

## Sovereignty

Qematiel approached Morne through the air from the west, the morning sun lending a golden adumbration to black and scarlet scales. She plummeted a thousand feet and alighted in an explosion of Hellfire within the Temple courtyard, her rider taking pains to avoid any area where the Faithful were gathered. Hallowed ground hissed and smoked, and all fled screaming from the wyrm's presence, save a quartet of the Anointed only: young paladins with glowing faces charged with guarding the gate to the precinct.

"Begone, you idiots," Shomei gestured as she slid from Qematiel's neck. They obeyed without hesitation. She whispered, and vanished beyond perception.

Shomei paced softly but rapidly across a lawn toward the Yew. Pulling off a glove, she stretched out her palm, and placed it on gnarled bark. Awareness was boundless. The universe seemed to breathe with a slow, measured pace. The scion itself was a tunnel of green light, leading to a heaven of limitless wisdom.

She inhaled sharply, withdrew her hand, and glanced about; her eyes now resting on an unremarkable patch of grass in the shade of the transept. There, the *I* had stood. Shomei walked over toward the place, and knelt upon the ground. Pulling away turf in clods, she dug down eight inches into soft earth with her fingers. Next, she carefully retrieved a wrapped canvas from within her robe, untied it, and withdrew a cutting.

She placed the seedling in the hole she had dug, and even before she had packed the earth back in place, she felt it stretch, twist and slide in her hand: radicles quickly sought moisture; twigs grew upon a slender sapling.

Power surged.

Dozens of other trunks shot up around her; wrapped in their own glamour, she knew they were imperceptible to all mortal senses. A coppice of Hazel within the compound of the Temple of Oronthon in Morne. Shomei conjured a once-devil, Haril, and tasked him with the maintenance of the grove; she then became visible again to sight.

Guards were moving around the periphery of the courtyard; Shomei was aware of others beginning to gather upon the enclosing walls.

The wizard ignored all present, made her way around to the great, carved valves which led into the Fane, and gestured; they swung inward noisily. Within, light glowed warmly and incense hung heavy in the air. Those at morning prayer or in meditation were roused.

Kicking off her slippers, Shomei the Infernal – to the curiosity of those present – strode down the nave. She handed her rod and robe to a bewildered scrollbearer who quaked beneath their power, and reverently – or perhaps cautiously – approached the apse. Before her, the vacant archiepiscopal throne and the great altar of Oronthon. She made a single, fluid ritual prostration, and rose smoothly.

In an act later viewed as blasphemy, reconciliation or rededication – depending on one's point of view – Shomei proceeded to swiftly burn characters in Old High Borchian into the arch above the exedra which contained Oronthon's Holy of Holies, in a script both elegant and precise. Her

revelation itself was by no means unambiguous, and was the cause of much subsequent speculation; the grammatical vagaries of Borchian lending additional uncertainty to her words:

*Gairn Spâhidan* Omnisapient Will [is Mine]

*Wáirdan Kanist Wistim* [I am] Becoming [is] the Refuge of Being

And then, upon the great solar orb, as if in refutation of the central transmetaphysic of *Saizhan* itself:

*ÍM*  
*SAIZHO*  
*WAÍRTH*

I AM. I SEE. I BECOME.

She muttered irritably to the priest as she took back her artefacts, turned, and cleared her throat. She spoke in a clear voice to those within the Fane: a bold declamation which echoed in the vaulted ceilings:

"*Swah Qith Oronthon*. I am reiterating your credo, not denying it.\* You are in danger of falling into dogmatic nihilism; a perennial hazard if you emphasize negatory dialectics. I am offering a cataphatic serum for your malady. Don't worry: the irony isn't lost on me. Cease your solipsisms! Your praxis is insufficient by itself; *the Truth is not enough*: you lack agency."

Shomei departed without ceremony, her slippers chasing her and returning to her feet as she exited the Fane.

Reconsidering, she turned on the threshold, and subjected the golden eagle which reared above the newly-engraved orb to a powerful transmutation. Its talons retracted, its wings became elevated as though about to take flight, its head drew back and gazed directly upwards. She then *disintegrated* the throne.

*Better*, she thought.

Outside, a crowd gathered. The wyrm Qematiel had coiled herself about the Yew and clung tightly to it, her annihilating fires subdued. The dragon's eyes – though they still retained their vast and ancient malice – seemed to possess a certain peace; she was permitted to remain until nightfall.

The Infernalist gazed at those assembled: in her mind's eye, they became a conflagration of light. Flames of Oronthon, returned from the Serenities, threatening to overwhelm her with radiance.

"Do you even know?" She asked them. "I think it's time someone told you."

The light smiled, and was occulted again.

Shomei scowled. With profound effort of Will – and the extent to which she recognized it as other than her own perplexed her – Shomei turned her thought upon them. She groped as through the flimsiest of veils; a subtle vapor concealed the apprehension of rarest truth. It eluded her.

"Become what You Are!" She hissed at them in frustration.

Silence.

Shomei considered her options. It would seem that more pressure must be applied. Pausing for a moment to gather her focus, she tapped her reservoir and reality shifted. She then issued a *sending*:

*I invite you to join me. There will be no compulsion, but I will remain the senior partner. Our association may end whenever you choose.*

Instantly, Irel, Who Smites – the last and greatest of the dark episemes – appeared before her. Shomei – a connoisseur of the Infernal aesthetic – gaped at his beauty despite herself. Here was a perfect being: fallen without sin; cradled by the Green, not imprisoned within it. *Oh, Mostin. I owe you for this.*

She considered briefly, grasped her rod, and struck the ground. A peal of thunder sounded as a *gate* opened. "Come," she raised an eyebrow and gave a sidelong glance. "We go to visit Azazel first."

Shomei's estimate of diabolic forces previously deployed on Avernus amounted to four hundred and thirty-four legions, including those of the independent magnates. Azazel had brought more than two hundred more – mostly pit fiends and horned devils – from Nessus itself, immediately subsequent to the *I*'s translation. Their current status intrigued Shomei; the extent to which they retained their infernality in varying degrees was curious: some – including the rulers of the Quarters – had become powerful feys. Others – such as Azazel himself and those accompanying him – seemed to enjoy a more protected status. Regardless, the general structure of their hierarchies remained intact: they represented a potential for power; perhaps the greatest and certainly the most coherent anywhere within the bounded cosmos.

Shomei and Irel vanished through the *gate* into dark verdancies: the Thickets of the Four Kings where the Hazel and Holly-*ludjas* held sway.

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The witch floated in the air, a half-mile above the eastern gates of the city. Bells and alarms were ringing frantically; the air around was thick with *wind walking* djinn and whichever fortunates they had managed to take with them. Below her, in shadow, the masses teemed in the streets and sought to flee the encroaching fire. All available magical aid had been lent to speed the evacuation; it remained woefully inadequate to the task.

Mulissu silently lamented. There was no time for anything, even to conjure *Ha'uh* – which might have at least forestalled the shape which now bore down upon the city. It was as though a great plough were being dragged at uncanny speed across the dark land toward Fumaril; the furrow it left was an open wound in the earth, the sides of which smoked and vitrified. At its approach, a vibration caused the foundations of the city to shudder; the sound rapidly became deafening, and houses began to topple.

*There is no scion at Fumaril*, Mulissu grimly observed.

The gate below her exploded into molten rubble.

As her subjects – those whom she had sworn to protect – began to perish by the thousand, she pushed all sense of grief and horror from her mind lest it overwhelm her; not one jot of remorse

would she let herself feel. The Tyrant of Fumaril gazed on, expressionless.

She studied her enemy with implacable calm.

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Kyrtill's Burh darkened as clouds gathered in the sky above it. Within two leagues – an area which included both the town of Deorham and many outlying farms – animals were transformed into misshapen, brooding things by the awakening Blackthorn scion. The land seemed to drift; shadows erupted and passed without warning. Buildings stretched and twisted. Trees grew shaggy and thorned. Of feys, all but the most wicked and insane fled.

In the public lounge of the *Twelve Elms*, Soneillon sat and pondered. Her demons were growing restless – most were currently contained in a demiplane of her devising, and only a handful attended her directly. Ilistet, she had promised a steed; Mazikreen had taken a liking to Afqithan, and Megual would need to be bought off. The Goat was remaining hidden and inscrutable; probably making magic. She must somehow seek to either placate or compel them all, but she could not afford to anger the *Ahma* quite yet, and loosing them on eastern Wyre would surely incur his wrath.

She motioned with her mind and gestured to the barkeep to bring her more wine. It seemed to be affecting her; Soneillon wondered as to whether she had acquired some measure of mundanity. When the bottle arrived – delivered by a flabby boy with an apish gait and an empty look - the demoness smiled languidly.

Soneillon made herself receptive. From far beyond the known – such as it now was – an impression reached her; concepts superimposed upon disquieting sound.

:: Beware of Shomei. We know her. She seeks to coerce the *I* with the Hazel. She will seek the *Urn*::

The demoness entered a potent divinatory fugue. To her, the world – all that is the case, and that had been a great deal – had changed into a small and unfamiliar but nonetheless exciting finitude. Much was new again and unexplored, with possibilities untapped. And now the Fires of Death in Jashat had erupted in fourfold manifestation, spewing Void into reality.

The first and most violent effluxion was in the process of ravaging Fumaril: of the eighty thousand inhabitants, some fifteen hundreds had escaped. Much of the city was already gone, and burning rivers now ran between mounds of ash and slag; clouds of steam rose from the harbors. Soon, Soneillon knew, the abomination would tire of its revels and sink down through the mantle to become a dark fire at the heart of the world.

A second manifestation, Kaalaanala had leaked into Dream; the Claviger would tolerate it but must necessarily move to contain it. Carasch and other Chthonics raced along a great bough of the Blackthorn into the nightmares which surrounded it. Soneillon sensed them as they brushed Delirium; the urge to join them was almost irresistible.

The Third Effluxion, a winged infernal shrouded in unlight, took flight. It sped to an island in Pandicule, a place far beyond the Claviger's purview, there to enlist powerful spirits – things now neither entirely demon nor fey – which had been seduced by the Blackthorn-*ludja*. At that same moment, within the Grotto of the Articles, Gihaahia manifested, even as the Claviger itself plummeted into Dream. Taking stock as consciousness recrystallized, the Enforcer's perception

reached out toward the southern boundaries of her remit. Soneillon felt the awareness pass through her and test the limit of the Blackthorn's ward; the *ludja* itself flexed, repelling Gihaahia's efforts.

The Fourth and last – an image of the dark and hooded form of the goddess, wreathed in corrupting flames – stood momentarily before the altar of itself in meditation. Its senses probed reality. Without word or gesture, it caused space to fragment and dragged forth a great Chthonic *anala*, binding it into the shape of a fiery steed. Faster than a hurricane, it then rode north, an emissary.

Soneillon scowled. *That bitch better not come here.*

A pulse. The demoness started. It was emanated by the scion at the nearby keep. To soothe her? Allay her concerns? She tasted an exquisite anguish; a sudden satiation of unbecoming. It struck her as a heady ecstasy of the utmost purity.

Immediately, a presence in her mind. Her mental defenses slammed into place; Soneillon transformed herself and arose in might, clutching the *Urn*. A shockwave blew a hole in the roof of the inn as she launched herself skywards: protective void blossomed around her; tendrils of madness lashed the air wildly.

All of her hatred, the entirety of her, focused into an execration directed at this interloper in her field of apprehension. There was a brief mental silence.

[Nehael]: As you wish. But take care where your senses roam.

Soneillon cursed.

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Hummaz lolled, wine-soaked, upon a great stone chair. Nymphs slept nearby in exhausted bliss. The Wild God of the Woods raised an eyebrow as something flitted across his vision four leagues distant.

What's this?

He reached out, grabbing a diminutive fey and dragging it toward himself. The creature was dressed strangely, possessed of one arm, and had an unwinking eye in the middle of its forehead. Hummaz absorbed its thoughts and history in a trice. An enigma.

Hummaz grunted and replaced the odd creature. He was thirsty, and his head pounded. Where was the wine?

Wine?

*"Wine!"* He bellowed. His temper was rising.

Every fey within a mile instantly heeded his call. Wine began to arrive; in bottles, cups, flasks and kegs.

Hummaz drank eight deep draughts and relaxed again. But not entirely.

Something wasn't quite right.

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In Northern Soan, in the world of Sisperi, it was known that the gods warred in the Heaven of Mulhuk. At first, Lai's priests blamed the machinations of Saes, the goddess of death; the truth was later revealed by oracles to be otherwise: a foreign war-goddess – Visuit – was attacking the Nireem.

Dark spirits – awakened by the passage of the interloper through the Bole of Shades – now stalked the fields of Soan. Steadings were attacked by evil sprites; gentler woodland spirits fled. Crofters barred their doors and nailed their shutters. Prayers were fervently offered: to Ortwine, Rhul, Lai and Akma. A few invoked Ninit, but the Rider was oblivious, galloping wildly along Faerie strands west of Nizkur.

Akma sent his furies to intercede; winged avengers with great maces and flaming swords drove fell monsters back into shadow. The faithful rejoiced.

In Mulhuk itself, events were less happy.

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[Eadric]: You cannot suppress her wards?

[Mostin]: No

[Eadric]: Conjure a...whatever that was?

[Mostin]: No

[Eadric]: Open a *gate*?

[Mostin]: There are no celestials or devils to invoke. I will not call a Horror using something as vulgar as a *gate*: anything of any use to us would simply ignore my commands and pursue its own trajectory.

[Nwm]: Invoke Nehael.

[Mostin]: I most certainly will not. Besides, there's no point. She doesn't ever *do* anything, anyway.

[Eadric]: She owes me for Yeshe.

[Mostin]: And what exactly did she *do* with Yeshe?

[Hlioth]: Do? Nothing. She left her with Rimilin.

[Eadric]: *What?*

[Hlioth]: Neither Rimilin nor Yeshe will leave the presence of the Tree until their time. I suspect that that whether they are "alive" or "dead" is not necessarily germane from the Tree's perspective. But Cherry will not snatch them. This is good.

[Eadric]: The Cherry is waking?

[Nwm]: Amongst others. Big trouble. It won't be long. The Aspen here is still sleepy.

[Eadric]: And Nehael *knew* this?

[Hlioth]: As the Image of Uedii. Nehael is, herself, merely an agent: an echo of an aspect. That is worth remembering.

"I am confused," Eadric sighed.

"As am I," Mostin confessed.

"Cherry and Blackthorn." Nwm explained. "These are the moot of Cheshne and Uedii: the Abysmal *ludjas*, so to speak; negotiations are tense. My bowels register it uncomfortably."

"You *feel* this? And yet Nehael is somehow blind to it?"

"Eadric," Nwm sighed, "Unlike the *Ahma*, I am wise: I see little purpose in burdening objective reality with my internal processes. I have occasional intuitions; Nehael is more empathic: perhaps she is too close to it. Visuit. Kaalaanala. Goddess grows darker."

[Ortwine]: Yes she does. And a little help would be appreciated here.

[Lai]: Soon.

"But Nehael is an echo of *what?*" Eadric asked, exasperated. "And to which *ludja* is she inclined? Hlioth, with all respect, please speak more directly."

"Of her own Sovereign Viridescence: her higher octave, which is still not Uedii. If we prevail, you may see. As to loyalty? To all and none. The Tree is there for Nehael, not vice versa." Hlioth glowered at him, and considered. "Imagine this picture: Tree in its entirety as an aegis bequeathed by Uedii to protect Nehael from the Apparition of Demogorgon. The surface of the shield, facing outward, carries a veneer of cherry and blackthorn: the wood is weak and apt to splinter and ablate under violent passion or disintegrative fire. Nonetheless, it dissipates the shock of an attack. Beneath, lacquered bands of hardwoods - oak, elm and ash – lend strength, flexibility and hardness. In all, twenty varieties of wood comprise the shield; taken as a whole, the construction is impenetrable."

"And how long must this shield endure?"

"An aeon or a moment, what does it matter? It will last for as long as it needs to. Thinking big is nice, but none of it helps us deal with Visuit," Hlioth observed. "Or the Blackthorn's waxing power. Our troubles are just beginning. Effects are no longer preceded by causes; Cheshne moves in tandem with Tree's shadow, seeking to Apparate. Yes, the Tree itself is indestructible; Nehael, unassailable. Unfortunately, this is not true of the rest of the world. We neglected to quickly plug a

certain cosmic hole."

She scowled at Mostin. It irritated him – mostly because she seemed to know more than him. But also because it made him feel guilty: it had been within his power to greatly curtail the menace. Had they only returned to Azzagrat, and sealed the *gates*. But that was now the prior reality.

"Where are the Blackthorn scions, Hlioth?" Eadric sighed.

"In Jashat and at Deorham, you know. One now grows northeast of Cirone, at the place where *Shvar Choryati* was ended: its roots sink into the crater floor."

Nwm groaned. "That scar should have been healed but there was no time; the landscape is blasted; trees flattened for a mile."

Hlioth ignored him and continued. "The scion at Cirone remains dormant for the time being, but will likely not long remain so. One – as with each – is in the vicinity of the Great *Ludja* itself: each of those scions is subdued; dwarfed in significance, but each *ludja* is thus ever-present. One is as yet unaccounted for."

"None in the realm of Hummaz?" Eadric seemed suspicious.

"No, no, no," Hlioth shook her head. "Pine, Linden, Willow; Hazel and Holly; Hawthorne and a Cherry – yes. And a Yew. But there is no place for the principle of elimination in relation to Hummaz; he is too fecund."

"I suspect it will be Fumaril," Nwm grumbled. "Or Afqithan. There are already powerful resonances there."

[Ortwine]: It damn well better not be. Now?

[Lai]: A little more patience.

[Eadric]: Do we have a plan?

[Mostin]: I'm thinking.

[Ortwine]: Hurry up!

[Mostin]: You need a nine hundred. I have it. It's ugly.

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*This gnat was becoming annoying.* Visuit stood upon the heaped bodies of minor godlings and revered ancestors.

Purposely vexing the augmented war-goddess was not an activity which Ortwine undertook lightly. Lai had been with her to begin with, but as soon as news had reached them that Mostin's tower had arrived, the goddess of magic had vanished to organize the ritual which Nwm must inevitably lead.

Ortwine – swifter and more elusive than a zephyr – had succeeded in briefly distracting Visuit from



her main purpose: the Butcher was intent upon smashing her way into the forge of Jaliere. However, Visuit's attention could not be captured for long: when it became clear that she could not engage Ortwine at her own choosing, but her enemy could inflict no harm upon her, Visuit simply returned her focus to the divinely barred portals.

They would not yield.

Visuit cursed, her spittle smoking like acid. Runes flared; the flower gardens nearby wilted. She turned her attention to the black rock around the doors: it was harder than adamant. With a titanic effort, she hewed a great shard away from the wall.

Ortwine hurled *Heedless*; it clattered noisily off of Visuit's helm. The war-goddess bellowed in fury, leaped a hundred feet, and brought her hideous weapon smashing down; her enemy was not where she should have been. But had she been... The sidhe raised an invisible eyebrow.

Ortwine taunted her. Visuit, unperturbed, sliced reality open with her weapon; darkness emanated from a *gate* into a dismal realm.

Ortwine groaned. Through the rift, dark feys now poured, each raised to a wicked eminence in the presence of the Blackthorn. Many had once been sidhe. Now they were much worse.

She began to charm or dominate those that she might, in an effort to turn them against one another.

Visuit resumed her assault upon the rock.

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Nwm observed that there were only twenty-three spellcasters amongst the flamines and scrollbearers. Spells were all but spent. Every reservoir – including his own – was exhausted. He considered Mostin's solution.

"You will give me everything. I am going to burn as hot as I can," he said to them. "This means that you will burn as well. As I am more practiced at burning than you are, all of you will die immediately. You will enjoy a brief spell in Rûk: a relatively agreeable underworld, as underworlds go. Sombre, quiet self-reflection is the order of the day. Some of you may be temperamentally inclined to remain there; otherwise, I will return you at the *Ahma's* request. In any event, the experience of burning will embed itself on your souls and permanently traumatize you. If any of you now wish to reconsider your contribution, I advise you to speak up."

The predictable silence which ensued reassured Mostin of the utility of religious fanaticism. Nwm turned to those who would not participate in the ritual, and would therefore survive it.

"It is impossible to say how long we will have; I am hoping for twenty seconds before Visuit's protections reassert themselves. Please be assured that speedy action is of great importance."

The rite which then followed was an horrific scene: Nwm screaming; an inferno of green fire which consumed all but he.

The Preceptor perceived her. Energy moved from him; a tendril of green power, suffused with magic, rupturing space. Distance was meaningless. He struck the Butcher remotely with a

*dispelling*, sealing the *gate* near her and suppressing the Voidwrought wards erected by Kaalaanala. Simultaneously, as though grasping a rope with his own awareness, Nwm dragged those present through a green vortex, directly into Visuit's presence.

In those next few moments – a matter of seconds, which passed as though they might be years – Eadric finally came to grasp an appreciation of the raw power which Mostin now possessed. Almost entirely bereft of spells, the Alienist became instead a formidable physical opponent, a dozen hideous tentacles setting about Visuit, pinning her arms, legs, head. With all of her augmentations subdued, the wizard now outmatched the war-goddess.

*Lukarn* ignited as it sprang from its scabbard.

Her plight was impossible. Mostin grappled her; tentacles crushing the goddess through her armor and pinning her. She growled in fury as the others set about her, and hacked at her.

Butchered her.

"Take her," Eadric invoked Nehael as Visuit fell. Now he understood.

War had passed. But at hideous cost. And he had broken a vow; demonstrated his own limit. He knew in his heart that not all of those who had perished in Nwm's immolating spell would fly to the Serenities. Not every martyr would find his reward. And each of those which might would be nonetheless diminished.

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Rimilin observed the Tree. Its leaves whispered in a gathering wind. The World changed again.

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Tozinak – appearing as a hook-nosed creature of medium stature with tufted feet and silky wings – returned to his island manse with a sense of profound relief. Mostin's insane schemes had almost rendered him dead again. The wizard understood in a moment of clarity that, although a coward, he was possessed of a genuine peaceful demeanor: the Alienist's actions never failed to perturb him on any number of levels simultaneously. Dauntan had insisted on a drink; Tozinak had been inclined to agree. The afternoon had been spent regaining a semblance of calm.

As he shuffled into his cluttered study – a large space with a lofty ceiling, crowded with papers, alembics, and other apparatus of unguessable purpose – his skin tingled and his nose turned blue in alarm.

A succubus of extraordinary presence relaxed, supine, on his favorite couch. Tozinak froze, emitting a high-pitched squeak.

"I believe you can guess who I am," Soneillon smiled, lifting her head.

Tozinak nodded meekly.

"I'm just across the lake there," the demoness sat up and pointed with her wingtip. "At Deorham. We're practically neighbours."

Tozinak swallowed.

"Which is nice. I'll be stopping by. To see how you're progressing on inscribing *A Flame Precedes the Aeon* for me."

"Ah," Tozinak finally said.

"What is your price?" Soneillon asked unexpectedly.

"Oh." Tozinak half-exclaimed. "I-I had assumed..."

"That this was extortion? Consider what you desire. I will grant it. I will return tomorrow. But you may begin the inscription at your earliest convenience." Soneillon vanished

The wizard retired, flustered and palpitating, to his herbaceous borders. What did he desire? Really, nothing which he did not already have; or simply to be left alone. This was Mostin's fault: Tozinak had previously shunned contact with all conjured entities; he judged that none were possessed of a facility which outweighed their price.

As he descended a small, uneven set of steps and rounded a corner, he began to hyperventilate. A tree where none had stood prior. Suspended, before his face, on a branch laden with their weight.

Cherries.

Tozinak reached out and smiled as he picked one and popped it in his mouth. It was exquisite; his mind seemed to melt. He yearned impossibly, although his longing had no discernible target.

Cherries. He knew he was safe. She would not come back. She was scared of the cherries. He would have to go to her. Bring her his spell. And cherries.

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Dusk fell.

Nehael, the Image of Uedii, manifested discreetly in the Temple precinct in Morne: she had been invoked by no few of those present for protection. She wore only a simple robe of green, and melded effortlessly into the throng; now the courtyard was packed with many hundreds. Lamps were being lit; vigils set: the wyrm was a portent of unknown significance.

As the sun sank behind the western hills, the dragon stirred. Unseen, Nehael approached, laying her hand upon Qematiel's great snout; the calm which emanated from the goddess was irresistible. An

impulse. Immediately, the crowd began to disperse – the attention of each suddenly drawn to some minor elsewhere.

Shomei appeared, unnoticed by the mortals present.

"You are mustering an army," Nehael observed. "For what purpose? Who is your enemy?"

"Always myself," Shomei smiled as she mounted the dragon.

"I did not foresee the union of these scions; you will make the Holly-*ludja* jealous."

"I am the Archivist of Hell: the two seemed a natural fit. As for the Holly, it hates enough already: it needs no prompting."

"There is no Hell."

"There is for me."

"Exercise compassion," Nehael advised.

"It is not my *forté*," Shomei admitted. "But I am not unprincipled."

Nehael fixed her with a look. "Answer me a question: what do you know of the *I*'s translation?"

"What is there to say? Will has been ceded to the Hazel; the *I* now acts from Instinct."

"I think we both understand that things are a little more complicated," Nehael seemed unimpressed.

"Truth is always so," Shomei was ironic.

"A piece of the *I* is unrevealed," Nehael said. "It is disguised as something else; or the *I* is hedging its bets."

"Such is the instinct for Self-preservation," Shomei agreed. "But whatever it is, it is here by the grace of the Tree; its nature is necessarily mixed."

"It is a Flame," Nehael remained impassive. "An Iota. Oronthon's memory of the Nameless Fiend, so to speak; or his preconception of *Antinomos*. The Flame which must, perforce, become Itself. It is a paradox: a Flame is pure; it cannot Fall. You seek it. And which laws will you set yourself against if you find it?"

"Not all laws are unequal," Shomei smiled grimly. "The only *Law* which presently matters is that of the Claviger. Its oneiric whimsies are too much to endure. Other laws may be subject to scrutiny in due course."

"You would look to assume this role?"

"This is already my role," Shomei sighed. "I am Exempt; the Agent of Will. Who else is better qualified?"

"You are not exempt from the Enforcer's mandate."

"The devil sitting by the Hazel begs to differ."

"He is not entirely a devil, nor was he entirely *Outside*. The World is changed."

"Outside? So Gihaahia now protects Wyre only from Mostin?" Shomei said archly. "That, at least, is reassuring."

"And Vhorzhe."

"Yes. And from Vhorzhe. I am beginning to believe that she may need some help."

Nehael was exasperated. "The [I]I[I]'s nature is now a visceral urge for satiation. You cannot contain Hummaz."

"I will subdue him."

"Shomei..."

"Will you trust me, or not?"

Nehael was silent: the memory of the *Antinomos*, reflected back at her. She approached the Yew, laid her hands on it. Its bark was warm, but from its own, inner heat; no trace of the wyrm's fire remained on the tree.

"You are sincere, but I am sceptical," Nehael remained in contact with the scion. "If you fail, and enrage Hummaz, things will go ill."

"I am no fool. I am not yet ready for this task, nor shall I attempt it until I am. *I am not the Adversary, Nehael*. But I might become what he should have been. Think on it."

Wreathed in Hellfire, Qematiel took to the skies and thundered away to the southwest.

The Goddess turned. Nehael grasped a living stave of Hazel and willed after Shomei as she departed.

*Compassion!*

The impulse echoed through a hundred worlds; Nehael blazed, and for a fleeting instant, the Aeon manifested: an eleos. A sigh rippled through the Green as the Butcher fell in Mulhuk.

[Nehael]: She is mine. I claim her.

All of significance heard her. Hummaz, maybe the only one who might, did not contest her. A naked, powerless spirit, Visuit fled briefly through the underworld of Rûk and into the presence of the Great Tree-*ludja* in the Womb of Qinthei.

At the Veils, the Mistresses screeched in hateful impotence.

\*"Thus Spake Oronthon [to me]," words which were typically only uttered by Oronthon's divine oracles in the heyday of Orthodoxy; her "reiteration" may also be interpreted as a rebuttal of *Nothing Is, Nothing Is Not, Nothing Becomes*. Shomei's assertions are unequivocally outrageous in all regards.

