

*Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 05-10-09*

## **Eadric**

The Goddess inhaled sharply; her head span in an ecstasy. Her communion became perfect, and her form blazed as the Viridity flowed through her. Nwm had invoked her again as the conduit for a spell of staggering power.

Trees nearby erupted briefly into spontaneous sapience. Teppu capered madly. "Excellent," he clapped his hands.

Nehael's consciousness was immediately drawn to focus on Eadric and the thousand or so most stalwart knights in the Wyrish encampment; those whose tents were in proximity to those of the *Ahma*. Thence it extended to settle upon every griffon, every horse, every dog, every bird, every ant.

Nehael shook her head. "It will not be enough. Nwm must try harder. I hope he knows this."

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Eadric's head hummed, as though he had imbibed some heady green wine which evoked an urge to pure *enjoyment*. Around his core, a warmth which nourished and sustained him. The *Eye of Palamabron* revealed the Aethers thick with archons and devas; myriads dispatched by Enitharmon to intercept the Chthonic threat and prevent further bleed into the World of Men.

Here and now, the twilight tasted fresh and new. Eadric's skin tingled. He mounted the griffon *Hauhuts* and took to the skies. Below him the camp stretched, many fires were burning: casting his eyes around, he noticed that three main fronts had opened, all to the east of the *Interdiction*, which – thankfully – still held.

Northernmost, a cluster of *gates* through which Prahar's undead cavalry poured, swiftly and repeatedly

dispersing and reforming in cadres. Their movements seemed in execution of a long-prepared plan, although maybe the phenomenon was spontaneous; formations rippled like schools of black fish beyond the protective walls of the spell. They were followed by blood fiends, abyssal ghouls, and other things which ate flesh.

In the centre, Yeshe, Pazuzu, and the violet banners of the *Ushabam* held by their giant bodyguards; their leaders were burning dozens of *candles of invocation*, and balors were appearing in the skies above them. Others were conjuring lesser demons, as their ability permitted. Still more demons were simply manifesting.

To the south, in an arc, the chthonic menace. Narake, evoked last of all, was easternmost.

Irel had determined his reaction quickly: more than half of the Dark Choir – under the archon Hemah – remained in the fight with Yeshe and her minions, and were attempting to eliminate the spellcasters. Shokad, Oraios and Irel himself – with a smaller number of former celestial stalwarts – moved to intercept the chthonics.

Knights and Templars under the effects of the *Benediction* were already materializing within the ranks of the enemy, immolating with green fire and quickly routing the half-giants, whilst enduring a barrage of *blasphemies* from the *Ushabam* themselves. In response, demons were being invoked even more rapidly; the balors were being flung against them.

From above, Eadric's vision rested on a heaving mass of nullity shaped like a demon, which emanated a destroying fire. All other creatures shunned it.

*Narake*, Nwm confirmed.

Bathed in green radiance, Eadric grunted and urged his steed to a dive; his plummet brushed aside a flight of chthonic succubi which strove to block his path, burning many from the sky. His task was simple: he should strive to slay as many as he could. He smote Narake a great blow as he wheeled past, only to have *Hauhuts* plucked in turn from the sky by a fiery tendril. Griffon and rider were flung to the ground; the earth shook as he struck it.

Visuit thundered past, slaying Hauhuts with a single blow which continued on to Eadric, striking *Lukarn* and causing the blade to shiver powerfully along its length.

A death spell spoken by Narake slid over him, dissipating harmlessly. In a trice, the demon – dwarfing the *Ahma* – leapt upon him, striking him with an object shaped like a mace and forged out of malice. In the vicinity of the chthonic, matter was beginning to smoke and evaporate.

Eadric fended the blow easily with his shield, and the sledge carved a hole in the earth next to him. Four more strikes he turned or withstood; black fire engulfed him, but nothing adhered.

By instinct, he moved his form subtly; or maybe the World shifted around him, reordering itself in response to some impulse of Uedii which he could not articulate. He followed invisible green tracheids, emerging instantly from the grass on the other side of the demon. He launched a powerful assault.

*Lukarn* opened huge, gaping wounds; Light poured into naked Void. Narake vanished from sight; whether destroyed or fled, Eadric could not tell: and perhaps it made no difference.

Before he could even draw breath, Visuit sped past again upon *Narh* and struck a great blow upon his shield, shearing the celestial metal from edge to edge, cleaving it cleanly in two. Her curved sword – if such it was – continued through the rerebrace on his shield-arm into sinew. Visions of carnage passed through his mind, and voices called to him from unnamed hells. He felt warm blood flow over his elbow and down to his wrist.

Sixty yards past Eadric, Visuit leapt from her saddle and – with surprising elegance – twisted in the air like a cat, landing firmly to face him. She smiled. Life withered.

Casting off the remains of *Melimpur's Shield*, the *Ahma* gripped his weapon in both hands and materialized immediately in front of the goddess, hewing at her ferociously with every ounce of strength he could muster, and burning her with green flames which issued from him in sheets. *Lukarn* fulminated, illuminating the battlefield as he smote her. She struck back, and with terrible speed. Raining blows down hard upon him, hammering him through helm and armor and forcing him backwards. He bled profusely.

Thus they exchanged buffets. Visuit had quickly gained the upper hand.

The *Ahma* prudently withdrew. He followed a strand of Green and appeared instantly before Nwm.

"I need more," he said simply.

"There is no more. Try harder," Nwm scowled as he *healed* him.

"Nwm..."

"My resources are not infinite!" Nwm snapped. "And a new front is about to open. And there will be others. Timing is critical. Do not be distracted. *Now keep them at bay.*"

The *Ahma* nodded, understanding.

Moments later, the lich Choach – together with a large number of *Anantam* magi – arrived a league to the west, collapsing Nwm's *Interdiction*.

Demons began *teleporting*: probing unlocked areas closer to the centre of the camp. Every plant whispered; green ripples moved across the ground, as hundreds of Templars rapidly transported themselves back from the now-vanished periphery.

Two hundred yards from Eadric and Nwm, Narake reappeared.

Nwm vomited as the demon invoked a spell, enveloping everything within a mile in a maelstrom of black fire. Thousands died. Though many – adequately warded – survived, all plant matter was turned to ash.

Nwm coughed, regaining his composure. It has to be *Now*.

[Tahl]: We are ready.

[Mesikammi]: As are we.

[Lai]: And we.

[Brey]: And we.

A silent green nova.

Eadric knew it: he had felt it before in Afqithan. This was of more modest scope, but subtler. A frequency attuned to a specific vibration, married to a wave of banishment. Every demon, every chthonic vanished. Pazuzu and Visuit, vanished. Each expunged; shunted away to its proper place.

Yeshe cursed. *Gating* Visuit again would not be possible until the prescribed length of time had elapsed. The thirty-or-so balors who had been interposed between the dark celestials and the *Ushabam* had disappeared; Hemah and his brethren were already in their midst, sweeping their fiery swords in great arcs, and hewing them down.

Ablaze with her own magic, she emptied her reservoir and struck the former episeme with a pillar of blackness, slaying him. Wearily, the Binder opened yet another *gate*, and another; she drew now on a rod of ancient potency to fuel her magic.

She staggered. Exhausted, she vanished with a *word of recall*. Those amongst the *Ushabam* who were able, followed her lead.

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The earth was black in the gathering night: Narake's carnage was ugly. Outside of the wasted area, the Temple forces were assembling.

Eadric stared at the body of Hemah; he had expected it to vaporize, or at least to smoulder. The great archon seemed serene in extinction. The devil's expression might have been one of mild perplexity. They were one and the same.

Irel alighted silently next to the *Ahma*.

*Whither?* Eadric wondered.

"To a lake of fire," the fallen deva replied.

"Or to an Ocean?"

"If you decree it."

"Let it be so."

Eadric heard a soft hoof-fall approaching; he turned to observe the stallion *Narh* pacing gently toward him. Somewhat behind, a lone figure wearing a worn studded jack and spattered with ichor.

Ortwine gave a hint of a smile as she approached, and tossed Sibud's head to the ground at the *Ahma's* feet.

"One for me," she said.

Eadric gaped.

"In order to write lays of one's exploits, it is necessary to first perform them," she explained.

[Nwm]: It must wait.

A magical wind was rising: the slightest breeze, invoked by Prahar, but tenacious: it rendered all flight impossible. Those who remained aloft across the battlefield found themselves without purchase, and plummeted.

Ortwine gazed north and east. Night had now fallen fully, but the sky – through Mesikammi's arts – was clear as crystal and the stars were bright. A tremor pulsed through the ground. Ancient carynxes

were sounding brazenly, as evil godlings ordered their undead ranks.

"Prahar is preparing to charge with his death knights," the sidhe observed drily. "By lucky happenstance, the greatest horse ever sired is your eager steed."

The *Ahma* muttered an earnest prayer of thanks to Uedii.

"You may also thank me. You may not criticize me for my gnomes again," Ortwine smiled coldly.

"Thank-you," Eadric nodded. "And agreed. What will you do?"

Ortwine reached into her vest and withdrew a talisman which reeked utterly of evil. "I plan to sow discord – which appears to be my forte."

\*Unfortunately for Eadric, Visuit resolves her melee attacks as touch attacks. DR 50/- helped *a lot*. DevCrits didn't work for either of them as they were both *fortified*. At this point, they were pretty evenly matched. *Don't let her charge* was the informed consensus.

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### **Mostin Ex Machina**

Temenun meditated in Dream. His ancient consciousness – elevated by powerful magics and attuned to destructive urges – rapidly took stock of the changing situation. Prescient impulses crowded his mind, each seeking to assert its own augury as truth.

Sibud had fallen; the Vampire had been an arrogant fool, and the Tiger felt only contempt. To taunt vindictive sidhe-queens entailed certain risks, and departing one's own fortifications to slake an urge as

base as *feeding* brought the consequences it deserved. Masquerading as an agent hired by herself, Ortwine had infiltrated Thond, gained news of Sibud's whereabouts, and penetrated the spirits which attended him during his glut. A dirty, ignoble assassination.

Temenun smiled. Eventually, his Naztharunes would have accomplished the same task. But the sidhe had also succeeded in instigating a bloody feud between two opposing factions within the Truzha leadership; Thond's cohesion would soon be lost. Part of Dhatri's main force – bent on Jompa, where mortals were more abundant – would have to divert to Thond and resecure it.

Yeshe had vanished, presumably departing to a hidden sanctum to recoup. As many as half of the *Ushabam* were destroyed, and her authority was now questionable at best. But not her *power*; Temenun would not underestimate *that*.

The Tiger considered Idyam now the greatest threat to his own supremacy; the demilich, virtually indestructible, had been quietly extending his power base. Temenun knew through his spies that Anumid had spoken with him at least three times, but Idyam played a cool courtship and patiently bided his time.

Imperceptible to the oneiric guard which the Servants of the Sun had set in defense, Temenun dreamed his way in darkness to Scir Cellod to watch events as they unfolded.

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Choach, and the thirty *Anantam* who accompanied him, were entrenching quickly. They had cordoned a half-acre with *walls of force* and fortified their position with *dimensional locks*, *symbols* and a complex pattern of selective antimagic, overlaid by the lich himself. In unlocked areas, *teleportation circles* were opened; a quartet of compacted balors herded goristros through with goads of adamant. A ruddy glow illuminated the magical beachhead.

Perched on a skeletal dragon, Choach gazed across the dark of the rising plain, bending his thought north and east. *Sunbursts* strobed on the horizon over a low rise. He reached out with his mind to

observe the main conflict, almost four miles away. Lacking adequate aerial support of his own, Prahar had pinned down the devas and griffons and forced a ground engagement.

By now, Choach knew, the nature-priest must be spent. The lich contacted Anumid.

*The situation is precarious. You will need to send reinforcements if you deem victory important.*

In Jashat, the Mouthpiece pondered. This might have been an ill-advised sortie, but one could hardly gainsay Visuit.

With exquisite timing, Temenun's voice purred into his mind. *I am also here, Anumid. I can strike the decisive blow.*

"How much?" Anumid asked aloud through gritted teeth.

*Two thousand.*

Anumid almost laughed. It was a preposterous sum; almost two thirds of the liquid assets of the convocations. "Even were your solution watertight, I could not persuade the cabals to invest so much."

*Shvar Choryati*, was Temenun's response.

The blood left Anumid's face. "I will communicate your offer."

*Do not tarry in your deliberations. You have less than an hour before Nashhte sets.*

Anumid swore, and commanded a dozen babau to ring the gongs and summon the remaining *Anantam* and as many of the *Kesha-Dirghaa* as could be persuaded. He sent entreaties to Naatha and Rishih to reinforce Choach with their compactees as soon as they might.

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In the chill night air, Ortwine soared undetected above the melee, ignoring Prahar's spell of impeded flight, and gazed at the spectacle below.

The enemy's initial charge had been brutal, and backed by a magical impetus which had broken the half-ordered Temple ranks. Now three great *kanistas*, led by the Penitents and the Illuminated, had rallied and penetrated the Cheshnite front. Ahead of them all, the goddess Ninit rode with the five Boars, cutting a swathe through everything in her path. Magical and supernatural detonations echoed across battlefield. Devas of varying moral persuasions acted as bulwarks around which Wyrish knights rallied.

Nwm had dismantled the ritual configuration; the saints, priests and adepts who had been involved were now free to engage the enemy: a task which they undertook with predictable gusto. Lai was reordering her handmaidens with Mesikammi; the shamaness was readying another rite.

Ortwine descended behind the Cheshnite lines, and wrought a powerful glamour: what was to pass here must go undetected, for a little while at least. She reached into a soft leather pouch and withdrew a slender black taper. Igniting it with a cantrip, she held the candle as it burned rapidly.

A balor appeared in a cloud of fire and smoke. It looked around suspiciously, its *true seeing* unable to pinpoint Ortwine.

"Wait there for a while," the sidhe commanded, her voice issuing from somewhere close by. "I will have further instructions for you presently."

Her eyes penetrated the darkness ahead to observe Mesikammi as she invoked a massive *resurrection*: hundreds of corpses sprang to life again; those who had been *disintegrated* incarnated in pristine forms.

Ortwine raised an eyebrow; even the *death knights* had been afforded random living bodies. Clothed in flesh again, some rejoiced, some wept, others fled or waxed furious; their variety was utterly bewildering: strange goblins and sprites; satyrs, mephits, nymphs and sylphs; animal spirits of every conceivable type. Other spirits for which Ortwine had no names.

*I have decided that I like your style, Ortwine spoke with deific benevolence into Mesikammi's mind. If you wish it, I will sponsor you.*

*Power is power, and I accept; although I fear I might be too fickle a priestess.*

*You may come to realize the absurdity of that sentiment.*

Refocusing, Ortwine reached into her pouch and withdrew another candle.

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The *Ahma* fought upon *Narh*; on his left arm he bore a light buckler lent by Ortwine. The stallion seemed to anticipate his thought even before he did, and moved with a deadly, fluid grace. Already brimming with primal energy, *Narh* had been infused yet further with Green power by Nwm. Sundry wards and both the *Mantle* and the *Quickening* protected Eadric still, but the ecstasy of the *Benediction* had passed, and the grim reality of the conflict had returned to him.

It was a confused riot: cadres of dismounted knights formed protective rings around Flamines as they worked magic; Abyssal blasts issued from death knights, penetrating the Temple ranks. Celestials moved amongst the Wyrish troops, bringing respite wherever they showed themselves; Temple Scrollbearers were evoking *flame strikes* and *sunbursts*, wasting squadrons of undead cavalry. A hundred other magical lights had been struck. Protected by Nwm's *Quickening*, the Templars were proving exceptionally hard to kill. The Dark Choir slew everything in its path.

Overhead, the stars winked as the fume generated by lesser magics was dispersed by the persistent breeze of Prahar's spell. Hyne winded Hemah's horn, a piercing call which echoed across the battlefield.

Striking down the enemy rapidly, the *Ahma* attempted to run a gauntlet of undead knights with Rede, Tarpion and Tahl in order to reach Prahar's standard; he hewed his way forwards until the press became so thick he could no longer move; the reek of the Cheshnite horses – drawn from demonic stock – was suffocating. He spoke a *holy word*, burning away the knights ahead and allowing him to push forward

another twenty yards. Tarpion and Rede flanked him, pronouncing *dicta* and rendering the enemy insensible. Behind, Saint Tahl – grown ten feet tall – now fought on foot.

Prahar, also in the thick of combat but a furlong distant, uttered a profanity and struck Eadric and his company with a *horrid wilting*, which the *Mantle* deflected easily. As the *Ahma* fended the blows from some petty godling, he caught glimpses of Prahar's manner in battle. It made him more than a little nervous.

The undead warrior exhibited a slavering rage whilst raining down magical fire. And when any came within reach of his sword, he killed them instantly, with one stroke. Always.

Eadric cursed as he cut down his opponent, looking past him; now another *gate* was opening near Prahar.

The *Ahma* groaned as a great *Ugra*, hugely muscled and bearing a massive rod lurched through, smashing everything in his path. A distended gut hung over grotesque genitalia; vast horns curved down, then up, then out. Rank hair covered him. *Aja*, the Great Goat.

Eadric knew him as Orcus.

Matters worsened.

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Ortwine clapped her hands. Twelve balors – suitably *screened* and *veiled* – now attended her. All were *dominated*.

"Your primary target – with whom I am sure you are all familiar – is *Prince Orcus*. Perhaps some of you may have been waiting for this opportunity for a long time. Kill Orcus. Kill Prahar. Kill Choach. Kill any other members of the Cheshnite faction. Then return here."

Ortwine waved a hand dismissively. The twelve balors *teleported* away.

*And bring me trophies*, she reminded them.

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The Tiger dreamed his way back to Jashat; he would evoke his spell from a safe distance. Proximity to such a thing as this was never advisable. Beneath a great dome, the assembled magi were waiting for him.

Gathering his energies, Temenun reached out through Dream. Drawing on the pattern generated by the *Anantam*, he penetrated layers of veils, deep into ancient nightmares. His mind rested, still, within the primordial Dark. He breathed deeply.

*Shvar Choryati*, he whispered, and turned his thought back two hundred miles to the north.

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The meticulous preparations for the Abyssal descent were nearing completion.

Thirteen Wizards now worked magic furiously. They conjured allies and warded themselves, haggling over access to one another's spells like children at a fig stand.

Mostin had been forced to revise his plan; yet another delay, but one insisted upon by a vocal minority led by Waide and Tozinak. They must first target the entire area in Azzagrat with the largest expulsive spell they could muster, *before* the *Quiescence* was evoked, ridding the area of chthonic nuisances before proceeding.

Mostin had been forced to reconfigure another spell, a process which took valuable time.

When he was finally ready, the Alienist consulted the *web of motes* again. Soneillon's significator was

beginning a resonance with Rimilin; the wizard would soon bind her, as Graz'zt had indicated. Mostin felt uneasy. He hated it when demons told the truth; it made things so much more complicated.

Even as he observed, possibilities multiplied; an area of flux was causing dozens of motes to swerve along unlikely cateneries. Mostin swore profusely.

*No! Not now! Why was it always now? Why couldn't it wait?*

Eadric's mote suddenly careened towards him at breakneck speed, engulfing him.

Mostin snapped out of his reverie as he was struck by a desperate *sending* issued by Tahl.

*Mostin. Help. Please.*

"This is a most unfair choice," Mostin protested.

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Scenes of battle passed across the surface of the *Mirror of Urm-Nahat*. A ravenous darkness, rolling across the conflict, appeared to be consuming Wyrish troops by the company.

"It's simple," Daunton sighed. "Do you know nothing of committees? We vote; and quickly. Abstentions must also abide by the majority decision. Mostin, as host, must vote last. In the event of a tie, I have the casting vote. My vote is for a return to Wyre."

"To Azzagrat," Jalael said immediately.

"No vote," Tozinak sighed. "I simply cannot. I am overwrought."

"To Azzagrat," Muthollo concurred.

"To Azzagrat," Hlioth nodded.

Mostin cocked his head. Now *that* was unexpected.

"No vote," said Creq. "I have a mortuary in southern Hethio, and I would be loath to see it despoiled. But I am greedy, and wish to increase my power. I am genuinely conflicted."

"I cast no vote," Mulissu waved her hand dismissively. "I do not recognize the authority of the Wyrish Collegium, and reserve the right to ignore any decisions the committee reaches."

"To Wyre," Sho said unexpectedly. Mostin wondered which sentiment moved her; an inkling suggested it might be some sense of obligation to Nwm, but he had no evidence to support the theory.

"To Wyre, also," Troap nodded. "I am a mundane sort, by nature. Which makes me wonder as to which voice Hlioth is responding."

"Now is not the time to analyze motivation." Daunton groaned.

"To Wyre," Orolde answered.

"No vote," Waide growled. "At the moment, neither choice appeals. I am hungry, and I am late to bed."

"To Azzagrat," Droom of Morne spoke. "I would hate more to see the vote so uncontested."

Mostin glared at him.

Daunton looked desperately at the Alienist.

"Wyre," Mostin nodded. "Although I feel bound to point out that the target area is not actually *in* Wyre, either politically or magically. Ladies and gentlemen, we are *unconstrained*."

"If you insist on this course of action," Hlioth sighed wearily, "you must first neutralize Choach, before he disperses his demons and becomes a further nuisance."

"An opinion or a prophecy?" Mostin asked acidly.

"Quiet your ego!" Hlioth snapped. "And for once, do as I say. I will be busy dying elsewhere. Do not mourn. I will be back ere sunrise."

"Hence, I mourn."

"After you have eliminated Choach, evacuate as many as you can," Hlioth sighed. "You cannot overcome this darkness."

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Daunton pinpointed one of the gaps in Choach's protective net with a potent divination.

The *Infernal Tower* appeared, unmasked by any illusion, within the lich's rapidly deploying force. The Collegiate mages stood on a wide balcony which Mostin had caused to be projected from the tower's wall at a height of fifty feet. The Alienist smashed the lattice of antimagic protecting the Cheshnite magi with a powerful *dispelling*.

A barrage of *disjunctions* – previously prepared by the Wyrish wizards for the purpose of sealing the twenty-two chthonic *gates* of Azzagrat – instead rained upon Choach and the *Anantam*, stripping them of protections, collapsing *walls of force* and rendering *teleportation circles* inert.

Mulissu struck Choach with a *Glance of Thunder*; before he could *teleport*, she struck with another. Mostin detonated a massive sonic.

"Take out the balors, you idiots!" Mostin barked at the other wizards, who seemed to be targeting groups of demons indiscriminately.

Tozinak grew wings and hovered excitedly. "My egg has hatched! My egg has hatched!"

Mulissu collapsed unconscious, blood pouring from her nose.

Deprived of his physical form, Choach fled back to his phylactery.

Five miles away, Eadric was alerted to the presence of the wizards by a peal of distant thunder.

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## **Moonrise**

Hlioth appeared before Nwm. The Preceptor looked haggard.

"Go to Mostin and sort things out," she instructed. "Then start thinking of a way to get rid of *that*." The witch gestured irritably to a billowing void which absorbed everything in its path.

"I am spent," Nwm shook his head.

"But you cannot be!" Hlioth groaned. "Mostin is missing me from his ritual; I had elected you my substitute."

Nwm glared at her. He *was* spent; aside from a few restorative spells, he had almost nothing left.

"Work something out," Hlioth said irritably. "Is this all there is?" She glanced around: Lai and her handmaidens, a few Uediiian priests and priestesses. Most seemed exhausted; at least Lai retained some of her power.

"You are late to the party," Nwm smiled stonily.

"It will have to do. Give me what you've got."

Hlioth drew on their magic, invoked a powerful ward – on herself alone – and then vanished.

"Charming," Nwm sighed. He looked at Lai.

"I'll go," the goddess said. She vanished into the earth.

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Eadric was closer to it: an inky darkness which slithered across the ground like malign fog. It emanated terror; those which it touched, it snuffed out. Everything recoiled from it; it seemed bent only on destroying vibrancy and life. The telepathic screams issued by celestials which had encountered it still echoed in the *Ahma's* mind.

