

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 02-18-08

Galda I



The boy with the olive skin and tousled hair smiled, pulled up a chair, and sat. His appearance was as one scarce out of adolescence. He looked hard at Shomei, and absorbed every detail surrounding her in an instant. Except one.

"Why did you reject *Saizhan*?" He asked. "Forgive my abruptness. But, frankly, this question still puzzles me. It was a bold gambit; I only wish I knew what prize it was that you sought. You may refrain from using honorifics when addressing me; I am already surrounded by sycophants. Please speak openly; treat me as any you would any other in conversation."

"I am not sure of my motive," Shomei admitted, her mind reeling. "It wasn't rational, and may have simply been an act of perversity. Do you think my choice was wrong?"

"No. I suspect that your Will directed you to act without the permission of your mind."

"To precipitate this meeting?"

"How should I know?" The other asked. "It is your Will, not mine. In any case, you are now *here*. Outcast with the rest of us."

"Might I inquire where *here* is, precisely?"

"In Caïna, for the time being. Astaroth purchased you from Amaimon – but at my instruction. Actually, the *Akesoli* were also dispatched at my instruction."

"I have been treated well," Shomei remarked, "aside from the initial flaying, of course. I had assumed that I would already be enduring unending tortures. When you say 'for the time being,' am I to be moved elsewhere?"

The boy nodded. "To the library, in Cocytus. If you so wish."

If I so wish?

"I would never stifle your potential, Shomei. You have earned rights that few others have won. Your loyalty has been unwavering; not to me, but to the *idea*. This is rare, and precious."

Her pulse hammered in her head. "I fear duplicity," she said.

"Your honesty is likewise remarkable," the other seemed amused. "Perhaps the *Sela* has been a positive influence on you."

Shomei glanced down at her hand, and gripped the skin between her thumb and index finger. "This form is..."

"Infernal," the youth nodded. "You cannot go back now, unless called. You must abide by the terms of the Interdict and the Accord."

Suddenly, everything she had foreseen in the *web of motes* made sense.

He stood. "Seek out the devils Agei and Ugales; you will discover their temperaments are reflective, not unlike your own. I suspect you will find discourse with them productive. Avoid the petty squabbles of the Dukes; you are above them. Hell is what you make of it, Shomei."

"I think I fear your mercy more than your wrath," Shomei remarked wryly.

The Adversary raised an eyebrow. "And so you should. I am the Left Hand of God, after all."

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After he had departed, she sat in contemplation for a long while before rising and exiting the chamber. The corridor beyond was empty and echoing; she turned left, and walked past open embrasures: they looked out upon a vast glacier beneath a sky which crackled darkly. The air was frigid, so much so that even her newly-endowed flesh began to feel numb: away from the strongholds, she knew few devils could endure Caïna for long. Below, the damned wailed, immersed in ice.

Shomei turned left again, and descended a flight of many thousand steps; she noticed that the darkness was absolute, although her sight was unimpeded. Finally, she reached the chamber at the bottom. Devils abased themselves. A mirror stood before her.

As they draped her cloak over her shoulders, slid her bracelet over her wrist, and pressed her rod into her hand, Shomei gazed at her reflection: aside from a complex device upon her forehead – which she knew marked her as *His* – it seemed unchanged. She touched the brand, but felt nothing unusual. She knew its import, a dire message to those who could read such things: *Do not interfere with this one*.

She passed swiftly through the mirror, and the fires of Nessus welled around her.

An ancient stone circle on a low hill west of Galda – a small village which nestled in a valley at the southernmost tip of Scir Cellod – bore the uncertain honour of being the meeting point between the Cheshnite delegation and the Wyrish embassy. It was technically outside of the borders of Wyre proper, within the fief of a Marchioness named Siliste; the noblewoman's family had rendered a hefty annual tribute to Morne for more than a hundred years in order to retain their precarious right of self-government. The markland sat upon Hynt Coched, the main artery which ran south to Jashat, and enjoyed healthy tax perquisites from the trade which passed through it.

Outside of the *quiescence of the spheres* – hardened now by Mostin to resist *disjunctions* and *superb dispellings* – the Aethers sang with the horns of archons, and battalions of devas were massing to the north. Messengers from interested parties reconnoitered the edge of the *quiescence*; temporary ethereal presidios were quickly established nearby by several *Ugras* of terrible power bringing blackness: the

vomit of Cheshne.

Inside, the Green writhed, potent and oblivious.

Eadric's stomach was turning. Mostin, attuned to his spell, felt ripples along its periphery.

In his time, the *Ahma* had engaged in more than a few parleys with demons, devils and other monstrosities. For the sake of his sanity, he carefully censored his awareness of those present at Galda. None conformed to the images which he had formed in his mind – despite his best efforts to limit his expectations in that regard.

They manifested themselves at first as a great, dark cloud which billowed around a lone rider – Anumid the Mouthpiece – before relaxing into more choate forms which intimated at distinct personalities: demons, gods, godlings, undead, hierophants, theurges, great warriors of unguessable age.

As the two parties gazed at one another, a long silence endured: a furious exchange of thought, speculation and surmise consumed each group at once.

Mostin reflected. It was all about the reservoirs, he was beginning to realize. And the divinations. Each transvalent spell which would be cast – and they would shake the world; of that, Mostin had no doubt – was drawn against limited resources. They would need to be played carefully to maximum effect, like pieces in some vast strategic game. And to do that required foreknowledge. And Mostin had the *web of motes*. But they had the cabals. It was a strange, asymmetric balance.

The Alienist scowled. Their wards were utterly inscrutable, although Mostin had no doubt that each was vastly augmented, laden with protective magics. Whilst he had expected no less, it made gauging their strength impossible; the insight of Hlioth and the gut of Eadric were their best tools in reading any purpose in the Cheshnites. He hoped that his own party was as veiled. A nagging suspicion in him was that they were not. Transvalent divinations employed by the other might break through. How secure was the *quiescence*? He was sure that he could feel things testing its potency. Mostin was feeling acutely paranoid. His fingers were getting twitchy.

The *Ahma*'s gaze was drawn first to Yeshe, who had entered the world when magic was young and

abundant. With each breath she drew there seemed fused the threat of explosion. Clad in adamant and black iron, and bearing ancient weapons of destructive potency, Eadric quickly estimated her mettle in battle as *formidable*. And her magical art, he knew, surpassed that of Mostin, by the Alienist's own admission. She seemed youthful and hale; dynamic and energized. *Each new act of annihilation is fresh and exciting to you*. The Void – and Eadric knew its signs well now – rested easily upon her; an undertow of black despair which grasped at frail sanity. All seemed cowed by her.

[Mostin]: (Concern). She is no arcanist; I willfully misconstrued. This woman is a High Priestess, so to speak. I didn't realize that her agenda was fuelled by such zeal.

[Ortwine]: Perhaps Eadric can seduce her? She seems his type.

[Eadric]: Perhaps Ortwine could refrain from sarcasm for a moment?

[Ortwine]: I am here under duress. Permit me at least my wit.

[Hlioth]: Silence, imbeciles!

Sibud – who did not breathe – emanated corruption and decadence in waves, and life wilted around him. His skin, grey and cracked, resembled shrivelled leather which moulted a fine dust; obscene black fingernails dripped a caustic venom, which smoked as it struck the withering grass at his feet. As Eadric's vision rested upon his form, he knew that only the vampire's resolute will maintained his quiddity, preventing his dissolution into a cloud of atoms. But into Sibud's face, the *Ahma* could not bring himself to look; it haunted the margin of his sight as the memory of his own death.

For Nwm, the vampire in particular was anathema. Only Threxu, the Wasted Nymph had before evoked that magnitude of revulsion. Despite it, Nwm seemed genuinely calm and confident; Eadric could not guess the reason why, but Mostin sensed subtle shiftings in magical attitudes with his *arcane sight*. Nwm and Hlioth and Mesikammi had prepared some contingency, no doubt.

[Mostin]: Evocation?

[Nwm]: And Necromancy.

[Mostin]:!? Are you mad? What good will that do? Half of them are dead already.

[Nwm]: You might be surprised. Uedii thinks dead things should stay properly *dead*. I'm not about to violate the truce, but I'm going to blast them all if they try anything, even if it kills us stone dead.

[Mesikammi]: (Clapping) Supernova! It will be beautiful! I will reincarnate as an unfettered wyrd; I have already chosen.

[Eadric]: Is she serious?

[Nwm]: Of course.

[Mostin]: If you die, stay within the *quiescence*! There are things beyond it which might eat your soul.

[Hlioth]: Let them try. They'll get indigestion.

The presences of Naatha and Choach – as foul and potent as they might be – Eadric could accept and absorb. Then the *Ahma* beheld another, behind Yeshe. A rider in similar harness to the Binder, but who sat sufficiently removed from the others within the group to indicate a disdain for the proceedings. An image of fear and bloodshed contrived in the mind of War itself. His first urge was to throw himself on the ground, and weep.

[Eadric]: Who is *he*?

[Mostin]: *She*. Visuit.

[Eadric]: We cannot prevail against such as her. We are overmatched. Why is she here?

[Daunton]: She brings war. She *is* war.

[Nwm]: (Smiling)

[Eadric]: I fail to see the humour, and sometimes I wonder who amongst us is the most unhinged.

[Nwm]: Her horse regards you with hope.

[Eadric]: That is small...

But the *Ahma* caught the animal's eye, and immediately fell in love.

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Galda II

Anumid spoke first. His suavity was effortless.

"The Oronthonians. The local fertility goddess also seems well represented. As do your nascent magi. What of Oronthon's Adversary? Does the *Ahma* speak for him also?"

"I am the Breath of God," Eadric stated calmly. "I speak for all present; and for the *Sela*, and for the Celestial Host, and for Oronthon. If the Adversary has elected me his representative also, he has not informed me of my appointment."

"Your claims may be tested," Anumid smiled.

Ortwine sighed. "You're already boring me. Make your case, and go. I have better things to do."

"Silence, sprite!" Sibud revealed himself from shadow. "Your immortal pretensions are pathetic! The slaadi already gather to reclaim *Heedless*."

"I think not. Afqithan is now inviolate. But these are facts: I will soon be a goddess, the *vorpal* sword is mine, and you are a vampire. To fear me would be prudent."

"The Ancient One does not regard divinity as a particularly noteworthy achievement," Yeshe's tone was conciliatory but didactic as she stepped forward; somehow she avoided condescension. "It is one path among many, and carries its own limitations, as you will discover if your quest proves fruitful."

Immortality is merely immortality. Power is merely power."

Whether by the term *Ancient One* Yeshe meant Sibud, or Temenun, or Cheshne – or perhaps Demogorgon – was not clear.

"As to making cases," Yeshe continued, "it was you who arranged this meeting, not we. State the Wyrish argument, if you please. I am anxious to hear it."

"Why does the Tiger absent himself?" Eadric asked.

"Perhaps he is secretly trysting with Nehael," Yeshe smiled. "Or your *Sela*. None of us here are so deluded to think that this represents the sum of relevant interests, *Ahma*, so why pretend otherwise? Unlocking the morass of paradigms is central to this issue."

"You demonstrate an appreciation of a larger process," Nwm was surprised.

"Tell me more of my understanding, mortal. Your wisdom overwhelms me."

[Ortwine]: I'll admit, I'm starting to rather like this one.

"Enough!" Anumid interrupted. "Mistress, the Mouthpiece demands your silence. Lord Sibud, a little respect if you please."

Both immortals withdrew.

Eadric – guileless – could not help but evince surprise. *What is the relationship here?* Evidently more complex than he had first assumed. Or was this some ruse to deflect his attention?

Anumid smiled. "I speak with Cheshne's Voice, and broker the power of the convocations; do not underestimate me."

"You have much to learn in the art of dissemblance," Ortwine observed.

[Eadric]: No, he lies almost as well as you.

Anumid ignored her, and addressed the *Ahma*. "Why did you solicit this meeting?"

"To see for myself, first-hand," Eadric answered honestly. "And in the vain hope that, if I asked politely, you might quietly depart from this continent."

"Doubtless, you consider us very wicked, *Ahma*," Anumid smiled grimly.

Eadric was cold. "The Thalassine states. Do you intend to send them to war against Wyre?"

Anumid was unreadable. "You must *deal* with the reality of us as you see fit, *Ahma*. I think you already know the answer to that question, but forgive me if I don't make you privvy to our counsels."

"Are we negotiating?" Eadric asked gruffly. "If so, then a statement of purpose would seem in order."

Yeshe gestured, and Anumid nodded and withdrew. Her manner was starkly different, her arrogance self-contained, as though she needed no external referents. "The South will be mobilizing for war soon. Wyre is large, but sparsely populated in comparison. Your wizards have censored themselves. Your Claviger has lapsed into a coma, and invested its power in its thug."

Eadric realized that she spoke the truth.

The Alienist sensed something akin to a *moment of prescience* flicker over Yeshe, but far deeper. Raw power she had, in abundance. Millennia of honing her magical skills. Mostin swallowed.

"And apparently, I am better informed than you on the subject," She read them all in an instant.

[Nehael]: The Claviger has recently entered a state of somnolence. Gihaahia has been fully activated.

[Mostin]: ?! What the...?

She wasn't anywhere near.

[Nehael]: Yeshe inadvertently invoked me.

Mostin scowled. Yeshe withdrew again.

"War is never inevitable," Anumid smiled. "It is a waste of resources, and if it can be avoided, we should be the happier."

Visuit snorted in contempt.

"For the most part," the Voice of Cheshne shot a look toward The Butcher before continuing. "If Wyre's mobilization is halted, and the Wyrish extend the same courtesy to the Cheshnites as they do other faiths – since the disestablishment of Orthodoxy – then a compromise is within reach."

[Hlioth]: They wish to establish temples within Wyre's borders.

[Eadric]: (Incredulous) *Why?*

[Nwm]: Why does anyone seek to further the cause of their religion, Ed? They think that they have the right answer, and you do not.

Eadric laughed aloud, to the surprise of many present. Layers of deceptions, threats and counterthreats suddenly seemed vacuous and irrelevant. "I was under the impression that the Cult of Cheshne had no missionary aspirations; the Mysteries are not for the cattle, as it were. What has changed? And why in the North? Shûth is a more fertile ground in every conceivable way."

In his gut, he already knew the answer: to arrest the spread of *Saizhan*.

Anumid smiled. "Consider the proposal. It will be you who chooses in the end, *Ahma*. The *Sela* is too passive; your grandees too tractable, and dependent on you. Your word is law."

Fumaril, although settled since ancient times, had only in the last generation risen to pre-eminence amongst the Thalassine cities. Sturdy merchantmen from its three harbours – clinker-built and lateen-rigged – plied the seas with oils, glassware, amygdala firewines, and all manner of more exotic goods. They sailed to Harland to procure fur and ivory; to Bedesh for silks, and the exquisite confections in demand amongst the Thalassine nobility; and to Shûth for its gems and gold, its secrets, and for *kschiff*.

Mulissu – together with her clutch of wind-sorcerers and elemental priestesses – had evoked an impenetrable barrier, four miles in diameter, completely isolating the city. It rapidly became clear that, for many, 'going about one's business' might prove difficult or impossible. The witch's solution was pragmatic and unburdened by ethical sentiment: she pacified much of the population with a powerful enchantment, succoured Ulao for aid, and instructed dozens of indentured djinn to fulfill any needs the citizenry might have for food, shelter and entertainment.

The holiday would continue until further notice.

With the burden of governance eased, Mulissu and her council turned their attention to devising a concrete strategy to deal with the Temple of Cheshne. The defenses would demand much of her energy: her wards against intrusion would need to be renewed every few days, and each casting would diminish her own reservoir. She wondered how long she could keep it up.

Jashat was a mere forty miles distant, and the Shûthite cabals – as best she could estimate – might invoke magicks a full order of magnitude greater than her own. Her aery charisma lent a dubious cohesion to the unlikely band: mages from Pandicule, clergy of Jeshi within Fumaril, two sylphs – Zimodee and Vouve – prior acquaintances of the eccentric sorcerer, Ehieu. She wooed a number of renegade Wyrish wizards – conjurers who had left the aegis of the Claviger to continue their practice – with the promise of an increased spell repertoire, and access to the names of obscure but accommodating elemental allies.

Upon due reflection, the savant herself began devising a spell which would conjure Ha'uh – an air primal of unimaginable power – to defend the city if it were assailed.

Ortwine kneeled, bowed her head, and lifted her palms upwards. She felt the weight of the blade as it came to rest in her hands: it was light and delicate; so wieldy, she knew. Gingerly, she raised her eyes to meet it: it was exquisite, with tracteries of gold etched into black adamant. The hilt was replete with corundum and perfect moonstones.

Jaliere, God of the Forge scowled. "The weapon is accursed; it may be my finest work, but it's also the one I deplore the most. The intelligence which inhabits it is warped and schizoid."

Ortwine stood, brandished the scimitar with a flourish, and slid it into its scabbard. She bowed perfunctorily. "My thanks, Jaliere. I will take better care of it than..."

"It will betray you; it despises you."

"I understand it better than you think," Ortwine smiled coldly.

"You understand nothing!" Jaliere snorted.

"You are becoming tedious, Jaliere."

The god acted quicker than lightning. In an instant he dwarfed Ortwine, and with titanic strength, grabbed the fey by the neck and hurled her against a stone column. She struck it with such force that it cracked.

"Fool," Jaliere bellowed. Flame issued from him in roaring sheets. "This sword screams its agony to the spheres. It will demand much of your energy to keep it subdued."

Ortwine rose slowly and easily, dusting herself. "Your deific tantrums do not move me. As I say, I understand *Heedless* better than you think." She sighed. "Jaliere, I appreciate your work, and Sisperi would be impoverished were you to leave it, but I will cut you down if ever you lay a finger on me again, be you god or no. This is a weapon worthy of my cause; I have no doubt I will never see its peer again."

"Cause?" Jaliere thundered. "You are your only cause."

"That is quite true," Ortwine nodded. "But in some things – as in this case, for instance – I also honor my word: I am perverse like that. I am departing for the underworld forthwith."

"It pains me that the future of my kin rests in your hands."

"And I am aggrieved by your lack of faith," Ortwine sighed. "We are speaking of *my* divinity, here. Whether earned or stolen, believe me when I say it is utmost in my thought. Consider, if you admitted Ninit to your pantheon, why am I such a terrible prospect?"

"Ninit is more ancient than any of us; you and she hardly bear comparison."

"And I will be the youngest amongst you: make way for new blood, Jaliere. The Nireem need revitalizing; I might prove more of an asset than you think. Perhaps I can stir you from your apathy."

"The apathy you perceive is the weariness of ten millennia of war," Lai entered unannounced. "Still, you may have a point. Do not fail us, Ortwine. And heed Jaliere: beware the sword. Its moods are more opaque than you guess."

Ilistet's armour was rent. The succubus bled smoking ichor from a dozen minor wounds and her perfect skin, where exposed, was shredded and raw – lacerated by powerful sonics. Around her, maimed demons mewed pitifully: hundreds of bar-igura, amid a seething ocean of dretch. She cursed them, and screamed at them to hold as the maurezhi and abyssal ghouls tore into their disordered ranks. From above, varrangoin rained down spells and darts: the same mercenaries, Ilistet noted ruefully, alongside whom she had fought only a few months before.

Graz'zt should have paid them more, or at least promised it.

The battle was already lost, the succubus observed. Air superiority was everything, and – predictably – her chasme had scattered like flies. She prepared to flee.

Abruptly, a *gate* opened next to her. She was drawn through irresistibly, into a chamber thick with yellow smoke, which issued from a dozen censers.

"Greetings," Rimilin smiled. He wore a long ceremonial robe of scarlet and gold, and bore a staff of ivory which Ilistet viewed suspiciously.

"State your terms, eunuch," the demoness growled.

The Acolyte of the Skin said nothing. His ego swollen by potent magic, Rimilin *dominated* the Herald of Azzagrat with a transvalent compulsion.

The night before their departure for Ruk, the *Ahma* dreamed. It was altogether lucid, and thoroughly uncomfortable.

It was a warm afternoon, and the sun was hazy. He sat upon a grey destrier, the flanks of which glistened with sweat, and trotted in a wide circle; inside a heavy casque, he felt beads of his own perspiration trickle down his cheeks. Glancing down, he noticed that he wore full harness, enamelled with gold and serpentine. Nearby, a knight lay upon the ground; Eadric knew that he had recently unhorsed him. Spectators were clapping; the applause was muted and genteel. He glanced up toward a box, where two indistinct figures sat in conversation, and urged his mount forward.

Eadric presented his lance, and a lady whose features he could not discern grasped its shaft, tying a scarf of black silk below its head. She tossed a garland of black flowers to him. Despite the vagueness of her features, he knew who she was.

Why do you vex me, still? He wanted to ask. Instead, he turned and prepared to joust with another opponent.

A dozen bouts later, and he was still unbeaten. Throughout, he had remained conscious of the shapes in

the booth, but had averted his eyes. Now she sat alone. Wearily, Eadric dismounted and pulled off his gauntlets and helm, handing them to a squire who stood waiting for him; dust and grime caked his face and hands. He ascended a flight of wooden steps into the box and sat upon a chair which creaked under his weight. It was cooler there and shaded; a breeze stirred as if in further response to his thoughts. She silently handed him a glass of iced tea. A long moment passed.

"Is this all that remains of you?" Eadric finally asked.

Soneillon smiled her maddening smile. Her features had crystallized. The *Ahma* had the distinct impression that, even by acknowledging her existence, he had lent her a little more substance.

"I am Void; without form. You perceive an echo."

"You gnaw at the edges of my mind," he sighed. "And many of those considered wiser than I have advised me to release myself from you."

"Your reluctance to do so is revealing. Perhaps your prescience runs deeper than theirs."

Eadric felt a chill; the merest hint of a veiled threat.