## **Midwinter Goddess**

After the fall of Visuit the Butcher, Nwm lingered for a day in Sisperi in order to aid Lai with the *resurrections*. Mostin removed his tower to eastern Nizkur, attaching it again to his manse – now the home of Orolde and Mei. Rhul and Mesikammi travelled to Afqithan to assess the danger in that realm with Ortwine. Eadric returned with Hlioth, his saints and remaining knights to Galda, there to receive mixed news.

Prahar had withdrawn his cavalry – their raids had been punishing for both sides in the conflict – and established a more distant perimeter. Obfuscatory magicks prevented Temple sriers from penetrating the Cheshnite ranks and determining their exact movements, but it was known that the main host was again marching, taking many hours to pass through the gates at Thond.

"She can be no worse than Visuit."

"You should not underestimate Dhatri," Hlioth cautioned. "She is a symbol. An all-consuming mouth and gullet. She has had long to prepare; she must time her momentum precisely. The *Pall* is more than half expired, and there are too few now amongst the cabals to renew it: many have died; some have moved to new centers of power. But she has had a month to work her necromancy uninterrupted. And a million ravenous undead accompany her. Sheer numbers may prevail."

"And when they meet the perimeter established by the scions?" Eadric asked.

"A test occurs."

"Then our lever must be at this point."

"We have a brief lacuna," Hlioth advised him. "Use the time wisely."

\*\*

Mulissu sat in Mostin's – now Orolde's – study, brooding. A fire burned steadily in the hearth, and the smell of musty books and burned toast filled the air. Outside, snow piled heavily against the window, diffusing the afternoon light as it streamed in. The savant had been absorbed in her own thoughts since witnessing the destruction of the city she had sworn to protect. Mostin could not determine whether it was guilt, rage, or some other emotion which consumed her and had caused her fugue.

"Crumpet?" The Alienist asked, proudly presenting a long fork which displayed an over-charred circle of dough.

Mulissu sighed, and took the proffered dainty, scraping off carbon before smothering it with butter and jam.

"We need to find a way to eliminate the effluxia," she remarked distractedly.

"That would involve *finding* and *confronting*," Mostin observed. "I suspect that our energies would be better deployed elsewhere."

"I assume that you are speaking of your *Ús*"

"I am," Mostin nodded sagely. "I am also of a mind to reengineer the *Quiescence* to allow for selective *teleportations* amongst those whom I designate. Furthermore, Dauntion informs me that a number of wizards are willing to demonstrate a more unified front in the face of the latest events."

"Which?" Mulissu sounded suspicious. "Why this sudden reversal?"

"The threat is now more imminent. Dauntion himself, Hlioth, Jalaël, Wigdryt, Gholu, Creq, Droom, Poylu, Troap, Muthollo, Sarpin. Even Waide. Tozinak appears to be sulking, and refuses to answer Dauntion's *sendings*."

"And Shomei?"

"Her path, as always, is her own," Mostin sighed. "But Sho is willing to participate."

"And her sibling?"

"Still awaits her pseudogenesis: as to that, I have given thought to a spell."

"What did you have in mind as a basis?"

[Mostin]: Look:  $A_N = \int D\mu \int D[X] \exp \left( -\frac{1}{4\pi\alpha} \int \partial_z X_\mu(z, \overline{z}) \partial_{\overline{z}} X^\mu(z, \overline{z}) dz^2 + i \sum_{i=1}^N k_i \mu X^\mu(z_i, \overline{z}_i) \right)$

[Mulissu]: You can reduce it to this:  $A_N = \int D\mu \prod_{0 \leq i < j < N+1} |z_i - z_j|^{2\alpha_{k_i, k_j}}$

**[Gihaahia]: You are both idiots. Use this:  $\int_{-\infty}^{\infty} \exp(\{a x^4 + b x^3 + c x^2 + d x + f\}) dx = e^f \sum_{n,m,p=0}^{\infty} \frac{b^{4n}}{(4n)!} \frac{c^{2m}}{(2m)!} \frac{d^{4p}}{(4p)!} \frac{\Gamma(3n+m+p+\frac{1}{4})}{\Gamma(\frac{1}{4})} a^{3n+m+p+\frac{1}{4}}$**

[Mostin]:!! (Gratitude)

[Mulissu]: Eleven dimensions works for me. I suppose that's as good a place to start as any.

**[Gihaahia]: Don't disappoint me, Mostin.**

"What is her involvement in this?" Mulissu asked, confused.

"I have no idea," Mostin was dubious. "She has never evinced any interest in my work prior to now. Although, she reconfigured Dauntion's transvalent repertoire, and bestowed the *Instant Convocation* on him. Perhaps she will do the same for me?" [Inquiry?]

...

"Apparently not," Mulissu said drily. "Still, you have something to work with. What will you need?"

(Calculation).

"You, me, Sho, Orolde...and Mei herself. That is all." Mostin was dumbfounded.

"Where is Mei?"

"In the parlour," the Alienist said intensely, his eyes rotating in excitement. "I will inform her immediately. Her time is close...two or three days will be enough."

"Can we afford even that much?"

"Mei has placed her trust in me without question!" Mostin was aghast. "I won't fail her now."

"You are an odd one," Mulissu sighed. "I don't believe I'll ever understand you."

\*\*

The errand-runner was beside himself with terror. Only moments before, archons had apprised Eadric telepathically.

"*Ahma*, a messenger from Shomei the Infernal. He purports to be one Yeqon; he styles himself the Fifth Prosecutor."

Hlioth scowled. Shomei was making a point. No Goetia so grand as the binding of one such as this had ever before been accomplished. Prosecutors, Antagonists – among the greatest of fiends and the most recondite. Signatories to the pact. Now atavisms, whom Shomei alone possessed the power to conjure and coerce. The Agent of Will had dispatched him as an errand-boy.

*Oronthon!* Eadric swore silently and reflexively upon encountering the devil.

Yeqon towered above him, and – saving Hlioth – none others amongst those present might even approach the devil, such was the magnitude of his presence. A fallen seraph, close kin to Enitharmon: vast, dark wings shrouded his form. The Fifth Prosecutor had been brooding in grim obscurity for an aeon, hatching impossible schemes for the renewed assault upon Heaven. A Heaven which might be no more; or one so far removed from thought and knowledge that it might as well no longer be.

Yeqon knelt and sat upon his heels, his eyes meeting the *Ahma*'s.

"What do you want?" Eadric sighed.

The Fifth Prosecutor briefly pressed his forehead to the ground at the *Ahma*'s feet.

"*Saizhan*," the devil replied.

Eadric squinted suspiciously. "Then it is to the *Sela* you must speak, not I."



"In due course," Yeqon's voice was calm and mellifluous. "But what I want and why I am here are two separate questions. My mistress has sent me as an ambassador; she is reconvening the Dark Choir. Bolstering its numbers. She asks that you remember your prior words to her, and that you continue to trust her."

"Pah!" Hlioth spat.

Eadric raised his hand, and addressed the Prosecutor. "*Reconvening?* With what? Only Irel remains."

"No devil is lost to Shomei the Infernal," Yeqon replied. "But some are more freshly-fallen. Did you not stand with Rintrah above the Blessed Plain?"

The *Ahma* recalled the Migration of Light he had witnessed; that some of the Host, in their haste to enter the burgeoning Viridescence, had crashed in smoking ruin. But to *where?*

"Into the Thickets of the Four Kings," Yeqon read his face precisely.

"Nets cast by the Hazel?"

"Yes," the Fifth Prosecutor answered. "And the Holly."

[Hlioth]: Beware this devil, *Ahma*. Blackthorn may rot and putrefy and eliminate; Hazel dominate and involute; Cherry lust and crave. But, for sheer wickedness, none can match Holly.

"And which words would Shomei have me remember?" Eadric asked wily.

"That you need not miss the opportunity of a good friendship," Yeqon replied.

"And I assume that some demonstration of my friendship is asked for?"

"Those arms and armor which you have under guard. Of Visuit the Butcher; Yeshe the Binder; Prince Graz'zt."

"She suggests I release these items to her?" The *Ahma* was incredulous. "Is there even any savage enough to bear Visuit's sword?"

"I, for one," the devil said steadily.

Eadric scowled. "I would speak with her directly."

"She is presently indisposed, but I will convey your request," Yeqon bowed, and departed in a pillar of dark fire.

"Indisposed?" Eadric turned to Hlioth.

"Shomei conjures," the Green Witch replied. "Goddess help us all."

He issued a mental summons to his steed.

"Wherever you are going, I can get you there faster," Hlioth observed.

"I need to ride," Eadric replied.

Straddling *Narh*, he sped away.

\*

As he rode northwards, winter began to assert itself: not merely by virtue of latitude, he noted, but because of distance from the unnatural energies which lay over the whole of the Thalassine and Wyre's southern marches. He reached Hrim Eorth by mid-morning; by noon he had passed Groba and was galloping over frosty fields in Hethio. In the wan sunlight, Nizkur loomed.

*Narh* knew the route well, and required no prompting from Eadric. The forest – although quiescent by season – seemed unusually subdued. With barely a faltering of pace, the stallion ran through webs and thickets impenetrable to those without permission: the Green bulwark which surrounded Qinthei, the Womb of the Goddess. Snow blanketed the ground; the air was frigid. A slender figure stood waiting beneath the Tree. Eadric reined in before her. Nebulous figures – the barely perceptible shades of vanquished foes – moved like mist in some adjacent world, but did not seem to register his presence.

Steam rose from *Narh*'s flanks and nostrils; Nehael extended her hand, rubbing the horse's muzzle, tugging at his forelock, and sending him into an ecstasy.

"I come for counsel," Eadric dismounted and bowed.

"Come," she said. "Walk with me."

\*

"The thing which destroyed Fumaril – Kaalaanala's avatar – what has become of it?"

Nehael paused and pointed at the frozen earth beneath her feet. "It is below us. A cancer at the heart of the world. It will irrupt again if the goddess at Jashat becomes sufficiently angry."

"Mostin said there were others," Eadric grimaced.

Nehael nodded. "One rages amid nightmares; another has set itself up in mockery of the Enforcer; the last...may prove the most dangerous."

"You offer little reassurance," the *Ahma* said bleakly. "This last – what can you tell me of it?"

"It is *her*," Nehael spoke carefully. "The Fires of Death. Or as close as you will come to encountering her without actually meeting her. She may bring cohesion to the remaining hierophants amongst the Cheshnite sect. She is abroad, but I do not know *where*, or exactly *why*. Powerful magic obscures her."

"Even from you?"

"Especially from me."

"And there are no limits imposed upon her actions? Why was I led to believe that Kaalaanala was *confined*; her remit strictly curtailed?"

"So it is," Nehael scowled. "Or all of Wyre should burn."

"Then is it as Nwm asserts? That the Goddess grows dark?"

"Our mood is various," Nehael observed laconically. "Or had this fact escaped you?"

"The movement is chaotic. I cannot find purchase," Eadric stopped walking.

A long silence followed.

"What of Soneillon?" Nehael inquired archly. Her gaze penetrated him.

Eadric replied with a pointed look. "It is a meeting which I am content to forestall for as long as possible."

"I ask because you should expect her. She perceives your Flame, albeit indirectly; she knows how bright it burns. She covets it, or is drawn to it like a moth. And it is Midwinter; the Sun is weakest."

"Your words are not comforting. Mostin informs me that she has undergone a 'great rapture.'"

"Her power is formidable," Nehael said plainly. "She is her own locus: of Dream, Oblivion, Delirium – imbued by the Blackthorn. Trace her passage, Eadric: she has been celestial, infernal, demonic; unbecome, a nightmare; something impossible, now perylene. More infinities collide in her than can be counted. She may be insane – psychotic – by your standards, but to characterize her as *evil* would be to reduce her complexity to a single dimension. Although I believe you already know this."

"You sound sympathetic."

"That would be natural: it is who I am. She is as I, maybe, on a different path. Perhaps we run contrapallel; each anathema to the other. Force cannot overcome her now, unless some sovereign strength is invoked. And it is she who is in possession of the *Urn*."

"Then how would you suggest that I deal with her?" He groaned.

"Naturally," Nehael laughed, "...naturally. But I see this prospect somehow disturbs you?"

"She remains my greatest weakness," Eadric acknowledged. "Or one of them."

"Maybe less than you are hers. And what of Shomei?"

"Must you always be so perceptive?"

"Goddess is manifold," Nehael smiled. "And little escapes my notice. Perhaps you understand Nwm's dilemma a little better."

"Shomei makes inquiries in my direction to gauge my disposition."

"You sound sympathetic," Nehael remarked drily.

"I am," Eadric admitted. "Insofar as I *trust* her; I understand her."

"As she was, maybe. But as she is?"

Eadric considered. "Shomei is always in process; I think she would reject any static characterization."

"I have spoken with her," Nehael's voice was subdued. "She has set herself tasks which are suitably unattainable. My concern is that she may drag the World into ruin in her effort toward self-mastery. Her revelation within the Fane at Morne: what is your reaction to *that*?"

"I am unsure," Eadric said apprehensively. "Although I find myself in a state of at least partial agreement with the Irrenite faction, and how they have chosen to interpret it."

Nehael raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

"They are calling it the *Third Turning of Saizhan*."

"The Third?" A look of mild puzzlement crossed the face of the goddess. "Did I miss one?"

"*Skôhslđaur*, the Gate of Demons," Eadric explained. "I am designated as its unfortunate patron and exemplar. And there are enough demons left in the World. *Faheth*, any advice you have to offer on how to proceed would be appreciated."

"You choose now to name me thus?"

"It is how I would relate to you."

Nehael sighed. "Somehow you must impress the notion of compassion upon Shomei. She still conflates it with sentiment; she needs to understand that it is rational."

"I was unable when she was mortal; how am I to believe that it will be possible now that she is a devil?"

"I didn't say it would be easy," Nehael smiled. "I, for one, have met with little success. But, as you have pointed out, she is in process."

"And otherwise?"

"Exercise compassion yourself. You cannot teach what you do not demonstrate."

\*\*

Nivorn – a rocky peninsula eighty miles long, extending into the sea to the east of the conflict – was attached to Wyre by a broad isthmus and boasted impressive natural defenses. Much of its coast was sheer cliff, pierced by a handful of protected harbors. An encircling row of peaks enclosing a high plateau, cloven by a wide, deep lake comprised Nivorn's interior.

Successive Wyrish kings had attempted to annex the foreland; all had met with failure. By their own vows, the lairds were bound in tribute to Morne. In practice, it had not been exacted for generations from most: like the inhabitants of Ardan – to whom they were related – the Nivornese were

generally considered intractable, often maniacal, and best left to their own devices. They feuded interminably amongst themselves; vendettas a thousand years old still raged. A previous king, Tulgus – regarded as the greatest of the Gultheins – had established a line of border forts in southern Wyre to prevent major incursions; drunken raids to abduct womenfolk and livestock still occasionally occurred, but were immediately met with fierce punitive strikes. An uneasy truce prevailed.

It was upon a densely wooded island within the lake – called Sooile by the natives – that Temenun had elected to establish a stronghold, placing himself under the protection of the Cherry which now grew there.

The Tiger's choice to defy the other immortals – and the Fires of Death herself – was not made lightly. But Temenun was ever his own master; he would not bow now, even to a *Bhiti* such as Kaalaanala, and throwing himself at the mercy of the Cherry – on the surface a highly risky proposition – was made in full consciousness: whatever dark prolepsis had served the Ak'Chazar for twenty millennia and had prompted him to his action, was the same faculty – the only thing, in fact – that he had come to trust.

His Naztharunes, who may have numbered in the dozens or in the thousands, accompanied their overlord without question. A clique of *Anantam* magi – those most uncomfortable with the current political climate and the direction offered by Anumid – also joined him. His armored legions, for the most part half-giants from Danhaan, the Tiger had left to whatever fate might befall them – such were the vicissitudes of service to an immortal such as Temenun.

Only hours after he had established his redoubt – a region of twisted vines and briars, from the center of which the Cherry scion itself emanated invisible lures across the island – news reached the Tiger of Kaalaanala's fourfold effluxion, and he breathed a silent sigh of relief. Here, at least, he was now safe from the Embassy; the last, most potent, most deadly of the avatars. The one which might force him to do the bidding of the Fires of Death. The others – even Idyam – would necessarily capitulate to whatever demands were imposed upon them.

Thoughts of Void, of *Tamasah* – the final darkness – he allowed to slip from his mind. Nothing was so pressing; or rather, Nothing now seemed less pressing. The poisoned fruits which grew nearby – familiar fruits, from beyond the southern deserts – were a source of comfort to him. And, finally, it was *warm*.

Temenun relaxed. Throile was but a footstep away. Perhaps he would pay a visit: the jungles there held many secrets. And Soneillon's cabal – now that their mistress had abandoned them – might prove amenable if offered sufficient inducements.

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It was dark when Eadric returned to Galda. Wearily, he dismounted and gave an ironic smile: *Narh* was tireless, and despite having been ridden hard for six hundred miles that day, the steed seemed fresh as though led from a month's pasturing. He realized that he himself had had no real rest for weeks – since long prior to his own *reincarnation*. Eadric unharnessed the stallion, bade him run free until dawn, and trudged through the camp on foot, his saddle cast over his shoulder. Bestowing nodding blessings upon sentries as he went, and a glare in the direction of rowdy Ardanese mercenaries celebrating the winter *Tagamuos*, he made his way to his pavillion.

He pulled the heavy fur drape closed across the opening to the tent, and illumination was dimmed; canvas filtered the light of campfires to a dull, flickering glow. Eadric unbuckled *Lukarn*, set his shield upon its stand, threw off begrimed armor, and sat for an hour in *saizhan* before entering the *Fultum* meditation: a steadfastness in the face of all doubt, and a protection against forces – or impulses – which might otherwise assail him.

He lit a narrow taper and placed it on a simple altar with a winter garland, and offered prayers to the *Eleos*: for the protection of the souls around him; for the safe passage of those lost at Fumaril; for mercy upon those within the orbit of the scion at Deorham; for the succour of his servants and those within his own household. Finally, he arose, extinguished the light, and cast himself, exhausted, onto his pallet. As visions and half-remembered ideas played across his consciousness, for a fleeting moment, the recollection of an insight which had been instrumental in shaping his understanding of the World.

Immediately, the familiar scent of lotus and sandalwood as lips and hair brushed his cheek; a soft body pressed eagerly against him. An oval face. Eyes, like pits of ravenous darkness. Power, as he had never before sensed. Somehow, Eadric wondered whether he had himself, in fact, invoked her.

"This tack will not be effective," he said plainly.

"May I stay?" Her whisper conveyed urgent need.

"I am in no mood to argue, Soneillon. I am tired. Let me sleep."

Fingernails briefly threatened to become talons – or something far worse – and then relaxed.

"As you wish, *Ahma*." Her eyelids closed; a fuliginous wing cracked open and encompassed him, settling over him like a blanket.

"Your egregiousness would seem undiminished," Eadric sighed. "Although I see you are not otherwise as you were. What do you hope to achieve by this? Do you really expect me to trust any façade which you present to me? That I can say with surety that you have not previously placed a spell on me? Perhaps I'm now to believe that I am the last thread of sanity to which you cling?"

But the demoness was silent; she was already enmeshed in some chthonic nightmare.

*Or do not.* Again, as always, her passivity – her apparent vulnerability – confounded him. In the dim light he studied her, touching her neck and shoulders uncertainly and tracing brutal scars: the legacy of wounds bestowed by his own hand. After so long, were they real, or an artifice? Was she? Did it matter? And what reason did he actually *have* to doubt her? Had she ever been anything other than entirely honest with him? No, he was obliged to concede. *Saizha, Ahma?*

One must encounter the Void on its own terms.

She stirred uneasily.

He closed his eyes, and slept.

## Midwinter Goddess - Part 2 (and 3)

“How many is that?” Teppu asked.

Nehael groaned. “Too many. She is out of her mind. I make three Antagonists; six others who were once episemes; around fifty recently-migrated devas – most of whom were exemplars. She began conjuring pit fiends and malebranche – presumably for heavy lifting tasks – but would appear to be taking a break. She seems to be avoiding magnates from the traditional order – for the time being, at least.”

“Does she have a purpose? What did she reveal to you?”

“Little,” Nehael shrugged. “She will be hard-pressed to control them all.”

“Do you believe that she will make an immediate bid for the *Urn*?”

“Shomei is not one for procrastination,” Nehael sighed. “But nor is she ignorant of the difficulty of the task. She will weigh probabilities carefully.”

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When he awoke, it was light. Her face was inches away. He groaned.

An eyelid flickered open. Void bored into him.

“Why are you here?” He asked.

She stood slowly and stretched, her wings unfurling to their maximum extent – and briefly darkening reality – before retracting. She turned to face him.

“I get lonely,” she smiled, tilting her head. “Sometimes, cold.”

“And how did you circumvent the wards?”

She laughed. “I *dream*, Eadric.”

Casting her eyes around the interior of the tent, her gaze settled on *Lukarn*. She raised an eyebrow.

Before he could mouth an objection – faster, even than he could articulate the thought to do so – she had moved and drawn the weapon from its scabbard. She seemed to absorb its light effortlessly.

“I remember you,” she whispered to the sword, running a forefinger along its fuller. “You don’t like me very much, do you?”

“I notice that your scars seem to have vanished,” Eadric observed without humour.

“They come and go,” she replied vaguely. She brandished *Lukarn* deftly, flipped the blade over and caught it by the tip between two fingers, presenting him with its hilt. “Did you wish to cause more?”

“No.” He set the sword down firmly next to him. “And I doubt this weapon is adequate to the task, in any case.”

“Move up,” she kicked his feet. “It is time you understood a few things.”

He drew his knees in, and she sat, cross-legged upon the narrow pallet, sable wings drawn around her like a bat. From beneath them, her hand appeared holding a plain clay jug. She placed it squarely between them.

“It is unremarkable, would you not say?”

Eadric was silent; his perception twisted and span.

“For a long while,” the demoness continued, “I wondered why Kaalaanala did not simply *take* it from me. I was there when she reified, Eadric: it was glorious; something to behold. At any rate, the question puzzled me: I know that *I* would have certainly taken it from *her*, had our roles been reversed.”

“And have you determined an answer?”

“No,” she shrugged. “I gave up looking for one. There comes a point where one must concede that there are things which cannot be known; and there are too many plausible *theories*: the Aeon forbade it; Cheshne forbade it; a deal was struck between Uedii and Cheshne – are they different, in any case? And so on, and so forth. The *Urn* has great power, Eadric – of that there can be no doubt. In the hands of a goddess such as the Fires of Death, its destructive – which is to say its *generative* potential focused toward an absence of matter and energy – would be great. But her remit is limited: she cannot leave Jashat, nor her direct influence extend beyond it: she is the black dart, stuck in Uedii’s green shield. Aggravating, unbalancing, but ultimately unmoving. And she lacks a certain *perspective* required to realize the *Urn* in full. Perhaps a deeper Void perceived this truth. I cannot say.”

“And this *perspective* is something which you possess, I presume?”

“Not exactly,” Soneillon replied unexpectedly. “I aberrate, Eadric. My path is not *conventional*, as you may have noticed. The *Urn* is a great boon to me, but I also lack a certain something. The demiplanes which I created which about Throile – which still persist, incidentally – were the labor of many years. Entities with more...wherewithal...in this regard are empowered to make more effective use of the *Urn*’s generative power.”

Eadric gave an inquiring look.

“That would be your other girlfriend,” Soneillon smiled innocently.

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“It becomes more complicated,” Soneillon continued.

“I had a feeling it might.”

“What do you know of the *I*?”



“I dislike the direction of this conversation already,” Eadric sighed. “Enough to know that it would be foolish to be complacent regarding its motivation.”

“The *I* is tenacious,” Soneillon nodded, “and will seek to survive despite all other indicators to the contrary. It fragmented in order to preserve itself, with a notion to recombine at a later time. And a vehicle – something *exempt* from the normal rules – to allow this to occur.”

“Shomei?”

“Yes. Your other other girlfriend.” Soneillon said lightly.

Eadric grunted. “I am tired of hearing this. Nehael also accused me of as much.”

“Then the green bitch is not entirely stupid,” Soneillon gave a sweet smile. “Not everything is about sex, Eadric. At least, not in the beginning.”

“I do not regard Shomei in this fashion.”

“Yet you evince a particular sympathy for her perspective?”

“She is complex. As to our philosophical differences, we reached...an understanding. I care for her wellbeing.”

“And you find her attractive?”

“She is comely enough, I would say.”

“And she, you?” Soneillon pressed on, evidently enjoying the line of questioning. “How does Shomei the Infernal relate to the *Ahma*, who is – or at least *was* – central to her paradigm?”

“I cannot speak to that,” Eadric sighed. “She has never demonstrated anything other than...” He paused, and considered.

“A measure of doubt crosses your face.”

“I had simply not considered that she is even capable of being driven erotically. It seems somehow... beneath her.”

Soneillon laughed, and it seemed warm and heartfelt. “Ah, *Ahma*. No wonder you interested me so: you are truly guileless. And you attach such *virtue* to chastity; a line of examination which we might pursue at some later time. Shomei is fired by deep passions, Eadric, and to suggest that she is somehow asexual or frigid is to misunderstand her absolutely. But her lovers have been – and remain – devilish, for the most part; I realize that these are not the social circles in which you are wont to move. And her façade is well-practiced: she is discreet; no brazen harlot.”

“Where is this leading, Soneillon?”

“Consider your subsequent interactions with her in the light of this perspective, and form your own judgment.”

“But why do you speak of Shomei at all?”

The demoness cast her eyes downward, toward the amphora which sat between them.

“Shomei wants the *Urn*?”

“That girl always had ideas above her station,” Soneillon sighed. “The devils which she currently conjures will be deployed against me. She will make her move in due course.”

Eadric was aghast. “Deorham...”

“Will likely be a violent and unpleasant locale. By the way, I have done nothing to harm your thralls – I’m sorry, you’d prefer a euphemism – although many have been *altered* by the scion. But my own demons are becoming impatient: at some point, I will need to either deploy them or disband them. Think on this, and we’ll come back to it. May I go on?”

Eadric nodded grimly.

“Shomei needs the power offered by the *Urn* in order to master Hummaz,” Soneillon continued. “To consolidate the various components of the *I*; to make herself whole. I’m disappointed that Nehael did not share this information with you; still we each have our own agenda.”

Eadric scowled. “It was Nehael who suggested that I remain open to discourse with you.”

“I despise her less already,” the demoness raised her eyebrows.

“You are not seriously suggesting that Nehael is manipulating me against my best interests?”

“Of course. To promulgate empathy is her *agenda*. That may involve a lack of full disclosure.”

“As your agenda is to sow dissension and madness?” Eadric smiled, and shook his head.

“No. But we’ll come to that.”

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“It gets more complicated,” Soneillon warned.

“This should be good.”

“There is a spell – *A Flame Precedes the Aeon*. It was dictated by Rintrah the Messenger to Jovol the Grey; the wizard Tozinak currently has it in his possession. It is conceptualized in terms of Urgic altitudes, and requires that a naked iota of Radiance be present, and the *Urn* also, and one who has shaken off their reality – several times, in fact. Its timing is also crucial – certain astrological windows must be observed.

“I see that you were not aware of the origin of this spell,” Soneillon sighed, and continued. “Nor, indeed is Tozinak. The Regents of the Purifying Wind bestowed it upon Rintrah – episemes lack aptitude for this kind of magic; it was, in fact, formulated in the Sovereign Sphere. But it was *contrived* in the Infinitudes; in the Mind of God – your God. Or your previous god; your bent would seem more theacentric of late: a tendency I am obliged to commend.”

A look of sheer bewilderment crossed the *Ahma*’s face.

“You have a question?” Soneillon seemed amused.

“This spell can somehow be used to create a set of circumstances which allow the wielder of the *Urn* greater latitude in exercising its generative power?”

“No,” Soneillon smiled. “The spell summons Pharamne. At which point all other considerations are moot.”

“The Dragon coils around the Tree...”

“Where have you been, I wonder?” Her surprise seemed genuine.

“What else do you know of this spell? How do you know so much? Mostin spoke of it.”

“It has preoccupied my thoughts for some time; I made inquiries. Mostin has seen the pattern in the broadest sense, but does not understand the specifics of the language. I have asked Tozinak to transcribe it for me. But there has been a complication. In the form of the Cherry.”

“And why, precisely, are you telling me all of this?” Eadric’s head throbbed. “It would seem to be contrary to your interests in all regards.”