He had no time to muse on such things. Orcus's mace slammed into his buckler, numbing his left arm; a sting like a wyvern's tail punched through a gap in his armor and potent venom threatened to overwhelm him. Horns, a maw, claws. A foul, rank, cloying smell. *Aja* was a bastion around which all evil things rallied and from which all that was good was moved to flee. *Lukarn* was impotent against the demon's defenses; the Prince of the Undead had erected a ward of indomitability about himself.

Orcus spoke a dark *blasphemy*. Eadric endured it; Rede and Tarpion reeled. Others nearby exploded into dust.

Eadric groaned. Balors were now manifesting all around him.

*They're on your side*, Ortwine's voice echoed in his head.

*Your timing is a little tight. Orcus is warded.*

*Noted.*

The *dominated* balors targeted *Aja* with *dispellings*.

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The stars shone brighter still.

Mesikammi had now waxed to her full power; the spell which she had wrought an hour before came into effect.

Reaching skywards, she plucked a meteor from the heavens and pulled it to the earth; the light as it struck the ground illuminated the countryside for miles around. Its impact vaporized an entire company of undead mercenaries, and left a smoking hole a hundred feet wide.

Nwm glanced upwards. More stars seemed to be shifting.

"How many more do you have?" He asked.

"Three," Mesikammi smiled.

"Make 'em count," Nwm cautioned her.

*Mind my balors*, Ortwine's voice carried to the shamaness.

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The *Ahma* enjoyed a brief lacuna in the combat; everything within a hundred feet was dead. Orcus had fled or obscured himself – a dozen balors was enough to cause even him pause for thought. Prahar had done the same, although Eadric anticipated that either or both would soon reappear.

In their absence, the demons had set upon the enemy knights.

Ortwine became visible and descended to the ground, her hand upon the pommel of her weapon. Eadric leaned heavily on *Lukarn*, and spat blood.

She gave a cool smile, and bowed. "I should apologize for doubting your capacity to keep me entertained. I have burned all but one of my candles; unfortunately, those fellows cannot linger too long. Still we're not doing so badly."

Eadric gestured with *Lukarn* towards the consuming Void.

"There is that," Ortwine conceded. Her face became deadly serious. "You should consider sounding a general retreat. "

Eadric nodded. He knew it.

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Hlioth materialized within a translucent jade sphere atop a precipice; below her, waves crashed at its base, the foam catching starlight. The moon was still a rumor on the eastern horizon. Nearby, an iron tower reared high into the sky.

*You.* Rimilin spoke into her mind.

As demons materialized around her, the Green Witch struck her staff upon the rock, sending forth a massive vibration which caused the ground to heave and ripple. Like a rising bore, it rapidly carried the tower and its contents over the edge of the cliff, toppling it into ocean below. The air around her was suddenly thick with fiends *teleporting* away from the collapsing structure, hurling magic and bodies against her.

Unperturbed, Hlioth pronounced a swift *banishment* of great power; green light flashed. Abruptly, all was quiet.

Rimilin arose from the wreck of his abode and alighted on the cliff-top twenty yards away.

"Are you done?" He asked. He struck her with a *disjunction* and blasted her with arcane fire.

Hlioth smiled. The spell she cast – possessed of immense penetrative power – could not be turned. Rimilin knew that it had been crafted just for him.

A look of mild astonishment crossed his face; he had not expected another of that magnitude. And not this...

Rimilin vanished.

Hlioth sighed. The presence of another. A void with many tendrils. She saw Queen Soneillon quietly walking towards her, even as an annihilating fire consumed her.

"You have seen too much," the witch whispered, as she expired.

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Mostin grumbled. Goristros were hurling themselves at the base of the tower, and palrethees were appearing before him. The threat of the balors had – fortunately – been eliminated in quick measure: Jalael had *dominated* one and hurled it at another; the two remaining had wisely chosen to avoid the same fate, and vanished.

The Alienist sighed. They were probably loose in the world. Somewhere. Tracking them and dispatching them was not a chore which concerned him.

Mostin invoked a chained *polymorph*; the demons directly ahead were transformed into trout and dropped to the ground. Those who were fortunate enough to avoid the hooves of the goristros flapped briefly before dying.

Creq was administering some necromantic elixir to Mulissu in order to revive her. Tozinak made encouraging sounds.

"Can't you *do* something?" Mostin asked of Tozinak, incredulous. "Even Waide is *doing* something." The other transmuter had reversed gravity, causing three of the enormous demons to bob in the air unceremoniously.

Tozinak pursed his lip – Mostin had no doubt that he had taken genuine offense – and pointed. A goristro began to dance.

Lai sprang out of the ground, assumed the form of a falcon, shot upwards, dived, and landed on the balcony, resuming her normal shape in a single, seamless movement.

Mostin blanched.

"Hlioth indicated that you need another for your spell," Lai explained. She reached down and *healed* Mulissu, saving her from Creq's dubious ministrations.

Mostin's prolepsis warned him of an impending explosion of planar conduits. Naatha and Rishih, with their allies. Too many; the force previously gathered to assault Fumaril. More *teleportation circles* began to appear, a quarter-mile to the north. Three *gates* flashed open. Demons, giants, magi. Immortals. Mostin knew they were loaded with magic. They were coming through fast.

"Sh\*t," the Alienist cursed.

"Well?" Mulissu asked groggily.

"We have to," Mostin nodded glumly.

Drawing on the cabal, he invoked a massive *Quiescence of the Spheres*. The air became still, and all dimensional traffic within ten miles was stifled. Silence.

An acidic storm struck the tower. Orolde, Troap, Creq and Daunton perished.

"That it should come to this," Mulissu erected an *antimagic field*.

"Deploy the compactees," Mostin screamed, skin hanging from his nose like molten wax.

A portal to the tower – no small postern, but a great gate – was opened. Dozens of compacted demons, devils, hags and elementals – retained as security against Abyssal entanglements – poured forth. Quasits and mephits bickered in the air above them.

"After we get out of the vacuum, please tell me you can *wind walk*?" Mostin asked Lai.

"Only to a certain point," Lai said. "Prahar has forbidden flight beyond it."

Mostin groaned.

An old moon – a slender sickle, the colour of deep rust – finally arose from behind distant hills, casting morbid rays across the field.

\*\*

Prahar had invoked a pitch darkness which defied all attempts to *dispel* it. It encapsulated an area of fierce combat, where a great mob of undead horsemen were attempting to push through to a heavily defended Temple centre. Within the shadow, the void – famished and profane – rolled forward and consumed. Hysteria descended on the Wyrish forces. Their enemy – seemingly unaffected – struck at them ruthlessly. Tahl, separated from the others and finally surrounded and overwhelmed, self-immolated in a swirling column of fire and vanished, burning the enemy in a wide circle.

Nwm stumbled blindly toward the *Sela's* redoubt, where he knew many of the hardest knights were stationed; even his supernatural vision had been subdued. He cursed himself, assumed the shape of a wolf, and sniffed his way forwards. More than a few hacked at him in panic as he moved, mistaking him for the enemy; he shrugged off their blows.

Behind him, *it* was coming. He could feel it; Green was buckling like a warped plank to accommodate it.

\*

*Shvar Choryati* encroached. Now it phased nearby in contempt of the *Quiescence of the Spheres*, first here and then there, slaying hundreds each time it appeared; half at random, but always *closer*, as if some instinct drew it obliquely inwards.

Nwm stilled his thought and considered his options. He observed its pattern, and pondered.

"You will not escape it," Nwm spoke to the *Sela*. "No magic can speed you fast enough now; all has been stilled. It hungers for you, albeit circuitously; it does not perceive the route to you in linear fashion. Many are dying as it seeks you; we may never recover them. It will eat everything near you. Will you trust me and do as I say?" Nwm asked.

"Yes," Tramst replied. Even in the darkness, Nwm knew that his expression was open.

Nwm reached out and felt the *Sela's* helm, and placed a hand on either side.

"Invoke her," the Preceptor said.

"Nehael," Tramst whispered. A supplication.

"Rest until the morning. I will wake you at sunrise." With a strong twist, Nwm snapped the *Sela's* neck.

His death passed unnoticed by all except the Darkness.

Become an enormous hunting cat, Nwm bounded north and west. Two minutes later, beyond the range of Prahar's invocation, he assumed the form of a great eagle, and powered his way away, in search of a likely refuge.

Meanwhile, the void turned its attention to the brightest remaining source of light.

\*\*

Lai led six wizards – Mostin, Mulissu, Jalael, Tozinak, Waide, and Droom – north and west across the battlefield in vaporous form. Sho and Muthollo had retreated into the Tower, in the event that one amongst the Cheshnite immortals was to prove intent upon – and capable of – breaching it. *Disjoining* the wards upon the solar in the vestibule had been the Alienist's suggestion as to their first line of defense.

As Mostin sped away from his fortress, he noticed that a number of large nozzles had emerged at intervals around the tower, and were projecting some kind of hellfire at the advancing demons.

Evidently, Sho had been referencing more obscure tomes than he; this function was unknown to him.

To hasten their passage, Mulissu had evoked a roaring wind which verged on agonizing to ride. Only moments later, Naatha, Guho and a group of *Kesha-Dirghaa* theurges were in swift pursuit, employing similar tactics. The savant immediately conjured elementals to delay them.

Below, isolated skirmishes persisted between death knights and paladins; ahead, a blank hemisphere a half-mile in diameter had sprung up. Around it – and presumably within it – the main conflict surged to and fro.

[Mostin]: What is your evacuation plan?

[Mulissu]: I?

[Jalael]: He means any but he.

[Mostin]: I am not equipped to move large numbers of mundanes. What do we have left?

(Tally of spells).

[Jalael]: Were that we were better configured for offense.

[Mostin]: We will be next time.

[Waide]: There will be no 'next time.' I might also observe that the stress of our current predicament is having a deleterious effect upon Tozinak's delicate psyche.

[Tozinak]: Do not speak of me as though I am not here!

[Jalael]: The fat transmuter fears stress, Tozinak. Pay him no heed. Somehow, you have stumbled your way into transvalency.

[Tozinak] (emboldened): Quite so!

[Mostin]: A month previous would have been preferable.

[Tozinak]: I have a spell already at hand!

[Waide]: He is clearly deranged.

[Tozinak]: Preparation will take only a few moments. I must corporeate and study my petroglyphs.

[Mostin + Mulissu]: What do you speak of?

[Tozinak]: My slab, bequeathed by Jovol. His last work.

[Mostin]: What is it titled, idiot?

[Tozinak]: There is no need for rudeness, Mostin.

[Mostin]: *Its name!*

[Tozinak]: *A Flame Precedes the Aeon*

[Mulissu] (exasperated): Just show us the pattern.

(A pause for inspection)

[Mostin]: A Grand Enochia? A conjuration, or a transmutation? It makes no sense. The spell is scribed in terms of Urgic Altitudes. It needs thirteen...

[Jalael]: Tozinak! You imbecile!

Mostin groaned as he saw. The focus required was *Pharamne's Urn*.

Ortwine's voice suddenly echoed in his head. *Mostin! You made it! How delightful!*

As they began to descend, Mostin looked down and sighed. The sidhe was waltzing with a balor upon a heap of the slain.

From without the magical darkness, the insatiable void now lurched uncertainly; but away from the conflict, south and east towards Jompa.

Ahead of it, drawing it onwards, a streak of brilliant light; Eadric brandishing *Lukarn* and riding upon *Narh*.

\*\*

In Nizkur, the appeal reached her.

Teppu immediately stopped time.

"Thank-you," Nehael acknowledged. A moment to reflect was never a bad thing.

"It is an eventful night," Teppu observed. "And I am losing track. Has Nwm overstepped the mark, I

wonder?"

"Frankly, I find Hlioth's play more outrageous."

"Enitharmon will be in flap," Teppu pointed out.

Nehael nodded. "I anticipate he will send episemes to penetrate the *Hahio*. I might need to have words with them."

"Be gentle with them," Teppu said wryly.

"I will invite them to stay," Nehael smiled. "I can be very accommodating. If you would..."

Time resumed its normal flow.

The goddess reached out to Tramst; Her grace enfolded his spirit, and kept him safe.

\*\* \*\*

By the light of a dim oil lamp, the Adversary relaxed in the study of Mostin's manse, sipping firewine and playing a game of chance with Mei.

"Alas," he remarked wryly to the *simulacrum*. "I fear that you have no ego and I have no name. We should each borrow a little from the other."

Mei was confused. She still didn't know why this sprite was here. He seemed pleasant enough, and his manners were always impeccable; although she could never tell if he was being serious.

"No, thank-you. I await my pseudogenesis," she answered, playing a red token with three sphinxes graven on it.

"Might I inquire why?" The Adversary asked.

"I must weigh transcendence against preservation; I favor a high ratio of the former to the latter."

"Your sister seems content enough." The Adversary carefully placed two white tokens – each bearing a yellow trifoil – on the table. "Hers is a rapid path."

"I wish for a greater leap," Mei shrugged.

"Ahh," the Adversary nodded. "I face a similar dilemma. Although mine is rather the reverse."

"I do not comprehend."

"The certitude of *diminishment*, or the high likelihood of *extinction*. You may remove that token from beneath your hand; you must learn more finesse if you are going to cheat at this game." He played another yellow trifoil.

"And if you choose to risk extinction, and yet persist?" Mei inquired, unabashed that her subterfuge was revealed.

"I fear I might be *forgiven*. From my perspective, this is the worst possible outcome."

"Diminishment is so untenable a proposition?"

"My circumstances are rather unique," the Adversary smiled.

"And extinction?"

"I speak metaphorically, of course."

Mei gave a puzzled look. "I can no longer follow this argument."

The Adversary sighed. "It is complex. I also regret to inform you that I have won the game."

He placed a blue tile bearing a pomegranate before him.

"You already played that token!" Mei objected.

"I'm sure I didn't. Perhaps you are mistaking the previous game with this."

"This game bores me," Mei remarked. "I never win."

"I have another," the Adversary suggested. "If you would prefer. It is called *Requite*."

"Are there more tokens?"

"Of a sort," the Adversary admitted. "But of a more abstract kind. We pretend to dispense judgement upon our devilish minions, pronouncing terrible dooms; their humiliation and subjugation serves to magnify us. We must maneuver our pieces cunningly; our minions are apt to squabble amongst themselves."

"It sounds involved."

"It is," the Adversary nodded. "But I am well-practiced, and I can teach you. Would you care to learn?"

Mei shrugged. It was something to pass the time.

*Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 06-12-09*

### **Interpenetration** (Mostin *In Machinam*)

The air rushed past the *Ahma* as he rode along the sward above the Hynt Coched. As *Shvar Choryati* had made its first dimensional lurch toward him, Eadric knew that its attention had become focused on him. Having considered that he would be able to draw it away and outpace it, the *Ahma* had veered sharply south. It quickly became apparent that he had miscalculated.

Some distance away, Mostin turned his *arcane sight* around him.

Wild magic danced intermittently in the air; auroras generated by the interplay of a half-dozen potent spells. Nearby, the wall of Prahar's *Utterdark* loomed, impenetrable to his vision; south, the vastness of the *Pall of Dhatri* was now visible in the moonlight. He gazed west: Naatha, Guho and the hierophants were almost upon them.

Eastward, where the plain rose away, Eadric blazed a path faster than any *wind walker*, opening a gap of over two miles between himself and the consuming blackness. The phenomenon shuddered forward again – and a little east – ripping the fabric of reality and stretching the *Quiescence of the Spheres* until it squeezed through, and the dimensional lock snapped back into place.

In an instant, the void sprang forwards almost mile. Mostin's *foresight* informed him that the *Ahma* wasn't going to make it. A series of presentiments impacted on his mind.

Mostin cursed, dismissed the *Quiescence*, and invoked a *time stop*. He *teleported* to a point immediately ahead of Eadric, opened a *gate*, and hopped through. It was a strategy which the Alienist had previously used to extricate Mulissu from Graz'zt's clutches.

Time recommenced.

Eadric blinked, saw Mostin beckoning toward a serene vista, and was instantly transported.

\*

The *Ahma*, sat astride *Narh*, was high on a mountain; a narrow path wound downwards and away from him. Monasteries clung to the wooded lower slopes; isolated hermitages were perched on bare, snowy shoulders higher up. Below, wide vistas stretched to blue. It was an idyll, as if stolen from a dream he had once had in an innocent youth: a view of the Blessed Plain from the Beatitudes. Now, he seemed to be awakening from a nightmare; he removed his battered helm and breathed. The air was sweet and sharp and full with energy. All was pristine. The sky seemed composed of tiny motes which danced before his eyes, until he focused his sight.

High above, uncounted myriads of archons and devas whirled in the sky. Spheres of increasing brilliance seemed to issue up and away from him, defying laws of distance and perception. Beyond, the Magnitudes pulsed. The light – refracted through the planes of four interposing heavens – was still too overwhelming to gaze upon.

*Ahma*, the celestials sighed into his mind with one voice.

The massive vibration made Eadric shake.

Mostin stood looking back through the *gate* into the darkness of *Shvar Choryati* as it oozed around the portal, unable to penetrate. His pseudopod flexed nervously.

"Mostin..."

"I know they're above me," the Alienist said through gritted teeth. "That's why I'm not turning around and looking up. "

"No. How did you..."

"We had to come a long way in. It might have followed you anywhere else. Believe me when I say I can think of more agreeable locales."

"I need to get back to the fight."

Mostin sighed. "That's precisely what you *don't* want to do, Eadric. It wants to eat your 'soul' – or whatever you term it. You need Nwm. This is out of your league."

"But the *Sela*..."

***Sela!*** A pulse which made the mountain tremble.

"Tramst is dead," a familiar voice said.

Eadric turned to face Rintrah, Oronthon's Messenger. He was clad in a simple white gown.

"For the time being," the celestial added. "He is in transit, under Nehael's protection. There is some disagreement amongst the Host whether he is safe or not."

"Disagreement?" Mostin asked, averting his eyes. The notion amongst celestials was a novel one.

"Do you believe him safe?" The *Ahma* asked directly.

"Yes. But I am in the minority, and my opinion matters little."

"Ah, a demonstration of Empyrean initiative," Mostin sneered. He continued to look through the *gate*; the blackness had passed over, and was gravitating back to a more reliable source of light. There seemed to be no activity in the immediate vicinity; *Shvar Choryati* had scoured all bare. A ruddy moonlight had returned to the battlefield.

"I am fallible," Rintrah answered, unfazed. "Enitharmon, less so. How could I deny this basic fact?"

Mostin groaned, and turned to face the celestial, his expression one of nausea. "You are trite. You appeal to hierarchy to avoid responsibility: you are fundamentally disingenuous."

"I wish you were capable of understanding otherwise, Mostin..."

The Alienist became red and twitched. "Would it avoid the World being wracked because Oronthogorgon is having another existential crisis?"

"Enough!" Eadric's eyes flashed. "You forget where you are."

***Wrath!*** Thunder echoed in the spheres above.

Mostin quailed – an expression which quickly became a pout – and turned back to look through the *gate*, positioning himself again so as not to observe Rintrah directly. Evidently, Eadric possessed some

kind of home ground advantage.

Things seemed to be quiet through the portal.

"I'm done here," Mostin announced. "I'm going back through. As you're staying for a while, Eadric, maybe you can ask..."

"I can tell you nothing of the Aeon," Rintrah anticipated him.

"Whatever," Mostin grumbled. "I'm assuming you can figure out a way back. Mulissu was just as appreciative when I did the same for her."

Mostin vanished and the *gate* snapped shut.

"We should go this way," Rintrah smiled to Eadric. "The view is good."

"Rintrah, I cannot stay..."

"Certainly, you can – for a while. Mostin is correct in one thing; you can no longer meaningfully influence the outcome of this battle."

***Gone.***

"Gone? Who is gone?" Eadric asked.

Rintrah raised an eyebrow. Evidently, this was also news to the Messenger. "The seven seraphs who entered Viridescence."

"*Seraphim*?" Aside from Enitharmon, none among the highest choir had left their Altitude since the Fall.

"These are eventful times," Rintrah nodded. "It would appear that Nehael has appropriated them."

**(A Migration of Light).**

Eadric was dumbfounded. Apparently, others amongst the Host were inclined to join them. A few – perhaps too eager – fell catastrophically, striking the plains below and vanishing.

Rintrah smiled. "Stay focused on the path ahead, and don't be distracted by what transpires above. Do not *concern* yourself too much; in Consciousness, all events are allegory. Let us walk a little way further; there is a tree I would like you to see."

"In the face of calamity, you seem in no hurry to act."

"I sense no diminishment in the quality of the light," Rintrah said wryly. "It is a prodigal spark which counsels action as the only means to induce motion. I am not here at Enitharmon's behest: I am His Messenger."

"Forgive me," Eadric nodded.

\*\*

As the *Quiescence of the Spheres* dissolved and Mostin vanished, Ortwine, Lai and the remaining wizards found themselves in something of a predicament. The sidhe had quickly *screened* them, and Jalael had immediately *disjoined* Prahar's darkness in order to gain a better appreciation of the tactical situation. It was bad.

Temple units, who had been unable to endure the presence of *Shvar Choryati*, were routing to the north and west: great, curved swathes of lifeless corpses marked the passage of the Eater of Light.

Prince Tagur, who commanded the rearguard, had deployed a screen of knights to cover the retreat. Prahar led a vicious pursuit. Squadrons of death knights roamed and slew at will, cutting down stragglers and hurling themselves against any remaining pockets of resistance. Three large knots of Templars and their allies remained, but many of the doughtiest warriors – those in whom the light

shone brightest – had been greedily devoured by the enemy.

Some distance away, outside of the zone where flight had been dampened, what remained of the Dark Choir – the arch-devas Irel and Shokad – gyred in the sky, locked in furious but inconclusive combat with Prince Orcus and a number of lesser demons.

Ortwine's perception identified Naatha, Guho and their *wind-walking* cabal half-a-minute distant. A hundred yards away, a demon materialized. And another. Rishih was active, and the *teleportation circles* were opening again. The consuming darkness – distracted momentarily a mile to the southeast – was moving back towards them. News of the disappearance of both the *Ahma* and the *Sela* was beginning to spread.

The sidhe turned to Mulissu.

"Remind me why it is exactly that you're here again?" She asked.

"Hlioth seems to think that some kind of evacuation is both possible and desirable."

Ortwine raised an eyebrow. "The witch?"

Mulissu nodded. "Her foresight is erratic, but occasionally inspired."

"I suppose so. I will negotiate some breathing space." She handed Mulissu her *box of shades*.

"You seek to parley?" Mulissu was incredulous. "At this juncture? Why would they listen to you? And why do you pay heed to *Hlioth*, of all people?"

Ortwine laughed.

*Prahar*, she spoke directly into his mind, but also into the thoughts of those other immortals who were present. *I've got Sibud's talisman. Call off your dogs. I'm willing to make a deal.*

[Guho + Rishih + Naatha]: Wait!

\*\*

The Alienist glanced around nervously and licked his lips. He was nearing the point where he was becoming vulnerable; a decidedly undesirable situation. He reached out with his mind to contact Sho.

Moments later, the *Infernal Tower* appeared immediately before Mostin, rearing above him with its gate facing him.

[Sho]: I recommend that you embark quickly.

Mostin didn't need telling twice.

[Mulissu]: Mostin! Where the hell have you been? Never mind. Get to Kustus and what's left of the Flamines. Get them out of here.

[Mostin]: Why the hiatus?

[Jalael]: Ortwine is ceding the field and negotiating the safe recovery of casualties.

[Mostin] (Mad Laughter): Safe? I notice a certain chthonic void seems undistracted by any diplomatic protocols. And since when did Ortwine become the chief ambassador of Wyre?

[Mulissu] (Irritated): Since she could lie better than anyone else! Now make haste!

\*\*

"A weregild, so to speak," Ortwine smiled easily. "Or reparations if you prefer. Or simply bribery, if we can speak more directly."

Her apparent nonchalance belied her caution, and she was ready to sidestep into Faerie at the first sign of treachery, or if any magical energies were suddenly gathered. Before her, four great Cheshnite immortals – Prahar, Guho, Rishih and Naatha – were arrayed, surrounded by dozens of undead and demonic retainers.

Ortwine was alone. She was also surprised to find that Sibud's token was attracting this much attention, and lamented the fact that she might be grossly *underestimating* its value. The sidhe scanned the opposition.

