

Effluxion – Part 1: Annihilation

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

[Soneillon]: ...

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Nehael shot.

Eadric sat upon the rampart of the outer defense at Galda with his back against the parapet and regarded her. She had been standing in the same position for more than nine hours, discharging arrows with an unwavering rhythm which seemed to measure time itself. The goddess had loosed thirty-three thousand and eleven missiles; she had killed thirty-three thousand and eleven ghouls: Nehael herself included the Abyssal type, ghouls and bonedrinkers – as well as several more obscure varieties of undead – in the rather broad category of *ghoul*. Eadric could not see the ghouls which Nehael had targeted; they were more than five miles away.

“Don’t you get bored?” He asked.

Her pace slowed; she drew a single arrow and released it. At the limit of his hearing, an *earthquake* rumbled. She resumed her previous rhythm.

“That would seem a more effective strategy,” he observed.

“It is,” she replied. “But I do not wish to create a fault zone.”

“Exactly how many are there, altogether?” Eadric inquired.

“Altogether?” Her measure did not falter. “About fifteen million. Coming this way? Only around four.”

“Fifteen *million*?”

“That’s just the ghouls,” Nehael continued shooting. “The vampires, spectres, wraiths and other heliophobes remain under the *Pall of Dhatri* for the time being; as soon as its magic fails and they find safe holes, they will begin to migrate north and operate by night.”

“Safe holes?”

“Villages which have been evacuated and overrun,” Nehael explained.

“But why such enormous numbers?” Eadric asked.

She smiled, but the tempo of her archery remained unchanged. “The Thalassine was a rich and populous region, Eadric; now everyone is *dead*.” As her bowstring hummed, the last word was spoken with what may have been anger: an emotion which Eadric could not recall Nehael having before evinced.

Ten thousand yards away, a ghoul dropped to the ground, its throat pierced by an arrow.

“Nwm informed me that you believe that some kind of *reconquista* is possible,” Eadric spoke dubiously.

She nodded. “It is both possible and desirable. It also requires that you *grow up*.”

“You deem me...unready?”

Nehael nodded. “Your values are childish from my perspective. The world you would seek to build requires a more objective love.”

“Nehael, when we spoke at Shomei’s cottage, you implied that some *potential* existed between us...”

She shook her head, and continued shooting. “Still, you are fixated on these quaint notions. What you inferred was not what I clearly stated. Whatever *lustfulness* I might possess, I would not cause suffering to any.”

“You speak of Soneillon?”

“Why not? Soneillon is no less deserving than any other.”

“And your own needs?”

“There is no *I*, Eadric. That is Shomei’s province.”

He groaned. “I cannot hold these contradictory truths. I wish only to relate simply.”

A look of exasperation crossed her face. She drew an arrow, nocked it, turned, and aimed it toward him.

“You wouldn’t...” He said nervously.

She shot it into his leg. Eadric screamed in agony.

“Are you *insane*?” He gasped with wide eyes.

“No. You are being selfish, *Ahma*,” Nehael said calmly. “You need to lose that.”

“For a deity of compassion, you have some pretty strange ideas.” Eadric groaned and shook.

“Well, that would be the wrathful part,” she resumed her previous rhythm, shooting at the southern horizon.

“And as to the causation of suffering? What do you call this?”

“Pain, *Ahma*.”

“A simple remonstrance would have been sufficient,” he spoke through a clenched jaw, and winced as he tried to extract the arrow.

“I am not the *Sela, Ahma*,” she replied. “I do not have the time or luxury to be *kind* to you, and algeis may impel you. Leave the dart; I will see to it in due course.”

“Even so...”

She paused, and sighed. “Eadric. You need to put this romantic nonsense behind you; it cannot dictate your thoughts or actions. One may not discriminate as to *where* to apply compassion, only *how*, and sentimental notions will interfere with your capacity to demonstrate it most effectively. Concentrate. The pain will help you focus.”

“I...”

“No.”

He entered *saizhan*. The pain remained, but was only one amongst millions: the living, the dead; birds, animals; faeries, demons, celestials. Their combined magnitude was unguessable, and the totality struck his awareness as a barrage of sensation which screamed torment and misery at his very substance, overwhelming his identity. But the fundamental perspective observed it calmly, and did not falter.

“Much better.” Nehael spoke softly, and knelt beside him. She carefully removed the arrow; no mark of the wound remained. He looked at her, and a kernel of desire for her began to form; immediately, his sense of self reasserted itself. The Moment was gone.

He inhaled sharply, and stared at her in amazement. “You perceive this suffering always?”

“It is always there.” She laughed.

“How do you bear it?” He felt utterly chastened.

“No *I* could, so it is a non-issue. Do not *worry*. Midwinter has passed; the days are lengthening. The Sun is returning.” She smiled.

Nehael stood, and shot.

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Thousands of tents and pavillions comprised the camp at Galda, occupying an area of some eighty acres. It was enclosed by a crenellated stone wall forty feet thick and sixty high which had been erected by the diligent efforts of a hundred flamines and scrollbearers over the course of several months. *Walls of stone* and indentured elementals summoned by Uediian priests had completed the initial construction; the entire edifice had been augmented and *hardened* by Nwm, Mesikammi, Teppu and Hlioth to withstand both physical and magical assault. The Preceptor had raised seven enormous bastions around its circuit, two of which flanked the single gate of adamant which gave access to the place. Upon the outer face of the valves were the most potent *symbols* ever wrought: runes of Tree and Sun which described a swift demise for things which should already be dead.