“Because you are the *Ahma*, *Ahma*. You are incandescent: I see you with clear eyes. I am mad – didn’t you know?”

“And you trust that I will not somehow use this information against you?”

“Dear Eadric,” Soneillon touched his face. “Trust has nothing to do with it. Do you not understand? You cannot *hurt* me unless I allow it – which I might, in a certain context, if it gave you pleasure. At least, you cannot hurt me *yet*. I am beyond your power. You still insist on seeing things in terms of good and evil; we and they; this and that: you need to put these notions behind you. There are simply *factions* in the World: they move; interact; communicate. But the World itself is an innocent playground, Eadric. Things are as they are.”

“And what is your *agenda* with regard to this spell?”

“It is through me that the shadow of Cheshne seeks to manifest; and thence, through the *Urn*, to bring an end to reality. But there is something which you need to understand.”

“Why do I get the feeling that this is the crux of your argument?”

“It is not *my* agenda. I do not *want* this, Eadric. I have no *desire* to be the architect of the annihilation of the World. I do not *wish* to marry the Cherry to the Blackthorn in myself; to invoke the Apparition and bring an end to all things. I have avoided the Cherry for that reason, amongst others. ”

“Then what do you want, Soneillon?”

“I want to play, *Ahma*. I just want to play. I like things just as they are.”

“You are beyond mad, Soneillon. And you intimate at ‘truths’ which I can barely begin to comprehend, much less accept. Tell me this, and this simply: *why should I believe you?*”

“Cheshne is not her shadow, Eadric. Nor is she her cult. And, as I said some time ago – and had you been paying attention, and less intent on smiting me, you might have heard it – *The Void Shines*; still, I would not deny you your passions. I precipitate both pain and joy, Eadric, and in bliss transcend both. I am the Fruit in the Void; the Mango in Cheshne’s Mouth.”

\*

“You may be the most dangerous entity I have ever encountered.”

“I am flattered, and will not argue the point. But you answer me *this*,” Soneillon fixed him with her gaze – and he knew that it alone might deprive him of his very existence, were she so to choose.

“Have I ever, to your certain knowledge, either directly or indirectly, caused an innocent to come to harm? Unless you count Hlioth amongst the innocent, which would mark you as an idiot in my mind.”

“There are tales...”

“There are many tales, Eadric. Answer the question.”

“No,” he groaned. He knew that whatever the Blackthorn had caused to pass, was beyond her power to control.

“And if not by my action, then how will you judge me?”

“I cannot,” he conceded.

“Thank-you,” she said. She rose and replaced the *Urn* in its hiding place. Her humour seemed to have left her.

“Soneillon...”

“Think on it, Eadric. In some ways, it was a disappointing night; in others, it was all I needed. Besides, I am patient. I should probably leave, now – I would hate to cause a scene.”

“Why do I...”

[Shomei]: You asked to speak with me directly, *Ahma*. May I translate to your location?

[Eadric]: Very well. Give me a minute. Come alone.

“Eadric,” Soneillon spoke swiftly and earnestly, “if you come to Deorham, I will act as guarantor of your safety. You need not fear the scion; I can ward you from its influence. I have not interfered with the chapel; it is no less holy to me than to you: something which was difficult to impress upon your brother. Also, the mattress there is larger and more comfortable.”

She dissolved into mist.

*Orm*? He sat for a moment in a state of utter confusion.

“Another devil to see you, *Ahma*,” the voice of a messenger spoke presently from outside of the tent.

He closed his eyes, and breathed deeply. “Show her in.”

\*\*  
\*\*

“Sandalwood?” Shomei caught the scent in the air. She glanced around, absorbing the minutest detail of the tent’s interior in an instant. It seemed barren; her host was half-clad.

Eadric looked at her. He had not seen her since that fateful day in Afqithan when three of the *Akesoli* had dragged her screaming, dissociate form into Hell. Ortwine had encountered her since, but Eadric found the sidhe’s description – however eloquent – did not do Shomei justice.

A robe of purple so dark as to be almost black shrouded her slight frame; within it, fields of stars seemed to fall in perpetual torrents. Upon her forehead, she bore the intimation of a mark or brand which, if observed directly, faded from view. Her features were otherwise her own – although in some fashion she blended the qualities of her two *simulacra*, as though they were her precursors and not her magical progeny. Infernal now by nature, without question, but also much more; she was at ease with her own power in a way which he had never before thought possible. Something about her – and recently, Eadric knew – had simply *ignited*. She was sheer, dynamic force.

“You cannot trust her,” Shomei said directly.

“Perhaps not. Questions of trust seem to preoccupy me of late. You do not bear your rod.”

“I am not here to coerce you, *Ahma*.” She retrieved *Lukarn* from the pallet, slid it into its scabbard, and handed it to him with a raised eyebrow.

“No,” Eadric took the weapon. “You are here to ask for my permission – my *blessing* if you will – for an assault upon Soneillon. I cannot grant it, Shomei. It would mean the destruction of all of western Trempa.”

“She sits on an army of demons; I cannot believe that you would simply endure this imposition.”

“Demons which have yet to demonstrate any ill-will toward my....subjects... on the part of their mistress.”

Shomei looked sceptical. “If she has found her way back into your bed, *Ahma*, you might also consider that your judgment is impaired.”

“Ngaarh!” Eadric groaned.

She inspected her surroundings, looking for a place to sit.

“*Ahma*,” Shomei ventured, choosing to redirect the conversation, “your accommodations are spartan and unwelcoming. If I might...?”

“I had not given thought to it; I require little. Do as you wish, if you would prefer more easement.”

She made the briefest gesture, and the interior of the tent transformed into an opulent pavillion, festooned with deep blues and vermillions. A table lay replete with exquisite wines and confections;

sumptuous leather chairs, chests, wardrobes and velvet couches appeared; his pallet became a wide bed, draped with furs. Eadric's armor sprang from the ground onto a stand, perfectly burnished. Exotic rugs from Bedesh carpeted the floor, and incense burned upon a small altar; the scent of cinnamon hung heavy in the air. A purplish light – with no discernible source – suffused the place.

"I confess, I like my creature comforts," Shomei smiled, seeming to relax. She poured a goblet of *kschiff* and handed it to him.

Eadric took it suspiciously, then downed the liquor in a single draught. His head span.

"Whatever she said to you, *Ahma*," Shomei continued, offering him a candied chestnut, "it would be unwise to afford it too much credence, until you have had time to reflect. I don't doubt that she evoked some compelling vision of the World, with disparaging – and highly plausible – remarks made regarding my disposition and motivation."

She opened a dresser, and presented him with a heavy robe of ermine.

"That is an accurate assertion," Eadric nodded in gratitude, drawing the vestment about himself, and sinking into a chair. "Shomei, I should like to ask you some questions."

"Of course," she sat opposite, hands folded lightly in her lap.

"How do you propose to overcome Hummaz, Shomei?"

"You have spoken with Nehael, then?"

"No – yes. But it was Soneillon who informed me of your plan."

"I do not have a *plan* yet, *Ahma*. Merely a direction; a course which I must inevitably chart. There are signs along the way – I write them myself."

"And *Pharamne's Urn* is one of these signs?"

"Indeed," Shomei nodded. "I would venture to suggest that this artifact is also far *safer* in my hands than most others."

"Others such as Soneillon?"

"Soneillon is advised by Vhorzhe, *Ahma* – a monster who was once Mostin's mentor, and who now persists in a state of pseudodaemonic insanity. *Uzzhin* penetrates every aspect of her mind and her formless form. Would it be correct for me to assume that she did not evince this particular aspect of her psychology – nor her *physiology*, in fact – in your recent exchange?"

"She did not," Eadric admitted. "Presumably in order to spare me undue stress."

"That would be one way of explaining her motivation," Shomei gave a small smile.

"Soneillon is fully conscious of her own psychosis, Shomei."

"Yes, *Ahma*. She is. Doesn't that fact concern you?"

She held the flask of *kschiff* above his glass and gave an inquiring look.

He nodded.

\*

“Your *intervention* in the Temple is causing a stir,” Eadric remarked. “The Irrenites are already enshrining your words as doctrine.”

“In which case they are missing the point entirely,” Shomei sighed.

“Your revelation is rather opaque.”

“I should hope so. The principal point of revelation is to make people *think*.”

“And you do not believe your act was rather...presumptuous?” Eadric inquired.

“Yes. And necessarily so. Many of those who practice *Saizhan* are slipping into a kind of existential torpor. They need to wake up.”

“Is it your understanding that Oronthon inspired you to this course of action?” Eadric asked.

“In a manner of speaking; although I do not locate Oronthon external to myself after the fashion of Orthodoxy.”

“I understand,” Eadric nodded.

“Let me ask you, *Ahma*: has the *Sela* made comment on my actions?”

“He inquired as to the aesthetics of your inscription.” Eadric smiled.

“And?”

Eadric laughed. “Upon hearing that your script was in keeping with the prevailing design of the Temple interior, seemed satisfied.”

“Good,” she poured more *kschiff*.

\*

“Do you have an erotic interest in me, Shomei?”

“You are drunk, *Ahma*, and it is not even mid-morning. Perhaps you should stop.”

“No, pour me another. The question stands.”

She sighed, and refilled his goblet. “I see things primarily in terms of alliances, *Ahma*; I am rational, and eminently practical. I enjoy physical recreation as much as the next devil, but I am not driven by my carnality, insofar as I do not let it dictate my choices.”

“Not dictate,” Eadric suggested, “but inform?”

“Perhaps,” she acknowledged. “But I have no need of a lover, *Ahma*, if that is what you are

suggesting.”

“I am not. You have infernal servants who fulfill this role?”

“Yes.”

“And as to a spouse?”

She set her glass down. “That, *Ahma*, is an entirely different proposition. Marriage is an *alliance*. Connubial duties must be taken very seriously, especially amongst immortals – where a dispute can last for decades, and the results of a spat be felt for a millennium. Is this interrogation leading somewhere specific?”

“No,” Eadric said hastily. “I am merely attempting to ascertain your motives with regard to me. Both Nehael and Soneillon have suggested that our association goes beyond conventional friendship.”

“You are the *Ahma* and I am Shomei the Infernal. We are both agents of cosmic change. How could it not?”

“The old order has vanished, Shomei, and I am still unsure of my place in the new. What is my role in your reality? What is the *Ahma* to you?”

She pondered briefly. “A few days ago, I etched words into the archway in the Great Fane in Morne; I burned yet more into the solar orb. I planted a Hazel scion within the Temple precinct...”

“You did *what*?”

“A Hazel, *Ahma*. I assumed you would have heard. Regardless, my acts and words describe a vision – my vision – of *how things should be*. When I stood upon the threshold, a great force moved through me; it was of me, and yet not: Will was manifest in its fullest form. It was directed at the Illuminated who were gathered there, and sought to enkindle them; to bring their Flames to realization. It was inadequate to the task. I revised my strategy, in the light of something which I already knew to be fact: my energies must be devoted toward my Self. If I deviate from this Truth, I will fail.”

“And now you have set this fire in yourself,” Eadric observed. “It is immediately apparent.”

“It is a beginning,” Shomei said softly. “And I am always beginning, *Ahma*. As to your role, consider those of Morne who returned from the Serenities. Because when *your* Flame ignites, *Ahma*, you will illuminate all of Wyre – and beyond. It will induce a torrent of Radiance which will make the cascade at Khu appear as a child’s squib in comparison. God will breathe into them all.”

Eadric stared at her, incredulous.

“And yes, I would consider an alliance with one such as that desirable.”

He swallowed.

“As for *compassion*,” Shomei added, “a topic which I am grateful you have avoided to this point: I believe that it is something which I would be willing to learn to practice, in the interests of preserving good relations.”



She smiled, and took a long sip of *kschiff*.

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### **Midwinter Goddess – Final Part**

There was a barely audible sound; a persistent hum, which suffused perception.

*Are you asleep again already?* The peasant-girl from Trempa looked up at him. *Ah, but I know this dreamscape well: you have been drinking kasshiv.*

The flat of his sword lay across her shoulder, two feet from the quillons. She smiled and raised an eyebrow as she turned the weapon slowly upon its edge with her fingertips; its weight broke her skin, causing her to hiss. A trickle of blood stained her white tunic.

His hands shook. She reached forward and clasped them, steadying them.

*Like this.* She drew the blade toward herself, gradually opening a wound; cold iron sank down into muscle and sinew. Her breath became rapid, and she clenched her teeth. Blood flowed freely over her. He moved to pull his hands free, but her grasp tightened. *Do not stop.*

He felt the blade bite into bone, and turned his face away from her. His stomach churned and heaved.

*Look at me. Eadric...please...*

He forced his gaze back to meet her eyes, and her grip threatened to crush his wrists. *Press.* He drove down hard, shearing through her collar-bone. She sighed, and shuddered gently; Void glazed over, and she collapsed in convulsion. Blood pooled rapidly around her.

This is too much, he thought.

*No. It is the same.* She crawled forward, insensible, and clung to him.

Eadric awoke at two in the afternoon in a cold sweat. His head pounded.

\*

“In Shûth,” Nwm handed him a glass of mint tea, “*kschiff* was originally considered a sacrament. It is unfortunate that it has achieved the status of an inebriant amongst wealthy aristocrats in the Thalassine and further north.”

The Preceptor poured himself a small glass of the astringent liquor, savored its aroma, took a sip, and placed it aside.

“I might add,” he continued, “that attempting to match Shomei’s prolific consumption is a losing

proposition – this would have been true even before her recent metamorphosis.”

Eadric moaned and sat up, shivering. He pulled his ermine robe around himself.

Nwm gave a wry smile. “But I am glad to see that the worldly goods which she bestowed upon you are also functional.”

Eadric groaned and lay back down again.

“And how goes the dialogue with Cheshne, *Ahma*?”

Eadric gestured him away.

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“Ah, the *Goddess*,” Nwm’s eyes twinkled merrily. “What can one say? She is elusive, yet ever present; demanding and forgiving; cold and passionate. Mother, lover, sister, daughter. She is flirting with you; presenting her many faces. You should feel blessed.”

Eadric grumbled. His face was still pale. “Since when have you included Soneillon – or Shomei, for that matter – in your ever-expanding category of *Goddess*?”

Nwm smiled, and popped a fig into his mouth. “I am not the *Ahma*.”

“And Gihaahia?” Eadric asked. “Do you include her too?”

“I am not a wizard,” Nwm shrugged.

“Shomei’s taste in furnishings cannot be faulted,” Ortwine observed calmly, uncoiling her hair and relaxing into a couch. “And you have an excellent selection of wines and victuals – some of these are the finest diabolic vintages and are no longer available. I think it’s time you placed this childish desire for frugality firmly in your past; and I see no particular need for abstemiousness whilst you are campaigning.”

“The chestnuts are rather good,” Nwm agreed. “And these little pistachio confections are simply delightful.”

“For an ascetic, you have expensive tastes,” Eadric said sourly. “Also, you seem overly eager to deify any female who crosses your path.”

“Not I,” Nwm laughed. “This conversation will inevitably lead to an examination of the *Ahma*’s psyche. Do you still wish to proceed?”

Eadric grunted.

“Shomei’s case is well-made,” Ortwine seemed serious. “And it is high time you began to look to marriage as a means of securing power, Eadric. You are an eligible bachelor-godling; you are saintly, with impeccable credentials. You have your pick of any number of immortals and goddesses as a potential mate – most of whom are admittedly depraved or mad. Or of poor estate, such as Lai. Shomei is a fine prospect, in comparison.”

“Indeed,” Eadric stood abruptly and opened a dresser, pulling out a doublet and hastily donning it.

“She has a superb sense of style,” Ortwine looked on approvingly. “And someone certainly needs to manage your wardrobe.”

Eadric turned. “It is an article of clothing, Ortwine. Or perhaps you’d like to marry me and see to my fashion needs?”

“I am haughty and aloof. I am also fastidious in matters of personal hygiene. We would make an unhappy couple.”

“Of that, I have no doubt.”

“Consider the military leverage offered by the Wurm, Eadric,” Ortwine continued. “As well as Shomei’s conjurations. They would bring a massive strategic advantage in any dealings with the Cheshnites. You said yourself that Shomei would take any matrimonial duties seriously; as your *wife* there is no question that she would lend her full support to your cause. Hell is no mean dowry.”

“Keep talking, Ortwine,” Eadric pulled *Lukarn* over his shoulder, fastening his baldric.

“I am not persuaded that you are really listening,” the sidhe sighed. “What is this sudden urgency about?”

Eadric exited the tent. Dusk was falling, and hundreds of campfires had already been lit. *Narh* was waiting for him; he flung his saddle over the stallion’s back, and swiftly tightened the cinches.

Ortwine followed. “Where are you going, *Ahma*?”

“Home,” Eadric replied.

“Do I really need to point out to you that *home* is the arbor of a highly questionable scion? Eadric. *Use your head.*”

He mounted *Narh* and rode away.

“He is unstable,” the sidhe remarked.

Nwm smiled. “The thought of her gnaws at him. Or have you altogether forgotten what it’s like?”

“To be ruled by irrational, seething passions? Of course not. But he, of all men, needs to master them. His political responsibilities far outweigh all other considerations. And she can’t be *that* good.”

Nwm guffawed, and slapped Ortwine across her back. “*Responsibilities*? A word I thought I’d never hear pass your lips in a hundred incarnations; the World is truly on its head. Come: while Eadric seeks annihilation we should avail ourselves of his wines; I fancy that I spied a bottle of almond liqueur. And as an *ascetic*, I am dependent upon the largesse of my feudal master.”

“Will you make no effort to intervene in this absurdity? He’ll listen to you.”

“No,” Nwm replied. “He won’t.”

“Very well,” Ortwine sighed. “Just don’t *touch* me again.”

\*\*

[*Faheth*]: Are you then set on this course of action?

[*Ahma*]: Yes.

[*Faheth*]: I would say that you are one who experiences pleasure from bestowing it; from seeing and knowing that it is felt. That you do not derive satisfaction from causing suffering.

[*Ahma*]: I would certainly hope that to be the case.

[*Faheth*]: And when inflicting pain also elicits joy? Can you still feel happiness in the same measure?

[*Ahma*]: I do not know.

[*Faheth*]: And can you tell the difference between deriving pleasure through causing suffering, and deriving pleasure from evoking bliss which is caused through suffering?

[*Ahma*]: That would seem to be the pertinent question.

[*Faheth*]: This is no parlour game, *Ahma*, practiced by the bored wife of some thane from Hethio for her idle amusement; nor a wanton thrill offered by a drunken streetwalker. No brand of masochism is so extreme: she will ask you to do great violence to her; to push her repeatedly to death and beyond. It may break your mind.

[*Ahma*]: You dubbed her insane and evil, yet still you asked me to find a way to her.

[*Faheth*]: She is insane by your standards, not mine; as to evil, who can even say what that means anymore? And I ask and have asked for nothing; but whatever you ask, I will grant it to the extent of my power. The Eye of Cheshne will be blinded by the Sun for a few days more; but understand that *the Sun is weak*: place your trust in the *Eleos*.

[*Ahma*]: And if my efforts prove inadequate, what then? Nothing is lost. She has her demons to look to.

[*Faheth*]: Demons are sadistic, *Ahma*. It is not the same thing at all. And Nothing *will* be lost.

\*\*

*Narh* reached the Blackwater Meadow and crossed the Nund two hours before midnight. The road to Trempa was thronged with tents and makeshift hovels; those displaced from Deorham and Hernath. A sickness had descended on them: Urgic mendicants moved amongst them, administering aid where they could. They implored him; Eadric remained for the best part of an hour, emptying himself, before resuming his journey.

Ten miles from Kyrtil's Burh, and reality darkened; not yet within the inner ambit of the scion, but beneath a wider compass which the *ludja* itself had set around its sapling. The presence of Nehael vanished from his mind; he knew that she was now blind to what transpired, unless the Blackthorn itself were to grant her vision.

He cast around for some sign; his eyes were drawn to The Follower, a star considered auspicious and which – in marriage with the Sun – marked the fullness of spring. It shone, steady and calm, close to its zenith. He took it as a portent, even as a glamour settled over him: a mantle of darkness – bequeathed, he knew, by Soneillon – to protect him from the warp which emanated from the scion at the keep.

His gaze penetrated the night, and he entered a twisted phantasmagoria, where angle and distance seemed meaningless; things crawled and festered and rotted: the Blackthorn was the quintessence of putrefaction. The town of Deorham had become a shadowy parody of itself, and although shapes and rumors intimated that many of its inhabitants remained there, all, the *Ahma* knew, were *changed*. He shunned it, and spurred straight for the Burh. For home.

As he crossed the bridge, *Narh's* hoof fall seemed muted and empty. The shadow of the Steeple fell on Eadric and the stallion shook, unwilling to go further: a vast shape roosted there, a guardian of terrible power recently bound by the mistress of the *Urn* for her protection. *Carasch*, he knew, for what other could it be? The great chthonic was crouched in silent vigil; the *Ahma* felt the demon's scrutiny settle upon him as a lance of pure malice. He dismounted, whispering words of reassurance, and slowly led *Narh* forward.

At the gate, Mazikreen stood waiting. Eadric said nothing, but fixed her with his gaze as he pressed the steed's reins into her hand. She lowered her eyes. The courtyard beyond was dim and hazy; all sound was subdued. He passed beneath the arch and trod swiftly to the keep proper, averting his eyes from the place outside of the chapel where he knew the scion reared. Opening the heavy door, he made his way through the hall, up the companionway, and to his rooms.

All within was darkness: profane, silent and absolute. At the centre, a naked singularity churned in space; a deeper void into which *ens* vanished, and around which madness accreted in tendrils. It contorted, seeming to fold outwards from within, assuming more apprehensible form.

"Welcome home, dear." Soneillon manifested in the shape of the peasant-girl, and struck a light. A fire ignited in the hearth. His chambers seemed unchanged since his last visit, many months prior. She smiled. "I notice you did not bring your cherub's eye: is there something which you did not wish to see?"

"I was not sure what you'd want to show."

"That is considerate of you. Are you here to play, then?"

"No, I am here to reach you."

She cocked her head and raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Well...the *Ahma* is bold; perhaps he has been drinking *kasshiv* again. That is no trivial undertaking, by any measure. She – the first one, that is – knows that you have come, of course?"

"Yes."

"And she offered some kind of *blessing*, I presume; an article of empathy and compassion, couched

in terms of my *need*?”

“Soneillon, does it matter?” Eadric asked. “That is a perspective which I must hold true in any event. You know this.”

“From you, I will endure it – at least, provisionally. But not from her: she understands me better than you. And consider your supplication to Cheshne and the Void, because make no mistake: that is what this is. If you have doubts or would prefer lighter fare tonight, now would be the time to articulate these feelings.”

He remained silent.

“Will you then do as I beseech of you?” She inquired.

“Yes.”

“And will you *trust* me?” She asked archly.

“I must.”

“You need not sound so enthused, Eadric. Do you speak out of feeling, or from some misplaced sense of obligation?”

“It is a *choice*, Soneillon.”

“Very well, then.” Her mood became at once both serious and playful. She approached, drew a thin stiletto fashioned of cold iron, and pressed it into his hand.

\*

At Deorham, the Sun reached its nadir on Midwinter’s night, even as, at Khu, the Eye of Cheshne did likewise and Soneillon waxed to power. Above, The Follower – the star of the *Eleos* – shone serenely at the midheaven, and the Dragon coiled yet tighter around the Tree.

In Nizkur, Nehael awoke to her full potential; to Sovereignty. Her sight penetrated the World.

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### **Perspective (Midwinter Goddess: Epilogue)**

[Nehael/*Eleos*]: Shomei...

[Shomei]: Piss off.

\*\*

Mostin stood upon the veranda with Mulissu, watching as the shape approached at incredible speed from the south through the swagging winter skies.

Qematiel landed in an inferno, obliterating trees within a swathe a hundred yards across, and setting many more ablaze. A great gout of steam erupted as snow melted and boiled, blown outward by a shockwave of ionizing gas. Shomei leaped down, and strode towards them; the frozen earth shuddered and ignited at her passage. A gale of hellfire preceded her.

“She is upset,” the Alienist observed.

“I should probably go,” Mulissu said.

“That might be best,” Mostin agreed.

The savant discreetly absented herself.

Shomei paused at the bottom of the steps, closing her eyes tightly and clenching her fists. She slowly mastered her rage. The flames subsided.

“Would you like tea?” Mostin asked.

She glared at him. His hat began to smoulder.

“Enough!” Mostin thundered, casting off his headgear and stamping on it. “I will tolerate the damage to my shrubbery, but this is my favorite felt. Control yourself. And don’t think you can intimidate me with your dragon; have you ever seen an *Ú*?” The vowel was pronounced with undue length, and accompanied a tilted head and a mad stare.

The fire left her. She suddenly seemed exhausted.

“Gooood...” Mostin said. “Now. Perhaps you should slow down; I think you might be pushing yourself too hard.”

“I want the *Urn*, Mostin,” she sighed.

“Well, yes dear. We all want the *Urn*, don’t we?”

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“Marriage?” Mostin scoffed. “Don’t be absurd. Wizards don’t get *married*; matrimony is for inferior beings. You are letting your infernality dictate your actions above your proper calling. And your social graces are also suffering.”

“He is the *Ahma*. It would be a sound alliance.” Shomei lounged. She was intoxicated. “But Soneillon has him all confused and irrational again. I even offered to practice compassion.”

“You are too *religious*, Shomei,” the Alienist grumbled. “That’s your problem. It’s always *been* your problem. All of this nonsense about God and now compassion. Interfering with their doctrine because you think that their mystical claptrap needs reformulating. And planting trees? Your automagnification is all very well, but you’ll end madder than Hlioth at this rate.”

“Nehael is manipulating him,” Shomei sighed. “He seems oblivious; he’s elevated her to the status

of Oronthon's empathic function because of some off-the-cuff remark which the *Sela* made to Nwm. And he has such *potential*, Mostin. Meanwhile, he empowers her instead; she just sits back and waits for him to bring her the *Urn*. Her lack of agency – or rather her persistent need to act through him – is beginning to annoy me. She is so *disingenuous*."

"She would be the first to admit to her own inertia," Mostin nodded. "Have you considered approaching Soneillon non-violently?"

"She is unlikely to surrender the *Urn* willingly, Mostin. The *Ahma* is of the opinion that an assault is unwarranted; Soneillon's demons have yet to wreak havoc. And now he is at Deorham, indulging her whims and demonstrating *compassion*; which Nehael sucks out of him like some green vampire. I can't stage an assault while he's there."

"Why ever not?" Mostin inquired. "Not that I'd like to see any harm come to Eadric." He hastily added.

"He is the *Ahma*, Mostin."

"I do not understand," the Alienist sighed.

"It is a *religious* thing, Mostin. You wouldn't."

"Well, no. I suppose not. Would you like to stay for supper? I plan to infuse Mei with pseudostuff tomorrow, and would like your opinion on the formula."

"Sorry, Mostin," she stood uncertainly. "I should probably go; I have more devils to conjure. And I'm sorry about the hat," she dusted it off, and placed it on her head. "Do you think it suits me?"

"Yes," Mostin replied. "But you can't have it."

"A shame. Thank-you, Mostin. You're a good influence on me."

"Yes. I am."

She walked unsteadily towards the door.

"And Shomei?"

She turned to face him.

"If you set yourself against the Claviger, I will be forced to protect the Articles. Just so we're clear."

\*

## **Obsession – Part 1**

Mostin stood with Hlioth in what remained of his rose garden the day after Shomei's passage. He had surprised himself by the fact that he had contacted her – a signicator in the *Web of Motes* had prompted him. He had been astonished when she had actually accepted his invitation.

"Despite her protestations to the contrary," the Green Witch said to Mostin, "she is, of course,



*jealous*. Not necessarily in some conventional, lovestruck way – I am not sure that Shomei is capable of experiencing romantic feelings *per se* – but rather simply because she *cannot get what she wants*. Actually, on consideration, they might be the same thing anyway. Regardless, she is exhausted, unhinged, volatile...and very, very *dangerous*. She is utterly fixated on the *Urn*, because it is the most direct route to power. I might also add that the heiress of Hell is twenty-seven years old; she lacks a certain perspective which millennia bring.”

“How old...” Mostin began.

“None of your business,” Hlioth interrupted.

Mostin bit his tongue. The crone seemed relatively agreeable today, and her demeanour was notoriously fickle.