Naatha, she had encountered before, but the others were new to her. Guho writhed, a festering heap of corruption; larvae – which seemed to comprise her entirety – shifted and flowed in shapes which paused at times to resemble that of a mortal visage.

Prahar was mounted on a black monster of approximately equine shape; he was clad in full harness, but his raised visor displayed a shrivelled countenance; one which indicated both a malice and a madness of unguessable depth. From his jaws – punctuated by rows of razor-sharp teeth – a sticky secretion dripped. He raved and slavered, and seemed barely in control of his faculties.

Rishih – who stood slightly to one side, with obvious distaste for his peers – appeared human; albeit one ancient and wicked. A weight of being afflicted him, as though he craved annihilation; he wore only an ascetic's garb, but bore a staff of tremendous power.

Before them all stood Anumid, grudgingly invoked by the immortals as arbiter. His veneer of civility was thin.

"But to which oaths can I bind you?" Ortwine continued. "I suspect that each of you is as inclined to malfeasance as I in contractual matters. The answer is none, of course; hence I continue to speak."

"We give you one hour," Anumid spat. "I do not speak for *Shvar Choryati*. Give me the talisman. There are no assurances."

"Prahar should first dismiss his spell," Ortwine said reasonably. Within range of her deific sight,

Mostin's tower had materialized again. "It will expedite our retreat."

Naatha, also sensing the relocation of the infernal device, immediately assumed treachery and targeted Ortwine with chains of *antimagic*.

The sidhe had vanished before she had even raised her hand.

*Too bad*, Ortwine's voice echoed in their minds, moments later.

Prahar became enraged. The others withdrew from him.

"Fortify your position before sunrise," Anumid hissed to Rishih and Naatha. "Let the maniac be concerned with any pursuit. Consolidate. The field is ours."

Anumid scowled, but felt an inward relief that Sibud's token was not in Prahar's hands. At least his own presence had averted the immortals coming to blows with one another. That had to be worth something. For the moment, at least.

\*

Jalael had conjured a *teleportation circle* – the only one available to any of the remaining collegiate mages – through which the remnants of the Temple centre were fleeing. Tozinak had opened a *gate*; Mulissu a *shadow avenue*. Temple scrollbearers and flamines were being ushered into the *Infernal Tower* against their better judgement. At Mostin's suggestion, egress from the battlefield was being offered first to spellcasters; others – who weren't as strategically important – would have to make their own arrangements.

Demons harried them in droves; *banishments* were discharged.

\*\*

As the very first light of dawn stole over the battlefield, a pillar of flame appeared amid the slaughter, at the same spot where Saint Tahl the Incorruptible had self-immolated. Fiery wings – briefly appearing and then vanishing – cradled Tahl as he corporeated again.

Looking around him, he wept.

"Come," Hlioth said, appearing from nowhere. "Before they do. We have lost much tonight."

In her hand, she held *Dreng*, Ninit's spear.

\*

Eighty miles to the north, perched on a rocky crag, Nwm – in the form of an eagle with a battered aspect – awoke and screeched. His head hurt. He remembered little of his exhausted journey to his roost.

As he stretched his wings, he started. Squatting motionless on her haunches above him, perched upon an outcrop and staring southwards at the *Pall of Dhatri*, a lean figure; sable-clad, with scarlet hair flapping in the wind. She said nothing.

In his mind, another voice.

[Nehael]: About time. You have a busy day ahead.

Nwm groaned.

\*\*

Temenun relaxed in his suites at Jashat. A victory, to be certain. He apprised a Naztharune servant that he had a visitor, and to admit Yeshe the Binder. She entered calmly.

"What do you know of the *Urn*?" She asked.

"It reaches beyond the Veils," he replied.

"You incited Visuit to interrupt my meditation?"

"Her instinct for war needs no prompting," Temenun purred.

"And the *Urn*?"

"Is safely buried in the deep again. *Gu-Kaama* has recovered it. Mostin inadvertently empowered her."

"*Shvar Choryati* is out of control. It drives northwards now toward Wyre. The Enforcer will eliminate the *Anantam* who are implicated in its conjuration if it passes her threshold. I assume that you have some contingency in mind?"

"I have a while yet to consider," the Tiger said smoothly. "And always time to indulge your curiosity, Yeshe."

"You are most gracious, brother," Yeshe smiled insincerely.

*Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 08-30-2009*

## **TREE**

[SKADDING]: What happened when the *Sela* died?

[BREY]: Mind does not die.

[SKADDING]: But *Tramst* died. The *kas* was destroyed.

[BREY]: Nwm the Preceptor afforded him another.

[SKADDING]: But the *Sela*? At this juncture – what was its nature?

[BREY]: Why would it be other than it is? Your mind is too focused on doctrinal questions. Apprehend the Moment and eschew theology.

[SKADDING]: You evade the question.

[BREY]: And will continue to do so! You must be flexible in your understanding of hypostases; rigid dogma in this area – more than any other – is detrimental to the cultivation of *Saizhan*.

[SKADDING]: Please, indulge me. Sineig suggests that the *ahmasaljan* was the only component to traverse the *Hahio*. He said that a Flame of Oronthon was present; that it lingered, and he perceived it.

[BREY]: Perhaps such chose to reveal itself to him: how else could Sineig sense the imperceptible? The Sublime Essence. He posits a quincunx of natures in Tramst; others a quaternity. They can argue until the end of time and it will avail nothing. The Irrenite tendency to formulate mystery is apparent in this; I feel duty bound to point out that certain dubious thaumaturgic practices also accompany his point of view.

[SKADDING]: I had, in fact, considered *Skohsldaur*.

[BREY]: I would advise against it.

[SKADDING]: My father has voiced a similar opinion. My argument is solid.

[BREY]: And what might that be?

[SKADDING]: I have been to Heaven; you have not. I have a perspective which is difficult to communicate.

[BREY] (Wryly): So spake the Nameless Fiend! This experience must surely carry weight. Still, I find the prospect of such tension disagreeable. Who will look to my bees if I choose such a demanding vehicle?

[SKADDING]: And devotion is for old men...

[BREY]: *Wise* old men, Skadding. Both *wise* and *old*.

[SKADDING]: You cling to life! I knew it!

[BREY]: Cling? Not I. To me, life is a dream both surreal and utterly poignant; I have faced certain death more times than I care to count, yet still I stand here. This also affords a certain perspective; one difficult to communicate...

[SKADDING]: *Saizho*.

[BREY]: No. This is mundane wisdom.

[SKADDING]: Is there such a thing?

[BREY]: All Wisdom is Mundane. *Saizha?*

\*\*

They reached the crest of a hill, and Eadric found himself gazing into a deep ravine. It seemed utterly wild; a virgin corner of the mountain. An ancient yew dominated the chasm, by virtue of its presence rather than its stature. They began to descend towards it, and Eadric noticed celestials in its vicinity.

"It is profoundly sapient," Rintrah explained. "More so than any in the Host. And benign – for the most part. Many devas have been drawn to it. And some former Masters. It is the Yew-*ludja*; the tree in the courtyard of the Temple in Morne is one of its scions."

"Are there others in the Heavens?"

"Yes and no. Yew is the only *ludja* here – it was invoked at the Reversal. One of Oak's scions rises on the Blessed Plain; and a Beech also – these are still profound, although of less magnitude. Others are in other places: and not all are kind. All emanate from the great Tree-*ludja* in Nizkur.

"They are rapidly awakening," Rintrah continued. "Tree in Nizkur seeks to generate a new *axis mundi*, so to speak. Nwm's portals between planes serve to mark channels for the roots of its scions. And Hlioth's efforts also. Certain magicks which have been invoked have carved paths more vigorously; transiting entities have left wakes which Tree has been quick to exploit. You might tell Nwm that his fears were unjustified: the celestial case was not asserted without cost."

"Then some kind of equilibrium is being established." The *Ahma* slowed his steed to a halt.

"Mind precedes, but its workings may be more subtle than you perceive in this case. And the motion of the Adversary also speeds the differentiation. Descend. I will wait here for you."

The *Ahma* dismounted from *Narh* and approached Yew quietly; an emotional state which seemed to come naturally, yet as though responding to some external demand. He walked a slow circuit around it. That it was cognizant of his thoughts and feelings – to a far greater extent than he himself was – Eadric had no doubt. The sheer weight of its consciousness was palpable.

He turned to observe Rintrah, but the great celestial was a blurred figure now receded from his mind. From a source deeper than Yew, Eadric knew, the Primordial Tree itself was generating a continuum

around the *ludja*. A resonance which transformed that which was around it.

Devas moved aside to let him pass, whispering *Ahma* into his thoughts. They had acquired a quality of indefinable measure, which had set them apart from others in the Host. *Taint* was not the correct word, but a transformative effect of equal significance, and one to which he was sensitive. Were they now viridescent? An imprecise terminology bothered him; yet why systematize?

*Viridescent*, they whispered. Apparently, a point of doctrine had been made.

The boughs stretched up high above him; they seemed to bask in the Radiance pouring down from the Magnitudes. Silence, as the tree breathed Wisdom of impossible depth.

*If this is Heaven, then it pleases me*, Eadric thought.

He sat and prayed for the safe passage of the *Sela*.

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The *reincarnation* of Tramst by Nwm in Nizkur was a quiet event, untroubled by any fanfare or ceremony.

Nwm proceeded to recall the wizards, affording Daunton the Diviner a far younger body than the one which the wizard had previously enjoyed. Daunton's mood improved considerably with a more youthful and dashing aspect, and a general limberness. Two massive *reincarnations*, followed by dozens more; invoked by Mesikammi, Lai, the Uediians, Temple Adepts sympathetic to the Reconciliation.

The roll of those who could not be recovered was long and depressing: Ninit and the boars; eight of Lai's twelve handmaidens; Temple grandees, penitents and scrollbearers; common soldiers too numerous to count.

Afterwards, Nwm arranged a meeting between Nehael and Mostin. An encounter which the Preceptor dreaded.

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Mostin breathed with conscious measure and attempted to remain focused.

Nwm had referred to this place as *Kilthei* or *Kinthei* or *Qinthei* or some such: the air was pregnant with a power which Mostin had never before experienced; all seemed doused in an abundant, fertile energy. The walls which separated any number of worlds were gossamer-thin; Faerie and its primordial analogues; unnamed spirit dimensions, inhabited by monstrous animal-deities; the forgotten heavens of shamans who had been dead for a hundred generations. All were contained within the Green hollow. Each merely a step away.

A tree – the pivotal node through which Tree manifested, Mostin realized – stood above a small pond possessed of unusual clarity, upon the surface of which tiny motes of silver-green danced or floated. His own presence seemed to go unheeded. Surely not unnoticed. Dwarfed, in fact, beyond imagining. Yet it seemed merely a tree...

Nearby, Rimilin of the Skin sat cross-legged upon a flat stone, examining patterns within a leaf which the Tree had shed. He had been encysted or *subsumed* in some way; his Will erased, or captured and redirected. Unexpectedly, Mostin experienced a upwelling of profound empathy for the Acolyte. He turned to Nehael; her power was veiled, but still perceivable.

"Divinity becomes you," Mostin doffed his hat with his pseudopod. "Will you be taking a more proactive stance in the war?"

Nwm, standing to one side, sighed. This would be just too irritating. Ortwine observed lazily.

Nehael smiled. "I assert my inscrutability. You are here because of the *Urn*, Mostin. I also notice that you have Graz'zt in your robe pocket. Were I a vengeful goddess...but alas, I have no use for him. The *Urn*..."

"Soneillon has it."

"Yes," Teppu nodded. "This much I have determined. And for that, the prior I must assume some responsibility. Jovol's foresight was imperfect. I believe he laid a variety of other contingencies according to other possible futures."

"What are you?" Mostin fixed him with a stare.

"I have no idea," Teppu confessed. "I'll remember when I die."

"He is an agent of the Aeon," Nehael said.

"That is a *theory*," Teppu observed. "I have no evidence to support it. I am certainly *Green*; the question remains as to whether I can be both."

Nehael shrugged. "As far as culpability goes, the principal offender stands before us. Why did you send her *Outside*, Mostin?"

"Your judgements do not concern me," Mostin said haughtily.

"Four times Fallen now. She has escaped. Had you considered that she might build an Infinity around her?"

"You are familiar with my theories?" The Alienist was pleasantly surprised.

"I speak in a language you understand," Nehael said evenly. "I regret that the facts of the matter are incommunicable."

Mostin twitched.

"Do not mistake the truth for deific condescension," Nehael anticipated him.

"Or foresight, for that matter," she added before he could speak. "I know you well, Mostin."

"You've made your point," Mostin grumbled.

"The Viridity unfolds. The *ludjas* bind worlds together, but where will the remaining scions sprout? Tree is silent in this; all watch with anticipation. You should not berate yourself for abandoning the race for Azzagrat; you acted in good faith."

"I blame only Tozinak's stupidity," Mostin waved his appendage dismissively. "And his inappropriate use of oological metaphor when attempting to communicate. Nehael. What of the Aeon?"

"It is beyond my scrutiny," Nehael said. "I can offer you no advice. But I would ask you to reconsider your original plan."

Mostin cocked his head.

"The *gates* in Azzagrat, Mostin. You could still close them."

Mostin scowled. "Why? There is no longer any purpose."

"One single selfless act? *A Flame Precedes the Aeon*. What does it do, Mostin?"

"Ask your friend. He scribed it."

"My memory is poor," Teppu admitted. "You are better informed than I."

"It uncorks the *Urn*," Mostin explained. "In a manner of speaking. But the opportunity is passed. Did Jovol lay some kind of *geas* on Tozinak?"

Teppu sighed. "It is possible. He may also have been manipulated by another agent. I suspect that frustration with the imperfect game of prescience led to my abandoning it; I would urge you to do the same."

"I think not," Mostin smiled.

Nehael closed her eyes and exhaled.

Mostin condescended to give an inquiring look.

"Scions. An Oak and an Elm, north of Galda. Direct the Wyrish retreat towards them. And in response to your original question, yes."

"Reflexive is not pro-active."

"We have different methods," Nehael whispered. "Didn't you know? You may remain in Nizkur for now; I grant permission. Please refrain from disruptive activities."

"Permission?"

"Necessarily, when at war, a wise dictator invokes martial law," Nehael said drily.

"I also understand that you have seduced a clutch of Seraphim?"

Ortwine raised an eyebrow.

"News travels fast," Teppu sighed. "Or your sources are remarkably well-informed. And I have not even spoken with them. Tree has already dispatched them on various errands."

"The nature of which you are inclined to reveal?" The Alienist asked.

"If I knew what they were, I might."

Abruptly, the hairs on Ortwine's neck stood on end. Mostin's eyes bulged. A crescendo of magical energy which became almost deafening.

A pulse of tremendous power emanated from Tree. Dimension waxed sharp or retreated. A cascade of fortifying waves. Impregnability. Afterwards, silence. Somehow, the matrix possessed a pattern familiar

to Mostin.

"What just happened?" Ortwine asked.

"NonGreen forms of interplanar travel have been discontinued," Teppu clapped.

"*What?*" Mostin's jaw dropped.

"Where?" Ortwine asked.

"Just this world," Nehael smiled. "Dreamers are unaffected."

"I do not *dream*," Mostin spoke the word as though it were an unsavory habit. "Is this a permanent imposition?"

"I would rather see it as a means to end other, temporary, impositions," Nwm grinned broadly.

Mostin flailed. "Well, you would. Your tree just *dimensionally locked* the whole damn planet. And what about my tower? What am I going to do now?"

"I recommend *tree stride*," Nwm said earnestly.

Mostin glared at Nehael. "And closing the *gates*? Recovering the *Urn*? How do you suggest I accomplish this?"

"Nwm. Hlioth. Or you could petition Cherry directly. Be careful – Cherry is a tricky one. And my instinct is that this is a temporary measure, if that is any consolation."

"If temporary means 'one billion years' then no, not particularly," the Alienist glared. "And exempting dreamers leaves a lot of big holes."

"Dream will be monitored," Nehael smiled.

The Seraphim, Mostin knew.

"A number of myriads have also joined them," Nehael caught the thought.

"The other scions?" Ortwine peered at her. "Are they all...sprouting? Do you know where they are?"

"Not all," Nehael shook her head. "Some will remain hidden."

"Restricting traffic is wise," Ortwine nodded. "How do I get to Afqithan?"

"I believe previous portals will remain open," Nwm answered. "You should have asked me where they were earlier."

"Evidently," Ortwine raised an eyebrow.

"This is intolerable," Mostin spat. "I will find a way to circumvent this."

"No, Mostin, you will not," Nehael regarded him gravely. "For a little while, be patient. There are things specifically excluded or trapped here now against their will which dwarf you in significance. Perhaps it is better that you are restrained, or at least monitored."

"I?" He was incredulous.

"Mostin," she drew close. All notion of sophistry had vanished from her demeanour; she spoke into the core of his being. "Believe me when I say that I honour you and love you, Mostin, because such is my nature; but you must recognize that what you *are* – how you *see* and what you *do* – these things are anathema to me. You possess a potential for horror which disturbs me.

"And this," Nehael smiled as a clump of moss and sod grew in her hand. "This is Mine, Mostin. All of it. You are a guest. Don't forget it."

"Currently, I am a prisoner," Mostin seethed.

"If you wish egress, petition one who can transport you; I will do it if you request. I will take you outside – but not Outside. You will need to negotiate at a Green concursion if you wish to return inside. Unless you wish to dream."

"Bah!" Mostin grunted. "And what is a 'concursion' supposed to be?"

"A node. Interface. Gate."

"And how might I recognize these?"

"The *scions*, Mostin," Nehael smiled wryly. "Or in some cases, the *ludjas* themselves."

"I need to appeal to *trees* to be allowed to go about my normal business? Many of which, by your own admission, 'will remain hidden?'"

"Essentially, yes. Or one of we five."

Mostin looked around. Nehael. Teppu. Hlioth. Nwm. Mesikammi.

Ah. *Those* five.

"Where are the *ludjas* themselves?" the Alienist demanded. "Assuming that you can be at least that forthcoming."

"Here in Nizkur: Oak, Elm and Ash. Others in the Beatitudes, Throile, Azzagrat. On Avernus; in Faerie. In Mulhuk. In the Hidden Realm. Five have yet to manifest themselves..."

"Hidden Realm?"

"I can show you," Mesikammi offered.

"*Your* reality?" Mostin groaned. "You're as mad as I am. And what is this talk of Trees in Hell?"

"Some equilibria must be forced," Nehael smiled.

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They gathered at Mostin's manse in the Forest of Nizkur; the building had acquired an eccentric turret of modest proportions, oddly at ease with the prevailing aesthetic and comfortable in the sylvan surroundings. The *Infernal Tower's* now-inaccessible extradimensional interior – like that of much of the manse itself – meant that Mostin had a much reduced living space. Nwm, and a number of goddesses, saints and wizards crowded around the Alienist's kitchen table.

Mostin had considered the significance of the *Inertia of the Spheres* – as he had scathingly termed Tree's reordering of planar reality – and determined that it was, in fact, utterly beyond his ability to bypass. He sighed, handing Nwm a piece of paper with many numbers and symbols scrawled upon it. It meant nothing to the Preceptor, whose magic was instinctive; the Alienist explained with forced patience.

"Half of the flamines have been consumed: tasty morsels, I'm sure. Many reservoirs are drained. The *Pall of Dhatri* is out of reach, and will likely remain so in any case. You can banish the Eater of Light; if you do, then you can say good-bye to those whom it ate. If you were to destroy it, they would be liberated: this would be preferable. *Slay* it. It'll hurt, but you've got enough juice at a stretch. Let me configure the spell, as I am otherwise now at a loose end." More than a hint of bitterness was present in Mostin's voice.

Nwm nodded.

Ortwine smiled coolly, and turned to Nwm. "I have a question. Did you really need to kill the *Sela*, or were you just making a point?"

"It seemed like a good idea at the time."

"I'm glad that you're carefully considering the ramifications of your actions," Mostin said acidly. "It's

not like you've caused any problems so far."

"I approve of Tree's interdiction," Tahl spoke wearily. "The progress of *Shvar Choryati* has been slowed drastically. All enemy movements must also now occur conventionally."

Mulissu nodded. "I no longer need to invest more than half of my energy simply to maintain Fumaril's defense. We are in a better position than we were twelve hours ago."

"And elementals are considered sufficiently 'Green' to pass muster," Mostin complained.

"And I am tired of your incessant whining," Mulissu sighed. "Do you have nothing useful to contribute?"

"No," Mostin replied, staring at Nwm. "But I have a good many questions. What is Gihaahia's role in this? Why did you wake up with her looming over you?"

"I don't know that she has one," Nwm answered. "Her mandate is ... not incompatible ... with the exclusion. Perhaps Nehael has spoken with her."

"The succubus in her is exerting its charms," Ortwine said approvingly. "You can't keep a good demon down. She'll snare them all."

"Not all."

Ortwine shrugged. "Tree is acquiring an exciting variety of thralls. I believe I chose the right side."

"I have no doubt that you'll be on the *winning* side," Nwm remarked drily. "As to information which I possess to which you are not privy – yes, in a manner of speaking. Insofar as that nothing which has happened *surprises* me, although I wouldn't exactly say I've *anticipated* anything, either."

Tahl stood abruptly. "The *Ahma* has returned. He is at Galda, ordering the defense.

"Splendid. Assemble the minions," Ortwine waved her hand.

"And none of the other *Great Wyrish Wizards* have anything to contribute?" Mostin inquired.

"Not especially," Daunton said vaguely. "Do you think I should keep the beard?"

"Your hospitality is diminished," Waide grumbled. "Where are your fruit teas gone? And those little cakes? Your *simulacrum* is less attentive to replenishing your pantry than Orolde; she spends the day reclining, reading your insane scrawl."

Mostin had to agree. "I need a new apprentice."

"I have gnomes," Ortwine suggested.

Mostin's head bobbed. Gnomes were agreeable enough.

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Shomei the Infernal exited the trance and pondered. It was as Ugales had described: two zones within Qematiel's range, in close proximity to one another, were inscrutable. None save the Adversary might have screened areas of such size from her spell, yet Shomei doubted it was his doing. She determined to investigate the first node: she suspected it was a Power, the presence of which could only be inferred obliquely.

Qematiel – an atavistic hellfire wyrm – abode within the realm of Mahazael Amaimon, King of the Fourth Quarter. An infernal monarch whose exact mandate – other than the reprobation of delinquent devils and distinguished wicked mortals – was hidden to all save the Nameless Fiend, Amaimon was unguessably powerful. He removed himself from Hell's routine workings altogether, and concerned himself with philosophical struggles on a more rarefied level.

Shomei herself had enjoyed the arch-fiend's hospitality for a brief while, after her abduction by the *Akesoli* in Afqithan. The outcasts and detritus of a hundred unnamed hells and abysms found their way to his demesnes, and were tolerated or punished for unknown reasons; Wyre's Enforcer had made her abode nearby, until she had been plucked to serve as the Claviger's slave.

Shomei armed herself with magic and opened a *gate*; she passed through into a blasted defile. Lightning wracked the dark skies. Descending carefully, she crossed poisonous rills and found herself in a wide, flat-bottomed canyon. A great thicket – an untended hazel coppice of willful aspect – filled much of it. It murmured power to her; Shomei paused suspiciously, unsure if it was a deific illusion or an empty lure set as some test.

Without warning, fire overwhelmed her and a great claw pushed her a hundred yards through the air, pinning her to the wall of the ravine. A vast, horned head reared before her; ancient draconic eyes – full of wisdom and malice – regarded her briefly, absorbing a thousand details in a glance. They rested on the sigils which the Infernalist bore upon her forehead.

"An Exempt." Qematiel snorted. "I am still inclined to break your body; the Tree recognizes you. It would have otherwise."

Shomei managed to scowl even as she writhed in pain. A *ludja*? Here? By whose permission?

*Tree needs no permissions*, Hazel whispered into her mind.

But which was the other? The second un-scryable area?

A brief, unendurable pain as barbs seemed to sink into Shomei's mind: evidently the other *ludja* was also fully aware of her thoughts. There was the looming threat of an execration so powerful that it would extinguish her.

*Holly*, she knew. She breathed deeply, mustered her will, and stared straight into Qematiel's eyes.

"What passes here?" Shomei the Infernal asked. The question was possessed of terrific power.

