted his invitation.

“Despite her protestations to the contrary,” the Green Witch said to Mostin, “she is, of course,

jealous. Not necessarily in some conventional, lovestruck way – I am not sure that Shomei is capable of experiencing romantic feelings *per se* – but rather simply because she *cannot get what she wants*. Actually, on consideration, they might be the same thing anyway. Regardless, she is exhausted, unhinged, volatile...and very, very *dangerous*. She is utterly fixated on the *Urn*, because it is the most direct route to power. I might also add that the heiress of Hell is twenty-seven years old; she lacks a certain perspective which millennia bring.”

“How old...” Mostin began.

“None of your business,” Hlioth interrupted.

Mostin bit his tongue. The crone seemed relatively agreeable today, and her demeanour was

notoriously fickle.

“In any event, she is also *vulnerable* – just shut up, Mostin and let me finish – specifically with regard to the Holly, which has yet to show its face beyond the Thickets and the Realm of Hummaz

and which she must, somehow negotiate.”

“No more trees,” the Alienist moaned. “Please.”

“Yes, Mostin,” Hlioth smiled disagreeably. “More trees! There are a lot *more trees* and you’d better start getting used to the idea. Now, you may be one of the most abominable creatures within the

confines of the creation, but – or perhaps, because of this fact – you also have a certain *relationship* with Shomei which may allow you to curb her excesses.”

“By and large, I rather appreciate Shomei’s excesses,” Mostin sighed. “But in this case, you may be correct.”

“And what, may I ask,” Hlioth inquired, “prompted you to seek my *advice* in this matter. I assume that is what you are *doing* – am I correct? It is not as though you and I have had a

glowing friendship these past twenty years.”

“An intuition prompted by the Enforcer’s intervention in my spell formulations,” Mostin admitted.

“But one subsequently corroborated by the *Web of Motes*: that Shomei intends to challenge the Articles. I projected a catenary which took her straight into conflict with Gihaahia – although she needs both possession of the *Urn* and mastery of Hummaz in order to secure certain victory in this confrontation; she may attempt it without the latter. I am of the opinion that the Injunction is worth protecting; the fact that you and I are having this conversation is testament to that fact.”

“Are you suggesting that the Claviger is implementing some kind of defensive contingency through

the Academy?”

“It may have been its plan from the outset,” Mostin nodded. “We cannot gauge its prescience.

Gihaahia is not invulnerable; the Claviger itself currently dreams – it is containing the Second

Effluxion.”

“Well,” Hlioth breathed a sigh of relief. “Perhaps things are not as bad as I anticipated.”

“Perhaps not,” Mostin nodded. “Mei – I should say Pseudomei – is a test case; you should see her:

she is so *beautiful*. But consider multiple Mostin pseudosimulacra. And how beautiful *they* will be.”

A look of profound horror crossed Hlioth’s face.

“The formula is based on Gihaahia’s own premise,” Mostin continued enthusiastically. “I am glad that the Enforcer – in fact, the Claviger – is finally looking to *Uzzhin* as the source of ultimate unmeaning. Anyway, Mulissu’s inside: let’s have some tea; you’re not such a bad old stick, after all.

And as you’re here, Hlioth, do you think you could repair my shrubbery? I’m not very good at that

sort of thing.”

**

“Eadric’s problem,” Ortwine opined, “is that he cannot relate to *women*. As a woman who was a man, I have a unique perspective in this regard.”

Nwm nodded. Ortwine had consumed an excess of infernal wine over the course of several days.

The Faerie Queene had lost all of her inhibitions, and seemed the very model of one – or several –

of her former selves.

“Allow me to continue,” Ortwine smiled. “Consider Despina – yes, that’s a name you haven’t heard

for a while. He placed her on a pedestal; notions of courtly love – *fine amour* – and all that chivalric bullsh*t. Unreachable; unattainable. Unrequited love. ”

Nwm nodded. He had consumed no small quantity himself, relaxing his normal guard against

inebriation. It was, after all, the winter *Tagamuos*.

“When she disappoints him,” Ortwine continued, “he *demonizes* her – let’s dub this phase *Nehael I*.

Nehael I is the realization that she is *bad*, but may be trying to be *good*. Are we in accord?”

Nwm nodded.

“You intercede,” Ortwine smiled. “Good job – at least, I think. Nehael is removed from the

humdrum divide between Heaven and Hell, and becomes Nehael II. Did they get it on, I wonder?”

“You can ask him when he gets back,” Nwm interrupted. “If he ever gets back.”

“‘I don’t think so,’ is the answer.” Ortwine sighed. “Nehael II is *abducted* – unattainable again, you see?”

Nwm nodded.

“He broods, and encounters Soneillon – let’s call her *Soneillon I*. Sound good?”

“Aren’t there prior iterations?”

“Just think like Eadric,” Ortwine replied. “Soneillon I is one hundred per cent *wicked* and *naughty* –

he likes that. But he can’t *be* that. Is that a fair assertion?”

“I must concur,” Nwm nodded.

“Simultaneously, he develops an ‘intellectual’ camaraderie with Shomei – *Shomei II*, I suppose, after you *reincarnated* her . Now, let’s be honest, Nwm. When has Eadric developed an intellectual anything?”

“He’s not stupid,” Nwm objected.

“No. But he’s pretty green – especially when it comes to women. Anyway, Soneillon I dies – or

whatever she does. Shomei II is lost. What does he do?”

“He wages war?”

“*Precisely*,” Ortwine smiled. “Except he’s encountered Nehael again, and now he *deifies* her.

Nehael III. Note that he still can't *have* her."

"And Shomei?"

"When *she* reappears, she will be inserted into the conveniently vacant role of *Adversary*," Ortwine touched her nose. "Shomei III. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Mostin invokes Soneillon –

Soneillon II – from wherever she wasn't – in order to fuel his magic, and then sends her hurtling

into delirium. She quickly becomes Soneillon III and then Soneillon IV in short order – the crazed, *Urn*-bearing Soneillon whom Eadric is now *brutalizing* in some awful rite. By now, Nehael has also become Nehael IV – I assume you *felt* what happened the other night? At this point, she is *utterly beyond reach*. "

"Where is this leading, Ortwine?"

"You seem to forget, I am a *goddess*, Nwm – Ortwine IV *a* – and I have a perspective you cannot.

The energy isn't flowing in the direction that Eadric, or Nehael, or Shomei – or Soneillon, for that matter – expected. In fact, maybe she is now Soneillon V. Because *Cheshne is waking*. *She no longer dreams*. "

Nwm stared at her.

"Don't worry; it's not as bad as you think. But my original assertion about Eadric and women

stands. All of which brings me to the real question," Ortwine raised an eyebrow. "What do we know

about Eadric's *mother*?"

"Not much," Nwm perked up. "But now I think we might be getting somewhere."

**

Gematiel wheeled in the air, a mile above the Academy and its grounds. The Hazel scion – tucked in a remote corner of the thousand-acre estate and obscured by a distortion – had cordoned an area in its vicinity. It was a lattice of interwoven demiplanes which formed a perilous snare around

Shomei's cottage, itself a portal to the labyrinthine repository of diabolic knowledge which she had inherited – or appropriated. Many powerful devils – and more recently-fallen celestials – abode in the skies nearby, preferring to remain *invisible*, awaiting the bidding of their mistress.

Below, the diminutive figure of Shomei the Infernal walked deliberately across a wide lawn, and

stood before the doors to her former abode – now the seat of Wyrish High Arcanie, with the Articles of the Injunction displayed prominently above its entrance. She inspected them briefly before

making the merest gesture; the valves swung open silently, and she entered within.

To her approval, the infernal aesthetic was largely unchanged; midnight blues, indigos and maroons predominated. Columns of black marble, shot through with streaks of carnelian supported

lofty ceilings. A soft light overspread the interior; all elements blended into a harmonious whole. A spined devil flapped past quietly on some mundane task, its eyes wide at seeing its former mistress returned. The atmosphere was calm, subdued and studious. She paused briefly and inhaled. There

was *value* here, she knew; but more concrete and purposeful *direction* was required.

A young mage exited a study hurriedly, almost colliding with her. He froze; his first instinct was to worship her. With a thought, she quenched the outward signs of her Fire: mortals were apt to

overreact when in her presence, and she sought no veneration. Shaken, the wizard moved away

slowly, his eyes still fixed on her.

She made her way to the library: the vast collection which she had acquired in a previous lifetime, now swollen yet further by contributions made by other mages. It seemed paltry. Lesser wizards

cast sidelong glances at one another, or whispered to colleagues in nearby booths: she was known to all by reputation; to a few – whose heads remained conspicuously lowered – in person.

Shomei selected a blank section of wall in a nook beneath a mezzanine, and set forth her power,

causing an archway to appear. Those nearby craned their necks to see what might lie beyond:

shelves which seemed to go on forever, crammed with scrolls and codices. Her thought summoned

Ugales – a devil of mild temper – and placed him behind a desk beside the newly-forged portal.

She spoke directly into the mind of every arcanist within a league:

My other library is now also available. There will be a fee.

She passed through the portal. Abruptly, a door of adamant appeared and slammed in place.

The devil smiled benignly, and began to sharpen his quill-pen with a pocket knife.

**

**

All was Void. Perfect. Empty. Absolute. It was timeless; an aeon of aeons. A moment.

Breath moved, and a light kindled. It grew to fullness, and blazed, sovereign. A rumour became;

formed around it. Refulgence drew her forth.

Ens crystallized as a violent spasm.

Blood – ichor – her own, she knew – soaked everything. He sat in the meditative posture to which

she had become accustomed; his blade rested across his knees. It and he were drenched with her.

The gore vanished with her passing thought.

“*Anvashochah. Maa. Tvayiv viikshya varca,*” she murmured, because she felt it.* And then she questioned herself; whether her words were real, or were spoken merely to comfort him.

He moved to leave; she reached out and gripped his wrist. *Please. Stay.*

He nodded.

She smiled languidly, and drew him toward her.

And wondered if he hated her.

*You are lamenting. Do not. In you I have apprehended the Sun.

Obsession – Part 2 (Inversion)

“*A ludja,*” Hlioth explained, “acts – or does not – according to its nature. Around each of its saplings it creates a circuit in which its own concerns are afforded precedence, but it is not *willful* –

with the exception of the Hazel, of course: willfulness is its nature. There is nothing stopping

Shomei from entering the ambit of the Blackthorn at Deorham: it will not assault her. Or, at least, it will not single her out for assault; its concerns are with all of the processes of decay. The warp which emanates from it – the *corruption*, if you prefer, although I am reluctant to characterize any natural process in those terms – is an unfortunate side effect. Things rot quickly there: matter, mind and space. Shomei possesses magic enough to prevent its general effects.”

“And if Shomei – or I, for that matter – were to take an axe to the scion?” Ortwine inquired.

“You would perish,” Hlioth said simply. “The manner of your passing would likely be ugly. A scion

will preserve itself through reflex, and in the unlikely event that a scion is *actually threatened*, the *ludja* itself will react to protect its sapling. In the case of the *Blackthorn*, it might simply *squash* you. Or you might instantly decompose. Or it might deploy many chthonics, who roost in its

branches – when they are not scuttling hither and thither in Dream. The Blackthorn can

transfigure them – as it has Soneillon. They are most potent, and would flay you.”

“And Carasch is one such?”

“Carasch is Carasch,” Hlioth replied opaquely. “Cheshne looks out for him.”

Ortwine pondered. “And if, somehow, one *were* to destroy a scion – before it could react, so to speak. What then?”

“Another would grow in its place,” Hlioth chuckled.

“And if one were to assault the *ludja* directly? To destroy it at the root?”

“Another. Would grow. In its place. The Great *Ludja* is the root of all. And it is Reality.”

Ortwine sighed. “Is there no manner in which these things can be curtailed? Restricted? Contained?

Manipulated?”

“Certainly,” Hlioth replied unexpectedly. “To assert the higher paradigm. That capacity which Nehael possesses, but will only demonstrate in compassion; which Hummaz enjoys, but has no

interest in using – except to gratify his immediate urges. Which Kaalaanala cannot realize; toward which Shomei strives; which has not been revealed by the *Ahma*.”

“And Soneillon?”

“My eyes cannot penetrate the Void,” Hlioth smiled.

“And the Oak and the Elm – here at Galda?” Ortwine was dubious.

“They are a potent combination; they embody physical characteristics – physicality itself – or two thirds of it. The hardness and temper of the Ash is absent. But strength, resilience, pliability,

resistance to decay – yes. Kaalaanala’s sight cannot penetrate the compass set by the *ludjas* around the scions, and they are *vibrant*; things which are *dead* will have a difficult time here, as will things which are predicated on non- *Ens* – which is obviously to our advantage.”

“I was denied their protection when I made an appeal. Despite Nehael’s intercession. I am less than confident in their benevolence.”

The Green Witch shook her head. “You are ascribing a quality – or a lack of it – which is inappropriate to these *ludjas*.”

“Then what was the obstacle to their action?”

“You are the Hazel’s bitch, Ortwine,” Hlioth sighed. “I am not privy to the internal politics of the Trees. Either way, Shomei will not forget that fact.”

“And this impenetrability to sight around the scions? It is selective. What motivates it? Deorham is invisible to me. Morne is not. Nor is here at Galda. But Jashat is. There are also other areas which are...opaque.”

“To you, maybe,” Hlioth shrugged. “But not, any longer, to the *Eleos*. There is no veil

through which she cannot now see, except those of Cheshne herself. And you ascribe motivation to all

Trees, which implies will – your perspective is too corylian. Although that is to be expected.”

“Yet the Hazel itself does not shroud the Academy?”

“It has not been so implored – or directed. Yet.” Hlioth said with narrowed eyes. “It might be

construed as an overt act of aggression on the part of Shomei. The Enforcer would be less than

pleased.”

“And Nehael’s perception extends to Jashat? The Temple of Cheshne?”

“The Fires of Death and all of her avatars are transparent to the *Eleos*, Ortwine. To Compassion.

Something which Kaalaanala is likely to resent.”

“Does this make sense to you?” The sidhe asked Nwm.

“Of course,” the Preceptor replied. “What is unclear?”

“Never mind,” Ortwine sighed. “What are we now waiting to do?”

“Eadric has been gone for three days, and is unresponsive to any efforts at communication. We will make a reconnaissance,” Nwm said in a matter-of fact way. “Of Deorham and its environs. I, for

one, am curious to see what transpires beneath a Blackthorn’s pall.”

“Is everybody *mad*?” Ortwine groaned. “Why can’t we just ask Nehael?”

“Her concerns have become more global,” Nwm replied.

“In which case,” Ortwine said drily. “She is even less use than previously.”

“You may be surprised on that count,” Nwm smiled.

**

[Daunton]: You should probably come to the Academy.

[Mostin]: Why?

[Daunton]: Just come, Mostin.

*

“As you can see,” Daunton observed, “things are rather out of hand.”

A long queue of chattering wizards had formed before a desk, behind which a scholarly devil sat.

The fiend was haggling with an enchantress over the precise conditions for access to a number of

obscure dweomers.

Mostin barged his way to the front of the line, over the objections of many who stood there, and

shoved the wizard aside. Daunton followed uncertainly.

“Please take your place in an orderly fashion,” the devil looked up towards him.

Mostin twitched.

“I am conducting legitimate business on the part of Shomei the Infernal, as her broker,” Ugales

sighed. “Her rights are protected.” He pointed – not to the Articles, but to the Academy’s own

protocol guidelines.

“Bah!” Mostin turned to walk away.

“But I am also instructed to inform you that access is unrestricted in your case,” Ugales smiled.

Many voices were raised in protestation, including Daunton.

Mostin swiveled on the spot, licked his lips, and looked through the portal.

“Mostin,” Daunton tugged on his sleeve. “*Mostin!*”

“Oh very well. This *is* irregular,” Mostin nodded. “Some our punctilio with regard to brokerage may need revisiting. You should convoke the Collegium. A course of action must be decided.”

“As Chancellor of the Academy,” Ugales added, “and *President* of the Collegium, Daunton the Diviner is also allowed unrestricted access.”

“Oh? Really?” Daunton asked, gazing through the doorway. “Come Mostin, we must inspect these

forbidden tomes, to determine if they represent a threat to our work here.”

“Quite,” Mostin agreed, as he followed him through.

**

Teppu grinned, bundling his few magical oddments – each of which was quirky, and of particular

interest only to himself – into a cloak, which he tied to a gnarled oak staff.

Nehael – the *Eleos* – stood nearby and watched. Her expression was one of sadness.

“I will miss you,” she said. “Yet not, of course. I will miss your *presence*. It is comforting to me.”

He bowed smoothly.

“When you see Nehael again, she will remember you, but she will not be the *same*,” she looked at him. “Try to remember that. It is a relationship you will have to forge anew.”

“I have experienced something similar many times myself,” he laughed. “I’m sure she will be perfectly delightful.”

“Perhaps. But not in the way you expect; her method of ending suffering – her *compassion* – is particular.”

“A paradigm can absorb many paradoxes,” he shrugged.

“I’ll see you if you die.” She kissed him on the forehead. “Try not to,” she added.

The *Eleos* took three paces backward toward the Great Tree- *ludja* and smiled. “Assume an active stance, and do not compromise your truth. Give her your wisdom freely; she will need it. And do

not concern yourself too much with the Aeon; it will take care of itself. Always find the Middle

Way. And remember that you are much loved.”

She – and the Tree – vanished to perception. The Womb of Qinthei was closed.

Teppu sighed. All things must end.

Moments later, Nehael appeared: an avatar, emanated by the *Eleos*. The Image of Uedii, her eyes remained green within green, but her garb was scarlet.

“Teppu?” She asked.

“Red?” He asked, and bowed again.

“I will need a horse and a sword,” she remarked. “Where can I find these?”

**

At dusk, a shadow slid furtively through the grounds of the Academy; potent magic cloaked it from

the dark exemplars which whirled beyond perception in the skies above. It crept from stock to bole to trunk, seeking to move forward, but always, somehow, vexed in its efforts. Once or twice it

espied what it thought might be a light but, upon skulking toward it, seemed to lose its bearings, or become snagged in some briar.

Shomei the Infernal watched the figure silently. From its movements, it was a Naztharune, but she

knew that surely Temenun was not foolish enough to send it against her: what could he hope to

achieve? Its purpose must, therefore, be otherwise.

In an inkling, without word or gesture, she dispelled its wards, *dominated* it and drew it toward her with telekinesis. Their eyes suddenly alerted to the presence of the tigress, devas with cobalt skin and flaming swords were instantly all about her.

Shomei wrenched its thoughts from its mind and prepared to unleash a ruthless barrage of

flensing upon it. She analyzed meaning and intention, paused, and instead turned it upon its head; it hovered five feet above the ground. Shomei approached so that the Naztharune's eyes were inches away.

She held out her hand.

It reached within its vestment with backward palms, withdrew a bunch of tumid cherries – deep

scarlet in color – and placed them in her grasp.

“Tell your master that I will give his offer due consideration,” she smiled. “But that, at present, I have no nuts for him.”

She righted it and released it. It slunk away into the night.

Your concern is appreciated, she spoke drily into the minds of the fallen celestials. *But really, I can look after myself. You may return to your stations.*

Shomei withdrew to her cottage and pondered, her mind quickly dissecting new data. Temenun's

ritual pool was not insignificant, and if he was in the process of co-opting Soneillon's former

succubi in Throile as well, then he would emerge as a major player.

She poured herself a glass of *kschiff*, threw off her cloak, removed her slippers, and relaxed by the fire. Shomei examined the cherries and sighed, placing them on a silver platter. The marriage of

Will and Desire was the last thing that she needed; really, that was where it had all gone wrong last time.

Hours passed in contemplative reverie; finally, she roused herself and stood. With a thought, she

translated to Galda, appearing before the Tabernacle.

Sercion's hand moved to his weapon, but she presented an open palm.

“I wish to speak with the *Sela*,” she said.

“Come in, Shomei,” a voice said warmly from within. “You know you're always welcome.”

She exhaled slowly, and drew the heavy curtain aside. The *Sela* sat in meditative posture within.

“I am not here for moral instruction,” Shomei said tersely.

“Then you are fortunate that I do not offer it,” the *Sela* smiled. “Shall we begin where we left off?”

Shomei nodded.

*

Obsession – Part 3

“Your friends have arrived,” Soneillon raised an eyebrow. “In the village. They are warded against perception – poorly. Are we entertaining, tonight? Should I send Carasch to greet them?”

“Your sense of humor is singular,” Eadric smiled, but his face was etched with pain, as one who has experienced great anguish. “Who is here?”

“The Uediian and the sidhe – and also Hlioth. I have killed her once already; perhaps she liked it and is returning for more. Mostin is not with them; I suspect he is avoiding me: he still owes me

Graz’zt.”

“Why did they not simply issue a *sending*?”

Soneillon gesticulated vaguely. “I confess that a number of signals have been deflected.”

“How many?” Eadric squinted.

“I did not count. Besides, it’s better that you have company on your return to Galda. Your horse is ready; Mazikreen has taken care of him. She has become rather attached.”

“He seems to have that effect. You are a curious creature, Soneillon.”

“Yes?” She fastened a garland of black lotuses around his wrist.

“What will you do now?”

“I will brood and pine desperately, Eadric. Or perhaps I should instead fortify my position against the coming storm – which may blow from any number of directions, or from all at once. Shomei

musters her devils; the Fourth Effluxion is moving – I do not relish that meeting. Dhatri’s host is marching. Desire – the Cherry – is active. And your first girlfriend has a new persona; we’ll see

how that plays out. Let’s hope that you don’t like her more than me.”

“Of what do you speak?” He asked suspiciously.

“I would hate to spoil the surprise,” she replied drily.

“Shomei may still be open to dialogue,” Eadric suggested. “I have not given up on her.”

“Maybe. Or she may simply *dominate* you at your next encounter; she is the assertive type.

Although, perhaps you’d like that too.”

“You are impossible.”

“Thank-you,” she gave a small nod. “I try not to take things too seriously.”

“You need not remain here.”

“I am not tied to this place, Eadric; I come and go as I please. But prudence demands that I strengthen a bulwark, and this one is better than most. And it would appear that Nehael – your

Eleos – has been of some *use* after all; she has struck a delicate balance, which compromises neither my solidity here, nor your attachment to this particular plot of earth. I should ask you to thank her for me when you next pray to her, but I won't; it would be an inauthentic request."

"Do you care to explain?" He asked.

"You will discover when you leave. Don't you ever like surprises, Eadric?"

"Generally, no," he said grimly. "It would appear that the lacuna has passed. If another should arise, I will return."

"Of course you will, *Ahma*." She smiled darkly. Her eyes were fathomless voids. "And things need not always be so *harrowing*; your courtesy and forbearance have earned my gratitude. But I have known you in death: you are now *mine*. And I don't share well."

She pressed a scarf of black samite into his hand, and curled his fingers tightly around it.

*

Fresh snow had fallen, blanketing the courtyard; the winter sun was wan. Eadric looked upon the

Blackthorn cautiously, as if his gaze alone might invoke malignancy from it, but it seemed subdued, as though its song had changed in some way. He closed the door to the keep behind him, and turned

to pull a handful of dead ivy away from the wall, but green leaves had begun to shoot. He paused,

confused, and lowered his hand.

Eleos, he knew, and understood Soneillon's words.

The *Ahma* made his way to the gatehouse, and slowed to regard the Steeple where Carasch roosted; the demon seemed not to have moved a hair's breadth. A shadow of darkness passed across his

mind; again, the same feeling of dread and foreboding oppressed him, as he felt the chthonic's eyes follow him. He shook it off with effort, and trudged forward.

"Nice horse," Mazikreen handed him the reins to *Narh*. "Come again."

Eadric climbed into the saddle, rode through the gate, across the bridge, and straight for Deorham.

He did not look back to the Burh.

Within, Soneillon brooded.

**

"You knew," Ortwine glared at Nwm. "And so did you." She glared at Hlioth.

"Yes," Nwm laughed. Beer-foam clung to his beard; the *Twelve Elms* was thronging with activity.

"I did not. This irks me," Ortwine continued.

