

*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, naive 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 naiive." 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 Trempla, 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 "soured" 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 Metagnostoc 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 swagging 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.

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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 Planetar? 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.

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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..."

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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.

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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 Trempa – 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 Trempa. "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- ‘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.

.  
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 Archbishopal 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. "It's 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 jousting, 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 Sepulchrae 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 had 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 unharmed.

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 Trempe, 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 takes 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."

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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.