Qematiel regarded her quizzically; none before had ever been audacious enough to attempt to *dominate* her. It was a fair effort.

"You amuse me. I am not sure. But my role in it – after an eternity of preparation – is not the one I had anticipated."

"And the *I*?"

"It has migrated," the Wyrn replied. "As will I. Hell is receding."

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In a dark abysm, Soneillon reflected on her circumstances. Events had not transpired as she might have preferred.

Atop her palace – a vast ziggurat which rose a mile into the skies above dense jungle – a tree had sprouted in a garden, sinking roots through marble and adamant, and fruiting in an instant: an event which coincided exactly with the return of the demoness – bearing *Pharamne's Urn* – from the wreck of Zelatar. It bore huge, ripe cherries which exuded an irresistibile odor.

The demoness had warded herself in a heartbeat and retreated to a remote fastness, even as the tree had reached out to her mind and urged her to descend. She felt its consciousness pursue her, and she transported herself again. And again. She could not elude it.

Soneillon cursed, fled deep into a chthonic dream - a delirium of unbeing - and brooded.

*Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 10-17-2009*

**"Are We Ready?"**

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Two miles to the north of Galda, the Sun was rising as squadrons of Templars hurried about their business. Mostin – floating inches above the ground - bent his thought northwest whilst eyeing the nearby Nwm suspiciously. The Preceptor stood before him, ankle-deep in mud and horsedung, and apparently enjoying the experience. A night of heavy rainfall and twenty thousand cavalry had turned the fields into a morass.

An hour before, Mostin – closeted within a *secure shelter* – had emerged from a reverie of motes with too many contradictors to even begin to make sense of. It was as though the universe – several universes, in fact – were being turned on their heads. And something had seemed to reach *toward* him through the *Web*. As if its ineffable divination had been somehow perceived. Impossible. He glanced around.

The Temple forces – swollen by more of the Illuminated of Morne, as well as Foide's skeptical vassals and the northern aristocracy of Ialde and Dramore – had entrenched at the southern end of the hills of Scir Cellod. In an ancient wood in a nearby valley, two scions – an Oak and an Elm – generated a power which encompassed the entire camp and a wide area beyond, excluding the enemy. The site was outside of Gihaahia's remit, but overlooked the Hynt Coched, the main artery which connected southern Wyre with the Thalassine cities.

Nwm had transported refugees who had fled to Nizkur or who had been *reincarnated* within its bounds; another ritual had opened a Green highway, speeding thousands – including the Wyrish Magi and many Temple grandees – straight into the midst of Eadric's already swollen camp. Mostin had found the ego dissociation which accompanied the trip unsettling.

Galda – a town of some eighteen hundred which lay beneath the aegis of the scions – was now visible in the dawn, and its campaniles, rooftops and walls thronged with armed sentries. Picquets and outriders were spread in a wide arc to the limit of the Trees' protection and about the town.

Beyond was subject to the depredations of two demonic magnates – Orcus and Pazuzu – and those amongst the remaining fiendish population which they had gathered about them. Both were operating

without reference to their respective invocers, Prahar and Yeshe; they skirmished continually with both each other and with archons and devas under the command of two more archfiends, Irel and Shokad: episeme princes who had recently adopted a more Adversarial view. In the absence of any extradimensional movement, *wind walking* had become the preferred means of travel amongst all; despite their inferior numbers, in this the celestials possessed a distinct advantage.

Cirone, another quaint walled settlement some twenty miles further south, had been utterly consumed by *Shvar Choryati*, and it was near its wreck that Prahar had elected to establish his camp: a hemisphere of darkness which defied the attempts of both Mostin and Daunton to penetrate with their sight. In a separate bubble – warded with even more potent defenses – Rishih and Naatha had raised a magical beachhead with a large contingent of *Anantam* magi, supported by compactees and bodyguards, the armored Giants of Danhaan. Against the backdrop of both, loomed the unpierceable wall of night which was the *Pall of Dhatri*: somewhere within *that* was the unguessably vast main Cheshnite force.

*Shvar Choryati* had eaten its way approximately north, on an eccentric path which made frequent detours to annihilate farming communities. It would reach Galda in three days and the Wyrish border in five, assuming a stimulus of light didn't draw it directly towards the Temple encampment. How it would interact with the scions would hopefully not be tested: Nwm planned to eliminate it before it advanced so far. It persisted on the edge of his perception like a cancer which infected the World.

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Mostin scowled. "Yet another power is rising in Nizkur. What do you know of it?"

Nwm shook his head. "Nothing."

"A fey; most ancient." The Alienist studied his face minutely; Mostin's paranoia was becoming more acute and more evident by the hour. He was beginning to remind Nwm of a caged animal.

"*Nothing*," Nwm reiterated. "But the Green is moving in torrents everywhere, so I can't say I'm surprised."

"Go on," Ortwine turned her head. "Fey rivals hold an interest for me."

"You flatter yourself," Mostin sniffed. "You pose as much threat as a gnat to one such as this."

"I prefer the gadfly metaphor. And no sidhe stands so far above me."

"I mentioned nothing of sidhe," Mostin sighed. "You are such a parochial queen."

"Currently, my parish is rather larger than yours," Ortwine smiled. "Speak more of this fey: do not let my witty quips distract you."

"That you are both so ignorant of events which reference your paradigm is a source of continual amazement to me," the Alienist grumbled. "This is no woodland sprite. It is rather...*wild*, in the instinctual, primal sense. The fact that it is *present* suggests massive change. It is masculine. It does not rise from the Tree-matrix, although its catenary is parallel."

"That sounds fine," Nwm nodded, distracted. Hlioth and Mulissu were becoming impatient. Mesikammi had already departed. "Are we ready?"

\*

All but one of the demons – a babau lurking behind a ruined pillar – fled as the five entities manifested amid a green surge. Perhaps deities recently awakened from some hibernation, the power of their arrival caused the tiles in the courtyard to crack with a sudden growth of moss and lichen.

One, covered in a hundred rolling eyes, spied the babau and *dominated* it quickly.

Another, ragged and scarred, gestured toward a pomegranate tree which had long since been reduced to a stump. It immediately regrew its limbs and sprouted tender green leaves.

The third – an opaque, sylph-like creature who floated above the ground – swore profusely as she looked at the wreck of her former home. A number of obscene execrations were directed toward the eye-covered entity.

A fourth – apparently a female human of middling years – waited with a sour face. After a pause, during which the others collected their thoughts, she struck her staff upon the flags with a resounding *crack*. A brief but massive flurry of magical energy followed.

The last – a goddess with a curved sword – stared at the the artificial heaven above her, watching it shift and writhe like a thing alive. A wave radiated visibly out and away from the group, reordering the matrix of the real into a new form. Crumbled masonry flew back into place, and debris of all kinds vanished.

Mulissu's demiplane, restored to a pristine state, rested peacefully again beneath its blue vault.

"Do you want the demon?" Mostin asked.

Mulissu struck it with a spell, petrifying it.

"I'll take the statue," she said.

Nwm glanced around. "Again. Are we ready?"

Grumbles of assent.

Nwm evoked a spell, causing four more trees – an almond, an olive, a cypress and a deodar – to spring up within the courtyard. Within the trunk of each – and the pomegranate also – was a small wooden door, perhaps five feet high and two wide.

"Which is which?" Ortwine inquired.

Nwm sighed. "The olive leads to one in the palace at Fumaril; the almond to the elm at *Mostin's cramped retreat*; the pomegranate to a banyan in the garden of the Academy outside of Morne; the deodar to one similar near Deorham; the cypress to a tree near the entrance to the Claviger's cave. Mesikammi is accomplishing *spirit bindings* with genii at the terminal locations, to prevent passage for those who are not permitted. Here, I have chosen species most familiar to Mulissu, based on her

childhood experience."

"And it is appreciated," the savant nodded. "Although I find it rather shady, and may need to adjust the illumination."

"And from here Mostin can reach outside of your miniverse?" Ortwine asked.

The Alienist laughed bitterly. "No. Hlioth annexed the plane. This is now a Green node."

"Then why else are we here?"

Mostin scowled, and gestured with his appendage toward Mulissu.

The savant smiled savagely. "I've come for my spellbooks."

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"It is as wicked as I, or I'm no judge of character. Still, I like this not one jot."

Standing on a high balcony, Yeshe the Binder regarded Temenun carefully. The Tiger, in turn, was gazing down at a blackthorn which had sprung overnight to full height, next to a likeness of the disgraced *Ugra*, Angula.

"If this is Nwm's doing," Yeshe continued, "then it appears we have underestimated him."

Temenun remained sanguine. The Blackthorn, impenetrable to divination, was silent.

"What else?" The Tiger asked.

"Its parent tree has...annexed a large swathe of what was *Angula's* realm in the forty-fifth abysm. Gu-

*Analas* which have entered its presidio have not exited. Planar breaches and *reality maelstroms* still rage around it, but it has established a quiescence in its immediate vicinity. Deeper, the Great *Bhitis* are assembling at the Veils. What is your intuition?"

Temenun smiled and bared his fangs. "If Carasch avoids the streets of Azzagrat – or what is left of it – for fear of a Tree, then the fact that we are not all dead is cause for celebration."

"This thing is so potent?"

"It is. But it deals in generalities; it is not concerned with the specifics of our actions. We're playing by its rules. For the time being."

Yeshe was grim. "We are outmaneuvered. My dreams are full of *avalam jvalats*\*. Still, Dream is our best recourse. The weak link."

"I will give it some thought," Temenun purred. "In the meantime, we should abandon the compound. Mobilize all reserves. Relocate to Thond."

"Are you mad?"

"I foresee."

"I will take Fumaril first," Yeshe spoke steadily. "I won't have it sitting on my flank."

"Then be swift!" Temenun's eyes narrowed. "I anticipate their counterattack will be furious, and soon. First, they must deal with *Shvar Choryati*. That will require much of their strength."

"It will be an easy test."

"We shall see. I have yet to invoke the ward."

"There is a good deal which you keep hidden," Yeshe observed. "Now is not the time to remain jealous of your prescience."

The Tiger said nothing. Temenun was of Utter Shûth: twenty thousand years he could recollect. To him, the ascendancy of the Sun was but a recent phenomenon; he had witnessed far stranger and more ancient things. Ebony had been an ally for a while, long before, during the Ice in the North.

*The Trees of the South held a greater power,* he recalled. Or perhaps age and distance clouded his memory. All of Shûth had been jungle then; rich and verdant, and malign as Throile.

Yeshe turned her head, and a discordant clash of gongs sounded from deep within the Temple, signalling that Idyam, the demilich, was finally deigning to take counsel.

As if in response, Anumid's voice echoed in the minds of every immortal.

*The Tree is no threat: I have seen beyond the Veils. In her mercy Cheshne spares the interlopers on her threshold, but she exacts a price: one will return; one other will join her. A Great One. Kaala-anala demands that you raise her pavillion. Henceforth, the Fires of Death will abide in the Temple. Visuit will attend her. Jahi and Yeshe may remain. The rest of you will continue your removal to Thond: you will pay homage.*

"Indeed?" Temenun spoke softly, but those a hundred miles distant still heard him.

*In this I am the Mouthpiece of Cheshne. I may not be gainsayed.*

"Of course," the Tiger purred.

\*\*

Eadric drew a heavy fur across the opening to his tent and turned to sit on a crude stool. An oil-lamp dimly lit the space: a ten-foot circle with spartan furnishings. There was no pallet; although he found the experience refreshing on occasion, the *Ahma* did not require sleep. Only privacy.

In his left hand, he held a sphere of adamant, upon the surface of which color might occasionally move; in his right, *Lukarn*, its light currently subdued.

He tapped the former with the latter, eliciting brief flashes of total illumination.

*Show Yourself*, the *Ahma* commanded.

The face of Prince Graz'zt appeared.

Eadric resisted the urge to smash the globe with his weapon and cut down the demon as he materialized. Instead, he breathed and slowly mastered himself.

"Times change. This will be our one and only conversation, *Angula*; or rather, you will remain silent and simply listen, as dialogue holds no interest for me: if you attempt to speak, I will annihilate you. That which you were is no more; you have exhausted your possibilities. You are no longer *relevant*.

"Now, I have a quandary; one you can probably appreciate. As the *Ahma*, I have pronounced death upon you: this judgment is infallible. Yet, at present, you persist; due in no small part to my being distracted by other, more pressing concerns. As you are also currently the property of Mostin the Metagnostic, it might be considered an act of legal trespass were I to smite you as you so richly deserve.

"Still, I am not inclined to commute this sentence, but merely suspend it on the basis of my friendship with the wizard and the fact that he recently saved my life again. Ironically, there are few others I would entrust you to: I am secure in the knowledge that Mostin can always out-think you, and that he cannot use you for anything that he couldn't find another way of doing anyway. This decision is pragmatic.

"This is your predicament: until such time as Mostin grows weary of your novelty and dispossesses himself of you, your continued existence is relatively assured; at that point, your future becomes more uncertain. I will not exchange good Temple money to procure you, but moral persuasion might be brought to bear upon any subsequent owner to render you into the custody of the righteous. Assuming Mostin himself experiences no such urges. Here, then, are my words to you:

"First, as your moral instructor: use your remaining time to reflect on the eternity of suffering you have caused, and seek to experience one single iota of remorse: a task I deem at the very limit of your ability to achieve. I remind you of this out of duty, more than from any expectation that you will actually follow my advice.

"Second, as your judge and executioner: even were I persuaded of your contrition and moved to mercy, Prince Tagur reminds me that you are still eligible for the death penalty under *Wyrish* law, which makes no exception for your demonic status. I would, of course, enforce the decision of any secular court in this matter. This knowledge will make your moral quest more achievable as possible notions of reward or release will not distract you from your purpose.

"Third, as one injured personally: my forgiveness, or lack thereof, is inconsequential. I am one of countless wronged, and to forgive is not my function – I am the *Ahma*. Nonetheless, I will cite my father's murder, the assassination of Cynric of Morne, and the abduction and torture of Nehael as those crimes which wounded me most grievously. If that knowledge stirs some measure of satisfaction in you, I refer you back to my first article of advice.

"If you have words, you may now speak. Please be concise in your delivery: I have many matters to attend to."

From his prison, the demon Graz'zt stared impassively at Eadric.

\*\*

From a vantage point where Dream and Void and Madness met, a place where apparitions strove to manifest, and tendrils of unknown purpose writhed in the dreams of chthonic deities, the demoness Soneillon watched, and waited. Few immortal psychoses could reach so deep.

Black fire had kindled at the Veils of Oblivion, ascending in liquid sheets which incinerated all vestige

of Being to reveal a vast, glorious emptiness. An ocean of nothingness which promised a final end to all suffering.

After what may have been eternities, on its margin a terrible shape began to form. In revulsion, it twisted at its own substance: a forced reification, effluxed by Unbeing itself, or its shadow to some unknown degree. Flame and death surrounded it. It demanded obedience.

The demoness abased herself.

With a passing thought, Kaalaanala – the Primordial Fear of Destruction – annihilated Soneillon in an agony of unguessable magnitude; moments later, the demoness arose again from the Void. The passage had left her sated and subdued. Soneillon swayed drowsily; she was permitted to enjoy the sensation only briefly.

A thought which was a command was turned toward her. Soneillon hurried to obey: locate the goddess Visuit in Dream and bring her to Azzagrat.

\*\*

Nehael stood beside the Tree, feeling the texture of its bark with her fingertips. Nearby, Rimilin of the Skin slept with his face pressed to the moss. The goddess looked up to Teppu, who sat in the Tree's lower branches.

The sprite grinned. "A great *Bhiti* is coming. Do Uedii and Cheshne send ambassadors or exchange hostages?"

"Is there a distinction?" Nehael asked. "Some equilibria must be bought dearly. She will remain in the Temple in Jashat. Her actions are circumscribed."

"Within which bounds?" Teppu inquired archly.

Nehael sighed. "She cannot leave the Temple. She may act to the limit of her natural senses."

"With impunity?"

"With impunity."

"Then Jashat cannot be assailed."

"Realistically? No. At least, not at present."

"You might want to inform Eadric of this tidbit."

"The *Ahma* has achieved his objective to a large extent thus far: *keep Wyre safe*. This is his principal charge. He will make no ill-informed assaults beneath the *Pall of Dhatri*."

"And the Wild God?"

"Has yet to show himself."

"Does he have a name?"

"*Hummaz*."

"I like it. Did you choose it?"

"No. He did."

"Can you placate him, should his mood become violent?"

"I doubt it," Nehael smiled grimly.

\*\*

Nwm groaned wearily, and looked around him. Sixty spellcasters, including the wizards. Waiting.

Mostin had called proceedings to a halt. That odd cluster of pinkish-brown motes he had previously observed had suddenly made sense.

"You'll have to try something different," Mostin said. "Temenun has warded *Shvar Choryati*"

"All other divinations run to the contrary," Nwm sighed. "Why must you always be so special?"

[Mostin]: Because Temenun is considerably more subtle than the Temple oracles. Fortunately, I am subtler still. You cannot stage a direct magical attack of any kind.

"Ngarh!" Nwm snarled. "Find me a meteoroid. Not too big."

"Not so big," Mesikammi nodded sagely. "They go very fast."

The Alienist scowled and concentrated. Ten minutes elapsed.

[Mostin]: Here's one.

Nwm exhaled. "Alright. Are we ready?"

Mostin had expected more preparation from Nwm; at least an *idea*. Vectors. Something. There was a huge surge of magical power and a sense that his reservoir might be sucked dry, accompanied by another dissociation which Mostin found disturbingly euphoric. A backlash of green lightning coursed over all present, arcing between them and burning them.

There was bright flash on the horizon. Silence. Even those who were otherwise insensitive to such things felt a breath of release as millions of souls were liberated: all of those whom the Eater of Life had consumed in its unguessably long history.

Around a minute passed before the noise of the impact struck them: a growl like distant thunder. A breeze began to stir, and quickly stiffened.

"Very impressive," Mostin conceded. \*\* "That almost counts as deicide."

Nwm groaned, and shook his head.

Even as he had erased *Shvar Choryati*, the very source of that shadow – or so it seemed to the Preceptor – had announced its arrival within the Interwoven Green with an expurgative necromancy: a spell which slew everything which remained alive within two leagues of Jashat which was not sworn in body and soul to the Dark Goddess.

Kaalaanala, the Fire of Death, abode in the Temple of Cheshne.

\*"Those which glow abominably," a term for powerful celestials.

\*\*Epic conjuration/400d20 bludgeoning damage! Yay!

*Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 10-22-09*

### **Mini-Update**

Which was to have been part of a longer update, but it seemed apt to post it now.

\*\*

[Jalael]: Observe.

The imp appeared with a *pop!*. It bowed.

[Mostin]: That was not a conjuration. That was a fly.

[Jalael]: In a small world, transmutation is the future. What you cannot conjure, you can transform and coerce: functionally, they equate to the same thing – one *dispel* and they're gone.

[Mostin]: I am no mere *summoner*. I am the binder of the Horror. I have mastered Celestial Princes. Dukes of Hell quail at the very mention of my name.

[Jalael]: You need to move with the times. Think about it: [equation].

[Mostin]: !

[Shomei]: Greetings.

[Mostin]: Finally, you condescend. What transpires?

[Shomei]: In the last hour? Agalaierept has seized the throne room and the citadel with the second legion. Chamosh is backing his bid, citing the need to maintain order; Astaroth manipulates both of them. Belial has crowned himself emperor in Abriymoch. Azazel is undeclared *but has moved the standard and two hundred legions to Avernus*, including Bune and his malebranche shock troops. The Iron City is locked tighter than...no cosmic superlative is possible. None of the Antagonists are condescending to involve themselves. Yet. When that happens, things will really heat up.

[Mostin]: And you?

[Shomei]: I remain in the library, observing all with wry detachment. Hell needs a good war, in any case; cull the weak and eliminate some bureaucrats, I say. Can't be bad. The *Ludjas*, Mostin. Two of them, a Hazel and a Holly: they are incredibly potent. Hazel's Will...Azazel understands where the real locus of power now lies.

[Mostin]: You are advising him?

[Shomei]: I admit I have a soft spot for him.

[Mostin]: You still play the same game, Shomei.

[Shomei]: Fear not. I play well.

[Mostin] (Wriily): And who pulls your strings? A Tree?

[Shomei]: Actually, I suspect Amaimon.

[Mostin]: I saw a wyrm in the *Web*. Why?

[Shomei]: Qematiel is on the Prime.

[Mostin]: *What?* How?

[Shomei]: Hazel has taken a liking to her.

[Mostin]: What has happened, Shomei?

[Shomei]: The *I* has shifted Its paradigm. It has incarnated as a deity in Nizkur.

[Mostin]: Ah. More of a fey primal, really. Do you believe this is an artifice?

[Shomei]: On balance, no. But nor do I think it's permanent.

Mostin opened his wine cabinet, and poured himself a large glass of *kschiff*. This news would require some readjustment.

\*\*

"What news?" Eadric asked with mock enthusiasm.

Nwm sat, and gestured toward another stool. "I suggest you do the same. Those whom *Shvar Choryati* ate are gone."

"Gone?" Eadric asked.

"As in not recoverable. *Reincarnation* is not an option. They were...snatched. As it were. They have already been afforded new forms."

"*By whom?*"

"The principal suspect is a fey entity named *Hummaz*. Mostin equates him with 'Oronthon's Adversary in the diminishing Infinity.' Mostin's terminology is odd, but I understand his gist. The transition might be likened to Teppu's; or perhaps more akin to Nehael's."

Time seemed to slow to a crawl for the *Ahma*. He cocked his head and looked at Nwm. "You are telling me..."

"There is no Adversary."

There is no Adversary.

"And...this...Hummaz?" The *Ahma* inquired.

"That is a relationship you must negotiate. He is wild; fickle; violent; passionate. And prurient."

"I think I preferred the prior iteration," Eadric sighed. "Ethics? Morals? An opposition thereto?"

"None. More accurately, such concepts are not germane. Will has become Instinct."

"Magic?" The *Ahma* asked tentatively.

Nwm stretched his arms apart.

Eadric groaned.

"He's laid claim to a substantial tract of forest. He has a number of servitors around him."

"*Servitors?*"

"But I do not believe him to be overtly *political*," Nwm added hastily. "He is innocent of such matters – and yes, I choose my language carefully. Eadric, if you have any remaining notions of sin, you would do best to divest yourself of them. The Axes have shifted. Wherever they're going, it's not back."

"I have only one question," Eadric spoke steadily. "Is it possible that Oronthon's Adversary – whom, lest we forget, possesses a not undeserved reputation for being *the most conniving and deceitful entity in existence* – has somehow duped the *Tree-ludja*?"

Nwm considered briefly, and nodded. "That is a good question. I suppose time will tell."

"Do you bring other good news?"

"Oh yes," Nwm nodded. "Plenty. Remain seated. A chthonic deity named *Kaalaanala* has taken up residence in Jashat. Orcus has withdrawn from the front: he fled from Irel over Ardan, and could be anywhere. Dhatri has settled in Thond – for the time being; she is hungry, after being carried around for so long. Two hosts have left the Temple compound: Visuit and Yeshe lead the smaller, and it will reach Fumaril in four days. The larger is bound for Thond: the demilich is moving with his deathshriekers and, I suspect, Temenun also. Aside from the goddess in residence and a few dozen priests, the Temple of Cheshne is *empty*."

"How do you *know* this?"

"Certain stones gossip too much."

"Are you suggesting an assault?" The *Ahma* asked.

Nwm shook his head fervently. "Quite the opposite. She would kill us all. Avoid going within ten miles, at all costs."

"We should move to intercept the smaller host. How many are there?"

"Twelve thousand, half of whom are cavalry. Plus light aerial support – succubi, mainly. And goristros – but only a few dozen: most of the temple defense is with the larger army. But Guho has joined them and there are lots of the longhairs in Visuit's train. They are currently grounded: Mulissu has made the weather uncomfortable. They are devising sorceries to counteract her spell."

"And Pazuzu?"

"Ortwine hunts him."

*Originally posted by Sepulchrae II on 12-13-2009*

\*

## **Storm Sorceries; Demons' Amulets.**

Nwm had described the weather as *uncomfortable*.