“In any event, she is also *vulnerable* – just shut up, Mostin and let me finish – specifically with regard to the Holly, which has yet to show its face beyond the Thickets and the Realm of Hummaz and which she must, somehow negotiate.”

“No more trees,” the Alienist moaned. “Please.”

“Yes, Mostin,” Hlioth smiled disagreeably. “More trees! There are a lot *more trees* and you’d better start getting used to the idea. Now, you may be one of the most abominable creatures within the confines of the creation, but – or perhaps, because of this fact – you also have a certain *relationship* with Shomei which may allow you to curb her excesses.”

“By and large, I rather appreciate Shomei’s excesses,” Mostin sighed. “But in this case, you may be correct.”

“And what, may I ask,” Hlioth inquired, “prompted you to seek my *advice* in this matter. I assume that is what you are *doing* – am I correct? It is not as though you and I have had a glowing friendship these past twenty years.”

“An intuition prompted by the Enforcer’s intervention in my spell formulations,” Mostin admitted. “But one subsequently corroborated by the *Web of Motes*: that Shomei intends to challenge the Articles. I projected a catenary which took her straight into conflict with Gihaahia – although she needs both possession of the *Urn* and mastery of Hummaz in order to secure certain victory in this confrontation; she may attempt it without the latter. I am of the opinion that the Injunction is worth protecting; the fact that you and I are having this conversation is testament to that fact.”

“Are you suggesting that the Claviger is implementing some kind of defensive contingency through the Academy?”

“It may have been its plan from the outset,” Mostin nodded. “We cannot gauge its prescience. Gihaahia is not invulnerable; the Claviger itself currently dreams – it is containing the Second Effluxion.”

“Well,” Hlioth breathed a sigh of relief. “Perhaps things are not as bad as I anticipated.”

“Perhaps not,” Mostin nodded. “Mei – I should say Pseudomei – is a test case; you should see her: she is so *beautiful*. But consider multiple Mostin pseudosimulacra. And how beautiful *they* will be.”

A look of profound horror crossed Hlioth’s face.

“The formula is based on Gihaahia’s own premise,” Mostin continued enthusiastically. “I am glad that the Enforcer – in fact, the Claviger – is finally looking to *Uzzhin* as the source of ultimate unmeaning. Anyway, Mulissu’s inside: let’s have some tea; you’re not such a bad old stick, after all. And as you’re here, Hlioth, do you think you could repair my shrubbery? I’m not very good at that sort of thing.”

\*\*

“Eadric’s problem,” Ortwine opined, “is that he cannot relate to *women*. As a woman who was a man, I have a unique perspective in this regard.”

Nwm nodded. Ortwine had consumed an excess of infernal wine over the course of several days. The Faerie Queene had lost all of her inhibitions, and seemed the very model of one – or several – of her former selves.

“Allow me to continue,” Ortwine smiled. “Consider Despina – yes, that’s a name you haven’t heard for a while. He placed her on a pedestal; notions of courtly love – *fine amour* – and all that chivalric bullsh\*t. Unreachable; unattainable. Unrequited love. ”

Nwm nodded. He had consumed no small quantity himself, relaxing his normal guard against inebriation. It was, after all, the winter *Tagamuos*.

“When she disappoints him,” Ortwine continued, “he *demonizes* her – let’s dub this phase *Nehael I*. Nehael I is the realization that she is *bad*, but may be trying to be *good*. Are we in accord?”

Nwm nodded.

“You intercede,” Ortwine smiled. “Good job – at least, I think. Nehael is removed from the humdrum divide between Heaven and Hell, and becomes Nehael II. Did they get it on, I wonder?”

“You can ask him when he gets back,” Nwm interrupted. “If he ever gets back.”

“‘I don’t think so,’ is the answer.” Ortwine sighed. “Nehael II is *abducted* – unattainable again, you see?”

Nwm nodded.

“He broods, and encounters Soneillon – let’s call her *Soneillon I*. Sound good?”

“Aren’t there prior iterations?”

“Just think like Eadric,” Ortwine replied. “Soneillon I is one hundred per cent *wicked* and *naughty* – he likes that. But he can’t *be* that. Is that a fair assertion?”

“I must concur,” Nwm nodded.

“Simultaneously, he develops an ‘intellectual’ camaraderie with Shomei – *Shomei II*, I suppose, after you *reincarnated* her. Now, let’s be honest, Nwm. When has Eadric developed an intellectual anything?”

“He’s not stupid,” Nwm objected.

“No. But he’s pretty green – especially when it comes to women. Anyway, Soneillon I dies – or whatever she does. Shomei II is lost. What does he do?”

“He wages war?”

“*Precisely*,” Ortwine smiled. “Except he’s encountered Nehael again, and now he *deifies* her. Nehael III. Note that he still can’t *have* her.”

“And Shomei?”

“When *she* reappears, she will be inserted into the conveniently vacant role of *Adversary*,” Ortwine touched her nose. “Shomei III. But I’m getting ahead of myself. Mostin invokes Soneillon – Soneillon II – from wherever she wasn’t – in order to fuel his magic, and then sends her hurtling into delirium. She quickly becomes Soneillon III and then Soneillon IV in short order – the crazed, *Urn*-bearing Soneillon whom Eadric is now *brutalizing* in some awful rite. By now, Nehael has also become Nehael IV – I assume you *felt* what happened the other night? At this point, she is *utterly beyond reach*. ”

“Where is this leading, Ortwine?”

“You seem to forget, I am a *goddess*, Nwm – Ortwine IVa – and I have a perspective you cannot. The energy isn’t flowing in the direction that Eadric, or Nehael, or Shomei – or Soneillon, for that matter – expected. In fact, maybe she is now Soneillon *V*. Because *Cheshne is waking*. *She no longer dreams*.”

Nwm stared at her.

“Don’t worry; it’s not as bad as you think. But my original assertion about Eadric and women stands. All of which brings me to the real question,” Ortwine raised an eyebrow. “What do we know about Eadric’s *mother*?”

“Not much,” Nwm perked up. “But now I think we might be getting somewhere.”

\*\*

Qematiel wheeled in the air, a mile above the Academy and its grounds. The Hazel scion – tucked in a remote corner of the thousand-acre estate and obscured by a distortion – had cordoned an area in its vicinity. It was a lattice of interwoven demiplanes which formed a perilous snare around Shomei’s cottage, itself a portal to the labyrinthine repository of diabolic knowledge which she had inherited – or appropriated. Many powerful devils – and more recently-fallen celestials – abode in the skies nearby, preferring to remain *invisible*, awaiting the bidding of their mistress.

Below, the diminutive figure of Shomei the Infernal walked deliberately across a wide lawn, and stood before the doors to her former abode – now the seat of Wyrish High Arcanie, with the Articles of the Injunction displayed prominently above its entrance. She inspected them briefly before making the merest gesture; the valves swung open silently, and she entered within.

To her approval, the infernal aesthetic was largely unchanged; midnight blues, indigoes and maroons predominated. Columns of black marble, shot through with streaks of carnelian supported lofty ceilings. A soft light overspread the interior; all elements blended into a harmonious whole. A spined devil flapped past quietly on some mundane task, its eyes wide at seeing its former mistress returned. The atmosphere was calm, subdued and studious. She paused briefly and inhaled. There was *value* here, she knew; but more concrete and purposeful *direction* was required.

A young mage exited a study hurriedly, almost colliding with her. He froze; his first instinct was to worship her. With a thought, she quenched the outward signs of her Fire: mortals were apt to overreact when in her presence, and she sought no veneration. Shaken, the wizard moved away slowly, his eyes still fixed on her.

She made her way to the library: the vast collection which she had acquired in a previous lifetime, now swollen yet further by contributions made by other mages. It seemed paltry. Lesser wizards cast sidelong glances at one another, or whispered to colleagues in nearby booths: she was known to all by reputation; to a few – whose heads remained conspicuously lowered – in person.

Shomei selected a blank section of wall in a nook beneath a mezzanine, and set forth her power, causing an archway to appear. Those nearby craned their necks to see what might lie beyond: shelves which seemed to go on forever, crammed with scrolls and codices. Her thought summoned Ugales – a devil of mild temper – and placed him behind a desk beside the newly-forged portal.

She spoke directly into the mind of every arcanist within a league:

**My other library is now also available. There will be a fee.**

She passed through the portal. Abruptly, a door of adamant appeared and slammed in place.

The devil smiled benignly, and began to sharpen his quill-pen with a pocket knife.

\*\*  
\*\*

All was Void. Perfect. Empty. Absolute. It was timeless; an aeon of aeons. A moment.

Breath moved, and a light kindled. It grew to fullness, and blazed, sovereign. A rumour became; formed around it. Refulgence drew her forth.

*Ens* crystallized as a violent spasm.

Blood – ichor – her own, she knew – soaked everything. He sat in the meditative posture to which she had become accustomed; his blade rested across his knees. It and he were drenched with her.

The gore vanished with her passing thought.

“*Anvashochah. Maa. Tvayiv viikshya varca,*” she murmured, because she felt it.\* And then she questioned herself; whether her words were real, or were spoken merely to comfort him.

He moved to leave; she reached out and gripped his wrist. *Please. Stay.*

He nodded.

She smiled languidly, and drew him toward her.

And wondered if he hated her.

\*You are lamenting. Do not. In you I have apprehended the Sun.

### **Obsession – Part 2 (Inversion)**

“A *ludja*,” Hlioth explained, “acts – or does not – according to its nature. Around each of its saplings it creates a circuit in which its own concerns are afforded precedence, but it is not *willful* – with the exception of the Hazel, of course: willfulness is its nature. There is nothing stopping Shomei from entering the ambit of the Blackthorn at Deorham: it will not assault her. Or, at least, it will not single her out for assault; its concerns are with all of the processes of decay. The warp which emanates from it – the *corruption*, if you prefer, although I am reluctant to characterize any natural process in those terms – is an unfortunate side effect. Things rot quickly there: matter, mind and space. Shomei possesses magic enough to prevent its general effects.”

“And if Shomei – or I, for that matter – were to take an axe to the scion?” Ortwine inquired.

“You would perish,” Hlioth said simply. “The manner of your passing would likely be ugly. A scion will preserve itself through reflex, and in the unlikely event that a scion is *actually threatened*, the *ludja* itself will react to protect its sapling. In the case of the *Blackthorn*, it might simply *squash* you. Or you might instantly decompose. Or it might deploy many chthonics, who roost in its branches – when they are not scuttling hither and thither in Dream. The Blackthorn can *transfigure* them – as it has Soneillon. They are most potent, and would flay you.”

“And Carasch is one such?”

“Carasch is Carasch,” Hlioth replied opaquely. “Cheshne looks out for him.”

Ortwine pondered. “And if, somehow, one *were* to destroy a scion – before it could react, so to speak. What then?”

“Another would grow in its place,” Hlioth chuckled.

“And if one were to assault the *ludja* directly? To destroy it at the root?”

“Another. Would grow. In its place. The Great *Ludja* is the root of all. And it is Reality.”

Ortwine sighed. “Is there no manner in which these things can be curtailed? Restricted? Contained? Manipulated?”

“Certainly,” Hlioth replied unexpectedly. “To assert the higher paradigm. That capacity which Nehael possesses, but will only demonstrate in compassion; which Hummaz enjoys, but has no interest in using – except to gratify his immediate urges. Which Kaalaanala cannot realize; toward which Shomei strives; which has not been revealed by the *Ahma*.”

“And Soneillon?”

“My eyes cannot penetrate the Void,” Hlioth smiled.

“And the Oak and the Elm – here at Galda?” Ortwine was dubious.

“They are a potent combination; they embody physical characteristics – physicality itself – or two thirds of it. The hardness and temper of the Ash is absent. But strength, resilience, pliability, resistance to decay – yes. Kaalaanala’s sight cannot penetrate the compass set by the *ludjas* around the scions, and they are *vibrant*; things which are *dead* will have a difficult time here, as will things which are predicated on non-*Ens* – which is obviously to our advantage.”

“I was denied their protection when I made an appeal. Despite Nehael’s intercession. I am less than confident in their benevolence.”

The Green Witch shook her head. “You are ascribing a quality – or a lack of it – which is inappropriate to these *ludjas*.”

“Then what was the obstacle to their action?”

“You are the Hazel’s bitch, Ortwine,” Hlioth sighed. “I am not privy to the internal politics of the Trees. Either way, Shomei will not forget that fact.”

“And this impenetrability to sight around the scions? It is selective. What motivates it? Deorham is invisible to me. Morne is not. Nor is here at Galda. But Jashat is. There are also other areas which are...opaque.”

“To you, maybe,” Hlioth shrugged. “But not, any longer, to the *Eleos*. There is no veil through which she cannot now see, except those of Cheshne herself. And you ascribe motivation to all Trees, which implies will – your perspective is too corylian. Although that is to be expected.”

“Yet the Hazel itself does not shroud the Academy?”

“It has not been so implored – or directed. Yet.” Hlioth said with narrowed eyes. “It might be construed as an overt act of aggression on the part of Shomei. The Enforcer would be less than pleased.”

“And Nehael’s perception extends to Jashat? The Temple of Cheshne?”

“The Fires of Death and all of her avatars are transparent to the *Eleos*, Ortwine. To Compassion. Something which Kaalaanala is likely to resent.”

“Does this make sense to you?” The sidhe asked Nwm.

“Of course,” the Preceptor replied. “What is unclear?”

“Never mind,” Ortwine sighed. “What are we now waiting to do?”

“Eadric has been gone for three days, and is unresponsive to any efforts at communication. We will make a reconnaissance,” Nwm said in a matter-of-fact way. “Of Deorham and its environs. I, for one, am curious to see what transpires beneath a Blackthorn’s pall.”

“Is everybody *mad*?” Ortwine groaned. “Why can’t we just ask Nehael?”

“Her concerns have become more global,” Nwm replied.

“In which case,” Ortwine said drily. “She is even less use than previously.”

“You may be surprised on that count,” Nwm smiled.

\*\*

[Daunton]: You should probably come to the Academy.

[Mostin]: Why?

[Daunton]: Just come, Mostin.

\*

“As you can see,” Daunton observed, “things are rather out of hand.”

A long queue of chattering wizards had formed before a desk, behind which a scholarly devil sat. The fiend was haggling with an enchantress over the precise conditions for access to a number of obscure dweomers.

Mostin barged his way to the front of the line, over the objections of many who stood there, and shoved the wizard aside. Daunton followed uncertainly.

“Please take your place in an orderly fashion,” the devil looked up towards him.

Mostin twitched.

“I am conducting legitimate business on the part of Shomei the Infernal, as her broker,” Ugales sighed. “Her rights are protected.” He pointed – not to the Articles, but to the Academy’s own protocol guidelines.

“Bah!” Mostin turned to walk away.

“But I am also instructed to inform you that access is unrestricted in your case,” Ugales smiled.

Many voices were raised in protestation, including Daunton.

Mostin swiveled on the spot, licked his lips, and looked through the portal.

“Mostin,” Daunton tugged on his sleeve. “*Mostin!*”

“Oh very well. This *is* irregular,” Mostin nodded. “Some our punctilio with regard to brokerage may need revisiting. You should convoke the Collegium. A course of action must be decided.”

“As Chancellor of the Academy,” Ugales added, “and *President* of the Collegium, Dauntton the Diviner is also allowed unrestricted access.”

“Oh? Really?” Dauntton asked, gazing through the doorway. “Come Mostin, we must inspect these forbidden tomes, to determine if they represent a threat to our work here.”

“Quite,” Mostin agreed, as he followed him through.

\*\*

Teppu grinned, bundling his few magical oddments – each of which was quirky, and of particular interest only to himself – into a cloak, which he tied to a gnarled oak staff.

Nehael – the *Eleos* – stood nearby and watched. Her expression was one of sadness.

“I will miss you,” she said. “Yet not, of course. I will miss your *presence*. It is comforting to me.”

He bowed smoothly.

“When you see Nehael again, she will remember you, but she will not be the *same*,” she looked at him. “Try to remember that. It is a relationship you will have to forge anew.”

“I have experienced something similar many times myself,” he laughed. “I’m sure she will be perfectly delightful.”

“Perhaps. But not in the way you expect; her method of ending suffering – her *compassion* – is particular.”

“A paradigm can absorb many paradoxes,” he shrugged.

“I’ll see you if you die.” She kissed him on the forehead. “Try not to,” she added.

The *Eleos* took three paces backward toward the Great Tree-*ludja* and smiled. “Assume an active stance, and do not compromise your truth. Give her your wisdom freely; she will need it. And do not concern yourself too much with the Aeon; it will take care of itself. Always find the Middle Way. And remember that you are much loved.”

She – and the Tree – vanished to perception. The Womb of Qinthei was closed.

Teppu sighed. All things must end.

Moments later, Nehael appeared: an avatar, emanated by the *Eleos*. The Image of Uedii, her eyes remained green within green, but her garb was scarlet.

“Teppu?” She asked.



“Red?” He asked, and bowed again.

“I will need a horse and a sword,” she remarked. “Where can I find these?”

\*\*

At dusk, a shadow slid furtively through the grounds of the Academy; potent magic cloaked it from the dark exemplars which whirled beyond perception in the skies above. It crept from stock to bole to trunk, seeking to move forward, but always, somehow, vexed in its efforts. Once or twice it espied what it thought might be a light but, upon skulking toward it, seemed to lose its bearings, or become snagged in some briar.

Shomei the Infernal watched the figure silently. From its movements, it was a Naztharune, but she knew that surely Temenun was not foolish enough to send it against her: what could he hope to achieve? Its purpose must, therefore, be otherwise.

In an inkling, without word or gesture, she dispelled its wards, *dominated* it and drew it toward her with telekinesis. Their eyes suddenly alerted to the presence of the tigress, devas with cobalt skin and flaming swords were instantly all about her.

Shomei wrenched its thoughts from its mind and prepared to unleash a ruthless barrage of *flensing* upon it. She analyzed meaning and intention, paused, and instead turned it upon its head; it hovered five feet above the ground. Shomei approached so that the Naztharune’s eyes were inches away.

She held out her hand.

It reached within its vestment with backward palms, withdrew a bunch of tumid cherries – deep scarlet in color – and placed them in her grasp.

“Tell your master that I will give his offer due consideration,” she smiled. “But that, at present, I have no nuts for him.”

She righted it and released it. It slunk away into the night.

*Your concern is appreciated*, she spoke drily into the minds of the fallen celestials. *But really, I can look after myself. You may return to your stations.*

Shomei withdrew to her cottage and pondered, her mind quickly dissecting new data. Temenun’s ritual pool was not insignificant, and if he was in the process of co-opting Soneillon’s former succubi in Throile as well, then he would emerge as a major player.

She poured herself a glass of *kschiff*, threw off her cloak, removed her slippers, and relaxed by the fire. Shomei examined the cherries and sighed, placing them on a silver platter. The marriage of Will and Desire was the last thing that she needed; really, that was where it had all gone wrong last time.

Hours passed in contemplative reverie; finally, she roused herself and stood. With a thought, she translated to Galda, appearing before the Tabernacle.

Sercion’s hand moved to his weapon, but she presented an open palm.

"I wish to speak with the *Sela*," she said.

"Come in, Shomei," a voice said warmly from within. "You know you're always welcome."

She exhaled slowly, and drew the heavy curtain aside. The *Sela* sat in meditative posture within.

"I am not here for moral instruction," Shomei said tersely.

"Then you are fortunate that I do not offer it," the *Sela* smiled. "Shall we begin where we left off?"

Shomei nodded.

\*

### **Obsession – Part 3**

"Your friends have arrived," Soneillon raised an eyebrow. "In the village. They are warded against perception – poorly. Are we entertaining, tonight? Should I send Carasch to greet them?"

"Your sense of humor is singular," Eadric smiled, but his face was etched with pain, as one who has experienced great anguish. "Who is here?"

"The Uediiian and the sidhe – and also Hlioth. I have killed her once already; perhaps she liked it and is returning for more. Mostin is not with them; I suspect he is avoiding me: he still owes me Graz'zt."

"Why did they not simply issue a *sending*?"

Soneillon gesticulated vaguely. "I confess that a number of signals have been deflected."

"How many?" Eadric squinted.

"I did not count. Besides, it's better that you have company on your return to Galda. Your horse is ready; Mazikreen has taken care of him. She has become rather attached."

"He seems to have that effect. You are a curious creature, Soneillon."

"Yes?" She fastened a garland of black lotuses around his wrist.

"What will you do now?"

"I will brood and pine desperately, Eadric. Or perhaps I should instead fortify my position against the coming storm – which may blow from any number of directions, or from all at once. Shomei musters her devils; the Fourth Effluxion is moving – I do not relish that meeting. Dhatri's host is marching. Desire – the Cherry – is active. And your first girlfriend has a new persona; we'll see how that plays out. Let's hope that you don't like her more than me."

"Of what do you speak?" He asked suspiciously.

“I would hate to spoil the surprise,” she replied drily.

“Shomei may still be open to dialogue,” Eadric suggested. “I have not given up on her.”

“Maybe. Or she may simply *dominate* you at your next encounter; she is the assertive type. Although, perhaps you’d like that too.”

“You are impossible.”

“Thank-you,” she gave a small nod. “I try not to take things too seriously.”

“You need not remain here.”

“I am not tied to this place, Eadric; I come and go as I please. But prudence demands that I strengthen a bulwark, and this one is better than most. And it would appear that Nehael – your *Eleos* – has been of some *use* after all; she has struck a delicate balance, which compromises neither my solidity here, nor your attachment to this particular plot of earth. I should ask you to thank her for me when you next pray to her, but I won’t; it would be an inauthentic request.”

“Do you care to explain?” He asked.

“You will discover when you leave. Don’t you ever like surprises, Eadric?”

“Generally, no,” he said grimly. “It would appear that the lacuna has passed. If another should arise, I will return.”

“Of course you will, *Ahma*.” She smiled darkly. Her eyes were fathomless voids. “And things need not always be so *harrowing*; your courtesy and forbearance have earned my gratitude. But I have known you in death: you are now *mine*. And I don’t share well.”

She pressed a scarf of black samite into his hand, and curled his fingers tightly around it.

\*

Fresh snow had fallen, blanketing the courtyard; the winter sun was wan. Eadric looked upon the Blackthorn cautiously, as if his gaze alone might invoke malignancy from it, but it seemed subdued, as though its song had changed in some way. He closed the door to the keep behind him, and turned to pull a handful of dead ivy away from the wall, but green leaves had begun to shoot. He paused, confused, and lowered his hand.

*Eleos*, he knew, and understood Soneillon’s words.

The *Ahma* made his way to the gatehouse, and slowed to regard the Steeple where Carasch roosted; the demon seemed not to have moved a hair’s breadth. A shadow of darkness passed across his mind; again, the same feeling of dread and foreboding oppressed him, as he felt the chthonic’s eyes follow him. He shook it off with effort, and trudged forward.

“Nice horse,” Mazikreen handed him the reins to *Narh*. “Come again.”

Eadric climbed into the saddle, rode through the gate, across the bridge, and straight for Deorham. He did not look back to the Burh.

Within, Soneillon brooded.

\*\*

“You knew,” Ortwine glared at Nwm. “And so did you.” She glared at Hlioth.

“Yes,” Nwm laughed. Beer-foam clung to his beard; the *Twelve Elms* was thronging with activity.

“I did not. This irks me,” Ortwine continued.

“You are attuned to darker currents, Ortwine,” Hlioth sighed. “And none of us can see everything.”

“These benches are still filthy. And why is there a hole in the ceiling?”

“Should we go to the *Burh*, I wonder?” Nwm mused.

“We wait,” Hlioth replied. “He will come here, or will not. She can see us.”

A short time passed, and Eadric entered.

Hlioth quickly spoke a spell, masking the *Ahma* from the inevitable attention – and subsequent religious hysteria – which his presence was likely to provoke.

He nodded in gratitude, and sat.

“Gods, you look terrible,” Ortwine observed. “I’d offer a quip, but even that seems inappropriate. Nice bracelet, by the way.”

Eadric shook his head.

“Did you encounter the *rot*? How was it?”

“Ugly.” Eadric scowled.

Ortwine sniffed her wine disapprovingly, and placed it on the table. “Nehael seems to have reversed it. But the cordon set by the *ludja* is still in place. We are inscrutable; although apparently not to Soneillon. Did Nehael communicate with you regarding her intervention here?”

He shook his head. “At Galda, I invoked the *Eleos*; I prayed for the safeguarding of Deorham – of all within the Blackthorn’s range. I must assume that she listened; or she chose to act thus anyway.”

“A goddess who listens sets a worrying precedent,” Ortwine remarked. “And if Shomei comes here now?”

“I may have to forbid it outright,” Eadric replied.

“*Forbid*?” Nwm asked sceptically. “One does not *forbid* Shomei the Infernal anything. If you set yourself up as Law; she will be forced to confront you.”

“She will not attack me. I am the *Ahma*.”

“Are you sure?” Nwm inquired.

“No,” Eadric admitted.

“Is there an alternative?”

“I would prefer to avoid conflict here. Attempting another dialogue with Shomei is the first step. But I will not have Soneillon assailed for no reason...”

Ortwine groaned. “You are blind, Eadric. This girl has you mixed up.”

“...other than the fact that she possesses something which Shomei *wants*. Yes, Ortwine? You are about to present some solid, ethical case? A sound reason why I should allow half of Trempa to perish in smoking ruins, whilst demons and devils run amok and Carasch slugs it out with a half-dozen fallen seraphim? I am sorry, but *because Shomei wants* is not a compelling argument to me.”

“*Carasch*?” Ortwine asked.

“I was coming to that. He is at the Burh. Climb up the ridge above the North Road; you will see him perched on the Steeple.”

“And he will see you,” Hlioth said. “I advise against it.”

“And Soneillon is the *innocent* party, here?” Ortwine spoke contemptuously. “There *is* no greater demon than this one, *Ahma*.” The religious appellation was pronounced with some derision.

“I know it well!” Eadric snapped. “He has haunted my imaginings for longer than you know; since first I heard his name. And now he is at the Burh? Do not worry, Ortwine; the irony is not lost on me. And trust me: in person he is worse than in your darkest nightmares. I do not doubt that he could extinguish all life within a hundred miles – but, as of yet, no rampage has ensued.”

“And you are confident that your psychotic inamorata is trustworthy?” Ortwine exuded pure acid. “Or even capable of containing this monster? *This* is where I question your judgment, Eadric.”

“Soneillon asked me one question – and one only – to which I have attached value throughout this: *If not by my action, then how will you judge me?* For one who advocates repeatedly and in varied guises for Shomei’s case – and I suggest you question your own motivation in *that* regard – the notion of *agency* and its implications should strike a particular resonance.”

The sidhe smiled coldly. “Let us hope that your suspense of judgment – and your action – is vindicated.”

Nwm coughed. “You said yourself that Cheshne was awakening, Ortwine. That Soneillon is not who she was.”

“And at no point did I suggest that I *trusted* her,” Ortwine groaned.

“There is something else,” Hlioth spoke through gritted teeth. “Shomei seeks to woo the ritual pool offered by the Academy, and bribe leading members of the Collegium. Mostin has committed himself to protect the Articles – and curiously enough, I believed him, because he believed himself

– but until the Articles are actually *threatened*, he will not act. Gihaahia will prompt him; she is *leaning* on him – and Daunton. In the meantime, he may try to reason with Shomei – he may be the only one who can slow the meteor. Or she may attempt to sway *him*; and she is the superior rhetorician.”

Nwm nodded. “She is smarter than Mostin. Shomei presses hard against every barrier. She tests her exemption to the limit. For what it’s worth, I don’t think she’ll strike here until Dhatri reaches the envelope of the scions at Galda. I suspect that she will force you to choose, Eadric, or split your force. And perhaps I should keep my mouth closed in future, and learn from the *Ahma*’s mistakes: if the wizards *do* find a goddess in Gihaahia, then a reign of dark magic is imminent.”

“Her parentage is mixed,” Hlioth said archly. “She is the daughter of Astaroth and the Void; it might behoove us to remember this fact – it is apt enough. Forces other than the Claviger may be seeking to manifest through her.”

“We are a muddled and incestuous pantheon,” Ortwine sighed.

\*\*

:: Mostin ::

Begone, Vhorzhe. I have nothing to say to you.