“You are attuned to darker currents, Ortwine,” Hlioth sighed. “And none of us can see everything.”

“These benches are still filthy. And why is there a hole in the ceiling?”

“Should we go to the *Burh*, I wonder?” Nwm mused.

“We wait,” Hlioth replied. “He will come here, or will not. She can see us.”

A short time passed, and Eadric entered.

Hlioth quickly spoke a spell, masking the *Ahma* from the inevitable attention – and subsequent religious hysteria – which his presence was likely to provoke.

He nodded in gratitude, and sat.

“Gods, you look terrible,” Ortwine observed. “I’d offer a quip, but even that seems inappropriate.

Nice bracelet, by the way.”

Eadric shook his head.

“Did you encounter the *rot*? How was it?”

“Ugly.” Eadric scowled.

Ortwine sniffed her wine disapprovingly, and placed it on the table. “Nehael seems to have reversed it. But the cordon set by the *ludja* is still in place. We are inscrutable; although apparently not to Soneillon. Did Nehael communicate with you regarding her intervention here?”

He shook his head. “At Galda, I invoked the *Eleos*; I prayed for the safeguarding of Deorham – of all within the Blackthorn’s range. I must assume that she listened; or she chose to act thus anyway.”

“A goddess who listens sets a worrying precedent,” Ortwine remarked. “And if Shomei comes here now?”

“I may have to forbid it outright,” Eadric replied.

“*Forbid*? ” Nwm asked sceptically. “One does not *forbid* Shomei the Infernal anything. If you set yourself up as Law; she will be forced to confront you.”

“She will not attack me. I am the *Ahma*.”

“Are you sure?” Nwm inquired.

“No,” Eadric admitted.

“Is there an alternative?”

“I would prefer to avoid conflict here. Attempting another dialogue with Shomei is the first step.

But I will not have Soneillon assailed for no reason...”

Ortwine groaned. “You are blind, Eadric. This girl has you mixed up.”

“...other than the fact that she possesses something which Shomei *wants*. Yes, Ortwine? You are about to present some solid, ethical case? A sound reason why I should allow half of Trempa to

perish in smoking ruins, whilst demons and devils run amok and Carasch slugs it out with a half-

dozen fallen seraphim? I am sorry, but *because Shomei wants* is not a compelling argument to me.”

“*Carasch?*” Ortwine asked.

“I was coming to that. He is at the Burh. Climb up the ridge above the North Road; you will see him perched on the Steeple.”

“And he will see you,” Hlioth said. “I advise against it.”

“And Soneillon is the *innocent* party, here?” Ortwine spoke contemptuously. “There *is* no greater demon than this one, *Ahma*.” The religious appellative was pronounced with some derision.

“I know it well!” Eadric snapped. “He has haunted my imaginings for longer than you know; since

first I heard his name. And now he is at the Burh? Do not worry, Ortwine; the irony is not lost on me. And trust me: in person he is worse than in your darkest nightmares. I do not doubt that he

could extinguish all life within a hundred miles – but, as of yet, no rampage has ensued.”

“And you are confident that your psychotic inamorata is trustworthy?” Ortwine exuded pure acid.

“Or even capable of containing this monster? *This* is where I question your judgment, Eadric.”

“Soneillon asked me one question – and one only – to which I have attached value throughout this:

If not by my action, then how will you judge me? . For one who advocates repeatedly and in varied guises for Shomei’s case – and I suggest you question your own motivation in *that* regard – the notion of *agency* and its implications should strike a particular resonance.”

The sidhe smiled coldly. “Let us hope that your suspense of judgment – and your action – is

vindicated.”

Nwm coughed. “You said yourself that Cheshne was awakening, Ortwine. That Soneillon is not

who she was.”

“And at no point did I suggest that I *trusted* her,” Ortwine groaned.

“There is something else,” Hlioth spoke through gritted teeth. “Shomei seeks to woo the

ritual pool offered by the Academy, and bribe leading members of the Collegium. Mostin has committed

himself to protect the Articles – and curiously enough, I believed him, because he believed himself

– but until the Articles are actually *threatened*, he will not act. Gihaahia will prompt him; she is *leaning* on him – and Daunton. In the meantime, he may try to reason with Shomei – he may be the only one who can slow the meteor. Or she may attempt to sway *him*; and she is the superior

rhetorician.”

Nwm nodded. “She is smarter than Mostin. Shomei presses hard against every barrier. She tests her

exemption to the limit. For what it’s worth, I don’t think she’ll strike here until Dhatri reaches the envelope of the scions at Galda. I suspect that she will force you to choose, Eadric, or split your force. And perhaps I should keep my mouth closed in future, and learn from the *Ahma*’s mistakes: if the wizards *do* find a goddess in Gihaahia, then a reign of dark magic is imminent.”

“Her parentage is mixed,” Hlioth said archly. “She is the daughter of Astaroth and the Void; it might behoove us to remember this fact – it is apt enough. Forces other than the Claviger may be seeking to manifest through her.”

“We are a muddled and incestuous pantheon,” Ortwine sighed.

**

:: Mostin ::

Begone, Vhorzhe. I have nothing to say to you.

:: Soneillon has abandoned us, Mostin ::

I don’t blame her. Now, *begone!* .

*

“*Roses of life?*” Daunton grinned broadly, brandishing a scroll. The two wizards were closeted in an obscure nook of Hell’s library. Mostin wondered if they might need a spell to find their way out

again.

“I am beginning to understand Shomei’s strategy,” Mostin sighed. “We will spend the next thousand

years searching for and transcribing exotic dweomers, whilst she suborns the Academy and uses it

for whatever she wants. And we shall be perfectly happy. How long have we been here, anyway?

“I have no idea,” Daunton mumbled. He brushed dust off a green tome entitled *The Fortification of the Skin*. “It’s a shame Rimilin is gone. He’d like this one.”

“Why are we even here?” Mostin asked. “We don’t *need* any of this.”

“No, you don’t.” Shomei had appeared from nowhere behind them. Daunton started. She seemed

inordinately calm and focused. “And you have been here for nine hours. But there are transvalents; some were struck by the Adversary. Would you care to see them?”

Mostin twitched. His heart pounded. “And you have not committed them to your armamentarium?”

“There are more than a few. Most are beyond my ability – or yours – to cast,” she smiled. She did

not need to add the word *yet*.

“Proceed,” Daunton said enthusiastically.

“Your library persona is an agreeable one,” Mostin observed.

“This is my passion, Mostin. You know this. I am most *me* here; I would not have you think that a quest for raw power has blinded me to what is important for my *I* – which is, and remains, the pursuit of knowledge. Now, follow me.”

She led them through winding corridors, past dens and studies, between stacks of books and down

flights of steep stairs. They skirted repositories and scriptoria; passed through secret panels and hidden doors. All was silent, and musty. Finally, she produced a small key and opened an iron

postern at the rear of a room crammed with scrolls. They descended yet more stairs, until they

reached an open space. Ahead was an area of dead magic. Shomei gestured for them to proceed; the

Alienist paused uncertainly.

“I would not cut the claws from the cat and then leave him at home with the fox,” Mostin said

through narrowed eyes.

“Mostin...”

He assumed his pseudonatural shape.

“Then you will have me at a disadvantage,” she sighed. “Because the cat just became a wolf.”

The hall beyond was cavernous, a hundred fathoms tall, and stretched as far as Mostin’s many eyes

could see ahead of him. Their footsteps – and his slitherings – echoed within. In the vaulted

ceilings, great ruddy lights glowed at intervals, illuminating the contents: countless slabs -

of

adamant, marble, alabaster, steel, jade and obsidian - attached by clamps to soaring cables. A vast infernal apparatus controlled the assembly above; pulleys, derricks and sheaves arranged with

impossible intricacy.

They followed as Shomei made her way to a booth which contained an array of levers and switches.

She initiated a complex operation; wheels span, gears ground, and a single slab – a hundred yards

distant – slowly swung out into the chamber and towards them.

When it reached them, she lowered it into a waiting channel: it was a plaque of diabolic steel, three feet wide and six high. As she released its clamp, another, like a vice, contracted to grip it. It stood upright before them. Dauntton gaped. Mostin reached out, and ran a pseudopod over the embossed

glyphs and sigils. It was a thing of beauty.

The Irrefutable Argument, it read. It was a spell which had been in effect when the Nameless Fiend had precipitated the Fall; when unnumbered billion celestials had been seduced to his cause.

“This is Knowledge, Mostin. This is my legacy; I am the librarian of Hell.”

“Yes,” he quivered. Shomei read it as a nod.

“I am making an appeal to you.”

“I understand,” he hissed. Shomei heard it as a sigh.

*

Dauntton sat within her study; Shomei poured *kschiff*. Mostin stood, looking at the Accord which hung above the mantelpiece.

“Temenun has offered an alliance.” She nodded toward the cherries which still rested on their plate.

“He suggests that I marry the remaining Hazel scion to a Cherry which grows in Nivorn. I am

reluctant to conflate Will and Desire for obvious reasons. But with his *Anantam* and the succubi in Throile – who bear no great love for their former mistress – I am looking at the twelve-hundredth

order. I can do a lot with that.”

“But you would prefer to use the Wyrish Academy,” Mostin finished for her. “Because they are

known, safer, more passive – but they also represent the body which Gihaahia is mandated to

uphold.”

“Touché,” Shomei raised her glass. “I find it hard to believe that the Enforcer will censure a

majority, if it comes to infraction.”

“I don’t,” Dauntton grumbled. “She is a tyrant, not an elected representative.”

“I have tried the more *wholesome* route,” Shomei sighed. “I cannot make headway. The *Ahma* is stubborn and irrational, and refuses to engage with his own potential. Those who practice *saizhan* are difficult to inspire – except the Irrenites, who are a small minority and whom I have yet to

approach. I do not *feel* compassion – and I am not one wont to make empty gestures. I went to see the *Sela* yesterday.”

Mostin groaned. “You are certainly exhausting all avenues. What is it with you and Oronthon,

anyway?”

“I cannot explain. I was confused, angry and depressed. His perspective is beyond all others. There is no judgment in him.”

“And he offered a solution? Or absolution?”

“Actually, neither. He offered tea. And a mirror to look in.”

“And what did you see?” Mostin asked cynically. “Note that I do not afford much credence to his

mystical posturing.”

“That my *I* is relational, and does not exist in a vacuum,” she shrugged.

“That is all?” Mostin scoffed. “I might have told you that.”

“But you didn’t, Mostin. That’s the point. Regardless, I need help – not compactees and servants

and indentured mages, but willing partners. To retrieve the *Urn*. To master Hummaz. To *correct* the Morphic and end the Claviger-Enforcer’s *tyranny*. To propagate knowledge. Is this goal not

worthy?”

“And you would have me play Belial to your Adversary,” Mostin said acidly. “Did the *Sela* also whisper in the ear of the Nameless Fiend before the Fall?”

“Actually, I think you would know my answer to that.”

“It is no surprise, then, the spell which you chose to show us,” the Alienist remarked.

“There is a certain symmetry; it is hard to deny.”

“And you would then elect yourself as the new arcane factum?” Mostin inquired drily.

“I am a librarian, Mostin. It is only natural.”

**

Obsession – Part 4

Turel and Rumyal – two infernal seraphim – and Irel, Who Smites, passed swiftly through the skies

above the frozen River Nund; three flights of dark exemplars accompanied them. Warded and

augmented by Shomei, all were inscrutable to any but the most probing eyes. They flew east, and

skirted the compass of the Blackthorn near Droming. Irel gyred and broke away. The mighty deva

cast his gaze – unrivalled amongst celestial princes, fallen or otherwise – toward Deorham and

Kyrtill's Burh, one of Wyre's holiest sites: the birthplace and earthly dwelling of the *Ahma*. It was impenetrable; his sight could not pierce the shroud which Soneillon had set about the place.

Twelve miles distant, the demoness herself stood upon the Steeple beneath the shadow of Carasch –

a smoldering void which had yet to erupt to blistering rage – and stretched lazily. The great chthonic had seen them. Was Shomei baiting her, or testing the limit of her perception? Or was this a simple reconnaissance? Soneillon considered: to act would be to disclose; to ignore, to dissemble.

She chose to act.

Carasch turned his thought on them, casually smashing their protections.

Soneillon materialized within the main flight and spoke a soundless syllable, unleashing oblivion.

Turel and Rumyal, Great Antagonists who had previously offered counsel to the Adversary himself,

were instantly extinguished along with eighteen devas.

She disappeared.

Irel alone remained.

Soneillon reappeared, and her speed was blinding. Tendrils of void lashed the fallen prince,

stripping away *ens* like vapor, and flinging his mace from his hands. She hissed, and drove him into the ground in a tempest, claws sinking through his throat and chest and pinning him. Ichor steamed as it poured from his massive frame, staining the snow black; his strength ebbed from him.

She paused, and smiled.

“My, but you *are* the pretty one,” Her eyes widened and her wings curled. “And you are unbound; without compact: I believe she *likes* you – how delicious! It is so tempting to *steal* you. Alas! My heart belongs to another. But now I am feeling tender; she may keep you. Invoke your mistress by name.”

The deva was silent.

She raised an eyebrow. “Presently, I am keeping you from dying, Irel, and it would be sad to lose

one as beautiful as you. Do you trust that your spirit will fly to the winds; or will it go to the Tree-Bitch for *reallocation* – perhaps, as a wood-gnome or troll? Heaven is lost to you, and there is no time to show you the Void. She may save you – if she cares for you. Speak.”

“Shomei,” he choked. Ichor welled in his mouth.

She brought her face close, and her grip relaxed. She moved over him.

“Good...” She breathed softly in his ear. She lifted her head and smiled at Shomei, whose infernal

perception had been drawn there.

Soneillon gently withdrew her talons, and vanished.

**

Shomei tapped her fingers. She picked up a bottle of *kschiff* and hurled it against a bookcase.

Hellfire crawled over her.

Mostin smiled unsympathetically. “You’re in way over your head; she has fifteen billion years on

you, and she *enjoys* this. Perhaps you are beginning to appreciate the magnitude of this task?”

“How did she see them?”

“I could not say,” Mostin replied. “Probably a transvalent. She may have allies.”

“I spent a third of my reservoir repairing Irel’s wounds. They just *wouldn’t heal*. His cohesion was...wrong.”

“You are fortunate she simply obliterated the others,” Mostin observed drily.

“If you were to send your *Ú* s...”

Mostin became irritable. “Shomei, you may be exempt from the Injunction – and I say *may be*, because much has yet to be tested – but one thing is certain: *I am not*. You asked me here for advice, and I will give it to you: *let this go*. You are simply unprepared for this endeavor; if you do actually attack her and she survives and escapes do you really think that she will calmly forgive? Do you

think Eadric – I’m sorry, the *Ahma* – will? Now, I am going to offer you some *perspective* again, because it is apparent to me that at this point that she has acted with the utmost restraint with regard to you...”

“I don’t need this, Mostin...”

“... *by not already annihilating you*. And if you don’t think she could have accomplished this, had she set her mind to it, then you are *stupid*. Perhaps Eadric has restrained her; perhaps her perspective is other than we can guess. And she let you keep your favorite toy; although what you

see in those hideous, feathery monsters is beyond me.”

Shomei glared at him. “She drew first blood, Mostin, not I.”

“And I think she might cite provocation as a reasonable defense; frankly, I would be inclined to

agree with her. You are the lawyer; what do you think? Perhaps we should ask Gihaahia to mediate

– although Soneillon’s *exemption* with regard to the Injunction is not in question. Do not give her a *casus belli*. ”

“I cannot slow now, Mostin.”

“You must!” He was exasperated.

“No; I cannot. *It is what I am*. ”

“Then you should repair to your library,” he said grimly. “Or stay safely within the compass of the Hazel, because if you begin this and then step beyond its bounds – and are not prepared to finish

what you’ve started – then she will find you and extinguish you. You will make a prison for

yourself, Shomei; and that is *symmetry*.”

“Will you aid me?”

“I am disinclined,” he replied.

“If you were to speak to the *Ahma*; find out what transpired at Deorham. He has returned to Galda...”

“I will not *spy* for you Shomei. If you have questions for Eadric, ask them yourself.”

“Mostin. Please. Then use the *Web of Motes*. At least let me know what I’m dealing with that I haven’t foreseen.”

He stood and sighed. “I will contact you in one hour. Do not ask me for anything else. Here.”

He took off his hat – his favorite ochre felt, with its wide brim somewhat charred – and placed it on her head.

*

Exactly one hour later, Shomei received a *sending* which contained only one word: *Carasch*.

She sat and tapped her fingers. Time elapsed.

She translated to Galda for the final time.

**

“I see you bear your rod,” Eadric said dubiously. “Are you here to coerce me this time?”

“It is a preventative measure,” Shomei explained. “May I sit?”

He gestured toward a chair. “I am not about to assail you, Shomei. I’m glad you came. I have been

considering how to approach you.”

“*Ahma*, I lost twenty of my best devils earlier today in an unprovoked attack by your lover.”

“Unprovoked?” He asked sceptically. “Would you like *kasshiv*? It’s all I have left – Nwm and Ortwine drank everything else.”

“Yes.” She raised an eyebrow at his pronunciation. “My servants were reconnoitering over Trempa;

they were beyond the compass of the Blackthorn.”

“I did not realize a formal exclusion zone had been established,” he said drily, pouring a goblet for her. “Shomei, I have been pondering how to deal with this *situation* and I’m at a loss. I cannot seem to appeal to you; I cannot risk *forbidding* you for fear of provoking the *Antinomos* in you to an immediate response: I do not wish to come to blows with you. But you are flouting every law

conceivable: Wyrish, magickal, ethical and religious. What would you have me do?”

“Enkindle your potential, *Ahma*. But you do not seem interested in assuming this responsibility.”

“That is a larger question which we may return to,” Eadric sighed. “In the meantime I must consider the wellbeing of those whom I am charged to protect; I am Earl Marshal of Wyre, Shomei: I must defend it, regardless.”

“You know that Carasch is aiding her, of course?”

“He is her watchdog. I have encountered him. He is terrifying. It is not germane to this discussion.”

“I lost two seraphs in her ambush, *Ahma*.”

“They ceased being seraphim at the beginning of the *last* Aeon, Shomei.”

“Yet the *Ahma* would place himself as a shield before this chthonic abomination?” She asked.

“No,” he groaned. “But he would place himself as a shield before the inhabitants of

Trempla. There

are limits on the number of devils which even you can conjure and compel, Shomei. If you send

them in waves, will she be able to kill them quicker than you can call more? Or perhaps you will

muster a large force, and she will entrench further: and the longer the buildup, the worse for

everyone.”

Shomei looked hard at him. “Not all devils need to be compelled, *Ahma*. Only a key few – and then, only persuaded. I could end this all very quickly.”

His eyes flickered nervously. “I do not follow.”

“Azazel still bears the standard; two hundred legions accompany him. There is no longer a Celestial Interdict.”

A look of horror crossed his face. “You would do this? Raise *that* banner over Wyre?”

“I would prefer not to, but I must have the *Urn*, *Ahma*.”

“By invoking the eschaton? And you dub Soneillon psychotic?”

“She is,” Shomei smiled thinly. “I am merely determined. And the eschaton has been and gone, *Ahma*. We are what’s left.”

“And if I were to demand of you – *command* you – how would you respond?”

Shomei shook her head. “Please do not force me to make that choice, *Ahma*. It would not sit well with me.”

“Indeed? For one who asserts the *Ahma* as central to their paradigm I am sure it would cause you some discomfort.”

“I simply wish you would embrace the larger reality.”

“Then perhaps we should force the issue.” He stood grimly and drew *Lukarn*, gripping it below the quillons and presenting it in censure. It illuminated the interior of the tent. “By the authority...”

“Please, *Ahma*...”

“...vested in me as *Ahma*; the Breath of God manifest in the world...”

“*Ahma*...”

“...I hereby command...”

“Eadric. Do not...”

“...that *Shomei*...”

Her Flame ignited. She brought the full force of her will to bear through her rod; it was colossal, and should have overpowered him. Instead, there was a resonance, and a reflection, which Shomei

experienced as a great gale blasting over her. His pavillion and its contents were gone, blown to the four winds. Both Shomei's eyes and those of the *Ahma* became wide in astonishment; a cluster of lotuses in the garland which he wore on his wrist had turned to dust: Soneillon had warded him, and he hadn't even known it.

Devas and archons appeared all around him, summoned by his thought, but her presence paralyzed

them; they would not strike her, only worship her. He *smote* her repeatedly, but her exemption protected her. Her will recommenced, unleashing a cyclone of hellfire focused on herself which

could not touch him, but which slowly burned the garland to ash.

He spoke a *holy word*; again, exemption sustained her.

The firestorm increased in intensity; still the lotuses burned away. The devas were incinerated.

Nwm – alerted and now present – struck her with a sonic of tremendous power, which echoed for

miles. She weathered it, and her focus did not falter; she hurled the Preceptor aside with *telekinesis*.

The last blossom turned to soot. Finally, she gripped Eadric's mind, and *dominated* him.

"I'm sorry, *Ahma*. It's a preventative measure." She wept.

Abruptly, both Shomei the Infernal and the *Ahma* vanished.

**

**

The goddess strode ahead impatiently.

Teppu followed, anxiously. "What should I call you?"

"It does not matter – call me what you wish." Her manner was disconcertingly brusque.

"You were Nehael before," he suggested.

"Then call me Nehael."

"But you are no longer the same."

"Then call me something different," she sighed.

"May I choose a name?" He suggested.

"Why not?"

"Names are important." He explained.

"Are they?" She asked.

"Yes! Stop!"

She stopped, and smiled at him. "Do you have one for me?"

“You are not so different,” Teppu laughed. “Where are you going?”

“This way,” she said.

“What is this way?”

“What I need.”

“What...”

“Good,” she said. A horse stood waiting; a varnish roan mare. Strapped to the saddle was an arming sword. A bow – with flowers tied around its limbs – was fixed around its cantle, and a quiver of red-fletched arrows hung from its skirt.

Teppu raised an eyebrow. “That bow is...”

“Yew.”

“And the arrows...”

“*Hazel.*”

“And the sword...”

She drew it, and it rang; runes were etched into its blade: *Trúa*.

“Compassion?” He asked.

She shook her head. “*Pity*, Teppu. One cannot slay with compassion.”

“Where are you going now?” He asked.

“South,” she smiled.

“Why...”

“The *dead* are there Teppu. Are you coming?”

“Certainly,” he replied uncertainly.

She climbed into the saddle, picked him up, and deposited him behind her.

Moments later, they were at Cirone. Ahead, the *Pall of Dhatri* loomed.

**

Obsession – Final Part

She hung, naked and motionless in the void, gazing at the world. Behind her and beyond her, an

infinite expanse of emptiness stretched.

Wyre was blanketed in snow, a heavy veil which pressed upon its wide provinces and muffled the

verdancies which pulsed beneath. It ranged from gold through deep crimson, west to east, as dusk

stole across the frozen landscape below.

Further south, greens prevailed; and then a great fume of corruption, surrounding a perfect circle of blackness: the *Pall of Dhatri*. A red dart was moving within it, like a surgeon’s knife attempting to excise some cancer, the roots of which ran too deep. Nehael, yet not. *Suuratamanyu?* * she

considered; an obscure and ill-defined *bhiti* – if such it was – or merely another manifestation of *Aliikaghana*?

She did not care.

She turned her eyes to the Sun and observed it impassively; she understood its radiance: no longer feared it. It regarded her with disinterest, as a parent who has surrendered a child and watched it grow separate, but from a great distance. It did not offer anything, and all she had gained had been apart from it. But neither did it condemn: its judgment was suspended, as though in regret of

previous choices it had made. An admission, perhaps, of its own fallibility.

It began to sink over the Western Ocean, and an intense display of color ensued; the atmosphere split the light into its component parts like some deific prism: every element of the spectrum was revealed. For the briefest moment, the rumor of an Idea: a vast wyrm – serene, yet energized; a

perfect, infinite potential – coiled around the world. Then, just as suddenly, it was gone. The

luminary vanished. Beyond – now free from its glare and glamour – the ruddy Eye of Cheshne

pulsed.