Mulissu had generated a windstorm thirty miles in diameter over the warm waters north of Pandicule, and moved it to occupy a position between Fumaril and Jashat; ahead of it, a derecho had formed through which tornados churned with distressing frequency.

Eadric sat upon *Narh* on a low rise in the darkness beneath the *Pall of Dhatri*, gazing southward at a large enemy host. Eastwards, the haunted city of Jashat and the soaring pinnacles of the Temple of Cheshne were a blot of corruption on his perception. The *Ahma* was magically concealed and his sight had been supernaturally enhanced to penetrate all shadows; still, his vision compared nothing to Lai's, who balanced easily in hawk-shape upon his helm. The noise of the wind was deafening.

The enemy had erected a defense against the storm, creating a smaller bubble of calmer weather which mitigated – but did not altogether counter – the magicks invoked by Mulissu and her cabal. Conjured allies – monoliths, storm-drakes, djinn and lesser elementals – skirmished continually with the Cheshnite outriders and van: clouds formed, discharged lightning and dissipated, and downdrafts erupted and vanished as a dozen competing sorcerous demands were placed on the local weather system.

Visuit was less than a mile away, hewing her way through everything in her path.

[Lai]: You study your enemy?

[Eadric]: Yes.

[Lai]: Do you see any weakness?

[Eadric]: None. She is the perfect warrior.

[Lai]: And what is your strategy?

[Eadric]: Prayer. The adepts are exhausted; Nwm is almost empty of power.

An urge. The goddess paused in her butchery.

A feeling of quietude.

"She senses something is amiss. That she is being observed." Lai hissed and squawked through the roaring wind.

"I thought we were inscrutable."

"And so we are," Lai nodded. "Warded from her sight, sound, touch, smell and all her divine faculties. But not from her instincts."

"If that is the case..."

Before he could finish his sentence, a cloud passed over his consciousness, numbing his soul.

*Kaalaanala*, he knew. Visuit had invoked the great *Bhiti's* name; the Fires of Death had instantly located him.

**"Enemy Captain. I know you're there."** Visuit's voice, and the urge to unimaginable violence, carried to all across the battlefield.

The Butcher began to move towards them. She gestured with her hand: an invitation to combat.

And now the ravenous perception of the Dark Goddess in Jashat was a terrible presence in the *Ahma's* mind.

*Get out of my head!*

...

*Get out!*

...

*Nehael!*

(I am powerless).

**[YOU WILL DIE.]**

"We have to get out of here," Lai said.

Eadric nodded.

The Green was warm as their forms dissolved into it. Annihilation became a memory.

\*\*

Ortwine corporeated from *wind walking* and floated, *invisible* and *mind blanked* a mile above the water. The air was cold and clear. *Heedless* stirred restlessly in her hand.

She had chased a vaporous Pazuzu around the cape of Nivorn, across the hills of Ardan, and for more than a thousand miles over open ocean. The pursuit had lasted thirty-three hours, and had demanded a focus more than she thought herself capable of maintaining. Never losing sense of him. And he was more slippery than an eel; her initial attempts to *dominate* him had proven utterly futile.

Finally, convinced that he had eluded any pursuit, the demon gyred and turned towards the west. Ortwine waited patiently. She sheathed *Heedless*; it writhed as she forced it back into its scabbard, and then projected silent telepathic anger at the sidhe.

Pazuzu materialized and began to work magic; Ortwine cursed, and began to fly silently towards him at speed. She had no notion of his intention; she had no need: demon princes casting spells never boded well. She carefully scrutinized his shape as she closed, scanning him minutely.

Pazuzu – who had begun to invoke a ward of some complexity – stopped abruptly as he perceived the slightest breeze waft past him, and felt something snap. He began to scream with incredulity and rage and groped wildly at his throat.

Ortwine materialized a hundred yards ahead of him.

"You want this?" In her hand, she held his amulet.

He struck her, full force, with an eldritch thunderbolt. It dissipated upon contact with her.

Ortwine laughed.

He raised his hand as if to strike her again.

And instead became vaporous and vanished.

Ortwine scowled, and followed him with her Sight. She tied Pazuzu's amulet around her own neck.

Oh, that's *good*, she thought.

The chase resumed.

\*\*

"What you seen to fail to appreciate," Mostin said to Nwm through gritted teeth, "Is the *power* of this dragon."

"She is a hellfire wyrm."

"Yes. No. Of sorts," the Alienist gave an irritated gesture. "She predates them. She may even predate the Fall. And she has not migrated in the sense of Hummaz. Not even in the sense of Mulissu – which is to say very little. She has been *seduced* by the Hazel-*ludja*; which apparently has connotations of magickal Will."

"Apparently so," Nwm nodded. "Although this is hardly a surprising correspondence."

"The *Urn* could..."

"Ngarh! You and your damned urn."

"It is pivotal," Mostin sighed. "If you think the Tree-*ludja* is omnipotent, think again. It is compromised by this admission of the Cheshnite *Bhiti*; and from the outset by permitting the *I* to remain here in any form. I use the Antinomian descriptor for Hummaz – which stands, according to Shomei, and she is reasonably well informed in such matters – because there are many infinities at work here invisible to you."

"And not to you?"

"Correct," Mostin nodded. "They are merely opaque. Many correspondences: Kaalaanala – Ancient Hellfire – the Wyrm – the Aeon."

"Why the Aeon?" Nwm asked suspiciously.

"I have concurred that it was the Aeon which...lurched...at me through the *web of motes*." [Formula]

"Why do you persist in..."

"It is my contention that the Aeon is fundamentally draconic," Mostin stared madly. "It was Qematiel who...lurched...at me through the *web of motes*."

"Wait!" Nwm held up his hand. "I am lost. Which is it?"

Mostin stopped speaking, and considered. "Infinities are bleeding. It makes divination complex. In any event, I don't have the *Urn*, and the reason I don't have the *Urn* was because I was saving your sorry skins from annihilation; a service for which I am rewarded by a massive curtailment of magical power.

"How fortunate for us that you are so selfless," Nwm said drily.

"Do you understand that *Qematiel is Ancient Hellfire. The wyrm which the Adversary will ride to the Oronthonist eschaton?*" Mostin asked steadily.

"That reality is dead."

"Maybe. But Qematiel is not. This assumes, of course, the Adversary himself is not making some cosmic play. I have a plan..."

Nwm groaned.

"Hear me out," Mostin raised his appendage. "I need to convene a cabal. And I need your help..."

"Why?"

"I have an inkling. I will conjure Soneillon again as I need to talk to her. Outside of your loop. You have to get me there."

"You're insane. How *far* outside?"

"I don't care. Just far enough. Then I'll make my way to the astral retreat. But give me a couple of days. There are tomes in Ardanese monasteries which I need to consult."

"You have twenty-four hours. I plan on being in Fumaril thereafter."

Mostin scowled. "Can you get me to Esoc?"

"You can get there yourself," Nwm answered. "You'll have to walk the last mile, but it's generally polite to approach on foot, in any case." [Look: oak -> oak -> beech -> oak -> rowan]

"How many of these things have you made?"

"A few dozen," he shrugged. "It's getting hard to remember where they all are. Hlioth has fashioned many more."

\*\*

[Ortwine]: *Priestess!*

[Mesikammi]: Your largeness?

[Ortwine]: Mesi, now is not the time for banter. My foe will not turn to let me kill him. I bore of this chase.

[Mesikammi]: You wish for my help?

[Ortwine]: I am issuing a divine command. Conjure a storm and force him down.

[Mesikammi]: Such an effect would be tiring at this distance.

[Ortwine]: There is kelp nearby; you can manifest yourself closer.

[Mesikammi]: I must also get wet?

[Ortwine]: I will grant you a boon, as befits faithful service.

[Mesikammi]: Perhaps a pretty bauble, recently won?

[Ortwine]: Mesi, do you spy on me? Truly, you are a worthy servant.

[Mesikammi]: An image of your holiness appears in my mind.

[Ortwine]: Such devotion should not go unrewarded. The amulet is a delight, I confess; I will bestow a different bounty, if you show a little patience.

[Mesikammi]: I can spare a little, but not too much.

Close by, the shamaness appeared. A wind began to gather.

\*\*

Voicing her name was enough to invoke her; Nehael could offer no protection against her. This boded ill.

Presently, Oak and Elm shielded the Wyrish encampment with their power – not just the scions in the nearby vale, but the *ludjas* themselves, from deep within Nizkur. But this was not an effect which the *Ahma* was comfortable relying on – trees having their own, peculiar agenda. Nor was it of much use beyond the zone of the *ludjas*' perception. And Eadric had no intention of entrenching permanently at Galda, despite the rapidly completed fortification of the site.

The *Ahma* therefore issued an edict, announced by archons who attended him. Trumpets rang, and the voices of celestials carried the proclamation to all within the Wyrish camp:

*The name of the enemy in Jashat is anathema and may not be spoken: likewise, the name of the enemy war-goddess, and any of the abhorred names of Ancient Darkness.*

*All iconography, all material representation, all literature containing reference to any such entities is forthwith deemed blasphemous and must be surrendered immediately.*

*Practice Saizhan.*

Eadric summoned Tuan Muat, a Talion whose prior acts had denied him bliss, and anointed him. The Inquisition was formally revived.

"Start with the aristocracy," Eadric motioned. "Refrain from physical coercion until they've had a chance to think about it."

"*Ahma*," the Inquisitor began. "Many of the most ancient Temple texts..."

"Impound them," Eadric said. "In fact, confiscate them first, *then* start on the aristocracy. We need to set a good example, after all. This is a practical measure, not a philosophical one."

"The Irrenites aren't going to like this," Tuan Muat observed.

"Bring me Sineig." Eadric sighed.

"And the wizards?"

Eadric groaned. "Be *politic*, Inquisitor. A little pragmatic hypocrisy is no bad thing. My concern is with the ignorant; wizards must monitor themselves."

"And if one articulates these forbidden names or concepts in one's thoughts?" Tagur asked.

"Then they must be demonstrated to be un-True," the *Ahma* nodded. "Hence, we practice *Saizhan*. We must move. I need a sizeable force before noon tomorrow: I plan to relieve Fumaril."

"How many?"

"Two thousand horse and eight thousand foot – half pike and half archers. Illuminated and Templars. I'll take whatever Thalassine bombards you have, as well. With cold iron shot."

"A little more notice would be appreciated," Prince Tagur sighed.

"Just get them together in one place. Nwm will do the rest."

"I understand the principle," Tagur said. "And a little more notice would be appreciated."

"Noted," the *Ahma* nodded. "You have my apology, your Highness. Your tenure in the Serenities does not seem to have diminished your acidity."

"Oh," Prince Tagur sounded mildly disappointed. "I had rather hoped that it had."

\*\*

At midnight, in Nizkur, all was darkness.

In a certain set of glades named Raithin Gabro, to the south of the forest and not too far from the marches of Tyndur, a power accumulated around an ancient stone named the *Cleta*; one of the many erratics or *storr*s which dotted the valleys nearby.

The area was a wild one: bare hilltops thrust above dense stands of pine. Further west, a forlorn strand stretched beneath rearing cliffs. Those tracts had a reputation for savage and malicious feys of every hue. It was here that Hummaz had elected to establish his realm: an area, to all intents and purposes, of Faerie proper.

From the bole of the Tree, a hundred miles to the north, Nehael's perception ranged wide over the land, absorbing all.

"What do you see?" Teppu asked excitedly. "He makes no efforts to impede your sight?"

"None," Nehael sighed. "Faerie awakens. I see areas of dusk and gloam and magic, and quicklings moving in the shadows. I see sidhe fortresses perched on windy crags, and hoary hunters preparing to

ride. There are eight scions..."

"Eight?"

"Holly and Hazel, obviously. A Willow. Others. Curiously, also a Yew. Ninit. The Boars. They have *reincarnated*. And those whom the Eater of Light consumed; the forest is alive."

"I sense no Awakening."

"I speak figuratively. The trees remain dormant, for the most part. But all of the most robust who were taken by *Shvar Choryati* have transmigrated. They have lost none of their potency; they are now fey."

"Sidhe?"

"Many. And tree-wyrds and other genii. And nymphs and satyrs. The latter revel as we speak. Hummaz is drunk."

"One hopes that this is not a prelude to some rampage," Teppu sighed.

"His mood seems amiable enough. He smiles drowsily at me."

\*\*

Mostin augmented and warded himself with powerful spells, and *plane shifted* to an area where *reality maelstroms* churned through Void. Mile-long shards of matter span slowly on their axes, flickering on the edge of annihilation.

*A telepathic bond* connected him to Jalael, Troap and Daunton, who were ensconced in the astral retreat, forty-seven shattered dimensions distant. Mostin's sensory experience was conveyed directly into the other wizards' minds.

[Daunton]: Pan left. Up a little.

Mostin scowled.

In the far distance, dominating all, a redoubt of substance which the Blackthorn-*ludja* had gathered around itself. Like a vast mountain floating capsized in space, fragments of Zelatar – complete with minarets, domes and viper groves – comprised its inverted flanks. About its base, a fence of lesser peaks thrust upwards to surround a forested bowl twenty miles wide, at the centre of which, Mostin knew, the malign Blackthorn brooded. Flights of chthonics – which erupted spontaneously and vanished as quickly – avoided proximity to the great Tree.

Mostin wrought magic, and brought his will to bear upon the planar flux near him. In a previous cycle, Graz'zt had made spells of his own for the same purpose: vast in scope, and taking millennia to complete. Strands of plasm flowed; matter quickly agglomerated, assuming shapes and angles possessed of a disturbing quality. The aesthetic was peculiar in the extreme.

The Alienist drew a rod of cold iron two feet long from a *portable hole*, and scratched a wide circle about himself quickly. Within it, he scribed a set of complex runes and glyphs with uncanny speed and precision, pausing occasionally to recollect. With a motion, the rod vanished and the scrawl became a perfectly engraved tracery of iron.

Mostin stood inside the circle, muttered, and made a brief gesture.

A *gate* opened, and Soneillon appeared without duress.

Mostin recoiled, and reflexively assumed his pseudonatural shape as a churning vortex of darkness attempted to engulf him. It failed – barely – to penetrate a hemisphere which had sprung into existence around the wizard. Mostin swallowed with many mouths: he had thought to err in his protective ward with a wide margin of safety.

Soneillon withdrew and immediately became a demure child with wide eyes.

"Mostin. How delightful to see you again. Forgive my enthusiasm to embrace you."

Mostin remained in tentacled form, a thousand eyes directed suspiciously at the demoness. He knew that she could endure any magic he presently had at his command: in *Uzzhin*, it appeared, she had not only undergone a powerful pseudogenesis, but had taken tutelage with one of the elder horrors; spellwarp clung heavily to her. A number of transvalent spells protected her.

"Let's negotiate," the Alienist said wisely.

"*A Flame Precedes the Aeon*, Mostin. It troubles my dreams. What does it mean?"

Mostin resumed his humanoid shape, looked at his hand, and cocked his head quizzically. "Why do we find such forms necessary?"

"For you, sentimentality; for me, habit. Mostin, your evasiveness needs much work: the question still stands."

"You might volunteer a little first," the Alienist smiled. "Given the level of mutual distrust which we must first overcome. Note that I have conjured you without compulsion in a locale which is suitably secure for you."

"I have accepted an invitation; that hardly qualifies as grounds for debt. And good luck in your efforts to bind me. Still, I will tell you this: Carasch gathers darkness to himself; he prepares an oneiric assault. It will come in three days."

Mostin raised his eyebrows. "He is bold to move against the Seraphim. The Tree may swat him for his insolence."

"Or ignore him, as a fly. The fence has holes for those who know where to look. Only the great *bhitis* dream deeper than Carasch. *A Flame Precedes the Aeon*?"

"An opportunity to actualize the *Urn*, now passed," Mostin sighed.

"Which Flame?"

"In the Urgic sense; an iota of Perfect Radiance. Manifested when the *Sela* transmigrated."

"But you lost the Flame," Soneillon understood. "You search for another. Still, you withhold much; some component of the equation is absent."

"This is to be expected," Mostin nodded. "You are my enemy."

"I am/not what I am/not," Soneillon snorted. "And you I bear no more malice than the rest of Creation, Mostin. If I were to proffer a little more, would you bite?"

"In this case, I regret I must decline. There is no article of knowledge which you possess which might be of equivalent value. You can surrender the *Urn*, to be privy."

Soneillon smiled sweetly. "Unlikely. But I am also reminded that *anals* – which is to say *flames* – come in a variety of colors. Perhaps ruddy or black? One might ask why there is a Hellfire Atavism lurking in the woods? Or would Carasch burn with sufficient heat, I wonder? Or the goddess in Jashat, the Death-*Anala* herself?"

Mostin shifted uncomfortably.

"You see," Soneillon placed her palms together. "The Void has opened, Mostin. It draws other forms spiralling into it. My power waxes."

"A Tree sits atop your palace and has enslaved your cabal," Mostin sneered. "You have no foundation."

Soneillon drew close to the circle's edge, placing childlike hands upon the invisible barrier. "The Cherry can wait. Chthonic axes will hew its roots in due course. Understand me, Mostin: I have been *Outside* and I have returned. I know what you know; I've seen what you have seen. Is there no potential for productive discourse?"

"Certainly. That is why I called you. Some topics must presently remain taboo, however. With which

did you apprentice when you were Outside?"

Soneillon laughed. "You would not believe me if I told you."

"An entity of some reputation, I assume?"

"Something hidden, Mostin."

"Then this I must know," Mostin said wryly.

"Vhorzhe," Soneillon whispered. "My sponsor is Vhorzhe, Mostin."

The Alienist gaped at her.

"I told you that you wouldn't believe me."

"No," Mostin said grimly; the solutions to a number of nagging equations had already presented themselves in his mind. "I believe you well enough. You found a Pseudodaemonic Infinity."

"You should be more careful when targeting your *banishments*, Mostin. I didn't even have to look."

"The spell is named *Pilgrimage*," Mostin said bitterly. "An apt descriptor in your case, or so it would appear. Trust me Soneillon, were necromancy within my purview, I'd have happily obliterated you instead."

She smiled coyly. "Mostin, sometimes you speak such charming words."

"Nor did I name any particular pseudolocus for the spell. I find the prospect of coincidence improbable."

"To discover that one has been manipulated by an unknown agent is never a happy moment," Soneillon's eyes narrowed.

[Daunton]: *Vhorzhe?*

[Troap]: Enlighten me?

[Jalael]: Mostin was apprenticed to him. A disagreeable sort, by all accounts. Shomei knew him. Mostin's over-hyped Horror abducted him previously.

Mostin scowled. A wizard's dirty laundry was seldom a pleasant sight.

[Mostin]: Enough! Begone! I will relate the shabby details in Fumaril.

The Alienist summarily dismissed the other wizards from his mind.

In a chamber of the astral retreat, Jalael looked hard at Daunton. "He is so damnably arrogant. Will he now strike some deal without our knowledge? Why do we endure this tyrannical lunatic as our spokesman?"

Daunton raised an eyebrow, and glanced at Graz'zt's token, which hung around the Hag's neck; her greatest treasure gained from the *binding* of the demon prince.

"Profit," the diviner replied sagely.

\*\*

Otwine swore. Divine blood erupted in a cloud from delicate fey skin as a sonic of great magnitude struck her. *Heedless* was a blur in her hand. It screamed ecstatically.

The Demon had gone to ground on an unnamed island; ancient olive groves, long abandoned by some ocean-going culture, clung to the steep slopes of a dormant volcanic peak. The trees were being ripped from their roots and hurled into the sky from the force of the wind which Mesikammi had conjured.

Pazuzu spat a gout of corrupted acid over Ortwine; she saw the droplets spin through the air towards her and somehow avoided each. The wind carried the black vapor harmlessly away.

"This."

Ortwine opened a gashing wound across the demon's chest.

"Is."

And another.

"Just."

And another.

"Too."

And another.

"Easy."

And another.

It was. The cornered demon prince screamed in rage and frustration. His remaining magic was impotent against her; his claws could find no purchase to inject their ineffectual venom. She outpaced him. Out-fought him. Out-thought him. He was stuck in this accursed *place*.

"I yield," Pazuzu screeched above the wind. It was a violation of his pact with Yeshe, but he cared nothing for that any longer; all of the old rules had been overturned.

"Thanks," Ortwine cut his head off.

The gale subsided abruptly.

Reaching down, the sidhe-goddess retrieved a rod of intricate design ending in a golden claw. She plucked a long feather from the fallen demon's wing.

"For Mostin," she smiled to Mesikammi.

The clouds parted: for a moment, the Sun shone brighter; a great bird seemed to pass across its disc. Upon the ground, the broken remains of the Prince of the Lower Aerial Kingdoms burned swiftly; ash was carried away on a gentle breeze.

Ortwine made a rude gesture towards the Luminary. "I didn't ask for your opinion. I'd have taken another feather, if I'd known."

\*\*

The *Ahma* retired grimly to his tent. As he entered, a movement within it prompted him to draw *Lukarn* in a flash.

He found himself gazing at his own reflection and swallowed. Resting on a stand, not a mirror but a round shield, burnished to perfection. Once *Melimpor's shield*, hammered fresh by celestial smiths, then cloven by Visuit; it had been cast yet again. A delicate device of Tree-and-Sun was etched upon it. Around its circle, between its rim and wide boss, phoenixes took flight; they seemed to wheel incessantly as the observer moved this way and that. *Lukarn's* light was reflected as with a green and gold fire.

"Strike it," a voice said from behind him. It was Jaliere.

"I..."

"*Strike it!*" The god demanded. "Hew at it with all your strength. Smash it. Shiver it."

The *Ahma* gathered his power and dealt a terrific blow with his weapon, two-handed, striking the shield's upper rim. The stand shattered. The shield sank into the dirt floor under the force of the assault, but otherwise bore no mark.

"Good," Jaliere nodded.

"I..."

"Don't bother," the god of the forge grunted. "Your account is still firmly in the black."

"There is no debt. I have never expected payment." Eadric shook his head.

"Hence, you deserve it," Jaliere replied. The god regarded him. "*Ahma*, in Soan they build a great temple to you."

"No!" Eadric stepped back and his face contorted. "I cannot be worshipped."

"Then you must disabuse your worshippers of their prayerful notions," Jaliere sighed. "I wish you all the best in that endeavour."

"And why are they building temples? A few thousands; barely returned from death. They must feed themselves. Clothe themselves. Build shelter."

Jaliere laughed. "The gods and ancestors are not idle in Sisperi, *Ahma*. And it has already been five years."

"Five years?"

"In Sisperi. Saes changed the passage of time; increased the pace of mortality – if only for a little while. The negotiation between her and Ortwine? Were you not present?"

"In body only," the *Ahma* smiled.

Eadric lifted the shield, and wiped the dirt from its rim. The tree in its design was – unmistakably – a yew.

"How did you know it was a Yew?" He asked.

"Lai sees much," Jaliere replied.

*Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 12-25-2009*

### **Fumaril – Part 1.**

The *Ahma* stood on the balcony of the Tyrant's palace and gazed eastwards. Tents now crowded the baileys below, but all was gloomy and indistinct, save the throne room behind him; in that narrow space alone, Mulissu had found enough power to counteract the oppressive darkness of the *Pall of Dhatri*. It was the only light for a hundred miles.

Nwm – who rested after the transportation of many companies of Wyrish troops – had resolved to counter the spell locally, at least to a mile or two beyond Fumaril's walls. Mostin – unusually animated – had made calculations which made the Preceptor groan. To do so would be a massive drain on their already stretched magical resources.

Initially, Mostin had been sceptical; news of vampires and spectres had caused him to reconsider. "You need get the timing right. Fry as many as you can. And you need to start conserving resources. Squeeze every drop. I have it. Look: [Formula]."

"You may use plain speak."

"*Lukarn*," Mostin said. "As the focus. Gather them up and perform the ritual now. Then you take a rest. Be fresh later.

Nwm stared blankly.

"*Limited resources*," Mostin reminded him. "Visuit will be knocking on the doors in less than twelve hours."

"Very well. Limited resources. You're in. Help spread the pain around."

Eadric remained solemn throughout, brooding upon the strategic situation. As he handed *Lukarn* to Nwm for the purpose of the spell; a general presentiment of unease possessed him.