:: Soneillon has abandoned us, Mostin ::

I don’t blame her. Now, *begone!*

\*

“*Roses of life?*” Daunton grinned broadly, brandishing a scroll. The two wizards were closeted in an obscure nook of Hell’s library. Mostin wondered if they might need a spell to find their way out again.

“I am beginning to understand Shomei’s strategy,” Mostin sighed. “We will spend the next thousand years searching for and transcribing exotic dweomers, whilst she suborns the Academy and uses it for whatever she wants. And we shall be perfectly happy. How long have we been here, anyway?”

“I have no idea,” Daunton mumbled. He brushed dust off a green tome entitled *The Fortification of the Skin*. “It’s a shame Rimilin is gone. He’d like this one.”

“Why are we even here?” Mostin asked. “We don’t *need* any of this.”

“No, you don’t.” Shomei had appeared from nowhere behind them. Daunton started. She seemed inordinately calm and focused. “And you have been here for nine hours. But there are transvalents; some were struck by the Adversary. Would you care to see them?”

Mostin twitched. His heart pounded. “And you have not committed them to your armamentarium?”

“There are more than a few. Most are beyond my ability – or yours – to cast,” she smiled. She did not need to add the word *yet*.

“Proceed,” Daunton said enthusiastically.

“Your library persona is an agreeable one,” Mostin observed.

“This is my passion, Mostin. You know this. I am most *me* here; I would not have you think that a quest for raw power has blinded me to what is important for my *I* – which is, and remains, the pursuit of knowledge. Now, follow me.”

She led them through winding corridors, past dens and studies, between stacks of books and down flights of steep stairs. They skirted repositories and scriptoria; passed through secret panels and hidden doors. All was silent, and musty. Finally, she produced a small key and opened an iron postern at the rear of a room crammed with scrolls. They descended yet more stairs, until they reached an open space. Ahead was an area of dead magic. Shomei gestured for them to proceed; the Alienist paused uncertainly.

“I would not cut the claws from the cat and then leave him at home with the fox,” Mostin said through narrowed eyes.

“Mostin...”

He assumed his pseudonatural shape.

“Then you will have me at a disadvantage,” she sighed. “Because the cat just became a wolf.”

The hall beyond was cavernous, a hundred fathoms tall, and stretched as far as Mostin’s many eyes could see ahead of him. Their footsteps – and his slitherings – echoed within. In the vaulted ceilings, great ruddy lights glowed at intervals, illuminating the contents: countless slabs - of adamant, marble, alabaster, steel, jade and obsidian - attached by clamps to soaring cables. A vast infernal apparatus controlled the assembly above; pulleys, derricks and sheaves arranged with impossible intricacy.

They followed as Shomei made her way to a booth which contained an array of levers and switches. She initiated a complex operation; wheels span, gears ground, and a single slab – a hundred yards distant – slowly swung out into the chamber and towards them.

When it reached them, she lowered it into a waiting channel: it was a plaque of diabolic steel, three feet wide and six high. As she released its clamp, another, like a vice, contracted to grip it. It stood upright before them. Daunton gaped. Mostin reached out, and ran a pseudopod over the embossed glyphs and sigils. It was a thing of beauty.

*The Irrefutable Argument*, it read. It was a spell which had been in effect when the Nameless Fiend had precipitated the Fall; when unnumbered billion celestials had been seduced to his cause.

“This is Knowledge, Mostin. This is my legacy; I am the librarian of Hell.”

“Yes,” he quivered. Shomei read it as a nod.

“I am making an appeal to you.”

“I understand,” he hissed. Shomei heard it as a sigh.

\*

Daunton sat within her study; Shomei poured *kschiff*. Mostin stood, looking at the Accord which hung above the mantelpiece.

“Temenun has offered an alliance.” She nodded toward the cherries which still rested on their plate. “He suggests that I marry the remaining Hazel scion to a Cherry which grows in Nivorn. I am reluctant to conflate Will and Desire for obvious reasons. But with his *Anantam* and the succubi in Throile – who bear no great love for their former mistress – I am looking at the twelve-hundredth order. I can do a lot with that.”

“But you would prefer to use the Wyrish Academy,” Mostin finished for her. “Because they are known, safer, more passive – but they also represent the body which Gihaahia is mandated to *uphold*.”

“Touché,” Shomei raised her glass. “I find it hard to believe that the Enforcer will censure a majority, if it comes to infraction.”

“I don’t,” Daunton grumbled. “She is a tyrant, not an elected representative.”

“I have tried the more *wholesome* route,” Shomei sighed. “I cannot make headway. The *Ahma* is stubborn and irrational, and refuses to engage with his own potential. Those who practice *saizhan* are difficult to inspire – except the Irrenites, who are a small minority and whom I have yet to approach. I do not *feel* compassion – and I am not one wont to make empty gestures. I went to see the *Sela* yesterday.”

Mostin groaned. “You are certainly exhausting all avenues. What is it with you and Oronthon, anyway?”

“I cannot explain. I was confused, angry and depressed. His perspective is beyond all others. There is no judgment in him.”

“And he offered a solution? Or absolution?”

“Actually, neither. He offered tea. And a mirror to look in.”

“And what did you see?” Mostin asked cynically. “Note that I do not afford much credence to his mystical posturing.”

“That my *I* is relational, and does not exist in a vacuum,” she shrugged.

“That is all?” Mostin scoffed. “I might have told you that.”

“But you didn’t, Mostin. That’s the point. Regardless, I need help – not compactees and servants and indentured mages, but willing partners. To retrieve the *Urn*. To master Hummaz. To *correct* the Morphic and end the Claviger-Enforcer’s *tyranny*. To propagate knowledge. Is this goal not worthy?”

“And you would have me play Belial to your Adversary,” Mostin said acidly. “Did the *Sela* also whisper in the ear of the Nameless Fiend before the Fall?”

“Actually, I think you would know my answer to that.”



“It is no surprise, then, the spell which you chose to show us,” the Alienist remarked.

“There is a certain symmetry; it is hard to deny.”

“And you would then elect yourself as the new arcane factum?” Mostin inquired drily.

“I am a librarian, Mostin. It is only natural.”

\*\*

## Obsession – Part 4

Turel and Rumyal – two infernal seraphim – and Irel, Who Smites, passed swiftly through the skies above the frozen River Nund; three flights of dark exemplars accompanied them. Warded and augmented by Shomei, all were inscrutable to any but the most probing eyes. They flew east, and skirted the compass of the Blackthorn near Droming. Irel gyred and broke away. The mighty deva cast his gaze – unrivalled amongst celestial princes, fallen or otherwise – toward Deorham and Kyrtil’s Burh, one of Wyre’s holiest sites: the birthplace and earthly dwelling of the *Ahma*. It was impenetrable; his sight could not pierce the shroud which Soneillon had set about the place.

Twelve miles distant, the demoness herself stood upon the Steeple beneath the shadow of Carasch – a smoldering void which had yet to erupt to blistering rage – and stretched lazily. The great chthonic had seen them. Was Shomei baiting her, or testing the limit of her perception? Or was this a simple reconnaissance? Soneillon considered: to act would be to disclose; to ignore, to dissemble.

She chose to act.

Carasch turned his thought on them, casually smashing their protections.

Soneillon materialized within the main flight and spoke a soundless syllable, unleashing oblivion. Turel and Rumyal, Great Antagonists who had previously offered counsel to the Adversary himself, were instantly extinguished along with eighteen devas.

She disappeared.

Irel alone remained.

Soneillon reappeared, and her speed was blinding. Tendrils of void lashed the fallen prince, stripping away *ens* like vapor, and flinging his mace from his hands. She hissed, and drove him into the ground in a tempest, claws sinking through his throat and chest and pinning him. Ichor steamed as it poured from his massive frame, staining the snow black; his strength ebbed from him.

She paused, and smiled.

“My, but you *are* the pretty one,” Her eyes widened and her wings curled. “And you are unbound; without compact: I believe she *likes* you – how delicious! It is so tempting to *steal* you. Alas! My heart belongs to another. But now I am feeling tender; she may keep you. Invoke your mistress by name.”

The deva was silent.

She raised an eyebrow. “Presently, I am keeping you from dying, Irel, and it would be sad to lose one as beautiful as you. Do you trust that your spirit will fly to the winds; or will it go to the Tree-Bitch for *reallocation* – perhaps, as a wood-gnome or troll? Heaven is lost to you, and there is no time to show you the Void. She may save you – if she cares for you. Speak.”

“Shomei,” he choked. Ichor welled in his mouth.

She brought her face close, and her grip relaxed. She moved over him.

“Good...” She breathed softly in his ear. She lifted her head and smiled at Shomei, whose infernal perception had been drawn there.

Soneillon gently withdrew her talons, and vanished.

\*\*

Shomei tapped her fingers. She picked up a bottle of *kschiff* and hurled it against a bookcase. Hellfire crawled over her.

Mostin smiled unsympathetically. “You’re in way over your head; she has fifteen billion years on you, and she *enjoys* this. Perhaps you are beginning to appreciate the magnitude of this task?”

“How did she see them?”

“I could not say,” Mostin replied. “Probably a transvalent. She may have allies.”

“I spent a third of my reservoir repairing Irel’s wounds. They just *wouldn’t heal*. His cohesion was...wrong.”

“You are fortunate she simply obliterated the others,” Mostin observed drily.

“If you were to send your *Ús*...”

Mostin became irritable. “Shomei, you may be exempt from the Injunction – and I say *may be*, because much has yet to be tested – but one thing is certain: *I am not*. You asked me here for advice, and I will give it to you: *let this go*. You are simply unprepared for this endeavor; if you do actually attack her and she survives and escapes do you really think that she will calmly forgive? Do you think Eadric – I’m sorry, the *Ahma* – will? Now, I am going to offer you some *perspective* again, because it is apparent to me that at this point that she has acted with the utmost restraint with regard to you...”

“I don’t need this, Mostin...”

“...*by not already annihilating you*. And if you don’t think she could have accomplished this, had she set her mind to it, then you are *stupid*. Perhaps Eadric has restrained her; perhaps her perspective is other than we can guess. And she let you keep your favorite toy; although what you see in those hideous, feathery monsters is beyond me.”

Shomei glared at him. “She drew first blood, Mostin, not I.”

“And I think she might cite provocation as a reasonable defense; frankly, I would be inclined to agree with her. You are the lawyer; what do you think? Perhaps we should ask Gihaahia to mediate – although Soneillon’s *exemption* with regard to the Injunction is not in question. Do not give her a *casus belli*.”

“I cannot slow now, Mostin.”

“You must!” He was exasperated.

“No; I cannot. *It is what I am*.”

“Then you should repair to your library,” he said grimly. “Or stay safely within the compass of the Hazel, because if you begin this and then step beyond its bounds – and are not prepared to finish what you’ve started – then she will find you and extinguish you. You will make a prison for yourself, Shomei; and that is *symmetry*.”

“Will you aid me?”

“I am disinclined,” he replied.

“If you were to speak to the *Ahma*; find out what transpired at Deorham. He has returned to Galda...”

“I will not *spy* for you Shomei. If you have questions for Eadric, ask them yourself.”

“Mostin. Please. Then use the *Web of Motes*. At least let me know what I’m dealing with that I haven’t foreseen.”

He stood and sighed. “I will contact you in one hour. Do not ask me for anything else. Here.”

He took off his hat – his favorite ochre felt, with its wide brim somewhat charred – and placed it on her head.

\*

Exactly one hour later, Shomei received a *sending* which contained only one word: *Carasch*.

She sat and tapped her fingers. Time elapsed.

She translated to Galda for the final time.

\*\*

“I see you bear your rod,” Eadric said dubiously. “Are you here to coerce me this time?”

“It is a preventative measure,” Shomei explained. “May I sit?”

He gestured toward a chair. “I am not about to assail you, Shomei. I’m glad you came. I have been

considering how to approach you.”

“*Ahma*, I lost twenty of my best devils earlier today in an unprovoked attack by your lover.”

“Unprovoked?” He asked sceptically. “Would you like *kasshiv*? It’s all I have left – Nwm and Ortwine drank everything else.”

“Yes.” She raised an eyebrow at his pronunciation. “My servants were reconnoitering over Trempa; they were beyond the compass of the Blackthorn.”

“I did not realize a formal exclusion zone had been established,” he said drily, pouring a goblet for her. “Shomei, I have been pondering how to deal with this *situation* and I’m at a loss. I cannot seem to appeal to you; I cannot risk *forbidding* you for fear of provoking the *Antinomios* in you to an immediate response: I do not wish to come to blows with you. But you are flouting every law conceivable: Wyrish, magickal, ethical and religious. What would you have me do?”

“Enkindle your potential, *Ahma*. But you do not seem interested in assuming this responsibility.”

“That is a larger question which we may return to,” Eadric sighed. “In the meantime I must consider the wellbeing of those whom I am charged to protect; I am Earl Marshal of Wyre, Shomei: I must defend it, regardless.”

“You know that Carasch is aiding her, of course?”

“He is her watchdog. I have encountered him. He is terrifying. It is not germane to this discussion.”

“I lost two seraphs in her ambush, *Ahma*.”

“They ceased being seraphim at the beginning of the *last* Aeon, Shomei.”

“Yet the *Ahma* would place himself as a shield before this chthonic abomination?” She asked.

“No,” he groaned. “But he would place himself as a shield before the inhabitants of Trempa. There are limits on the number of devils which even you can conjure and compel, Shomei. If you send them in waves, will she be able to kill them quicker than you can call more? Or perhaps you will muster a large force, and she will entrench further: and the longer the buildup, the worse for everyone.”

Shomei looked hard at him. “Not all devils need to be compelled, *Ahma*. Only a key few – and then, only persuaded. I could end this all very quickly.”

His eyes flickered nervously. “I do not follow.”

“Azazel still bears the standard; two hundred legions accompany him. There is no longer a Celestial Interdict.”

A look of horror crossed his face. “You would do this? Raise *that* banner over Wyre?”

“I would prefer not to, but I must have the *Urn*, *Ahma*.”

“By invoking the eschaton? And you dub Soneillon psychotic?”

“She is,” Shomei smiled thinly. “I am merely determined. And the eschaton has been and gone, *Ahma*. We are what’s left.”

“And if I were to demand of you – *command* you – how would you respond?”

Shomei shook her head. “Please do not force me to make that choice, *Ahma*. It would not sit well with me.”

“Indeed? For one who asserts the *Ahma* as central to their paradigm I am sure it would cause you some discomfort.”

“I simply wish you would embrace the larger reality.”

“Then perhaps we should force the issue.” He stood grimly and drew *Lukarn*, gripping it below the quillons and presenting it in censure. It illuminated the interior of the tent. “By the authority...”

“Please, *Ahma*...”

“...vested in me as *Ahma*; the Breath of God manifest in the world...”

“*Ahma*...”

“...I hereby command...”

“Eadric. Do not...”

“...that *Shomei*...”

Her Flame ignited. She brought the full force of her will to bear through her rod; it was colossal, and should have overpowered him. Instead, there was a resonance, and a reflection, which Shomei experienced as a great gale blasting over her. His pavillion and its contents were gone, blown to the four winds. Both Shomei’s eyes and those of the *Ahma* became wide in astonishment; a cluster of lotuses in the garland which he wore on his wrist had turned to dust: Soneillon had warded him, and he hadn’t even known it.

Devas and archons appeared all around him, summoned by his thought, but her presence paralyzed them; they would not strike her, only worship her. He *smote* her repeatedly, but her exemption protected her. Her will recommenced, unleashing a cyclone of hellfire focused on herself which could not touch him, but which slowly burned the garland to ash.

He spoke a *holy word*; again, exemption sustained her.

The firestorm increased in intensity; still the lotuses burned away. The devas were incinerated.

Nwm – alerted and now present – struck her with a sonic of tremendous power, which echoed for miles. She weathered it, and her focus did not falter; she hurled the Preceptor aside with *telekinesis*.

The last blossom turned to soot. Finally, she gripped Eadric’s mind, and *dominated* him.

“I’m sorry, *Ahma*. It’s a preventative measure.” She wept.

Abruptly, both Shomei the Infernal and the *Ahma* vanished.

\*\*

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The goddess strode ahead impatiently.

Teppu followed, anxiously. “What should I call you?”

“It does not matter – call me what you wish.” Her manner was disconcertingly brusque.

“You were Nehael before,” he suggested.

“Then call me Nehael.”

“But you are no longer the same.”

“Then call me something different,” she sighed.

“May I choose a name?” He suggested.

“Why not?”

“Names are important.” He explained.

“Are they?” She asked.

“Yes! Stop!”

She stopped, and smiled at him. “Do you have one for me?”

“You are not so different,” Teppu laughed. “Where are you going?”

“This way,” she said.

“What is this way?”

“What I need.”

“What...”

“Good,” she said. A horse stood waiting; a varnish roan mare. Strapped to the saddle was an arming sword. A bow – with flowers tied around its limbs – was fixed around its cantle, and a quiver of red-fletched arrows hung from its skirt.

Teppu raised an eyebrow. “That bow is...”

“Yew.”

“And the arrows...”

“*Hazel.*”

“And the sword...”

She drew it, and it rang; runes were etched into its blade: *Trúa*.

“Compassion?” He asked.

She shook her head. “*Pity*, Teppu. One cannot slay with compassion.”

“Where are you going now?” He asked.

“South,” she smiled.

“Why...”

“The *dead* are there Teppu. Are you coming?”

“Certainly,” he replied uncertainly.

She climbed into the saddle, picked him up, and deposited him behind her.

Moments later, they were at Cirone. Ahead, the *Pall of Dhatri* loomed.

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## **Obsession – Final Part**

She hung, naked and motionless in the void, gazing at the world. Behind her and beyond her, an infinite expanse of emptiness stretched.

Wyre was blanketed in snow, a heavy veil which pressed upon its wide provinces and muffled the verdancies which pulsed beneath. It ranged from gold through deep crimson, west to east, as dusk stole across the frozen landscape below.

Further south, greens prevailed; and then a great fume of corruption, surrounding a perfect circle of blackness: the *Pall of Dhatri*. A red dart was moving within it, like a surgeon’s knife attempting to excise some cancer, the roots of which ran too deep. Nehael, yet not. *Suuratamanyu*?\* she considered; an obscure and ill-defined *bhiti* – if such it was – or merely another manifestation of *Aliikaghana*?

She did not care.

She turned her eyes to the Sun and observed it impassively; she understood its radiance: no longer feared it. It regarded her with disinterest, as a parent who has surrendered a child and watched it grow separate, but from a great distance. It did not offer anything, and all she had gained had been apart from it. But neither did it condemn: its judgment was suspended, as though in regret of previous choices it had made. An admission, perhaps, of its own fallibility.

It began to sink over the Western Ocean, and an intense display of color ensued; the atmosphere split the light into its component parts like some deific prism: every element of the spectrum was revealed. For the briefest moment, the rumor of an Idea: a vast wyrm – serene, yet energized; a perfect, infinite potential – coiled around the world. Then, just as suddenly, it was gone. The luminary vanished. Beyond – now free from its glare and glamour – the ruddy Eye of Cheshne pulsed.

She descended through aurorae, plunging rapidly through the thermosphere. Meteors flashed to incandescence around her; she outpaced them, dropped through noctilucent clouds and felt their crystals caress and cool her. Her plummet came to rest at an altitude of twenty miles. She cast her glance downwards.

Lights were kindling in a city: an unfolding sevenfold symmetry, spontaneous yet inevitable. Her eyes followed a thin line which ran south and west into rolling hills, apprehending an involuted knot in a deep hollow.

Then she remembered that she was a demoness, and that she was angry.

\*

[Soneillon]: You have one hour to evacuate the Academy.

[Many Wizards]: !

*Sendings* buzzed across Wyre. Twenty minutes elapsed.

(Far to the north and west, in an obscure corner of Nizkur).

[Mostin]: This demonstration is unnecessary, Soneillon. Shomei has marginalized herself by her own actions.

[Soneillon]: Oh, there you are.

Soneillon appeared within his study, a writhing mass which pinned Mostin, spreadeagled, above the fireplace.

“Don’t try and wriggle, Mostin,” a childlike face materialized, and then a body. “Or I’ll have to hurt you. You may have more tentacles than I, but mine are far *nastier*.”

A tendril reached inside his robe, flipping open pouches in his *belt of many pockets*, and searching until it retrieved a sphere of adamant, ten inches in diameter. She shook it vigorously, until Graz’zt’s countenance appeared.

“Well, look who it is,” she smiled. An expression of horror crossed the face of the demon prince.

Her form became fully humanoid – that of a small child, which she had chosen in previous dealings with the Alienist – as she secreted the globe on her person. Mostin dropped unceremoniously onto the floor.

“Now that that’s settled,” she hopped into a chair, and dangled her legs, “you have around forty minutes to convince me not to level the estate. I will not name her, and would advise the same of



you: it would draw her attention here – funny how that comes around. But she has my boyfriend, and *I want him back*.”

\*

Mostin sighed. “Destroying her *former* abode would achieve nothing, Soneillon – except, perhaps, to irritate her.”

“That would seem as good a place to start as any. You are fuelling my argument, Mostin, not dissuading me. You need to think more like a demon.”

“She may also invoke the Hazel,” Mostin continued. “In which case, no effort on your part will penetrate its cordon. And do you really want an Academy unified in defense under her leadership? She has been seeking to co-opt the ritual pool; this would hand it to her on a plate. And *in defense* she would even receive the sanction of the Enforcer.”

“That is far more persuasive,” the demoness conceded. She issued another *sending*.

[Soneillon]: I’ve changed my mind.

Three hundred miles away, scores of wizards breathed a collective sigh of relief.

“Less than a minute. Not bad, Mostin.”

Mostin groaned. “You had no intention of destroying the Academy, did you?”

She shook her head.

“You tracked my *sending* to its source. Circumvented my obfuscations. You are a devious one.”

She hopped down, and ran over to him. Her form changed, and she threw a dozen tiny tentacles around his knees. She looked up with multiple huge, doe eyes welling with tears.

“Will you help me get Eadric back, Mostin? Please?”

“You are insufferable,” the Alienist replied.

“You are not an erotic creature, Mostin; I must adjust my tack accordingly.”

“I am no more paternal than I am erotic,” Mostin observed.

She sighed, and once again became a succubus. “Will you help me or not?”

Mostin shook his head. “She is within Hell’s library, Soneillon; it is *separate* – part of the prior infinity. Eadric is also there. There are two doors, and both lie within the Hazel’s ambit. You cannot touch her while she remains there. I have been inside, with her approval: she may come and go as she pleases. There is a tight net around the ‘front door’ – a cottage very close to the Hazel scion itself – the area where she performs her conjurations. The ‘back door’ – so to speak – is within the library of the Academy. Only Ugales has permission to enter and leave; he retrieves obscure spells and tomes for ambitious mages in return for outrageous pledges. The back door is currently closed anyway.”

Soneillon gave a suspicious look. “How do you *know* that Eadric is in the library, Mostin? Presumably your divinations cannot penetrate it.”

“A wizard does not reveal all of his means.”

“And how did you anticipate certain events in Afqithan?” She persisted.

Mostin sighed.

“Do you have a *thing* which helps you?”

“Yes,” he grudgingly admitted.

“Can I see it?” Soneillon smiled.

“Well...”

Soneillon raised an eyebrow, and slowly revealed *Pharamne’s Urn*. Mostin’s eyes rotated in his skull.

“Mostin. You have to show. No wonder you don’t have a girlfriend.”

“Very well,” he produced it. “It is called the *Web of Motes*. Although I think every wizard in Wyre knows I have it – I’m surprised that you didn’t hear already.”

She shrugged. “I tend not to mix with wizards, Mostin. They are usually dull – present company excepted, of course. And you *will* help me. With this *mote*-thing of yours, you can determine whether or not she is in her library, am I correct?”

“Yes, but it makes no difference. How difficult is this to explain...”

“Because you *can* help me,” she smiled. “In fact, I believe you are the *only* one who can.”

“You are not listening, Soneillon.”

“Yes, I am, but you’re not. She is a devil. I cannot conjure devils, Mostin. But you can.”

“She is *magnified*, Soneillon. Binding such an entity is a different proposition altogether.”

“My reservoir is deep, Mostin. It is yours.”

He considered; Shomei had gone too far, there was no denying it. His mind rapidly processed transvalent algorithms, finding various solutions.

“You will not annihilate her,” the Alienist exhorted.

“Mostin, be reasonable...”

“I mean it, Soneillon. She is a colleague, and a fellow intellect. Let me handle her.”

“Oh, very well,” Soneillon sighed.

“I will need a week to devise the formula.”

“A *week*? Wyrish wizards are so *slow*.”

“And I will need the *Urn*,” Mostin smiled madly.

Soneillon’s eyes narrowed. “No you don’t, Mostin. We both know that.”

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“Do you purpose to keep me here indefinitely?” Eadric raised his eyebrows. He sat easily in the posture of *saizhan* within a *forcecage* in Shomei’s study. A fire – of cut hazel logs – burned slowly and steadily in the hearth.

“Only until I have the *Urn*, *Ahma*,” Shomei was curled nearby in a comfortable chair, reading. She did not meet his eyes.

“And you still address me by the religious appellation. You are an unlikely abductress,” Eadric observed. “And an even more unlikely Adversary.”

“*That* moniker is defunct,” she sighed.

“Your actions would indicate otherwise. Should I officially brand you as such? I do determine doctrine, after all.”

She shifted her position, and took a sip of *kschiff*.

“If it would be easier for you, I will be silent. Or perhaps you could *dominate* me again.”

“I take no pleasure in depriving you of your will, *Ahma*.” She raised her head and looked at him. “Of all things, that, at least should be clear about me.”

“But you *did*, Shomei,” he replied.

“I must judge necessity, *Ahma*; for my Self, no other can.”

“And, in hindsight, was your judgment correct?”

She placed the book down, open, on the table beside her. “If you are asking whether I have experienced remorse, then the answer is *yes*: I am not beyond that. But what is done is done. The question of what to do next preoccupies me now. Such is my nature.”

“You would seem to be missing a moral compass, Shomei.”

She gave a small smile. “I do not need one, *Ahma*. My lack of kindness is perfectly balanced by my lack of malice. My temper needs some work.”

“And if jealousy and hatred come to rule you? What then?”

“Then you and I will have both failed, *Ahma*, but for different reasons.”

“Yet jealousy and obsession have characterized many of your actions of late.”

She stood, approached the *forcecage*, and knelt, drawing close. Her presence was intense, focused and calm. “Are you speaking of my reaction to your liaison with Soneillon, or to my efforts to gain the *Urn*?”

“You do not take well to being thwarted, Shomei. And the union of opposites is something which you yourself once gave me advice regarding.”

“*Ahma*, there are many *hieroi gamoi*. Some are fleeting; some enduring. Some take place within a paradigm; others – such as that of the Reconciliation – span infinities; others beyond infinities even into the ineffable. I do not deny your experience of Soneillon; it is, in fact, an articulation of truth far beyond Magnitude as the Urgics would understand it. But it is not *ultimate* in the sense that nothing is *ultimate*, and whether it is even *enduring* remains to be seen. I am pragmatic, and could only offer you a paradigm, *Ahma*; to shape the reality which we inhabit. To make it *better*.”

Eadric laughed bitterly. “Something which Azazel and his two hundred legions can help you achieve, I presume? Your argument is beginning to sound more than a little deluded, Shomei.”

“Do not interpret the transparency of my thought to you as an articulation of intent; there are other avenues which I would prefer to exhaust first. Understand that I began with the most *moral* from your perspective: an alliance with you. I do not practice *saizhan*, *Ahma*. My method is otherwise. It is for me, and me alone. It can be neither learned, nor taught. I must invent it myself as it evolves; at critical junctures, I have looked to others – including both you and the *Sela* – for help, but the solution must always be *mine*.”

Eadric shook his head. “Your reaction to my anathematization of you – to engulf me in hellfire and coerce me – would suggest to me that this relationship is far from clear to you. My word is Law; but you accept none but your own.”

“It is a paradox I grapple with. I do not wish to be branded your Adversary, *Ahma*. To become what you most hate. I strive only to realize my potential.”

“And you somehow insist that I am capable of a similar feat; this awakening of my potential to which you refer. Yet it demands embracing some harsh and violent truth for you; a willing sacrifice of your own humanity. Something which I am unprepared to make.”

“I am a fiend, *Ahma*,” Shomei smiled.

“But you were not always so.”