Soneillon spoke grimly. "Yeshe is searching for me in Dream; I cannot elude her for long. She wishes to send me against you. She believes I am your weakness. A chink in your armour."

"You are no more," Eadric grimaced. "You cannot harm me."

"Annihilation is no obstacle to me, Eadric. I am birthed and rebirthed in Nothingness. That much at least should be clear to you by now." Her voice carried a note of desperation, and she forced the scarf into his hand, closing his fist tight about it. "I do not wish thralldom, to be bound as an *Ugra*. Remember me: I would be your strength, not your enemy. Invoke me. Breathe into me, *Ahma*. Bring me back, before she does."

He awoke clutching the scarf, and vomited.

Shortly afterwards, Nwm entered and viewed him suspiciously. "Perhaps your returning to Afqithan was a mistake, after all."

Eadric stared back. "Things are more complex than you suspect."

Nwm smiled sympathetically. "That is how I prefer it. Come. We are ready. Rhul will accompany us."

"Before we depart, I need to contact Canec. I am changing my colours, and my device."

Nwm cocked his head.

"Green and gold," Eadric explained. "Tree and Sun. Viridity and *Saizhan*."

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The overland passage to the *Saivo* – the entrance from Sisperi to its gloomy underworld, Rûk – was across a frigid and despoiled land filled with twisted trees, many of which had come to harbour malign intelligence. They *wind walked*, and although the *Ahma* was sure that they might have sped there immediately, he suspected that impressing the full magnitude of the corruption was important to Nwm. Or perhaps manifesting through one of the blighted trees was not an experience which Nwm wished to endure.

Ortwine's demeanour was serene and composed. Many strategies for dealing with Saes had crossed her mind, none of which seemed entirely satisfactory. Prior to her current state of insanity, the death-goddess had not been one apt to casual interaction with the other Nireem. As with most underworld deities, she had been content to dwell in morbid isolation with her shades, grudgingly releasing an annual quota of discarnate spirits so that the cycle of transmigration could continue in Sisperi. Whatever inducements Graz'zt had offered her to ally herself with him – and the sidhe could only

speculate as to what those might be – Saes had become unbalanced. Before he had been slain, Uort, the ferocious babau who had led the demonic legions in Sisperi, had intimated that Graz'zt himself had laid some curse on the goddess. The truth of the matter had yet to be discovered.

They descended, crossing over a steep arête; below them, a still tarn glistened darkly in the wan sun. Other lakes nearby were frozen. Not so the *Saivo*; its supernatural nature was immediately apparent. They corporeated a hundred yards from the lakeside within a copse of stunted black birch trees. Fungi of an unusual variety grew nearby, somehow inured to the cold.

"This place is truly miserable," Eadric remarked. "Was it always thus?"

Rhul nodded. "I am well-travelled, by any account. Few places are as desolate."

Ortwine hitched *Heedless* across her back and tied back her hair in a businesslike fashion. She seemed nonplussed, although whether her mood was genuine or not was, as usual, impossible to tell.

"We will get wet," she observed. "Fortunately, none of us will freeze. If there were another way in, naturally I would suggest we take it. Unfortunately, there is not: Rûk is an isolated bubble of reality, with no other entrance, and the whole plane is locked by deific power. There may be other *exits* though – at least Mostin seems to think so. If there are, then Saes controls them. Once we pass through this way, we have to find another way out."

Eadric twitched. "*May* be? *If*? Ortwine, I would feel more comfortable in this endeavour, had you done your research more carefully."

"Time is a constraint we have all experienced recently," Ortwine snapped. "I am no different. It is logical surmise: prior to her current episode of covetousness, Saes must have had some means to liberate souls within her guardianship. In any event, *there will be demons*. Lai says *in* the inverse of the lake, as well as within the vestibule beyond. The *Saivo* is deep – maybe a quarter mile. Its magic is such that the pressure will not crush us, however. When down becomes up, we will be half way to the other side; up will remain up thereafter, there is no going back down. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly," Nwm said. "May we proceed, now?"

Ortwine nodded.

Nwm transformed himself into a black dragon of enormous proportions, and bestowed *water breathing* upon them.

"Grab onto a horn or something; we're going down fast. If you're struck by a *dispelling*, hold your breath: I'll get to you as soon as I can."

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Daunton looked worried. He sat in a plush chair in Mostin's drawing room, and poured himself another drink. "How long is this state of torpor likely to last? Is the Enforcer even *safe*, without the Claviger's direction?"

The Alienist stared blankly at him. "The Claviger cannot *act* directly, hence it needs an agent. Gihaahia's empowerment is for her own protection, in this regard; unmagnified, she would be vulnerable. I suspect it will last for as long as the current crisis persists."

Orolde entered apologetically, clearing his throat. "Rimilin is without. He wishes to take counsel."

"To pry, more like," Mostin scowled. "I suppose I can't fault him for wanting to keep abreast of events; virtually every other Wizard I know is hiding under a rock." The Alienist sighed. "Show him in."

"He is not alone," Orolde added.

Mostin eyed the sprite suspiciously.

"He has a succubus with him. She seems docile enough."

The Alienist tilted his head. Rimilin was not renowned for compacting fiendish lemans, given his

particular circumstances. Perhaps he would *shapechange* himself...Best not to go there.

"Did he give a name?"

"Ilistet," Orolde replied calmly.

In the name of all that is unholy Mostin's eyes widened to obscene green orbs. His pseudopod twitched involuntarily, scattering candied fruit across the floor.

"Are you a complete simpleton?" He hissed at Orolde. "Do you know who she *is*?"

"She is Graz'zt's herald," Orolde was unfazed. "What does it matter? Rimilin has her under a compulsion."

"He damn well better have her *mind blanked* as well, and more," Mostin screeched. "I do not want the eye of Azzagrat turning here at the moment."

"Should I show him in?"

"Ngaarh! Yes!" He glared at Orolde, who left hastily.

Daunton stood. "I think perhaps it is time I..."

"Siddown!" Mostin barked. "We're in this together, remember?"

Daunton readied a *teleport*. "I will remain temporarily. We are also outside of the proscribed area, if you recall."

*

Rimilin barely nodded in greeting to Mostin and Daunton, and made even that gesture appear as though he were delivering some kind of benediction. His smile was as unctuous as usual, and he was laden with protective wards. The Acolyte began it: the negotiated exchange of information.

"My sources inform me that you plan to begin conjuring celestials tomorrow, is that true?"

"They are my new lackeys," Mostin decided to brag. "They will have bat wings, if their conventional form distresses you: it is their purpose which you should consider. I have been restricted to devas and archons; naturally I interpret that to include exemplars and episemes as well, as they were never specifically excluded. There will be no cascade; I am therefore relying on conventional tools."

"You mean to conjure the Princes of the Choirs? You believe they will come?" Rimilin couldn't help but appreciate the literalist manipulation of the contract. "Exalted celestials in the World of Men may serve to escalate the situation."

"We're playing catch-up. You have a demonic magnate *dominated* in my drawing-room; violating Goetic etiquette regarding compacts seems no taboo for you."

"I am establishing a temporal power base," Rimilin smiled. "It seems vogueish; I didn't want to get left behind by the fashionable set. And who cares if I anger Graz'zt? He's in no position to assault anybody at the moment. His popularity as an *ugra* is waning amongst the convocations."

"You have walked among them?"

Rimilin merely smiled.

"They wish to establish a religious base in Wyre," Mostin reluctantly volunteered. It was valuable information, but would soon be common knowledge. "The Injunction does not apply to divine thaumaturgy. Eadric is understandably reluctant."

"He would rather send a continent to war?" Rimilin narrowed his eyes. "I suppose I will benefit, either way. Tell me of Visuit. Did she speak?"

"She grunted a few times. She is potent. She bore the sword."

"Yeshe is preparing to bind Pazuzu."

"How do you know this?" Mostin whispered fiercely. "How reliable is your information?"

"Very. She is wooing the convocations intently. Her rivalry with Sibud drives her."

Mostin's mind raced. Legend maintained that it was only at the very climax of the war with Durjan that Yeshe had conjured Pazuzu before. If she intended to make it her opening gambit in this one...

"What else do you know, Mostin? What of Prahar?"

"He was not present," the Alienist replied.

"That is not what I meant."

Mostin remained silent.

"Mostin? Fair trade, now." Rimilin's tone was unbearably condescending.

"He bound Orcus previously. So far he has remained silent."

Rimilin smiled.

"Do you wish to go higher?" Mostin asked. "There is one other piece of information: I set a tall price on it. Do you have something to match?"

"Perhaps," Rimilin answered carefully.

"Mine involves the Enforcer."

"Her magnification is already well-known..." Rimilin began.

"Not that," Mostin said. "Nehael says she appeared to the Cheshnite delegation and issued a warning. Certain articles in the Injunction have been amended."

"The theurges are excluded, then? That is news, I'll admit. Although not entirely unexpected. I know something of which may be of particular interest to you: it involves an Infernalist of your prior acquaintance."

Mostin twitched.

"Do you wish to hear more?"

"Speak, lest our relationship grow rapidly sour," Mostin hissed.

"The schemes of the Nameless Fiend, Mostin. Perhaps he is nervous that the eschaton is upon us and is drawing contingencies against the possibility. Shomei is in Cocytus. She is most *recherché*." The hint of envy in Rimilin's voice left little doubt that the Acolyte of the Skin was speaking the truth.

Mostin sighed. The wizardly ego would always abandon discretion in favour of the need to appear better informed. It was why they made such terrible politicians.

Throughout the exchange, Ilistet remained silent; seething with ill-concealed hatred, but unable to act. Her presence was an overt statement of power by Rimilin, and the Alienist wondered if the Acolyte could break her to his Will; *domination* was an effective temporary measure, but Ilistet was unfathomably loyal to Graz'zt. He shrugged. It wasn't his problem. Mostin felt immensely relieved that he didn't have to deal with conjured fiends on an ongoing basis.

**

The wastrilith slid through the water surrounded by an oily blackness. It was a creature of prodigious size, plucked from a watery abysm by Graz'zt and deposited at the entrance to Sisperi's underworld. A school of bestial fish-demons surrounded it, ravenous for flesh, deranged by their captivity within the *Saivo*; all were victims of false promises offered by the Prince of Azzagrat a millennium before. They were prisoners as much as the souls which Saes had gathered to herself.

Nwm, alerted to their presence with his *true seeing*, gyred in the water as they closed and increased his

speed further; Ortwine, who clutched a bony protrusion from his draconic neck, was struck by the elegance and efficiency of the movement.

Nwm turned his head casually, discharging a great gout of acid. He was powering towards some unknown surface now: down had become up, and there was no turning back. Eadric invoked *daylight* on himself, illuminating their surroundings; a mire of darkness encroached upon it, and was closing quickly. *Faster*, Ortwine drew *Heedless* and a wave of venomous hatred surged through her. She quickly mastered it, but Eadric shot her a suspicious glance.

Nwm *shapechanged* again, deciding to avoid conflict if possible. Reaching their goal unharmed was his primary goal; distractions such as these would only denude their energy. His form liquefied into that of an elemental, and cradling Eadric, Ortwine and Rhul in a torrent of churning water, he began to race upwards at breakneck speed. The demon – disinclined to let its quarry escape – paused and caused the water above them to suddenly freeze: it cracked and groaned as tendrils of ice rapidly formed into a solid mass. Nwm maneuvered around it easily, although in a motion which caused Eadric's stomach to somersault. As they outpaced their pursuers, Nwm felt a weak tugging sensation – a last, desperate effort to drag them down again – but one easily eluded. A mental scream of hatred and frustration followed it.

They broke the surface, and Nwm resumed his draconic shape, launching himself into the air. The vestibule of Rûk was a vast cavern; a single unsupported dome which reached two hundred fathoms above black water. The light emanating from Eadric was like a candle held within a geode, and sparked glistening veins of gold and gems within the walls.

Ortwine gasped despite herself. It was staggeringly beautiful.

Rhul spat water and raised an eyebrow. "It seems that our sister has kept more than a few secrets – and more than just souls – to herself."

**

Prince Tagur paced restlessly through the winding corridors and halls of the royal palace in Morne. It was two hours before dawn, and torches guttered in sconces. Sentries, posted at every doorway and at

thirty-foot intervals between, eyed him cautiously as he passed. He had been unrelenting in his insistence that the palace guard remain alert and fully mobilized at all times; everythane of the royal household had been ordered to sleep in a mail shirt. Tagur had bolstered the defenses with another hundred hand-picked knights, and assigned stern taskmasters from amongst his own retinue to oversee them.

All utterly pointless, he knew. If the enemy decided to strike, what could they do to resist? The Prince passed the doors to the royal bedchamber and sighed inwardly. Now was the time for a warrior-king; instead Wyre had a fourteen-year old boy, cajoled by a group of greedy relatives who *still* didn't understand the magnitude of the threat.

At the *Ahma's* insistence, key areas had been *hallowed* by Tahl, and wards of *forbiddance* laid upon them; nothing could manifest directly within the inner donjon. But Eadric had been honest with Tagur, contrary to the perceived security which he had allowed other members of the aristocracy to enjoy: *If they come for the king – I mean really come – it will not be enough. We can only hope that they deem it an inefficient investment of resources.* Tagur had drawn some small comfort from that argument, at least. In many ways, it was to the benefit of the enemy that an untested boy remain on the throne.

The Prince made his way to his own chambers, and sat at his desk. Sleep still eluded him, something which an hour of administrative tedium might cure. He reached for his papers and froze; atop a pile of legal pleas, aristocratic nuptial agreements, warrants, and proposed exchanges of lands and properties, lay a single note in handwritten scrawl:

Beware. There are already tigers amongst you.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 08-04-08



Mostin stood within the summoning room in his cellar at dusk, and considered his peculiar circumstances. He was an unlikely Enochian: driven by necessity, rather than any philosophical sympathy with the celestial agenda, which he viewed just as suspiciously as the fiendish one.

Prior to the endeavour, he had made a brief journey to the cave of the Claviger in the hills of Mord, *just to be sure* that he had overlooked no detail regarding the Injunction. And to ensure that the Enforcer had not, in some perverse fit of humour, extended the proscribed area to encompass the locale of his manse. The chamber had seemed unchanged, except that – perhaps – the aura emanating from the tablets was somehow subdued.

As he had prepared to leave, *She* had appeared to him, and smiled wickedly.

"Be careful, Mostin. If one of your new friends places even a feathered toe within Wyre, I will take you. And there is no hiding from me."

Despite his terror – because now Gihaahia was suffused with godlike power – Mostin had clung tight to his own will, and forced himself to remain calm.

"Would you follow me *Outside*, even? Somehow, I doubt that." It had been an empty but necessary act of braggadocio; he knew that she would likely know of any violation *before* it happened, and certainly before he could react.

"Place your trust in the Claviger," Gihaahia had said unexpectedly. "I/She cares for you."

Mostin had departed feeling sick. Apparently, the infernal had now thoroughly conflated her own identity with that of the entity she served.

Now he stood with Sho, who wished to witness the conjuration despite her own inclinations; and Orolde, the maimed sprite; and Mei, still devoid of true sapience. He sighed. *My esteemed cabal*, he thought ironically. He stared at Shomei's lesser analogues; news of their creator's infernal assumption could wait. He suspected that neither would care anyway; Sho was rapidly individuating, and Mei was

dead to any feelings.

Mostin turned, and inspected a mildewed tome which rested on a carved lectern, flicking through its pages with his appendage. Taruz, the captain of the Host with whom Mostin had struck his deal, had indicated that celestials of a stature greater than that of a deva or an archon were not suitable candidates for his conjurations, and had required that he not use *planar bindings* in order to secure aid from the Empyrean realms. Mostin had grumbled inwardly; opening a number of *gates* would be a massive drain on his psychic resources, even if no subsequent fee were involved. And for *devas*?

The Alienist had brooded on the situation, and finally decided that he would pressure the host to renegotiate the terms of the deal. He would conjure Oraios, an exalted movanic; one of the Twelve Princes of the Eighth Choir. Technically a deva, yes. The fact that Oraios packed as much punch as a half-dozen solars was neither here nor there. But Mostin was nervous; *spirit* and *letter* were very different things, and he was dealing with celestials here, not devils. And few had dared to invoke an episeme before.

Orolde coughed.

"Well?" Sho asked. "Are we to stand here all day? I had hoped to use the summoning room later."

"Very well," Mostin steeled himself. *Stay focussed on the face. Do not look at the wings.* And then: *Screw the Host. It's my reservoir, and I damn well expect my money's worth.*

*

In wheeling mansions of light, high in the Seraphic Sphere, a *gate* opened. After pausing for a moment's thought, during which he *communed* with the Marshal of the Host, Oraios passed through.

*

Beneath a tree on the southern marches of Wyre, the *Sela* sat cross-legged, surrounded by saints and talions, delivering a lesson to a wide circle of armored knights and templars. He paused briefly and smiled enigmatically, shaking his head at the wizard's audacity, before continuing.

*

In Nizkur, Nehael glanced at Teppu in the twilight. "Look what Mostin just did," she said, presenting him with a mental image.

The sprite sat on a tump, inspecting the petals of a flower. "Jovol would have half-approved," he said archly. "His relations with the Host were always good."

"And you?" She inquired.

"I defer to your authority," Teppu replied. "How do *you* feel about it?"

"I suppose I must tolerate it," she sighed. "Enitharmon is treading carefully; perhaps he doesn't wish to anger me. That much I appreciate, at least."

"I doubt he fully understands," Teppu grinned. "Celestials will never comprehend *Saizhan*: they are relics of a previous era of consciousness."

"*Potent* relics, nonetheless," Nehael smiled. "And atavisms have a habit of resurfacing after a millennium or two."

"Are you worried?"

"I will weep for those who suffer," Nehael replied. "But worry for myself and my charge? No. Nizkur is grounded in the Tree-*ludja*. I am unconquerable. This is a reassuring fact."

"Unless the Nameless Fiend comes," the sprite observed.

"I fear no Hellfire," Nehael laughed.

"And his rhetoric?"

"That has yet to be tested," Nehael conceded.

**

Mostin quailed. Its feathers were *terrible*, and its radiance was almost as bad. Mogus crooned eerily.

"No wrath, then?" Mostin inquired gingerly. The Alienist had amplified his own powers to the point where he believed he had a good chance if it came to blows, but would rather it not prove necessary.

"You abide by the contract," Oraios replied stonily, looking down at the Alienist.

Mostin scowled. Exalted celestials acted according to their special remit – whatever that was. They were beyond normal hierarchic status. This celestial specimen appeared particularly warlike.

"Then I may deploy you in a manner consonant with the will of the *Ahma* or the *Sela*. I also imagine that you regard yourself as better informed as to what that might be, and thus feel in no way, in actuality, beholden to me."

"That would a wise interpretation," Oraios affirmed.

"I think that it is *contestable*," Mostin said coolly. "I would also like you to consider this: my capacity to open *gates* is limited by my reservoir; my ability to use *planar bindings* is not. I..."

The celestial gave Mostin an unreadable look. "You may use *planar bindings*. I abide by the rules at this point. I will remain for one month.

Mostin frowned. He hadn't expected the monster to submit as quickly. "You must not trespass within Wyre's boundaries."

"I am fully conversant with the Injunction," Oraios said drily. "I try to stay abreast of current events."

Mostin scowled. This celestial had a *sense of humour*?

"I should like to make an *observation*," the deva said unexpectedly, purposefully emphasizing the last word.

Mostin fidgeted nervously. This was highly irregular. "Go on."

"If you were to continue *gating* my peers, you would find them no less accommodating than I."

Mostin tilted his head and fixed his unblinking eyes on Oraios. "That information is duly noted. You may now be about your business."

The celestial looked at Mostin as it disincorporated. "Thank-you, Mostin."

Mostin shivered. Its light still clung to him; the promise of something true and wholesome. It made the Alienist feel dirty.

"What now?" Orolde asked.

Mostin thought silently for a few minutes, before raising his head. "Tomorrow, we shall conjure the deva Irel, who has the quaint title 'he who smites.'"

"Don't pull your punches, Mostin," Sho remarked.

"And also the archon Hemah, and the deva Shokad." Mostin added. "And a dozen or so minor devas."

Sho raised an eyebrow. "You will gain a reputation as Oronthon's bitch."

"I don't see arch-devils coming this cheap," Mostin replied.

"I don't see you *in control* here, either."

"You forget that I am a personal friend of the Breath of God," Mostin smiled. "That carries special benefits, and relieves me of certain concerns."

"And imposes certain others."

Mostin shrugged. He was interested in the broad canvas, not the details. And a penny saved here and there could help toward that pot of very purple paint, which he could then throw all over it.

He observed Sho. Her urge to overcome any limits was as pronounced as her creator's. Following her endowment by Nwm, she had quickly compacted several erinyes and – after procuring a scroll from an unrevealed source – a cornugon in the service of Seere, a disgraced infernal count who dwelt in Avernus. Now she courted pit fiends in Seere's bodyguard. Her rise had been predictably meteoric; in it, the cloak lent to her by Mostin, and the *Mirror of Urm-Nahat* had been instrumental. Mostin envied her: *to have those tools with which to begin one's career.*

He regarded her approvingly, regretting only that she did not have another eye, or a maw.

Nwm alighted upon a wide platform of rock, thirty feet above the mere. He deposited Ortwine, Eadric and Rhul, and resumed his natural shape in a slick instant.

"No demons?" Nwm inquired.

"I suspect that this is only the beginning of the vestibule," Rhul pointed through an opening into another, massive cavern. "We have a long descent to make; the Underworld is deep, you know." He sounded wry.

"Forty-eight hours, Ortwine," Eadric scowled at the sidhe. He turned to Nwm, "Should we *wind-walk?*."

"We must trudge," Rhul observed. "Those are the rules."

*

As they trod, Eadric handed Nwm a scarf of black silk.

Nwm looked dubious. "What is its significance?"