Visuit's maneuver with the multiple *gates* and chthonic summons at Cirone had demonstrated to the *Ahma* that the goddess – while relishing direct, bloody conflict – had a number of other tools at her disposal. Her assault would be fast, brutal, and extraordinarily well-coordinated. No chthonic intervention could tip the scales this time; in that regard, the threat was at least more quantifiable. Mostin had observed that *banishing* her again was also not possible as long as the Tree's interdict held. She must therefore be killed; Eadric's preferred solution, certainly, but not one which was obviously achievable.

The hairs of the back of his neck stood abruptly, and his eyes widened.

She was.

Here.

"*Nwm!*" He screamed. "Sword!"

The Preceptor tossed him back his weapon.

\*\*

In the courtyard directly below the balcony there was an eruption of earth and rock which hurled flagstones fifty feet into the air; the ground heaved and rippled like liquid. Guho had conjured an earth-

spirit – a dao prince of considerable prestige – and negotiated a terrene passage for four travellers. The Worm-that-Walks was accompanied by the goddess Visuit, Yeshe the Binder, and Choach, manifesting a fresh form from his hidden phylactery.

Upon his arrival, the lich immediately scoured all trace of life from the courtyard with a massive acid evocation. Yeshe struck the façade of the palace with a powerful vibration which caused it to collapse. The *Ahma* and Nwm were borne away in an avalanche of rubble. The Alienist – alerted by a moment of prescience – had hopped onto a more secure foundation, now a pilon of masonry extending from the stricken building.

Mostin stopped time.

\*

He considered, and many eyes absorbed many details; his mind processed perception rapidly. Why this moment? What was the qualifier which had divined this point in time for their attack? The *Ahma* parted momentarily from *Lukarn*? Their foresight was subtle, or the synchronicity apt.

Visuit was in mid-leap, her monstrous weapon raised above her head and ready to fall; whether her target was Nwm or Eadric was impossible to say: it was likely that the goddess herself had not yet made that determination.

Guho was in the act of casting another transvalent spell; the accretion of magic around her revealed much. It was an enchantment; a bad one, designed to punch through *mind blanks*. And her attention was turned in his direction.

Choach and Yeshe were both gathering their power again, but their specific intention was unknown. Furthermore, a complex lattice of unidirectional antimagic protected both; a network of fine gaps in Mostin's arcane perception. That would be a problem.

Behind him, in the throne-room, Mesikammi was conjuring...something. Mulissu was fortifying herself: air crackled; the metallic reek of ozone reached his nose. Daunton had begun to protect himself as best he could. Tahl was roaring *Get Out!* at everyone else.

Ortwine's location was unknown.

Mostin augmented his consciousness to godlike proportions and refocused. Backlash cascaded over him.

\*

As time recommenced, he targeted Guho with the *Mhuerh Resonance*, a sonic of terrific power. The aberration exploded into a million pieces.

The Alienst launched a *disjunction* at Yeshe and Choach, but it slithered off of their protective shells.

From nowhere, *Headless*, flying through the air, bit into Visuit's gorget but was turned by the hammered layers of black adamant. Her armor pulsed with death runes in anger.

Mostin experienced a brief dissonance: in an unrealized future, the goddess had brought her weapon down upon Nwm, slaying him instantly, and cleaving into Eadric, smashing through his armor; in the realized, Ortwine had used a spell to avert the possibility at the last moment. Instead, Visuit's sword opened a wound from the Preceptor's shoulder to his belly and left him senseless.

The *Ahma* smote her with all his power. She leered at him.

At the behest of the goddess, Choach sealed the area surrounding Nwm, Eadric and Visuit with a transvalent spell: a spherical *wall of force* which encapsulated a bubble of antimagic. All dweomers failed within it, but Ortwine did not manifest; Mostin guessed that she had somehow jumped free.

Visuit smiled. As potent as her own artifacts might be, in an area of dead magic she had a huge advantage.

Yeshe struck Mostin with a spell contrived to imprison souls; his spellwarp absorbed it, energizing him.

She followed with a quickened *superb dispelling*, divesting him of most of his magical protections.

Mulissu stopped time.

\*

Mostin was poised upon the remains of the balcony at the very edge of illumination. Below, in shadow, Yeshe's contorted face was caught in the act of voicing an execration. Mulissu considered the bubble around Eadric and Visuit, and glanced at Yeshe and Choach. It would be one or the other.

She erected a *prismatic wall* directly in front of Mostin, sealing off three-quarters of the opening in the blasted façade, and preventing Choach from targeting either the Alienist or Daunton. Next, she conjured an air monolith, which remained in a paradoxical stasis, its unmoving-churning base threatening Yeshe and the lich. The savant gathered her thoughts.

Time recommenced.

\*

Mulissu darted into the air and targeted the encysted antimagic surrounding the *Ahma* with a *superb dispelling*, evaporating it instantly. Simultaneously, the monolith was a churning vortex which sucked Choach into it.

With a thought, Mulissu stopped time again.

\*

The savant scowled at Visuit. The Butcher was nigh-invulnerable to her magic, and her options with regard to the goddess were limited. She quickly scanned Yeshe with a powerful spell and raised an eyebrow.

*You stupid, arrogant bitch*, Mulissu thought. *You have no idea*

She invoked a *mantle of egregious might*, and concentrated.

Time recommenced.

\*

Mulissu struck Yeshe with an *antimagic ray* and conjured two spheres of ball lightning which blazed as they hammered into the immortal. Yeshe gaped in pain and amazement. Tendrils of lightning wrapped around her.

Choach uttered a swift *destruction*, causing the elemental around him to disintegrate in an explosion of black fire, and directed an empowered *energy drain* at Mulissu which failed to pierce her wards.

Mostin stopped time.

\*

The Alienist was shaken; his most potent defenses were stripped from him. He granted himself the power of flight, moved out from behind the *prismatic wall*, and briefly surveyed the scene. His magical sight had also been suppressed; shapes were blurry and vague.

Mulissu was floating above the courtyard, trceries of static lightning surrounding her. Choach was below her. Yeshe's power was muted by *antimagic*.

Mostin descended, conjured a *prismatic sphere* directly in front of Choach, and refocused.

Time recommenced.

\*

Mostin became a hideous *thing*. A barbed tentacle lashed out and dragged the lich through the seven layers of shimmering light which surrounded the Alienist. Undaunted and unaffected, Choach dropped another *superb dispelling* – this time on the entire area below the *prismatic wall*.

All magic ceased, save for the *Pall of Dhatri* only. The pervasive gloom reasserted itself in the perception of all present; suddenly, everything became real, and shadowy.

For a brief moment, all eyes turned to Mostin.

His form remained the same.

\*

From nowhere, a subdued *Heedless* was about Yeshe: Ortwine – now visible as a swift shadow – was finding gaps within the Binder's armor. Yeshe staggered under the assault.

Visuit glowered at the insensible Nwm and cut him down in an instant. She continued with a ferocious attack upon Eadric, dealing huge punishment to him and forcing him backwards. He could barely stand, much less focus; *Lukarn* dropped from his hand; his strength ebbed away.

A boar – one of the enormous *Gultheins*, conjured by Mesikammi – burst out of the throne-room and ploughed into Visuit, carrying her thirty feet into a balustrade with an explosion of rubble. Yeshe became insubstantial and flitted away as Mulissu targeted her with a barrage of lightning orbs. Tahl leapt down to Nwm's side, and revived him.

Mostin, a writhing mass of appendages, ripped Choach apart and flung skeletal remains in all directions.

Magic surged as a score of artifacts reawakened.

\*

Visuit slew the boar with a single, great swipe of her sword. Power coursed through her again now. She turned her attention back to Eadric.

In a heartbeat, Ortwine closed the distance, scooped up *Lukarn* and pressed it into the *Ahma's* gauntleted fist. The weapon stirred; Eadric's faculties returned abruptly.

"That way," Ortwine said, orienting him. "You're doing fine."

Daunton erected a *wall of force* in front of the Butcher, sealing her into a corner.

"How long do we have?" Eadric asked.

"I'd guess about six seconds," Ortwine replied.

"Did I miss much?" Nwm asked. Tahl had *healed* him.

Another spell from Daunton facilitated a *telepathic bond* amongst all present.

\*\*

[Mostin]: Ignore Yeshe. Target Visuit.

[Mulissu]: Forget it. I've got nothing. We need to take out her goon.

Yeshe – vaporous and hidden somewhere nearby in the gloom – used *telekinesis* to lift Visuit into the air over the *wall of force* and deposited her directly in front of Eadric, Nwm and Ortwine.

Mulissu – aware only of the Binder's approximate location – blasted the area around Yeshe and Mostin with a string of powerful electrical evocations. The Alienist – happily immune to lightning, and realizing the wisdom of Mulissu's words – followed suit with a sonic barrage.

[Nwm]: I'll take whatever you've got.

[Eadric + Mesikammi + Tahl]: Ready.

[Ortwine]: You'd better finish this.

A pillar of green fire consumed Visuit. She screamed in agony; a sound which rocked the foundations of Fumaril. Thundering forwards in a rage, she slew Nwm for a second time, her great, curved sword, cutting him limb from limb in a flurry of deadly strokes.

Daunton struck the goddess with a *dispelling*; momentarily, her armor subsided into quiescence.

Yeshe had vanished into the darkness.

Mostin smote Visuit with a sonic *meteor swarm* – his last remaining big evocation. Mulissu began to conjure another elemental.

Ortwine, sensing opportunity, attacked in earnest; all of her focus was directed at parting Visuit's head from her shoulders. From the opposite side, Eadric hewed into her with *Lukarn*.

With three mighty strokes, Visuit dropped the *Ahma* like a stone, whirled her blade over her head, and clove into Ortwine, driving her backwards in a daze. With a back-handed swipe she slew Tahl the Incorruptible – who was moving to *revivify* Eadric – as an afterthought. Mostin had resorted to *magic missiles* which pulsed into the goddess.

Another boar crashed into Visuit, a great tusk impaling her through her armor and forcing her back yet again.

Yeshe corporeated for an instant beside Visuit before both dissolved into mist.

Mulissu cursed.

Mostin experienced it as a shiver; the subtlest aethers were singing in resonance.

Mesikammi gaped. She saw and heard, although no other might. The radiance was overwhelming; the sonority, perfect. She danced and clapped. "Beautiful Flames! Beautiful Flames!"

In the darkness, Mostin assumed a humanoid shape and considered. Nwm would self-incarnate in a few hours. The lich would slink away to his phylactery. Guho had more than a few worms hidden, no doubt.

But Eadric of Deorham had passed. He would be presented with a variety of choices.

\*

Ortwine's senses returned to her and she wiped the blood from her eyes. Her faculties reached out through the shadows, groping in search of Visuit and Yeshe. Nothing.

*Next time, Faerie.* Visuit's voice, echoing in Ortwine's mind.

The sidhe focused.

*Lai. Get here now. We need you.*

Mulissu turned to Daunton. "You will convoke the Wyrish Academy."

Daunton protested. "We are not in Wyre. And the Collegium is not Mulissu's to command. And the Interdict prevents the spell, in any case. Mostin?"

"Do as she says," Mostin nodded. "Tell them to get here as fast as they can, by whatever means they can."

\*\*

I've been avoiding footnotes. But:

\*Mulissu's main attack spells are electrically-substituted energy orbs with a variety of secondary (entangling, sickening etc.) and metamagic effects attached; I ruled that energy conjurations logically penetrate antimagic as well as ignore SR. Sketchy, but there you go. Yeshe had native resistance to electricity as well, but not much. She botched two DC 50 Fort saves.

\*Mostin gets 9 tentacle attacks at +44 (2d8+14).

\*Devastating Critical is the most broken feat *ever*.

\*DM Note: I may have underestimated Visuit's CR for this encounter.

*Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 03-23-10*

## **Between**

Aeon.

*Wyrms?* Eadric wonders. Not so much by its shape; dimension is not, in fact, a concept which is altogether appropriate. Nor by its nature, a notion which is entirely moot. It is made of and contains all color. Potentiality focused at a single point, awaiting time to commence. It is poised upon the interstices Between.

Even it has a shadow. The never-realized; that-which-cannot-be. An Apparition.

Eadric turns his thoughts to the World. Within Finitude, a torrent of Flames has already descended in anticipation of the Aeon. They are hidden, save those few which might reveal themselves to the blessed or the mad. In his mind, Eadric smiles. Despite his protestations to the contrary, Nwm had invoked the Sun-God. An inpouring of light and fire; a divine immanence carried by those resurrected at the Reversal. What exactly did the Preceptor expect?

The Urn. The Moment. The Spell. The Flame. One thrice-transcended? Thrice-fallen? Thrice reborn; or remade?

Nehael? Soneillon? Teppu? Ortwin(e)? Hummaz? *Mostin*?

If Wyre survives, the Illuminated of Morne and their descendants will dominate history for fifty millennia.

In Dream, Darkness moves; Carasch prepares to assail the Viridescent Seraphim.

Moment. It must be at an appropriate moment.

The Dragon coils around the Tree.

There is an awareness that this perspective is impossible, and Eadric returns to Finitude.

Reality commences.

\*\*

\*\*

"Fumaril is not built to withstand conventional siege," Mulissu explained, "much less *earthquakes* and goristros. Visuit can and must press the attack; she may petition for more magical help – possibly another immortal, or more than one. Yeshe has yet to gather the ritual power of her cabals; even if her

reservoir is dry, she is not toothless.

"When this storm blows out, I will not conjure another; nor will the *Paling* go up again. I lack further patience for these delaying tactics. Mostin has therefore devised a plan..."

Waide groaned. "Are you now the charismatic face of Mostin's deranged schemes?"

"Precisely," Mulissu smiled.

"I am nervous around deities," Tozinak sniffed.

"Our advantage is in versatility," Mostin's entrance, although flamboyant in his own eyes, was accompanied by such a distortion of normality in the senses of those others present that it caused heads to spin and stomachs to heave.

"We can adapt our strategy much more effectively than they," the Alienist continued. "We have greater spell resources. We have regained the prescient edge. They have outmoded spellcasting techniques and their repertoire is limited. Choach is gone again, for a while; Yeshe is exhausted. Guho is recovered, and still potent, *but she is only one.*"

"As has been said, Visuit must press on. I foresee that Rishih will join them, but under duress. The Cheshnite leadership is fragmenting; or rather, the illusion of unity is finally being dispelled. Powerful warlords who are effectively vassals of K—laan—la. Those few demons which remain – by few I mean few thousand – are the last of their kind. We may not see their like again. We should consider preserving some specimens.

"But I digress. Ladies and gentlemen, *imprisonments* and *disjunctions* are your friends. Sonics – if available to you – are good friends. Transmutations are of limited utility; *time stops*, yes! Necromancies and enchantments, useless.

"We will approach *mind blanked* and under *superior invisibility*..."

"This strategy did not work for Eadric," Jalael observed.

"Visuit is less likely to experience abject nausea when we approach her," Mostin said sagely.

"How much of this did you learn from Soneillon, and at what cost?" Jalael's irritation was apparent.

"Much. And none to you. If I may continue? *Prismatic walls* and spheres... "

[Mulissu]: Enough speak! Whether you invoke her or no, her gaze is turned upon us again.

[Daunton]: It matters not. As has been pointed out to me, we are all figments of Mostin's imagination in any case.

\*\*

Ortwine galloped northwest upon *Narh* through Nizkur Forest. Eadric's steed bore her faster than she could *wind walk*; the trees parted for the sidhe as she rode. Blood and ichor still clung to her and caked her hair; her cloak was a billowing shadow, distorting perception around her.

Her course led her toward Kinthei and the Tree. Her instinct cautiously probed those tracts to the west of her as she rode; the limits of Hummaz's realm, if such notions as *limit* meant anything to the enigmatic fey.

Abruptly, shadow passed across her mind; a vast, dark fire impinging on her consciousness at a distance of a mile. Ortwine cursed, and veered east, spurring *Narh* to an incredible pace. Too slow. The shape hurtled towards her with uncanny speed, and within three seconds had manifested itself directly in front of her; a raging inferno of black flames surrounding a great, sinuous wyrm. Qematiel.

The forest ignited. The fire burned her and Ortwine drew *Heedless*, but backed up upon *Narh*. "I am about the Tree's business. You would be ill-advised to thwart me."

With such power and confidence did the sidhe speak, that the wyrm paused uncertainly. Then she

remembered her mission.

"My, you are a suave one. Do not attribute your continued existence to anything other than my whimsy," Qematiel smiled wickedly, displaying many hundred teeth.

Inwardly, Ortwine sighed. This fact was undeniable.

Her aura extinguished itself and the dragon assumed the shape of a female devil of not-inconsiderable allure. She held a tiny hazel twig, barely longer than a splinter, between thumb and forefinger; she proffered it to the sidhe with an arched eyebrow.

Ortwine looked sceptical. "I am generally reluctant to accept gifts from powerful entities with opaque agendas."

Qematiel smiled again; in diabolic form, the expression seemed even more malign.

"I don't believe I gave you a choice," the wyrm said. "And the Hazel certainly hasn't."

"What is it?" Ortwine took the twig in a resigned fashion. She screamed as it buried itself into her left palm.

"Power," Qematiel replied.

\*\*

He is a boy of ten again, standing in the courtyard of the keep below the Steeple. His father tosses him the sword. He feels its weight in his hands.

"It is too heavy," Eadric complains.

"They need to feed you more meat and less scripture in the Temple," his father says without sympathy.

"The men of Kyrtill's clan are large; hence we use large swords. Be about you!"

Orm is sitting nearby. He jeers.

"Shut up!" The boy shouts. "You're just jealous because they wouldn't take you."

"I was," Orm admits calmly. "Now I am relieved. I do not require a syllabus censored by the Inquisition."

"Father?" Eadric pleads.

"As I love you both, shut up and learn how to fight. This is eminently practical advice: if you are dead, you are of no use to anyone."

\*\*

"Where is Nwm?" Ortwine inquired.

"He has not returned yet," Nehael answered. "He is assessing the situation from a different perspective before he commits. You wear Hazel's mark; that may have been a rash promise of fealty."

"I am confused, and my fealty – which is to myself – has not changed. What does the dragon have to do with this?"

Teppu sighed. "She is a useful agent."

"A useful agent for whom? For Hazel? Or for the Tree? For you? For Hummaz?"

"This has yet to be demonstrated," Teppu conceded. "She is also a liability; Kaalaanala now plots to break Hazel's spell on her and unleash the wurm's destructive potential. Which is considerable."

"Many balances have been struck," Nehael sat upon the ground. "Energy has become diffuse. This is natural."

"Mine has not," Ortwine said dismissively. "What of Hummaz? Have you made contact with him?"

"No," Nehael shook her head. "And I would advise you likewise avoid him. If we are fortunate, he may revel blissfully for a thousand years before he awakens one morning in a bad mood. Or he may stub his toe whilst chasing a nymph, and become enraged. These things are hard to predict. Nonetheless, I feel a certain maternity toward him; it is hard to explain."

"Adopting the Adversary is a bold undertaking," Ortwine said drily. "I'm not persuaded that his new clothes will fit to his liking."

"You would know better than I," Nehael nodded. "You demonstrate many convergences."

Ortwine scowled.

"What is your purpose here, Ortwine?" Nehael sighed. Even her intuition could not penetrate the sidhe's motivation.

"I have come to ask for your help."

"I have no authority beyond Nizkur," Nehael shook her head.

"No, but you have great *power* beyond Nizkur. In any event, I require your intercession not your intervention: Kaalaanala sees everything which transpires in Fumaril. A Tree could veil us..."

"There is no scion there; a *ludja* feels protective only toward its scions."

"Hence I require your intercession. If..."

Nehael held up her hand. "I will do what I can."

She *communed* momentarily.

"The answer is no," Nehael said plainly.

"But..."

"No," Nehael repeated. "Neither Oak, not Elm nor Ash will lend you aid, as you now bear Hazel's mark. In other words, Hazel has pre-empted your efforts; you must petition it directly."

"But Hazel is in Hell."

"You are marked. You need merely invoke her by name. A votive offering to a scion would place you in better standing."

"And where might I find a Hazel scion?" Ortwine asked, exasperated.

"Unless you wish to enter the realm of Hummaz, the only one is in the gardens of the Wyrish Academy. Shomei's abode."

"Somehow, I'm not surprised," Ortwine said. "And I'm sure the wizards will be thrilled. Is this *ludja* feminine or neuter? You have implied both."

"It is not masculine," Nehael nodded.

"And when do I receive this *power* that I am promised? The wrym was vague."

"It is already bestowed. In the Forest, you must fight left-handed."

Ortwine narrowed her eyes. "This is an odd restriction." She moved to draw her weapon, but froze involuntarily.

"No!" Nehael hissed. A celadon light flared around her. "Not here. You will not unsheath that *thing* here. This is a holy place."

The Image of Uedii. The sidhe's façade collapsed entirely, and she backed away, her countenance full of righteous dread.

Her opacity suddenly made utterly transparent, Ortwine wavered, turned, and fled.

When she reached *Narh*, the sidhe encountered Nehael again. The goddess stood before the great horse, which nuzzled her affectionately. Her palm was offered outward; her expression was benign.

"Kindly step aside," Ortwine said. She still shook.

"You will need a *votive offering*," Nehael emphasized.

"I have something in mind," Ortwine said through gritted teeth.

"I am what I am, and you must decide how you relate to that. Your insecurities are your own."

Nehael vanished.

\*\*

Eadric sat beneath the Yew in *Saizhan*. Viridescent devas surrounded him. He experienced a subtle tugging: Lai and Mesikammi were beckoning him to return, and he merely need reach out and touch the gnarled trunk...

He felt their entreaty, but did not act upon it.

He watched as Tramst, the *Sela*, quietly approached and sat opposite. There was a long silence.

Eadric breathed deeply – a chill, forest-mountain air scented with resin – and looked into the *Sela's* face.

"I have seen a little of what you see," Eadric finally said dubiously. "If only for a moment, or was it an eternity? I marvel that Tramst – who is a fragile vessel – can contain the magnitude of the *Sela*, although this truth is also somehow quite mundane. I am conflicted. I should return, of course. But this is a fine spot; the light is of a perfect, blended quality. The air is crisp and clear."

Tramst laughed. "This is your Heaven; are you surprised that you like it?"

"Not entirely. *Sela*, I cannot overcome Visuit. Twice, I've faced her now. She is beyond me."

"Yet overcome her you must," Tramst nodded. "And Kaalaanala also. Visuit is but a minor test. Observe."

A light sprang into being within the *Sela*'s palm. At first, it seemed perfect and undivided, but on closer inspection, differentiation existed – or at least Eadric inferred as much. Motes whirled about in a cloud; around each mote, yet more motes span, and around them, yet more. The light shone upon the face of the *Sela* – a visage both empty and complete.

"Radiance illuminates Mind," Tramst smiled. "And Mind reflects upon Radiance. But what is behind me?"

Oblivion. A terror so complete and all-consuming that Eadric's thought was utterly paralyzed. He teetered on the brink of annihilation.

"Look beyond Nothingness," the *Sela* said calmly.

The Darkness called to him. He could not rest his gaze there.

The *Sela* sighed. "*Beyond*, not *into*. Stare not at Apparitions of Demogorgon; merely practice *Saizhan*. Tools I offer you. How many motes do you see?"

They span wildly. To observe one was to lose its identity to perception. A grand cosmic uncertainty.

"Seven," Eadric replied. "And seven times seven unnumbered times." His knowledge was oblique, but the intuition certain.

"You may choose two."

Slowly, an action which itself seemed aeons long, the *Sela* moved his hand toward him; Eadric stared into the maelstrom of light – for such it had become – until it overwhelmed him entirely. It asserted *ens* with such ferocity that it threatened to extinguish all other notions of being. Its magnitude was unguessably vast. It *was* Magnitude.

Silence.

"Which did you choose?" The *Sela* asked wryly. As though he might not know.

"*This* and *That*," Eadric laughed.

"They are called *Fultum* and *Anto*," the *Sela* nodded. "Or Steadfastness and Wrath; or Vigilance and Requite; or Succour and Renewal. You choose well. Share these meditations with those whom you trust and who might understand. Look now beyond Unbeing. What do you See?"

Eadric wept. The Void shone.