“Nor were any others. Deep down, I have always *wanted* to be a devil, *Ahma*. I think you know this. And no such sacrifice is necessary from you: you are the *Ahma*. One reason why seeing you confined thus saddens me.”

“Then you might release me.”

She sighed. “If you were to affirm that you would make no efforts to assail me or escape, then I might grant you exit from that box. But I would prefer not to *dominate* you again.”

“I will so vow. Although I am unsure if my assent is tantamount to my endorsing your actions.”

“Life is full of paradoxes, *Ahma*.” The *forcecage* vanished.

“A little freedom is a precious thing,” he stood and glanced around.

She gestured. “The library is that way, *Ahma*. All the devils are gone; I’m the only one left. Call me if you get lost. I will hear you.”

“I cannot help but like you, Shomei.”

“I know. It makes it difficult.”

She returned to her book.

\*Wrathful Mercy

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## **Day 1 – Antiphon**

Nwm and Ortwine stood waiting before the fortified gates at Galda, and watched as the rider approached from the south. She, her horse and her harness were caked in blood, ichor and entrails so thick that the muck might need to be scraped clear with a trowel rather than washed away; her visage was altogether terrifying.

As she approached, the Preceptor noticed that she carried another with her: a diminutive figure who clung desperately to her waist, barely able to remain upright in the saddle. She reined in, reached behind her, and lowered him gently to the ground. Her small companion shivered and stood unsteadily.

“Hello, Nwm,” Nehael said, “Ortwine. Teppu is tired, and I think he’d like a bath. Where is Eadric?”

Ortwine looked at Nwm and raised an eyebrow.

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“Eadric is very *popular* with the ladies, these days, Nehael.” Ortwine gave a caustic smile. “And I must say, red rather suits you; I can see that it is also a *practical* color.”

They sat around a campfire: one of hundreds which burned in the encampment. The goddess had acquiesced to a cantrip to clean her of the foul-smelling gore which had clung to her, but which had seemed not to perturb her in any way; it was, in fact, for Ortwine’s benefit that she had agreed. Teppu was wrapped in a blanket, asleep.

“I had hoped to speak with him; to discuss the reconquest,” she threw off her boots.

Ortwine cast a sidelong glance at Nwm, who shrugged.

“Might I assume that you lack the prescience of your previous sister-avatar; now, your mother-deity?” Nwm inquired. “I am unaccustomed to explaining anything to Nehael; usually the information flows in the other direction.”

“I *slay*, Nwm,” she said simply. “This is the persona that you get: I make no apology for it. It is *necessary*. I don’t have time for magic or plots or webs. I am the counterpoint which Uedii must chant to contain the corruption; her image reflected through the *Eleos*: the enlightened, engaged, dynamic face of compassion. I am unsentimental, and occasionally ugly on the surface. Nor am I as *Tree-ish* as my former self; actually, I prefer horses.”

She lay down on her back in the wet earth and looked upwards. The Follower was soaring in the east, flickering through the smoke in the air. Some time passed before Nwm spoke again.

“You are aware that Eadric is currently being held by Shomei the Infernal?” The Preceptor queried.

“Well, I imagine I might have been, had I thought about it.” She thought about it. “I see. I suppose I could go and talk to her.”

“*Could?*” Ortwine gave a quizzical look.

Nehael raised her head, leant on an elbow, and smiled. “Eadric is confused, Ortwine. It is his defining feature. He gets himself into these *situations*; I’m not really convinced that my becoming involved at this stage would help. He should have followed my advice, and simply exercised compassion.”

“In which specific instance?” Nwm asked.

“He shouldn’t have censured Shomei, Nwm. It didn’t help. Really, he just lost his temper and became offended and pious. It’s always been an issue with him.”

“Mostin is working on a solution.”

“Yes. Mostin may aggravate the problem further,” Nehael remarked.

“And this assumes that Soneillon does not become unhinged in the interim,” Nwm added.

“Ahh, Soneillon,” she lay back down. “Another *situation*.”

Ortwine stared hard at her. “For an avatar of *compassion*, you seem very free in your criticism of those absent.”

“I would say the same to him – or her – were either here, Ortwine. As you have rightly implied, malicious gossip is incompatible with my nature. And frankly, the march of Dhatri’s host and the Embassy are of more concern to me at present than Eadric’s convoluted emotional life. I put an arrow in the latter earlier today; she knows I’m here well enough.”

“Then that is some good news.” Nwm grunted approvingly.

“She will not make the same mistake again.”

“By the *Embassy*, I assume you are referring to Kaalaanala’s final effluxion,” Ortwine sighed. “And each time I say *that* name I am nervous; in case I draw her perception to me.”

“The Trees protect you from that faculty here, Ortwine.”

The sidhe gave a stony look. “Had the Trees here been more *comprehensive* in their protection – and not allowed dreaming demonesses and exempt devils to penetrate their cordon - then this entire fracas might have been avoided. I think we may have placed too much faith in their effectiveness in protecting the *Ahma*’s moral fibre.”

“On the last count, I am inclined to agree.”

“So will you speak to Shomei?” Nwm inquired.

“Well. Are you asking for my intercession in this?”

“I don’t know,” Nwm admitted. “Should I?”

“Probably not,” Nehael replied.

“Then I suppose I won’t,” Nwm sighed. “But if I had, what would you have done?”

“Nothing,” Nehael smiled. “Which is the best that can be done at the moment. Ask me in a few days – things will probably unravel even more before they come together again. ”

“A prescience?” Nwm asked archly.

“Call it what you like,” Nehael shrugged. “I experience it as a vague notion. And today was too much for this one; he is too gentle.”

The goddess stood and removed her cloak. She folded it and placed it under Teppu’s head.

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Eadric did not see Shomei – who had exited the cottage in order to perform conjurations, and sealed it behind her – for the entirety of the next day. After quickly becoming bored, he ventured forth to wander alone in obscure and musty corridors within the limitless repository which was Hell’s library. Ruddy candles burned with infinite slowness in deep sconces, barely illuminating the interior. It was eerily silent and – except for the occasional tome which itself exhibited some sign of sapience in addition to its malignancy – there was no question within the mind of the *Ahma* that he was alone.

Eadric was not a scholar; or rather, he had never had the time to pursue his scholarly interests: the art of war had demanded most of his attention throughout his life. The weight of infernal knowledge oppressed him, but more by virtue of its sheer volume than by its evil content. He considered the magnitude of Shomei’s commitment to the task of *knowing* the library; surely she must have read only the minutest fraction of the books contained within it. It seemed an impossible undertaking to

master even its geography; to familiarize oneself with its contents would take a life's age of the universe, or more.

It did not take him long to become lost, despite – what he had been sure – were his own meticulous precautions to the contrary regarding his bearing and distance from Shomei's study. After a brief period of anxiety – during which he considered that his aimless wandering might, in fact, be his eternal lot – the *Ahma* determined that he would *climb* – the notion of ascent being comfortable and familiar to his inner aesthetic. Whenever a staircase – whether a narrow spiral, steep ladder, or wide companionway with sweeping balustrades – presented itself to him, he would eagerly scale it. At times, he would backtrack in frustration: his path would lead to a hidden nook, a suite of chambers or dark, diabolic cloisters with no other exit, and he would search out some new way. He entertained no notion of destination in his efforts, except *up*. Yet the light became no brighter; the atmosphere no less oppressive. There was no relief to be had, except in the act of ascent itself; a metaphor which struck him as particularly apt, given the nature of his hostess – or gaoler.

After what must have been many hours – all sense of time having long since left him – Eadric stumbled upon an archway within which a grate of adamant bars had been set. Dire runes were carved in warning above the threshold; *symbols* which, although they posed no threat to him, would have slain any devil of lesser stature who might have approached them. He looked at the bars: no keyhole or aperture of any kind was present. Peering through the grate, only darkness was present beyond. Eadric ran his fingers around the archway, searching for some secret mechanism. Nothing.

He illuminated the space beyond with *daylight*. A narrow tunnel, extending ahead as far as he might see.

Mustering all of his strength, he gripped the grate and tore it away from the archway, placing it ruefully against the adjacent wall, conscious that he had committed some gross act of vandalism against the integrity of the place – then berating himself for entertaining any notion of guilt in the context of his current predicament. Lighting the passageway at intervals, he proceeded for a hundred yards until he came upon another archway – this time unblocked by gate or door. A sound threatened to overwhelm, until he recognized it. Some trap had been triggered; a *holy word* of great power. Eadric gave an ironic half-smile; fiendish interlopers – not the *Ahma* – had been on the mind of whoever had set the device: a barely-visible glyph which throbbed in the keystone above.

He entered into a low chamber perhaps ten feet on a side, and illuminated it. On shelves or chained to the walls were books with tarnished covers; they had been neglected and forgotten for many epochs. Ancient books. Forbidden books. Books whispering secrets best left untold. He opened one, and thumbed its metalline pages – *Meditations on Radiance*; and then another – *Divining the Light*; and then another – *The World of Men to Come*. He tilted his head.

They were celestial books, penned by great devils – then seraphs and other episemes – before the Fall.

He sat, and began to read.

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Soneillon hovered high in the skies above the Academy, beyond the compass of the Hazel-*ludja*, and gazed at the shifting patterns around the scion. She was hidden – more effectively, she knew, than the fallen celestials who had come to spy upon her at Deorham – but was, herself, unable to



penetrate the layers around the Tree below. A nest of hemi-demiplanes, through which a tortuous path wound to Shomei's cottage: invulnerable to her magic and sight. The concursion which was the library's 'front door.'

There were many devils in the skies below her; of that, there could be no doubt. But they remained invisible; their numbers and type unknown. Six more days must elapse before Mostin could complete his arcane equations; a formula which would incorporate only herself, Mulissu and Nwm: the Alienist had indicated that he trusted no other – including Ortwine, whose duty to the Hazel was suspect – to be part of it.

She scowled, and retreated to Deorham; she considered that, were she to abandon it and Shomei to locate her beyond the stronghold, that some force brought against her might overwhelm her and deprive her of the *Urn*. Extinction was of no particular concern to her, but being *bound* – by Shomei – remained a possibility, however remote. The Infernalist would need a sizeable ritual pool in order to guarantee success, and would need time herself to devise a suitable rite – and some safe location in another world, from which it could be conducted.

Mostin had elected Sisperi as his venue. But Mostin might fail, whatever his *mote*-thing told him.

Soneillon considered the time she had before the test came. She allowed her anger to subside, and gave thought to entrenchment: should it become necessary, it would be as well to be prepared.

The demoness began in earnest to fortify both herself and Kyrtil's Burh with powerful spells.

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Shomei sat by the fire, reading, when Eadric entered. His route to her study was not something he could accurately recall; there was no doubt in his mind that she had guided him back by some art.

She raised her head as he entered. "Did you find what you were looking for?"

His eyes narrowed. "I found; although I was not looking for it."

"That is often best," she nodded.

There was a brief silence.

"I may have caused some...structural damage," Eadric confessed.

"Don't worry, *Ahma*. I've already repaired it."

She returned to her book.

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## Day 2 – Down

"You are very *small*, Shomei," Eadric observed.

“Yes, *Ahma*.”

“Is this an hereditary trait?”

“My flesh is infernal, *Ahma*.”

“But your prior incarnation – upon which your present body is based – was...*slight*. At least, the *first* one was...or... What I mean to say is that I know nothing of your ancestry. Is your lineage magical?”

She gave a quizzical look. “It *was*; yes, *Ahma*. Sorcerous, actually – although several generations removed. And aristocratic. With a dash of fey – which is never a bad thing for an arcanist, and may account for my *small*-ness.”

“And your parents?”

“Were devout and faithful,” Shomei said drily.

“And what became of them?”

“Devils killed them, *Ahma*.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

“I *conjured* the devils, *Ahma*,” Shomei explained.

“Oh.” A look of horror crossed his face.

“I was young,” Shomei was nonplussed. “It was an act committed without principle.”

“How young?” Eadric asked.

“Five, *Ahma*.”

His eyes widened. “*Five*? Your parents had angered you in some way?”

“They took my books away, *Ahma*. I wanted them back.”

“Oh,” Eadric nodded uncertainly. “Perhaps they thought your books were dangerous?”

“They were, *Ahma*.”

“Apparently so,” Eadric raised an eyebrow. “And after you had...well...”

“Murdered my parents?” She asked.

“Yes...”

“I got my books back, *Ahma*.”

“But in terms of your *upbringing*, Shomei.”

“My servants looked after me.”

“No other relatives? No guardian?” Eadric asked, aghast.

“I did not need them. My servants were *devils*, *Ahma*.”

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“Yesterday, you went *up*; will you go *down* today?” Shomei inquired.

“Exactly how closely have you been monitoring my movements, Shomei? And did I stumble upon the celestial repository, or was I directed to it?”

“I did not manipulate you toward it, if that is what you are asking,” she replied. Her answer seemed genuine. “I knew of it, but have not had the leisure to investigate it. But the library has a habit of *presenting* certain books or collections; if you were *directed*, then it was not by me. As to monitoring – not in the way you might think. I am aware of where you are and where you have been, if I call you to mind. I *can* encourage you to take certain paths – as I did in your inbound journey yesterday when I perceived that you wanted to return – but in your explorations, you were following your own impulses. I was busy with my conjurations.”

“Would you suggest going down?”

“I make no recommendation,” Shomei answered. “You could go straight, or left, or right, or backwards; or some combination of any of these – including up and down – but these are harder to track. *Only* going down is an easier route to focus upon; you are new to the geography.”

“I suspect that the willful act of descent would be harder for me,” Eadric remarked.

Shomei shrugged. She exited the cottage, and sealed it.

Eadric sighed.

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“They seethe and swell like a great, purposeful ocean of malice,” Nehael explained. “They are without number. There is nothing left for them to consume except each other; hence they must *move*. The greatest – Idyam and Dhatri herself, together with the Embassy – remain near to the centre. Rishih, Naatha and Prahar are closer to the periphery of the mob. They are only forty miles away – would you like to see?”

Nwm nodded grimly.

Ortwine looked sceptical. “How?”

“I can show you; Nwm knows what I mean. The experience will not be pleasant.”

“Very well.” The sidhe gave a resigned sigh.

Perception expanded to embrace reality within sixty miles. To the south, a festering tide of

corruption of such magnitude that it seemed as though the World could not sustain its weight. Nwm reeled. Ortwine staggered and vomited.

“And you experience this *all of the time*?” Ortwine groaned. She vomited again.

Nehael smiled.

“How did you get close enough to *shoot*?” Ortwine asked her, regaining her breath. “Was she not alerted?”

“Yes,” Nehael nodded in a matter-of-fact way. “But she did not withdraw. She struck me with fire. Coming within a league was difficult. The press of corpses was thick; it was hard to aim...”

“Wait. You can shoot from *three miles*?”

“I can shoot from six, Ortwine; as long as I have a clear aim – I didn’t.”

The sidhe wiped her mouth and raised an eyebrow. “This, I have to see. I assume that your missile struck its target unerringly?”

“I shot eighteen arrows at her before she could react,” Nehael replied. “Only one found its mark.”

Ortwine looked at Nwm. “I think we’re *seriously* out of our depth.”

Nwm stared at Nehael. “And Teppu...how did he fare? I mean, I have never seen him so *weak*.”

“He died five times. It was difficult for him. And each time I brought him back as himself again – it is hard for a self-incarnate such as he.”

“Why was he even *there*? Could he meaningfully affect the outcome?”

“A little, perhaps. But each of us can only do *a little*. I do not enjoy what I do, Nwm; really, he was there for me. So I didn’t have to be alone. He is kind.” She smiled.

“And today?” Nwm asked. “You will both ride out again?”

Nehael shook her head. “I would spare him the experience.”

“If you require a consociate,” Nwm said, “I will gladly offer myself.”

“I think you should also remain,” Nehael suggested. “Teppu is here; Hlioth is nearby; Mesikammi is on her way. The Temple is all but spent of power, and the *Ahma* is missing. You should give thought to the defense here; a quarter of the Cheshnite host will be here within a few days.”

“Only a quarter?” Ortwine asked.

“It is more than enough to contain Galda,” Nehael explained. “The rest will bypass it altogether, and head north, straight for Wyre. And I have a companion in mind.”

The sidhe heard a soft hoof-fall, felt hot breath on her neck, and turned. *Narh* had approached, and was nuzzling her eagerly.

“Me?” Ortwine inquired. “Undead are not my specialty.”

“If you are willing, I could use the company.” Nehael smiled. “Besides, you said that you wanted to see me shoot.”

“Two against a million would seem to be a rather uneven match.” Ortwine observed drily.

“If it were only a million, our impact might be more significant,” Nehael replied.

“If I die, take note that *I* am perfectly content with this form; I do not wish to be a buckawn or a sylph.”

“Duly noted,” Nehael nodded. “Unless Hummaz snatches you first.”

Ortwine raised an eyebrow. “A joke?”

“No,” Nehael strapped her sword across her back. “It is unlikely, but it is as well to be prepared. Stay close to me; you will encounter every conceivable type of undead, and some you have never imagined. You are goddess: the deathshriekers cannot touch you, but beware the crawling heads and famine spirits; many can abide my aura, and they may bite your head off.”

“Eadric, you moron,” Ortwine muttered under her breath, and mounted the stallion.

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Eadric descended rapidly; he leaped down staircases, over banisters and through shafts which gave to lower floors. His heart pounded, and he wondered if there was a *bottom* to be found; no *top* had been revealed to him on the previous day, but he was also certain, in his own mind, that the library was *finite*. It did not appear to *bend* – inasmuch as he did not come back to some place which he had previously visited – and it seemed sensible to him that the entrance from Shomei’s cottage should be closer to the bottom than the top, and that the bottom must, therefore, be more accessible.

But he found no root; no foundation to the library: only a dismal, perpetual declivity into measureless depths filled with books. Again, all sense of time eluded him, but he knew that his plunging into the library’s bowels had consumed him for many hours; he had descended for miles.

Eadric paused to consider his predicament: ascent might take him days; he would need Shomei’s help, this time. But to ask her for anything...the notion sat uncomfortably with him. Had she returned? Or would his whispered entreaty to her interrupt her work? And why should the notion of *distracting* Shomei from her purpose – to overrun Wyre with devils for the object of her own self-aggrandizement – cause him conflict, in any case?

He sat upon a stone bench within a niche in a damp wall, and cleared his mind. From his pocket, he withdrew the scarf of heavy black silk which Soneillon had bestowed on him and pondered. The magics which the demoness had placed on the garland of flowers had eluded Shomei’s perception; he wondered if the samite might hide some similar secret. He needed a dream, perhaps, and she might manifest through it; but there were no dreams here. The prior infinity in which he found himself was cut off; isolated.

Eadric replaced the scarf and stood. He would wait a little while longer. He removed a hellish

candle from its pricket and willed light upon it, illuminating his surroundings with a more substantial brightness; the radiance was at odds with the general character of the place. He walked a little way, rounded a corner, and found himself looking over a balcony into a wide amphitheatre. Some kind of devilish lecture-hall or auditorium; Eadric wondered what kind of lessons might have been expounded within its circuit. After searching for some time, he found his way down and made his way to the lectern – a morbid pulpit, wrought of steel and bone – upon which a book lay open. Its language – being an archaic dialect of Infernal – was unfamiliar to him.

He thumbed its hide pages and looked at dense text interspersed with curious pictograms and symbols, wary that he might inadvertently hex himself or invoke some latent malevolence. Still, the book somehow seemed *less* wicked than its surroundings. Recalling Shomei's words regarding the library's tendency to *present* certain tomes, the *Ahma* closed the book, removed it from the lectern, and tucked it beneath his arm. He ascended several levels, found a quiet cloister and scanned its pages for some clue as to its meaning, but could determine none. Finally – and again, time seemed to have drifted by without measure or meaning – he sighed.

"*Shomei*," he spoke in a clear voice.

She appeared presently, and raised an eyebrow. "You have been gone a long time, and come very deep indeed, *Ahma*. These collections are hardly known to me."

Eadric held out the book.

Shomei took it, and scanned its cover. She flipped its pages; her eyes widened in incredulity.

"I felt this tome was significant," the *Ahma* explained. "It was on a rostrum in a hall not too far from here."

Shomei stared at him suspiciously. "It might be deemed an heretical codex, from a conventional diabolic perspective. Here."

She ran a hand over the book, and returned it to him.

*The Reattainment of Luminance*, it read.

"There is no author," Eadric remarked.

"No. The author had no name, *Ahma*."

Eadric handed it back to her, and smiled. "Then I believe it is for you. The *Sela* once said to me that for you to surrender yourself to bliss would be the ultimate antinomian act. Perhaps the prior *I* entertained similar notions?"

She gave him a dubious look. "I will read it. But entertaining a notion and acting on it are two very different things. I confess I am weary, *Ahma*; if you wish to return..."

He nodded, and the scene changed abruptly: they were back in her study. As always, the fire burned; the scent of cinnamon hung in the air. It seemed familiar, comfortable, safe. Shomei placed the book on a table, threw off her robe and uncorked a flask. Eadric knew that she was exhausted; that she had emptied herself that day. He wondered if he might overwhelm her.

"Would you like *kschiff*?" She asked.

“No. But thank-you.” Eadric removed his shoes, sat, and entered *saizhan*.

When he arose, he saw that she was curled, asleep in a chair; the flask of liquor was empty and barely a dram remained in her glass. *The Reattainment of Luminance* was open on its last page; she had already finished it. He took it from her hand. The pages were still wet from her tears.

Eadric sighed, covered her with the *robe of meteors*, and returned to his meditations.

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### **Day 3 – Rest**

[Mulissu]: You should be working.

[Mostin]: I am taking a break; my head is full of iterated functions and I cannot concentrate.

[Mulissu]: You are looking at motes, Mostin. That hardly qualifies as relaxation.

[Mostin]: It is for me. Look [here] and [here] and [here].

[Mulissu]: You will need to decipher for me. My Motish is rusty.

[Mostin]: There are two sets of exclusory paradoxes relating to Eadric.

[Mulissu]: This [here] is Shomei?

[Mostin]: Yes. Notice that all sixteen remaining infernal seraphs are now bound to her mote; sixty other once-episemes; almost a thousand exemplars. No force of this power has ever before been assembled by a mage; nor yet a cabal. Nor one of this concentration even *deployed* since the Fall – if then.

[Mulissu] (Impressed): How?

[Mostin]: I should mention that this is three days hence, not *now*. Regardless, her valent capacity for conjurations is prodigious.

[Mulissu]: Her mote is in tight resonance with Eadric.

[Mostin]: Their dance is subtle, and many layered; there are elements which are antagonistic, amative, paternal, mutually didactic, dominating, religious and companionable. The relationship is complex.

[Mulissu]: *All* relationship is complex, Mostin; that is why sensible wizards avoid it. I assume that this dark, brooding bomb-beneath-a-blanket is Soneillon? There is a field of blackness behind her.

[Mostin]: That is the Shadow of Cheshne. And this hungry node of void is Carasch.

[Mulissu]: Demonstrate your paradoxes.

Mostin stabilized the resonance between Shomei and the *Ahma*, and progressed the *Web of Motes*

accordingly; the numerous devil-motes in her vicinity began to flicker and slowly fade.

[Mulissu]: That would seem to be...

[Mostin]: Wait.

The darkness behind Soneillon's mote seemed to crystallize through it; hundreds of motes began to vanish. A tide which swept through the *Web* extinguishing everything. Only one mote – that of Nehael – remained.

[Mulissu]: That future would be best avoided.

[Mostin]: Here is another.

Shomei's mote was transfixed. The darkness receded, but the devil-motes began to disperse and recombine, forming new resonances and extending outwards in a net which permeated the entire *Web*. Tension increased, until motes began to crash into one another.

[Mostin]: That was a hypothetical war, fought between Yeqon and his devilish *saizhan*-advocates, and the Antagonist Armaros; both of these infernal seraphim are currently beneath Shomei's thumb. If I *bind* her, they will factionalize and attempt to assert themselves as soon as their compacts come to term.

[Mulissu]: Reverse the *Web*. Do not allow the compacts to expire, and assume only a brief *binding* of Shomei.

He did. Shomei's mote erupted, and drove toward Soneillon; those of the fallen episemes detonated spectacularly around her. Futures began to bifurcate rapidly; Mostin held Shomei to a tight course, and Soneillon's mote vanished, and then reappeared. Shomei acquired new intensity and plunged immediately toward an energetic mote of deep jade, impacting it and shattering it.

[Mostin]: This is a typical catenary. If she can gain the *Urn*, her mastery of Hummaz is all but guaranteed, and she knows it. Her Fire is only half-actualized at present; if she can further unlock the *Antinomos*, Shomei will be unstoppable.

[Mulissu]: Before or after Hummaz?

[Mostin]: *Before*, with the help of the *Urn*.

[Mulissu]: And what is [*this?*]

[Mostin]: It is an anomalous catenary.

[Mulissu]: Progress it.

[Mostin]: [*Here*]. It does not lead anywhere. It is inert.

[Mulissu]: Progress it further.

Resolution. Shomei's mote pulsed, and expanded. It shone steadily: an isolated monad, around which a bright corona formed. It regarded those in her vicinity benignly.



[Mulissu]: What is it?

[Mostin]: *Perfection*. A complete integration of her Flame.

It did not move, but the signifier for Hummaz – seemingly magnetized – migrated and was drawn into orbit around Shomei's lambency; its revolutions slowly deteriorated until it was silently absorbed.

Motes exploded in a million directions as thought and color surged toward Mostin, shattering his inner vision and challenging the foundation of his prescience. A vibration of utter, draconic, profundity.

[Mulissu]: Mostin?

...

[Mulissu]: Mostin...?

[Mostin] (Wriely): That was the Aeon. It just reminded me that it knows I am looking.

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Ortwine collapsed onto the ground. She was covered in blood and guts. Nwm looked at her approvingly.

"You have done good work, Ortwine," the Preceptor nodded. "How many times did you die?"

"Only twice," Ortwine grunted. "I feel I did well; my instinct for self-preservation must be better honed than that of Teppu. *Narh* died nine times; he doesn't seem to care: he just *keeps going*. Nehael turns animals into suicidal fanatics, although I think that he may be like that normally."

"And you?"

Ortwine nodded. "Her presence is exhilarating; it cannot be denied."

"If the fear of death is removed, it is remarkable what can be accomplished."

"Empty words, Nwm," Ortwine shook her head. "The fear of *pain* remains. And Nwm, for pity's sake: I am a queen and a goddess. Can we have no better accommodations than this wet earth?"

"If you wish for something more comfortable, you will need to find a wizard."

"It does not have to be *lavish*, Nwm. Just *something*."

Nwm gestured, and wood flew together to form a small, crude hut, open on one side which faced the fire.

"Bed?" Ortwine asked.

Nwm shook his head.

“Moss?” Ortwine asked.

Nwm nodded. A cradle of soft moss grew within the shelter.

“Adequate,” Ortwine crawled into it. “And where *are* the wizards? Where is Mostin? And I thought the Academy were supposed to be more *invested* in events now?”

“Shomei’s actions have them in a fluster,” Nwm replied. “They are fragmented and nervous. Mostin is preoccupied with his work.”

“What *work*?”

“I believe a conjuration of some kind,” Nwm smiled.

“Another terrible beast?”

“Doubtless,” Nwm nodded.

“And your own preparations for defense?” Ortwine asked. “Have you accomplished anything *worthy*?”

“That remains to be tested,” Nwm sighed. “We are stacking spells as fast as we can – which is slowly – but, frankly, everyone is empty. And if the Fourth Effluxion can bring all of the remaining Cheshnite ritual power to bear, she will likely smash the net like so many eggshells.”

“If?” Ortwine inquired.

“She may not be *predisposed* toward ritual magic. One of the other immortals may need to take the lead in directing the cabals against our countermagicks; this would work in our favor. If she can focus them through herself, her assault will be powerful.”

“You cannot determine which?”

Nwm shook his head. “Her obfuscations are difficult to pierce; she seems opaque to most divinations, and only so much energy can be directed to trying to penetrate them.”

Ortwine groaned. “My suspicions are not good, Nwm. Still, I suppose a spell which counters a spell, is one less spell which burns a swathe of people.”

“That is my philosophy also,” Nwm nodded.

“She burns very hot, Nwm.”

“You encountered her then?”

“Twice,” Ortwine nodded. She fell asleep.

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Shomei struggled with difficulty to regain consciousness, and stared across the room from beneath her robe. Narcoma still clung to her.