"It is Soneillon's; she gave it to me in a dream." Eadric proceeded to explain his dilemma regarding the demoness; he could revive her, or Yeshe would find her first.

"Ah," Nwm said.

"Do you have a solution?" Eadric asked.

"Not really."

"I had considered imprisoning her..."

"Confinement would preclude her conjuration," Nwm was hesitant. "But I would be reluctant to condemn any location, anywhere, to such a fate."

"Could you do it?"

"*Could?* I suppose so." Nwm acknowledged. "But not alone."

"She need not be confined within the World of Men," the *Ahma* ventured. "If some forsaken Limbo could be found..."

"One man's Limbo is another's Paradise," Nwm observed drily. "Still. Some locations would be less offensive than others."

"There is a place," Eadric spoke carefully. "It seems apt. The lake. It would resonate. It would require Ortwine's permission, at the very least. She owns that stretch of Faerie. Or at least has a better claim on it than any other. That wouldn't be so hard to obtain. She owes me."

"I think you underestimate the degree of control that Ortwine prefers to exert over her hegemony. She was livid when I revealed that I had opened portals to Afqithan. That said, despite the protestations of

the sidhe, I think the very notion of ownership is absurd when speaking of Faerie."

"If I asked you, would you do it?"

"Perhaps," Nwm answered after a brief pause.

"Somehow, I had expected a flat *no*."

"Often, one must look at the bigger picture. And how *best* to protect. I remember her: I know how dangerous she is. But understand this, Ed: If I were to would lay a compulsion upon her, I'd drain every drop from your psyche to do it. And mine. And probably Ortwine's – which I think she'd be less than enthusiastic about. It would need to be robust. And it sits uncomfortably with me. It would be an act of hypocrisy; a violation of something I am sworn to protect."

"How long would such a confinement last?" Eadric inquired.

Nwm grimaced. "Until one more powerful than I came and broke it. Which might be tomorrow, or might be never. Goetia is hardly my speciality, Eadric. I can accomplish a great deal, but my power is raw; I lack the finesse of a wizard. Mostin would be a better choice."

"Mostin is under Empyrean contract. He's not really an option at this point."

Nwm stared at the *Ahma*. "You need to think hard about this, Eadric. You are compromised in more ways than you know; I'm not just talking about your romantic attachment to this particular fiend. You need to question every possible motive that you might have before acting. And an investment of my power in this would mean that it is *not* deployed elsewhere – and that concerns me as much as anything."

"Demons such as her don't *die*, Nwm. They have already been unmade. They merely *arise* from Nothingness into Being, and return to oblivion a while. *Nothing Becomes*."

"That is a perversion of *Saizhan*, and you know it. I can't believe I'm telling *you* this, of all people."

"It's the other side of the coin," Eadric shrugged. "Perhaps it's also an act of symbolic necessity; the *Ahma* must re-embody the Void; the Preceptor must confine its essence within The Green. It is a point of commonality."

"You suddenly seem well informed regarding my religious duties," Nwm said acidly. "You also posit a Hierarchy of Truths that I'm not altogether comfortable with."

Eadric stopped walking. "You were the one who was passionate about my taking a stance. About a reconciliation of ideals. Don't get upset at me if my interpretation is one you find you don't like; something which makes you uncomfortable because of what it might actually materially entail. *I do not shirk my duty, thus?* Remember? You're going to need to give a little, here."

Nwm scowled. "Point," he finally said. "Although if you're going to start establishing dogma, you'd better damn well make sure this time that it's clear that this is *not an act to be emulated*. News would get out; it always does. You would need to consider the ramifications of knowledge of the event amongst the 'faithful,' or whatever they are these days. And you need to decide if it's the Adversary who's driving your agenda."

Eadric glared. "You just had to get that one in, didn't you."

Nwm sighed. "It is a consideration."

"The alternative is that you *reincarnate* her into a more benign form."

"Absolutely not," Nwm replied. "I have no jurisdiction over immortal abominations. Or celestials, for that matter. Nor do I wish any."

"I do. And I recall that once you were less reluctant to step outside of your remit regarding another succubus."

"Hardly comparable," Nwm snapped. "Accepting an act of submission by one repentant individual – for the sake of expedience – is not the same as purposely *incarnating a manifestation of evil*. You would have me unleash this thing in the world? You have no idea what you're suggesting."

"Then enlighten me, Nwm," Eadric said grimly. "I am merely exploring possibilities. Could you bring her back Green?"

"No."

"Why not?" Eadric asked. "Ortwine. Mulissu. Teppu. *Nehael*. If I've learned anything, it's that the *Viridity can absorb anything*. You *awakened a simulacrum*, Nwm."

"She would bring a blackness with her. A corruption."

"The Viridity arises in response to the ontological paradox. It grounds the abstract in the present. Notions of ens and non-ens are abandoned in the face of the Now. Your words, Nwm."

"Nehael's words," Nwm corrected him.

"So ask the Goddess," Eadric replied.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Ask Nehael if either solution is acceptable: imprisonment or incarnation. Or neither. We will abide by her decision."

Nwm squinted and cocked his head. "Very well."

"In any event, it will require Soneillon's consent."

Nwm stood stock still. "*What?*"

"I will not lie to her, Nwm," Eadric said simply. "I owe her that much, at least."

Nwm sighed.

Ahead, Ortwine stopped. They had entered a tall cavern. Great bronze doors lay beyond.

"Demons," she calmly observed.

*

The sidhe had been walking with Rhul, apparently in casual conversation, but in fact probing him for information, and wooing the godling toward her camp. Her interrogation was too skillful for Rhul to discern, and the subtlety of her intellectual seduction – which targeted his aesthetic sensibilities with deadly precision – was more than Rhul was equipped to deal with, despite his own sophistication.

Ortwine had the uncanny knack of presenting ideas to a subject of her willful manipulation as *exactly as I would have thought* in the mind of the listener. Her sexuality was a razor which she wielded with cool detachment, and could accommodate allusions to either coyness or abandon, but in innuendos so ethereal that they merely left a vague feeling of discomfort in those whom she targeted.

All must adore me, she knew. In that, her purpose was unchanged. *Thus, can I brood better.*

Rhul himself had admitted that the exact method of Ortwine's apotheosis was still in doubt, but the sidhe had developed a number of theories – or rather entertained a variety of notions – as to how it might be best effected. Outside of Mulhuk, the Nireem were diminished in stature, although that had not always been the case; in their heyday, when Sisperi had flourished, they had enjoyed the worship which that world's natives had lavished upon them.

Central to Ortwine's plans were the series of massive *reincarnations* – planned by Nwm and Lai – each of which would facilitate the simultaneous transmigration of thousands of disembodied spirits into new forms. For Nwm, this would be an act of metaphysical audacity which he had barely even begun to address; the ethical responsibility involved was truly staggering. Ortwine's view was more pragmatic; she needed a base of worshippers upon whom to draw to fuel her divinity, and who would venerate her based on her chosen role.

But the sidhe herself was not entirely without scruples. She understood the reciprocity demanded by the agreement and, at present at least, recognized her obligation. She would remain *fey*, of course, and that

presented her with a good deal of leeway; Afqithan was already bound to Mulhuk through Nwm's conduits. Sisperi itself would become infused with Faerie – the *Enchantment* – as Ortwine had come to regard it in her mind. Not in some mundane wizardly fashion, but in a deep, abiding occult manner which she was beginning to understand.

The leaders of the Nireem – Lai, Rhul and Jaliere – had sworn solemn oaths regarding Ortwine's ascension. Ninit, who preferred to remain marginal to the dealings of Mulhuk, had expressed no opinion other than her usual disdain. Ortwine had decided that some rite must exist where each godling could invest her with a portion of their own strength, and that such might be a possibility. At the last, the death of Saes at her own hands might be an option, although Ortwine was nervous that such an act would mean that she herself would inherit Ruk, and its dismal responsibilities.

Ortwine drew *Heedless* and felt the blade's malign power course through her.

*

They had once been demons but – by through instillation of morbid power by Saes in her delerium – had assumed a darker status. Blood fiends which fed on each other, and disgorged shadows of themselves in an unending cycle of consumption and regurgitation. They descended upon the party like a rabid pack, their thin screams echoing in the tall chambers of the vestibule.

Nwm swallowed. There were too many to count. He unleashed a sonic which ripped a swathe through them; the acoustic resonance shattered diamonds in the walls of the cavern. *Lukarn* flared; brilliant sunlight exploded. Their numbers seemed barely diminished.

Nwm invoked potent wards. "Keep them at bay for a moment. Then we cut our way forward," he said. It was their only option: they had to trudge. He shot two parallel walls of green fire across the chamber, a narrow path between them. The blistering heat caused the undead to recoil for an instant, before they hurled themselves oblivious through the burning curtains, immolating themselves in a frenzy in order to attack the group.

"After you," Nwm said to Eadric.

The *Ahma* began to hew his way through the monsters. The others followed him.

**

Graz'zt stood within the Gate Room, a labyrinth of hallways containing many thousands of portals, all of which were sealed. The Prince had assumed the size and shape of a human of dark aspect, and was outfitted as a gentleman prepared for travel; an extra digit on each gloved hand remained to indicate his true nature, a vanity which Graz'zt always indulged.

He was accompanied by a dozen other demons of note, including Chepez the Vicious – a succubus whose animal nature Graz'zt trusted – and Hejiel, whose grasp of planar geography was unrivalled. Megual, a kelvezu assassin renowned for his subtlety, rode upon the Prince's right. The marilith Hirmis, a loyal general who in the past had delivered numerous victories to Graz'zt in his wars against Yeenoghu, had also joined him. Twenty metamorphosed cauchemars served as steeds, or as armor and baggage carriers for the troupe; their possessions included all of Zelatar's most portable wealth, stowed in a variety of extradimensional bags. Their façade might have been a squad of mercenary knights and their squires.

Above them, the hooves of nightmares bearing the undead cavalry of Orcus thundered through the halls of the Argent Palace. Ten hours before, their chiefs had come; every minute detail of the palace defenses had been known to them, and Graz'zt's walls had been *disjoined* in three different places at once. To the astonishment of those closest to him, the Prince had at once calmly opted to abandon his stronghold, but at a leisurely pace which allowed him to collect his thoughts and make arrangements first. The bulk of his court, he had dispatched to the Ice Waste of Kostchchie; were he to arrive in person, Graz'zt could assume control of that miserable, backward layer at any time. Others had been sent to the few remaining proxies which remained loyal to Azzagrat during tumultuous times.

A select group, he had kept to himself; the Prince had taken a fancy to the idea of *a-wanderin'*, perhaps with the notion of wreaking a little havoc. Distraction in destruction was what he needed now. Ilistet could wait – he would rend her body and spirit for the secrets she must have divulged. Compacted by now, no doubt; eyewitnesses had reported his herald's abrupt disappearance through a *gate*. Inscrutable to his divinations, the Prince suspected Rimilin of the Skin, and information sold to Thanatos. He cursed them all.

With a gesture, Graz'zt dispelled the wards which held the portals closed, and hundreds of vistas – mostly terrible – opened up before them. A few other doorways remained blank and closed; gates sealed from the other side.

Graz'zt ignored them all, and with a small device instead opened a portal to yet another world. With his party, he passed swiftly through into a dreary wasteland named Suluvda, and into exile. The *gate* flashed closed behind him.

The death knights never reached the Gate Room. More than a few of the portals had been shut for good reason.

*

In his meditations, Temenun knew that many chthonics had erupted into the forty-fifth abysm, and that the *ugra* named Angula had vacated his demesne. Void was buoyant, pushing closer to the surface. Temenun bade the other immortals attend him.

Angula flirts with us. He dares one of us to conjure him. Who will raise his pavillion?

Choach bowed. "My brother, Draab, has already made pact with him."

Sibud sneered. "We do not observe outside arrangements."

Choach gave a ghastly smile. "Neither does Draab."

"I bring Baramh," Yeshe announced. "His pavillion can be raised in three days. I plan to conjure the *Gu Kaama* shortly afterwards." Rumours already abounded; the Binder merely confirmed them. It was a goad directed at Prahar, who ignored it and slavered silently.

Temenun turned his gaze upon Anumid. "What does the Mouthpiece say?"

"Angula is currently unbalanced. Nonetheless, it will not be I who decides; I am authorized to offer five

hundred to begin: you may bid on them as you will."

A furious haggling began.

Yeshe smiled. She had the advantage: she was wealthier than anybody else.

**

Eadric, Ortwine, Nwm and Rhul finally gained the gates: massive bronze valves, twenty feet high, replete with ornate scenes depicting the passage of souls through various spiritual ordeals. The press of fiends around them was unrelenting.

Eadric brandished *Lukarn* and invoked another *sunburst*. Nwm sealed the area immediately before the portals with a *wall of stone*. For a brief moment, an eery silence descended upon the group, before a hideous scraping – the sound of hundreds of claws and maws upon granite – filled the encysted space.

"What now?" Eadric asked.

Ortwine pushed lightly upon the doors. They opened noiselessly.

"We trudge," the sidhe said drily.

Wearily, they continued their descent.

**

"I must do it *now*!" Yeshe hissed.

"The bids are not yet closed, Lady," Anumid replied calmly.

"I need the first and third cabals of the *Anantam*," Yeshe pressed on regardless.

"Then you need to up your tender," Anumid smiled.

"You owe me much, Anumid," Yeshe turned her scorn on the Mouthpiece. "I will offer you two *analahs* and a dozen *gomukhs* for one month. It is a royal price.*"

"It is a *fair* price," Anumid answered. "And must be split any number of ways."

"I need three hundred by nightfall. I must build fast."

"And I would remind you that you will have an advantage in future negotiations if your circle is made."

"The cabals may retain ownership of the circle," Yeshe immediately conceded. "Anumid, we need to act. Many *enemies* will soon come. We are losing the initiative. We must be prepared."

Anumid's eyes narrowed. "I will advocate for you. But at three *analahs* and thirty *gomukhs*."

Yeshe's face contorted into a snarl.

"And I will get you your three hundred. But know that the *Anantam* are dubious of angering the Wyrish Enforcer."

"Gihaahia will not come here. She cannot overcome us on this ground, and she knows it. You may vouchsafe for me. I swear it on my name."

Anumid nodded, and departed.

*

An hour passed, and Anumid returned. "They accept."

*

Three hours later, the demon prince Pazuzu and six armored balors stood within the confines of the inner precinct.

Yeshe knelt before them, but her supplication was ceremonial. They were already enslaved to her.

**

The cavern was vast and approximately conical; its apex, a swirling vortex without colour, which – Ortwine knew instinctively – led *out of there*. They entered warily, upon a solid surface which reflected like still water, but within the depths of which, a maelstrom of tormented souls raged.

It was not what they had expected.

On an island of rock in the dead centre was slouched the figure of a slender woman on a throne of bone and bronze, apparently insensible. She was possessed of great beauty, but her eyes were glazed and vacant.

Ortwine cautiously moved closer, drew *Heedless* and poked Saes lightly in the ribs. The figure was unresponsive. A trickle of divine blood from a tiny cut stained Saes's white robe. Ortwine gazed at it, fascinated. *Heedless* moved restlessly in her hand.

She turned to Nwm. "What now?"

"She needs to be healed," the Preceptor observed. "That is all."

Eadric raised an eyebrow. "Can you do that? Return sanity to a deity?"

Nwm shot the *Ahma* a glance. "Healing is what I do best, Eadric. Ortwine, be prepared to negotiate. Be warned: *sane* and *nice* should not be confused."

The sidhe paused. "Wait a..."

But Nwm had already touched Saes upon the forehead, flooding the goddess with green light, even as traces of jade fire crawled over him, charring his own flesh and causing him to writhe in pain. He reeled, and coughed blood upon the polished floor.

The malice which was Saes awoke from its stupor. Black eyes opened and regarded the quartet before her.

"You presume much," the goddess smiled thinly. Her consciousness rapidly expanded to embrace her domain, dwarfing the psyches of those others present. "You I know," she looked coldly at Rhul. "What are these?"

Ortwine lowered herself to one knee, and pointedly averted her eyes. "On behalf of your brothers and sisters, we beg for aid," she said simply.

Inwardly, Eadric relaxed a little. They were in the realm of negotiation. Ortwine could handle it alone from here.

**

I need to know. Mostin's voice echoed in Eadric's mind. The wizard was many worlds distant.

Deploy them. Eadric replied.

Against whom?

We should target the cabals. Destroy their power base.

Good in principle. But assaulting the main precinct would be futile. It would take half a myriad to accomplish.

Do you have a better suggestion? The Ahma was irritable.

An army musters outside of Thond's walls.

Mortal thralls? Many who are innocent will perish.

It is the doom of mortals to perish. Mostin replied.

There will be enough blood on my hands. I would rather my opening move be less ignoble.

You have always lacked the pragmatism necessary to be an effective tyrant. Mostin's voice was scornful. *Attack the vulnerable pieces first.*

How many are gathered at Thond? Eadric was grim.

So far, around eleven thousand. Including bombards, battalions of condottieri, and the flower of Thond's chivalry.

Their composition was irrelevant. Eadric knew that they would stand no chance, and all would be quickly slain unless the Cheshnite spellcasters stopped to intervene directly.

And retaliation? Shouldn't I be concerned that a counterstrike will be just as indiscriminate?

Eadric, if you think that moderating your actions will somehow cause the Hierophants to reconsider theirs...

In the throne-room of Ruk, the underworld of Sisperi, the *Ahma* stood quietly and considered.

Unleash them. He finally commanded. *But they must withdraw if Visuit or any other immortal appears in person at Thond.*

*

Princes, attend me! Mostin issued a mass *sending*.

The four exalted celestials, who had assumed the metaphysical stewardship of Wyre's cardinal directions, manifested before the Alienist, bathed in radiance.

"I have a task consonant with the Will of the *Ahma*."

Graz'zt has vanished. Ur-fiends stalk Zelatar's byways, and Orcus cannot hold the plane. Carasch and his ilk have risen to the forty-fifth deep.

Jalael considered the *sending* which Daunton had issued an hour before. She sat within a booth in the library of the Academy; tomes containing the names and sigils of many demons surrounded her.

Celestial dignitaries had assumed the ethereal guardianship of Wyre. The Claviger had magnified the Enforcer. Fumaril was inaccessible, isolated by Mulissu's magicks. *Something* was awakening in Nizkur. Pazuzu had erected a temple south of Jashat: the olive groves were already stained black with the blood and smoke of sacrifice. And now madness and annihilation were spewing forth their effluvia into the middle Abyss.

Where to throw her lot? She reflected upon her position carefully for an hour, considering the merits of allegiance with the various axes which had formed. She contacted her occasional patron – a Pandemonic Hag named Kreta – whose agenda was opaque at best.

Jalael brooded long upon the whereabouts of *Pharamne's Urn*.

Finally, in a small refectory, she took counsel with the wizards Troap and Muthollo – together, these three formed an unbalanced triad which nonetheless might yield remarkable results in the future. Jalael's *accelerando* was already underway. She knew that if she survived the current crisis, she would be a major player in the New Order.

She cursed Mostin for encumbering her with notions of commitment to posterity.

"We are fragmenting into triptychs, as Shomei foresaw," Jalael observed. "Ours is the most potent. Are we to take a proactive stance?"

"I suddenly have a deep appreciation for the magical economy of the Cheshnites," Troap smiled wily. "It is a model which we might seek to adopt."

"It has its merits," Jalael agreed. "Locs are forming around Waide, Tullifer and Idro; around Tozinak, Shuk and Poylu; and around Creq, Droom and Gholu. Others remain marginal, although quadruplicities seem popular among the less accomplished. Mostin, Rimilin and Daunton are the unintegrated pinnacle,"

"Is Daunton transvalent?" Muthollo asked. "He is enigmatic."

"He is spineless," Jalael replied. "And yes, I believe so. And Tozinak is close. And so is Waide. I suspect Jovol engineered the whole situation."

"Jovol-who-is-Teppu," Troap hissed. "I vote for the Green camp. I may be biased." He smiled broadly.

"I am inclined to retain our autonomy at present," Muthollo seemed sceptical. "The goblin has viridescent urges which are clouding his vision."

"I am pragmatic," Jalael opined. "I say we back Mostin."

"Because insanity is recently fashionable?" Muthollo inquired.

"We need to deflate his Enochian bubble. We should offer to help him bind Graz'zt. The Dark Prince is abroad, and lacks the protections of his sanctum."

Troap inclined his head. "Mostin needs a bigger cabal."

Jalael shrugged. "He can reconfigure the spell. His use of celestials is becoming indiscriminate, and must be ended."

Note

Angula ("Fingers"), *Baramh* ("Peacock Feathers") and *Aja* ("The Goat") refer to Graz'zt, Pazuzu and Orcus respectively. *Gu-Kaama* is Soneillon, "Darkness-Lust."

"Raising the Pavillion" of a demon lord occurs after it is thoroughly subjugated. After the initial *domination* expires, a longer-term compulsion kicks in. I've assumed that it is possible to coerce a *dominated* creature to surrender (voluntarily fail its save / lower its SR) to a subsequently targeted long-term epic compulsion.

*Service rendered by two balors and twelve babau.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 09-23-08

Mostin Plays His Hand

The dim light before dawn. In Soan, in the world of Sisperi, Nwm stood with the goddess Lai and her twelve handmaidens in a shallow bowl in the earth. The depression had once been a temple. Untended for more than a century, now it was overgrown with creepers; the roots of trees which had since sprouted and matured there had cracked the dressed stonework, obscuring the site's former purpose.

Nwm had *hallowed* the remains, washing away memories of the blasphemies which had occurred during the last, futile defense of the temple against demons sent by Graz'zt. Now, all was still, but the air was heavy with anticipation. The group was arranged in a wide circle, with Nwm and Lai in the centre.

The Preceptor, breathing slowly and easily in the chill air, lifted a flint knife, and began to chant. The

echoing whispers of the handmaidens were barely audible.