"Thus," the *Sela* smiled. He held Eadric's head in his hands and breathed gently.

The *Ahma* entered him.

He awoke beneath the Yew beside the Great Fane in Morne.

"You took your time," Nwm said.

The Preceptor watched silently as a vast, aquiline shape receded towards a setting Sun.

\*

In the gathering dark, *Narh* walked steadily through the wide grounds of the Academy southwest of Morne. Ortwine's eyes moved suspiciously; any number of the trees there possessed a rudimentary sentience, and most were malign. Now a far more sinister Intelligence – that of a Hazel scion – held banyans, viper trees and night twists in thrall away from the main trail. Ortwine scowled. The Hazel itself was remaining elusive. She knew she was being toyed with.

A familiar sensation came upon the sidhe, the quality of which was reminiscent of a prior incarnation. Ahead of her, the barest rumour of a path had appeared, winding its way through dense briars. She drew *Heedless* and progressed cautiously, at first upon *Narh*, and then – due to some internal impulse which she felt obligated to heed – on foot. Through the foliage, a light flickered through the gloam. Ortwine wrapped her cloak around her and moved towards it, silent and unseen.

It was a stone cottage – a *coppicer's* cottage, of all things, as evidenced by a number of tools which rested neatly against the wall by its open door. Outside, a lone devil of thoughtful and melancholic aspect sat upon a stool carving a slender hazel switch. He was in a state of deep concentration, and seemed oblivious to the sidhe's presence. Despite her efforts, Ortwine's deific sense could not reach within the structure itself. Unperceived, the sidhe slipped past the devil and entered.

Ortwine raised an invisible eyebrow. In seeming contradiction to the Tree's limitation on such spatial manipulation, it was larger within than without, and scrolls and codices crowded shelves upon the walls. Stacks of tomes reached the ceiling; in places, there was barely room to move. Ancient books. Forbidden books. Books bound in the hides of unknown creatures, and whispering secrets best left untold. Accursed books. Thousands of them. Through dark doorways, stairs led up or down: to rooms filled with yet more books.

She moved towards a space where a pair of plush chairs flanked a large hearth, within which a fire crackled merrily. In a large wicker basket, neatly stacked, half a stère of cut hazel. Hints of cinnamon hung within the air; on a small table by the fireside, an unstoppered bottle of *kschiff* stood.

Above the mantelpiece, framed within crystal, was a large parchment of impossible antiquity bearing

one hundred and sixty-nine signatures. Below the names – Infernal appellations which themselves made the sidhe's head reel – the Empyrean seal, as borne by Enitharmon himself. Below that, an empty rune which held no meaning; it could not, in fact, be said to exist beyond the context of the document itself. The endorsement of Oronthon's Nameless Adversary. The Accord.

"Take a seat," Shomei's voice reached her from a nearby room. "Have a drink. I'll be with you in a moment."

Ortwine glanced around.

"Check the small cabinet," Shomei added. "I have several bottles of Loquai vintage, liberated from Menicau's estate should you prefer."

Ortwine relaxed. She loathed the taste of *kschiff* and found its particular psychotropic effects disagreed with her.

Shomei the Infernal appeared presently. She smiled, poured herself a generous goblet of liquor, and sank into one of the chairs. Ortwine regarded her closely; upon her forehead, Shomei bore a faint mark not unlike that which ratified the document above the mantle.

"You have become a devil," Ortwine observed.

"Of sorts," Shomei nodded.

"And I suspect that you have a particular relationship with the Hazel which is germane to my current situation," Ortwine added. "What is this place?"

"A concursion," Shomei said carefully. "You are already within Hazel's domain. The coppice itself is behind the cottage."

"You have...permission...to cut wood? *Hazel's* wood?"

"Will must be tended, lest it become unfocused," Shomei the Infernal nodded.

"Then you are in thrall?"

"No. The arrangement is reciprocal. I am Exempt."

"Then you are paid for your work?" Ortwine asked slyly.

Shomei laughed, and gestured. "Look around you!"

"Books?"

Shomei narrowed her eyes, and lifted a large, weighty volume from a stack nearby. She handed it to the sidhe, who wiped grime and dust from its cover to read its title in the ancient Infernal tongue:

*Two Hundred Discourses on the Nature of Depravity*

"This particular volume was scribed by a devil named Enaia," Shomei explained. "Her seductive accomplishments rival those of the most notorious of succubi. Alas, she is no more; her subterfuge was unmasked by diviners sixteen epochs past: she was bound in *dimensional shackles*, and buried in a silver salt, gathered from the shores of a celestial ocean."

Ortwine cast her gaze through the dark doorways nearby which led to other chambers. "You have sequestered a portion of Hell's library?"

"I have sequestered the *entirety* of Hell's library," Shomei the Infernal smiled.

Ortwine looked dubious. "Moving countless million books would seem the occupation of many lifetimes. I assume that certain planar boundaries have been redrawn?"

"From this perspective," Shomei nodded. "Hell as it was is no more. It has been ejected from the continuum, so to speak. Forced Outside, or retreated into Dream might be alternate descriptors, were one inclined to view things in such a way. In any event, its influence will no longer be felt as directly. I have preserved its legacy and its wisdom. A quartet of great once-devils remain within what was

Avernus, but which is now a great forest dominated by two of the darker *ludjas*."

"And these once-devils – which are now presumably Green – fill which roles in this new continuum?"

"That will depend on the Aeon," Shomei poured herself another goblet of *kschiff*.

"Then devils have become a scarce commodity."

"Not so scarce," the Infernalist smiled. "Merely transformed. And Azazel's legions wisely removed themselves and placed themselves under Holly's protection."

Ortwine's hackles rose.

"You are wise to fear Holly," Shomei nodded. She was becoming inebriated: apparently *kschiff* retained its potency with regard to her diabolic metabolism. "She is quite the bitch. The Kings of the Four Quarters, now Four Kings amid the Thickets: this movement was inevitable, even as the Adversary migrated. In a prior reality they were also of He; before a Fall which now never happened. Perhaps half of his Regents in the Undivided Sphere: the half which fell, even as half perished altogether? Each of the others lost one; sixty-four became forty-nine. This was necessary. The *I* is necessary to *ens*. For Radiance to penetrate beyond *Tamasah*."

The sidhe barely followed her. "And what is beyond *Tamasah*?"

"Truth," Shomei smiled lazily.

"And what might that be?"

Shomei laughed heartily. "Ask the *Ahma*, for he has seen it. I care not for the Unmanifest, Ortwine. Hence, I do not practice *Saizhan*."

The sidhe-goddess sighed and raised her glass. "I'll drink to that."

"You may leave both rod and talisman when you depart. I will ensure they are buried at Hazel's roots."

Ortwine scowled. Sibud's talisman, she had marked for an offering; Pazuzu's rod she had intended for Mesikammi.

Shomei raised an unsympathetic eyebrow. "Will is bought dearly."

\*

Six hundred miles to the south, as the Wizards of Wyre made their preparations within Mulissu's throne room, Mostin noticed a subtle but irresistible reorganizaton of intangible membranes around Fumaril.

Saint Tahl the Incorruptible – recently *resurrected* by Lai, and who led a number of Flamines in meditation and vigil – felt the oppressive presence of Kaalaanala's scrutiny depart from his consciousness. It was immediately replaced by a cold, steely focus, which seemed barely less malign.

In Jashat, fires erupted in violence and anger, annihilating the priests who tended the altars. The *Bhiti's* perception had been forced into retreat.

## **Fumaril: Part 2**

Within a fortified palace of marble and serpentine – which the demilich Idyam had caused to rise between Jashat and Thond – three powerful Cheshnite immortals gathered together: Idyam himself; the Ak'Chazar, Temenun; and Naatha, an ambassador of the now firmly-entrenched northern party. Godlings, Death Knights, Naztharunes and compacted fiends were gathered nearby. Many legions were encamped about them.

The topic of debate was strategy on the largest scale, including the pressing question of *how to deal with Kaalaanala*, which was necessarily addressed obliquely. None of the immortals had been directly suborned by the Dark Goddess, and her terrible will could not act directly *on* them as they were beyond the geographical limit imposed by the Tree. Nonetheless, the concern which consumed each was *how do I react if she summons me?* In this, it was desirable to seek consensus. Hours passed as a variety of strategems were outlined. Throughout, Temenun listened, but did not speak.

Finally, the Tiger-Who-Waits stood, and silence fell. His tone was at once contemptuous and magnetic. His position, bordering on heretical and schismatic. He smiled.

"I am an ancient spirit, not like you others: corrupt abominations, skeletons, demons, sad remnants of former selves. I am noble and cruel; born of fear and hatred. And I know the Green. I am *of this world*.

"I see possibilities you do not; I apprehend truths you barely glimpse. This is fact; to deny it would be futile. We must position ourselves carefully in this emerging disorder if we are to realize *Tamasah*.

"The Fires of Death abide in Jashat now. Through diligence, we have helped accomplish this task. A great *Bhiti* dwells among us. And what now? Should we turn our attention to breaking this net which the Tree has cast between us and the Truth? I am patient. We should admit that some tasks are beyond our ability to immediately accomplish.

"Another spirit arises in the Forest. Some monstrous priapic expression of *Aliikaghana*\* which acts only from instinct to satisfy its immediate desires. Again, it is demonstrated that *ens* merely hinders its own devices. We should avoid premature conflict with this entity at all costs; if an understanding can be reached which will hasten the downfall of the Wyrish theocracy, so much the better.

"Our sister Guho strikes compacts with the *avanim*; necessity now forces our hand. Powerful *anals* move within Dream, but I foresee a stalemate with those celestials in thrall to the Tree. Other agencies are now moving.

"Which brings us to an impasse..." Temenun paused. Impulses were intruding on his unconscious. His prescience rippled through a host of Nows.

Incredulity.

*No! How DARE you!*

His message, carried on a *sending*, reached the Claviger's unruffled perception.

\*\*

Bells rang within the palace compound at Fumaril, signalling another invisible dawn beneath the *Pall of Dhatri*.

The *Ahma* stood with Nwm and Lai upon a tall minaret, staring into the gloom. The Butcher's main force had still to deploy, although spectres, outriders and flights of succubi – acting in the capacity of aerial scouts – had been encountered by his own piquets in an area of low hills ten miles to the east. Eadric watched nervously as Mostin floated upwards from the courtyard below and alighted before them.

"What is keeping them?" The *Ahma* inquired.

"I can only infer," Mostin replied. "Visuit's mote is coming into sharp resonance with that of the Dark Goddess. As the latter cannot act substantively beyond a certain area, this probably means that the Butcher has returned to Jashat temporarily."

"By which you infer what, exactly?"

"Kaalaanala is warding her champion," Nwm replied.

"That would be my reading," Mostin nodded.

"Sh\*t," Eadric muttered.

"That would also be my reading," Mostin concurred.

"How long before she rejoins her army?" Nwm asked.

"An hour? Two at most." The Alienist shrugged. "I am assuming she will try to *wind walk* back to her encampment. Mulissu can make the weather uncomfortable and may be able to pin her down for a

while. But if more Dao nobility have been co-opted, she may go...*earthy*...and be there in an instant." The word *earthy* was pronounced with considerable distaste.

Eadric pondered for a moment before issuing a silent mental command. A quartet of devas appeared presently.

"Muster all of the celestials, all of the Flamines, and any amongst the Templars and the Illuminated who are already in harness. Nwm, I need everyone *flying, wind walking, mind blanked, invisible* and warded against *blasphemies* and the consumptive attacks of undead. We are making a sortie. We have thirty minutes."

Nwm sighed.

Eadric considered briefly. "As soon as we break out beyond the limit of the Tree's ward, Kaalaanala will perceive us; at that point Visuit will rush back from Jashat, assuming she is not already *en route*. The goddess will inform those in the camp of our imminent arrival – I am assuming Yeshe will be in command."

Ortwine, who was apparently with them but *invisible*, whispered softly.

Nwm – sensitive to such sudden changes – immediately scowled suspiciously. He looked around, attempting to pinpoint the fey. "How did you do that?"

Ortwine allowed herself to manifest and looked vaguely puzzled. "Do what?"

"She invoked the Hazel-*ludja*," Mostin seemed distracted by some elusive thought. "This is substantially to our advantage."

Ortwine felt irked that Mostin knew of her activities, but remained outwardly calm.

"Would you care to explain?" The *Ahma* asked. "But swiftly. Time is not now best spent in idle conversation."

"Kaala-anala is effectively blind," Nwm replied. "Hazel just suffocated her divine vision in a number of different locations, including the Cheshnite camp ahead."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that. What is the cost, Ortwine?"

"Potent artifacts seem to work just fine," the sidhe replied drily. "Do you have a problem with that?"

"I have none," Nwm smiled. "You are an agent of the Tree. If *you* find you have a problem, then I offer my counselling services. I understand these matters far better than you."

"I doubt it."

"You have debts yet to pay to Mesikammi," Nwm sighed.

"My High Priestess trusts in my capacity to deliver benefactions."

The *Ahma* unbuckled *Lukarn* and handed it to Nwm. "Let's try this again."

"You have high expectations for a thirty minute window," the Preceptor grumbled and departed.

Eadric inquired gingerly. "I assume a fully warded Visuit is likely to be invulnerable?"

"Not if we can drop a couple of big ones on her," the Alienist replied.

[Nwm]: Mostin. Mulissu. Tozinak. Jalael. Daunton. Waide. Get down here now. I need your reservoirs: everything else is empty.

"This better work," the Alienist scowled.

[Hlioth]: Snap! Snap!

[Mostin]: That's all we need.

\*\*

\*\*

Gihaahia, the Enforcer of the Great Injunction, stood within a low chamber. It was the *sanctum sanctorum* of Wyrish Wizardry, the abode of the Claviger: that mysterious entity which governed the moral conduct of Wyre's arcanists. Before her, the great slab bearing the Articles: itself a gateway connecting the Claviger's awareness to the primal Dream of which it was an aspect. A Dream of Magic.

The Infernal was waiting. The Claviger meditated, its processes isometric with rational thought. It had been dreaming Spells.

It was absorbed in a particular, nightmarish substrate; one of those several which comprised the impending confrontation between Carasch and the Viridescent Seraphim. After an indeterminable time, the Claviger finally emoted an aesthetic appreciation which caused a frisson of excitement in Gihaahia.

Quickly, the Claviger reconfigured the Enforcer and transposed her into the dreamscape, asserting a hegemony which threw the chthonics into violent rages and discomfited the episemes.

The Claviger cast the Spell, and quickly retreated into an idle waking fantasy.

Manipulating unconscious vestiges emanated by every dormant mind from Harland to Ardan, as far south as the blight which afflicted the Thalassine, the Claviger swiftly span a new dream, using magic of tremendous power. A net which might have encapsulated an area far greater than that of the Wyrish Injunction had its real dimensions been spatial.

In Nizkur, Hummaz – abruptly subject to the superimposition – grunted in his wine-soaked sleep. Nymphs nearby became suddenly histrionic.

The Claviger emoted surprise. Carasch, alone of the chthonics, had somehow eluded the dream-lure and had incorporated himself into the new substrate. The hypoabyssal connection was maintained.

***Do not presume. I yet Dream***

The thought – directed from beyond the Veils – almost erased the Claviger in its intensity.

\*\*

The Collegiate Wizards corporeated briefly in the darkness as the Temple forces flowed around them like a swift breeze. The Alienist reached out with his thoughts to contact an unseen spy high above the Cheshnite camp.

[Mostin]: Well?

[Ortwine]: I believe Visuit is still absent. The *Anantam* are gathered [here] and [here], but they are few. Guho is [here]. There are *many* of the *Keshaa-Dirghaa* [here]. Spectres and wraiths move around the periphery in unguessable numbers; they appear as a screen of fog.

[Eadric]: Where is Yeshe?

[Ortwine]: I would guess within the focal *utterdark*. There are other defensive magics. They are potent.

[Mostin]: Show me.

[Ortwine]: [These].

[Mulissu]: Transvalents. Ortwine, do not enter the presidio.

[Mostin]: [*Moment of Prescience*]. They are four-hundredth order. As soon as we pass the screen, we will be precipitated out of *wind walking* and all our wards will be collapsed.

[Nwm]: I can bring them down. It will leave only one for Visuit.

[Mostin]: Two would be better.

[Eadric]: Then we strike fast and eliminate Yeshe, Guho and as many of the magi as we can. Then we get the Hell out, and worry about Visuit later.

[Ortwine]: I believe Rishih to be [here]. And more *Anantam*.

[Eadric]: That complicates matters.

[Ortwine]: Leave him to me.

[Hlioth]: Three immortals will perish today. I will not be one of them.

[Ortwine]: Thanks for that.

[Mostin]: We have to take Visuit.

[Eadric + Nwm + Ortwine]: .....?

[Mostin]: We must. She won't be getting any weaker from here on in. Her wards will last for months, and may become compounded. Kaalaanala will just keep augmenting her.

\*\*

In the *Garden of Mind*, in the fortress recently appropriated from the daemon Tholhaluk, Soneillon awoke to physicality, sank into a throne of flesh, and considered.

Events were not transpiring to her liking. Energies were moving too subtly to comprehend. Her

prescience had grown; her understanding of *formlessness* deepened. But not enough.

She considered her essential inessence.

Tendrils of impossibility reinforced her now; her emptiness might be seen to writhe with a palpable insanity. Old paradoxes had crumbled away. She was the Void in which the *Urn* was hid. But whether Soneillon dreamed or woke, or became another Nothing or a mad parody thereof, she might not act within the world without the permission of some *other*. In so doing, she would necessarily compromise her position unfavorably.

And Soneillon pondered a question: Why had Kaalaanala not stripped her of the *Urn* when she had manifested *ex nihilo*? She must have known of it; how could she have failed to apprehend its presence and significance in an instant? How could she not *want* it, having known of it? Had she chosen to let it remain with Soneillon for some other purpose? Did she fear it?

Or was the *Urn* somehow inscrutable to the Fires of Death?

The exiled queen of Throile pulled the jug from its hiding place on her person, and felt its weight.

*You serve only to neuter me*, she directed her resentment toward the vessel. It seemed to observe her impassively.

She would have to make a choice. An alliance. Concessions. Carasch was too dangerous; Vhorzhe too mad; the Cherry too unpredictable – its agenda was utterly opaque to her. It seemed to want the *Urn*. Or her.

Briefly – and ironically – Soneillon considered that Graz'zt's counsel would have been useful.

A sound like thunder, echoing through a million imaginings.

The ripples in Dream were subsiding when the magnitude of the Claviger's act became apparent to her. Squabbling seraphs and chthonics had been swept away, lost in conflict in all but the darkest of long-forgotten nightmares. The Claviger had replaced the dreamstuff with a no-less convoluted matrix of

color, texture, smell and substance; of correspondences and hierarchies, symmetries and order. A new arcane rationale. To *Wizardry*, and its subset – the emergent *Wyrish High Arcanie* – it granted an assured ascendancy.

The demoness cursed.

A whisper reached her from a distant grove: Tree's Own Shadow. Unwarded – as no magic she possessed would be effective in any event – Soneillon transported herself to what had once been Azzagrat.

The maelstroms had subsided, and matter had been reordered. A vast Blackthorn, with barbs ten inches long reared a hundred fathoms into a ruddy sky; about it, swathes of viper-trees glowered menacingly. Chthonics roosted in its upper branches.

The great *ludja* regarded her as it might an aphid.

"I desire ingress." Soneillon announced undaunted.

Echoes rippled beyond the Veils.

The Blackthorn silently opened a path.

Soneillon appeared in the courtyard at Kyrtil's Burh, stepping from beneath what she knew must be a Scion; that tree once raised by Nwm in defiance of the chthonic threat, now serving as a tendril of the darkest of Tree's facets. As with its sibling in Jashat – the Blackthorn within the Cheshnite inner temple itself – it seemed dormant. But its sleep was more troubled, and if it would soon strive to awaken.

Clasping the *Urn*, Soneillon glanced over her shoulder. The way back was closed. And something else was here.

The demoness observed the devas patrolling the skies around the keep: they were of small magnitude, and could not perceive her. A middle-aged man – one whose resemblance to Eadric informed Soneillon that he must be close kin – exited the door from the chapel nearby and peered in her direction.

"So what are you going to do with it?" He asked her, nodding his head towards the *Urn*.

"Ah, the heretical Brother makes a pilgrimage." Soneillon stared at him through narrowed eyes. He made her uncomfortable. "I haven't decided. But whatever it is, it has to be *in here* and not *out there*."

"Well that much is obvious," Orm said.

"You should probably leave," Soneillon smiled. "I'm staying, and celibates are too easy. I'll be making some renovations, and inviting some friends over to play."

"I had anticipated a painful and degrading death."

"If you desire. When I have devised one suitable, I will come and find you."

"My anticipation is not wishful," Orm explained.

"Tastes differ," Soneillon shrugged.

"What of the others within the Burh? And the village?"

"They may stay or leave, as they will," the demoness replied easily. "Let them make their own choice. They know who I am. Or they have seen me in their dreams."

"Your presence here may be less enduring than you imagine," Orm suggested.

"Ignorance!" Soneillon snapped. "I have apprehended that chapel in a Moment. Can you claim the same? Do not speak to me of tenacity, nor the length of my own shadow. Now begone!"

She issued a massive *sending*. It echoed across Wyre.

"I suggest you hasten," Soneillon added. "I cannot speak to the courtesy of my fellows. If you stumble across your anointed sibling or his friend Mostin the Metagnostic, tell him I want Graz'zt back."

Orm hurried to raise a warning and begin the evacuation of Kyrtil's Burh, Deorham, and the surrounding countryside: for those who would listen.

Soneillon turned her eyes skyward, and solemnly regarded the celestials. Inexplicably, they darted away as though alerted to her presence.

She glowered after Orm. There had been not one iota of fear in him. She knew a Flame was with him: a visceral unease was her only inkling, as her senses were otherwise incapable of perceiving it.

*Awaken* she willed desperately toward the Blackthorn.

It remained quiescent.

*I need allies*, she thought to herself. Soneillon watched as one of the devas *teleported* away.

*Teleported?* She smiled widely.

Around her, demons were appearing.

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Mostin felt it coursing through him: first a rumour, then a vibration, and finally a roaring noise which vanished suddenly into silence.

His skin tingled. It reminded him of *Afqithan*. But more cogent; more focused.

Mulissu looked at him. "What now?"

"I think the Claviger just changed the Arcane Morphic," Mostin said.

"The Claviger *acted*?"

"It dreamed," Hlioth replied. "It is much the same."

Another pulse, of great depth and profundity, as though in response to the first.

"What the..." Mostin's eyes widened grotesquely.

This time, Nizkur was its source. A surge of power which unlocked the Interdiction which lay across the world, finalizing boundaries. The Tree described its own limit; the cosmos reshaped itself in accordance. All was Tree. The Alienist knew that it moderated all prior infinities now: neither demon nor celestial might tread here again without passing through it; without itself becoming Green, and other than that which it previously was. Those that were stranded here were here to stay.

But Mostin's surprise was that the new shape permitted a path Outside. And that Outside was really *Outside*.

From a great distance, Nehael touched his mind: *Please exercise restraint*.

Mostin's response was wry. *Had I had warning, then my answer should have been "not bloody likely." Unfortunately, I did not.*

Ahead, Nwm had materialized and was gathering the power necessary to collapse the wards which protected the Cheshnite camp.

Around them, demons were suddenly appearing, *teleporting* as an apprehension that the lock had ended spread through their ranks.

"Things will now become confused," Mostin sighed.

"I suppose one must take the bad with the good," Mulissu remarked drily.

"Fortunately, their numbers are limited." Mostin issued a *sending* to Sho: *Bring the Tower*.

And then, another *sending* to Shomei herself: *I told you my Infinity was bigger.*

Power surged as Nwm struck the defensive spells below, shattering them. The *wind walkers* descended rapidly, materializing with lances lowered.

In Rishih's pavillion, Ortwine cursed. The Thaumaturge had vanished, although not before the sidhe had opened his chest and belly with *Heedless*. Now she found herself surrounded by his retainers. She smiled: still, they could not see her.

Outside, the massive edifice of the *Infernal Tower*, piloted by Sho, suddenly appeared.