She descended through aurorae, plunging rapidly through the thermosphere. Meteors flashed to

incandescence around her; she outpaced them, dropped through noctilucous clouds and felt their

crystals caress and cool her. Her plummet came to rest at an altitude of twenty miles. She cast her glance downwards.

Lights were kindling in a city: an unfolding sevenfold symmetry, spontaneous yet inevitable. Her

eyes followed a thin line which ran south and west into rolling hills, apprehending an involuted knot in a deep hollow.

Then she remembered that she was a demoness, and that she was angry.

*

[Soneillon]: You have one hour to evacuate the Academy.

[Many Wizards]: !

Sendings buzzed across Wyre. Twenty minutes elapsed.

(Far to the north and west, in an obscure corner of Nizkur).

[Mostin]: This demonstration is unnecessary, Soneillon. Shomei has marginalized herself by her

own actions.

[Soneillon]: Oh, there you are.

Soneillon appeared within his study, a writhing mass which pinned Mostin, spreadeagled, above the

fireplace.

“Don’t try and wriggle, Mostin,” a childlike face materialized, and then a body. “Or I’ll have to hurt you. You may have more tentacles than I, but mine are far *nastier*.”

A tendril reached inside his robe, flipping open pouches in his *belt of many pockets*, and searching until it retrieved a sphere of adamant, ten inches in diameter. She shook it vigorously, until Graz’zt’s countenance appeared.

“Well, look who it is,” she smiled. An expression of horror crossed the face of the demon prince.

Her form became fully humanoid – that of a small child, which she had chosen in previous dealings

with the Alienist – as she secreted the globe on her person. Mostin dropped unceremoniously onto

the floor.

“Now that that’s settled,” she hopped into a chair, and dangled her legs, “you have around forty

minutes to convince me not to level the estate. I will not name her, and would advise the same of

you: it would draw her attention here – funny how that comes around. But she has my boyfriend, and *I want him back.* ”

*

Mostin sighed. “Destroying her *former* abode would achieve nothing, Soneillon – except, perhaps, to irritate her.”

“That would seem as good a place to start as any. You are fuelling my argument, Mostin, not

dissuading me. You need to think more like a demon.”

“She may also invoke the Hazel,” Mostin continued. “In which case, no effort on your part will

penetrate its cordon. And do you really want an Academy unified in defense under her leadership?

She has been seeking to co-opt the ritual pool; this would hand it to her on a plate. And *in defense* she would even receive the sanction of the Enforcer.”

“That is far more persuasive,” the demoness conceded. She issued another *sending*.

[Soneillon]: I’ve changed my mind.

Three hundred miles away, scores of wizards breathed a collective sigh of relief.

“Less than a minute. Not bad, Mostin.”

Mostin groaned. “You had no intention of destroying the Academy, did you?”

She shook her head.

“You tracked my *sending* to its source. Circumvented my obfuscations. You are a devious one.”

She hopped down, and ran over to him. Her form changed, and she threw a dozen tiny tentacles

around his knees. She looked up with multiple huge, doe eyes welling with tears.

“Will you help me get Eadric back, Mostin? Please?”

“You are insufferable,” the Alienist replied.

“You are not an erotic creature, Mostin; I must adjust my tack accordingly.”

“I am no more paternal than I am erotic,” Mostin observed.

She sighed, and once again became a succubus. “Will you help me or not?”

Mostin shook his head. “She is within Hell’s library, Soneillon; it is *separate* – part of the prior infinity. Eadric is also there. There are two doors, and both lie within the Hazel’s ambit. You cannot touch her while she remains there. I have been inside, with her approval: she may come and go as

she pleases. There is a tight net around the ‘front door’ – a cottage very close to the Hazel scion itself – the area where she performs her conjurations. The ‘back door’ – so to speak – is within the library of the Academy. Only Ugales has permission to enter and leave; he retrieves obscure spells and tomes for ambitious mages in return for outrageous pledges. The back door is currently closed

anyway.”

Soneillon gave a suspicious look. “How do you *know* that Eadric is in the library, Mostin? Presumably your divinations cannot penetrate it.”

“A wizard does not reveal all of his means.”

“And how did you anticipate certain events in Afqithan?” She persisted.

Mostin sighed.

“Do you have a *thing* which helps you?”

“Yes,” he grudgingly admitted.

“Can I see it?” Soneillon smiled.

“Well...”

Soneillon raised an eyebrow, and slowly revealed *Pharamne’s Urn*. Mostin’s eyes rotated in his skull.

“Mostin. You have to show. No wonder you don’t have a girlfriend.”

“Very well,” he produced it. “It is called the *Web of Motes*. Although I think every wizard in Wyre knows I have it – I’m surprised that you didn’t hear already.”

She shrugged. “I tend not to mix with wizards, Mostin. They are usually dull – present company

excepted, of course. And you *will* help me. With this *mote*-thing of yours, you can determine whether or not she is in her library, am I correct?”

“Yes, but it makes no difference. How difficult is this to explain...”

“Because you *can* help me,” she smiled. “In fact, I believe you are the *only* one who can.”

“You are not listening, Soneillon.”

“Yes, I am, but you’re not. She is a devil. I cannot conjure devils, Mostin. But you can.”

“She is *magnified*, Soneillon. Binding such an entity is a different proposition altogether.”

“My reservoir is deep, Mostin. It is yours.”

He considered; Shomei had gone too far, there was no denying it. His mind rapidly processed

transvalent algorithms, finding various solutions.

“You will not annihilate her,” the Alienist exhorted.

“Mostin, be reasonable...”

“I mean it, Soneillon. She is a colleague, and a fellow intellect. Let me handle her.”

“Oh, very well,” Soneillon sighed.

“I will need a week to devise the formula.”

“A *week*? Wyrish wizards are so *slow*.”

“And I will need the *Urn*,” Mostin smiled madly.

Soneillon’s eyes narrowed. “No you don’t, Mostin. We both know that.”

**

“Do you purpose to keep me here indefinitely?” Eadric raised his eyebrows. He sat easily in the

posture of *saizhan* within a *forcecage* in Shomei’s study. A fire – of cut hazel logs – burned slowly and steadily in the hearth.

“Only until I have the *Urn, Ahma*,” Shomei was curled nearby in a comfortable chair, reading. She did not meet his eyes.

“And you still address me by the religious appellation. You are an unlikely abductress,” Eadric

observed. “And an even more unlikely Adversary.”

“*That* moniker is defunct,” she sighed.

“Your actions would indicate otherwise. Should I officially brand you as such? I do determine

doctrine, after all.”

She shifted her position, and took a sip of *kschiff*.

“If it would be easier for you, I will be silent. Or perhaps you could *dominate* me again.”

“I take no pleasure in depriving you of your will, *Ahma*.” She raised her head and looked at him.

“Of all things, that, at least should be clear about me.”

“But you *did*, Shomei,” he replied.

“I must judge necessity, *Ahma*; for my Self, no other can.”

“And, in hindsight, was your judgment correct?”

She placed the book down, open, on the table beside her. “If you are asking whether I have experienced remorse, then the answer is yes: I am not beyond that. But what is done is done. The question of what to do next preoccupies me now. Such is my nature.”

“You would seem to be missing a moral compass, Shomei.”

She gave a small smile. “I do not need one, *Ahma*. My lack of kindness is perfectly balanced by my lack of malice. My temper needs some work.”

“And if jealousy and hatred come to rule you? What then?”

“Then you and I will have both failed, *Ahma*, but for different reasons.”

“Yet jealousy and obsession have characterized many of your actions of late.”

She stood, approached the *forcecage*, and knelt, drawing close. Her presence was intense, focused and calm. “Are you speaking of my reaction to your liaison with Soneillon, or to my efforts to gain the *Urn*?”

“You do not take well to being thwarted, Shomei. And the union of opposites is something which

you yourself once gave me advice regarding.”

“*Ahma*, there are many *hieroi gamoi*. Some are fleeting; some enduring. Some take place within a paradigm; others – such as that of the Reconciliation – span infinities; others beyond infinities even into the ineffable. I do not deny your experience of Soneillon; it is, in fact, an articulation of truth far beyond Magnitude as the Urgics would understand it. But it is not *ultimate* in the sense that nothing is *ultimate*, and whether it is even *enduring* remains to be seen. I am pragmatic, and could only offer you a paradigm, *Ahma*; to shape the reality which we inhabit. To make it *better*.”

Eadric laughed bitterly. “Something which Azazel and his two hundred legions can help you

achieve, I presume? Your argument is beginning to sound more than a little deluded, Shomei.”

“Do not interpret the transparency of my thought to you as an articulation of intent; there are other avenues which I would prefer to exhaust first. Understand that I began with the most *moral* from your perspective: an alliance with you. I do not practice *saizhan*, *Ahma*. My method is otherwise. It is for me, and me alone. It can be neither learned, nor taught. I must invent it myself as it evolves; at critical junctures, I have looked to others – including both you and the *Sela* – for help, but the solution must always be *mine*.”

Eadric shook his head. “Your reaction to my anathematization of you – to engulf me in hellfire and coerce me – would suggest to me that this relationship is far from clear to you. My word is Law; but you accept none but your own.”

“It is a paradox I grapple with. I do not wish to be branded your Adversary, *Ahma*. To become what you most hate. I strive only to realize my potential.”

“And you somehow insist that I am capable of a similar feat; this awakening of my potential to

which you refer. Yet it demands embracing some harsh and violent truth for you; a willing sacrifice of your own humanity. Something which I am unprepared to make.”

“I am a fiend, *Ahma*,” Shomei smiled.

“But you were not always so.”

“Nor were any others. Deep down, I have always *wanted* to be a devil, *Ahma*. I think you know this.

And no such sacrifice is necessary from you: you are the *Ahma*. One reason why seeing

you

confined thus saddens me.”

“Then you might release me.”

She sighed. “If you were to affirm that you would make no efforts to assail me or escape, then I

might grant you exit from that box. But I would prefer not to *dominate* you again.”

“I will so vow. Although I am unsure if my assent is tantamount to my endorsing your actions.”

“Life is full of paradoxes, *Ahma*.” The *forcecage* vanished.

“A little freedom is a precious thing,” he stood and glanced around.

She gestured. “The library is that way, *Ahma*. All the devils are gone; I’m the only one left. Call me if you get lost. I will hear you.”

“I cannot help but like you, Shomei.”

“I know. It makes it difficult.”

She returned to her book.

*Wrathful Mercy

**

Day 1 – Antiphon

Nwm and Ortwine stood waiting before the fortified gates at Galda, and watched as the rider

approached from the south. She, her horse and her harness were caked in blood, ichor and entrails

so thick that the muck might need to be scraped clear with a trowel rather than washed away; her

visage was altogether terrifying.

As she approached, the Preceptor noticed that she carried another with her: a diminutive figure who clung desperately to her waist, barely able to remain upright in the saddle. She reined in, reached behind her, and lowered him gently to the ground. Her small companion shivered and stood

unsteadily.

“Hello, Nwm,” Nehael said, “Ortwine. Teppu is tired, and I think he’d like a bath. Where is

Eadric?”

Ortwine looked at Nwm and raised an eyebrow.

*

“Eadric is very *popular* with the ladies, these days, Nehael.” Ortwine gave a caustic smile. “And I must say, red rather suits you; I can see that it is also a *practical* color.”

They sat around a campfire: one of hundreds which burned in the encampment. The goddess had

acquiesced to a cantrip to clean her of the foul-smelling gore which had clung to her, but which had seemed not to perturb her in any way; it was, in fact, for Ortwine’s benefit that she had agreed.

Teppu was wrapped in a blanket, asleep.

“I had hoped to speak with him; to discuss the reconquest,” she threw off her boots.

Ortwine cast a sidelong glance at Nwm, who shrugged.

“Might I assume that you lack the prescience of your previous sister-avatar; now, your mother-

deity?” Nwm inquired. “I am unaccustomed to explaining anything to Nehael; usually the information flows in the other direction.”

“I *slay*, Nwm,” she said simply. “This is the persona that you get: I make no apology for it. It is *necessary*. I don’t have time for magic or plots or webs. I am the counterpoint which Uedii must chant to contain the corruption; her image reflected through the *Eleos*: the enlightened, engaged, dynamic face of compassion. I am unsentimental, and occasionally ugly on the surface. Nor am I as

Tree-ish as my former self; actually, I prefer horses.”

She lay down on her back in the wet earth and looked upwards. The Follower was soaring in the

east, flickering through the smoke in the air. Some time passed before Nwm spoke again.

“You are aware that Eadric is currently being held by Shomei the Infernal?” The Preceptor queried.

“Well, I imagine I might have been, had I thought about it.” She thought about it. “I see. I suppose I could go and talk to her.”

“*Could?* ” Ortwine gave a quizzical look.

Nehael raised her head, leant on an elbow, and smiled. “Eadric is confused, Ortwine. It is his

defining feature. He gets himself into these *situations*; I’m not really convinced that my becoming involved at this stage would help. He should have followed my advice, and simply exercised

compassion.”

“In which specific instance?” Nwm asked.

“He shouldn’t have censured Shomei, Nwm. It didn’t help. Really, he just lost his temper and

became offended and pious. It's always been an issue with him."

"Mostin is working on a solution."

"Yes. Mostin may aggravate the problem further," Nehael remarked.

"And this assumes that Soneillon does not become unhinged in the interim," Nwm added.

"Ahh, Soneillon," she lay back down. "Another *situation*."

Ortwine stared hard at her. "For an avatar of *compassion*, you seem very free in your criticism of those absent."

"I would say the same to him – or her – were either here, Ortwine. As you have rightly implied,

malicious gossip is incompatible with my nature. And frankly, the march of Dhatri's host and the

Embassy are of more concern to me at present than Eadric's convoluted emotional life. I put an

arrow in the latter earlier today; she knows I'm here well enough."

"Then that is some good news." Nwm grunted approvingly.

"She will not make the same mistake again."

"By the *Embassy*, I assume you are referring to Kaalaanala's final effluxion," Ortwine sighed. "And each time I say *that* name I am nervous; in case I draw her perception to me."

"The Trees protect you from that faculty here, Ortwine."

The sidhe gave a stony look. "Had the Trees here been more *comprehensive* in their protection –

and not allowed dreaming demonesses and exempt devils to penetrate their cordon - then this entire fracas might have been avoided. I think we may have placed too much faith in their effectiveness in protecting the *Ahma*'s moral fibre."

"On the last count, I am inclined to agree."

"So will you speak to Shomei?" Nwm inquired.

"Well. Are you asking for my intercession in this?"

"I don't know," Nwm admitted. "Should I?"

"Probably not," Nehael replied.

"Then I suppose I won't," Nwm sighed. "But if I had, what would you have done?"

"Nothing," Nehael smiled. "Which is the best that can be done at the moment. Ask me in a few days

– things will probably unravel even more before they come together again. "

"A prescience?" Nwm asked archly.

“Call it what you like,” Nehael shrugged. “I experience it as a vague notion. And today was too

much for this one; he is too gentle.”

The goddess stood and removed her cloak. She folded it and placed it under Teppu’s head.

**

Eadric did not see Shomei – who had exited the cottage in order to perform conjurations, and sealed it behind her – for the entirety of the next day. After quickly becoming bored, he ventured forth to wander alone in obscure and musty corridors within the limitless repository which was Hell’s

library. Ruddy candles burned with infinite slowness in deep sconces, barely illuminating the

interior. It was eerily silent and – except for the occasional tome which itself exhibited some sign of sapience in addition to its malignancy – there was no question within the mind of the *Ahma* that he was alone.

Eadric was not a scholar; or rather, he had never had the time to pursue his scholarly interests: the art of war had demanded most of his attention throughout his life. The weight of infernal knowledge oppressed him, but more by virtue of its sheer volume than by its evil content. He considered the

magnitude of Shomei’s commitment to the task of *knowing* the library; surely she must have read only the minutest fraction of the books contained within it. It seemed an impossible undertaking to

master even its geography; to familiarize oneself with its contents would take a life’s age of the universe, or more.

It did not take him long to become lost, despite – what he had been sure – were his own meticulous precautions to the contrary regarding his bearing and distance from Shomei’s study. After a brief

period of anxiety – during which he considered that his aimless wandering might, in fact, be his

eternal lot – the *Ahma* determined that he would *climb* – the notion of ascent being comfortable and familiar to his inner aesthetic. Whenever a staircase – whether a narrow spiral, steep ladder, or wide companionway with sweeping balustrades – presented itself to him, he would eagerly scale it. At

times, he would backtrack in frustration: his path would lead to a hidden nook, a suite of chambers or dark, diabolic cloisters with no other exit, and he would search out some new way. He

entertained no notion of destination in his efforts, except *up*. Yet the light became no brighter; the atmosphere no less oppressive. There was no relief to be had, except in the act of ascent itself; a metaphor which struck him as particularly apt, given the nature of his hostess – or gaoler.

After what must have been many hours – all sense of time having long since left him –

Eadric

stumbled upon an archway within which a grate of adamant bars had been set. Dire runes were

carved in warning above the threshold; *symbols* which, although they posed no threat to him, would have slain any devil of lesser stature who might have approached them. He looked at the bars: no

keyhole or aperture of any kind was present. Peering through the grate, only darkness was present

beyond. Eadric ran his fingers around the archway, searching for some secret mechanism. Nothing.

He illuminated the space beyond with *daylight*. A narrow tunnel, extending ahead as far as he might see.

Mustering all of his strength, he gripped the grate and tore it away from the archway, placing it

ruefully against the adjacent wall, conscious that he had committed some gross act of vandalism

against the integrity of the place – then berating himself for entertaining any notion of guilt in the context of his current predicament. Lighting the passageway at intervals, he proceeded for a

hundred yards until he came upon another archway – this time unblocked by gate or door. A sound

threatened to overwhelm, until he recognized it. Some trap had been triggered; a *holy word* of great power. Eadric gave an ironic half-smile; fiendish interlopers – not the *Ahma* – had been on the mind of whoever had set the device: a barely-visible glyph which throbbed in the keystone above.

He entered into a low chamber perhaps ten feet on a side, and illuminated it. On shelves or chained to the walls were books with tarnished covers; they had been neglected and forgotten for many

epochs. Ancient books. Forbidden books. Books whispering secrets best left untold. He opened one,

and thumbed its metalline pages – *Meditations on Radiance*; and then another – *Divining the Light*; and then another – *The World of Men to Come*. He tilted his head.

They were celestial books, penned by great devils – then seraphs and other episemes – before the

Fall.

He sat, and began to read.

**

Soneillon hovered high in the skies above the Academy, beyond the compass of the Hazel-

ludja, and gazed at the shifting patterns around the scion. She was hidden – more effectively, she knew,

than the fallen celestials who had come to spy upon her at Deorham – but was, herself, unable to

penetrate the layers around the Tree below. A nest of hemi-demiplanes, through which a tortuous path wound to Shomei's cottage: invulnerable to her magic and sight. The concursion which was the

library's 'front door.'

There were many devils in the skies below her; of that, there could be no doubt. But they remained invisible; their numbers and type unknown. Six more days must elapse before Mostin could

complete his arcane equations; a formula which would incorporate only herself, Mulissu and Nwm:

the Alienist had indicated that he trusted no other – including Ortwine, whose duty to the Hazel was suspect – to be part of it.

She scowled, and retreated to Deorham; she considered that, were she to abandon it and Shomei to

locate her beyond the stronghold, that some force brought against her might overwhelm her and

deprive her of the *Urn*. Extinction was of no particular concern to her, but being *bound* – by Shomei

– remained a possibility, however remote. The Infernalist would need a sizeable ritual pool in order to guarantee success, and would need time herself to devise a suitable rite – and some safe location in another world, from which it could be conducted.

Mostin had elected Sisperi as his venue. But Mostin might fail, whatever his *mote*-thing told him.

Soneillon considered the time she had before the test came. She allowed her anger to subside, and

gave thought to entrenchment: should it become necessary, it would be as well to be prepared.

The demoness began in earnest to fortify both herself and Kyrtil's Burh with powerful spells.

**

Shomei sat by the fire, reading, when Eadric entered. His route to her study was not something he

could accurately recall; there was no doubt in his mind that she had guided him back by some art.

She raised her head as he entered. "Did you find what you were looking for?"

His eyes narrowed. "I found; although I was not looking for it."

"That is often best," she nodded.

There was a brief silence.

"I may have caused some...structural damage," Eadric confessed.

"Don't worry, *Ahma*. I've already repaired it."

She returned to her book.

*

Day 2 – Down

"You are very *small*, Shomei," Eadric observed.

"Yes, *Ahma*."

"Is this an hereditary trait?"

"My flesh is infernal, *Ahma*."

"But your prior incarnation – upon which your present body is based – was... *slight*. At least, the *first* one was...or... What I mean to say is that I know nothing of your ancestry. Is your lineage magical?"

She gave a quizzical look. "It was; yes, *Ahma*. Sorcerous, actually – although several generations removed. And aristocratic. With a dash of fey – which is never a bad thing for an arcanist, and may account for my *small*-ness."

"And your parents?"

"Were devout and faithful," Shomei said drily.

"And what became of them?"

"Devils killed them, *Ahma*."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"I *conjured* the devils, *Ahma*," Shomei explained.

"Oh." A look of horror crossed his face.

"I was young," Shomei was nonplussed. "It was an act committed without principle."

"How young?" Eadric asked.

"Five, *Ahma*."

His eyes widened. "*Five*? Your parents had angered you in some way?"

"They took my books away, *Ahma*. I wanted them back."

"Oh," Eadric nodded uncertainly. "Perhaps they thought your books were dangerous?"

"They were, *Ahma*."

"Apparently so," Eadric raised an eyebrow. "And after you had...well..."

“Murdered my parents?” She asked.

“Yes...”

“I got my books back, *Ahma*.”

“But in terms of your *upbringing*, Shomei.”

“My servants looked after me.”

“No other relatives? No guardian?” Eadric asked, aghast.

“I did not need them. My servants were *devils*, *Ahma*.”

*

“Yesterday, you went *up*; will you go *down* today?” Shomei inquired.

“Exactly how closely have you been monitoring my movements, Shomei? And did I stumble upon

the celestial repository, or was I directed to it?”

“I did not manipulate you toward it, if that is what you are asking,” she replied. Her answer seemed genuine. “I knew of it, but have not had the leisure to investigate it. But the library has a habit of *presenting* certain books or collections; if you were *directed*, then it was not by me. As to monitoring – not in the way you might think. I am aware of where you are and where you have

been, if I call you to mind. I *can* encourage you to take certain paths – as I did in your inbound journey yesterday when I perceived that you wanted to return – but in your explorations, you were

following your own impulses. I was busy with my conjurations.”

“Would you suggest going down?”

“I make no recommendation,” Shomei answered. “You could go straight, or left, or right, or

backwards; or some combination of any of these – including up and down – but these are harder to

track. *Only* going down is an easier route to focus upon; you are new to the geography.”

“I suspect that the willful act of descent would be harder for me,” Eadric remarked.

Shomei shrugged. She exited the cottage, and sealed it.

Eadric sighed.

**

“They seethe and swell like a great, purposeful ocean of malice,” Nehael explained. “They are

without number. There is nothing left for them to consume except each other; hence they must

move. The greatest – Idyam and Dhatri herself, together with the Embassy – remain near

to the centre. Rishih, Naatha and Prahar are closer to the periphery of the mob. They are only forty miles away – would you like to see?”

Nwm nodded grimly.

Ortwine looked sceptical. “How?”

“I can show you; Nwm knows what I mean. The experience will not be pleasant.”

“Very well.” The sidhe gave a resigned sigh.

Perception expanded to embrace reality within sixty miles. To the south, a festering tide of corruption of such magnitude that it seemed as though the World could not sustain its weight. Nwm reeled. Ortwine staggered and vomited.

“And you experience this *all of the time*? ” Ortwine groaned. She vomited again.

Nehael smiled.

“How did you get close enough to *shoot*?” Ortwine asked her, regaining her breath. “Was she not alerted?”

“Yes,” Nehael nodded in a matter-of-fact way. “But she did not withdraw. She struck me with fire.

Coming within a league was difficult. The press of corpses was thick; it was hard to aim...”