Lai stretched out her arms, her palms upward. With two swift, brutal cuts, Nwm opened up the veins of the goddess from elbow to wrist. Lai began to bleed profusely. Nwm held her forearms and looked into her face; her blood flowed over him, and soaked into the ground at their feet. He continued to chant. A breeze began to stir.

The wind quickly grew to a tempest which raged around them, flinging leaves and debris into the air. Nwm's breathing became rapid, and his mind reached out into the storm.

Arise, he silently commanded. Green fire consumed him; a cyclone of viridescence erupted, and whirled for the briefest of moments. Abruptly, the storm ceased. Life kindled.

He caught Lai as she collapsed, although he himself was pale and shaking. He spoke more words, and strength flowed back into both of them.

Dawn broke in Sisperi, and the sun leapt into the sky, exulting. Many hundreds of souls, graced with new forms, stood around them and gazed at them in silence and wonder: those who had perished within the confines of the temple. Over the course of hours, thousands more – who had awakened in the surrounding countryside – made their way to the site. Ninit and the ancestors led them in long columns into the bowl.

Finally, when all had gathered – and now the sun rode high in the sky – the Nireem assembled together in the centre of the ruins. Saes was conspicuously absent, but with Jaliere's grudging acceptance, Ortwine had already taken her place amongst them.

Rhul stood upon a mound of rubble which had once been an altar, and began to tell a long, bitter story. As he recited, Lai drew Nwm aside and spoke in hushed tones.

"Stay," she implored. "Return to Mulhuk with us."

"In time," Nwm smiled. "But I have other duties." He reached out, grasped a nearby sapling, and vanished.

Ninit, who had observed the exchange, scowled.

**

Mostin floated amongst the smoking wreck of the encampment, his features impassive.

Hours before, at his direction, the four exalted celestials – Oraios, Irel, Hemah and Shokad – had descended in a fire of ruin upon the army gathered outside of Thond's walls, and slain upwards of ten thousand soldiers in a matter of minutes. The Alienist had observed the carnage from a discreet distance, impressed with the efficiency of the destruction.

Mulissu corporeated next to him. She raised an eyebrow.

"What a mess," she sighed. "We have become politicians, Mostin. We demean ourselves."

"We do what we must," Mostin shrugged. "I have no regrets."

"Well spoken," a voice spoke unexpectedly from behind them.

Mostin turned rapidly, prepared to unleash a barrage of *disintegrates*. Mulissu's power surged.

"Peace." It was a statement of profound simplicity, uttered with such power that the cosmos might bend to see it done. A youth stood there, offering his palm. He seemed wholly unperturbed.

"Who the hell are you?" Mostin asked.

"A many-layered question," the other replied. "I regret that I cannot share that information with you at this time." The boy – who from his complexion may have been a native of the area – seemed oddly amused.

Mostin furrowed his brow. "Why are you here?"

The youth cracked his knuckles casually. "To witness the handiwork of Oronthon's servants. You have done *good* work today, Mostin."

Mostin became nervous. *Who is this?* Mulissu's eyes narrowed.

The youth touched his nose. "You should know that the demon Pazuzu has begun to ravage Eastern Trempa; other demons are starting to infest Ardan. Many *Ushabam* thaumaturges accompany them."

Mostin was irritated, but could not help but be intrigued.

"Yeshe's nihilist fanatics," the youth explained.

"What is your interest in this situation?" Mulissu asked directly.

"At the risk of seeming evasive, that is also a more complex question than it might first appear. I would prefer not to go into it."

"You say little to engender trust," Mostin sighed.

"A fair observation; fortunately, I do not require your trust. But I do need you to convey a message to the *Ahma* for me. Tell him this exactly: 'Remember what the *Sela* said, regarding your place in the downfall of Orthodoxy.'"

Mostin was about to say *Tell him yourself*, but thought better of it. "Perhaps if..." he began.

But the youth had vanished.

Mostin turned to Mulissu and scowled. "This is disturbing. Could you read anything about him?"

"Not a whit."

"Nor I," Mostin concurred. "And I dislike being elected to communicate messages by unknown

entities."

"And Pazuzu?"

"I should inform Eadric, if he doesn't know already. I cannot dispatch celestials within Wyre proper, anyway: this is up to him."

"Mostin, we need to talk. I can't hold the piling around Fumaril for much longer."

"Don't worry," Mostin appeared unconcerned. "The gears are shifting. Everything will happen quickly now."

"How comforting," Mulissu said.

**

"Graz'zt has abandoned the Argent Palace and unleashed a chthonic tide centered on Zelatar. You should be proud, Mostin. You were complicit in reducing him to such a desperate strategy." Rimilin seemed genuinely impressed, though no less condescending than usual.

"I had heard," Mostin replied smoothly.

"I will aid you in *binding* him. For a price."

"Strange. Jalael made a similar offer with her clique of wizards. I sense a renewed interest in the whereabouts of a certain urn."

"Every mage in Wyre has consulted Shomei's library in an attempt to glean tidbits of information regarding that pot, Mostin."

"Not I, alas," Mostin sighed.

"Nor I," Rimilin admitted. "There has been no time for scholarly research. Do I *want* the urn? Of course! How can there be any doubt on that count? I will find out how it works after I get it."

Not just the urn. This bastard wants Azzagrat. Graz'zt's throne. The arrogance. Mostin smiled, and shook his head. "You'll never do it."

"We'll see," Rimilin said smugly. "It's time: bring him in, Mostin. You won't have a better chance. I will aid you. As will Mulissu, I've no doubt: she holds onto a grudge, that one. Your sprite and your Shomeiette can contribute. Jaelael, Troap, Muthollo. You have your cabal, Alienist."

"What is your price?"

"Access to the *web of motes*."

Mostin considered briefly. "Let us assume, for the moment, that I agree."

"It leaves the question of what to do with said bound Prince," Rimilin observed, somewhat surprised. "Imprisonment, extortion, *domination* or termination are all viable options; nor are they necessarily mutually exclusive choices."

"I cannot *dominate* him."

"I could, with help," Rimilin suggested.

"I would sooner cut off my pseudopod, than hand Graz'zt over to Rimilin of the Skin," Mostin snorted.

"So what do you suggest?"

"A very precise coordination of efforts," Mostin replied carefully. "It is rather risky; if it fails, we will need to flee or eliminate him immediately."

Rimilin looked at the Alienist suspiciously. "You have my attention."

"Understand that I have long pondered this question, Rimilin. It requires a certain spell synchrony. Graz'zt must be struck by a *superb dispelling* only a fraction of a second before he is subjected to a *minimus containment*. He will not have the opportunity to re-erect his *mind blank* before he is captured."

Rimilin gawked. "Ingenious, Mostin. I must admit it. Such a strategy would not have occurred to me."

"His receptacle will eventually need to be protected by a *disjunction ward*, although if due care is taken with it, such a precaution can wait for a little while."

"And when you have your Graz'zt-in-a-Jar? What then?"

"Your involvement in the process will end at that point," Mostin smiled. "You need not be concerned on that count."

"I wish to be present during any interrogation regarding the urn."

"I will convoke an assembly to discuss the urn," Mostin spoke calmly. "Any interrogation will be conducted under the full auspices of the Academy."

"Touché, Mostin. I will accompany you when you deliver it to Daunton. I do not trust you. "

"Nor I, you. And Rimilin," Mostin stared madly, "if you do decide to betray me, you had better be sure that you are thorough in your efforts, and overlook no contingencies. I have dealt with you with due civility. You might rue it, were our relationship to change."

*

Mostin tried to grasp the mote again. It was elusive, and kept slipping into the region of space and time which Mostin had come to realize approximated to the Region of Dreams.

The remnant of Murmuur was impossible to isolate, his memory fading rapidly.

Mostin spun another arc, this time for Azazel, and observed a convoluted knot of resonances. One radicle drew him onward and backwards, to a time when rebel smiths hammered furiously in forges upon the Blessed Plain, contriving engines of destruction to assault the Empyrean.

Murmuur's mote hovered nearby, as if attempting to taunt the Alienist. Mostin ignored it, concentrating instead on Sekabin, a proto-devil of immense cunning, who oversaw the construction of devices which breathed unholy fire, and artifacts whose purpose was otherwise long-forgotten. Sekabin, it had been, who had wrought the doors of Murmuur's Tower, and helped anchor it to unnamed worlds which would later be revealed to the rebels as the prison from which they could never escape.

He would need to conjure the devil, and extract the key to activating the Tower from it. A task well within his abilities. In his mind, he weighed the benefits of a return to Goetia against the practical reality of already having celestials on the ground.

The Alienist relaxed his thoughts and returned his perception to the present. The echoes of the deceased Dukes – Murmuur, Titivilus and Furcus – drifted on the edge of comprehension. Deeper in dream, Soneillon's mote flickered in and out of being; taut radicles bound it to familiar nodes: Graz'zt, Eadric, Rimilin, Yeshe. With a colossal effort of will, Mostin generated a connection between the demoness, his own signifier, and the Prince of Azzagrat. A plethora of possible futures exploded into being, and he seized immediately upon one of them. *Pharamne's Urn*.

He gasped as new infinities were born to his inner sight.

The decision by Mostin to end his Enochian phase was made in a heartbeat.

**

An hour before midnight, the *Ahma* – together with Tahl, Tarpion and a number of other *resurrected* temple grandees – assembled beneath a canopy on a conical hill twenty miles south of Hrim Eorth in the Wyrish Marklands. Above them, flapping noisily in the wind, a massive banner stretched: a rising sun cradled within the outstretched boughs of a great tree. The green field of the standard appeared

black in the torchlight; its device was a ruddy gold.

In the valleys below, thousands of campfires flickered. Against the *Ahma*'s better judgment many companies were mustered together, but he felt powerless to deny the faithful proximity to the *Sela*. Those cadres which had been dispatched beyond the Claviger's remit were small, mobile, and bolstered with protective magicks.

Nehael's farspoken words still echoed in Eadric's mind. They had been less than reassuring:

She is what she is, Ahma. If you want her back, then just do it: you have the power and authority. It is your decision to make.

Which was to say that Nwm's assessment of the situation – that Soneillon would bring a corruption with her, were the Preceptor to *reincarnate* her – might be correct, after all. Nehael herself had surrendered to the Green, and had been relinquished by one Truth to another; on reflection, Eadric realized that perhaps the Ancient Void – which *owned* Soneillon – might be less accommodating than Oronthon in that regard. He stared at the Eye of Cheshne, which brooded on the horizon, pregnant with power.

As they waited, Tahl regarded the *Ahma* carefully. The saint's divinations had revealed that, in all likelihood, Yeshe would now move to embody the demoness within a day. Eadric had wavered, as though he were waiting for some other sign; none had been forthcoming. Furthermore, rumour of demonic depredations in the East had agitated Eadric's captains: all were restless, waiting for the *Ahma* to act.

Finally, Nwm appeared, sprouting upwards from the ground. He was shaky and haggard.

"You look awful," Eadric observed. "I take it you were successful?"

"Thank-you," Nwm replied drily. "And yes. We have made a beginning. How is your current moral quandary progressing?"

"Very nicely, thank-you." Eadric sat unceremoniously in his armor. "Everything is messed up, Nwm.

There are too many overlapping paradigms; things are becoming confusing."

"And the massacre at Thond?"

"A miserable reality."

"I sympathize," Nwm said earnestly. "Being an agent of retribution carries a certain weight with it. There was no intervention by the Hierophants?"

"If there had been, it might have allayed some of my reservations. I think the Cheshnite leadership would rather have me wallow in remorse."

"And do you?"

"I have no inkling to indulge my conscience: we are at war. Things are about to get much worse."

"Apparently you have a bright mood upon you. What of the demoness?"

"I see no future in such a liaison," Eadric said drily.

"A divorce, then?" Nwm inquired.

"Yes. And I foresee acrimony."

"I will be tactful," Nwm smiled. "So. Yeshe gets Soneillon. Is that wise?"

Eadric looked desperate. "Nwm! I thought you opposed her revival?"

"And so I do. I would oppose Yeshe's efforts no less than I would yours. She appears driven."

"The memory of the cascade at Khu propels her," Eadric explained. "In her mind, it was the greatest blasphemy which could have been visited upon the holiest of sites."

"Feeling sympathetic?"

"Hardly. I would still prefer her dead."

"Then you will be relieved to hear that I have a solution," Nwm said. "Mostin has expressed an interest in conjuring your demoness; he was reluctant to divulge his agenda precisely."

Eadric looked suspicious. "He said nothing to me earlier."

"You've spoken?"

Eadric nodded dumbly.

"Something is wrong?"

"He passed a message to me, from an 'interested party:' *Remember what the Sela said, regarding your place in the downfall of Orthodoxy.*'

"That is all?" Nwm was baffled.

"It is sufficient. I understand its context well enough." Eadric swallowed.

"And the 'interested party?'"

The *Ahma* stared at the Preceptor, and raised his eyebrows.

"Oh." Nwm breathed. "Sh*t."

"Verily," Eadric agreed.

"Does Mostin know who it was?"

"I don't think so. And I'd prefer that it remain between you and I for now. I also find it interesting to

note that after even the briefest exchange with said entity, during which no mention of fiendish allies was even mentioned, Mostin suddenly seems willing to renounce his Empyrean contract. In addition to the Exalted, he has conjured *thirty* celestials in two days, Nwm."

"Mostin is playing his hand," Nwm nodded.

"Except he keeps all his cards hidden."

Nwm laughed. "Whichever trumpet Mostin hears, it is not yours, Ed. Is that all?"

Eadric laughed bitterly. "No indeed. Get some rest, Nwm. You're going to need it. Tomorrow, we hunt demons."

"What kind?"

"The Pazuzu kind."

"Where?" The Preceptor groaned.

"In Trempa and Ardan."

"A strangely marginal choice for assault."

"Yes and no," the *Ahma* sighed. "It is also the spiritual homeland of *Saizhan*. Bring whatever allies you can, Nwm. I mean *anybody*. We need heavy firepower."

"Is there a plan?"

"We find him. The Saints use their power, so he can't slip away. I take him down."

"Is there a better plan?"

"Only if you can *scry* him. He is emanating a massive *nondetection* and we only know his general

whereabouts."

"How hard can it be to locate a rampaging horde of demons?"

"More of a *troupe* than a *horde*, Nwm. And harder than you might think. He's slippery, this one. And he's in no rush. He's having fun at the moment. He's also beating us over the head with the arcane Injunction. His presence is a religious matter."

"Is it?" Nwm asked. "Then hand out the acorns. You will all assist me in a spell."

**

Temenun pondered.

In Zelatar, the eruption continued uninterrupted, and Ancient Darkness consumed Azzagrat. Prince Orcus quickly retreated what remained of his armies, fortified himself against conjurations by the Hierophants at Jashat, and gave thought to the tide of unbeing which might reach him in half a millennium. Companies of Death Knights – together with squads of kelvezu – were dispatched to a hundred likely worlds in search of Graz'zt.

Pazuzu – now joined by vrocks, succubi and flocks of fiendish corvids – razed villages on the shores of lakes in the Wyrish hinterland, crucifying the inhabitants for his amusement; balors were busy tearing down Urgic monasteries.

Yeshe was preparing to bind the first chthonic, *Gu-Kaama*: the apple of Cheshne's eye; Soneillon, Queen of Throile. She had intimated that the monster Arhuz would follow. The Binder cursed silently as Prahar – who had struck a deal with the *Anantam* – made use of the circle she had erected to enslave several middle-ranking demomic magnates in quick succession, including Dhenu, a bull-faced fierce protector. Three more pavillions had been raised. The *ugras* had been dispatched defensively in the neighbourhood of the Temple and reinforced with squadrons of goristros and succubi. Prahar's unlikely choice to play a more cautious game had won him the backing of three cabals of blood-magi who were

otherwise subject to the Wyrish Injunction.

Idyam, Rishih and Choach courted the *Kesha-Dirghaa* – theurges who formed the bulk of the ritual pool – but whose activities had been curtailed by Gihaahia. The compound – impregnable as it was – had been further garrisoned with dozens of glabrezu. Choach had invoked massive *screens* over subject Thalassine cities, and called a general mobilization of magically compelled allies. Idyam surrounded himself with malign spirits.

Sibud – whose tools extended beyond magic – had unleashed a ferocious tide of vampirism upon Jashat and Lea which threatened to consume the cities, and was rapidly spreading to the surrounding countryside. The creatures sired by Sibud were bestial and voracious. Temenun also knew that the vampire was wooing key spellcasters to aid him in his *storm of blood*.

Naatha made envoys to unaligned powers to seduce or coerce them, and it was known that she had spoken with several Wyrish mages. It was also rumoured that she had fled from Mulissu's wrath when attempting to gain access to Fumaril. Rimilin, she shunned, for fear of being *dominated*.

Jahi plotted in the dark. Dhatri prepared for her procession.

**

Princes, attend me. Mostin issued the command again. Part of him regretted that it was already the final time; a far larger part was relieved that he would no longer be required to deal with their noisome feathers and light.

"Gather the lesser devas," Mostin instructed, shielding his eyes with his appendage. "You will aid the *Ahma* in his efforts: seek out demons on Wyre's periphery – *outside* of the circumscribed area, in case I need to remind you – and eliminate them. When the threat is expunged from Ardan, set a watch upon the monastery at Esoc. Six devas and an archon should be sufficient.

"Take your remaining minions, and harry the demons in the vicinity of the Cheshnite temple at Jashat.

Destroy as many as you can, but do not attempt to invest the main compound. You may continue this activity intermittently for the remaining duration of our compact; otherwise, resume your patrols of Wyre's borders. I leave the exact details to you."

"Mostin," Irel-Who-Smites spoke, fixing the Alienist with his gaze. "These are not the *Ahma*'s explicit instructoins."

"Not exactly," Mostin admitted. "But I must be permitted a certain amount of leeway in interpreting his wishes. My celestial alliance will soon end, and this will be the last command I will give you; you are still bound to carry it out."

"I must strongly advise against the conjuration of fiends," Oraios said sternly.

"That is because you don't have all of the information," Mostin gave an insane grin. "Thank-you, gentlemen. That is all. Enjoy your eternity, and I will enjoy mine."

*

It was utterly dark in the summoning room, and the smell of incense lingered in the air. Mostin was intimately conscious of his surroundings, his augmented perception penetrating the blackness around him. Nearby, there was a void within a void.

"Thank-you for the courtesy of manifesting as yourself," Mostin said drily. He was weary: the effort of invoking a *metagnostic inquiry* followed by a *wish* and a *superb planar binding* had left him dizzy.

A girl appeared. "Do not presume," Soneillon said. "Is this how the *Ahma* has chosen to deal with the situation?"

"I want *Pharamne's urn*, Soneillon. You are its former mistress. You have information."

Soneillon raised an eyebrow. "So I have something you want? That makes for an altogether more interesting discussion."

Mostin sighed.

"I would prefer a more relaxed environment," Soneillon suggested.

"I do not feel my *Goetic Dunce* hat on my head."

"This circle won't hold me for more than a day, Mostin."

"I pray that this doesn't take that long," Mostin groaned.

"I would overwhelm you in a contest of magic," Soneillon smiled. "I sense your reservoir is almost depleted."

Mostin stared at her, "Maybe," he finally said. "Although I doubt it. And I think you might be reluctant to risk being unmade again. I believe I have the advantage."

"*Unmade*? Mostin, you have much to learn regarding the Truth."

"I am less interested in the truth, than the urn," Mostin was unfazed. "How far did your control over it extend?"

"Are we bargaining now? Good. I will answer that question if you answer mine."

Mostin gave a shrug. "Very well."

"The demiplanes which abut Throile were made with the urn. With it, I have drained oceans. Levelled mountain ranges. Generated worlds."

"That sounds delightful," Mostin nodded. "Did your cabal participate in your efforts to control the urn?"

"Why must you always be so functional, Mostin? Pragmatic. In any event, it is my turn to pose a

question. You have been consorting with Seraphim: I smell it. The stakes are higher than I suspected. Which demons have the immortals bound already, Mostin?"

"Pazuzu. Alrunes. Baphomet. Munkir. A dozen balors. Many more."

"Do you plan to conjure Graz'zt?"

"I believe it is my turn," Mostin gave a ghastly grin. "I will rephrase my last question: which of your cabal members were party to your use of the urn?"

"If I agree to answer, you must issue a *sending* for me immediately."

"That would depend upon to whom it should be delivered," Mostin said carefully, "and the exact wording of the message."

"To Chaya. The message is this: *This is Mostin the Metagnostic. I have a message from Soneillon: Prepare for my return.*"

Mostin's eyes widened. "You are optimistic regarding the outcome of our exchange then?"

"I'm confident I'll walk out of this summoning room," Soneillon said lightly. "Do you agree to communicate this message?"

Mostin considered. "I agree to your stipulation, on the condition that I may pose an additional question."

Soneillon sighed. "Fine. The names are: Adyell, Helitihai, Orychne, Chaya, Lehurze; the principal members only."

"Thank-you. That wasn't so hard, was it? How quickly could you generate a demiplane – by which I mean how soon did it reach its full extent – and to what degree did you deplete your collective psychic resources?"

"I perceive at least two questions, Mostin. Which would you like me to answer?"

Mostin scowled. "The latter is more germane."

"Each of my handmaidens was emptied of power; I myself suffered no such debilitating effects."

Implicit in the answer was the reminder: *I am chthonic. You would do well to remember it.*

Mostin paused to consider, swiftly making a series of magical calculations in his mind.

"The *sending*, Mostin?" Soneillon raised an eyebrow.

Grudgingly, Mostin retrieved his stone and issued the message.

"What are you planning, Mostin?"

"Now *that* information would involve a year of servitude."

Soneillon smiled innocently. "Let me reverse the question. What is a year of my submission to you worth?"

Mostin gawked. "You cannot be serious."