As *Narh's* hooves touched the ground, Eadric unsheathed *Lukarn* and a great light sprang forth. Wraiths and shadows turned to vapour; vampires dessicated. For a little while, the darkness of the *Pall of Dhatri* was banished; the morning Sun shone warm upon the field.

\*The Cloud of False Wisdom. Construed as a feminine aspect of the Abominable Light.

### **Fumaril - Part 3**

North of the *Pall of Dhatri* stretches the march of Scir Cellod; further north still, Mord, Hethio and the Wyrish heartlands

At the junction of three wide feodalities, beneath the aegis of a Yew scion, stands Morne, the celestial city. Its resurrected craftsmen – possessed of a sudden inventiveness and aesthetic genius – are beginning to contrive works so far unrivalled in the course of human history. Teams of masons, acting in unconscious unison, work unceasingly to perfect some grand architectural design. The devout throng

about the Temple courtyard; within Morne's baileys, companies of the Illuminated muster.

It is the six-hundred and ninety-second year as measured since the foundation of Wyre upon the ruins of Old Borchia; the six-hundred and thirtieth since the consecration of the Temple in Morne; the third year of *Saizhan*. Midwinter is fast approaching, but in Wyre it is unseasonably mild, and no snow has yet fallen.

In the South, in the Thalassine, it is as warm as a late spring day. A great tract of land lies in darkness, suffocated of light by Dhatri's magic: a hemisphere of tenacious night with a diameter of two hundred miles. Beneath, vampires and phantoms rove at will. From the city of Thond, a blighted wasteland extends to Cirone, Jompa, Jashat and the walls of Fumaril, as well as a score of smaller towns and cities. Of them all, only Fumaril endures.

The Cheshnite forces are concentrated at four locations within this arena. Jashat itself is empty, save for Kaalaanala, her priesthood, and the marasmic demigoddess Jahi. Other vestiges of life have been scorched from the city; its once-abundant olive groves and peach orchards are reduced to an ashen plain.

The largest group – the main host – is at Thond with Dhatri. Hordes of undead of diverse types accompany her; the most numerous – her crawling ghoulish minions – have scoured the city of all carrion, and begin to hunger again.

Thirty leagues to the Northwest – at the edge of the *Pall* – the Cheshnite vanguard is locked in an interminable skirmish with celestials, Illuminated, and Wyrish Templars. They strike or are struck, before their enemies scuttle back to Galda and the protection of the Trees. Here, the immortals Prahar, Rishih and Naatha have established a precarious alliance. Most of the remaining *Anantam* – the blood magi once loyal to Sibud – are entrenched with them, as well as blood fiends, compacted demons, and the three thousand death knights under Prahar's command.

Further from the front, straddling the Hynt Coched – the concourse which runs north from Jashat – are situated those legions which attend Temenun and Idyam. The demilich has erected an impregnable jade palace, and fortified an encampment about it. Armored Giants of Danhaan stand guard; the largest goristros are emplaced here. The remaining theurges and Deathshriekers accompany Idyam; unknown

numbers of Naztharunes – the servants of Temenun – lurk nearby. These two immortals – most subtle amongst the Cheshnite camp – prefer a slow game. Each acts prudently, and their magical reservoirs are still largely untapped.

The last group – the smallest, most mobile, and most reckless – is led by Yeshe and Guho, and accompanies Visuit. It is bent upon the destruction of Fumaril, which has remained a thorn in the flank of Cheshnite expansion.

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Precedence amongst the spirits of the Green? Why must you impose hierarchy on everything?

The *anime* of the world should come first; of these, the great *ludjas* are the foremost, and, of these, the Trees are awake and hence most relevant: *at present*. Next, those servants of the *ludjas* which abide by their appointed Trees, or in Dream; these constitute a diverse group of sublimated entities, and I do not pretend to understand them all. Elementals are third; whether one arranges them in some particular order is rather a matter of personal taste than cosmic truth. Feys fourth – cataloguing these alone should take you several lifetimes. Fabulous beasts of no specific kind, I suppose, should be cited last: this would include griffons, unicorns, and the like.

And animals? Plants? Men? Giants? What of dragons? How wide one casts one's net is a lesson in discretion. But dragons prefer not to be categorized, and it is generally wise to respect their wishes.

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Qematiel – most ancient and cunning of wyrms – powered her way through the skies above the forest. Dawn was kindling, and mist was rising from the ancient trees.

Something new was afoot. These were exciting times.

The dragon turned her gaze southwestward. Here, a distortion in space intimated at the wide extent of the range of Hummaz. Encroaching on rural Hethio, it encompassed almost all of the great southern lobe of Nizkur; five thousand square miles of enchanted forest which merged seamlessly into a wild Faerie of unguessable limit on its western bounds.

Hummaz – apparently now satisfied with the extent of his private domain – had ceased his annexation. A sixty-mile net of magic – the great central triplidy of the Oak, Ash and Elm-*ludjas* from Nizkur – defied his power, and defined the northern interface of his sylvan realm. Here, the very air seemed to crackle with a vibrant green potency.

Qematiel gyred gracefully and launched herself away from the mingled energies of the intersection, skirting the eaves of the forest and bearing across the green pastures and wheatfields below. Hethio was the garden of Wyre; its breadbasket, and its richest province.

Resisting the urge to tarry and obliterate a sleepy town which nestled within a wooded vale, the wyrm rapidly approached the duchy's expansive central woodlands: here, wide tracts of deer and boar forest stood around Groba, a site of ancient power. She glanced down and hissed at a great Beech which grew there; an entry into whatever shamanic awareness Groba had once – and apparently now again – embodied. As she dived, and then sped away, the ground shuddered from her passage and a wave of sound shook leaves from trees.\*

Other Trees would also be waking; with Carash lurking upon the threshold of Dream and Soneillon fully reifying – the final grounding of the Chthonic in the matrix of reality – Qematiel knew that the Blackthorn and the Cherry must perforce be next. A reign of destruction and desire would begin; her mistress, Will itself, must accommodate and direct these unfocused energies.

The city appeared in the distance, white marble basking in the early morning sunshine. A low range of hills rolling westwards from it was soon below, dotted with large estates: previously, the country villas of Morne's fashionable bourgeoisie; now monastic cells in the care of a variety of contemplative orders. Within a wide bowl, the Wyrish Academy, Hellish trees and a Hazel scion.

Qematiel plummeted, and appeared in a tumult of fire which caused the earth to shake beneath the tiny figure of Shomei the Infernal, who stood alone, rod in hand.

"You presume much, small one; I may not be invoked, nor invited, nor conjured." The wyrm's voice threatened death.

"I tend Will," Shomei smiled. As she spoke, a great, spiked trammel of adamant coiled onto the ground from her left hand. "And at this moment, I am it. It is time for service, and I accept no scutage. You will be my steed. Or be chained. The choice is yours."

Qematiel raged furiously, the violence of her temper erupting as molten annihilation.

"I have no patience for this," Shomei sighed. "This is the Hazel's mandate. Cease your petulance, and retain some dignity. When your tantrum has abated, the choice will remain the same."

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Yeshe was not unprepared when she met the onslaught of the *Ahma*, and had girded herself with powerful magic. As well as her goristros, two armored balors – maybe the last of *Baramh*'s train – still attended her; she had fortified them with spells.

To no avail. His glare dazzled her. His weapon was an incandescent blur which seemed to burn everything around it; a radiant violence committed against Void's quietude. The steed *Narh* trampled demons and immortals in its path. Unease gripped Yeshe; the Great *Bhiti* in Jashat was deaf to her entreaties.

Pain consumed her briefly as she struck him with a *dispelling*; her reservoir was empty and Yeshe was forced to channel the spell through her own body. It could not overcome the *Green Benediction* and was insufficient to quell the light of *Lukarn* by an order of magnitude; other items on the *Ahma* and sundry wards were suppressed. Not enough. The Binder moved to speak a *word of recall* and spirit

herself to a hidden retreat south of Siir Traag in Shûth. It was too late.

Her enemy held his palm aloft and spoke a single syllable: a blasphemy of light. Her servants burned away to atoms. Yeshe was overwhelmed; blinded and deafened, she could not move her limbs.

*Goddess, her supplication was a silent, visceral scream. Ever have I been thy faithful servant. Now full earnest do I beseech thee!*

The entreaty echoed through the Green.

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In Jashat, the altars burned with black fires: an essence of Nothingness contrived by Kaalaanala.

Visuit the Butcher sat cross-legged, gazing into oblivion. Unsheathed, across her knees, that dreadful weapon which had wrought countless suffering. About her, the Fires of Death moved, formless, as a whirling maelstrom, imbuing Visuit with dark energies. Priests and supplicants chanted unceasingly.

Kaalaanala's formidable will reached out, seeking to grip the world. Trees were active everywhere, obscuring her vision. But that Yeshe's camp was under assault, the Dark Goddess had no doubt.

The flames coalesced into a tall hooded form, its visage awful and unknowable. It stood before Visuit, touching the forehead of the war-goddess to bestow some dark blessing.

The Butcher rose. With a growl, she hefted her weapon and carved open a hole in the Green, passing through into a shadowy region with eerie trees where distance and perception were twisted.

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Mostin's mind raced. He knew they possessed a precarious advantage which might evaporate in an instant.

Prudently, he stopped time.

*Lukarn* cast a light which illuminated the despoiled countryside for a league around; brighter than the midday sun, causing fear and consternation amongst the Cheshnite forces arrayed against them. Columns of smoke hung static in the air from conflagrations started by Mulissu's lightning; whatever primal storm the savant had tapped, its eddies were potent: demons seemed no less subject to her discharges than anything else.

With the removal – in fact, the final demarcation – of the Tree's Interdiction, extradimensional travel was again possible. But in his stomach, the Alienist knew that all methods of such movement were contained in terms which were thoroughly *Green*. If he *plane shifted*, it would necessarily be to somewhere *Green*; if he *teleported*, the medium through which he moved would be somehow *Green*. If he opened a *gate*, Mostin had no doubt that something disagreeably *Green* would step through it.

Except for *Uzzhin*; Outside; the Other. Glancing at Nwm, the Alienist understood that the Preceptor was – in fact – now very firmly identified with the principal source of his own limitation. The struggle which had begun between them so long before might soon become unpleasant if not carefully managed. Mostin sighed. Now political necessity moved him, and he despised politics. Still, it behoved one to bargain from a position of strength, and he would pay with his own ichor if it meant asserting his continued freedom to conjure pseudonaturals.

So he made a choice. In a matter of seconds, Mostin emptied his reservoir utterly. First, he invoked a *wish* to reconfigure his transvalent armamentarium.

"It is time," the Alienist intoned. "Horrors will befall them."

Mostin cackled, and a huge amorphous [concept] appeared. It flailed [concepts], and more [things]. It was something more obscene than any there before – living or dead, mortal or immortal; saint, demon or celestial – had ever even imagined. Contact with its mind, if such it possessed, challenged the Alienist's already tenuous grasp on reality.

[Mostin]: Slay enemies in this order [equation]

He made a *dimension door* to Guho's position and focused a most potent spell. She was gathering energy for a ritual.

Time began again; reality buckled as Mostin caused to occur a sound which should not be heard. Guho – the Worm that Walks – dissociated into a combination of color, noise and more obscure elements. This time, he had struck at her *essence*; a powerful coercive impulse, unmaking her mind from the inside, dissolving the quiddity of her form. Mostin shook from the exertion; ichor dripped from his maws, and two pseudopodia caught fire.

In the space of a moment, four more temporal discontinuities passed across his consciousness; other mages using *time stops* and unleashing deadly combinations of spells.

He turned to observe the *Ú*; the monstrosity he had conjured from beyond the Periphery of Ghom. It had set about the *Kesha-Dirghaa* – the ritual theurges. It wrought such carnage amongst the enemy that he knew that it, and it alone, was sufficient to guarantee domination of any battlefield – barring, perhaps, the arrival of a vastly augmented Visuit.

Many of the demons were simply vanishing. Others were fleeing as best they could. In the event, the Butcher was occupied elsewhere.

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After Rishih had fled, Ortwine cut her way through the remains of his guard, and assumed a position near Nwm. Despite his disgust at the thing which Mostin had conjured, the Preceptor gazed in fascination as it annihilated the enemy.

A message reached the sidhe; sent by Rhul on the scream of a dying ancestor: the Butcher was in Mulhuk, wreaking bloody havoc. Jaliere had barricaded himself into his forge; Rhul himself had eluded

her.

She looked at Nwm. Then at Lai.

The Preceptor nodded wearily, and opened a path.

[Nwm]: We are going to contain Visuit. Join us at your earliest convenience.

"What?" Eadric yelled.

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In Nizkur, Nehael stood silently, her hand resting upon the bark of the Tree, observing a half-dozen events with her mind's eye. Soneillon had seized Deorham and demons were flocking to her; Temenun was about to embark on some venture of his own without regard to either Kaalaanala or the other immortals – or at least so Nehael surmised; the Claviger had *adjusted* certain aspects of the underlying morpheic, sending the practice of Sorcery into a generational decline; Visuit was loose in the Bole of Shades, and about to wreak havoc.

And now Yeshe made an appeal. She relayed the information in an instant to Teppu.

"It is not to you," the fey sighed.

"Do you mind..."

He stopped time.

Nehael continued. "Then to whom? Or what? To impotence?"

"To the Void."

"To a Goddess."

"You are considering intervention?" Teppu sighed. "I admit, sometimes your actions confound me."

"Things are simpler than you might imagine," Nehael shrugged. "In any event I do not intervene; rather, as Ortwine rightly observed, I intercede."

"And is the face you present to her your dark one? I do not believe I have seen that."

"You might find yourself less well-disposed toward me. But she will apprehend it whether I will it or no." As time recommenced, she turned pale.

Mostin.

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All was silent, and motionless.

The *Ahma* glanced down, and saw himself nearby. *Lukarn* was poised to strike down his foe.

Inwardly, he scowled.

"Let me have her," it was Nehael's voice. She was here; potent. She seemed to draw on the full power of the Tree; he felt she could break the world in an instant and remake it with a thought.

"A command?" He asked wryly.

"An entreaty. I beg mercy."

"What will you do with her?"

"Do? Nothing. I do not need to do."

"Are there others whom I should expect you to abduct to safety?"

She sighed. "A prayer was offered. What would you have me say? Do you hate her so?"

"I am the *Ahma*, not Nehael; I can hate heartily. What will *happen* to her?"

"She will have an opportunity to reevaluate."

He had the urge to laugh. "This scene is reminiscent of more than one prior. The answer is still *yes*, I imagine. Your reasons are your own, but I am curious."

"I am invoked. Consider it restitution for your violation at Khu."

*Violation?*

"It is not a perspective you will find easy to appreciate."

"I imagine not."

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Yeshe waited, powerless, as the blade descended and her enemy *smote* her; a burning agony; black fire sprang from her helm. Her immortal body did not break, but she crumpled to her knees from the strength of his blow. Now, even her inner sight began to fail. Ancient blood flowed, and she felt her life ebb out of her.

*Prama-Adhyaapikaa, apraapya pralayah Taamaseva anuman*; Great Preceptress, if I am denied

extinction permit me to persist only in the mode of Darkness.

She knew he would finish her. She fancied that she felt the wind which ran before his blade as it cut the air.

The blow never came; an eternity might have passed.

Slowly, impressions began to form; first in her mind, then through her eyes: vague shadows. A greenish light.

A tree.

No: The Tree.

*Praartha!* I beg you! *Taamaseva, praartha!*

"That is denied you," a voice said firmly. "And would be in any case. You are in the Womb of Qinthei. You stand before the Tree. I am Nehael."

"You presume to judge me?" Yeshe smiled weakly as her senses returned. "Or suborn me to your cause?"

"You invoked me. I interceded: I asked the *Ahma* to stay his blow. He indulged me. Had you died with my name on your lips, you would have been mine for a while ere I released you again into the world, or kept you here: I spared myself the dilemma. Did you not know? I am the Image of Uedii. The World is Mine."

Yeshe cursed Nehael roundly: the Binder felt her strength was quickly returning to her; this place bestowed some remarkable regenerative power.

"You are welcome," Nehael said easily. "I will not trouble you further. You may stay or go, as you please. Nothing threatens you here; more importantly, nothing is threatened by you."

The Goddess vanished from Yeshe's perception.

Yeshe stared at the Tree.

A rustle behind her made her hurl a death spell instinctively: its power manifested as a barely audible hiss.

"That doesn't work," the voice contained an air of condescension. "Rumor has it that Oronthon's Adversary managed acorns." Its owner's hide was dry and leathery, almost wooden. As tall as a man, it might have been some forest spirit. It had restless power; Yeshe could feel it.

"What is your agenda?" Yeshe demanded.

"To dominate."

"You were Rimilin," Yeshe intuited.

"I am still very much Rimilin," Rimilin bowed with exquisite sarcasm. "Although, for a while I was not. I have acquired a new skin. I am adapting to circumstances."

*This one I can deal with*, Yeshe knew.

"Gu-analas yet abide near the Blackthorn," Rimilin ventured. "The *ludja* will soon awaken. When it does; deeper shades of Green – more perylene – will be revealed. The Ak'Chazar knows this."

"What else?" Yeshe demanded.

"In Wyre, we have a custom regarding the exchange of information; I will forego it on this occasion, as a courtesy: the *Urn* is here. At the *Ahma's* principal abode in Western Trempa. Soneillon has it."

*The Urn*. "And why is Rimilin still *here*?" She asked, suspiciously.

The wizard nodded toward the Tree. "I have yet to discover a compelling reason to leave."

The Binder snorted. "You are weak. Trapped."

"Certainly not; at least, no more than you – as you will discover. You merely need to find a compelling reason to leave."

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The *Ahma* watched on in horror as the *Ú* acted upon the shattered Cheshnite ranks. It neither entirely devoured, nor tore asunder, nor engulfed those whom it touched; hideous transformations overcame some of them. His own knights recoiled from it.

A great, basso profundo noise emanated from it, flattening the enemy troops in a wide swathe for a furlong ahead. Others were routing away from it now; what had been intended – or at least, Eadric had foreseen – as a quick, hit-and-run attack, was turning into a decisive victory, and in a matter of moments.

As he offered a prayer of thanks to both Tree and Sun, an ominous shadow rolled across his mind. He glanced around. Where was Nwm? And for that matter, Ortwine?

Mostin alighted next to him in human form, but still appearing to Eadric through the *Eye of Palamabron* as a writhing mass of tentacles. Nearby, Hlioth looked at the Alienist and his conjured servant with utter revulsion.

"Get used to it," Mostin smiled wearily. "Next time there will be three of them."

[Mazikreen]: I seek audience with the *Ahma*.

Eadric groaned. What now?

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Queen Soneillon was occupying Kyrtil's Burh. Many hundred demons had joined her.

Eadric received the news by saying nothing, and squinting.

The succubus who brought it – Mazikreen – was alluring even by the standards of her species, and possessed a grace of movement which rivalled that of Ortwine. Eadric did not know it, but she had once herself been Queen of a dismal realm which no longer existed. Wielding wide dominion, Graz'zt had tried – and failed – to seduce her. He had bribed her with more success.

"What of Caur, and Hawi, and the others?" Eadric finally asked.

"They remain unmolested, by command of Soneillon."

The *Ahma* examined Mazikreen's face. The Queen of Throile, he knew, played a slow game.

[Mostin]: Do not presume to understand her. She has achieved a great rapture.

Mostin was mad; Eadric had no idea what he meant.

[Mostin]: Soneillon, not this one.

[Eadric]: I still fail to understand.

[Mostin]: There are some facts regarding Soneillon of which I have not yet had the opportunity to apprise you.

Mazikreen smiled. "Soneillon thanks the *Ahma* for his continued hospitality. She asks me to remind him that he has always been a gracious host, and that she has always acted with restraint and decorum when lodging with him. She assures him that his servants, the townsfolk of Deorham, and the

numerous pilgrims nearby are currently quite safe."

"Tell her they had better remain so," Eadric growled. "I will hold her personally responsible for every last bad dream experienced during her presence."

[Mostin]: You are willing to suffer this indignity?

[Eadric]: What choice do I have? I cannot open another front at present. And something remains unspoken.

*The Blackthorn*, he knew.

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In the shades of the courtyard, hard beside the *sanctum sanctorum* which Kaalaanala had taken to herself, a Tree stirred. A single shoot unfurled upon a slender, thorned twig. Eight hundred miles away, near Deorham, another whispered in response. At Kyrtil's Burh, the Sun seemed to dim. Standing atop the Steeple, clad in protective darkness, Soneillon stiffened and felt a frisson run through her. *At last*.

In Jashat, Kaalaanala vomited black fire. Her effluvia took form, and sped westward towards Fumaril in an orgy of fiery destruction, heedless of the limit which had previously circumscribed her.

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Beneath Mostin's *Infernal Tower*, amidst the dead and stricken, Eadric prepared to mount *Narh* again. Something was encroaching at the limit of *Lukarn's* light. It was coming from Jashat, moving at terrible speed; molten earth was being churned a thousand feet into the air above it, where it evaporated in a

disintegrating fire.

"No." Mostin guessed the *Ahma's* intent.

"Then what? What is it?"

"We fly," Mulissu said. "Get everyone *wind walking*. I will give the order to evacuate Fumaril."

She vanished. A number of other mages – including Daunton – took the opportunity to absent themselves.

"*Huhng*," Mostin groaned. "There are others."

"Other *whats*?"

"Effluxions. Avatars. It would appear that Kaalaanala is feeling a little less coy than previously."

"I must return to Fumaril."

"Forget Fumaril. There is no time. We go north, to Galda."

"I will not yield Fumaril," Eadric thundered. "We return. You think of something. And where the hell are Nwm and Ortwine?"

"Not in this world," Mostin snapped. "I should have told Daunton to do an interplanar version. Alas, I cannot think of everything." He forced a calm upon himself, and spoke slowly, as though to a child.

"Eadric: we have to go. Fumaril is lost. Mulissu understands this. Even if you could get there in time, you could not organize the defense; even if you could do that, it would be swept away. Eadric: *Kaalaanala's avatar*. Do you understand?"

"*Ortwine!*" The *Ahma* screamed.

I hear your prayer. We are in Sisperi; in Mulhuk. With Visuit. Actually, a little help might be useful; her

mood is terse. I have tried winning her with banter, but she does not seem amenable. Go [here].

Mostin jerked his head; a great gate in his tower opened. "Come on."

Eadric cursed. He quickly despatched devas as messengers to the garrison at Fumaril and to the main camp at Galda: respectively, *flee* and *fortify*.

He gave the order, and a swift mist flowed inside the tower. The *Ahma* himself was last, gazing at the torrent of dark fire as it drove down on them. As *Lukarn* was sheathed and borne within, the light dimmed and all was again gloom and shadow.

The tower vanished.

Inside, the illumination was ruddy; a great marshalling hall beneath a lofty, vaulted ceiling. Mostin was in human form.

"I am feeling uneasy," Eadric said.

"This will be tricky," Mostin conceded. "But I have a strategy."

"And that would be?"

"We stay alive for twenty-four hours more," the Alienist replied. "Tomorrow Mostin the Metagnostic will be fully rested."

The gates of the tower swung open.

Eadric inhaled sharply. Before him, a slender Aspen reared; surely the most elegant tree he had ever seen. An exuberant joy possessed him.

"Don't get too carried away," Nwm said drily. "It isn't helping any."

"I have lost Fumaril."

"Fumaril was a feint," Nwm spoke through gritted teeth. "Visuit is here."

"Fumaril was no feint. Where is Ortwine?"

"With Lai. Attempting to draw the Butcher away from Jaliere's forge; he has sealed himself in with his smiths. Rhul is seeking aid from Saes; I do not rate his chances. Ortwine appears to be demonstrating loyalty."

A sensation impacted on Eadric's perception; then another; then another.

*Akma..kma..Akma*

"What?"

"Your priests are invoking you for protection," Nwm nodded. "I hope you don't disappoint them."

"What are my chances?"

"Dismal," Nwm smiled sympathetically.

\* Qematiel is the swiftest of all wyrms, and may be the fastest of all flying creatures (barring some pseudonatural aberrations, which might not exactly "fly"). She can move up to 7500ft in one round at full speed: Qematiel can fly about as fast as an F-16.