“Wait. You can shoot from *three miles*?”

“I can shoot from six, Ortwine; as long as I have a clear aim – I didn’t.”

The sidhe wiped her mouth and raised an eyebrow. “This, I have to see. I assume that your missile

struck its target unerringly?”

“I shot eighteen arrows at her before she could react,” Nehael replied. “Only one found its mark.”

Ortwine looked at Nwm. “I think we’re *seriously* out of our depth.”

Nwm stared at Nehael. “And Teppu...how did he fare? I mean, I have never seen him so *weak*.”

“He died five times. It was difficult for him. And each time I brought him back as himself again – it is hard for a self-incarnate such as he.”

“Why was he even *there*? Could he meaningfully affect the outcome?”

“A little, perhaps. But each of us can only do *a little*. I do not enjoy what I do, Nwm; really, he was there for me. So I didn’t have to be alone. He is kind.” She smiled.

“And today?” Nwm asked. “You will both ride out again?”

Nehael shook her head. “I would spare him the experience.”

“If you require a consociate,” Nwm said, “I will gladly offer myself.”

“I think you should also remain,” Nehael suggested. “Teppu is here; Hlioth is nearby; Mesikammi is on her way. The Temple is all but spent of power, and the *Ahma* is missing. You should give thought to the defense here; a quarter of the Cheshnite host will be here within a few days.”

“Only a quarter?” Ortwine asked.

“It is more than enough to contain Galda,” Nehael explained. “The rest will bypass it altogether, and head north, straight for Wyre. And I have a companion in mind.”

The sidhe heard a soft hoof-fall, felt hot breath on her neck, and turned. *Narh* had approached, and was nuzzling her eagerly.

“Me?” Ortwine inquired. “Undead are not my specialty.”

“If you are willing, I could use the company,” Nehael smiled. “Besides, you said that you wanted to see me shoot.”

“Two against a million would seem to be a rather uneven match,” Ortwine observed drily.

“If it were only a million, our impact might be more significant,” Nehael replied.

“If I die, take note that *I* am perfectly content with this form; I do not wish to be a buckawn or a sylph.”

“Duly noted,” Nehael nodded. “Unless Hummaz snatches you first.”

Ortwine raised an eyebrow. “A joke?”

“No,” Nehael strapped her sword across her back. “It is unlikely, but it is as well to be prepared.

Stay close to me; you will encounter every conceivable type of undead, and some you have never

imagined. You are goddess: the deathshriekers cannot touch you, but beware the crawling heads and

famine spirits; many can abide my aura, and they may bite your head off.”

“Eadric, you moron,” Ortwine muttered under her breath, and mounted the stallion.

**

Eadric descended rapidly; he leaped down staircases, over banisters and through shafts which gave

to lower floors. His heart pounded, and he wondered if there was a *bottom* to be found; no *top* had been revealed to him on the previous day, but he was also certain, in his own mind, that the library was *finite*. It did not appear to *bend* – inasmuch as he did not come back to some place which he had previously visited – and it seemed sensible to him that the entrance from Shomei’s cottage

should be closer to the bottom than the top, and that the bottom must, therefore, be more accessible.

But he found no root; no foundation to the library: only a dismal, perpetual declivity into

measureless depths filled with books. Again, all sense of time eluded him, but he knew that his

plunging into the library's bowels had consumed him for many hours; he had descended for miles.

Eadric paused to consider his predicament: ascent might take him days; he would need Shomei's

help, this time. But to ask her for anything...the notion sat uncomfortably with him. Had she

returned? Or would his whispered entreaty to her interrupt her work? And why should the notion of

distracting Shomei from her purpose – to overrun Wyre with devils for the object of her own self-aggrandizement – cause him conflict, in any case?

He sat upon a stone bench within a niche in a damp wall, and cleared his mind. From his pocket, he withdrew the scarf of heavy black silk which Soneillon had bestowed on him and pondered. The

magics which the demoness had placed on the garland of flowers had eluded Shomei's perception;

he wondered if the samite might hide some similar secret. He needed a dream, perhaps, and she

might manifest through it; but there were no dreams here. The prior infinity in which he found

himself was cut off; isolated.

Eadric replaced the scarf and stood. He would wait a little while longer. He removed a hellish

candle from its pricket and willed light upon it, illuminating his surroundings with a more substantial brightness; the radiance was at odds with the general character of the place. He walked a little way, rounded a corner, and found himself looking over a balcony into a wide amphitheatre.

Some kind of devilish lecture-hall or auditorium; Eadric wondered what kind of lessons might have

been expounded within its circuit. After searching for some time, he found his way down and made

his way to the lectern – a morbid pulpit, wrought of steel and bone – upon which a book lay open.

Its language – being an archaic dialect of Infernal – was unfamiliar to him.

He thumbed its hide pages and looked at dense text interspersed with curious pictograms and

symbols, wary that he might inadvertently hex himself or invoke some latent malevolence.

Still, the book somehow seemed *less* wicked than its surroundings. Recalling Shomei's words regarding the library's tendency to *present* certain tomes, the *Ahma* closed the book, removed it from the lectern, and tucked it beneath his arm. He ascended several levels, found a quiet cloister and scanned its

pages for some clue as to its meaning, but could determine none. Finally – and again, time seemed

to have drifted by without measure or meaning – he sighed.

“*Shomei*,” he spoke in a clear voice.

She appeared presently, and raised an eyebrow. “You have been gone a long time, and come very

deep indeed, *Ahma*. These collections are hardly known to me.”

Eadric held out the book.

Shomei took it, and scanned its cover. She flipped its pages; her eyes widened in incredulity.

“I felt this tome was significant,” the *Ahma* explained. “It was on a rostrum in a hall not too far from here.”

Shomei stared at him suspiciously. “It might be deemed an heretical codex, from a conventional

diabolic perspective. Here.”

She ran a hand over the book, and returned it to him.

The Reattainment of Luminance, it read.

“There is no author,” Eadric remarked.

“No. The author had no name, *Ahma*.”

Eadric handed it back to her, and smiled. “Then I believe it is for you. The *Sela* once said to me that for you to surrender yourself to bliss would be the ultimate antinomian act. Perhaps the prior *I* entertained similar notions?”

She gave him a dubious look. “I will read it. But entertaining a notion and acting on it are two very different things. I confess I am weary, *Ahma*; if you wish to return...”

He nodded, and the scene changed abruptly: they were back in her study. As always, the fire burned; the scent of cinnamon hung in the air. It seemed familiar, comfortable, safe. Shomei placed the book on a table, threw off her robe and uncorked a flask. Eadric knew that she was exhausted; that she

had emptied herself that day. He wondered if he might overwhelm her.

“Would you like *kschiff*?” She asked.

“No. But thank-you.” Eadric removed his shoes, sat, and entered *saizhan*.

When he arose, he saw that she was curled, asleep in a chair; the flask of liquor was empty and

barely a dram remained in her glass. *The Reattainment of Luminance* was open on its last page; she had already finished it. He took it from her hand. The pages were still wet from her tears.

Eadric sighed, covered her with the *robe of meteors*, and returned to his meditations.

*

Day 3 – Rest

[Mulissu]: You should be working.

[Mostin]: I am taking a break; my head is full of iterated functions and I cannot concentrate.

[Mulissu]: You are looking at motes, Mostin. That hardly qualifies as relaxation.

[Mostin]: It is for me. Look [here] and [here] and [here].

[Mulissu]: You will need to decipher for me. My Motish is rusty.

[Mostin]: There are two sets of exclusory paradoxes relating to Eadric.

[Mulissu]: This [here] is Shomei?

[Mostin]: Yes. Notice that all sixteen remaining infernal seraphs are now bound to her mote; sixty other once-episemes; almost a thousand exemplars. No force of this power has ever before been

assembled by a mage; nor yet a cabal. Nor one of this concentration even *deployed* since the Fall –

if then.

[Mulissu] (Impressed): How?

[Mostin]: I should mention that this is three days hence, not *now*. Regardless, her valent capacity for conjurations is prodigious.

[Mulissu]: Her mote is in tight resonance with Eadric.

[Mostin]: Their dance is subtle, and many layered; there are elements which are antagonistic,

amative, paternal, mutually didactic, dominating, religious and companionable. The relationship is complex.

[Mulissu]: *All* relationship is complex, Mostin; that is why sensible wizards avoid it. I assume that this dark, brooding bomb-beneath-a-blanket is Soneillon? There is a field of blackness behind her.

[Mostin]: That is the Shadow of Cheshne. And this hungry node of void is Carasch.

[Mulissu]: Demonstrate your paradoxes.

Mostin stabilized the resonance between Shomei and the *Ahma*, and progressed the *Web of Motes*

accordingly; the numerous devil-motes in her vicinity began to flicker and slowly fade.

[Mulissu]: That would seem to be...

[Mostin]: Wait.

The darkness behind Soneillon's mote seemed to crystallize through it; hundreds of motes began to

vanish. A tide which swept through the *Web* extinguishing everything. Only one mote – that of Nehael – remained.

[Mulissu]: That future would be best avoided.

[Mostin]: Here is another.

Shomei's mote was transfixed. The darkness receded, but the devil-motes began to disperse and

recombine, forming new resonances and extending outwards in a net which permeated the entire

Web. Tension increased, until motes began to crash into one another.

[Mostin]: That was a hypothetical war, fought between Yeqon and his devilish *saizhan*-advocates, and the Antagonist Armaros; both of these infernal seraphim are currently beneath Shomei's thumb.

If I *bind* her, they will factionalize and attempt to assert themselves as soon as their compacts come to term.

[Mulissu]: Reverse the *Web*. Do not allow the compacts to expire, and assume only a brief *binding* of Shomei.

He did. Shomei's mote erupted, and drove toward Soneillon; those of the fallen episemes detonated

spectacularly around her. Futures began to bifurcate rapidly; Mostin held Shomei to a tight course, and Soneillon's mote vanished, and then reappeared. Shomei acquired new intensity and plunged

immediately toward an energetic mote of deep jade, impacting it and shattering it.

[Mostin]: This is a typical catenary. If she can gain the *Urn*, her mastery of Hummaz is all but guaranteed, and she knows it. Her Fire is only half-actualized at present; if she can further unlock the *Antinomos*, Shomei will be unstoppable.

[Mulissu]: Before or after Hummaz?

[Mostin]: *Before*, with the help of the *Urn*.

[Mulissu]: And what is [*this?*]

[Mostin]: It is an anomalous catenary.

[Mulissu]: Progress it.

[Mostin]: [Here]. It does not lead anywhere. It is inert.

[Mulissu]: Progress it further.

Resolution. Shomei's mote pulsed, and expanded. It shone steadily: an isolated monad, around

which a bright corona formed. It regarded those in her vicinity benignly.

[Mulissu]: What is it?

[Mostin]: *Perfection*. A complete integration of her Flame.

It did not move, but the signifier for Hummaz – seemingly magnetized – migrated and was

drawn into orbit around Shomei's lambency; its revolutions slowly deteriorated until it was silently absorbed.

Motes exploded in a million directions as thought and color surged toward Mostin, shattering his

inner vision and challenging the foundation of his prescience. A vibration of utter, draconic,

profundity.

[Mulissu]: Mostin?

...

[Mulissu]: Mostin...?

[Mostin] (Wrily): That was the Aeon. It just reminded me that it knows I am looking.

**

Ortwine collapsed onto the ground. She was covered in blood and guts. Nwm looked at her

approvingly.

"You have done good work, Ortwine," the Preceptor nodded. "How many times did you die?"

"Only twice," Ortwine grunted. "I feel I did well; my instinct for self-preservation must be better honed than that of Teppu. *Narh* died nine times; he doesn't seem to care: he just *keeps going*."

Nehael turns animals into suicidal fanatics, although I think that he may be like that normally."

"And you?"

Ortwine nodded. "Her presence is exhilarating; it cannot be denied."

"If the fear of death is removed, it is remarkable what can be accomplished."

"Empty words, Nwm," Ortwine shook her head. "The fear of *pain* remains. And Nwm, for pity's sake: I am a queen and a goddess. Can we have no better accommodations than this wet earth?"

"If you wish for something more comfortable, you will need to find a wizard."

“It does not have to be *lavish*, Nwm. Just *something*.”

Nwm gestured, and wood flew together to form a small, crude hut, open on one side which faced

the fire.

“Bed?” Ortwine asked.

Nwm shook his head.

“Moss?” Ortwine asked.

Nwm nodded. A cradle of soft moss grew within the shelter.

“Adequate,” Ortwine crawled into it. “And where *are* the wizards? Where is Mostin? And I thought the Academy were supposed to be more *invested* in events now?”

“Shomei’s actions have them in a fluster,” Nwm replied. “They are fragmented and nervous. Mostin

is preoccupied with his work.”

“What *work*?”

“I believe a conjuration of some kind,” Nwm smiled.

“Another terrible beast?”

“Doubtless,” Nwm nodded.

“And your own preparations for defense?” Ortwine asked. “Have you accomplished anything

worthy?”

“That remains to be tested,” Nwm sighed. “We are stacking spells as fast as we can – which is

slowly – but, frankly, everyone is empty. And if the Fourth Effluxion can bring all of the remaining Cheshnite ritual power to bear, she will likely smash the net like so many eggshells.”

“If?” Ortwine inquired.

“She may not be *predisposed* toward ritual magic. One of the other immortals may need to take the lead in directing the cabals against our countermagicks; this would work in our favor. If she can

focus them through herself, her assault will be powerful.”

“You cannot determine which?”

Nwm shook his head. “Her obfuscations are difficult to pierce; she seems opaque to most divinations, and only so much energy can be directed to trying to penetrate them.”

Ortwine groaned. “My suspicions are not good, Nwm. Still, I suppose a spell which counters a

spell, is one less spell which burns a swathe of people.”

“That is my philosophy also,” Nwm nodded.

“She burns very hot, Nwm.”

“You encountered her then?”

“Twice,” Ortwine nodded. She fell asleep.

**

Shomei struggled with difficulty to regain consciousness, and stared across the room from beneath her robe. Narcoma still clung to her.

“Thank-you for not snapping my neck, *Ahma*,” she remarked sleepily. “I was not sure if your word was binding, if offered to fiends.”

“It is not,” Eadric was laconic. He approached her and regarded her.

She seemed tiny. He knew that she was still vulnerable: her reservoir was depleted; almost all of her valences unoccupied. She had allowed her most potent wards to expire, for the purpose of more

conjunctions. He wondered how many *superior planar bindings* she was capable of in the course of a day, now that her Fire had ignited.

“Technically, one hundred and thirty-three,” she replied lazily and unexpectedly to the unasked

question. “Although even I am not so dedicated. And I did not realize that my valent condition was so apparent to you.”

“Your thoughts are undisciplined when you drink too much *kasshiv*,” he observed. “And your mind makes connection without your volition.”

She briefly lifted her head. “I do believe that your pronunciation of that word is an affectation, *Ahma*. Speaking of; do you mind...?” She pointed at the cabinet where the *kschiff* was kept.

“I merely emphasize its proper ritual purpose.” He retrieved another flask and filled her glass to the brim. “Which you might remember, from time to time.”

Shomei drank deeply, smiled, replaced her glass, and shifted her position. “There are no dreams

here, *Ahma*. Its effects are purely soporific. We all need a little oblivion, now and then; something I’m sure you can appreciate.”

“How was your book?” He asked.

“Complicated.” She furrowed her brow.

“It seemed to evoke an emotional response,” Eadric remarked.

“Yes, *Ahma*; I am capable of them.”

“Can you readily communicate its contents? Even in the broadest terms?”

“It would be difficult,” she sighed, closing her eyes again. “It would require that you are familiar with a sevenfold hermeneutic; unfortunately, the Infernal Septiga takes some time to master.”

“I feel you are being evasive, Shomei.”

“Yes, *Ahma*,” she yawned.

“Should I assume that some personal article was touched?”

“I don’t know, *Ahma*.” She raised an eyebrow with effort. “Would you care to talk about the totality of your experience with Soneillon?”

“I am not sure that that would be appropriate.”

“Because it is deeply intimate, or because you feel it would leave you open to subsequent manipulation?” She asked drowsily.

“Point taken,” he replied.

“Perhaps I will speak again later; when my guard is not so low, and I have had time to consider.”

“That seems only reasonable,” he conceded.

“And then, so can you,” she mumbled and smiled.

“Unfortunately, that seems equally reasonable.”

“I am sorry for your confinement, *Ahma*. And I have been rude; given no thought to your need for space. I will do something...” Her cogency was beginning to leave her.

“Don’t mention it,” he replied drily

“And thank-you again for not *killing* me, *Ahma*,” she muttered.

“I thought about it,” Eadric sighed.

“I know.” She reached up, fumbled, and patted his hand.

Shomei returned to sleep.

Eadric shook his head and opened the cabinet where his host-cum-gaoler kept a plentiful supply of

kschiff and other beverages. He sniffed a number of them – some seemed even more dubious than Shomei’s drink of preference – before settling upon a bottle of Bedeshi brandy.

He put his feet up and sat for a long while by the fire, considering his circumstances. Shomei’s

choice to allow herself to be vulnerable – because there was little doubt that every action committed by Shomei was one of willful *choice* – spoke of complexities which compromised him, and with which he felt ill-equipped to engage. He did not suspect any calculated program of seduction,

although there was an inevitable sympathy which arose through knowledge and revelation

of the

other; she had made herself transparent to him, and trusted him. Her *I*, to him, had become a *Thou*.

He felt warmth – even gratitude – despite her actions, and an odd feeling of protectiveness; as

though she were something altogether precious: he knew that she should be *cherished*.

Really, I have always preferred fiends, he thought. They were just more *interesting*.

His mind drifted; he was oblivious to events in the world outside, and wondered what transpired at Deorham, in Morne, at Galda. He pondered, at length, about Soneillon: only days had passed since

he had left her; it felt like months. Her reaction to his predicament concerned him.

Eventually – having consumed half of the bottle – a deep, dreamless sleep claimed him.

*

When he awoke, Shomei was already gone. Eadric stood and looked at the wall: a heavy timber

door had appeared, where none had been before. He narrowed his eyes in suspicion: what lay beyond was, no doubt, for him – Shomei had indicated as much, and apparently, she recalled vague

commitments made in even the most inebriated state. He slowly opened the door, expecting some

vast, opulent suite of rooms bedecked with furs and exotic fabrics.

Instead, he found four small, modestly-furnished but well-lit stone chambers – not *too* austere, he noted – and a space which might be a shrine or meditation room, were he to make it so.

Still, a prison was a prison. He sighed.

A book sat upon a table. He read its pristine cover – embossed in contemporary Wyrish – and

laughed despite himself:

Infernal Hermeneutics – An Introduction

*

Day 4 – Intercession?

“Although I am incarcerated, I still feel as though I should thank you for providing me with

chambers,” Eadric said.

“Then you certainly should, *Ahma*.” Shomei sat with a look of intense concentration on her face.

She was carving a block of Hazel-wood with a slender knife; chips and shavings gathered at the

floor beneath her feet. Her hands were a blur, moving with uncanny speed and precision.

“You seem to have none of your own,” Eadric observed. “Yet you have a reputation for ostentation.”

“In quieter days, I have more time for relaxation,” she nodded.

“Then there is some place in the library set aside for you?”

“I make rooms here as I feel the need, *Ahma*. It is no great matter. A parlor, a drawing room, a hall or bedchamber.” The wood had begun to assume the form of a human-shaped figurine.

“You also sleep more in quieter days?”

“Yes. But I sleep by the fire, *Ahma*.”

“Ah,” he nodded. “Chambers for entertaining your devilish lovers, then.”

“Yes, *Ahma*.” She regarded him with amusement. “Do I detect a note of judgment in your voice?”

“I am hardly one to judge,” Eadric replied.

“Indeed, *Ahma*.” The wood in Shomei’s hand had become a recognizable female shape, with slender limbs.

“And mortals?” He inquired. “They hold no interest for you?”

She paused and raised an eyebrow. “This line of questioning is becoming personal, *Ahma*.”

“I apologize. I did not mean to embarrass you.”

“You will not. Mortals are frail, and lack stamina, *Ahma*.”

“Then devils are...adequate to your needs? You have not sought to look beyond the Infernal?”

“Only once, *Ahma*.” Shomei blew hard upon the carving, and dust flew from it. She wiped it in her robe, and smiled. “I was declined, if you recall. But adequate? – yes; devils might surprise you with their tenderness, and are subtle and inventive in all matters.”

She presented a statuette to him. It was exquisite: a work far surpassing genius; its line and proportion were perfect. An *Eleos* with her left hand raised aloft, bearing a star; a clod of earth, from which flowers sprang, was in her right.

“This is extraordinary,” he gaped. “Although, I admit, your choice of subject matter is perplexing.

Why do you need an idol?”

She shrugged. “Art is art, *Ahma*. And it is for *you*, not me. I do not require an external focus, but should you feel the need for an object of veneration, then you have one.”

He felt it; it made his hands tingle. “It is enchanted?”

“Of course, *Ahma*. It was carved by Shomei the Infernal from the wood of a Hazel scion. How could it not be?”

“Thank-you,” he nodded. He placed it gently upon the table.

“I should be about...”

“...your conjurations.” Eadric sighed. “Yes, I know. Shomei, is there nothing which I can say or do

to dissuade you from this course of action?”

“I do not believe so, *Ahma*.”

“I cannot beg, cajole, threaten or otherwise impress my frustration and unhappiness regarding your choices upon you?”

“No, *Ahma*.”

“Then my words have no meaning to you?”

“In this, they cannot,” she shook her head, and stood.

“Why not? I am the *Ahma* in this matter no less than any other.”

“We have had this conversation already, *Ahma*.”

“Perhaps we should have it again.”

“Things were going well,” Shomei groaned. “Why do you bring me back here?”

“Because you need to be here, Shomei. *The Reattainment of Luminance*? What was it to you? What did you read?”

“Another time, *Ahma*.” She was becoming irritable; angry. Hellfire slowly began to crawl over her hands.

“No. Now. I want to hear it.” He held her wrist. His flesh burned; he ignored it.

“*Ahma*, do not force me to...”

“There is no external *force* acting on you, Shomei. Only your own choice.”

“Please let go of my wrist, Eadric. You will hurt yourself.”

He nodded. “Now we’re getting somewhere...”

There was a knock at the door.

Her fire died abruptly; she extricated her hand. Eadric gave a puzzled look. “Were you expecting

someone?”

Shomei sighed. “No. But there is only one person who can treat the Hazel’s cordon with impunity,

Ahma.” She walked to the door and opened it.

Nehael – or rather *a* Nehael – stood there, her hands held behind her back. It was not a Nehael with whom the *Ahma* was altogether familiar.

*

“Am I interrupting?” Nehael asked.

“Yes,” Shomei answered. “We were having an argument.”

“May I come in?”

“Yes,” Eadric interjected before Shomei could speak.

“Hello, Eadric,” Nehael smiled. “Thank-you, but that choice is not yours to make.”

“Where are your weapons?” Shomei inquired. “Shouldn’t you be shooting ghouls or something?”

Weapons? Eadric had the distinct notion that he was behind the times.

“I should still like to come in,” Nehael insisted.

“Shomei?” Eadric looked at her.

“Very well,” Shomei sighed, waving her in.

Nehael entered, and regarded the figurine of the *Eleos*. “You are no mean talent, Shomei.”

“You have something behind your back?” Eadric asked.

“This?” Nehael produced a sprig of Holly. Eadric’s hackles rose. “Yes; I found it nearby. It’s been growing there for a little while. Didn’t you know?”

“No.” Shomei scowled.

“It may be connected with the seven hundred fallen exemplars who are nearby,” Nehael suggested.

“*Seven hundred?*” Eadric asked in horror.

“Shomei works fast, Eadric.”

The Infernalist gave a nonchalant shrug.

“The Holly scion is not yet awake,” Nehael added. “But there again, Azazel is not here yet, either. I am surprised that you invoked me at this late stage.”

“I was not aware that I did,” Eadric sighed.

“Not you, Eadric.” Nehael picked up the statuette of the *Eleos* and handed it to Shomei.