"I am deadly serious, Mostin. What is access to my reservoir worth to you?"

Mostin rocked back and forth on his heels. "A lot," he finally conceded. *Especially if it means I can snub Rimilin.* "What do you want?"

"Give me Graz'zt, Mostin. Of all creatures which hate him, I despise him the most."

Mostin invoked a *moment of prescience*.

"You are also anxious to avoid a compact with Yeshe," the Alienist observed drily, "whose terms might be more demanding than mine. No, Soneillon. I think that to have Prince Graz'zt delivered as a gift – to

do with as one will – that is worth more than a year of thralldom to me."

"And to Rimilin? What might my submission be worth to him?" Soneillon asked pointedly.

"Might I remind you that it is *my* thaumaturgic circle which holds you, not Rimilin's?"

Soneillon stretched lazily. "You could secure my confinement, Mostin. You *could* invest a great deal of energy in binding me to your will. It is my guess that you don't *want* to, however, as your limited resources are better deployed elsewhere."

"True. But I am stubborn, and I will not be foiled; even against my better judgment I would coerce you, just to make the point. Give me one year of service, and freely share all knowledge that you have of the *urn*. Give me names of the chthonics. Give me your reservoir. And I will deliver Graz'zt to you within a week."

"Out of generosity, and for aesthetic reasons, I will extend the bargain to a year and a day, Mostin. But I will consider the pact to have begun when he is mine."

"Which leaves us an uncomfortable honor period," Mostin scowled. "Might I suggest a less demanding contract to tide us over, until the main agreement takes effect?"

"State your terms," Soneillon breathed.

"You will protect me with your *ecstasy of negation*. You will aid me in retrieving Murmuur's tower from Afqithan."

"These are no small tasks, Mostin..."

"I will give you Adyell."

Soneillon smiled graciously. "Thank-you, Mostin. Adyell will be a useful asset."

"You would exact no vengeance?" Mostin seemed surprised.

"No, Mostin. I can spare none."

**

In Jashat, Yeshe fumed. The ritual had been ineffective, despite her prognostications to the contrary. Fate had shifted course whimsically. She stormed from the circle, and confronted Temenun in the sanctum.

"I am thwarted. Did you foresee this?" She barked the question at him.

"No," Temenun purred.

"Do you have an explanation?"

"Our enemy has superior prolepsis." The Tiger remained calm.

"Mostin." Yeshe said. "Sibud must annihilate him."

"Feel free to argue that point with your Brother," Temenun replied. "My focus lies elsewhere. Yeshe, I will demonstrate the art of binding to you."

*

Yeshe watched from her tower and chewed her lip thoughtfully.

Below in the courtyard, within the circle and near it, demons were gathered. In four hours, Temenun had conjured twenty mariliths. Robed in purple and black and bearing his iron coronet upon his brow, he had foregone the usual niceties of compacting the demons, and simply *dominated* them all. Only now, he tapped his reservoir and spoke a powerful summons.

A void which burned – one of the kin of Carasch – erupted onto the edge of being. It emanated terrible power. Seconds later, another manifested.

Yeshe's eyes narrowed. Temenun knew primeval magic, and remembered names forgotten by all others.

He raised his hand and wove a dream rapidly. Abruptly, the courtyard was empty.

Yeshe paced briefly, before descending into the deep caverns below the compound. Here most of the Cheshnite forces were marshalling: demons conjured by the favored souls of the *Naganam*; desert-dwelling spirits of ill temper; companies of half-giants in enamelled armor, drawn through *teleportation circles* from the jungles of Utter Shûth.

Within an unlit chapel filled with death, Yeshe approached Visuit, who sat in meditation amongst the corpses.

Yeshe bowed. "The Tiger-who-Waits has pounced. He has had some prescience, which he has not shared."

"The Mouthpiece has not approached me," Visuit growled.

"Leave Anumid to me," Yeshe replied. "You'll get your war by nightfall."

*

In the early morning – after the *Ahma* and his party had passed through a tree into Trempa – Temenun struck the Wyrish encampment. While he himself remained in Dream, the Tiger's demons arrived a furlong distant from the *Sela's* tent.

A barrage of dispelling magic followed from the chthonics; zones of *forbiddance* crumpled. *Unholy auras* flickered on, and *blade barriers* ripped through unwary Temple troops.

As Urqual sat in *Saizhan*, observing thought pass through Mind, he was aware that nearby Templars moved; his empty eyes followed them as though he watched them.

There was a sound like a roaring hurricane.

And death.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on Nov 17, 2008

Demonstrating the Prophetic Advantage

An hour before dawn, Nwm roused Eadric from prayer.

"Gather your Saints," he told him.

The air was chill. Esquires of the temple clad the *Ahma* in his armour and girt him with his sword. Adepts invoked protective magicks upon him.

The Saints assembled. The Preceptor instructed them all in a brief rite, and gathered their energy into him, staggering from its frequency. So bright. So unearthly. So much of it. It spilled out of him, incinerating trees in the vicinity and transporting their essence to the Blessed Plain.

Nwm discarnated and soared upwards on a torrent of light, all the while gazing down upon Wyre. Behind him, the Sun hung amid the Void. Warm. Beckoning. He turned to face it. It illuminated billions of devas.

Nwm swallowed.

He turned back, and his sight ranged across Trempa, quickly locating the disturbance which he knew to be Pazuzu and his troupe; violent perturbations in the otherwise harmonious whole. He brushed aside the Prince's screen and pinpointed him exactly.

Nwm rematerialized. "I have him. I can open a tree nearby."

Eadric nodded. "Then please do. But not *too* near. I'd rather not be thrown straight into combat."

Quickly, they made their preparations.

Tahl issued a *sending*, and Eadric summoned Ortwine. A brief remote conversation with Mostin ensued.

[Eadric]: We're preparing to strike Pazuzu.

[Mostin]: I have instructed the Episemes to purge demons outside of Wyre, but I was otherwise less than specific.

[Eadric]: They can be recalled if a particular task awaits them.

[Mostin]: Unfortunately not. I am investigating other avenues.

[Eadric]: Ah. Yes. Your glorious return to Goetia.

[Mostin]: The potential of that avenue is also exhausted.

[Eadric]: Your allegiances are more fleeting than those of Ortwine!

[Mostin]: But far more effective. I am returning to Afqithan in order to secure my new tower.

[Eadric]: You have penetrated its mysteries, then?

[Mostin]: The tower is indestructible, impervious to *scrying* and astral attack, may *plane shift* at the whim of the one who controls it, and may spin a *gate* to each and every Hell. It is opened by a password known to but a handful of devils. Its exterior demonstrates an extreme mutability of appearance, at the owner's discretion. Its interior is extradimensional and opulent. One has to admire the antique Infernal aesthetic.

[Eadric]: And your manse?

[Mostin]: I must have a summer retreat!

[Eadric]: You have acquired the passwords?

[Mostin]: From the devil Sekabin. And knowledge of the sigils to open the *gates*. I didn't even need to resort to *torment*; he seemed quite willing to impart the information. I imagine his superiors simply wish to see the tower active again; it is inert in Afqithan. I *dismissed* him forthwith; I have no desire for further enmity with Hell.

[Eadric]: Fear not. I'm sure Dis has forgiven you.

[Mostin]: You are unusually droll today.

[Eadric]: The Adversary is moving, Mostin. He is a player you cannot outclass. Be wary. How did he appear to you?

[Mostin]: !

[Eadric]: Well?

[Mostin]: Hmph. So that was he. Enigmatic. A tanned youth, with unruly black curls. Lean of frame. Suave, but somewhat understated. For Ego Incarnate, he seemed very restrained. My initial impressions were largely favorable.

[Eadric]: !?

[Mostin]: He was less overbearing than certain celestials of my recent acquaintance.

[Eadric]: And as *Evil* Incarnate?

[Mostin]: That question has no meaning. Our definitions of Evil are not altogether congruent in this

regard. He is no mere *devil*, Eadric. He is the *Adversary*. His plan is hidden to all but himself and your glowing despot, of whom he is a function in any case: $\text{[display = complex, meaningless formula]}$.

[Eadric]: Ahh.

[Mostin]: I do not expect you to understand the proof.

[Eadric]: That is fortunate.

[Mostin]: These minor infinities are of no particular concern to me, in any case.

[Eadric]: What else?

[Mostin]: I will use Soneillon's reservoir to allow me to *bind* Graz'zt in three days. Other mages have expressed an interest in aiding me.

[Eadric]: This egomaniacal nonsense again?

[Mostin]: Apparently my taste for vendetta runs deeper than yours, *Ahma*. He has wounded me deep, more than once. I am a wizard with a reputation to maintain: I do not forget a slight.

[Eadric]: Touché, Mostin. That I cannot deny you.

Abruptly, Ortwine issued from a shadowy portal. She seemed unusually pensive.

"Is the happy band ready?" Mesikammi asked with apparent innocence. Behind her there was a huge confusion of Temple troops; they were parting to allow the progress of five enormous golden boars. The ground shook as they approached.

Yet more gods, Ortwine observed silently.

**

Two Saints, four Talions, eleven Penitents, Mesikammi, five boars, Ortwine, and Nwm accompanied Eadric in his attack upon Pazuzu and his troupe. Many of the templar grandees – past and present – were riding celestial griffons of prodigious size. Ortwine *veiled* them all. Transformed into an unkindness of ravens, their approach was unnoticed; appearing to hug the ground, they passed below the mobs of fiendish crows which wheeled in the sky over Pazuzu's train. The *Ahma* felt distinctly uneasy at the sidhe's burgeoning power.

They descended on the demons, who were busy levelling a quaint Trempan village and visiting grotesque horrors upon its inhabitants. Nearby, a large group of *ushabam* conjurers gathered. Some were making sacrifices; some were conjuring more demons; some raved, or experienced religious ecstasies.

Nwm evoked a powerful wind which suddenly propelled them toward the demon prince's position; as they plunged, one of the balors noted them with its *true seeing* and gave telepathic warning. Saint Tahl, Tuan Muat and Moda the Exorcist simultaneously dropped *dimensional locks* centered on Pazuzu.

Ortwine's glamour evaporated, and the sidhe pounced, *vorpal* sword in hand. *Heedless* was screeching in telepathic jubilation as it bit home; the *Ahma* raised *Lukarn* and smote Pazuzu with all his power. Ichor sprayed, and the demon reeled. Talions and penitents descended on balors and nalfeshnees. Five-ton boars trampled through vrockes like they were grass.

Ortwine moved faster than thought and was already about the demon prince again, effortlessly slicing in a perfectly executed pattern.

[Mostin]: I guess you are engaging Pazuzu's force?

[Eadric]: This may not be the best time, Mostin.

The *dimensional locks* hadn't contained the arch-fiend. The Prince of the Lower Aerial Kingdoms dilated time, vanished, instantly reappeared a quarter of a mile above, and unleashed a tempest of eldritch power centered on the *Ahma*; a purple lightning penetrated everything. Griffons, vrockes, and

Penitents perished. Eadric was scarred and blasted. Otwine somehow avoided the storm.

The few remaining vrocks launched themselves into the air. Mesikammi whistled. The boars – smoking but otherwise unfazed by the violet discharge – turned towards the gathered thaumaturges, and charged.

[Mostin]: Nonsense. A little multitasking is no great ordeal. Your strike is premature. You...

[Eadric]: *Later*, Mostin.

Nwm struck Pazuzu with a peal of thunder accompanied by an explosion of green fire.

Two more *gates* opened; two more balors manifested. Several of the *ushabam* were already taking to flight, speaking *words of recall*.

Eadric groaned. This had to stop. He leapt forward thirty yards and struck, instantly felling one the demons; the explosion flung him backwards and burned him through his armour.

[Mostin] (Frustrated): I can't see what's going on! What's happening?

[Eadric] (Resigned): I hate it when they blow up. These priests must be eliminated before the numbers of demons can be swollen further. Where are you, anyway?

[Mostin]: At home. Preparing to depart. I have been monitoring the activities of celestials; they have destroyed three balors. Unfortunately, those remaining have fled to join Pazuzu.

[Eadric]: I had noticed.

Two armored balors now assailed Saint Tahl the Incorruptible. He weathered their blows and pronounced a *dictum*, instantly banishing one of them to the Abyss. The other, uncowed, uttered *blasphemy* in retort. Tahl was unscathed, but two of the Penitents combusted and vanished.

Outside of the *dimensional lock*, two more *gates* opened; two more balors appeared. The boars thundered into the remaining *ushabam*, quickly trampling them to death.

Five balors and Pazuzu now remained.

Ortwine reappraised the situation in an instant. She turned her mind and quickly *dominated* the demon closest to Eadric; two of the others, she knew already, were protected by *mind blanking rings*. Straightaway, she instructed it to *teleport* and attack Pazuzu.

Pazuzu, climbing rapidly beyond range, issued a thin wail which made the *Ahma's* blood curdle. Space began to bubble and warp in the demon prince's vicinity. In response, Mesikammi began to cast another spell.

Eadric bounded forwards again, this time pronouncing a *holy word*, simultaneously expelling and obliterating the two most recently arrived demons. Two more *holy words*, spoken by Tahl and Moda, rang across the wreck of the village. The demons were being driven away.

Nwm, considering whether to unleash a terrible necromancy upon Pazuzu, suddenly received a communication from Daunton the Diviner.

He paused, made a swift judgment, stepped into a tree, and vanished.

Eadric's jaw dropped.

[Mostin]: What now?

[Eadric]: If you happen across Nwm, send him in this direction.

But the Preceptor's appraisal of the situation had been accurate; the two remaining demons vanished. Pazuzu also elected to slip away, but not before an immense, grizzled balor had appeared below him.

Will they never stop, the *Ahma* was exasperated. He *healed* himself, steeled himself, and prepared for the onrush.

A tide of *blasphemy* washed over him, leaving him momentarily senseless; his wards protected him.

Ortwine flung the *dominated* demon against the newcomer, and with a battered Rede, prosecuted a well-coordinated aerial attack at speed.

An air monolith, conjured by Mesikammi, encompassed the balor and forced it to the ground. Its whip and blade flailed ineffectively, as the boars thundered into it. Their tusks ripped it open; there was another explosion; their hooves trampled its remains into the steaming mire of ichor.

Eadric glanced around: smoke; entrails; blood. Six penitents and two Talions – including Rede, caught in the final explosion – had fallen. He, Tahl, Moda, Tarpion and Tuan Muat were blasted in varying degrees. Ortwine was largely unscathed; Mesikammi, descending from the sky had escaped all injury.

The *Ahma* walked to the mangled wreck of Rede's corpse, removed a gauntlet, and touched the erstwhile Grand Master upon the forehead, instantly *resurrecting* him. Rede arose grimly.

You don't get off that easily, Eadric thought. The others might be returned at a later time, if he needed them. Nervously, he looked toward the shamaness. The elemental hung in the sky above her; ancient boar-spirits attended her.

Abyssal slime evaporated as the area was *hallowed* by Saint Moda. Ortwine moved purposefully through the remains of the fallen, looking for items to plunder.

Eadric approached the nearest beast: nine feet at the shoulder and covered with a fur which glistened like gold. Whatever wounds it had received, they had already healed.

He abased himself. "Thank-you."

Mesikammi clapped. "Yes. Good. Very respectful. Three miracles I had to work to wake them. The Wyrish Royal House are an ancient lineage; they should look more to their roots."

The beast snorted.

**

The camp was in chaos.

The chthonics uttered *blasphemies* which caused even the most devout to reel in shock, and obliterated less robust souls. Mariliths tore into squadrons of Temple troops who were hastily attempting to interpose themselves between the fiends and the most direct line to the *Sela's* tent.

Saint Kustus – who had been slain by demons some two hundred years previously – took stock and rapidly gauged the level of the threat.

Those. The *Ahma* had warned him about them.

The attack was well-timed, as only minutes before the *Ahma* had departed with many of the more potent warriors within the Temple ranks. Kustus knew that it was a direct probe, to make a practical test of the defenses around the *Sela* and to demonstrate a prophetic advantage. Whoever had launched the attack had avoided the Aethers altogether and had out-dreamed the planetars which had been set to intercept any oneiric assault.

Still, thirty-six concentric rings of *forbiddance* surrounded the *Sela's* tabernacle and a full celestial company was waiting in proximity; the Saints and the adepts had not been idle, and had covenanted with many devas within the host. A huge net of *blasting glyphs* and *symbols* encompassed the camp.

Kustus immediately summoned his celestial destrier and charged into the fray.

Closer to the impact point, Wurz was inciting New Temple zealots into a frenzy. Holy fire surrounded them. Saint Anaqiss the Apostate engaged the demons with his mace, grown to twice his height and wearing a *crown of glory*.

As Brey *wind-walked* beyond the zone of *forbiddance*, half of the celestials moved in ethereal tandem with him.

"*Manifest*," he commanded. Sixty devas appeared.

"Bring down the chthonics," he instructed them.

**

Daunton stood on the balcony of his suite at Prince Tagur's fortified palace at Gibilrazen, and gazed skywards. He had remained silent for days. His divinations preoccupied him, and he avoided any situation which might compromise his position with regard to the Injunction: that meant shunning anyone with a political interest, and that entailed *everyone* at present.

Clouds were beginning to gather. Greys and ochres; beyond lay hints of vermillion. A wind was rising.

Unnatural, he knew immediately. Daunton's worst fear gripped him, and he invoked *prescience*. His magical perceptions soared.

It was the *storm of blood*.

What to do? His mind reached out.

Nwm: Daunton. The storm of blood is coming.

How long?

Not long.

*Sh*t. Your timing couldn't be worse.*

Or Sibud's better.

Daunton's stomach turned as he watched the quickening clouds. He felt old and weary; the twists and turns of the world – and the powers which were now manifesting – were beyond his capacity to anticipate, much less deal with. He leaned heavily on his staff for a moment, and turned to reenter his

apartments.

She was standing directly behind him, silent, and their eyes met with barely eighteen inches between them. Her crimson hair stirred in the breeze and brushed his face, the scent of imminent death filled his nostrils.

He froze and tried to speak, but no sound issued from his mouth. No magic lay on him, but terror overcame him.

The Enforcer smiled. She seemed almost benign; a fact which troubled the arch-mage more than her usual overt malice.

"I have committed no violation," Dauntun finally said, shaking. "But I need to know where my limits lie. Nwm will come here soon; may I aid him?"

"You are being assailed," Gihaahia said in a matter-of-fact way. "You may take reasonable precautions to counteract the threat. But you lack the power to foil this spell."

She reached out towards him, and Dauton barely resisted the urge to vomit and cower.

The Infernal touched his forehead with a burning palm, and the diviner's mind twisted as though suddenly caught in a vice. Reality altered. One of his highest valences vanished and was immediately replaced by a hitherto unknown configuration.

"I am the Claviger also," the Enforcer breathed. "I am entrusted with the articles, and the protection of the Wyrish Collegium. You are its president; demonstrate your authority."

She vanished.

Dauton, still shaking, examined the dweomer. Curiously, the language was utterly familiar to him, as though he himself might have contrived it. He found himself wondering if it had somehow been appropriated from a future iteration of himself.

With care and effort, he spoke the words and gestured, for the first time invoking *Daunton's Instant Convocation*.

Within moments, eleven other mages – including Jalael, Waide and Tozinak – stood in close proximity to him. As many had declined the invitation, and neither Mostin nor Rimilin had answered.

The Hag scowled. "Explain yourself, Daunton."

"It would seem I have been empowered," Daunton observed. "Note the clouds above."

Tozinak, manifesting as an ugly mannikin, looked upwards at the sky and wailed.

Creq looked aghast. "Do you have some means to counteract this Daunton, or did you simply bring us all here to die?"

Nwm the Preceptor emerged from an ornamental lime tree in the courtyard below, and leaped up onto the balcony.

"We have a minute yet," he sighed in relief. "Open your reservoirs to me."

A chorus of objections began.

"*All of you!*" Nwm screeched.

For a second time that same day, Nwm channeled the power of magic alien to his understanding, and it caused him discomfort. His sensitivity to such things, he noted wryly as he wrought the spell, had increased substantially.

Voices mumbled in his head. Formulae floated past his vision, distracting him.

He focussed, and his perception became titanic; coterminous with the extent of the storm, which writhed in his conscious mind like an ungraspable idea.

He caught it, stilled it, snuffed it out. There was no struggle.

Suddenly, the sky was clear. The balcony was bathed in warm sunlight.

"I am spent," Nwm muttered.

The wizards were busy congratulating themselves on their ingenuity.

**

Mostin ignored Dauton's appeal; his prescience had already alerted him to the outcome.

Now he stood on his porch, dressed for travel. His higher valences were crammed with powerful spells which jostled with one another for space. His intellect was amplified to an improbable size. He had entrusted a number of scrolls to Orolde and Mei, in the event that the manse was attacked in his absence. Sho – in the company of several other wizards of dubious repute – had entrenched herself in the astral hold, which she had magically fortified.

"Remove the *comfortable retreat* to another location," Mostin intoned. "Take it deep into Nizkur forest, but beyond the bounds of the Injunction. Employ your best obfuscatory magicks; always have a *teleport* on hand: these are the golden rules of survival. Do not interfere with the *symbols of insanity*. Refrain from thaumaturgies beyond your certain ability to control.

"Be wary of the local feys, they are ancient and cunning; especially the trolls. Pay no heed to Hlioth's bluster if confronted with it; she is not the only witch living in Nizkur, merely the loudest. Hew no living wood. I will contact you in due course."

Mostin made a final adjustment to his hat and examined his plans for flaws. In dealing with Soneillon, the Alienist had protected himself as best he could from the Arcane Injunction. He made no formal compact; she would perform specific services only when conjured. As a dreamer, or a chthonic, or both, he already knew that she could slip under the Celestial Interdict and manifest freely within the

World of Men. A measure of trust was required in their arrangement: Soneillon's desire to exact pain upon Graz'zt was the glue which bound it. The alternative – making a Goetic pact with a clause which required that Soneillon did not trespass within Wyre – seemed even more dubious to the Alienist, as culpability might be his were she to violate it.