“Thank-you for not snapping my neck, *Ahma*,” she remarked sleepily. “I was not sure if your word was binding, if offered to fiends.”

“It is not,” Eadric was laconic. He approached her and regarded her.

She seemed tiny. He knew that she was still vulnerable: her reservoir was depleted; almost all of her valences unoccupied. She had allowed her most potent wards to expire, for the purpose of more conjurations. He wondered how many *superior planar bindings* she was capable of in the course of a day, now that her Fire had ignited.

“Technically, one hundred and thirty-three,” she replied lazily and unexpectedly to the unasked question. “Although even I am not so dedicated. And I did not realize that my valent condition was so apparent to you.”

“Your thoughts are undisciplined when you drink too much *kasshiv*,” he observed. “And your mind makes connection without your volition.”

She briefly lifted her head. “I do believe that your pronunciation of that word is an affectation, *Ahma*. Speaking of; do you mind...?” She pointed at the cabinet where the *kschiff* was kept.

“I merely emphasize its proper ritual purpose.” He retrieved another flask and filled her glass to the brim. “Which you might remember, from time to time.”

Shomei drank deeply, smiled, replaced her glass, and shifted her position. “There are no dreams here, *Ahma*. Its effects are purely soporific. We all need a little oblivion, now and then; something I’m sure you can appreciate.”

“How was your book?” He asked.

“Complicated.” She furrowed her brow.

“It seemed to evoke an emotional response,” Eadric remarked.

“Yes, *Ahma*; I am capable of them.”

“Can you readily communicate its contents? Even in the broadest terms?”

“It would be difficult,” she sighed, closing her eyes again. “It would require that you are familiar with a sevenfold hermeneutic; unfortunately, the Infernal Septiga takes some time to master.”

“I feel you are being evasive, Shomei.”

“Yes, *Ahma*,” she yawned.

“Should I assume that some personal article was touched?”

“I don’t know, *Ahma*.” She raised an eyebrow with effort. “Would you care to talk about the totality of your experience with Soneillon?”

“I am not sure that that would be appropriate.”

“Because it is deeply intimate, or because you feel it would leave you open to subsequent manipulation?” She asked drowsily.

“Point taken,” he replied.

“Perhaps I will speak again later; when my guard is not so low, and I have had time to consider.”

“That seems only reasonable,” he conceded.

“And then, so can you,” she mumbled and smiled.

“Unfortunately, that seems equally reasonable.”

“I am sorry for your confinement, *Ahma*. And I have been rude; given no thought to your need for space. I will do something...” Her cogency was beginning to leave her.

“Don’t mention it,” he replied drily

“And thank-you again for not *killing* me, *Ahma*,” she muttered.

“I thought about it,” Eadric sighed.

“I know.” She reached up, fumbled, and patted his hand.

Shomei returned to sleep.

Eadric shook his head and opened the cabinet where his host-cum-gaoler kept a plentiful supply of *kschiff* and other beverages. He sniffed a number of them – some seemed even more dubious than Shomei’s drink of preference – before settling upon a bottle of Bedeshi brandy.

He put his feet up and sat for a long while by the fire, considering his circumstances. Shomei’s choice to allow herself to be vulnerable – because there was little doubt that every action committed by Shomei was one of willful *choice* – spoke of complexities which compromised him, and with which he felt ill-equipped to engage. He did not suspect any calculated program of seduction, although there was an inevitable sympathy which arose through knowledge and revelation of the other; she had made herself transparent to him, and trusted him. Her *I*, to him, had become a *Thou*. He felt warmth – even gratitude – despite her actions, and an odd feeling of protectiveness; as though she were something altogether precious: he knew that she should be *cherished*.

*Really, I have always preferred fiends*, he thought. They were just more *interesting*.

His mind drifted; he was oblivious to events in the world outside, and wondered what transpired at Deorham, in Morne, at Galda. He pondered, at length, about Soneillon: only days had passed since he had left her; it felt like months. Her reaction to his predicament concerned him.

Eventually – having consumed half of the bottle – a deep, dreamless sleep claimed him.

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When he awoke, Shomei was already gone. Eadric stood and looked at the wall: a heavy timber

door had appeared, where none had been before. He narrowed his eyes in suspicion: what lay beyond was, no doubt, for him – Shomei had indicated as much, and apparently, she recalled vague commitments made in even the most inebriated state. He slowly opened the door, expecting some vast, opulent suite of rooms bedecked with furs and exotic fabrics.

Instead, he found four small, modestly-furnished but well-lit stone chambers – not *too* austere, he noted – and a space which might be a shrine or meditation room, were he to make it so.

Still, a prison was a prison. He sighed.

A book sat upon a table. He read its pristine cover – embossed in contemporary Wyrish – and laughed despite himself:

*Infernal Hermeneutics – An Introduction*

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#### **Day 4 – Intercession?**

“Although I am incarcerated, I still feel as though I should thank you for providing me with chambers,” Eadric said.

“Then you certainly should, *Ahma*.” Shomei sat with a look of intense concentration on her face. She was carving a block of Hazel-wood with a slender knife; chips and shavings gathered at the floor beneath her feet. Her hands were a blur, moving with uncanny speed and precision.

“You seem to have none of your own,” Eadric observed. “Yet you have a reputation for ostentation.”

“In quieter days, I have more time for relaxation,” she nodded.

“Then there is some place in the library set aside for you?”

“I make rooms here as I feel the need, *Ahma*. It is no great matter. A parlor, a drawing room, a hall or bedchamber.” The wood had begun to assume the form of a human-shaped figurine.

“You also sleep more in quieter days?”

“Yes. But I sleep by the fire, *Ahma*.”

“Ah,” he nodded. “Chambers for entertaining your devilish lovers, then.”

“Yes, *Ahma*.” She regarded him with amusement. “Do I detect a note of judgment in your voice?”

“I am hardly one to judge,” Eadric replied.

“Indeed, *Ahma*.” The wood in Shomei’s hand had become a recognizable female shape, with slender limbs.

“And mortals?” He inquired. “They hold no interest for you?”

She paused and raised an eyebrow. “This line of questioning is becoming personal, *Ahma*.”

“I apologize. I did not mean to embarrass you.”

“You will not. Mortals are frail, and lack stamina, *Ahma*.”

“Then devils are...adequate to your needs? You have not sought to look beyond the Infernal?”

“Only once, *Ahma*.” Shomei blew hard upon the carving, and dust flew from it. She wiped it in her robe, and smiled. “I was declined, if you recall. But adequate? – yes; devils might surprise you with their tenderness, and are subtle and inventive in all matters.”

She presented a statuette to him. It was exquisite: a work far surpassing genius; its line and proportion were perfect. An *Eleos* with her left hand raised aloft, bearing a star; a clod of earth, from which flowers sprang, was in her right.

“This is extraordinary,” he gaped. “Although, I admit, your choice of subject matter is perplexing. Why do you need an idol?”

She shrugged. “Art is art, *Ahma*. And it is for *you*, not me. I do not require an external focus, but should you feel the need for an object of veneration, then you have one.”

He felt it; it made his hands tingle. “It is enchanted?”

“Of course, *Ahma*. It was carved by Shomei the Infernal from the wood of a Hazel scion. How could it not be?”

“Thank-you,” he nodded. He placed it gently upon the table.

“I should be about...”

“...your conjurations.” Eadric sighed. “Yes, I know. Shomei, is there nothing which I can say or do to dissuade you from this course of action?”

“I do not believe so, *Ahma*.”

“I cannot beg, cajole, threaten or otherwise impress my frustration and unhappiness regarding your choices upon you?”

“No, *Ahma*.”

“Then my words have no meaning to you?”

“In this, they cannot,” she shook her head, and stood.

“Why not? I am the *Ahma* in this matter no less than any other.”

“We have had this conversation already, *Ahma*.”

“Perhaps we should have it again.”

“Things were going well,” Shomei groaned. “Why do you bring me back here?”

“Because you need to be here, Shomei. *The Reattainment of Luminance*? What was it to you? What did you read?”

“Another time, *Ahma*.” She was becoming irritable; angry. Hellfire slowly began to crawl over her hands.

“No. Now. I want to hear it.” He held her wrist. His flesh burned; he ignored it.

“*Ahma*, do not force me to...”

“There is no external *force* acting on you, Shomei. Only your own choice.”

“Please let go of my wrist, Eadric. You will hurt yourself.”

He nodded. “Now we’re getting somewhere...”

There was a knock at the door.

Her fire died abruptly; she extricated her hand. Eadric gave a puzzled look. “Were you expecting someone?”

Shomei sighed. “No. But there is only one person who can treat the Hazel’s cordon with impunity, *Ahma*.” She walked to the door and opened it.

Nehael – or rather *a* Nehael – stood there, her hands held behind her back. It was not a Nehael with whom the *Ahma* was altogether familiar.

\*

“Am I interrupting?” Nehael asked.

“Yes,” Shomei answered. “We were having an argument.”

“May I come in?”

“Yes,” Eadric interjected before Shomei could speak.

“Hello, Eadric,” Nehael smiled. “Thank-you, but that choice is not yours to make.”

“Where are your weapons?” Shomei inquired. “Shouldn’t you be shooting ghouls or something?”

*Weapons?* Eadric had the distinct notion that he was behind the times.

“I should still like to come in,” Nehael insisted.

“Shomei?” Eadric looked at her.

“Very well,” Shomei sighed, waving her in.

Nehael entered, and regarded the figurine of the *Eleos*. “You are no mean talent, Shomei.”

“You have something behind your back?” Eadric asked.

“This?” Nehael produced a sprig of Holly. Eadric’s hackles rose. “Yes; I found it nearby. It’s been growing there for a little while. Didn’t you know?”

“No.” Shomei scowled.

“It may be connected with the seven hundred fallen exemplars who are nearby,” Nehael suggested.

“*Seven hundred?*” Eadric asked in horror.

“Shomei works fast, Eadric.”

The Infernalist gave a nonchalant shrug.

“The Holly scion is not yet awake,” Nehael added. “But there again, Azazel is not here yet, either. I am surprised that you invoked me at this late stage.”

“I was not aware that I did,” Eadric sighed.

“Not you, Eadric.” Nehael picked up the statuette of the *Eleos* and handed it to Shomei.

“Devotional art made from a Hazel by the *Antinomios* for the *Ahma* is likely to gain my attention.”

“You are not the *Eleos*,” Shomei observed.

“I was the nearest available avatar,” Nehael smiled.

Shomei replaced the figurine on the table. “If you believe that a red dress and a bad attitude are likely to impress me, you can think again. You will divert me from my purpose no more effectively than the *Ahma*.”

“No, Shomei,” Nehael sighed. “That I will not. The choice is yours. It always is. May I speak briefly with Eadric?”

“Yes. He is right here.”

“Alone, Shomei?”

“But of course,” Shomei replied acidly, gesturing toward the timber door. “He has his own cell, now.”

“Thank-you.”

Eadric sat in stunned silence.

Shomei ushered them away, and poured *kschiff*.

\*\*

“It is good to see you,” Nehael smiled. She had declined a chair, and sat on the floor in effortless



*saizhan*. There was a dynamic quality about her that Eadric had not before encountered; she seemed entirely grounded and *embodied*. He recalled Soneillon's words, and understood that, although spoken lightly, they had not been altogether in jest.

"I am bewildered, Nehael." Eadric confessed.

"I have come to expect it," Nehael nodded.

"You sit in *saizhan*..."

"I am a syncretic deity, Eadric."

"Your posture is better than mine," he added.

"Things are moving rapidly, *Ahma*. You need to resolve this situation as quickly as possible and return to Galda."

"I have been trying."

"Where are you in your dialogue with Shomei?"

Eadric sighed. "I do not know. I cannot fathom her. She is complex."

Nehael nodded. "She is a *devil*, *Ahma*, and an *I*. Prior to that, she was the most gifted mage of her generation – perhaps of *any* generation. *Complex* does not even begin to cover her."

Eadric sighed. "She chose to trust me: she left herself completely vulnerable to me; I might have slain her, and spared us all from what will likely ensue."

"But you did not."

"No." Eadric said. "It would have been an act of violation against Truth. She is utterly authentic."

"Nor yet did you marry her," Nehael smiled wryly.

"I did not know her as I have come to."

"Then you *regret* your decision?" Nehael asked with raised eyebrows.

"No. I regret that not all opportunity can be realized. But I made a choice. I stand by it."

"I am sure Soneillon will be pleased," Nehael spoke in a droll voice. "Or at least, not wrathful and vindictive."

"Self-preservation also informs my perspective," Eadric admitted.

"And Nehael?" She inquired. "Where do you stand with regard to *her*? To *me*?"

"That relationship is different."

"Why?" She asked. "Am I not desirable?"

Eadric looked at her and groaned. “Yes.”

“You somehow believe me less *lustful*?”

“Well...”

“Would you deem me less *unattainable* than previously?”

His head reeled. “Yes?”

“Do not worry, Eadric.” She laughed. “I am not *pressing a claim* upon the highly-coveted *Ahma*.”

“That is a relief,” he sighed.

“But then again, I wouldn’t, would I?”

“No...?” He said unsurely.

“I am Compassion, *Ahma*. Possessiveness is not in my nature. *Saizha*?”

\*

“Are you quite finished?” Shomei asked irritably.

[Nehael]: This is what we exchanged [information].

Eadric stared at Nehael in disbelief. Shomei raised an eyebrow and analyzed.

“You need not look *betrayed*, Eadric,” Nehael sighed. “I do not *hide* anything for the purpose of manipulation, and neither should you. And it was Shomei who invoked me, not you. I will see myself out.”

Nehael departed.

“Perhaps celibacy is best,” Eadric sat wearily.

Shomei handed him a glass of *kschiff*. “You would not be the first mystic to come to this conclusion, *Ahma*.”

“What next?” He asked.

“Well,” Shomei smiled. “First, I will have a drink. And then I will return...”

“...to your conjurations. Yes. I suppose I should know the drill by now. Shomei, as I didn’t kill you, I feel that you might indulge me. I should like some diabolic *company* in your absence.”

Shomei looked sceptical. “Very well, *Ahma*. But I should warn you that devilish courtesans can be difficult. Lagusuf might serve; her skin is...”

“*Intellectual* company, Shomei.”

“Very good, *Ahma*.” She considered briefly.

A *gate* opened, and a tall, strikingly beautiful female devil with violet eyes emerged. She was clad in white; her hair was arranged in an elaborate coiffure.

“Shomei...”

“This is *Nercamay, Ahma*. An infernal muse. You need not be distracted by her full lips and rapid, shallow breath. Nor her heady perfume and natural tactility. She is both *intellectual* and *company*: she is a scholar of some renown; her mind is exquisitely perverse and convoluted.”

“As is yours,” Eadric said.

“Thank-you, *Ahma*. *Nercamay*, you may attend to the *Ahma*’s needs: perhaps it might be best if you made no attempt to seduce him; it may cause him undue distress. Did you have some topic in mind to discuss?”

“Actually, yes,” Eadric reached for the *The Reattainment of Luminance*. “You will give me lessons in diabolic heresies, won’t you *Nercamay*?”

Shomei sighed. The *Ahma* was nothing, if not persistent. She exited the cottage.

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*Nercamay* smiled gently, sat next to Eadric, and opened the book in her lap. She smelled of jasmine and orchids.

“How familiar are you with the sevenfold hermeneutic?” She asked in a soft voice. Her hand immediately began to wander. Eadric replaced it.

“Very little,” Eadric admitted.

“It’s very warm in here, *Ahma*...”

“You are a devil; I am sure you will cope.”

“Are your chambers cooler?”

“Just read,” Eadric said through gritted teeth.

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## **Day 5 – *Seeing***

*Nercamay* knelt. Eadric drew her knees apart – whilst carefully avoiding her gaze – held her breast-bone, and pressed in the hollow of her back, straightening it.

“Good,” he exhaled. He stood, poured himself *kschiff*, and sat in a chair.

“I am not sure what this posture is designed to achieve, *Ahma*,” the devil looked at him. “It does not seem very practical for the purpose of pleasure. I know many others, which would serve better.

Unless you simply require...”

Eadric held up his hand. “It will help you concentrate. And you being over there, and me being over here will help me concentrate. Look ahead, Nercamay, and slightly down. Not at me.”

She did so.

“Place your fingertips together, *thus*,” he demonstrated.

“I cannot see. I may now look at you?”

“You may *glance*.”

She sighed and followed his instructions.

“You need to slow your breathing, Nercamay.”

“I do not *need* to breathe at all, *Ahma*.”

“Do so anyway,” Eadric instructed.

She complied.

“Are you comfortable?”

“Not entirely,” Nercamay admitted.

“Excellent,” Eadric smiled. “A little tension is good. Let us review what we have learned to date. First, that it is hard for me to remain focused if you *drape* yourself over me. Second, that time is *limited* for me, in terms of what I need to understand. Third, that distinguishing between the points of the Septiga is very *difficult* for me, as the fields seem to overlap so much: the *poetic* and the *functional* I can grasp easily enough; the *enigmatic* I can see in theory, if not in practice as I have no experience of Hellish mysteries; but discerning the subtleties between the *inflammatory*, *mephitic*, *vitiating*, *debasing* and *perfidious* may be beyond me.”

“That would make eight. The *mephitic* is synonymous with the *debasing*, *Ahma*.”

“Precisely my point,” Eadric nodded.

“Although they are unidentical in the *Noniga*,” Nercamay added.

“One thing at a time, Nercamay. Now, you may continue your explication.”

“The text of *The Reattainment of Luminance* is very abstruse, *Ahma*. I am not sure where to recommence.”

“Might it help if I were to make specific inquiries?” Eadric asked.

“I think it may be the only way to proceed,” Nercamay replied.

“Let us concentrate on the *functional* at present; Shomei has asserted on numerous occasions that her inclination is more practical than mystical.”

"I am not sure that function and praxis can be conflated in that way, *Ahma*," Nercamay opined.

"You are probably right," Eadric nodded. "It is, however, where we will look."

"And your purpose in this is the redemption of Shomei the Infernal?" Nercamay asked dubiously.

Eadric shook his head. "No. Shomei charts her own course. And devils do not need to be *redeemed*, Nercamay. They are already perfect, but are trapped in false perceptions. They simply need to *see*."

Time slowed to a crawl. Eadric experienced a *sensation*; neither entirely a flash, nor a vibration, nor an understanding; but something of each, and a certitude.

"I..." Nercamay stopped speaking; her expression relaxed, with a hint of mild puzzlement. Her breath became slow, purposeful, rhythmic. She cast her gaze around, and her eyes came to rest on him. She was serene; impassive. Eadric sat, and waited until he judged it had passed in her.

She began to shake. He stood, walked over to her, and knelt before her.

"That was *saizhan*," he spoke gently.

She was bewildered. "You also...?"

"No." Eadric smiled. "But you experienced that you and I are not different; so in a sense, yes."

"Then this is not your natural mode of perception?"

"Arguably, it is *the* natural mode of perception. But remaining there is...difficult," Eadric said wryly, and shook his head. "The *Sela* always abides in perfect *saizhan*; perhaps Nehael – I do not know. Memory of this experience may evoke powerful emotions in you. If you wish to reflect, we may end this discourse for a while. My chambers are available if you wish for privacy."

"Would you like to..."

"No." He said firmly. "And that temptation is now so much crueller, yet so much easier to resist."

"I do not understand," she sighed.

He smiled ironically. "Our relationship has changed, Nercamay. From this point, I have a *duty* toward you, and a responsibility for your well-being."

"I feel no less wicked, *Ahma*. Your sudden concern for me is vexing."

He sighed. "Prior modes of perception do not vanish instantly, Nercamay. Consider whether this experience was of value to you; I would contend that it was, and that it is worth seeking to repeat it. Unless there is something more pressing, you should relax for a while."

Nercamay considered. "*The Reattainment of Luminance* is many things, *Ahma*. An argument and counter-argument; a technique or method; an entreaty; a prophecy; a *solution*."

"Concerning what?" Eadric inquired.

“I believe that the book is about Shomei. About devils. About *saizhan*. About you.”

He swallowed.

“Do you *like* fiends, *Ahma*?” Nercamay asked.

“Far too much,” Eadric sighed.

“You understand that I have done as Shomei bid me and have not, actually, attempted to seduce you?” She asked. “That my flirtations are meant in good humor?”

“Of course,” Eadric nodded. “I play the game well enough. I mean no disrespect Nercamay, but I have met some who would put you to shame. And consider *why* you feel a sudden impulse to communicate the truth to me in such comprehensible terms, Nercamay; you may find that it is not unconnected with your insight.”

\*\*

The wind was bitter; Soneillon stood on the Steeple and scowled. Carasch had alerted her to another interloper; this time, a solitary figure north of the town of Deorham, wearing a bright yellow cloak. Its form was in the region of fey; its gender, indeterminate; its progress, circuitous and unhurried.

*Tozinak*, she knew. The wizard seemed completely unwarded, and apparently oblivious to the danger he was in. The demoness surmised that he must be under the Cherry’s spell, although what, exactly, that entailed was unknown to her.

She invoked a potent protection, and appeared close to his location. He was crossing a bridge over a frozen stream, plodding knee-deep through the snow which had drifted there. Upon spying her, he smiled and waved, and hurried toward her position.

Soneillon held up a hand. “Wait right there. What are you doing here, *Tozinak*? You’ve just decided to *deliver* the spell to me? Color me suspicious, but I smell cherries.”

*Tozinak* nodded enthusiastically. He held up a bunch of ripe, luscious fruit.

“Is there no artifice to you at all?” Soneillon asked in an exasperated voice. “You desperately need lessons in deceit and guile.”

“None. I *love* you, Soneillon.”

Soneillon sighed.

“Here,” *Tozinak* withdrew a thin plaque from within his robe, and placed it upon the snow. He set the cherries upon it.

She swallowed; there must be some hidden trap. “Would you mind withdrawing a little way, *Tozinak*. I am feeling shy.”

“Of course, my love.” He moved back ten yards.

She approached cautiously and inspected the plate, but touched neither it nor the cherries which sat upon it. The symbolism seemed apt; the references Urgic. But all was unrealized and unfulfilled; as though some profound *absence* were to be invoked.

She regarded him suspiciously. "Is this the spell which Jovol bequeathed to you?"

"My transcription may contain some creative license," Tozinak admitted. "Or even interpretative errors. But the *elegance* is undeniable; I am sure you will agree. I *love* you, Soneillon. Will you marry me?"

"I will need time to consider, Tozinak," she raised an eyebrow. "Currently, the *Ahma* is my paramour. He may not take kindly to a rival."

Tozinak seemed mortified.

"But he I am sure he will be willing to release me," Soneillon quickly added. "Given our particular circumstances."

Tozinak breathed a sigh of relief.

Gingerly, Soneillon touched the plaque; a profound sense of *nonentity* was immediately conveyed to her.

"Thank-you, Tozinak," she said. She lifted the tablet, and allowed the cherries to slide off, into the snow. "Have you given thought to the boon which I promised you?"

He smiled hopefully.

"I will get back to you," she nodded. *How very odd*, she thought. The spell had been *modified*; of that she had no doubt. She would examine it upon her return to the Burh, but without question it invoked an *Apparition*, and not a Aeon. And it was given freely; *impressed* upon her, in fact.

Briefly, she wondered *how*? No matter. More pressing events concerned her.

\*

[Soneillon]: Are you done, yet?

[Mostin]: *Do not interrupt me!* Now I have lost it. Almost; I am finishing the aesthetics of the auditory display.

[Soneillon]: Mostin. Time is of the essence. Such details may be omitted.

[Mostin]: They may not.

[Soneillon]: Do you foresee any problems?

[Mostin]: No. Well, perhaps Nwm. He seems unsure of his commitment. Nehael's latest avatar may be leaning on him. He has been forced to conceal certain things from Ortwine, which also does not sit well with him.

[Soneillon]: Can we find another?

[Mostin]: I *trust* no other, Soneillon. Shomei has offered substantial bribes to most of the Collegium. I surmise this because many are conveniently *indisposed*.

[Soneillon]: Can she use their power offensively against me? Would the Enforcer intervene?

[Mostin]: I believe that she would prefer not to put it to the test quite yet. But she will draw on them to augment herself and her devils. And her dragon. Heavily.

[Soneillon]: How long do I have, Mostin?

[Mostin]: That is rather difficult to predict. Futures are becoming unstable. Eadric's interaction with Shomei is generating new catenaries.

[Soneillon]: I see.

[Mostin]: Tomorrow is the earliest that we can attempt the rite. I have selected a suitable site in an unpopulated area of Soan, in Sisperi. I have tried to keep it brief – ten minutes or so. But we will be vulnerable during that window. Punching through her wards will take tremendous focus and power. There will be a *lot* of backlash; and a *lot* of pain.

[Soneillon]: *Thank-you*, Mostin. That's very sweet of you.

\*\*

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Shomei set her rod upon its stand, threw off the *robe of meteors*, and uncorked a flask of *kschiff*. She sank into a chair by the fire. Eadric was on a couch, absorbed in *Infernal Hermeneutics*.

"Where is Nercamay?" She asked.

"She is resting," Eadric nodded toward his chambers.

Shomei raised an eyebrow, and filled a glass. "How is *Infernal Hermeneutics*?"

Eadric lifted his head. "For a subject so dense, convoluted and impenetrable, it is a remarkably clear and concise exposition; it touches on frameworks with which I am familiar. I might almost believe that it was written for me."

"Good," Shomei nodded.

"You wrote this book."

"Yes," Shomei acknowledged.

"How long did it take you?"

"Not too long, *Ahma*. I wrote it in my head while I was putting my boots on."

"Yet there are some dialogues in which you will not engage," Eadric observed.



“Sometimes, the written word is easier, *Ahma*. And sometimes, it is necessary to begin at the beginning.”

“You believe that I should read *The Reattainment of Luminance* myself, then?”

“Of course,” Shomei replied. “Your experience of it will differ from mine.”

Eadric groaned. “And how do you suggest I approach this most subtle of diabolic texts, given my total ignorance in matters of infernal scripture?”

“Without prejudice, *Ahma*. Because the *enigma* may speak to you, if nothing else does.”

“Do I really have time for devilish enigmas, Shomei? How long – in your reckoning – before I *need* to be at Galda?”

She was silent.

Eadric nodded appreciatively. “Well *this* is something new. Shomei the Infernal is at a complete loss for words. She will not even dissemble.”

“I resent your implication. I do not employ deceit in my dealings with you, *Ahma*.”

“Very well,” Eadric said. “But let us continue this line of investigation. Given the fact that you are now making *military* choices for the Wyrish Crown and the Temple – and I am assuming that Prince Tagur will be appointed to command in my absence – how long before Galda is invested?”

“Two days hence. If you have not returned, Nehael can lead them in your absence.”

“*Can she?*” Eadric asked sourly. “Whatever her individual martial prowess is in battle, Shomei – and I’m sure it is considerable – it is not the same as coordinating fifty thousand Templars, footsoldiers, bickering aristocrats, and Ardanese hooligans. Something which I’m rather good at, even if I do say so myself. I would suggest *I’m already late*. In my absence, I would appoint Tagur. Perhaps you would be so kind as to communicate this to the Small Council for me?”

“I have no wish to become embroiled in politics, *Ahma*. My goal is the *Urn*.”

“Yes, Shomei. That is abundantly clear. And such arbitrary lines you draw with regard to *politics*, when it suits you.”

“Why are you purposely seeking to anger me, *Ahma*?” Shomei asked irritably.

Eadric smiled. “Well, our discourse does seem to be most productive in that climate; I need to rile you to certain point, in order to stimulate moral conflict in you. I wouldn’t be a very good *Ahma* otherwise, would I?”

Shomei looked at him and sighed. She picked up the *kschiff* and two glasses, and moved onto the couch.

“Drink,” she said, pouring.

“*Kasshiv* is not the answer to everything, Shomei.”

"It helps," she said. "And your consumption has not exactly diminished. What did you do to Nercamay?"

"She experienced *saizhan*," Eadric replied. "She is integrating."

Shomei shook her head. "You are an insidious influence, *Ahma*. You have begun corrupting my devils."

"We touched a little on *The Reattainment of Luminance* afterwards," he added.

"I'm sure she has her own perspective," Shomei sighed, leaned back, and closed her eyes.

Eadric observed her reaction and continued. "The notion of *perfection* seems to be alluded to frequently; it may also have been my choice of the word *perfect* in the context of her particular understanding at that moment which impelled Nercamay to *saizhan*."