“Devotional art made from a Hazel by the *Antinomos* for the *Ahma* is likely to gain my attention.”

“You are not the *Eleos*,” Shomei observed.

“I was the nearest available avatar,” Nehael smiled.

Shomei replaced the figurine on the table. “If you believe that a red dress and a bad attitude are likely to impress me, you can think again. You will divert me from my purpose no more effectively

than the *Ahma*.”

“No, Shomei,” Nehael sighed. “That I will not. The choice is yours. It always is. May I speak

briefly with Eadric?”

“Yes. He is right here.”

“Alone, Shomei?”

“But of course,” Shomei replied acidly, gesturing toward the timber door. “He has his own cell,

now.”

“Thank-you.”

Eadric sat in stunned silence.

Shomei ushered them away, and poured *kschiff*.

**

“It is good to see you,” Nehael smiled. She had declined a chair, and sat on the floor in effortless

saizhan. There was a dynamic quality about her that Eadric had not before encountered; she seemed entirely grounded and *embodied*. He recalled Soneillon’s words, and understood that, although spoken lightly, they had not been altogether in jest.

“I am bewildered, Nehael.” Eadric confessed.

“I have come to expect it,” Nehael nodded.

“You sit in *saizhan*...”

“I am a syncretic deity, Eadric.”

“Your posture is better than mine,” he added.

“Things are moving rapidly, *Ahma*. You need to resolve this situation as quickly as possible and return to Galda.”

“I have been trying.”

“Where are you in your dialogue with Shomei?”

Eadric sighed. “I do not know. I cannot fathom her. She is complex.”

Nehael nodded. “She is a *devil*, *Ahma*, and an *I*. Prior to that, she was the most gifted mage of her generation – perhaps of *any* generation. *Complex* does not even begin to cover her.”

Eadric sighed. “She chose to trust me: she left herself completely vulnerable to me; I might have

slain her, and spared us all from what will likely ensue.”

“But you did not.”

“No.” Eadric said. “It would have been an act of violation against Truth. She is utterly authentic.”

“Nor yet did you marry her,” Nehael smiled wryly.

“I did not know her as I have come to.”

“Then you *regret* your decision?” Nehael asked with raised eyebrows.

“No. I regret that not all opportunity can be realized. But I made a choice. I stand by it.”

“I am sure Soneillon will be pleased,” Nehael spoke in a droll voice. “Or at least, not wrathful and vindictive.”

“Self-preservation also informs my perspective,” Eadric admitted.

“And Nehael?” She inquired. “Where do you stand with regard to *her*? To *me*?”

“That relationship is different.”

“Why?” She asked. “Am I not desirable?”

Eadric looked at her and groaned. “Yes.”

“You somehow believe me less *lustful*?”

“Well...”

“Would you deem me less *unattainable* than previously?”

His head reeled. “Yes?”

“Do not worry, Eadric.” She laughed. “I am not *pressing a claim* upon the highly-coveted *Ahma*.”

“That is a relief,” he sighed.

“But then again, I wouldn’t, would I?”

“No...?” He said unsurely.

“I am Compassion, *Ahma*. Possessiveness is not in my nature. *Saizha*? ”

*

“Are you quite finished?” Shomei asked irritably.

[Nehael]: This is what we exchanged [information].

Eadric stared at Nehael in disbelief. Shomei raised an eyebrow and analyzed.

“You need not look *betrayed*, Eadric,” Nehael sighed. “I do not *hide* anything for the purpose of manipulation, and neither should you. And it was Shomei who invoked me, not you. I will see

myself out.”

Nehael departed.

“Perhaps celibacy is best,” Eadric sat wearily.

Shomei handed him a glass of *kschiff*. “You would not be the first mystic to come to this

conclusion, *Ahma*.”

“What next?” He asked.

“Well,” Shomei smiled. “First, I will have a drink. And then I will return...”

“...to your conjurations. Yes. I suppose I should know the drill by now. Shomei, as I didn’t kill you, I feel that you might indulge me. I should like some diabolic *company* in your absence.”

Shomei looked sceptical. “Very well, *Ahma*. But I should warn you that devilish courtesans can be difficult. Lagusuf might serve; her skin is...”

“*Intellectual* company, Shomei.”

“Very good, *Ahma*.” She considered briefly.

A *gate* opened, and a tall, strikingly beautiful female devil with violet eyes emerged. She was clad in white; her hair was arranged in an elaborate coiffure.

“Shomei...”

“This is *Nercamay*, *Ahma*. An infernal muse. You need not be distracted by her full lips and rapid, shallow breath. Nor her heady perfume and natural tactility. She is both *intellectual* and *company*: she is a scholar of some renown; her mind is exquisitely perverse and convoluted.”

“As is yours,” Eadric said.

“Thank-you, *Ahma*. *Nercamay*, you may attend to the *Ahma*’s needs: perhaps it might be best if you made no attempt to seduce him; it may cause him undue distress. Did you have some topic in mind to discuss?”

“Actually, yes,” Eadric reached for the *The Reattainment of Luminance*. “You will give me lessons in diabolic heresies, won’t you *Nercamay*?”

Shomei sighed. The *Ahma* was nothing, if not persistent. She exited the cottage.

*

Nercamay smiled gently, sat next to Eadric, and opened the book in her lap. She smelled of jasmine and orchids.

“How familiar are you with the sevenfold hermeneutic?” She asked in a soft voice. Her hand

immediately began to wander. Eadric replaced it.

“Very little,” Eadric admitted.

“It’s very warm in here, *Ahma*...”

“You are a devil; I am sure you will cope.”

“Are your chambers cooler?”

“Just read,” Eadric said through gritted teeth.

**

Day 5 – *Seeing*

Nercamay knelt. Eadric drew her knees apart – whilst carefully avoiding her gaze – held her breast-bone, and pressed in the hollow of her back, straightening it.

“Good,” he exhaled. He stood, poured himself *kschiff*, and sat in a chair.

“I am not sure what this posture is designed to achieve, *Ahma*,” the devil looked at him. “It does not seem very practical for the purpose of pleasure. I know many others, which would serve better.

Unless you simply require...”

Eadric held up his hand. “It will help you concentrate. And you being over there, and me being over here will help me concentrate. Look ahead, Nercamay, and slightly down. Not at me.”

She did so.

“Place your fingertips together, *thus*,” he demonstrated.

“I cannot see. I may now look at you?”

“You may *glance*.”

She sighed and followed his instructions.

“You need to slow your breathing, Nercamay.”

“I do not *need* to breathe at all, *Ahma*.”

“Do so anyway,” Eadric instructed.

She complied.

“Are you comfortable?”

“Not entirely,” Nercamay admitted.

“Excellent,” Eadric smiled. “A little tension is good. Let us review what we have learned to date.

First, that it is hard for me to remain focused if you *drape* yourself over me. Second, that time is *limited* for me, in terms of what I need to understand. Third, that distinguishing between the points of the Septiga is very *difficult* for me, as the fields seem to overlap so much: the *poetic* and the *functional* I can grasp easily enough; the *enigmatic* I can see in theory, if not in practice as I have no experience of Hellish mysteries; but discerning the subtleties between the *inflammatory*, *mephitic*, *vitiating*, *debasing* and *perfidious* may be beyond me.”

“That would make eight. The *mephitic* is synonymous with the *debasing*, *Ahma*.”

“Precisely my point,” Eadric nodded.

“Although they are unidentical in the *Noniga*,” Nercamay added.

“One thing at a time, Nercamay. Now, you may continue your explication.”

“The text of *The Reattainment of Luminance* is very abstruse, *Ahma*. I am not sure where to recommence.”

“Might it help if I were to make specific inquiries?” Eadric asked.

“I think it may be the only way to proceed,” Nercamay replied.

“Let us concentrate on the *functional* at present; Shomei has asserted on numerous occasions that her inclination is more practical than mystical.”

“I am not sure that function and praxis can be conflated in that way, *Ahma*,” Nercamay opined.

“You are probably right,” Eadric nodded. “It is, however, where we will look.”

“And your purpose in this is the redemption of Shomei the Infernal?” Nercamay asked dubiously.

Eadric shook his head. “No. Shomei charts her own course. And devils do not need to be *redeemed*, Nercamay. They are already perfect, but are trapped in false perceptions. They simply need to *see*. ”

Time slowed to a crawl. Eadric experienced a *sensation*; neither entirely a flash, nor a vibration, nor an understanding; but something of each, and a certitude.

“I...” Nercamay stopped speaking; her expression relaxed, with a hint of mild puzzlement. Her

breath became slow, purposeful, rhythmic. She cast her gaze around, and her eyes came to rest on

him. She was serene; impassive. Eadric sat, and waited until he judged it had passed in her.

She began to shake. He stood, walked over to her, and knelt before her.

“That was *saizhan*,” he spoke gently.

She was bewildered. “You also...?”

“No.” Eadric smiled. “But you experienced that you and I are not different; so in a sense, yes.”

“Then this is not your natural mode of perception?”

“Arguably, it is *the* natural mode of perception. But remaining there is...difficult,” Eadric said wryly, and shook his head. “The *Sela* always abides in perfect *saizhan*; perhaps Nehael – I do not know. Memory of this experience may evoke powerful emotions in you. If you wish to reflect, we

may end this discourse for a while. My chambers are available if you wish for privacy.”

“Would you like to...”

“No.” He said firmly. “And that temptation is now so much crueller, yet so much easier to resist.”

“I do not understand,” she sighed.

He smiled ironically. "Our relationship has changed, Nercamay. From this point, I have a *duty*

toward you, and a responsibility for your well-being."

"I feel no less wicked, *Ahma*. Your sudden concern for me is vexing."

He sighed. "Prior modes of perception do not vanish instantly, Nercamay. Consider whether this

experience was of value to you; I would contend that it was, and that it is worth seeking to repeat it.

Unless there is something more pressing, you should relax for a while."

Nercamay considered. "*The Reattainment of Luminance* is many things, *Ahma*. An argument and counter-argument; a technique or method; an entreaty; a prophecy; a *solution*."

"Concerning what?" Eadric inquired.

"I believe that the book is about Shomei. About devils. About *saizhan*. About you."

He swallowed.

"Do you *like* fiends, *Ahma*?" Nercamay asked.

"Far too much," Eadric sighed.

"You understand that I have done as Shomei bid me and have not, actually, attempted to seduce

you?" She asked. "That my flirtations are meant in good humor?"

"Of course," Eadric nodded. "I play the game well enough. I mean no disrespect Nercamay, but I

have met some who would put you to shame. And consider *why* you feel a sudden impulse to

communicate the truth to me in such comprehensible terms, Nercamay; you may find that it is not

unconnected with your insight."

**

The wind was bitter; Soneillon stood on the Steeple and scowled. Carasch had alerted her to another interloper; this time, a solitary figure north of the town of Deorham, wearing a bright yellow cloak.

Its form was in the region of fey; its gender, indeterminate; its progress, circuitous and unhurried.

Tozinak, she knew. The wizard seemed completely unwarded, and apparently oblivious to the danger he was in. The demoness surmised that he must be under the Cherry's spell, although what,

exactly, that entailed was unknown to her.

She invoked a potent protection, and appeared close to his location. He was crossing a bridge over a frozen stream, plodding knee-deep through the snow which had drifted there. Upon spying her, he

smiled and waved, and hurried toward her position.

Soneillon held up a hand. "Wait right there. What are you doing here, Tozinak? You've just decided to *deliver* the spell to me? Color me suspicious, but I smell cherries."

Tozinak nodded enthusiastically. He held up a bunch of ripe, luscious fruit.

"Is there no artifice to you at all?" Soneillon asked in an exasperated voice. "You desperately need lessons in deceit and guile."

"None. I *love* you, Soneillon."

Soneillon sighed.

"Here," Tozinak withdrew a thin plaque from within his robe, and placed it upon the snow. He set

the cherries upon it.

She swallowed; there must be some hidden trap. "Would you mind withdrawing a little way,

Tozinak. I am feeling shy."

"Of course, my love." He moved back ten yards.

She approached cautiously and inspected the plate, but touched neither it nor the cherries which sat upon it. The symbolism seemed apt; the references Urgic. But all was unrealized and unfulfilled; as though some profound *absence* were to be invoked.

She regarded him suspiciously. "Is this the spell which Jovol bequeathed to you?"

"My transcription may contain some creative license," Tozinak admitted. "Or even interpretative

errors. But the *elegance* is undeniable; I am sure you will agree. I *love* you, Soneillon. Will you marry me?"

"I will need time to consider, Tozinak," she raised an eyebrow. "Currently, the *Ahma* is my paramour. He may not take kindly to a rival."

Tozinak seemed mortified.

"But he I am sure he will be willing to release me," Soneillon quickly added. "Given our particular circumstances."

Tozinak breathed a sigh of relief.

Gingerly, Soneillon touched the plaque; a profound sense of *nonentity* was immediately conveyed to her.

"Thank-you, Tozinak," she said. She lifted the tablet, and allowed the cherries to slide off, into the snow. "Have you given thought to the boon which I promised you?"

He smiled hopefully.

“I will get back to you,” she nodded. *How very odd*, she thought. The spell had been *modified*; of that she had no doubt. She would examine it upon her return to the Burh, but without question it

invoked an *Apparition*, and not a *Aeon*. And it was given freely; *impressed* upon her, in fact.

Briefly, she wondered *how*? No matter. More pressing events concerned her.

*

[Soneillon]: Are you done, yet?

[Mostin]: *Do not interrupt me!* Now I have lost it. Almost; I am finishing the aesthetics of the auditory display.

[Soneillon]: Mostin. Time is of the essence. Such details may be omitted.

[Mostin]: They may not.

[Soneillon]: Do you foresee any problems?

[Mostin]: No. Well, perhaps Nwm. He seems unsure of his commitment. Nehael’s latest avatar may

be leaning on him. He has been forced to conceal certain things from Ortwine, which also does not

sit well with him.

[Soneillon]: Can we find another?

[Mostin]: I *trust* no other, Soneillon. Shomei has offered substantial bribes to most of the Collegium. I surmise this because many are conveniently *indisposed*.

[Soneillon]: Can she use their power offensively against me? Would the Enforcer intervene?

[Mostin]: I believe that she would prefer not to put it to the test quite yet. But she will draw on them to augment herself and her devils. And her dragon. Heavily.

[Soneillon]: How long do I have, Mostin?

[Mostin]: That is rather difficult to predict. Futures are becoming unstable. Eadric’s interaction with Shomei is generating new catenaries.

[Soneillon]: I see.

[Mostin]: Tomorrow is the earliest that we can attempt the rite. I have selected a suitable site in an unpopulated area of Soan, in Sisperi. I have tried to keep it brief – ten minutes or so. But we will be vulnerable during that window. Punching through her wards will take tremendous focus and power.

There will be a *lot* of backlash; and a *lot* of pain.

[Soneillon]: *Thank-you*, Mostin. That’s very sweet of you.

**

**

Shomei set her rod upon its stand, threw off the *robe of meteors*, and uncorked a flask of *kschiff*.

She sank into a chair by the fire. Eadric was on a couch, absorbed in *Infernal Hermeneutics*.

“Where is Nercamay?” She asked.

“She is resting,” Eadric nodded toward his chambers.

Shomei raised an eyebrow, and filled a glass. “How is *Infernal Hermeneutics*?”

Eadric lifted his head. “For a subject so dense, convoluted and impenetrable, it is a remarkably clear and concise exposition; it touches on frameworks with which I am familiar. I might almost believe

that it was written for me.”

“Good,” Shomei nodded.

“You wrote this book.”

“Yes,” Shomei acknowledged.

“How long did it take you?”

“Not too long, *Ahma*. I wrote it in my head while I was putting my boots on.”

“Yet there are some dialogues in which you will not engage,” Eadric observed.

“Sometimes, the written word is easier, *Ahma*. And sometimes, it is necessary to begin at the beginning.”

“You believe that I should read *The Reattainment of Luminance* myself, then?”

“Of course,” Shomei replied. “Your experience of it will differ from mine.”

Eadric groaned. “And how do you suggest I approach this most subtle of diabolic texts, given my

total ignorance in matters of infernal scripture?”

“Without prejudice, *Ahma*. Because the *enigma* may speak to you, if nothing else does.”

“Do I really have time for devilish enigmas, Shomei? How long – in your reckoning – before I *need* to be at Galda?”

She was silent.

Eadric nodded appreciatively. “Well *this* is something new. Shomei the Infernal is at a complete loss for words. She will not even dissemble.”

“I resent your implication. I do not employ deceit in my dealings with you, *Ahma*.”

“Very well,” Eadric said. “But let us continue this line of investigation. Given the fact that you are now making *military* choices for the Wyrish Crown and the Temple – and I am

assuming that Prince Tagur will be appointed to command in my absence – how long before Galda is invested?”

“Two days hence. If you have not returned, Nehael can lead them in your absence.”

“*Can she?*” Eadric asked sourly. “Whatever her individual martial prowess is in battle, Shomei –

and I’m sure it is considerable – it is not the same as coordinating fifty thousand Templars, footsoldiers, bickering aristocrats, and Ardanese hooligans. Something which I’m rather good at,

even if I do say so myself. I would suggest *I’m already late*. In my absence, I would appoint Tagur.

Perhaps you would be so kind as to communicate this to the Small Council for me?”

“I have no wish to become embroiled in politics, *Ahma*. My goal is the *Urn*.”

“Yes, Shomei. That is abundantly clear. And such arbitrary lines you draw with regard to *politics*, when it suits you.”

“Why are you purposely seeking to anger me, *Ahma*?” Shomei asked irritably.

Eadric smiled. “Well, our discourse does seem to be most productive in that climate; I need to rile you to certain point, in order to stimulate moral conflict in you. I wouldn’t be a very good *Ahma* otherwise, would I?”

Shomei looked at him and sighed. She picked up the *kschiff* and two glasses, and moved onto the couch.

“Drink,” she said, pouring.

“*Kasshiv* is not the answer to everything, Shomei.”

“It helps,” she said. “And your consumption has not exactly diminished. What did you do to Nercamay?”

“She experienced *saizhan*,” Eadric replied. “She is integrating.”

Shomei shook her head. “You are an insidious influence, *Ahma*. You have begun corrupting my devils.”

“We touched a little on *The Reattainment of Luminance* afterwards,” he added.

“I’m sure she has her own perspective,” Shomei sighed, leaned back, and closed her eyes.

Eadric observed her reaction and continued. “The notion of *perfection* seems to be alluded to frequently; it may also have been my choice of the word *perfect* in the context of her particular understanding at that moment which impelled Nercamay to *saizhan*.”

“Such synchronies occur.”

“Although, she understood *perfected* primarily in terms of Urgic *dignity*. The Sublime Essence of the Flame.”

Shomei remained silent.

“Will you speak to me, Shomei?”

“I would prefer not to,” she smiled.

“Perhaps I should continue speculating, then? As your eyelids are closed, I will gauge your facial expressions; as you pointed out, you do lie poorly for a devil.”

She opened her eyes and glared at him. “You are relentless. That road is closed to me, *Ahma*. There can be no *perfection*, and I had not even considered my potential in those terms until I read that accursed book; sometimes my Will drives me without my full cogniscance: I am an *imperfect I*. ”

“What is the obstacle?” He asked.

“Would you like the poetic or the functional?”

“Whichever suits you.”

“A little of each,” she said drily. “*Ansus anamik ahman nihabaída*. Into me, God would not

breathe.”

“I see.”

“You have made your choices, *Ahma*; do not repudiate mine.”

“It seems I cannot,” he sighed. “Shomei, what I feel...”

“*Don’t, Ahma*. What you feel is merely what you feel; what you do is what you do: and that’s the point. Here.” She handed him a goblet. “Drink.”

“You are very wise, Shomei.”

“Yes, *Ahma*.”

They drank.

*

“I cannot readily see a solution to this problem,” Eadric sighed.

“You have certainly made things very *difficult* for yourself, *Ahma*. ” Shomei nodded.

“Although, I admit, on some level I am sympathetic to your efforts. You are trying to hold three truths in balance; this is no trivial task.” With a flourish, three balls appeared within Shomei’s hand: one black, one green, and one deep indigo.

She span them with a conjurer’s finesse and handed them to him one by one “You need to find a

new perspective in order to resolve your trilemma, *Ahma*. Then you will be able to juggle.”

He squinted. “A clever analogy, Shomei, but I foresee problems. This one,” he held up the black

ball, “will stick to my palm. This one,” he showed the green, “is difficult to catch. And this one,” he presented the indigo, “is apt to pursue its own trajectory, regardless of where I throw it.”

“Then you will have to concentrate very hard, *Ahma*.”

He looked at her. “Are you suggesting that some kind of *accommodation* is possible?”

“The black ball may be less kindly disposed to view things in those terms, but yes, *Ahma*; Nehael’s philosophy in this regard has merit,” she shrugged.

“I am incapable of such a feat,” he shook his head.

“Your frame of reference needs to change before *you* can make such an accommodation, *Ahma*.”

“And how do you suggest that I might achieve this?” He asked.

“*Sovereignty* would be my solution, *Ahma*, with Regency as an intermediate step. If you deify yourself, you will no longer be bound by conventional mores.”

“A route which you make sound so *simple*, Shomei.”

“I imply nothing of the sort,” she said through narrowed eyes. “But nor can I see how you can

challenge Kaalaanala without it. And think, *Ahma*, your romantic problems will be solved: each of your women can have an avatar, and there will be no squabbling.”

He shook his head.

“Of course, Soneillon is greedy, and will probably want three *Ahma* s.”

“Shomei...”

“Which, at least, might fill her needs and shut her up.” She smiled and raised her glass.

He sighed. “You can be a very *wicked* devil, Shomei.”

“Thank-you, *Ahma*.” She gestured, and a door appeared in the wall beside the fireplace.

“A new chamber?” he asked.

“Yes, *Ahma*.” Shomei stood and picked up the *kschiff*.

“May I see?” He inquired.

She raised an eyebrow. “That was the general idea, *Ahma*.”

“Ah,” he nodded. “Shomei, I am still your prisoner.”

“Yes, *Ahma*. But you are drunk on *kschiff*; I am taking advantage of you.”

“Why now?” He asked.

“Tomorrow, I must fight, *Ahma*; as you said, you will need to be at Galda. It would be *unprincipled* for me to detain you much longer.”

“Shomei, I...”

“*Don’t*, Eadric. Yes or no?” She offered her hand.

He took it. The rest followed. Her tenderness astonished him.

*

Day 6 – Confrontation

When Eadric awoke, Shomei was gone. His stomach turned, and a sense of foreboding gripped him.

He leapt up and hurriedly entered the study.

The air was cold. The door to the cottage was open, the fire had guttered and gone out; morning

sunlight streamed in. Eadric ran outside into the snow; a long, narrow area, hemmed in on all sides by a dense thicket of Hazel. There was no sign of her, but a large patch nearby was bare of frost and had been scorched with such heat that the earth had vitrified; Qematiel must have alighted there, he knew. He heard footsteps behind him, and turned to see Nercamay; she carried a heavy robe. She

drew it about him to cover his modesty.

Nercamay smiled gently. “She asked me to tell you that the fence will be passable by noon, and you will be able to leave; that she will try her best to keep damage at Deorham to a minimum. And in

the event that you don’t see her again and she does not have the opportunity to harangue you, to

look first and foremost to your own enkindlement: that you should gaze upon the Sun, because

*Isthu Sa.**”

“How long has she been gone?”

“Less than an hour, *Ahma*.”

“Did she reveal her specific intention to you?” He asked.

“She was meeting with a clique of a dozen wizards which included Jaelael, Muthollo and Daunton;

thence to Deorham.”

“*Shomei!*” He called, the force of his will behind her name. He knew that she could hear him. She ignored him.

He invoked the *Eleos*. Nehael. Goddess. Oronthon – last.

Nercamay shook her head. “She is her own Self, *Ahma*; she will brook no intervention on her behalf on the part of another.”

“I refuse to accept this circumstance,” he sighed.

“I do not see that you have much choice, *Ahma*.”

“Can you leave here, Nercamay?” He asked.

She shook her head. “The area is *locked*.”

“Unsurprising,” Eadric smiled grimly. “Can you issue a *sending*?”