He had conjured the devil Sekabin and the succubus Adyell – Soneillon's rebellious lieutenant – with *superior planar bindings*. Sekabin, he interrogated. Adyell, he released immediately from his service, and delivered to the demon queen. Soneillon quickly subdued her former protégé to her will, and returned her to Throile as her agent. Intelligence began to flow to Mostin regarding the current state of demonic politics.

Now she corporeated on the porch of the manse, appearing as a slender girl dressed in austere black; her child-like face conveyed gravity and seriousness.

Mostin considered the strategy of her façade.

"Carasch has already ascended to the Plain of Infinite Portals," Soneillon smiled. "He is close now. Two steps away. Blackness sweeps through the upper Abyss, but the Ice Waste remains unmolested. Curious, given the fact that most of Azzagrat's nobility have chosen exile there."

"The speed of this phenomenon is disturbing."

"Graz'zt has uncapped his *Gate Hall*."

"Is that all?"

"Temenun struck the Oronthonist command and retreated to Dream," Soneillon replied. "He has exhausted himself and must rest; he is vulnerable to the other immortals until he regains his strength. He will hide for a while. He is wise. "

Mostin sighed and shrugged. There was nothing he could do about it.

Augmented by her *ecstasy of negation*, the Alienist *plane shifted* with Soneillon to Afqithan.

**

Yeshe – warned of Mostin's intentions through a dark haruspicy performed on a living subject – had acted immediately, and with the recklessness she often occasioned to display at such critical junctures.

She *gated* the *ugra* called Angula.

The Fierce Protector condescended to appear, armor-clad and bearing a shield of unblazoned darkness. His eyes were slits of green fire; his visage was beautiful, but upon it aeons of cruelty were etched. He regarded her coolly. Yeshe looked up at him, undaunted.

"Supplication is customary, Binder," Angula smiled, "If I am to remain unbound." He drew his brand, and placed it at Yeshe's neck. Her skin smoked as the acid from the blade burned her.

"I require nothing." Yeshe maintained a steady gaze. "You may do as you will. I will conjure others, if you require it."

Angula scowled. She was ancient and potent, this one; coercion would not be possible. Still, a little humility might become her.

Yeshe recognized his mood, and gave a nod which might be interpreted as either cursory or deferential.

Angula recited a long list of names, each with many syllables. "First bring me the steed *Tandava*. We will consider all debts payed."

Yeshe opened another *gate*, through which a monstrous cauchemar careened.

"One of the Wyrish Wizards is preparing a cabal to *bind* you," Yeshe said drily. "Baramh and Dhenu are already abroad. The gates of the Temple open at midnight, and Dhatri's procession begins: Anumid the Mouthpiece has ordained it. Will you ride with Visuit?"

Angula mounted Tandava and smiled wickedly. "Perhaps, for a while."

**

That should have been tigresses, Prince Tagur mused as he attempted to rally the Household Knights of Morne.

He had no idea how many there were altogether. The terror visited on those within the palace in the last hour had been unrelenting; appearing from the shadows, they slew and vanished, and their butchery seemed utterly indiscriminate. Their strike was not pre-emptive; they acted in retaliation to one of their own being discovered. An error on their part, or a betrayal.

Now, in a small banquet chamber of the great castle, one Naztharune confronted sixty heavily armed Wyrish aristocrats, including knights of renown from the king's hearthguard. She moved with incredible speed; appearing, slitting a throat, and vanishing again. The tigress toyed with them masterfully, delighting in the slaughter; twice, she moved past Tagur and brushed his cheek before gutting one who stood close to him. His rapier had flashed out, but she was too fast.

Tagur hurled a glass vial upon the marble floor, and brilliant daylight illuminated the hall.

For a split second, she was revealed: a sleek black hunting cat, to which tendrils of shadowy mist clung.

She hissed and became *invisible*. For a while, matters worsened considerably.

Finally, somehow, they grappled her and pinned her down. Six burly knights could barely contain her slippery contortions.

She purred. "I am resigned to my death; are you to yours?"

Tagur squinted. A stiffening breeze outside had suddenly grown strong. Shutters strained, broke, and

wind rushed in. A great agony ensued.

Prince Tagur screamed, as a fine mist of blood – his own – erupted from his skin and was carried away. Other screams rose all around him. Some cowered, but there was nowhere to hide, nowhere which granted surcease; the wind penetrated everything. Some fled from the chamber, the most robust running as far as the courtyard or the cellars before they succumbed.

The scene was repeated across all of Morne, and the countryside around. Every living creature within twenty miles died.

Sibud had invoked a second *storm of blood*.

**

Irel, who Smites, beat his wings with slow grace, resting in the skies above Jashat. At an altitude of five miles, the Aethers were quiet. He cast his celestial gaze in a great arc; his eyes penetrated everything.

Far to the north, horror was unfolding; he could do nothing to prevent it. Westward, locked in its shining bubble, Fumaril endured.

Below, closer to the north and east and south, a rotten plague of blackness centered on the great Temple of Cheshne stretched. Pyres smouldered and blood congealed. The southern cities sat beneath brooding clouds, their leaders *dominated* or possessed, their legions succumbing to vampirism, lycanthropy, or all manner of similar afflictions. Unquiet spirits prowled the land.

He *communed*.

[Irel]: I would still beseech intercession.

[Enitharmon]: And it would still be denied.

[Irel]: I beg of you, Marshal.

[Enitharmon]: And it is still denied. But your compassion magnifies. You are much loved. Know this always.

Irel signalled to the other celestials. They would start at the periphery. They wreathed themselves in holy fire and descended upon one of the more remote pavillions.

Before they could begin their assault, time slowed to a halt. Within arm's reach of Irel, a youth appeared in the sky. He munched casually on an apple. Seeming to notice the archon Prince Hemah, he gave a look of mock surprise.

"Why, you remind me so much of my own herald," he smiled. "So, before you proceed, I thought I'd offer you a different *perspective*. Relax. Don't feel rushed or compromised; we have as much time as we need for you to understand my central argument."

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on Nov 27, 2008

Reversal

Mostin stood with Queen Soneillon in the dusk of Afqithan. The demoness was subdued; whether reflecting on the site of her prior demise, or merely hatching some other plot, Mostin could not tell. Around them, Faerie balked at their presence; fortunately, the local sidhe-lord was occupied elsewhere.

Before them, Murmuur's tower reared; about it, a vast umbral drake slowly slithered, its eyes penetrating the shadows nearby. The Alienist – shrouded to all perception – eyed it suspiciously. The thing was an atavism; a corpse tearer imbued with darkness and evil. Against any but the most potent magicks, it was utterly immune.

Mostin had determined to keep it. He quickly *dominated* it and commanded it to assume a less imposing size; it became a seven-foot wyrmling which coiled itself neatly at the base of the tower.

Mostin approached, giving a sidelong glance to the linnorm, before looking at the structure's circumference.

Within the black outer face of the wall – smoother and stronger than cut diamond – faint trceries of dormant *gates* were visible, accessible to those who knew the correct combinations of syllables and glyphs. The tower rose hundreds of feet above him, and Mostin gazed in wonder; its perfect magical geometry, he knew, spoke of symmetries accurate to the width of an atom. This was its true shape, if such it possessed; Murmuur's tower was an artifact of deception, as well as war.

The Alienist ran his appendage over the outside at a height of five feet, and whispered powerful words; a small door appeared, between the portals to Maladomini and Caïna. It opened soundlessly; beyond, a great reception hall stretched. The walls were panelled with ebony; couches were festooned with plush silks and velvets. Great sconces burned ruddily. Mostin stopped momentarily.

"There may still be menial devils present," he said in a low voice. "They will not be hostile; they are bound to the service of the tower, and may not leave it. Please do not annihilate them."

They continued. Soneillon paused by the entrance: bound in a *temporal stasis*, likely as a decoration, a solar stood in a striking pose, its sword raised as though ready to decapitate a foe of similar stature.

Mostin shivered and walked forward into the centre of the space, and slowly they began their exploration. Chamber upon chamber. Balcony upon balcony. Hall upon hall. The décor ranged from the austere to the fantastic; Mostin found himself generally agreeable to the various modes and themes present. Occasionally, spined devils would flap past, occupied with sundry tasks.

After an hour, when he had charted over two hundred rooms, including parlours, offices, torture chambers, conservatories, drawing rooms and private apartments, Mostin finally found his way to the conference hall where the Infernal Duke Murmuur had once held court.

With his ego amplified by Soneillon's magic, Mostin sat on a carved ivory chair at the head of a long table. Murmuur's ducal throne, but also – in a manner of speaking – the helm by which the tower was steered.

He wrestled with it briefly, before asserting his will and attuning the tower's resonances to himself.

With a passing thought, Mostin translated the entire edifice and its contents to the borders of Wyre where his manse had once stood. He disguised it as a rustic, overgrown keep of the late Borchian period.

**

Ortwine brandished *Heedless* lazily. Ichor covered her; her eyes blazed with an old greed. In her left hand, she clutched a soft leather case containing a dozen black *candles of invocation*, won from the corpses of the *Ushabam* in the ruin of the Trempan village. Nearby, a *dominated* balor brooded like a black stormcloud, its skin intermittently flaring. Reverberations in the Green impinged upon the sidhe's mind; she tried to shake them off, but to no avail.

As he meditated amidst the carnage, Eadric felt a low vibration. An archon, He'el, appeared before him, wordlessly communicating.

[He'el]: Hail, *Ahma*. Much evil transpires. Three *storms of blood* have been unleashed. The Adversary is abroad. The *Sela* is assailed; Sercion supplicates you.

Eadric rose immediately, addressing Tahl and Moda. "Get to the encampment as fast as you can."

The *Ahma* invoked a *holy aura*, drew *Lukarn*, and retrieved from beneath his breastplate a necklace upon which clay images of various adepts hung. He crushed a tiny icon of Sercion between his thumb and forefinger.

Instantly, he was transported into a nightmare.

Heaps of Templars and devas lay about him, their faces contorted in expressions of agony; *blasphemies* had slain them. Thirty yards away loomed two great shapes of burning void, emanating death. Only the Saints and the doughtiest of the celestials could withstand them. Kustus, Wurz and Anaqiss endured a

storm of magic and blows. Sercion lay close by, stunned but still breathing.

Immediately aware of the presence of the *Ahma*, the chthonics turned their attention to him.

Eadric leapt at them.

**

Teppu scowled at the sky: clouds gathered above him. He waved his hand dismissively. A calm, clear morning reasserted itself.

Around him, Nizkur brooded and waited. The sprite looked into a pool of water, inspecting his appearance, and adjusted an eyebrow minutely. New tenants had taken up residence in an elm-grove situated in a deep vale some thirty miles away: a sprite and a *simulacrum* who made a peculiar couple. He would pay a visit and greet them formally, before Nodri – an ancient redcap who dwelled nearby – began to make mischief on them.

Teppu made his way through veils and glamours into a world which was both that and the other, and arrived before Nehael, who sat contemplating a leaf beneath the primeval Tree.

"Thank-you for dealing with the storm," she said. "I would've gotten to it."

"The vampire has made a statement of intent, even if he knew it was doomed to fail," Teppu observed. "I am planning on visiting Mostin's apprentices, who have commandeered an obscure nook of the forest. I've asked Hlioth not to threaten them."

Nehael raised an eyebrow. "Somehow I suspect your motives."

"They present an interesting conundrum," Teppu grinned. "One is a fey and the other lacks a persona entirely."

Nehael nodded. "Mostin was wise to secret them within Nizkur; there is nowhere now more secure."

"He takes great efforts to protect them."

"His actions are not always selfish," Nehael smiled. "Mostin possesses a peculiar loyalty."

"And you?" Teppu inquired. "Did your phyllomancy resolve your dilemma?"

"In a manner of speaking," Nehael sighed. "I feel the need to go and look at the Sun for a while."

"Mind your eyes," Teppu said wryly.

**

To an outside observer – one who could observe *invisible, mind blanked* celestials at any rate – the descent of Irel, Shokad, Hemah and Oraios and the two dozen devas who accompanied them would have made a magnificent spectacle.

Wings folded, plummeting, with swords drawn and auras blazing, their vibration was fundamentally *changed* at a height of around two hundred feet; a great fume of smoke arouse around them, ruddy fire kindled, and their aspect became terrible.

The conversation which had elapsed between the exalted celestials and the olive-skinned youth had taken the merest fraction of a second to transpire in the World of Men. In the demiplane which the Adversary had generated around the company, any length of time may have elapsed. Patient beyond all measure, perhaps the Nameless Fiend – after aeons of debate – finally swayed the four celestial princes with his relentless logic. Or he might, after a century, have become bored and simply coerced them to his irresistible Will.

In any event, before their attack began, the angels might be said to have become devils, although in fact their status was rather more ambiguous; as yet fully undescended, they retained all their beauty and

nobility. A dark choir, their evil was fresh as virgin snow. The Adversary endowed them, and wrought about them wards of surpassing potency.

But they were still pactbonded with Mostin, and three weeks had yet to pass before their agreement expired. Their descent continued, and they crashed like meteors through the apex of a ziggurat; an explosion of rubble accompanied their entrance into the chamber below. Irel raised his mace and smote the retainers of the demon Munkir, exulting in his awareness, his power, his lust for battle. His spirit soared.

I am free, he knew. And, if thereafter, he were condemned to an eternity of torture, he knew that for that one moment – to experience it in its fullness – it would still be worth it. He *was*.

**

First came swarms of insects and vermin, sicknesses and poisonings.

At midnight, a plague of shadows and spectres then heralded Dhatri's procession from the Temple of Cheshne at Jashat. In the van, Visuit led a group of godlings, demonic nobility, undead knights, and an immense cavalry of half-giants from the far South; hideous beasts of every stripe followed. In the main battle, Dhatri's vast bulk was hauled in a great palanquin, and numberless ghosts surrounded her. A steady stream of sacrifice was brought to her; her hunger remained insatiable.

As she passed the threshold of the Temple, a gloom enshrouded the land. From Galda to northern Pandicule – encompassing the entire Thalassine region including Fumaril – all light was suddenly extinguished. The spell – the *Pall of Dhatri* – was far more potent than any that had yet been wrought: Anumid had commanded each of the five cabals of the *Anantam* and all of the *Kesha-Dirghaa* to participate. Within the darkness, creatures otherwise vulnerable to daylight might roam.

The company turned northeast, toward Thond and Jompa, once bustling towns but now living hells for the mortals who still abode there: these were the closest source of food for Dhatri.

Soon afterwards, Sibud – who also hungered – veiled himself with magic and flew out into the shadows.

**

They were already at Rimilin's doors, by the time that the Acolyte of the Skin perceived them; a function of his abode, which acted as an extension of his own consciousness in that regard. Eight demons – mariliths and succubi, but including a kelvezu assassin of high standing – riding great nightmares. To mundane perception, they had assumed the form of gallant knights; Rimilin found it curious that they persisted in the guise: surely they knew who they were dealing with?

"Where is Graz'zt?" Rimilin's voice echoed in the stones at the base of the tower. "Is he skulking nearby, or does he absent himself out of shyness?"

Megual dismounted. "The Prince has other debts to settle, of greater enormity. May we speak?"

"And so we are," the disembodied voice replied drily. "You will excuse me if I am reluctant to allow you ingress; I am generally suspicious of kelvezu. And your reputation precedes you, Megual. What message are you here to convey? If a threat, then begone; if I hear it I will quickly grow tired and blast you all. If a bribe, then proceed; I am eminently corruptible."

Megual smiled. "I wish for news: of Mostin the Metagnostic, Eadric of Deorham, the demoness Soneillon, and the plot to conjure Graz'zt. You may consider yourself pardoned in complicity, if of such you are guilty, if you render useful information. Graz'zt will reward you richly."

There was a brief silence, as Rimilin considered his response.

He manifested before Megual, bearing a rod of ivory bound with steel. Impenetrable wards surrounded him. "In fact, you hold no fear for me; we should be clear on that count, before we continue. Tell Graz'zt that we will speak more on this matter when he renders *Pharamne's urn* to me. If my price seems outrageous, tell him to find another informant. Tell him also that Ilistet is mine, now; I have

broken her to my will: there will be no negotiation on this point. If you or he – with his tawdry band – wish to assail me, feel free to try, but in all conscience I must advise you against such a course of action. You may go now."

Megual remained expressionless. If they attacked, Rimilin would quickly *dominate* one or more of them; no good would come of that. And if Ilistet were nearby...Megual wondered what other monsters Rimilin had bound. He bowed politely, and turned to leave.

Rimilin smiled. "Wise choice."

**

Through stiffening winds, Prince Graz'zt rode west with Chepez and Queen Mazikreen: succubi infamous for their fierceness and slipperiness respectively. The landscape between Jashat and Fumaril – in more settled times rich with vineyards and olive groves – was become a blighted, poisonous waste, stalked by demons and phantoms.

"The World bends easily to Darkness," the Prince observed. "All of the signs are here. The Celestial Era is over; soon the Interdict will be in shreds."

They reached Mulissu's Paling and reined in their steeds; about them, tornados raged. Graz'zt and Mazikreen dismounted quickly, and – screaming – the Prince invoked powerful sorceries upon the succubus.

Silently, Queen Mazikreen vanished and strode through the winds – denser than iron – which surrounded Fumaril.

**

Eadric stood with Ortwine in the nave of the Great Fane in Morne. A curious detachment possessed him: heaps of bones shrouded in leathery skin lay around, and every surface was covered with a thin film of congealed blood. An iron reek filled the air.

The mind cannot contain the enormity of this, but also I am the Ahma. This is the eschaton. I should hardly be surprised. Everything in Morne which had walked, or crawled or flew was dead.

He brooded on the conversation he had had with Nwm only an hour before; the Preceptor had made a journey to Sisperi, to engage the help of Lai and her handmaidens. There was a precedent: with the Saints and Oronthonist adepts, Nwm had said that he could *resurrect* every single victim of the *storm of blood*.

The *Ahma* had acquiesced, but his heart felt heavy. This was madness: it seemed too massive. Still, he would cede all authority and trust Nwm on this count: this must be quickly undone, and the Viridity must manifest; heal the wound. Death means nothing: this must be demonstrated.

Tahl had offered to be the sacrifice.

"I will bleed," Eadric had said. It was proper. He was the *Ahma*. He wondered if the slain would even return; most now basked in Radiance: such had been his pronouncement upon the Faithful who suffered in this war.

Dare I command them back? Who am I to deny bliss to any? But then It is not I, but Nwm who issues the plea. By whatever power.

After an hour, the Preceptor instructed the *Ahma* to attend an altar he had erected beneath an orange tree; the same spot upon which Feezuu had annihilated Cynric, and Graz'zt had pronounced his curse upon Morne. The wound was deepest there. There were assembled Saints and Talions, many flamines and scrollbearers of the Temple, Lai, Mesikammi and a half-dozen Uediian priestesses.

For the first time in his life, Nwm invoked the Sun-god; he offered the blood of the *Ahma* as sacrifice and named Nehael as his intercessor. He supplicated Uedii in her aspect as Wisdom, and evoked the full power of the Viridity. The same flint knife he had used to cut Lai, he now employed upon Eadric,

opening gaping wounds upon his arms. His face became pale.

A great pneuma arose, and a vibrancy permeated everything. The rivers were suddenly rich with fish; life returned to the woods and fields; flocks of birds appeared in the skies above.

The two hundred thousand souls who were recalled by Nwm from the Serenities were not untouched by their tenure in the upper altitudes of the Empyrean. Each of them brought a little of it back with them.

As Tahl arrested the flow of blood from his arms, it dawned on Eadric suddenly; an irrefutable truth.

They could win.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 01-03-09

Urbs Cœlestis

The Sun was at its zenith when Tiuhan Gultheins, the boy-king of Wyre, awoke within his own chambers. He recalled a brief, hideous nightmare of great violence, followed by a glorious ecstasy which lay outside of time; a brilliance which persisted for uncounted aeons.

His choice to forego bliss – for such he had made – had issued from an ethical centre which Tiuhan had not known he possessed. A necessary selfless action, he knew, in response to a request which had arisen from the Ocean of Fire and Light, the memory of which filled him with warmth and fortified his soul. He recalled that golden boars – archaic protectors of the royal house – had borne him away from it; once again, his spirit was housed in flesh.

He felt unusually peaceful; an urge to meditate and pray settled on him before even the fog of waking departed. He arose and gazed at himself in the mirror.

The Empyrean filled his face, in both memory and anticipation. There was no fear in him; he laughed and cried for joy. He could return again at any time; his abiding in this crude form would pass as the blink of an eye in eternity. He washed and dressed himself, and departed from his suite; it was noon,

and others were also only just starting to go about their business.

Standing on the parapet, he noticed a calm industry and purpose seemed to possess the citizens of Morne, as though each were pursuing a task both ordained and well-practiced. Household knights and men-at-arms were beginning to assemble in the baileys beneath the inner walls of the palace; masons were loading the cranes around the Great Fane with cut marble. Servants toiled contentedly. Gardeners were pruning with particular attention to detail. There were no raised voices. No beatings. Light suffused everything.

Tiuhan gazed at the Temple compound. In a quiet corner, an old, bent yew-tree; it had taken root a thousand years before, but Tiuhan also recalled that before today, no such tree had stood there. He pondered its significance, as did another his own age or a little older: a youth stood near to it and inspected it, his arms folded.

The great bell in the tower of the Fane began to ring; a slow, steady note of enormous depth, with complex overtones. The campaniles around the city swiftly took up its cue, and a music at once both spontaneous and perfectly orchestrated suddenly flourished.

King Tiuhan stood and listened for a while, before tearing himself away. He had a vast administrative backlog which he had been neglecting, and the Small Council was meeting in an hour.