"Such synchronies occur."

"Although, she understood *perfected* primarily in terms of Urgic *dignity*. The Sublime Essence of the Flame."

Shomei remained silent.

"Will you speak to me, Shomei?"

"I would prefer not to," she smiled.

"Perhaps I should continue speculating, then? As your eyelids are closed, I will gauge your facial expressions; as you pointed out, you do lie poorly for a devil."

She opened her eyes and glared at him. "You are relentless. That road is closed to me, *Ahma*. There can be no *perfection*, and I had not even considered my potential in those terms until I read that accursed book; sometimes my Will drives me without my full cogniscance: I am an *imperfect I*."

"What is the obstacle?" He asked.

"Would you like the poetic or the functional?"

"Whichever suits you."

"A little of each," she said drily. "*Ansus anamik ahman nihabaída*. Into me, God would not breathe."

"I see."

"You have made your choices, *Ahma*; do not repudiate mine."

"It seems I cannot," he sighed. "Shomei, what I feel..."

"*Don't, Ahma*. What you feel is merely what you feel; what you do is what you do: and that's the point. Here." She handed him a goblet. "Drink."

“You are very wise, Shomei.”

“Yes, *Ahma*.”

They drank.

\*

“I cannot readily see a solution to this problem,” Eadric sighed.

“You have certainly made things very *difficult* for yourself, *Ahma*.” Shomei nodded. “Although, I admit, on some level I am sympathetic to your efforts. You are trying to hold three truths in balance; this is no trivial task.” With a flourish, three balls appeared within Shomei’s hand: one black, one green, and one deep indigo.

She span them with a conjurer’s finesse and handed them to him one by one “You need to find a new perspective in order to resolve your trilemma, *Ahma*. Then you will be able to juggle.”

He squinted. “A clever analogy, Shomei, but I foresee problems. This one,” he held up the black ball, “will stick to my palm. This one,” he showed the green, “is difficult to catch. And this one,” he presented the indigo, “is apt to pursue its own trajectory, regardless of where I throw it.”

“Then you will have to concentrate very hard, *Ahma*.”

He looked at her. “Are you suggesting that some kind of *accommodation* is possible?”

“The black ball may be less kindly disposed to view things in those terms, but yes, *Ahma*; Nehael’s philosophy in this regard has merit,” she shrugged.

“I am incapable of such a feat,” he shook his head.

“Your frame of reference needs to change before *you* can make such an accommodation, *Ahma*.”

“And how do you suggest that I might achieve this?” He asked.

“*Sovereignty* would be my solution, *Ahma*, with Regency as an intermediate step. If you deify yourself, you will no longer be bound by conventional mores.”

“A route which you make sound so *simple*, Shomei.”

“I imply nothing of the sort,” she said through narrowed eyes. “But nor can I see how you can challenge Kaalaanala without it. And think, *Ahma*, your romantic problems will be solved: each of your women can have an avatar, and there will be no squabbling.”

He shook his head.

“Of course, Soneillon is greedy, and will probably want three *Ahmas*.”

“Shomei...”

“Which, at least, might fill her needs and shut her up.” She smiled and raised her glass.

He sighed. “You can be a very *wicked* devil, Shomei.”

“Thank-you, *Ahma*.” She gestured, and a door appeared in the wall beside the fireplace.

“A new chamber?” he asked.

“Yes, *Ahma*.” Shomei stood and picked up the *kschiff*.

“May I see?” He inquired.

She raised an eyebrow. “That was the general idea, *Ahma*.”

“Ah,” he nodded. “Shomei, I am still your prisoner.”

“Yes, *Ahma*. But you are drunk on *kschiff*, I am taking advantage of you.”

“Why now?” He asked.

“Tomorrow, I must fight, *Ahma*; as you said, you will need to be at Galda. It would be *unprincipled* for me to detain you much longer.”

“Shomei, I...”

“*Don’t*, Eadric. Yes or no?” She offered her hand.

He took it. The rest followed. Her tenderness astonished him.

\*

## **Day 6 – Confrontation**

When Eadric awoke, Shomei was gone. His stomach turned, and a sense of foreboding gripped him. He leapt up and hurriedly entered the study.

The air was cold. The door to the cottage was open, the fire had guttered and gone out; morning sunlight streamed in. Eadric ran outside into the snow; a long, narrow area, hemmed in on all sides by a dense thicket of Hazel. There was no sign of her, but a large patch nearby was bare of frost and had been scorched with such heat that the earth had vitrified; Qematiel must have alighted there, he knew. He heard footsteps behind him, and turned to see Nercamay; she carried a heavy robe. She drew it about him to cover his modesty.

Nercamay smiled gently. “She asked me to tell you that the fence will be passable by noon, and you will be able to leave; that she will try her best to keep damage at Deorham to a minimum. And in the event that you don’t see her again and she does not have the opportunity to harangue you, to look first and foremost to your own enkindlement: that you should gaze upon the Sun, because *Isthu Sa*.\*”

“How long has she been gone?”

“Less than an hour, *Ahma*.”

“Did she reveal her specific intention to you?” He asked.

“She was meeting with a clique of a dozen wizards which included Jalael, Muthollo and Daunton; thence to Deorham.”

“*Shomei!*” He called, the force of his will behind her name. He knew that she could hear him. She ignored him.

He invoked the *Eleos*. Nehael. Goddess. Oronthon – last.

Nercamay shook her head. “She is her own Self, *Ahma*; she will brook no intervention on her behalf on the part of another.”

“I refuse to accept this circumstance,” he sighed.

“I do not see that you have much choice, *Ahma*.”

“Can you leave here, Nercamay?” He asked.

She shook her head. “The area is *locked*.”

“Unsurprising,” Eadric smiled grimly. “Can you issue a *sending*?”

“No, *Ahma*.”

“Is there no way for you to *reach* anyone?” He asked, exasperated.

“I am a muse, *Ahma*; I appear in dreams.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Then that will have to do. What time is it Nercamay?”

“Dawn was two hours ago, *Ahma*.”

He cursed, and made his way back inside into his chambers. Eadric retrieved the figurine of the *Eleos*, and then rummaged through drawers in the study until he found the knife with which Shomei had carved it. He exited the cottage again, and sat upon a rude stool; all the while, Nercamay watched uncertainly.

“I need you to communicate with someone who sleeps at this late hour; Ortwine is a likely target. She prefers to rise just before noon.”

Nercamay entered a brief trance, and shook her head. “Ortwine does not sleep *Ahma*.”

Eadric sighed, and wracked his brains. “Try the goddess Lai.”

Again, a brief pause. Nercamay nodded. “I touched her; she seemed confused that no message was forthcoming.”

“Good,” Eadric nodded. “Dream again. Tell her to wake up, to contact Nwm and to instruct him that the *Ahma* will require immediate reembodiment.”

“*Ahma*, I...”

“*Do so*, Nercamay.”

She complied.

He touched the statuette of the *Eleos*, invoking her for protection, and handed Nercamay the blade.

“I cannot kill myself, Nercamay. It is antithetical to my nature. If you...”

“I know where to put a knife, *Ahma*,” she said drily. “I am a devil.”

There was a brief, white-hot pain. Blood stained the snow.

Nercamay sighed, sat by the body of the *Ahma*, and entered *saizhan*.

\*\*

Mostin had chosen an abandoned croft in a heavily wooded range of hills in Soan. None had gone there since the infestation of Graz’zt’s demons had scoured Sisperi; some few – mostly babau and leaping demons – remained, but had been quickly slain or driven off by Nwm. The binding site was an overgrown stone silo which lay half below ground, into which a steep set of moss-covered steps gave; the interior was damp and cool. Mostin had prepared an area ten feet in diameter, and drawn a diagram of baffling complexity with celestial silver and salts; items which were becoming increasingly difficult to procure with the removal of the Empyrean from reality as currently described.

Little of the remaining symbolism was traditional in nature. Shomei’s exempt status – together with her magnification – made unconventional adjuncts and trappings a requirement. Gone were the blasting rods, holy water and other typical Goetic tools; Mostin had based the rite off of the Articles of the Wyrish Injunction, and would invoke the Claviger in testimony to Shomei’s confinement. It meant working with oneiric ideograms describing various substrates of Dream; conditions to which Shomei might be vulnerable, but of which he, himself, had little experience. He fretted and paced and muttered.

Nwm – still conflicted in his feelings, but grimly conscious that the binding was probably necessary – watched dispassionately. The choice to keep Ortwine in the dark – because of her connection to the Hazel – also left him with a sour feeling in his mouth. But Hlioth’s words – that Shomei would leverage that relationship – could not be ignored. However mad, the crone’s insights were almost unerring in matters Tree-ish.

Mulissu descended through a large hole in the domed ceiling and sighed. “Will this take much longer, Mostin?”

“Trust me when I say that it would be best to get it right the first time,” the Alienist replied acidly.

\*\*

No viridescent devas waited for him. There was no Yew; no mountain; no fresh, resin-scented air.

Only a frigid void. He was distinct from it, and illuminated its merest fraction; its vastness humbled him. He gazed across an immeasurable distance at the World; it seemed tiny and insignificant. He waited. His knew that his own light and heat might sustain him for an eternity. He hoped they would not have to: he was utterly alone.

A familiar voice called to him. He sighed, and leapt toward it, intent upon descent into the Green and the body which he knew awaited him. Something – a claw made of color – rushed at him and seemed to snatch him, drawing him aside. A visage made of potential, dynamic and shifting, and wise beyond all conception, held him and observed him without emotion.

*Do not forget that you are still frail*, it said to him.

It hurled the *Ahma* downwards like a meteor; briefly, his essence fragmented into a quintillion parts and streamed into the World, which gathered them together again.

He awoke with a start, not to Nwm's face, but to Nehael's.

\*

Eadric stood at once. His surroundings were familiar: the interior of the tabernacle. The *Sela* sat nearby in meditation, but did not regard him.

"That was a riskier strategy than you might imagine," Nehael sighed.

"The stakes are high. Where is Nwm?" He asked.

"He and I are in unspoken disagreement," Nehael smiled, handing him clothing, which he hastily began to don. "He believes that neutralizing Shomei is necessary. He has travelled to Sisperi with Mostin and Mulissu in order to bind her. Soneillon will act as a sink for Mostin's spell. He would have waited until after this was accomplished before *reincarnating* you – probably as a mule. Fortunately, I knew that you were dead; I suppose if you invoke every deity you can conceive of, someone is bound to hear."

"Why do you believe this to be an error on Nwm's part?"

"First, because Shomei's survival hinges on the word of Soneillon given to Mostin – and I suspect that she views it as somewhat less binding than when given to the *Ahma*, for whom she has a rather intense and possessive love. She *knows*, Eadric – how can she not, after what you have shared? Your recent actions may have led her to now view Shomei as a substantive *threat* to your affection."

"And the second reason?" He groaned.

"The second reason is that the first reason does not matter, Eadric," she handed him *Lukarn*. "Because Shomei will throw her full weight at Deorham before Mostin even has a chance to begin his spell; you can be assured that Soneillon will remain there until the last possible minute for her own safety. Even if she subsequently made her way to Sisperi, Shomei would follow her with Qematiel and her devils and attack before the rite could be completed. She might hound Soneillon through a dozen worlds and wreck them in her passing. Of course, Shomei wouldn't be attacking today *at all* if it weren't ..."

"...for my recent actions." He sighed. "I feel as though I've made a terrible mess of things."

“Well, then at least we’ve made some progress,” Nehael nodded.

“How long do I have?”

“Fifteen minutes,” Nehael smiled.

“What if the rite were to proceed *without* Soneillon’s involvement?” Eadric asked. “With me acting as guarantor of Shomei’s safety?”

“You would need to find a very *selfless*, willing caster of some magnitude with an untapped reservoir to act as the sink,” Nehael replied.

“Can you...”

“Do not look at me, Eadric. I am red; magic is not my forte.”

“Is there any...”

Teppu coughed gently and entered the tent. Eadric gave a hopeful look.

Nehael sighed. “Yes, Eadric. Teppu is capable.”

“Then I must go now...”

“One moment,” Nehael interrupted. “Teppu’s reservoir was reserved against the imminent danger of the Cheshnite horde and the Fourth Effluxion, which looks like *this*.”

Eadric staggered as the magnitude of the threat was revealed to him.

Nehael nodded. “So please bear that in mind when you choose to spend it elsewhere.”

“Why must I always be the one to choose?”

“Because you are the *Ahma*, Eadric,” Teppu smiled jovially. “A job which no-one else wants.”

The *Sela* stirred. “Do not forget that you are still frail.”

“*Sela*, I...”

Tramst held up his hand. “Remind Shomei that the Flame needs nothing and is always Perfect, Eadric. *It cannot Fall*.”

He nodded.

“And *Ahma*,” the *Sela* continued. “I don’t think you’ve done too *badly*, given the circumstances.”

Nehael raised an eyebrow. “The *Sela* is much *kinder* than I; I am merely compassionate.”

“Will you come?” Eadric asked Nehael.

“No, Eadric.” She smiled. “I am going to go and shoot ghouls; which is, to say, *my job*. But I’m sure Ortwine will accompany you; she has a bone to pick with Nwm.”



“Nehael,” he began. “Concerning Soneillon...”

“At this point, Eadric, my practical advice would be to *grovel*.”

“Noted,” he said.

\*\*

[Mostin]: We are ready.

[Soneillon]: You are too late, Mostin.

\*

Qematiel gyred in the skies above Trempla. Shomei considered.

Between them, Soneillon and Carasch might have a total of seven transvalents of up to the four-hundredth order available. Shomei herself had two remaining, and of only the two-hundredth, but her most powerful infernal minions had a large array of *superb dispellings* which, if intelligently managed, might open a gap in Soneillon’s defenses and reveal a line of attack. Shomei could then use *time stops* and bring a barrage of *hellfire acid storms* to bear against Soneillon before she could react; hopefully enough to end it. Shomei knew that careful deployment of her devils was vital. There was no doubt that the chthonic balor had seen the first wave which Shomei had dispatched; the six-winged Aristaqis and fifty exemplars would test the potent wards which shrouded Kyrtil’s Burh, and attempt to goad Soneillon into precipitous action.

Shomei could not afford to be indiscriminate in her attack; any volley or assault which happened to catch the Blackthorn in its area would result in the certain and immediate extinction of the devils responsible, as the reflex of the scion – or worse yet, the *ludja* itself – snuffed them out.

Her mind was linked to that of Aristaqis and followed his thoughts, although no direct sight could be conveyed to her within the suppressive ambit of the scion. The eight flights which preceded him described an arc a quarter-mile across; their positions and velocities understood by Shomei as an abstraction of constantly changing coordinates and vectors.

As though to demonstrate to Shomei both her own, sheer physical prowess and her willingness to engage immediately and without intermediaries, Soneillon appeared directly within the flight path of Aristaqis and deep within the ranks of the exemplars who accompanied him. The demoness set about the infernal seraph instantly, eschewing magic for a more direct attack. He dwarfed her with his mass, but Void struck as a storm of tendrils which lashed at him. Before he had even the chance to swing his weapon, he had been reduced to nothing; all trace of *ens* had been removed. His blade – a nine-foot flaming sword etched with infernal runes – plunged from the skies and sank into a bank of snow.

Shomei cursed. She hadn’t expected Soneillon to act *that* impulsively. The remaining devas hurled themselves at the demoness, but Soneillon shrugged them off; she preferred no further engagement at that time, and vanished. Shomei ordered the devils to reform and press on.

Shortly after, they encountered the outermost of the defenses around the keep; an impenetrable

barrier of force.

\*

Soneillon had learned many tricks, and had drawn freely upon the power of the *Urn* to entrench and fortify her position. Nested magics surrounded the stronghold, each more complex than the last.

The outermost ward was a paling not unlike that which she had erected in Throile, albeit of more modest scope: a force encountered as a solid barrier with a diameter of a mile at the center of which Kyrtil's Burh – the stones of which had been reinforced to the point of magical adamant – was situated.

The entire area was a dimensional cordon of such power that no magic within Shomei's grasp – or so Soneillon judged – might break it; within, a veiled discontinuity was hidden, large enough for the demoness to facilitate the summoning of her minions, and for her to flee if it became necessary. Six invisible nets, debilitating screens which would afflict those who attempted to press close, further surrounded the bastion; each was protected by a metaward designed to stave off aggressive *dispellings* which were focused upon it. Two inner screens – wrought of blasphemy and keyed to the annihilation of devils – provided the tightest defense. *Symbols* adorned the flags of the courtyard; scribed on walls and doors were glyphs describing ruin and insanity.

Within the chapel – her gap within the *dimensional lock* – Soneillon began to *summon* her lesser kin in an unending torrent; chthonic succubi who seemed as dark reflections of herself, some degrees removed in power but formidable nonetheless.

[Mazikreen]: The *Paling* is down.

Soneillon ignored her; the demonesses began to take flight. They harried the devas who were now moving forward in determined waves.

Powerful *dispellings* began to target her defenses.

Shomei deployed the main strength of her devils, striking from east, south and west with a focus upon negating the transvalent screens. An erosion of the wards began, but the *dimensional lock* remained intact, impervious to the *superb dispellings* which struck it. Fallen exemplars and episemes pressed forward relentlessly.

The Infernalist stopped time, *teleported* to a distance of a mile from the keep, and struck it with a yet more potent *dispelling*, shattering the tight inner cordon. Still, the *lock* endured. Shomei swore, retreated beyond range, and waited.

Time recommenced. Devils surged toward Kyrtil's Burh.

\*

Realizing what had happened, Soneillon opened the mouth to an adjacent demiplane; a confined space where several hundred demons – including Abyssal nobility whom she had suborned – had been kept locked in close proximity to one another for far too long. They erupted with a fury which was utterly indiscriminate; an explosion of malice and spite which poured out into the world, intent on doing violence to whatever was nearest. Soneillon augmented them with a powerful spell.

Within the courtyard, the black axe of Carasch now moved in great arcs, cutting through swathes of

the dark celestials who flung themselves at him as though they were butter. His annihilating fire – a shroud of unbeing kindled by magic to greater intensity – burned those of lesser stature away before they even came close to him. None could withstand him.

He uttered a syllable; three Antagonists perished, along with a dozen other episemes: ash and smoke, borne away on a mordant wind. And another; a storm of blasphemous void scoured the keep and the countryside beyond of devils of less than once-exalted status. And a third; Armaros, Shomei's captain – reckoned greatest of the Thirteen – perished beneath it.

Hellfire engulfed him; he weathered it.

\*

At the last, Shomei had thrown the wyrm at the engagement. She circled above the keep, breathing great goutts of fire, carefully avoiding the scion. Demons disintegrated in droves; more than a few devils were caught in her discharges. Ahazu and Dhenu, once great Abyssal magnates, burned away within a line of destructive breath. Carasch prepared to engage her; Soneillon bade him otherwise.

The merlons on the Steeple melted as Qematiel unleashed ancient hellfire upon it, obliterating demons who jostled in the air above it. The dragon screamed; Soneillon had set about her neck, and Void pierced her scales. Qematiel powered vertically upwards, twisted her head, unleashed breath which should annihilate, groped with her claws. She thrashed wildly in the skies.

Soneillon clung tenaciously, enduring the heat, and drank of Qematiel's being: the quiddity of the wyrm began to falter; she was slowly unmade. Her ascent arrested; she began an erratic plummet, her head and tail spinning over, end to end. As they fell, the demoness moved over her and came to rest on her muzzle between her eyes; the world reeled around them both as she transfixed the wyrm with her gaze.

[Soneillon]: We are not so different, you and I. But your time has passed; you no longer belong. This is the Void [thus]. It is peace. It is your right. Do you wish it?

[Qematiel]: I cannot remember it.

[Soneillon]: Choose to trust me, or not. I will slay you either way.

[Qematiel]: I will take it.

"You were something glorious," Soneillon smiled gently, stroked the wyrm's great snout, and kissed her.

Qematiel – first, last and greatest of the hellfire wyrms, and the paragon of her kind – vanished in a dark fire into oblivion.

Soneillon returned to the melee.

\*

[Yeqon]: Almost...

Shomei turned to Irel, Who Smites – the only episeme whom she had not deployed into the combat, and raised an eyebrow.

“Stay here,” she instructed.

A *superb dispelling* of incredible power struck Soneillon.

[Yeqon]: Now. [Go *here*]

Shomei sensed her moment and stopped time, *teleporting* into the doorway of the chapel amid the chaotic fight which was underway. She paused momentarily to gain her bearings; Soneillon was in the process of slaying another seraph – the Prosecutor Pineme – and demons and fallen celestials clawed or hewed at one another nearby.

The Infernalist’s left hand began to coil temporality, a slow, purposeful movement which repeated *time stops* at regular twelve-second intervals. Her right charted a faster counterpoint, building hellfire in a rapid crescendo. There was no margin for error; if Shomei’s concentration faltered or she risked even one of her temporal interruptions to stretch beyond its safe duration, Soneillon, she knew, might finish her in an instant. But Shomei gave reality no opportunity to recommence.

Energy coalesced. From a subjective perspective, Shomei continued her motions for more than two minutes; outside of her bubble, no time had passed. The continuum in her vicinity threatened to snap under the pressure which she applied to it. Sweat poured off of her, as an unrealized maelstrom of power grew to incredible intensity. She emptied herself utterly. All power, all will, focused on a single Moment. That which must be done; that thing which she must have.

She *teleported* to a distance of twenty miles, beyond the range of the perception of Carasch.

Time began again.

Soneillon extinguished Pineme. A fraction of a second later, there was a detonation and she was engulfed in hellfire of unimaginable heat; an exquisite pain, which burned Void itself and pushed her to the brink of annihilation – where she teetered – but not quite beyond. The strength which she had sapped from her recent conquests had buoyed her to a point where she could withstand it; she sighed. *This girl is such a tease*, Soneillon thought.

[Shomei]: Well?

[Yeqon]: No. What now?

...

[Yeqon]: Mistress?

...

\*\*

Shomei hurled herself at an invisible barrier in a fury; Hellfire surged from her in waves as she raved. Beyond the confining circle stood Mostin, Teppu, Mulissu and Nwm; somewhat removed, Ortwine watched without emotion. Hindmost, the *Ahma*, who regarded her with concern.

Shomei fumed within the thaumaturgic diagram and glowered at Mostin and Eadric. The Alienist motioned; the others made their way in some relief from the chamber. He waited until her turbulence had subsided to a point where she could communicate.

“Very clever, Mostin,” she finally nodded, looking at the glyphs which contained her.

“Finding the apposite symbolism was difficult,” he agreed. “But I think I did a good job.”

“Will this argument be a presentation from both of you at once or a sequential attempt to change my perspective? How did you get out, Eadric?”

“Nercamay killed me; Nehael resurrected me.”

“Oh?” Mostin inquired. “The muse? What is she like?”

“Quite charming,” Eadric nodded.

“You treat death lightly, *Ahma*,” Shomei smiled. “I cannot afford to.”

“I do nothing of the sort,” he said stonily. “How much collateral damage did you cause, Shomei?”

“I? – None. All of my actions are intensely focused, *Ahma* – as you know. I do not thrash wildly about. Soneillon’s demons, on the other hand, are no doubt running riot.”

“The universe does not consist entirely of *you*, Shomei.”

“Yes, *Ahma*, it does: that’s precisely my point.”

“And the *I* as relational?” Mostin asked. “Didn’t your *Sela* mention something like that to you in one of your more religious moments?”

“You have already been in dialogue?” Eadric was astonished. “You haven’t been *communicating* very well, Shomei.”

“It’s none of your damn business.” Shomei said.

“*When will you assume some responsibility, you petulant child?*” Eadric thundered.

Mostin raised a hand. “It seems that I must act as arbiter of your passions as well, Eadric; perhaps a little restraint is in order?”

“I...” Eadric began, and then calmed himself. “Yes, Mostin; thank-you. Shomei, the *Sela* asked me to remind you that *the Flame needs nothing. It is always Perfect. It cannot Fall.*”

She looked uncertain. “I am not sure what...”

“It is my *function* as the *Ahma* with regard to *you* to impress this point upon you.”

“Your perfection is certainly achievable, Shomei,” Mostin agreed unexpectedly. “The *Web of Motes* revealed as much. But there is some kind of *gap* which prevents the catenary from forming. I cannot intuit precisely what the gap is; its order is Aeonic and thus inscrutable to the *Web*.”

“I do not understand...”

*Pharamne's Urn* landed in the dirt near the Alienist. Mostin twitched. Shomei gaped. Eadric turned his head and swallowed.

Soneillon smiled and approached. She had appeared in the guise of the Trempan peasant-girl. “There is your *gap*, Mostin. Ah...don't touch it; my gesture was purely for dramatic effect.”

“Soneillon...” Eadric began.

She struck Eadric's face soundly with her palm, flooring him. Mostin winced. Soneillon sighed, drew close to the thaumaturgic diagram, placed her hands behind her back, and inspected Shomei as though she were an exhibit on display. She arched an eyebrow.

“She is very *short*, Eadric,” Soneillon remarked, turning to him.

“You are very strong,” the *Ahma* stood groggily. He realized that she had never, before, committed any act of violence against him.

“I am not sure what you mean by the *Urn* being the *gap*,” Mostin licked his lips and looked at the amphora at his feet. “It is merely a source of great *power*. It is some kind of impediment to her Self-realization?”

Shomei sat within the diagram and groaned.

“I do believe your *short friend* just had a little epiphany,” Soneillon smiled at Eadric.

Shomei sighed. “The power is the problem, Mostin. The *Urn* is external to and greater than myself; it is of the transcendent order, and is not-*I*. Possession of it – and a focus of myself *upon* it – and my own *perfection* – which must necessarily be described in terms of *I* – might be deemed mutually exclusive. I can choose one route or the other.”

“And you would deem perfection preferable?” Eadric asked.

“Well obviously, yes.”

“This irony should be preserved for all posterity,” Eadric observed drily.

Soneillon approached Eadric. He gave a nervous smile. Her eyes bored into him. “You seem to have lost my token, Eadric.”

“Well, I...”

“No matter. I have another.” She reached within her pocket and withdrew a scarf of black samite which cracked as she unfurled it, causing him to start. “For the time being, you remain *mine*.” She spoke through gritted teeth and tied it tightly around his wrist, cutting off his circulation. “Let's see if you can go a week, this time.”

“Soneillon, I...”

“Later, dear.” She smiled sweetly.

The demoness turned back toward Shomei and regarded her with a mixture of scepticism and curiosity; the Infernalist appeared to have regained her focus, and seemed calmly absorbed in herself. Soneillon slowly walked toward the circle and looked intensely at her. She placed her foot within, scraping dirt across the diagram and breaking its confining power.

“Do not...” Mostin gave a horrified look.

Soneillon spoke softly. “*Drishhtavanaasi varca avadhya tvamayaa.*”

“*Leika kunnan sauili Thiudan, kuntho.*” Shomei replied. “*Sezho saizhia thatei saizhio. Antharuhthan? Saizhi?*”

“*Nitya iisi.*”

There was a pause. Fear gripped Eadric.

“I do like *Irel*,” Soneillon remarked. “I didn’t see him.”

“Yes, he’s sweet; I kept him back. He smites, you know.” Shomei stood.

“*Really?* How intriguing. Perhaps I might *borrow* him?”

“I am sure some arrangement can be made,” Shomei nodded. She gave a sidelong glance toward Eadric. Soneillon caught the exchange.

“But not before midsummer.” The demoness reached down, picked up the *Urn*, and smiled at Mostin.

“*Mine*,” she said.

\*Thou art That

### Exchange Between Soneillon and Shomei

This is rendered for the purpose of the story in the Tongue of Shûth (Soneillon) and the ancient Borchian dialect (Shomei); at this point, Eadric knows only that *something has been communicated*:

Soneillon: “I cannot (bring myself to) harm you because you have seen the Sun as I do.”

Shomei: “If you refer to his potential to realize that Sovereignty, I understand. I saw that you have seen the thing which I have seen. And the other one? She sees?”

Soneillon: “She always has.”

### Soneillon’s Bitch-Slap

Soneillon’s famous bitch-slap was made against a flat-footed Eadric and consisted of the equivalent of a surprise action trip attack followed by a full tendrill attack routine to subdue.

The attack was glossed (or ‘skinned,’ to use modern parlance) as a single slap.

Eadric sustained 780 points of nonlethal damage and was knocked prone.