“No, *Ahma*.”

“Is there no way for you to *reach* anyone?” He asked, exasperated.

“I am a muse, *Ahma*; I appear in dreams.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Then that will have to do. What time is it Nercamay?”

“Dawn was two hours ago, *Ahma*.”

He cursed, and made his way back inside into his chambers. Eadric retrieved the figurine of the

Eleos, and then rummaged through drawers in the study until he found the knife with which Shomei had carved it. He exited the cottage again, and sat upon a rude stool; all the while, Nercamay

watched uncertainly.

“I need you to communicate with someone who sleeps at this late hour; Ortwine is a likely target.

She prefers to rise just before noon.”

Nercamay entered a brief trance, and shook her head. “Ortwine does not sleep *Ahma*.”

Eadric sighed, and wracked his brains. “Try the goddess Lai.”

Again, a brief pause. Nercamay nodded. “I touched her; she seemed confused that no message was forthcoming.”

“Good,” Eadric nodded. “Dream again. Tell her to wake up, to contact Nwm and to instruct him that

the *Ahma* will require immediate reembodiment.”

“*Ahma*, I...”

“*Do so*, Nercamay.”

She complied.

He touched the statuette of the *Eleos*, invoking her for protection, and handed Nercamay the blade.

“I cannot kill myself, Nercamay. It is antithetical to my nature. If you...”

“I know where to put a knife, *Ahma*,” she said drily. “I am a devil.”

There was a brief, white-hot pain. Blood stained the snow.

Nercamay sighed, sat by the body of the *Ahma*, and entered *saizhan*.

**

Mostin had chosen an abandoned croft in a heavily wooded range of hills in Soan. None had gone

there since the infestation of Graz’zt’s demons had scoured Sisperi; some few – mostly

babau and

leaping demons – remained, but had been quickly slain or driven off by Nwm. The binding site was

an overgrown stone silo which lay half below ground, into which a steep set of moss-covered steps

gave; the interior was damp and cool. Mostin had prepared an area ten feet in diameter, and drawn a diagram of baffling complexity with celestial silver and salts; items which were becoming

increasingly difficult to procure with the removal of the Empyrean from reality as currently

described.

Little of the remaining symbolism was traditional in nature. Shomei's exempt status – together with her magnification – made unconventional adjuncts and trappings a requirement. Gone were the

blasting rods, holy water and other typical Goetic tools; Mostin had based the rite off of the Articles of the Wyrish Injunction, and would invoke the Claviger in testimony to Shomei's confinement. It

meant working with oneiric ideograms describing various substrates of Dream; conditions to which

Shomei might be vulnerable, but of which he, himself, had little experience. He fretted and paced

and muttered.

Nwm – still conflicted in his feelings, but grimly conscious that the binding was probably necessary

– watched dispassionately. The choice to keep Ortwine in the dark – because of her connection to

the Hazel – also left him with a sour feeling in his mouth. But Hlioth's words – that Shomei would leverage that relationship – could not be ignored. However mad, the crone's insights were almost

unerring in matters Tree-ish.

Mulissu descended through a large hole in the domed ceiling and sighed. "Will this take much

longer, Mostin?"

"Trust me when I say that it would be best to get it right the first time," the Alienist replied acidly.

**

No viridescent devas waited for him. There was no Yew; no mountain; no fresh, resin-scented air.

Only a frigid void. He was distinct from it, and illuminated its merest fraction; its vastness humbled him. He gazed across an immeasurable distance at the World; it seemed tiny and insignificant. He

waited. His knew that his own light and heat might sustain him for an eternity. He hoped they would not have to: he was utterly alone.

A familiar voice called to him. He sighed, and leapt toward it, intent upon descent into the Green and the body which he knew awaited him. Something – a claw made of color – rushed at him and

seemed to snatch him, drawing him aside. A visage made of potential, dynamic and shifting, and

wise beyond all conception, held him and observed him without emotion.

Do not forget that you are still frail, it said to him.

It hurled the *Ahma* downwards like a meteor; briefly, his essence fragmented into a quintillion parts and streamed into the World, which gathered them together again.

He awoke with a start, not to Nwm's face, but to Nehael's.

*

Eadric stood at once. His surroundings were familiar: the interior of the tabernacle. The *Sela* sat nearby in meditation, but did not regard him.

"That was a riskier strategy than you might imagine," Nehael sighed.

"The stakes are high. Where is Nwm?" He asked.

"He and I are in unspoken disagreement," Nehael smiled, handing him clothing, which he hastily

began to don. "He believes that neutralizing Shomei is necessary. He has travelled to Sisperi with Mostin and Mulissu in order to bind her. Soneillon will act as a sink for Mostin's spell. He would have waited until after this was accomplished before *reincarnating* you – probably as a mule.

Fortunately, I knew that you were dead; I suppose if you invoke every deity you can conceive of,

someone is bound to hear."

"Why do you believe this to be an error on Nwm's part?"

"First, because Shomei's survival hinges on the word of Soneillon given to Mostin – and I suspect

that she views it as somewhat less binding than when given to the *Ahma*, for whom she has a rather intense and possessive love. She *knows*, Eadric – how can she not, after what you have shared?

Your recent actions may have led her to now view Shomei as a substantive *threat* to your affection."

“And the second reason?” He groaned.

“The second reason is that the first reason does not matter, Eadric,” she handed him *Lukarn*.

“Because Shomei will throw her full weight at Deorham before Mostin even has a chance to begin

his spell; you can be assured that Soneillon will remain there until the last possible minute for her own safety. Even if she subsequently made her way to Sisperi, Shomei would follow her with

Qematiel and her devils and attack before the rite could be completed. She might hound Soneillon

through a dozen worlds and wreck them in her passing. Of course, Shomei wouldn’t be attacking

today *at all* if it weren’t ...”

“...for my recent actions.” He sighed. “I feel as though I’ve made a terrible mess of things.”

“Well, then at least we’ve made some progress,” Nehael nodded.

“How long do I have?”

“Fifteen minutes,” Nehael smiled.

“What if the rite were to proceed *without* Soneillon’s involvement?” Eadric asked. “With me acting as guarantor of Shomei’s safety?”

“You would need to find a very *selfless*, willing caster of some magnitude with an untapped reservoir to act as the sink,” Nehael replied.

“Can you...”

“Do not look at me, Eadric. I am red; magic is not my forte.”

“Is there any...”

Teppu coughed gently and entered the tent. Eadric gave a hopeful look.

Nehael sighed. “Yes, Eadric. Teppu is capable.”

“Then I must go now...”

“One moment,” Nehael interrupted. “Teppu’s reservoir was reserved against the imminent danger of

the Cheshnite horde and the Fourth Effluxion, which looks like [*this*].”

Eadric staggered as the magnitude of the threat was revealed to him.

Nehael nodded. “So please bear that in mind when you choose to spend it elsewhere.”

“Why must I always be the one to choose?”

“Because you are the *Ahma*, Eadric,” Teppu smiled jovially. “A job which no-one else wants.”

The *Sela* stirred. “Do not forget that you are still frail.”

“*Sela, I...*”

Tramst held up his hand. “Remind Shomei that the Flame needs nothing and is always Perfect,

Eadric. *It cannot Fall.*”

He nodded.

“And *Ahma*,” the *Sela* continued. “I don’t think you’ve done too *badly*, given the circumstances.”

Nehael raised an eyebrow. “The *Sela* is much *kinder* than I; I am merely compassionate.”

“Will you come?” Eadric asked Nehael.

“No, Eadric.” She smiled. “I am going to go and shoot ghouls; which is, to say, *my job*. But I’m sure Ortwine will accompany you; she has a bone to pick with Nwm.”

“Nehael,” he began. “Concerning Soneillon...”

“At this point, Eadric, my practical advice would be to *grovel*.”

“Noted,” he said.

**

[Mostin]: We are ready.

[Soneillon]: You are too late, Mostin.

*

Qematiel gyred in the skies above Trempa. Shomei considered.

Between them, Soneillon and Carasch might have a total of seven transvalents of up to the four-

hundredth order available. Shomei herself had two remaining, and of only the two-hundredth, but

her most powerful infernal minions had a large array of *superb dispellings* which, if intelligently managed, might open a gap in Soneillon’s defenses and reveal a line of attack. Shomei could then

use *time stops* and bring a barrage of *hellfire acid storms* to bear against Soneillon before she could react; hopefully enough to end it. Shomei knew that careful deployment of her devils was vital.

There was no doubt that the chthonic balor had seen the first wave which Shomei had dispatched;

the six-winged Aristaqis and fifty exemplars would test the potent wards which shrouded Kyrtil’s

Burh, and attempt to goad Soneillon into precipitous action.

Shomei could not afford to be indiscriminate in her attack; any volley or assault which

happened to catch the Blackthorn in its area would result in the certain and immediate extinction of the devils responsible, as the reflex of the scion – or worse yet, the *ludja* itself – snuffed them out.

Her mind was linked to that of Aristaqis and followed his thoughts, although no direct sight could be conveyed to her within the suppressive ambit of the scion. The eight flights which preceded him described an arc a quarter-mile across; their positions and velocities understood by Shomei as an

abstraction of constantly changing coordinates and vectors.

As though to demonstrate to Shomei both her own, sheer physical prowess and her willingness to

engage immediately and without intermediaries, Soneillon appeared directly within the flight path

of Aristaqis and deep within the ranks of the exemplars who accompanied him. The demoness set

about the infernal seraph instantly, eschewing magic for a more direct attack. He dwarfed her with his mass, but Void struck as a storm of tendrils which lashed at him. Before he had even the chance to swing his weapon, he had been reduced to nothing; all trace of *ens* had been removed. His blade

– a nine-foot flaming sword etched with infernal runes – plunged from the skies and sank into a

bank of snow.

Shomei cursed. She hadn't expected Soneillon to act *that* impulsively. The remaining devas hurled themselves at the demoness, but Soneillon shrugged them off; she preferred no further engagement

at that time, and vanished. Shomei ordered the devils to reform and press on.

Shortly after, they encountered the outermost of the defenses around the keep; an impenetrable

barrier of force.

*

Soneillon had learned many tricks, and had drawn freely upon the power of the *Urn* to entrench and fortify her position. Nested magics surrounded the stronghold, each more complex than the last.

The outermost ward was a paling not unlike that which she had erected in Throile, albeit of more

modest scope: a force encountered as a solid barrier with a diameter of a mile at the center of which Kyrtil's Burh – the stones of which had been reinforced to the point of magical adamant – was

situated.

The entire area was a dimensional cordon of such power that no magic within Shomei's grasp – or

so Soneillon judged – might break it; within, a veiled discontinuity was hidden, large enough for the demoness to facilitate the summoning of her minions, and for her to flee if it became necessary. Six invisible nets, debilitating screens which would afflict those who attempted to press close, further surrounded the bastion; each was protected by a metaward designed to stave off aggressive

dispellings which were focused upon it. Two inner screens – wrought of blasphemy and keyed to the annihilation of devils – provided the tightest defense. *Symbols* adorned the flags of the courtyard; scribed on walls and doors were glyphs describing ruin and insanity.

Within the chapel – her gap within the *dimensional lock* – Soneillon began to *summon* her lesser kin in an unending torrent; chthonic succubi who seemed as dark reflections of herself, some degrees

removed in power but formidable nonetheless.

[Mazikreen]: The *Paling* is down.

Soneillon ignored her; the demonesses began to take flight. They harried the devas who were now

moving forward in determined waves.

Powerful *dispellings* began to target her defenses.

Shomei deployed the main strength of her devils, striking from east, south and west with a focus

upon negating the transvalent screens. An erosion of the wards began, but the *dimensional lock* remained intact, impervious to the *superb dispellings* which struck it. Fallen exemplars and episemes pressed forward relentlessly.

The Infernalist stopped time, *teleported* to a distance of a mile from the keep, and struck it with a yet more potent *dispelling*, shattering the tight inner cordon. Still, the *lock* endured. Shomei swore, retreated beyond range, and waited.

Time recommenced. Devils surged toward Kyrtil's Burh.

*

Realizing what had happened, Soneillon opened the mouth to an adjacent demiplane; a confined

space where several hundred demons – including Abyssal nobility whom she had suborned – had

been kept locked in close proximity to one another for far too long. They erupted with a fury which was utterly indiscriminate; an explosion of malice and spite which poured out into the world, intent on doing violence to whatever was nearest. Soneillon augmented them with a powerful spell.

Within the courtyard, the black axe of Carasch now moved in great arcs, cutting through

swathes of

the dark celestials who flung themselves at him as though they were butter. His annihilating fire – a shroud of unbeing kindled by magic to greater intensity – burned those of lesser stature away before they even came close to him. None could withstand him.

He uttered a syllable; three Antagonists perished, along with a dozen other episemes: ash and

smoke, borne away on a mordant wind. And another; a storm of blasphemous void scoured the keep

and the countryside beyond of devils of less than once-exalted status. And a third; Armaros,

Shomei's captain – reckoned greatest of the Thirteen – perished beneath it.

Hellfire engulfed him; he weathered it.

*

At the last, Shomei had thrown the wyrm at the engagement. She circled above the keep, breathing

great goutts of fire, carefully avoiding the scion. Demons disintegrated in droves; more than a few devils were caught in her discharges. Ahazu and Dhenu, once great Abyssal magnates, burned away

within a line of destructive breath. Carasch prepared to engage her; Soneillon bade him otherwise.

The merlons on the Steeple melted as Qematiel unleashed ancient hellfire upon it, obliterating

demons who jostled in the air above it. The dragon screamed; Soneillon had set about her neck, and Void pierced her scales. Qematiel powered vertically upwards, twisted her head, unleashed breath

which should annihilate, groped with her claws. She thrashed wildly in the skies.

Soneillon clung tenaciously, enduring the heat, and drank of Qematiel's being: the quiddity of the wyrm began to falter; she was slowly unmade. Her ascent arrested; she began an erratic plummet,

her head and tail spinning over, end to end. As they fell, the demoness moved over her and came to rest on her muzzle between her eyes; the world reeled around them both as she transfixed the wyrm

with her gaze.

[Soneillon]: We are not so different, you and I. But your time has passed; you no longer belong.

This is the Void [thus]. It is peace. It is your right. Do you wish it?

[Qematiel]: I cannot remember it.

[Soneillon]: Choose to trust me, or not. I will slay you either way.

[Qematiel]: I will take it.

“You were something glorious,” Soneillon smiled gently, stroked the wyrm’s great snout, and kissed her.

Qematiel – first, last and greatest of the hellfire wyrms, and the paragon of her kind – vanished in a dark fire into oblivion.

Soneillon returned to the melee.

*

[Yeqon]: Almost...

Shomei turned to Irel, Who Smites – the only episeme whom she had not deployed into the combat,

and raised an eyebrow.

“Stay here,” she instructed.

A superb dispelling of incredible power struck Soneillon.

[Yeqon]: Now. [Go *here*]

Shomei sensed her moment and stopped time, *teleporting* into the doorway of the chapel amid the chaotic fight which was underway. She paused momentarily to gain her bearings; Soneillon was in

the process of slaying another seraph – the Prosecutor Pineme – and demons and fallen celestials

clawed or hewed at one another nearby.

The Infernalist’s left hand began to coil temporality, a slow, purposeful movement which repeated

time stops at regular twelve-second intervals. Her right charted a faster counterpoint, building hellfire in a rapid crescendo. There was no margin for error; if Shomei’s concentration faltered or she risked even one of her temporal interruptions to stretch beyond its safe duration, Soneillon, she knew, might finish her in an instant. But Shomei gave reality no opportunity to recommence.

Energy coalesced. From a subjective perspective, Shomei continued her motions for more than two

minutes; outside of her bubble, no time had passed. The continuum in her vicinity threatened to

snap under the pressure which she applied to it. Sweat poured off of her, as an unrealized maelstrom of power grew to incredible intensity. She emptied herself utterly. All power, all will, focused on a single Moment. That which must be done; that thing which she must have.

She *teleported* to a distance of twenty miles, beyond the range of the perception of

Carasch.

Time began again.

Soneillon extinguished Pineme. A fraction of a second later, there was a detonation and she was

engulfed in hellfire of unimaginable heat; an exquisite pain, which burned Void itself and pushed

her to the brink of annihilation – where she teetered – but not quite beyond. The strength which she had sapped from her recent conquests had buoyed her to a point where she could withstand it; she

sighed. *This girl is such a tease*, Soneillon thought.

[Shomei]: Well?

[Yeqon]: No. What now?

...

[Yeqon]: Mistress?

...

**

Shomei hurled herself at an invisible barrier in a fury; Hellfire surged from her in waves as she

raved. Beyond the confining circle stood Mostin, Teppu, Mulissu and Nwm; somewhat removed,

Ortwine watched without emotion. Hindmost, the *Ahma*, who regarded her with concern.

Shomei fumed within the thaumaturgic diagram and glowered at Mostin and Eadric. The Alienist motioned; the others made their way in some relief from the chamber. He waited until her

turbulence had subsided to a point where she could communicate.

“Very clever, Mostin,” she finally nodded, looking at the glyphs which contained her.

“Finding the apposite symbolism was difficult,” he agreed. “But I think I did a good job.”

“Will this argument be a presentation from both of you at once or a sequential attempt to change my perspective? How did you get out, Eadric?”

“Nercamay killed me; Nehael resurrected me.”

“Oh?” Mostin inquired. “The muse? What is she like?”

“Quite charming,” Eadric nodded.

“You treat death lightly, *Ahma*,” Shomei smiled. “I cannot afford to.”

“I do nothing of the sort,” he said stonily. “How much collateral damage did you cause, Shomei?”

“I? – None. All of my actions are intensely focused, *Ahma* – as you know. I do not thrash wildly about. Soneillon’s demons, on the other hand, are no doubt running riot.”

“The universe does not consist entirely of *you*, Shomei.”

“Yes, *Ahma*, it does: that’s precisely my point.”

“And the *I* as relational?” Mostin asked. “Didn’t your *Sela* mention something like that to you in one of your more religious moments?”

“You have already been in dialogue?” Eadric was astonished. “You haven’t been *communicating*

very well, Shomei.”

“It’s none of your damn business.” Shomei said.

“*When will you assume some responsibility, you petulant child?*” Eadric thundered.

Mostin raised a hand. “It seems that I must act as arbiter of your passions as well, Eadric; perhaps a little restraint is in order?”

“I...” Eadric began, and then calmed himself. “Yes, Mostin; thank-you. Shomei, the *Sela* asked me to remind you that *the Flame needs nothing. It is always Perfect. It cannot Fall.*”

She looked uncertain. “I am not sure what...”

“It is my *function* as the *Ahma* with regard to *you* to impress this point upon you.”

“Your perfection is certainly achievable, Shomei,” Mostin agreed unexpectedly. “The *Web of Motes* revealed as much. But there is some kind of *gap* which prevents the catenary from forming. I cannot intuit precisely what the gap is; its order is Aeonic and thus inscrutable to the *Web*.”

“I do not understand...”

Pharamne’s Urn landed in the dirt near the Alienist. Mostin twitched. Shomei gaped. Eadric turned his head and swallowed.

Soneillon smiled and approached. She had appeared in the guise of the Trempan peasant-girl.

“There is your *gap*, Mostin. Ah...don’t touch it; my gesture was purely for dramatic effect.”

“Soneillon...” Eadric began.

She struck Eadric’s face soundly with her palm, flooring him. Mostin winced. Soneillon sighed,

drew close to the thaumaturgic diagram, placed her hands behind her back, and inspected Shomei as

though she were an exhibit on display. She arched an eyebrow.

“She is very *short*, Eadric,” Soneillon remarked, turning to him.

“You are very strong,” the *Ahma* stood groggily. He realized that she had never, before, committed any act of violence against him.

“I am not sure what you mean by the *Urn* being the *gap*,” Mostin licked his lips and looked at the amphora at his feet. “It is merely a source of great *power*. It is some kind of impediment to her Self-realization? ”

Shomei sat within the diagram and groaned.

“I do believe your *short friend* just had a little epiphany,” Soneillon smiled at Eadric.

Shomei sighed. “The power is the problem, Mostin. The *Urn* is external to and greater than myself; it is of the transcendent order, and is not- *I*. Possession of it – and a focus of myself *upon* it – and my own *perfection* – which must necessarily be described in terms of *I* – might be deemed mutually exclusive. I can choose one route or the other.”

“And you would deem perfection preferable?” Eadric asked.

“Well obviously, yes.”

“This irony should be preserved for all posterity,” Eadric observed drily.

Soneillon approached Eadric. He gave a nervous smile. Her eyes bored into him. “You seem to have

lost my token, Eadric.”

“Well, I...”

“No matter. I have another.” She reached within her pocket and withdrew a scarf of black samite

which cracked as she unfurled it, causing him to start. “For the time being, you remain *mine*.” She spoke through gritted teeth and tied it tightly around his wrist, cutting off his circulation. “Let’s see if you can go a week, this time.”

“Soneillon, I...”

“Later, dear.” She smiled sweetly.

The demoness turned back toward Shomei and regarded her with a mixture of scepticism and curiosity; the Infernalist appeared to have regained her focus, and seemed calmly absorbed in

herself. Soneillon slowly walked toward the circle and looked intensely at her. She placed her foot within, scraping dirt across the diagram and breaking its confining power.

“Do not...” Mostin gave a horrified look.

Soneillon spoke softly. “*Drishhtavanaasi varca avadhya tvamayaa.* ”

“*Leika kunnan sauli Thiudan, kuntho.* ” Shomei replied. “*Sezho saizhia thatei saizhio.*

Antharuhthan? Saizhi? ”

“*Nitya iisi.* ”

There was a pause. Fear gripped Eadric.

“I do like *Irel*,” Soneillon remarked. “I didn’t see him.”

“Yes, he’s sweet; I kept him back. He smites, you know.” Shomei stood.

“*Really?* How intriguing. Perhaps I might *borrow* him?”

“I am sure some arrangement can be made,” Shomei nodded. She gave a sidelong glance toward

Eadric. Soneillon caught the exchange.

“But not before midsummer.” The demoness reached down, picked up the *Urn*, and smiled at

Mostin.

“*Mine,*” she said.

*Thou art That

Exchange Between Soneillon and Shomei

This is rendered for the purpose of the story in the Tongue of Shûth (Soneillon) and the ancient Borchian dialect (Shomei); at this point, Eadric knows only that *something has been communicated*:

Soneillon: “I cannot (bring myself to) harm you because you have seen the Sun as I do.”

Shomei: “If you refer to his potential to realize that Sovereignty, I understand. I saw that you have seen the thing which I have seen. And the other one? She sees?”

Soneillon: “She always has.”

Soneillon’s Bitch-Slap

Soneillon’s famous bitch-slap was made against a flat-footed Eadric and consisted of the equivalent of a surprise action trip attack followed by a full tendrill attack routine to subdue.

The attack was glossed (or ‘skinned,’ to use modern parlance) as a single slap.

Eadric sustained 780 points of nonlethal damage and was knocked prone.

Effluxion – Part 1: Annihilation

[Nehael/ *Eleos*]: Soneillon...

[Soneillon]: ...

**

Nehael shot.

Eadric sat upon the rampart of the outer defense at Galda with his back against the parapet and

regarded her. She had been standing in the same position for more than nine hours, discharging

arrows with an unwavering rhythm which seemed to measure time itself. The goddess had loosed

thirty-three thousand and eleven missiles; she had killed thirty-three thousand and eleven ghouls: Nehael herself included the Abyssal type, ghosts and bonedrinkers – as well as several more obscure varieties of undead – in the rather broad category of *ghoul*. Eadric could not see the ghouls which Nehael had targeted; they were more than five miles away.

“Don’t you get bored?” He asked.

Her pace slowed; she drew a single arrow and released it. At the limit of his hearing, an *earthquake* rumbled. She resumed her previous rhythm.

“That would seem a more effective strategy,” he observed.

“It is,” she replied. “But I do not wish to create a fault zone.”

“Exactly how many are there, altogether?” Eadric inquired.

“Altogether?” Her measure did not falter. “About fifteen million. Coming this way? Only around

four.”

“Fifteen *million*?”