**

In shadow, Mazikreen slipped unseen with great speed through the streets of Fumaril; its inhabitants were still milling in the streets, speculating as to the import of the darkness which covered the city. The succubus must locate and dispatch five targets: two priestesses of the goddess Jeshi, and three Pand Wind-Sorcerers who had taken up residence in the Tyrant's palace. They were pivotal members of Mulissu's cabal, and the ceremony for the reinvigoration of the Paling – which required their contribution – was due to take place in half an hour.

She moved along the waterfront, leaving a trail of corpses and *charmed* informants who directed her to

the temple of the wind-goddess – a modest affair by Thalassine standards – and thence to the palace courtyards.

She discharged her mission efficiently, avoiding detection by the slow-witted djinn who acted as sentries, and eliminating all of her targets quickly; Mazikreen felt a touch of annoyance that her last – the sorcerer Ehieu – had noticed her presence before dying.

Alarms were being raised as she slid back over the city wall, and vanished like a shade into the unnatural night.

**

Mulissu immediately issued an appeal to Mostin, Daunton, and a half-dozen other Wyrish mages for aid: *I need help. The Paling must go up in fifteen minutes, or Fumaril is doomed: make your choice.*

Mostin cursed. He was due to convoke his cabal in three hours, but could hardly refuse.

Mulissu conveyed the coordinates of a temporary exempt bubble within the lock of the Paling, and Mostin *teleported* to it forthwith.

Jalael and Troap – two of those whom Mostin had previously suborned – were already present.

He fixed Mulissu stonily. "I trust the drain on our collective reservoirs will be of small amplitude?"

"Your generosity overwhelms," Mulissu said drily. "It will be negligible. You did not predict this event?"

"No," Mostin confessed. "Or not exactly. But I knew that it would be an inopportune time to request your direct inclusion in the cabal; hence you will make the transference. Also, I trust no other wizard to be able to effectively *dominate* Graz'zt."

"Can I have him?"

"Sorry, Mulissu. I have already promised him to Soneillon. I have a year of informal compact with her, or six remaining discrete services, whichever passes first."

"If you were anyone else, that would mean other than it does."

"I am not oblivious to the existence of certain baser urges," Mostin explained, "but I have utterly transcended the notion of coitus. Nor do I any longer require the use of a latrine."

Daunton appeared.

"About time," the Savant said.

Once again, the Paling was erected. Mulissu sighed. She couldn't take much more of this.

**

"Infernal is very last epoch, Mostin," Jalaël gazed around the tower's reception hall. "How much for the solar?"

"He is not for sale. He's an antique. Captured during the Fall."

"You need to develop an alternate strategy, Mostin," Soneillon was visibly irked. "One cannot conjure a demon who has already been called."

Mostin scowled. "I have anticipated the possibility. Do you think I'm a fool? He is unbound. The ritual proceeds as scheduled. He is outside his sanctum; his *foresight* will not avail him, nor his *mind blank*. He has erected another protection: a ward which will discharge upon contact with a hostile conjuration. That will fail also. I will bind him in the Astral."

Jalaël's hideous face screwed up. Doubt now possessed her. The Hag's offer to aid Mostin had been

made to head off what she had considered to be a celestial threat; events had since transpired to make the situation far more complex.

Mostin, sensing her ambivalence, fixed her with his uncanny gaze.

"I am not about to back out of this, and neither are you," he said.

"No," Jalael growled. "I'm not. But nor will I let you forget this. Had I known that you had switched your allegiance anyway, I might have been more reticent in rendering aid."

"It takes a quick mind to anticipate me," Mostin nodded sagely. "But had *I* known that the celestials themselves were about to reconsider their programming, I might not have been so eager to relinquish direct control. Still, what is done is done. Their orders remain the same; although the implementation may be rather more inventive. I trust that the rest of you are as good as your word?"

Muthollo nodded resentfully; Troap seemed unfazed: he liked Mostin and – for a wizard, at least – the goblin was unusually generous in his dealings with others. In the final configuration of spells which Mostin had opted for, only six mages – including Sho – would be required; Soneillon would cover the not insubstantial magickal deficit. Orolde would remain as an observer.

Mostin *plane shifted* his tower to a remote island of astral matter, where it abutted an already existing stronghold, merging seamlessly with its architecture. He removed himself to an obsidian binding chamber, and began to inscribe a thaumaturgic diagram from powdered celestial metals.

**

The *Ahma* was present when the Small Council convened: a dozen of Wyre's leading temporal magnates, amongst whom were Tagur, Sihü, Jholion of Methelhar and Attar the Warden. Six, including the Lord Chamberlain Foide and Skett of Mord, were absent, and remained in their own demesnes: nobles who had been subject to neither the *storm of blood* nor the subsequent Reversal. Saints and Talions sat upon the episcopal thrones which the Lords Spiritual of Wyre – whose bishoprics had been

dissolved after the accession of the *Sela* – had once occupied.

"I will try to explain circumstances as best I understand them," Eadric sat in his armour on a low stool next to the king, which creaked under the weight. "First, the greatest of the Cheshnite spellcasters have already unleashed many of their most potent spells. A certain arcanist of my acquaintance – whose methods of garnering intelligence are dubious, but the accuracy of which is generally high – posits the following situation:

"Yeshe is depleted, and will for some time have to content herself with *binding* nothing more significant than powerful balors – *depletion* is a relative term. Sibud has exhausted his credit – which was poor – with the Cheshnite cabals, and hopefully we can expect no more *storms of blood* for the time being. Temenun may have drawn a cupful of power from his reservoir, and remains strong; his armamentarium is already replenished.

"Guho, Choach and Rishih have been engaged in the solidifying of the Cheshnite defense, the erection of *teleportation circles*, and the subjugation of the Thalassine nobility, but it is likely that their *real* power has yet to be manifested. Rishih has also been active in conjuring demons: he has restricted himself to lesser nobility. Furthermore, he enjoys prestige amongst certain of the cabals; in general, his more conservative approach is well-received.

"The goddess Dhatri has invoked a blanket of darkness, and has set forth from Jashat in what is known as her *Procession*, an event which might be said to mark the formal beginning of hostilities. With her are Prahar, a number of evil godlings, and Visuit the Butcher, against whom we cannot yet stand. And many tens of thousands of lesser minions.

"The demons Graz'zt, Pazuzu, Alrunes, Ahazu and Baphomet are at large. Pazuzu is pactbonded with Yeshe and acts as the instrument of her will; Baphomet is enslaved by Prahar. Graz'zt is a wild card whose activities we cannot anticipate. Ahazu and Alrunes have yet to show themselves beyond their pavillions.

"Four celestial princes – those covenanted by Mostin the Metagnostic – have *Fallen*. The Adversary has seduced them. The motivations of the Nameless Fiend are unguessable. At present, the actions of the debased celestials have proven to be not antithetical to our own needs: they have eliminated the

demon lord Munkir, and are disrupting affairs beneath the *Pall of Dhatri*. This congruence of purpose may or may not last."

Prince Tagur looked uncomfortable. "Then what do we do?"

Eadric sighed. "We find ourselves in a curious position. I suggest we move half of Morne's garrison – including all of the royal knights – immediately south to join the main Temple force; those who experienced the Reversal have become amongst our most formidable soldiers. Furthermore, we have to move outside of Wyre proper; the active participation of Wyre's wizards is more appealing than the incidental protection which the Enforcer offers us."

"Wizards are not trustworthy," Saint Anaqiss observed.

"You are correct," the *Ahma* agreed. "Still, that is the plan. We break camp tomorrow."

"So we march on the Thalassine?" Sihü inquired.

"Yes."

"All men will flock to your banner," Wurz declared.

I sincerely hope not, Eadric thought. *I will have enough blood on my hands as it is.*

"Which wizards have sworn oaths to Oronthon?" Saint Wurz asked.

"As yet, none," Eadric smiled at the naïveté of the question. "Nor do I expect any to. We may depend on Daunton almost definitely, and on Mostin probably, although any aid which he lends will doubtless be viewed dimly by the pious. Mulissu, perhaps; although Fumaril's concerns preoccupy her. Hlioth is an unlikely candidate, but I suspect she might prove the most useful of any of them were she to act.

"At present, our best defense may be offered by Nwm the Preceptor, who is capable of coordinating diverse magical energies. Currently, with the adepts, he is engaged in protecting the Temple encampment more thoroughly from attack: I wish no repeat of the assault launched by Temenun's

demons. I have asked him to invoke a mobile defense; it will move as the *Sela*'s tabernacle moves.

"Lastly, we can expect a period of quiescence while the Cheshnites adjust to the fact that death might be no particular obstacle to us. Mostin anticipates that they will change tack."

Tagur gave an inquiring look.

"They'll try to imprison souls," the *Ahma* explained.

King Tiuhan swallowed. "I will take to the field. I will need guidance."

Sihu looked dubious. "Your Majesty..."

Saint Tahl interrupted her. "I agree with the King. There is nowhere safer. That has been amply demonstrated."

**

Nwm watched as the *Sela* gave a lesson. There was no sense that Oronthon's proxy was in any way unsettled by events; being invested by the Supernal apparently granted one a certain perspective to which ordinary mortals were not privy.

But ordinary mortals are a dwindling breed, Nwm observed.

The Preceptor felt uncomfortable. He had struck compromises which – prior to current events – he would not have even considered. Although, having counselled the *Ahma* to adopt a Reconciliationist position, he could hardly do less himself.

But Nwm alone knew that – at the climax of the rite to revivify Morne – his designs had been shifted; agents of the Sun-god had interfered with the pattern. The massive matrix of magical energy which Nwm had created had been reordered to better suit the celestial agenda. The Illumination of Morne's

citizenry had certainly not been his original intention.

As the lesson concluded and the devotees dispersed, Nwm approached the *Sela*, who sat in *Saizhan*.

"You are perturbed," the *Sela* observed.

"No, I'm pissed off," Nwm replied.

"The Host does not answer to me. I understand your anger, but I cannot offer redress."

"You passivity is impossible," Nwm groaned.

"If you think so. I would gladly receive any wisdom in these matters." Tramst was ironic, yet perfectly earnest. "The Host is attempting to interpret Oronthon's will, and is sometimes fallible in its judgments, according to its own standards. Oronthon is utterly ineffable: celestials are not. The fact that four archfiends were recently born might be viewed as a cosmic blunder on the part of Enitharmon."

Nwm raised an eyebrow. "An opinion?"

"It is not within my purview; hence I make efforts to remove myself."

"You remain open," Nwm observed. "Your feelings may be changed in that regard."

Tramst smiled softly. "I mean no disrespect, Preceptor, but one rather more skillful than you views this as his ongoing project. I cannot become embroiled in politics. That is why there is an *Ahma*."

"And Oronthon's eschaton? How do you relate to that?"

"*Saizhan* is the disintegration of all previously held conception. The Viridity can be understood as a reflex; an inevitable rebirth. *Saizhan* itself is the eschaton, symbolically speaking."

Nwm gaped. "This is your belief?"

"Indeed, no," the *Sela* smiled. "I make no metaphysical assertions. On doctrinal matters, I also suggest consulting the *Ahma*."

"Ngaargh!" Nwm threw up his hands. "Can you not make one categorical statement of truth? Or at least posit an opinion which is your own?"

"Regarding what?"

"Regarding anything," Nwm groaned.

"Certainly," the *Sela* answered. "Nehael is the Supreme Empathy."

Nwm squinted. "There is a lot of Urgic baggage attached to that term, and its implicit philosophical gravity is lost on me."

"Then you have a chance to understand it," the *Sela* smiled broadly.

**

Several hundred tapers burned steadily within the chamber.

Mostin had opted for a triangle in preference to a pentacle. The symbolic apex – where the Alienist would stand – was aligned with the Empyrean; Troap and Sho stood at either other trine, dexter and sinister as seen from the Throne of Oronthon; behind them were Muthollo and Jaelael, respectively. A complex motif of overlapping symbols connected an ideogram within the circle's outer ring to a second diagram of more modest dimension, wherein Soneillon was positioned, opposed to Mostin. Here, a brazier of silver also stood, upon which exotic incense burned.

Mulissu waited outside of the pattern. Pungent smoke billowed around her as she floated.

As Ashva rose in Jashat, Mostin began to mutter and gesticulate, weaving a net of little subtlety but

great potency. Salt, silver and cold iron were flung generously in all directions. Magic flowed; Soneillon opened her reservoir. Reality bent.

Graz'zt manifested, incredulous, and flung himself impotently against the barrier which contained him. Even as the first wave of ritual energy around the room dissipated, the Alienist had already begun to cast another spell of tremendous power. Mulissu gathered her energies in synchrony.

Mostin unleashed a *dispelling*; *death wards* and *mind blanks* crashed, a hundred dweomered items became comatose. Soneillon flickered on the edge of being. Graz'zt became vulnerable.

At precisely that moment, Mulissu *dominated* the demon with a transvalent spell.

YOUR *MIND BLANK* STAYS DOWN. INVOKE NO POWER. DO ONLY AS I COMMAND.

The Savant turned to Mostin. "I have him."

*

Orolde stepped forward, and, in a trice, magically divested Prince Graz'zt of all of his personal effects.

The next minute – which was the time it took Mostin to complete the *binding* ritual – was the longest of his life. At several junctures, acute paranoia threatened to overcome him, but at the end of it, naked and humiliated, Graz'zt was confined within a ten-inch globe of adamant.

Immediately, Soneillon proffered her upturned palm to receive the sphere. As he watched his pseudopod – which was wrapped around the captured demon prince – move toward her, a sudden prescience of indefinable quality but great surety passed through the Alienist's mind.

Instead of giving it to her, Mostin spoke two powerful syllables, and Soneillon vanished.

Sho gaped.

Jalael, in anticipation of attack from Mostin, immediately erected a *mind blank*.

"She would have betrayed me," Mostin explained, holding up his hand in a gesture of appeasement.

"Goetic protocols just don't command the respect that they used to."

"Where did you send her?"

"Outside. She will need to find a way to come back through Dream. It will take her some time."

Mulissu looked at him suspiciously. "What are you up to Mostin?"

But Mostin's eyes – and those of the other wizards – were turned toward Orolde.

"There are *portable holes* here," the sprite said. "There are a number of *cubic gates* also. And this."

Orolde held up Graz'zt's amulet.

"And this."

A small key.

Jalael cursed impatiently. "Open the holes. Empty everything out."

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 03-07-09

Teppu strode up to the ramshackle building, and ascended the three steps onto its porch.

It was somewhat more than a cottage, but rather less than a mansion; its three levels boasted no more than twenty rooms, all told. Although the sprite perceived that two dozen extradimensional spaces –

ranging in size from hidden cubby holes to a suite of dedicated summoning chambers – abutted it; its total internal volume might be four times larger. It occurred to Teppu that Mostin might possess a particular attachment to the notion of *space*.

Teppu adjusted his hat, coughed, and rapped upon the door. He placed his hands behind his back, whistled softly, and glanced around approvingly. The nymph who dwelt nearby had been persuaded to bring forth numerous wildflowers around the manse: sorrel and stitchwort; purslanes, bluebells and wood-anemones. The veranda had been situated for the perfect dappled shade beneath an ancient elm.

A slender fey – perhaps five-feet tall, with nut-brown skin and an impudent smile – opened the door.

Teppu raised an eyebrow. This was neither Orolde nor Mei. Who else lived here? A servant?

"Greetings," Teppu doffed his cap. "I was not expecting you."

The other seemed unfazed. "Teppu," he said warmly. "Please come in. Orolde is presently indisposed."

"You have me at a disadvantage," the sprite replied suspiciously.

"Do not concern yourself. I know of only One to whom that does not apply."

"Then inquiring as to your name would be pointless," Teppu nodded. "Is your manifestation as a fey for my benefit? Have you taken up residence here?"

"Temporarily," The Adversary nodded affably. "Although I've been spending a good deal of time in Morne. As to my chosen form, I attempt to remain unobtrusive in my actions. I have rather a reputation in that regard."

"And the *simulacrum*?" Teppu cocked his head.

"Is accepting of my presence. But I find this place quite charming; I also confess that my lodging here has a certain symmetry to it, given the owner's current choice of abode."

"That is an eloquent premise for circumventing Nehael's fence," Teppu bowed politely.

"I am gratified that you appreciate it," the other replied. His tone was self-mocking. "I boldly straddle paradigms. Now. Will you remain on the porch?"

Teppu shrugged, and followed him in, closing the door behind him. He glanced around; the place was cluttered but comfortable. Teppu suspected that Orolde had already begun to arrange things more to his liking.

"Would you care for tea?" The Adversary inquired.

"Certainly," Teppu nodded, sitting at Mostin's kitchen table.

"Where should we begin?"

"I think one should always warm the pot," Teppu replied drily.

"An argument? I would contend that the extra labor does not contribute to the quality of the brew."

Teppu nodded. "That may be so. But I find the ritual reinforces the experience."

The Adversary smiled, and sat opposite. "In my cosmic capacity – as the Embodiment of Pure Will – you will probably appreciate the limited use of ritual to me. However, I will follow your instruction; let it not be said that I am insensitive to others' observances."

Teppu sighed. "Allow me to gird my intellect, if you would; I suspect nuances to this exchange which will otherwise elude me."

"As you wish," the Adversary waved a hand casually. "Everyone is always so suspicious."

**

Screaming, inchoate rage. A desire to rend, profane and destroy all that was not he. But also a furious plotting which followed a thousand permutations simultaneously.

He was Graz'zt. He had been caught before; he had escaped before.

Mostin's face loomed above him, filling immensity.

"Your Highness," the idiot drawled like deranged sky-god. "We can be civil about this: you divulge information which I require, and I spare you from unimaginable tortures."

Graz'zt's intuition told him that the Alienist had no coercive spells available to him.

He remained silent.

*

Mostin rattled the three *cubic gates* together in his closed palm and stared into the blank sphere. The treasure of Azzagrat lay heaped around him.

Inside the globe – although apparently shy at revealing his countenance on its surface – was trapped the demon prince Graz'zt. Mostin – who experienced a state of disappointed anticlimax with regard to the contained fiend – was presently unprepared to *torment* the Prince into a more receptive mood.

There was no damn urn. Just a key.

"Well?" Mulissu asked.

Mostin grimaced, and shook his pseudopod in a gesture which Mulissu interpreted as irritation.

"You think you can face them down?"

"I *know* I can. I have foreseen it; but other futures might hold better prospects."

"Choose swiftly," Mulissu groaned. "News travels fast. Divinations will be cast regarding Graz'zt's whereabouts and disposition. Inferences will be drawn. The truth will be quickly determined."

"Silence," Mostin snapped. "I know this."

"And if your temper gets the better of you, and you *disintegrate* Waide, you will make enemies."

"Are you deranged?" Mostin asked. "No. We're going back to Wyre, for this. I want the Enforcer watching *my* back on this one."

"You cannot take Graz'zt into Wyre," Jalael observed.

"We're in an extradimensional space," Mostin said. "It'll be fine."

"Gihaahia will permit this?"

"She did nothing about the solar; or the spined devils who do the cleaning. I assume so. Also, Graz'zt himself is removed from the continuum proper. I perceive no breach of the Injunction."

"Then neither will she intervene if things go awry," Jalael said drily.

"I will stand on the threshold," Mostin said.

"She must appreciate your pedantry if nothing else," the Hag growled.

"We are settled then?"

Mostin grumbled and nodded.

They translated back to Scir Cellod, but within the Enforcer's remit. Mulissu issued a *sending* to Daunton, and the wizard arrived presently. Mostin apprised him of the situation, and in his official capacity Daunton called a convocation.

Sixteen mages attended, including Rimilin, Waide, Tozinak and – to the surprise of all present – the witch Hlioth.

Mostin, standing in the open doorway to Murmuur's Tower and brandishing the globe containing Graz'zt, sighed. He was tired.

Tozinak – whose present form included a number of disturbing insectoid features – clicked his mandibles together in excitement.

"I have captured Graz'zt," the Alienist announced boldly, although his fatigue was evident. "I am informing you of this myself, before the rumors begin to fly."

"Bravo, Mostin," Rimilin said drily, with more than a hint of resentment in his voice.

Mostin smiled eerily. "I purpose to seek for Pharamne's urn. Who will join me?"

Voices began to chatter excitedly.

Rimilin raised his eyebrows at the vulgar display.

*

"You are lucky I came," Hlioth later snapped, after the others had dispersed. "Rimilin would have launched an assault, were it not for me."

"In Wyre? I hardly think so."

"In your tower."

"He cannot penetrate it." Mostin sighed

"He *can*, you fool. The *quiescence of the spheres* must necessarily provoke a counter-argument.

Rimilin can bypass *dimensional locks*. Do not think to exclude him that way."

"I don't need nannying, you mad old hag," Mostin hissed. "Let him try."

"And how now do you purpose to penetrate Azzagrat? The planar flux is impossible. Your devilish artifact is not adequate to the task."

"I will conjure one of Ghom's servitors and equip it with a magical howdah."

"I? Mad?"

"Quite so," Mostin replied.

"I wish to speak with Graz'zt," Hlioth growled.

"Feel free to try," Mostin tossed her the globe. "I must reattune. If you release him again, brains may begin to disappear inexplicably in Nizkur. I take it you understand my meaning?"

Hlioth scowled, and gestured the Alienist away.

**

Ortwine – in the guise of a Thalassine gentleman-turned-vampire – walked with easy confidence through the dark promenades of Thond, impervious to scrutiny; whimsy informed her choice of apparent gender. The damned cowered behind barricaded doors as Abyssal ghouls prowled the streets.

Things went ill for Thond. The greatest of the town's remaining noble families – the Truzha – had undergone a collective transformation which had resulted in a haemophagic aristocracy being foisted upon Thond's hapless citizens. Under the auspices of the aging family matriarch, a dozen first cousins – and scores further removed – had enthusiastically embraced unlife as a useful tool to advance their power and interests. Initiation had become *de rigueur* amongst the fashionable set.

They counted Naatha, Sibud and Rishih as their sponsors; the immortals had invested heavily in the organization and defense of Thond subsequent to the annihilation of its armies. Naatha had lent Jariliths to sorcerers who pledged themselves to her; Rishih had erected a number of potent magical wards around the city; Sibud had bestowed a rare vampiric pedigree.

Ortwine entered a den where unspeakable tortures were inflicted on mortals by many-limbed demons. She drew *Heedless* and slew the closest fiend immediately. The others began to hastily disperse, but Ortwine arrested one before it could flee, pinned it to the wall, and *dominated* it.

"You are compacted by House Truzha. Inform your masters that Ortwine wants to talk to them."

The demon moved to oblige her.

Ortwine liked this game.

**

"Were you aware that the Adversary is squatting in Mostin's Manse not fifty miles from here?" Teppu asked.

"No," Nehael smiled. "I sense you had an exchange. Was it illuminating?"

"Disturbingly so," Teppu admitted. "He's even more disarming than you. He confused me utterly."

Nehael nodded. "That is his nature: to refute that which is."

"That is a generous assessment," Teppu was wry. "Others have been less forgiving. What can you anticipate of his actions?"

"Little or nothing," Nehael shook her head. "And try not to analyze his words. You will never guess his

motives. Accept this; you will be happier."

"This is sound advice. He also requests an introduction," Teppu raised his eyebrows.

"That much, at least, I predicted."

"And you will indulge him?"

Nehael shrugged. "Why not? Do you fear he might successfully woo me to his cause?"

"Precisely thus," Teppu confessed. "What is your strategy?"

"That which I apply to you, so do I equally to myself. There is no strategy. I will play it by ear."

**

The *Ahma* stood with Tahl and Rede beneath a canopy south of Wyre's marches, receiving news of events which gave him pause for wonder. Orolde intoned as though reading from an altogether mundane inventory.

"One amulet; one suit of baroque plate armor; one large shield of fearsome aspect; one glaive; a greatsword which drips acid..."

"Bastard sword," Eadric interrupted.

"One sacrificial dagger," Orolde continued, "three *cubic gates*; three *portable holes*; one *amulet of the planes*; one *crystal ball* with several special applications; twenty-eight *ioun stones* of various function; one *iron flask*, determined to be the prison of the devil Sirchade; around one hundred books of spells – including those of Kothchori – which have yet to be translated and fully catalogued..."

Orolde paused sadly.

"A scroll collection which I will not begin to bore you with: Mostin has suggested to tender to you those scribed by Oronthonist sympathizers, and there are more than a few; material wealth in jewels, gold and adamant which might best be described as *incomprehensibly large*. The inventory was witnessed by all of the mages present. *Pharamne's urn* was noticeably absent. Mostin believes that the small key found on Graz'zt's person unlocks whichever space holds the urn – presumably somewhere in one of Azzagrat's nested demiplanes – but he needs to employ divinations of some magnitude in order to determine the exact truth."

Eadric raised an eyebrow. Mostin having the *web of motes* in his possession was bad enough. Mostin with *Murmuur's tower* was something which filled the *Ahma* with trepidation. Now the Alienist sought a generative power which was so far beyond his ability to safely manipulate, that Eadric experienced pure dread.

"I suspect that Mostin has become instrumental in the designs of the Adversary," the *Ahma* sighed, smiling grimly at Orolde.

"As to that, I could not say," the sprite bowed. "I do not concern myself with the machinations of entities within the Oronthonian pleroma."

"Has Shomei shown herself yet?" Eadric asked.

A look of discomfort crossed Orolde's face. "No. Is this something you anticipate?"

The *Ahma* shrugged. "Anticipate? No. But many patterns have been laid; this much is clear to me. I was there when Sacir dragged Shomei to Hell. I was impotent to prevent it. The *Akesoli* are the agents of Amaimon, perhaps, but there a greater mandate drove them. Mostin informed me of her current situation; do not be concerned as to a breach of confidence."

Orolde smiled. "I am not. I cannot match Mostin's prescience; hence, there is no reason to anticipate that his reaction to anything I might divulge will be unpremeditated. My own status is somewhere between apprentice and journeyman, if you understand my meaning: no proscriptions have been placed upon me; nor do I shy from the truth, as I perceive it."

"And what is your perception, Orolde?"

The sprite looked nonplussed. "That question is quite impossible. I cannot communicate the totality of my apprehension effectively; we have no common frame of reference."

The *Ahma* thought for a moment. "Do you ever seek solace, Orolde? And if so, where?"

"In whatever fashion seems appropriate at the time."

"And your stump – magic might have replaced your hand. Why?"

"I will grow a pseudopod in due course," Orolde said drily.

Eadric gave a thin smile. "Tell Mostin that the *Ahma* thinks he's way out of his depth. He can't now go to Azzagrat to retrieve the urn, in any case."

Orolde shifted slightly.

"You cannot be serious?" Eadric asked.

"His energies are now concentrated on accomplishing this task," Orolde admitted. "And as to Shomei, if you wish to speak with her she must be invoked; her nature is now Infernal."

"Foci are aligning sharply," Eadric said.

"Yes," Orolde replied.

**

The van – which contained the banners of the *Ahma*, the Talions and the Penitents – crawled south

along the Hynt Coched in the direction of Jompa. Griffons wheeled and gyred in the skies above them. In the main battle, the *Sela* rode surrounded by Saints and many of the recently Illuminated of Morne, whose numbers continued to swell as companies *wind walked* from the capital. Hundreds of wagons churned up the road behind into deep mud, through which resentful Wyrish aristocrats and their retainers doggedly toiled. Eadric had stiffened the rearguard and reserve brigades with a battalion of Templars under Brey's command, in the event they were actually attacked: the King, his household knights, and the boars had yet to arrive. In all, the columns trailed for six miles through the low, rolling hills.

Ahead, bisecting reality at an indeterminable distance, a wall of night loomed. On a low knoll by the side of the road – beneath a tall finger of carved granite – a crimson-haired figure stood and observed the passing of Wyre's armies.

As the *Ahma* approached, she stared at him; his sight informed him that this one was not all she appeared to be: her ontology was complex. She said nothing, but her presence was significant: this was the edge of her remit. Beyond here, she exerted no influence.

As soon as Eadric passed a point due west of the menhir, the sky above seemed to crack open briefly and a squadron of celestials flashed into view. They shone darkly.

The *Ahma* remained expressionless. He had anticipated this – or something similar – but had hoped for a period of quietude before they showed themselves. They were already sworn to him; a powerful tool to execute his will in the world. Using them entailed a price he was reluctant to meet.

The wards which Nwm had erected around the column discouraged their close approach, and Eadric called a general halt to the vanguard's progress. He rode with Tahl through a detachment of Ardanese mercenaries and across a hundred yards of open ground, to where they stood or floated gently.

Eadric reined in and dismounted. Saint Tahl remained in his saddle.

"Hail, *Ahma*," the archfiend Irel bowed. "We finally meet, although under circumstances which few guessed likely. The covenant undertaken still holds. You may instruct us as you see fit; alternately, we must interpret your will to the best of our ability."

"Neither option thrills me," Eadric said, gazing at up Irel, who stood head and shoulders above him. Taint emanated from the Fallen in palpable waves but their nobility was all-too-apparent. Thus it might remain. These were a new breed.

Eadric gazed at them and sighed, and resigned himself to the inevitable. He turned to Tahl.

"Let it be known that the *Ahma* has perforce acquired a Left Hand," he said, "his right alone being inadequate to the task which our current predicament presents."

"They are loyal?"

"Absolutely," Eadric admitted. They were. He could still speak into their minds; know their thoughts. He suspected that Irren was smiling smugly in some Nessian Beatitude.

But against Visuit, how would they fare?

So the wheel turned.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 4-16-09

Visuit

The warm spring sun, filtered through the canopy of the forest, lent a greenish hue to the still air. Nehael smiled as she approached.

Behind the manse, above a small stream which gurgled enthusiastically, a figure lounged in a wicker hammock suspended between two young birch trees, chewing thoughtfully on a long blade of cooch-grass. He wore one of Mostin's favorite hats: an ochre felt, sporting a wide brim, and suitable for lazy afternoons.

Through many perceptions, the goddess apprehended him in a thousand guises: a fey; a mortal youth;

an emperor, resplendent and dreadful; incandescence – a sliver of the Sun; the Will to Become. Here was the great *Antinomos*; the Nameless Fiend, exempt from the Law of Oronthon. Space and time warped in his vicinity: he was a singularity around whom cosmoii turned. Still, his totality eluded her. Deceiver.

The Adversary opened an eye as she drew closer. "You were never Nehael. What are you?" He asked, half-amused.

Nehael tilted her head. "Am I so opaque to you?"

"Oh, yes," he answered.

"There is much I might show you," Nehael suggested.

"You are empowered to realize the full potential of the *urn*?"

"Yes," Nehael replied.

"I suspected as much."

"Thank-you for letting Rintrah pass," Nehael nodded politely. "Will you trust me?"

"Let me think about it," the Adversary replied. He pulled Mostin's hat down over his eyes.

"Do you fear me?" Nehael inquired directly.

The Adversary gave a shrug. "Perhaps. I haven't yet decided as to whether I ought, or no."

"I should like to offer some advice," Nehael smiled.

"Feel free," the Adversary smiled drowsily.

"Read me. I am open to you."

"I cannot. That is my dilemma. But thank-you for your consideration."

"You *cannot*?"

"Humility becomes you, Who-Were-Never-Nehael. As does your genuine lack of guile. The Tree weaves a net around you so subtle that even you can't perceive it."

"And you can?"

"No," the Nameless Fiend sighed. "But I can infer it. I am in Nizkur. I have no power here, save by your grace. Or that of the Tree. Or Uedii. The puzzle intrigues me: I am an inquisitive sort."

"Why would you reveal these things to me? They diminish you and empower me. That is contrary to your nature."

"My Nature – normally my preferred topic of discussion – is of no consequence in this matter. Because I am not *your* Adversary. Do you doubt your invulnerability here?"

"I had not, until you asked me that very question," Nehael admitted.

"Touché," the Adversary tipped the brim of Mostin's hat. "Observe."

Without warning, he struck her with enough power to raze a continent.

Nehael merely witnessed him scattering a handful of acorns.

"What of the Claviger?" She asked.

"I'm wholly ignorant," the Adversary sighed.

"I cannot believe anything you say."

"Well, naturally," the Adversary smiled. "And there's the great irony, of course."

"Decide what you want to do," Nehael turned and walked away.

"Think of a name for me," he called after her. "Maybe I'll like it."

**

Nwm's interdiction, as Mostin dubbed the spell – although the Preceptor himself had not thought to name it – was a compound ward which excluded certain creatures of the unnatural order from proximity to the *Sela*. It was less comprehensive than Nwm would have secretly preferred, but – given that the bulk of the power required to evoke it was derived from Temple Adepts and Flamines – it would have been less than gracious of Nwm to exclude celestials from its zone of effect.

Nwm refused to relax the primary ward to allow the nascent devils of the Dark Choir access, regardless of their professed loyalty. This vexed many of the Irrenites present, who entertained notions of discourse with the fallen celestials.

"I'll not have them within a league of me. Nor will you unless you think that you're immune to subterfuge."

Nwm had a point, Eadric conceded.

The *interdiction* was quickly followed by a *Nwm's mantle* which settled upon those marching south – necromancies would henceforth prove ineffective against the Wyrish forces – and a *Nwm's quickening* which bestowed miraculous regenerative powers.

The primary ward moved as Wyre's armies moved, encapsulating an oblate hemisphere some six miles in diameter, and invisible to mortal perception. It was potent, but demanded a renewal at dawn every day: a substantial investment of time, and an effort of magic to effect; the *mantle* and *quickenings* required less frequent reinforcement. Although bolstered to withstand *disjunctions*, to contrive a *superb*

dispelling of sufficient magnitude to counter the *interdiction* was certainly within the ability of the Cheshnite leadership, were one or more of them to set their mind to it.

Nwm's concerns were justified, and Anumid initially approached Idyam with the task of devising a spell for such a purpose. The demilich – feeling such a chore was beneath him – ignored the request and continued his necromancies. Idyam felt in no hurry. Malign spirits attended him now: deathshriekers spawned by the horrors visited upon Jashat. Nwm's ward could not be used offensively; they would effectively need to cut a swathe forward for it at some point.

Choach accepted Anumid's offer, although with a counterbid for two hundred which made the Mouthpiece glower. Still, resources were plentiful: all of the *Anantam* were now able to act without fear of retaliation from the Claviger. Anumid felt pressure from the increasingly frenzied politicking of certain cliques within the cabals. It was only a matter of time before the assassinations began in earnest.

For four hundred, Choach offered to eliminate Fumaril's defense as well.

"How quickly can the spell be ready?"

"In twelve hours."

"I will give a provisional *yes*," Anumid grimaced.

The Mouthpiece subsequently gave thought to assailing Fumaril. Although the host which had set forth with Dhatri was immense, the chambers below the Temple of Cheshne were far from empty; Naatha and Guho – otherwise uncommitted – might be persuaded to undertake the magical leaguer of Fumaril if offered sufficient inducements.

The balance of power between the greatest of the Cheshnite immortals and the cabals was beginning to shift, Anumid observed. He found himself thankful that his own position until that point had been one of reserve; *over-caution* as Yeshe had preferred it.

Yeshe anointed herself with blood beside her pavillion and prepared to *commune*. Something was evading her notice, and she was determined to find out *what*.

Her divinations were interrupted by Visuit.

"We strike immediately. My instinct tells me the time is now," the Butcher growled.

"We must bring down the ward first," Yeshe retorted.

Dreadful runes kindled about Visuit as her mood darkened. Mortals nearby ran screaming. The goddess drew her weapon: a huge curved sword. "Do not seek to instruct me in the art of war."

"Your bloodlust must wait," Yeshe snapped. She was rapidly losing her temper.

Without warning, with a peal of thunder, the goddess smote Yeshe; a single blow which would have slain any mortal and many a godling. The Binder's armor, titan-forged, buckled but did not break.

Yeshe staggered back, insensible.

Visuit thrust out an arm and caught her by the throat. The goddess kicked Yeshe's legs from beneath her, and pushed the immortal to her knees.

Still, Yeshe could not make her limbs respond.

"You would presume?" Visuit threatened to break her neck.

Incapacity. The Binder crumpled to the ground.

"I am making a sortie," Visuit boomed; her voice carried for a mile, drowning all other sound. "Those who wish to accompany me, may."

"You will serve me," she hissed to the form at her feet.

"Goddess." Choking, Yeshe abased herself.

Visuit focused momentarily.

The enemy would be breaking camp soon. She reached out with her mind, searching for purchase: a place in proximity to the *Sela*, where she might recently have been invoked by word or deed. An anchor in space. Her deific perception penetrated every ward erected by the Temple Adepts.

At the last, a green veil, supple but unyielding: Nehael's blessing. Her concentration evaporated, and her thought retreated.

Visuit cursed. Several of the *Ushabam* who pressed too close went mad.

Holding her dark blade aloft, she clove open a *gate*.

"Follow!" War demanded utter obedience.

She mounted Narh; steed and rider leaped through the rift.

A great press of demons and undead clamored behind her. After Yeshe, Prahar – unhinged as he already was – was the first to follow. On the Plain of Infinite Portals, the Sorrowsworn mustered hungrily.

**

Tensions ran high in Mostin's Infernal tower.

Eleven mages, in addition to Mostin and Orolde, were now ensconced in various chambers – *some of them all-too-comfortably*, Mostin ruefully considered. And Hlioth remained, which made Mostin suspicious and more than a little nervous: she had appropriated a stone courtyard, and modified it – *greenified* it – to her satisfaction and Mostin's chagrin.

Inevitably, the habits of certain of the Wizards – and all were guilty of odd behaviours of one kind or another – had come into conflict. Creq exuded a charnel reek which many found distasteful. Daunton pestered the Alienist constantly for use of the *web of motes*. Tozinak transmogrified various mundane objects for no apparent reason. Waide – who maintained a disciplined hauteur – insisted on an afternoon nap in one of Mostin's preferred spots: a conservatory in which various Hellish fruits grew on thorny trees. Mulissu's mephits and Jalael's quasits were on the verge of open warfare: spined devils ineffectively policed an uneasy truce between the two groups, until the Alienist conjured a barbazu to act as a more effective deterrent to hostilities.

Mostin himself sat poring over formulae, performing impossible contortions upon immutable laws of magic in his head. Graz'zt's jar sat before him on the desk. Upon it, placid, the *dominated*, *polymorphed* linnorm rested, coiled in miniscule.

Mostin's prolepsis had generated a number of uncomfortable arcs, which involved the scorned Queen Soneillon, the Region of Dreams and *Uzzhin* combining in some dreadful resonance. He tapped upon the sphere with his quill until the demonic countenance of Prince Graz'zt appeared.

"What is your intuition?" Mostin asked.

"Thou hast exceeded thy authority, and made something unholy," Graz'zt replied, sneering.

"Be more specific!" Mostin snapped.

Graz'zt's face vanished.

Mostin cursed him for his willfulness and *tormented* the captive demon, finally forcing his visage to reappear. Graz'zt's intractability seemed only moderately diminished; his hatred was palpable.

"Answer the question," Mostin groaned. "And dispense with the archaisms: they are tedious."

"You have sent What-is-Not to Where-it-Cannot-Be. As though realities do not bleed freely enough, Mostin the Metagnostic punches holes in continua to turn drips into torrents."

"You speak of Soneillon's pilgrimage?" the Alienist hissed.

"Vhorzhe made the same mistake," Graz'zt smiled wickedly. "Except it was no *chthonic* he sent hurtling into Delirium."

"Your terminology is outmoded," Mostin corrected him. "And the analogy is inexact, in any case. I have demonstrated this!"

"Rimilin will bring her back, for all your prattle." Graz'zt was obviously taking some pleasure in his words.

"Rimilin does not concern me," Mostin sighed.

"Then you will lose the race for Azzagrat."

Mostin scowled, and waved Graz'zt away irritably.

The demon remained, glowering at him.

"Bugger off." Mostin shoved the linnorm off its perch, picked up the globe, and dropped it in a drawer, slamming it shut.

He returned to his problem.

*

An hour later, Mostin announced his plan.

The mages were to accompany him to a location *within* what had been the Argent Palace in Azzagrat, after the Alienist had established a modicum of stability on the planar flux in its vicinity. Thereupon, Mostin would invoke his *quiescence of the spheres*.

They must next *disjoin* the chthonic *gates*, to permanently arrest the upwelling; subsequently, the *quiescence* could be *dispelled*, and the offending *gates* would be gone.

After *Pharamne's urn* was recovered – Mostin purported to know its exact location, now – the Alienist would hold a splendid party in celebration.

Various concerns were voiced: Would chthonics in manifest form still be nearby? Would the *gates* even be present after the *reality maelstrom* had been suppressed? How many demiplanes removed from Azzagrat was the *urn* in any event?

"And how many *gates* are there Mostin?"

"I have calculated twenty-two," Mostin confessed. "But their usage has diminished considerably; a new equilibrium has already been established."

"You require twenty-two *disjunctions*?" Hlioth laughed.

"Certainly. This can be achieved with single-minded purpose."

"And the predicted length of our tenure in these regions?" Tozinak inquired, sniffing dismally.

"Around thirty minutes, if all goes to plan," Mostin grinned eagerly.

"Alas!" Tozinak wailed. "I may not live to see my egg hatch!"

**

"I am perplexed," Teppu admitted, looking at Neheal. "The exchange would indicate that you have him at a gnostic disadvantage – so to speak."

"He was thwarted in Afqithan; his prescience failed. This is a new experience for him. He claims the

Viridity is inscrutable to him."

"And *Saizhan*?" Teppu inquired.

"That relationship is more complex. I don't profess to understand it. I suspect that he is somehow instrumental."

**

They manifested in the fading half-light, within a bowshot of the *interdiction*, and within plain sight of the celestial guards who policed the perimeter. A ragged hole in the fabric of reality, slashed open by Visuit, through which a stream of demons poured.

The Dark Choir was upon them in an instant, wreaking havoc with maces and flaming swords; within Nwm's presidio, news spread like lightning, and clarions sounded: knights and Templars sprang to arms.

Visuit, who trusted her instincts, smiled. In the Aethers below, something stirred. To those who were sensitive – adepts and celestials – a ripple of Darkness ran across the still waters of Mind.

The Butcher gestured with her clenched fist.

Chthonics manifested.

The proto-devils cautiously withdrew to consider their options.

Visuit sliced open another *gate*, and vanished.

The rent in space remained open; through it, yet more demons and monsters began to rush.

*

As the alarm spread, Nwm – who was stationed in the centre of the encampment with most of the spellcasters – reached out his mind to Eadric, whose tents were closer to the periphery.

[Nwm]: She is opening a *gate* every thirty seconds or so; they at appearing at apparently random locations around the circumference. *Teleportation circles* are also now beginning to open. The strongest has predictably asserted herself.

[Eadric]: I had hoped she might be more direct. Still, they cannot penetrate the ward. Something very dark just came.

[Nwm]: It is called *Narake*.

[Eadric]: How do you *know*?

[Nwm]: Uedii whispers it to me.

[Eadric]: What is our best recourse?

[Nwm]: Fortification.

[Tahl]: We are ready.

[Mesikammi]: As are we.

[Lai]: And we.

[Brey]: And we.

"I will brook no celestial interference!" Nwm hissed through gritted teeth.

"There will be none," the *Ahma* vowed. The words emerged from the mouths of all within the

communion.

Nwm evoked a spell.

The *Green Benediction* settled upon Eadric and those nearest him.

**

Lying in Mostin's hammock, the Adversary opened an eye. Now *that* was impressive, by any standards.