“That’s just the ghouls,” Nehael continued shooting. “The vampires, spectres, wraiths and other

heliophobes remain under the *Pall of Dhatri* for the time being; as soon as its magic fails and they find safe holes, they will begin to migrate north and operate by night.”

“Safe holes?”

“Villages which have been evacuated and overrun,” Nehael explained.

“But why such enormous numbers?” Eadric asked.

She smiled, but the tempo of her archery remained unchanged. “The Thalassine was a rich and

populous region, Eadric; now everyone is *dead*.” As her bowstring hummed, the last word was spoken with what may have been anger: an emotion which Eadric could not recall Nehael having

before evinced.

Ten thousand yards away, a ghoul dropped to the ground, its throat pierced by an arrow.

“Nwm informed me that you believe that some kind of *reconquista* is possible,” Eadric spoke dubiously.

She nodded. “It is both possible and desirable. It also requires that you *grow up*.”

“You deem me...unready?”

Nehael nodded. “Your values are childish from my perspective. The world you would seek to build

requires a more objective love.”

“Nehael, when we spoke at Shomei’s cottage, you implied that some *potential* existed between us...”

She shook her head, and continued shooting. “Still, you are fixated on these quaint notions. What

you inferred was not what I clearly stated. Whatever *lustfulness* I might possess, I would not cause suffering to any.”

“You speak of Soneillon?”

“Why not? Soneillon is no less deserving than any other.”

“And your own needs?”

“There is no *I*, Eadric. That is Shomei’s province.”

He groaned. “I cannot hold these contradictory truths. I wish only to relate simply.”

A look of exasperation crossed her face. She drew an arrow, nocked it, turned, and aimed it toward him.

“You wouldn’t...” He said nervously.

She shot it into his leg. Eadric screamed in agony.

“Are you *insane*?” He gasped with wide eyes.

“No. You are being selfish, *Ahma*,” Nehael said calmly. “You need to lose that.”

“For a deity of compassion, you have some pretty strange ideas.” Eadric groaned and shook.

“Well, that would be the wrathful part,” she resumed her previous rhythm, shooting at the southern horizon.

“And as to the causation of suffering? What do you call this?”

“Pain, *Ahma*.”

“A simple remonstrance would have been sufficient,” he spoke through a clenched jaw, and winced

as he tried to extract the arrow.

“I am not the *Sela*, *Ahma*,” she replied. “I do not have the time or luxury to be *kind* to you, and algeis may impel you. Leave the dart; I will see to it in due course.”

“Even so...”

She paused, and sighed. “Eadric. You need to put this romantic nonsense behind you; it cannot

dictate your thoughts or actions. One may not discriminate as to *where* to apply compassion, only *how*, and sentimental notions will interfere with your capacity to demonstrate it most effectively.

Concentrate. The pain will help you focus.”

“I...”

“No.”

He entered *saizhan*. The pain remained, but was only one amongst millions: the living, the dead; birds, animals; faeries, demons, celestials. Their combined magnitude was unguessable, and the

totality struck his awareness as a barrage of sensation which screamed torment and misery at his

very substance, overwhelming his identity. But the fundamental perspective observed it calmly, and did not falter.

“Much better.” Nehael spoke softly, and knelt beside him. She carefully removed the

arrow; no

mark of the wound remained. He looked at her, and a kernel of desire for her began to form;

immediately, his sense of self reasserted itself. The Moment was gone.

He inhaled sharply, and stared at her in amazement. “You perceive this suffering always?”

“It is always there.” She laughed.

“How do you bear it?” He felt utterly chastened.

“No *I* could, so it is a non-issue. Do not worry. Midwinter has passed; the days are lengthening. The Sun is returning.” She smiled.

Nehael stood, and shot.

**

Thousands of tents and pavillions comprised the camp at Galda, occupying an area of some eighty

acres. It was enclosed by a crenellated stone wall forty feet thick and sixty high which had been

erected by the diligent efforts of a hundred flamines and scrollbearers over the course of several months. *Walls of stone* and indentured elementals summoned by Uediian priests had completed the initial construction; the entire edifice had been augmented and *hardened* by Nwm, Mesikammi, Teppu and Hlioth to withstand both physical and magical assault. The Preceptor had raised seven

enormous bastions around its circuit, two of which flanked the single gate of adamant which gave

access to the place. Upon the outer face of the valves were the most potent *symbols* ever wrought: runes of Tree and Sun which described a swift demise for things which should already be dead.

The camp was removed from the town proper – of comparable dimension – at a closest distance of

around a half-mile; an outer earthwork faced with stone and with a circumference of more than a

league encompassed both. The walls of Galda town itself had likewise been buttressed; most of its natives had departed some weeks earlier. The two were connected by *teleportation circles* and *tree portals* to allow the swift redeployment of troops.

Nwm stood within the centre of the encampment beside a muddy field which had been cleared of

tents, soldiers and horses, and sighed. Although it pained him, there was no denying the logic of

Mostin’s suggestion; it would save resources, and nothing within the combined power of those

present could rival it for effectiveness. The Preceptor gave a resigned look to Hlioth, who returned one of equal sympathy.

[Nwm]: Very well. The space is ready.

In the middle of the camp at Galda, a three-hundred foot tall edifice of infernal adamant appeared, blotting out the sun and immediately drawing the attention of everyone within the circuit of the

stronghold. Massive bartizans flanked a central tower, from which machiolated platforms and

corbels depended. Wide nozzles of unknown purpose protruded from its walls.

There was a brief silence, and then a tall doorway opened onto a balcony at a height of thirty

fathoms. Six creatures with many mouths and appendages slowly floated out, bobbing in the breeze,

and blew on clarions: a discordant fanfare of tremendous volume which shook the ground and made

all who heard it nauseous. Great purple drapes unfurled; lights of every known hue – and some of

wholly unfamiliar color – strobed brilliantly in the sky. Mostin – wearing an ornate puce mitre,

three feet high and bedecked with jewels – strode forth onto the platform, and spread his arms wide.

“I have arrived,” he announced to the world.

*

Around thirty wizards – including eight from the ruling body of the Collegium – had accompanied

Mostin, on the condition that they might abide within the tower and come and go at their leisure: a stipulation supported by Daunton, who recognized the relative safety of Mostin’s fortress. Mostin

had grudgingly assigned suites to Waide, Jalael, Muthollo, Creq, Droom, Troap, Sarpin and

Daunton himself. Lesser mages had been forced to share chambers; despite the enormous extradimensional volume of the *Infernal Tower*, Mostin preferred to keep a large portion out of bounds.

The presence of the wizards was met with mixed emotions; many of the more conservative and

influential Templars viewed them with suspicion or disdain. Ortwine received them graciously, and

immediately procured a well-furnished pavillion from Troap, with whom she had enjoyed long-

standing good relations. Their presence in the camp, the sidhe nodded appreciatively, would inject a much-needed *civility* into affairs; even with the numerous Wyrish aristocracy, the prevailing religious sobriety was far too *austere* for Ortwine's tastes.

Eadric spied a diminutive figure who walked purposefully through the camp, wearing a cloak of

deep blue – Irknaan's cloak, he knew. His leg still tingling from its recently-experienced trauma, he intercepted her, intent on determining her disposition.

Sho turned to him, and raised an eyebrow. "Yes, *Ahma*?"

"It has been some time," Eadric regarded her with curiosity. "I am intrigued: your vehicle – Goetia

– would seem to be a path with its end in sight. Your maker has a certain...dispensation in this

regard; but other wizards do not have the luxury of calling upon the previous Hell."

She looked at him *that way*. It made him feel distinctly uncomfortable.

"There will always be devils, *Ahma*," Sho answered. "You should not trouble yourself on that count."

"I do not mean to offend, Sho, but there is a question which I would like to ask you."

"My ego is robust, *Ahma*," Sho said drily. "You are unlikely to cause me discomfort."

"Do you have a *religious* vision, Sho? Some article of faith by which you abide?"

"No. I am a *wizard*, *Ahma*; such notions are uncommon amongst my kind."

"And devils?" He asked. "Their...perspective is one for which you have some special sympathy?"

"Devils are *tools*, *Ahma*," she replied. "But I confess a certain fondness for some of them, especially those who might be deemed high in the *Old Order*. "

"You speak of Azazel and his ilk?"

Sho nodded. "They are of a particular vintage."

"Hence my comment regarding Goetia as an increasingly obscure vehicle."

Sho raised an eyebrow. "The world is smaller than it used to be, and two hundred legions is a *lot* of devils, *Ahma*."

"Yes, I suppose it is." His expression was one of concern. "Do you consider yourself... unique, Sho?

Authentic? I ask because there are certain *resonances* with your progenitor."

"I am very much my own *self*, *Ahma*," she gave a quizzical look. "Whatever similarities you perceive are entirely superficial."

“It’s just that your *personae* are so similar.”

Sho shrugged. “A *persona* is exactly that, *Ahma*, and nothing more. Deeper truths are more often concealed.”

“Shomei, I...”

“I am Sho, *Ahma*,” she smiled.

“Indeed; I apologize. There is a profundity surrounding you,” Eadric sighed. “In any iteration. Do you have a *goal*, Sho? A *purpose*?”

“Only to become myself, *Ahma*,” Sho replied. “Although I have yet to define what that is to my satisfaction. I am on the verge of transvalency; it may provide additional insights.”

He gaped. “*Already*? You are something extraordinary, Sho.”

“Yes, *Ahma*. I know. I will not forget it: of that, you can be sure.”

“And Mei? She is here?” He asked.

“She is within the tower,” Sho nodded. “With Orolde.”

“Are you...close? By which, I mean, do you hold her in any special regard?”

“No, *Ahma*,” Sho shook her head. “Sho is Sho and Mei is Mei. And Shomei is Shomei.”

“I see,” he said. “But both you and your *sister* – if that term is appropriate – have a particular loyalty to Mostin.”

Sho nodded; her expression was one of mild confusion. “Of course. He has been a source of

unconditional support. Mostin is uncommonly *generous* for a wizard, *Ahma*. His absurd pomp and egotism are merely a *persona*. And he will always advocate for that thing which he values most.”

“And what might that be?” Eadric inquired, raising his eyebrows.

“Potential,” Sho smiled. “And the will to realize it.”

**

The Embassy – the Fourth Effluxion of Kaalaanala – sat in her saddle and gazed north, her sight

piercing all veils. The hood which framed where her visage might have been was empty: within was

a blankness which admitted no light; an impalpable void. Disintegrating fire wreathed her; an aura wherein all trace of being was extinguished. Although the shape of her mount was equine, its nature was also chthonic: a powerful *anala* bound and confined by her terrible will to serve as the steed for the avatar of the Fire of Death.

Undead surrounded her in numberless droves, driven unconsciously by her intention into some

coherence of purpose. Few amongst her living slaves might even approach her: Rishih and Naatha –

feared potentates and great immortals in their own right – cowered in her presence.
Anumid

lavished praise upon her; an unctuous sycophant regarded with contempt amongst most of the

remaining Cheshnite magnates, but still commanding the respect of the remnant of the Convocations. A fourth part of Dhatri's host accompanied the Embassy. The rest, which moved with

the bloated goddess and the entourage of the demilich Idyam had struck out toward the northeast

and crawled or lurched toward Wyre: a great swell of hunger which, now beyond the darkness of

the *Pall*, was revealed as a relentless tide of death and putrefaction which consumed everything in its path.

Galda was encompassed entirely; a cordon of rotting flesh at a distance of two leagues, beyond the ambit of the scions which nestled in the vale north of the town. The Embassy was acutely aware of

the diminishment which the Oak and Elm would force upon her undead minions, and had prepared

magicks to counteract the effects of the Trees on her troops; until she had positioned herself exactly for the assault, her spells were held in reserve. Three great hubs were established – south, northeast and northwest of the Wyrish defenses – which, although beyond the inner purlieu of the scions, still fell within the circuit established by the *ludjas*. Magical scrutiny by the Cheshnites was denied by quercine power within the area, and reconnaissance was achieved by flights of shadow demons,

succubi and palrethees: fiends which, by virtue of their scarcity, were now viewed as a valuable

resource by the immortal elite.

Choach – returned again from his concealed phylactery – had entrenched in the westernmost presidio. To Prahar's chagrin, the Embassy had appointed the lich – despite his own clear seniority in such matters – as her general above him: Prahar's own instability might make him a liability, and the situation was too precarious to risk a whimsical assault by the great death knight, whatever his own prowess, or that of his troops. The range east and north of Galda was commanded by Naatha,

with a bulwark of magi beneath Rishih, together with many of the staunchest remaining demons and

those troops whom Temenun had abandoned. The southernmost concentration – the largest by

number, if not in native power – Kaalaanala's avatar had taken to herself directly: a sea of rotten flesh which, when the time came, she would imbue with Void and ferocious hunger.

The Embassy bided her time for a while.

Void moved in deep, imperceptible currents.

**

Soneillon lounged upon the bed within the main suite at Deorham, studying the glyphs etched into

the tablet which Tozinak had bestowed upon her, and considered their import. Some agency was at

work, although she could not determine precisely *what*; it was neither Kaalaanala, nor the Cherry itself – which, being comprised of lust, lacked volition in the conventional sense. Something

hitherto unrevealed had prompted the wizard to transpose Jovol's spell into a minor key; it was no parody, and the artistry in the dweomer was immediately apparent to her. It was also something

utterly beyond Tozinak's capacity to achieve. And Tozinak still had the original spell – *A Flame Precedes the Aeon* – locked somewhere within his Cherry-addled mind. *Vhorzhe?* She considered.

The entity was capable, no doubt, although whether desirous was a different question entirely.

The Apparition strove to manifest; of that, there could be no doubt. And other chthonic forces were also active; impulses which she could not hope to fully comprehend. Soneillon began to wonder

whether another *Bhiti* – one of an order comparable to the Fires of Death – might be implicated. If so, the *medium* through which it was operating was obscure; if Delirium or some approximal region of Dream, she should have felt it herself. If it were confined within the Green – as was Kaalaanala –

then its presence would have been long known. Kaalaanala had been the reciprocal payment; the

price forced by Void to tolerate the Abysmal *ludjas*. But what if some other balance had been struck?

The demoness rose and exited the chamber onto a small stoop which overlooked the curtilage

below. All of the structural damage had been repaired, and Carasch had been dismissed – temporarily, at least. Most of her other minions had been slain or had fled, although a trio of succubi once sworn to Graz'zt – Mazikreen, Ilistet and Chepez the Vicious – still attended her. Around a

hundred demons remained loose in western Trempa, making mischief; none were of a mind to

submit themselves again to the former Queen of Throile, and eliminating them or driving them

away would be necessary to appease the *Ahma* – whose current mood of contrition regarding her should probably be enjoyed for as long as possible.

Hard beside the chapel, the Blackthorn scion dozed; snow sat upon its barbed limbs, and the

textures of its twisted trunk intimated at the very process of dissolution. Soneillon glided down into the courtyard, folded her wings, and approached the Tree: its *attitude* toward her – if its disposition could be described in such terms – seemed benign; somehow sympathetic. She sighed. This *Treeish-*

ness was difficult to fathom. She pressed her hands against its bark, feeling its energy; an inevitable

urge toward the *ending* of things. But not after the nullificatory fashion of Cheshne's unmanifest Shadow, the Apparition or *Aabhaasa* of Shûthite lore. More, a *délabrement* in a helical stream which did not deny new beginnings. *Cheshne was more than Her Shadow*; of this, the demoness had no doubt. *She* – the Void – was awake; no longer slumbering within the bounds of *ens* as tenuously described by her oneiric form. And Soneillon, in whom all infinities collided, might alone in her psychosis apprehend a great, dark, devouring love.

A sudden urge overcame her.

Soneillon gestured, and the door to the chapel creaked open. Inside, all was again ordered and

pristine, though nonetheless still profaned; the guts and ichor which had spilled in from the conflict of the previous day had been scoured clean. She entered and extended tendrils which seemed to

caress the floor, feeling the draught which issued from the crypt below.

Carefully, she lifted a three-hundred pound flag of granite and set it aside, revealing steep steps which led down into a narrow space with a low, vaulted ceiling. She descended slowly; a dozen

sarcophagi were crowded into the sepulchre, along with smaller caskets and urns: Eadric's direct

forebears, and uncles and cousins removed by degrees. She inspected those which seemed the most

recent, brushing away cobwebs, until she found the one she was looking for: directly below the

altar, a narrow funerary coffer of marble, unadorned except for its simple brass plaque:

THIOSTRI, Lady Deorham

628-656 TR

Dame of Witnung's Chase

Daughter of Nân of Jaive

Beloved Wife of Moad Saul, Baronet

And of Orm and Eadric, Mother

Soneillon folded her arms. “You would seem to have been a remarkable woman, Thiostri. Your

elder son gave lessons to the Mind of Oronthon, and your younger is his Breath; the last prosopopoeia of Radiance. And I do not believe in coincidences.”

She knelt, and lit an offertory taper. It flickered uncertainly as it illuminated the space, wavering in the chill breeze drawn through cracks in the chamber’s walls. The demoness focused and drew her

knife, opening a deep cut in her palm. She squeezed her fist, and ichor dripped onto the sarcophagus. Potent magic coursed through her; even a vanished archetype might have responded to

its entreaty.

“*Tyakh, asrij svaam*: an offering, my own blood. Were you a mortal woman, or one divine?”

There was no sound; no movement; no shade which spoke. No thing. The taper guttered and went

out. Peace, and an utter stillness. The darkness was perfect; unmarred.

Soneillon sat in silence. *Pasyaami. Tvam jaane*: I see. Thou, I know.

She pondered for a long while before finally cursing, standing and exiting the crypt. Her form

altered, and her wings retracted and vanished: no sense in alarming the Oronthonists beyond the

necessary. The demoness clad herself in sombre black – a high-collared robe which encased her

form with an appropriate propriety – and drew her hair back after the fashion of an Orthodox Sister.

Throwing a great, atrament cloak about herself, she dreamed her way to Galda, manifesting

discreetly beside the war pavillion of the *Ahma* – a large affair which had been erected after the

previous had been blasted away by Shomei. The daylight was waning; the voices inside the tent were intense, agitated and full of worry.

Soneillon opened a heavy curtain of canvas and entered quietly; Eadric was taking counsel with his captains: Saints, Talions, great magnates of Wyre and the chiefs among the Illuminated. She

lowered her hood: her presence was at once both disquieting and magnetic. Her beauty –

which

familiarity had somehow caused the *Ahma* to forget – transfixed those who gazed upon her; silence fell within. Eadric squinted; he had not encountered this particular façade before. While her features remained unchanged, the masque of the coquettish peasant-girl was entirely absent, replaced by a

solemn focus and composure. If anything, her assumed guise – which suggested modesty and

abnegation – made the succubus even more alluring.

Saint Tahl the Incorruptible, who wore an *Eye of Palamabron* around his neck – the mate of that borne by the *Ahma* – glanced toward Eadric. Immediately, he had apprehended the truths which clashed within her, and knew who she was. Many others within guessed: Soneillon's eyes were

apertures through which form and Void regarded one another. Around the table, a dozen hands came

to rest instinctively upon hilts and pommels, although the likely futility of any such gesture was lost to none, and least of all to Eadric; he knew that she could kill them all with a fleeting thought.

Soneillon said nothing; her face was impassive.

“A brief recess, *Ahma*?” Tahl inquired diplomatically. Inwardly, he grappled with the multiplicity of forms which he could perceive in her.

Eadric nodded.

When they were alone, Eadric approached her and gave an inquiring look. “Perhaps I should thank

you for not appearing naked upon the conference table. Are you here to ensure my fidelity?”

She offered a hand. “Now is not the time for levity, Eadric. Come to Deorham.”

“Soneillon, we have only hours before the assault begins.”

“Come,” she insisted. She was nervous. “There is something you need to see.”

He narrowed his eyes; this trepidation was most unlike her. “I assume I should be prepared to be

upset?”

“You should just be *prepared*,” Soneillon advised. “Although, in retrospect, everything makes perfect sense.”

“As you are making little,” Eadric opined.

“You spring from Void, Eadric; the Sun is born in the dark.”

He swallowed; the memory of his own, isolated, second death still haunted him: a monad bereft,

surrounded by night. “If this is some effort to distort...”

Soneillon hissed. “Trust me, or do not! The choice is yours; and the *via negativa* is an artifact of *Saizhan*: this is *your* description of truth, not mine.”

“Really?” He asked sceptically. “And how might you characterize that?”

“*Ni thatuh, jah thata; ni bai, jah nih*,” she half-smiled.

“You are most vexatious.”

“*Waihtai ni, waírthi*. The epistemic must become the ontic – or rather the meta-ontic.”

“And now even Soneillon would wax philosophical?” He groaned.*

“Only when all else fails,” she said drily. “How much do you really trust me, Eadric?”

Eadric looked at her, and shifted uneasily. He guessed her purpose. “You are proposing annihilation; that if I strip myself of my self, my Self will kindle? You have offered me this before, although its guise was more sinister at that time; the outcome crueller.”

“Times have changed.” She drew close; her fingers trembled as she reached out and touched his

face. “Are both *saizhan* and extinction not unattainable?*** It can be sweet, Eadric; death and climax. But *saizhan* – if it is the transmetaphysic it purports to be – will sustain you.”

He sighed. “Must *everything* be couched in terms of death and sex?”

“Eventually. Am I not Soneillon?” She laughed. For a moment, the playfulness returned. “And I

already hold you longer than I should.”

He looked at her curiously.

“Consider the Sun, Eadric. What is the *Ahma* – the manifest Breath of Oronthon in the World – if not that light? That is your legacy. This time between the winter solstice and the vernal equinox

should be yours; you will be Nehael’s from spring until midsummer. Properly, I do not get you until autumn.”

He gawked. “And the summer months?”

“That would be your *short friend*.”

“It might have been nice to have been consulted in this arrangement,” Eadric grumbled.

“And if this is the ‘empty quarter,’ so to speak, then why am I still beholden to you?”

She stared at him, her eyes penetrating to his core. “Because I am the jealous one, Eadric. I will always find it hard to let go. Besides, we started late this year. And this is your *arrangement* – or an arrangement made to accommodate *you*. Now, will you come to Deorham? Your third passing need not be final, merely complete.”

“And you would then call me back?” He asked. “You suggested before that if I jumped, you might catch me.”

“No,” Soneillon shook her head. “You must bring yourself back; Self-emanate *ex nihilo*. I can only make a cradle for you; ease your passage into oblivion with soft words and a warm embrace.”

“This would seem a task of more than middling difficulty,” Eadric remarked ironically.

“The *Ahma* is sempiternal, and will exist for as long as the World endures. I cannot destroy it,

although I can deprive it of its physical dwelling. If *Saizhan* is what you claim it is, you may cross the Abyss with impunity and wake on the other side.”

“Awaken to what?”

“To Regency, Eadric. To your own incandescence.”

“And what does that *mean*, exactly?” He asked.

“Amongst other things, that I will have cause to fear you,” she said ruefully. “Well?”

He sighed. “Do I need to bring anything?”

“Your self only.” Soneillon gave an ironic smile. A sacrificial robe appeared in each of her hands.

“Now. Would you prefer black, or white?”

A mile to the south, Nehael paused briefly; the *Ahma* had all of the tools he needed: what he did with them was up to him. She drew; her bow sang rhythmically again in the dusk as she continued

to loose arrow after arrow into the hordes of ghouls which pressed ever closer.

*

Eadric sat cross-legged upon the sarcophagus and glanced suspiciously at the ichor which stained it: a testament to Soneillon’s previous necromancy. “And here I was, thinking there were no taboos left to break.”

Soneillon said nothing, and lit a black *candle of invocation*. Its flame burned the color of soot.

“What, exactly, are you invoking?” He inquired.

“I believe you know the answer to that,” the demoness replied. She wore her most malefic aspect

now: a shape of terrible darkness; ravenous, clawed and fanged, with pinions which stretched to fill the chamber. Soneillon moved, and tendrils of madness and oblivion writhed about her. She slid

forward suddenly, and Void held him in a vice. *Kaalakamala*, the Lotus of Death; she was delirium, and despair.

Eadric swallowed. “Somehow, I think I like you best like this.”

She regarded him closely. “That is well.”

“Will there be pain?” He asked dubiously.

“If you like.” Her claws, razor-sharp, pricked the skin on his back.

“And if I don’t?”

“Then there won’t.” She relaxed her grip.

“That might be preferable,” he nodded.

She arched an eyebrow. “If you are having second thoughts, Eadric, now would probably be a good

time to articulate them. Would you like to reconsider?”

“Yes. No. Proceed.”

As you wish, Ahma.

Talons sank into the granite lintel above his head and wings encased him, cocooning him in

unbeing. Around him, form and substance disintegrated; he felt his strength begin to slowly ebb

away. Like a heady wine, Soneillon drank *ens* from him, savoring its potency, until his brilliance had dimmed to the merest flicker, a guttering lamp borne above a yawning chasm without root or

essence. The magnitude of the Void was immeasurable; its profundity, unguessable.

Without fear or rancor, the *Ahma* gazed long and deep into the Abyss; she held him at the brink of annihilation for what seemed an eternity: Aeons wheeled past him as infinities were born, unfolded and died. He would have remained there indefinitely, and the impetus to go further finally arose not from himself, but from her: she urged him on without her, and he blessed her for it. Beyond

Nothingness, he beheld the shining emptiness which neither was nor was not: the Fundamental

without category.

Seek the Dragon. She is waiting. . Void clenched softly, and snuffed out the last iota of light. Ecstasy and death converged, and in that fraction of a second Eadric understood her absolutely: what drove her, what she represented, what she must give up. He was awestruck; the *kius* was resolved, complete. His body was instantly consumed; no trace remained, save a scarf of black samite only.

Soneillon – drunk with radiance – lay down upon the tomb, her wings draped over its sides, and

silently wept.

Finally, reluctantly, she roused herself and stood, once again assuming her human form with its

funereal garb. She now had the bitterest task of all. Bile rose in her throat. She clenched

her teeth, closed her eyes, and reached out with her mind.

[Soneillon]: It is done. Nwm must conjure his herald in the hour before sunrise. Look to the

Blackthorn at Deorham.

[Nehael/ *Eleos*]: (Empathy). Soneillon...

[Soneillon]: Save it.

The demoness mindfully folded the token, placed it within a pocket, and climbed the steps into the chapel. She closed the door behind her and entered the courtyard. The air was cold and the night

was moonless; the stars glistened above, whispering expectantly to one another. Soneillon took

Pharamne's Urn and placed it carefully within the bole of the scion; immediately, she was diminished as its power left her. Veiling herself in shadows, she prepared to launch herself skywards: for almost nine months, she would walk on dark paths until the Sun fell within her orbit again.

The slightest breeze alerted her to the sudden presence of another; a statuesque figure who towered above her. She turned and gave an inquiring look.

"It was indicated that you might like some company," Irel bowed.

"Indeed?" Soneillon gave a small smile. "And yet it is not midsummer. Why has your mistress

dismissed you?"

"I was never compacted, if you recall; she merely intimated that I might come. I believe the *Sela* spoke with her and suggested it. I will leave, if you prefer."

"I did not say that," she said wryly. "But it may be that you cannot endure where I am to go. I will wander through nightmares, Irel; into Delirium and beyond; Outside; through the space between the

stars and into the Void."

"Then you must strive hard to keep me safe," the deva replied with an even humor. "That I might

prevent you from straying too far."

Soneillon looked up at him and sighed. "Thank-you, Irel. I think I should like that very much."

Eadric was gone, reduced to nihility. But the *Ahma* abode in *saizhan*. He would ignite with the dawn.

A dawn which was still six hours away.

*Translational Note:

Ni thatuh, jah thata; ni bai, jah nih: Neither this nor that; neither both nor neither.

Waihtai ni, waírthi. : That which is not, becomes.

******The original *kius* regarding Eadric's relationship with Soneillon was framed as *Hwa Soneo ith ni bai afhwapnan jah saizhan thau ni maht ist laiston?* , i.e. "What is Soneillon, if both *saizhan* and extinction are not unattainable?"

*

Effluxion – Part 2: Small Hours

The night air was motionless, and stifling. The stench of death filled it.

Wyrish troops manned the towers and parapets of Galda town and the nearby camp; elite companies

of Templars mustered within the inner perimeter. Nehael – Red Nehael – rode alone along the outer

rampart, her gaze turned south. Before her, a sea of undead seethed and roiled. Her mind's eye,

which could glimpse ten times further, encountered the same horror magnified a hundredfold.

Still, she shot; each dart which she loosed now caused the earth to convulse, or grasses and vines to grow in explosive violence. Her enemy perished by the battalion; legions replaced them.

[Hlioth]: Now. Shoot [here]

Nehael shot.

The arrow struck the Earth, which shuddered. Hlioth, Teppu and Mesikammi set forth their power: a

jade light began to kindle. First, as a pillar, it then erupted as a curtain of shimmering, emerald fire which tore a course six miles in circumference, describing a circle centered on the Elm scion to the north. Nehael watched impassively as it encompassed Galda and penetrated deep into the undead

host, stretching upwards into a dome; her deific perception felt it sink beneath her feet. The Green Witch had encapsulated them, sealing off a great multitude of the enemy within. There was a slow

surge; a building vibrancy: Viridity coursed. Every atom was energized.

A million undead within the sphere desiccated: a charnel vapor which swiftly dispersed on a

purifying wind. An uncanny green light and a profound silence prevailed – none other amongst the

enemy might penetrate the barrier and enter within.

[Hlioth]: We'll see how long that holds. But I am already weary. And Teppu is empty;

Shomei has

much to answer for.

[Nehael]: I see the emanation beyond the curtain. And she, I: she is less than a league distant. She is angry.

[Hlioth]: I imagine I would be wasting my time if I advised that you wait till sunrise?

Nehael spurred her horse, *Sura* over the parapet, and rode toward the Embassy.

Cautious, and as yet unprepared for confrontation, Kaalaanala's Fourth Effluxion withdrew.

**

The spirit of the *Eleos* soared above the World. Dimensions – which were no more than perspectives – cycled below her: Wyre, Faerie, Mulhuk, Throile; the Viridescent Heaven of the

Ahma. The infarction which was Kaalaanala; and beyond, a great clamor at the Veils, as their Mistresses hurled magicks of awful power. The Tree: enduring; oblivious.

On a mountain, the goddess manifested an avatar – a slender maiden, dressed in white – and sat

beneath the Yew- *ludja* in perfect *saizhan*. Turning her thought to a prior infinity, she grasped an idea, and Magnitude welled suddenly around her. A tempest of Radiance ensued, the *Ansin Leoma*

or Lambent Presence of Oronthon: it illuminated the heaven with such ferocity that Light alone

might be perceived. Its currents surrounded her, suffused her, became her.

Her focus narrowed, and a passageway opened. Enitharmon, Marshal of the Host, stepped through.

He abased himself before her.

“*Faheth*,” he breathed. The light receded.

“Yes,” she said unsurely, shook her head, and gestured – she had always been *Faheth*. The seraph rose smoothly; his frame – of perfect, titanic proportion – dwarfed her. But his countenance

remained lowered in obeisance: he would not, or could not, meet her gaze.

She smiled and stood. “You might kneel,” she suggested.

He did so.

“That we might regard one another, not in deference,” she raised an eyebrow. The *Eleos* reached up

and cradled his massive visage within her hands, inviting him to look at her. “Your sword, if you please.”

Mindfully, he drew his weapon – more than twice as tall as she – from its scabbard across his back, and proffered it upon open palms before her .

“Good,” the *Eleos* touched it gently. “This is no longer required.”

The blade, *Shard of Thought*, shivered instantly and was broken, its fragments wheeling slowly and eerily through space before dissolving into a fine mist. She stretched up on her toes and kissed his forehead, and the *Seal of Truth and Agency* which he bore vanished, flaring briefly in her hand before being absorbed.

“The Thought has changed.”

Enitharmon sighed, as a great burden and responsibility left him forever.

“Your tenure is ended; all of your duties, discharged. I am now Sovereign; you may rejoin your peers.”

The greatest of celestials wept as joy overcame him. His spirit soared, engulfed by Magnitude.

The consciousness of the *Eleos* shifted; the scene changed abruptly: the *Ash- ludja* towered above her, deep within Nizkur. She was Green again.

*

She reached out with her thought and touched the Enforcer. Presently, a shape appeared before her: a goddess of dark aspect with flaming red hair.

The *Eleos* scrutinized her. “I have a favor to ask. You succored Nehael once before with regard to this one; will you aid me again?”

Gihaahia scowled. “You are the *Eleos*; you may mandate whatever you please. Why are you asking?”

“I am appealing to the Claviger: for a broader interpretation of the Wyrish Injunction, so to speak. Is your Law not dynamic?”

“Yes. But I am its executrix, not its architect.”

“The Self begins its reascendance; you may find that you cannot not shirk responsibility for the choice.”

“The Self will be the cause of my demise – one way or another. Even now, the Claviger prepares to

cleave to the Aeon. This is precisely to contain the ascendant *I*. The Morphic must be preserved!”

“Let me mediate that exchange,” the *Eleos* smiled. “I will lend you a Tree in the meantime. Now, will you help me?”

“Yes,” the Enforcer sighed.

**

It was an hour past midnight; the eerie green light evoked by Hlioth prevailed at Galda. Yeqon, the Fifth Prosecutor, together with the once-seraphs Armen and Tumaël and nineteen former episemes,

knelt in the posture of *saizhan* before the *Sela*: he seemed to be bestowing some kind of benediction.

“This is becoming increasingly surreal,” Ortwine whispered. “What is going on?”

“Shomei has released them,” Nwm explained quietly. “It would appear that these devils are

predisposed to adopt the meditational practices of *Saizhan* with relative ease; Nehael indicated that their mental discipline gives them a certain advantage.”

Mostin snorted. “Shomei has released *herself*. She has also dismissed Ugales and her other responsibilities. Whatever these guilt-ridden devils subsequently choose to believe is entirely their own determination; at least the burden of their development is no longer hers. She has isolated

herself; the library – and the prior infinity – is currently closed. She is entirely focused on her own Perfection.”

“And how long is this gnostic reverie likely to last?” Ortwine inquired.

“Seconds? Millennia? I have no idea.” The Alienist shrugged.

Nwm scowled. “I hope the latter, for all our sakes.”

Unexpectedly, Mostin nodded in agreement.

“Oh?”

Mostin touched his nose with a finger. “Whilst the pursuit of the *Urn* might preclude *Perfection*, it does not hold that one who is *Perfected* cannot successfully pursue the *Urn*.”

“You believe she will resume her quest for the *Urn*?” Nwm was aghast.

“Yes. And she will surely succeed,” Mostin replied.

“And then?”

Mostin considered. “She will subsume Hummaz, banish the Claviger and rewrite the Arcane

Morphic so that it is more to her liking.”

Nwm raised his eyebrows inquisitively. “Then she will *Green-ify*?”

“Certainly not...” Mostin hadn’t before considered the possibility. If she absorbed Hummaz *what*

would actually happen? ; where the *Web of Motes* had promised an answer, the Aeon would not permit him to look. “I believe any expression of Hummaz as part of a ‘composite’ entity in defiance of her Will would be deemed a failure by her.”

A vibration.

“She will assert *quickly*,” Ortwine hissed. “The Hazel stirs.”

Nwm swallowed nervously. “And Nercamay?” He nodded toward the infernal muse; she sat in

tranquil reflection some distance from the others.

“Nercamay is eccentric, to say the least,” Mostin observed. “Eadric may have confused her beyond

saving.”

Nwm smiled. “Our soteriological notions diverge.”

[Nercamay]: I concur. Actually, I am saved beyond confusion.

[Mostin]: ! Are you eavesdropping, Nercamay?

[Nercamay]: I am merely paying attention.

[Nwm]: Pay no heed to my cynical associates, Nercamay.

“I believe you are rather fond of this fiend, Nwm,” Ortwine raised an eyebrow. There was a time

when her nature would have branded her anathema.”

“I have learned to make allowances,” Nwm looked pointedly at Mostin. “Besides, the World is

more *secure* these days.”

Mostin tilted his head and stared. “You stand upon a mote of dirt which bobs in an ocean of

pseudoinfinities and *I* am branded insane because I don’t cling to it?”

[Daunton]: You might want to return to the tower.

[Mostin]: What now?

[Daunton]: The Enforcer...

[Message interrupted]

[Gihaahia]: Make some tea, Mostin. I don’t have all night. And bring the Preceptor.

Mostin swallowed.

**

The Tiger dreamed his way west. Sharing his mind, thirty rebel *Anantam* and a clique of succubi –

former initiates of Soneillon. The Throile Cabal itself had grown to a more than a dozen bickering covens, and included many once subordinate to the exiled queen, as well as evil wyrds, lamias, hags and eccentric once-devils. Loyalty was nonexistent and alliances shifted rapidly, as the Cherry’s

transient urges to satiation were manifested through the Cabal. The faction which supported

Temenun represented only one of many diverse and conflicting interests; he had no illusion of

maintaining its cohesion for long.

Visions sped past: horrors and phantoms which lurked on the edge of nightmares; residual energies from Dhatri's massive necromancies which still lingered in the dreamscape.

Temenun drove through

them and skirted a deeper layer: the net of magic woven by the Claviger about Kaalaanala's Second

Effluxion. Its surface seemed absorptive and malleable.

The Cherry – which fed his desire – moved through him. As always, his basest instincts were

tempered: his was to contrive a rational program to achieve his object of lust. The goal: to rule

unthreatened in idle and despotic languor within a balmy paradise, where his every whim was

instantly met. A modest enough ambition in the prior infinity, but one now which might prove less

easy to realize. The Embassy, the largest threat to his designs – even Kaalaanala herself – must be diverted: Temenun, in essence, preferred a period of easement to a moment of destruction.

He squeezed around the bubble which isolated the dream larva, perceiving a continual pulse of

ultramarine and sapphire which sustained its cage, emanated by the Claviger from the deepest

arcane substrate. The Tiger strove to regard the source of the spell, but the Claviger seemed as but a lens for the Dream of Magic itself, and indistinguishable from it. And to a Dream, from beyond the Infinitudes, even the Aeon must bend.

Temenun corporeated. The scene around him was one of madness: a sea of slavering mouths and

claws and undead flesh. A hundred yards away, ghouls were turning to dust in swaths before they

could approach their target: a goddess in red who bore a slender blade. She had dismissed her steed, and now fought on foot amidst a dense press. Those few who could withstand her presence were

quickly dispatched by her steel as she danced serenely amongst them.

Instantly, she apprehended him. She leaped the distance between them, and landed before

him, the

point of her sword poised at his throat. She read his purpose in a heartbeat.

“Greetings, old cat.” Nehael spoke calmly, and lowered her weapon.

“Goddess,” the Ak’Chazar inclined his head politely, backward palms clasped before him. “If

agreeable, you will be my liaison with the Uediian Preceptor and the Wyrish Academy. I should like to meet with them. I will offer nine hundred now, for a return of two thousand split into four parts –

the largest no more than seven hundred – within one month. I will also require certain guarantees.”

“Is this an admission of my authority, Temenun?” Nehael asked.

“By no means,” the Tiger smiled, baring many fangs. “Merely a recognition of your power, which is considerable. I have issues with any authority which is not my own.”

Nehael sighed. “You’d better behave yourself. And don’t provoke Mostin; he is anxious to obliterate you. As to my prerogative – when I choose to wear black, be assured that you will be the first to

know it.”

“It would suit you very well. Will you guarantee the oaths to which we testify?”

“For my enemy, you assume many favors.”

“Yeshe invoked the Goddess; now she is cocooned within Nizkur. I am cautious.”

“That was a different Nehael, to be sure,” Nehael smiled. “Have no doubt that if you betray *me* then I will spare you the indignity of incarceration.”

“Your compassion is noted.” Temenun spoke wryly.

**

“Had you even noticed that Oronthon’s *Ahma* is missing?” The Enforcer inquired. She had manifested as a lean, muscular goddess of early middle age. Nwm looked at her curiously; there

was something *Green* protecting her.

“I had not,” Nwm admitted. “Is he safe?”

“He is dead,” Gihaahia smiled wickedly.

“Again?” Ortwine asked. “I did not realize that he and I were in competition.”

“And I did not realize that I had invited *you* to this audience.” The Enforcer tilted her head.

“I forgive the oversight,” Ortwine smiled benignly.

“You, of course, realize that you will have more than one effluxion to contend with before

morning?”

Ortwine glanced sideways at Mostin.

“That would be unfortunate,” Mostin swallowed.

Gihaahia looked at Mostin as though he were simple. “If Kaalaanala is bending all her thought and will here now, necessarily all of her avatars will converge. This is obvious, yes?”

“Yes,” Mostin looked sceptical. “No, not really. What is your involvement here?”

She sighed. “Consider *function*, Mostin. The First Effluxion – the phaethon which ravaged Fumaril

– is Kaalaanala’s obdurate ire directed toward – at that time, actually mostly the *Ahma* and *Mulissu*.

Although I suppose also you, for your Tower and your *Ú*.

“The Second manifested in resonance with the Claviger’s *tuning* of the Morphic; this dream larva liberated many chthonics in the process. The Claviger has been forced to suppress its action; the

avatar is effectively contained within a nightmare prison of the Claviger’s devising.

“The Third Effluxion is a reflex which embodies Kaalaanala’s frustration with the Law of the

Injunction and its agent – namely *me*. You will notice that two of these emanations already chart courses running directly counter to my interests.”

“And the Fourth?” Mostin inquired. “The Embassy?”

“A much more rational manifestation of hatred,” Gihaahia smiled disturbingly. “The Great Dark

Fire has assumed the shape of a human – at least a semblance of one; she deigns to enter the World of Men.”

“If this is leading somewhere specific...”

“A great *Bhīti* may efflux fivefold,” Gihaahia spoke impassively.

“There will be a Fifth?” Nwm groaned. “Why has it not already shown itself?”

“Its form will be contingent upon the stimuli which provoke Kaalaanala,” the Enforcer stared hard

at him.

“She is holding an avatar in reserve,” Mostin sighed. “I can’t say I blame her – although I suspect her choice is visceral, not considered.”

“Do you know the form it will take?” Nwm asked.

“Yes,” Gihaahia nodded. “It will be nuanced.”

“You knew there would be a Fifth?” Nwm looked to the Alienist.

“I had my fingers crossed that there might not,” Mostin waved his hand. He turned to the Enforcer.

“You have still to reveal your purpose here.”

“I will be going into a brief stasis,” Gihaahia spoke steadily. “I should warn you that any misdemeanors committed against the Injunction will be prosecuted enthusiastically when I reanimate.”

“But...” Daunton opened his mouth for the first time.

Gihaahia silenced him with a glance. “I have yet to devise a suitable penance for your sedition;

involving yourself with Shomei’s *mischievousness*. Consider yourself on probation. Perhaps I should appoint a new president on my return?”

Tyrant, Daunton thought.

Her eyes flickered at him. He quailed.

“Why the hibernation?” Mostin asked.

“The Claviger needs that which has been lent to me returned to it – for a short while.”

“And who is supposed to uphold the Injunction in the meantime?”

Gihaahia shrugged. “The Academy must police itself. The Articles are clear enough.”

“We will need lawyers,” Daunton groaned. “How awful. Tyranny might be preferable.”

“I am dispensing some *advice* before I absent myself,” the Enforcer sighed, staring pointedly at the Alienist. “The Embassy will need transvalents to penetrate your spellwarp, Mostin; you can endure

her conventional magic – the same is not true of the rest of you; you will all die if she targets you with spells. On the other hand, Mostin, if you attract her attention ...”

“Such as by *not dying*,” Ortwine interjected drily.

“She will single you out...”

“And kill you, Mostin.” Ortwine finished.

“How do you abide this deity’s presence?” Gihaahia inquired of Mostin, glowering at Ortwine.

“I close my ears,” Mostin nodded sagely.

“My advice, regardless, is *give all thought to offense*.”

“Oh, I already had,” Mostin nodded.

“There is a spell.”

“There is?”

“It is for Nwm; hence I required his presence here.” [Spell]

Mostin scowled. “This is an Enochia. It is also of the *two thousand two hundredth order*. We don’t have that kind of juice; every reservoir is empty. We might get a twelve hundred with every caster –

of every persuasion – participating.”

“And I will not invoke the celestial host,” Nwm said through gritted teeth.

“You could not if you tried,” Gihaahia smiled. “This is to conjure a sunwurm. Here is the mitigation.” [Formula]

Mostin looked sceptical. “This equation is illegal. You cannot simply cancel those infinities to

balance it. And the backlash is preposterous. And where does this nine hundred come from?”

Gihaahia raised an eyebrow. “I make the rules, Mostin. Temenun will approach you with a deal.

Accept it.”

“Are you insane? The Cherry’s agenda...”

Nwm shook his head and nodded in understanding at the same time, his chin describing a figure-of-

eight. “Not exactly an *agenda*. It will amplify his desire, and the Rakshasa is fundamentally lazy and vain; the Tiger wants to be left alone. Personally, I’ll settle for a cat-who-naps.”

“Until a higher paradigm asserts,” Mostin sighed.

“What is this sunwurm of which you speak? Its provenance?” Nwm asked.

“Mixed. Oronthon. Or Uedii. Or the Aeon emanates many forms. It is *new*.”

“A new despot?” Ortwine inquired.

“No. It is a herald; sometimes a rearguard. You must provide it with context.”

“A herald for whom?” Ortwine asked.

“The *Ahma*,” Gihaahia gave a ghastly grin. “You must invite him back, Nwm. The Sun.”

“Exactly how much backlash are we talking, here?”

[This much]

Nwm’s eyes widened. “Even I cannot burn that hot; I am a mortal: I would not withstand it.”

“Your mortality is not relevant,” Gihaahia said dismissively.

“I am but a man.”

“*Narh* is but a horse,” the Enforcer retorted. “Yet superior to most. Am I a goddess? If so, then heed my advice.”

“What do you suggest?”

“Choose a Tree,” the Infernal’s eyes narrowed. “Take refuge in it. You’ve been hedging your bets.

It’s time you assumed a position.”

“I cannot align myself with some limited perspective; my purview must be broad.”

“I am talking of practical measures, Nwm, not philosophical commitments. There must be some

quality which would be of benefit.”

“There are many.”

“Then *choose*. Now is your time. What *now*?”

Nwm sighed. “If one, then durity; the temper of the Ash.”

“Well, of course,” Gihaahia sighed. Her hand suddenly held a slender staff: it appeared as though

hewn from a bough of living ash, with silver-grey bark still upon it. It drew Nwm’s mind in; its

knots and whorls were harder than adamant.

The Preceptor held up his hands, and shook his head. “I do not *own*; I cannot accept such a thing.”

She pressed it into his hand. “This is no *thing*, Nwm. It is the limb of a *ludja*. And who said anything about ownership?”

His fingers curled around it, and his awareness exploded.

“You must hold something in reserve,” Gihaahia cautioned him. “These rest, not so much; although

keeping enough of them alive might prove a challenge in itself.”

Nwm nodded, and gave the Enforcer a puzzled glance; he knew that the same *ludja* – at the behest of Uedii’s reflection – had extended its protection to her.

“The ascetic has a magic staff?” Ortwine inquired archly.

Without warning, Nwm struck her rump soundly with it, causing her to exhale sharply and her eyes

to widen in indignation.

“No.” The Preceptor replied. “It’s just a stick.”

And so it was. The power was in him now.

“And when you return?” Mostin asked the Enforcer.

“I will resume my former duties. But the Claviger is binding itself to the Aeon; to Pharamne. The

Morphic will be Transcendental and will not be overturned. Shomei cannot challenge it.”

“Shomei will find a way.”

“No, Mostin,” Gihaahia sighed. “She will not need to. She remains exempt.”

“And how long is this absence of yours likely to last?”

“As long as it lasts, Mostin.” Abruptly, Gihaahia vanished.

[Nehael]: Daunton. Mostin. Nwm. Temenun wishes to parley. He offers nine hundred – with certain

stipulations, naturally.