The camp was removed from the town proper – of comparable dimension – at a closest distance of around a half-mile; an outer earthwork faced with stone and with a circumference of more than a

league encompassed both. The walls of Galda town itself had likewise been buttressed; most of its natives had departed some weeks earlier. The two were connected by *teleportation circles* and *tree portals* to allow the swift redeployment of troops.

Nwm stood within the centre of the encampment beside a muddy field which had been cleared of tents, soldiers and horses, and sighed. Although it pained him, there was no denying the logic of Mostin's suggestion; it would save resources, and nothing within the combined power of those present could rival it for effectiveness. The Preceptor gave a resigned look to Hlioth, who returned one of equal sympathy.

[Nwm]: Very well. The space is ready.

In the middle of the camp at Galda, a three-hundred foot tall edifice of infernal adamant appeared, blotting out the sun and immediately drawing the attention of everyone within the circuit of the stronghold. Massive bartizans flanked a central tower, from which machiolated platforms and corbels depended. Wide nozzles of unknown purpose protruded from its walls.

There was a brief silence, and then a tall doorway opened onto a balcony at a height of thirty fathoms. Six creatures with many mouths and appendages slowly floated out, bobbing in the breeze, and blew on clarions: a discordant fanfare of tremendous volume which shook the ground and made all who heard it nauseous. Great purple drapes unfurled; lights of every known hue – and some of wholly unfamiliar color – strobed brilliantly in the sky. Mostin – wearing an ornate puce mitre, three feet high and bedecked with jewels – strode forth onto the platform, and spread his arms wide.

“I have arrived,” he announced to the world.

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Around thirty wizards – including eight from the ruling body of the Collegium – had accompanied Mostin, on the condition that they might abide within the tower and come and go at their leisure: a stipulation supported by Daunton, who recognized the relative safety of Mostin's fortress. Mostin had grudgingly assigned suites to Waide, Jael, Muthollo, Creq, Droom, Troap, Sarpin and Daunton himself. Lesser mages had been forced to share chambers; despite the enormous extradimensional volume of the *Infernal Tower*, Mostin preferred to keep a large portion out of bounds.

The presence of the wizards was met with mixed emotions; many of the more conservative and influential Templars viewed them with suspicion or disdain. Ortwine received them graciously, and immediately procured a well-furnished pavillion from Troap, with whom she had enjoyed long-standing good relations. Their presence in the camp, the sidhe nodded appreciatively, would inject a much-needed *civility* into affairs; even with the numerous Wyrish aristocracy, the prevailing religious sobriety was far too *austere* for Ortwine's tastes.

Eadric spied a diminutive figure who walked purposefully through the camp, wearing a cloak of deep blue – Irknaan's cloak, he knew. His leg still tingling from its recently-experienced trauma, he intercepted her, intent on determining her disposition.

Sho turned to him, and raised an eyebrow. “Yes, *Ahma?*”

“It has been some time,” Eadric regarded her with curiosity. “I am intrigued: your vehicle – Goetia – would seem to be a path with its end in sight. Your maker has a certain...dispensation in this regard; but other wizards do not have the luxury of calling upon the previous Hell.”

She looked at him *that way*. It made him feel distinctly uncomfortable.

“There will always be devils, *Ahma*,” Sho answered. “You should not trouble yourself on that count.”

“I do not mean to offend, Sho, but there is a question which I would like to ask you.”

“My ego is robust, *Ahma*,” Sho said drily. “You are unlikely to cause me discomfort.”

“Do you have a *religious* vision, Sho? Some article of faith by which you abide?”

“No. I am a *wizard*, *Ahma*; such notions are uncommon amongst my kind.”

“And devils?” He asked. “Their...perspective is one for which you have some special sympathy?”

“Devils are *tools*, *Ahma*,” she replied. “But I confess a certain fondness for some of them, especially those who might be deemed high in the *Old Order*.”

“You speak of Azazel and his ilk?”

Sho nodded. “They are of a particular vintage.”

“Hence my comment regarding Goetia as an increasingly obscure vehicle.”

Sho raised an eyebrow. “The world is smaller than it used to be, and two hundred legions is a *lot* of devils, *Ahma*.”

“Yes, I suppose it is.” His expression was one of concern. “Do you consider yourself...unique, Sho? Authentic? I ask because there are certain *resonances* with your progenitor.”

“I am very much my own *self*, *Ahma*,” she gave a quizzical look. “Whatever similarities you perceive are entirely superficial.”

“It’s just that your *personae* are so similar.”

Sho shrugged. “A *persona* is exactly that, *Ahma*, and nothing more. Deeper truths are more often concealed.”

“Shomei, I...”

“I am Sho, *Ahma*,” she smiled.

“Indeed; I apologize. There is a profundity surrounding you,” Eadric sighed. “In any iteration. Do you have a *goal*, Sho? A *purpose*?”

“Only to become myself, *Ahma*,” Sho replied. “Although I have yet to define what that is to my satisfaction. I am on the verge of transvalency; it may provide additional insights.”

He gaped. “*Already*? You are something extraordinary, Sho.”

“Yes, *Ahma*. I know. I will not forget it: of that, you can be sure.”

“And Mei? She is here?” He asked.

“She is within the tower,” Sho nodded. “With Orolde.”

“Are you...close? By which, I mean, do you hold her in any special regard?”

“No, *Ahma*,” Sho shook her head. “Sho is Sho and Mei is Mei. And Shomei is Shomei.”

“I see,” he said. “But both you and your *sister* – if that term is appropriate – have a particular loyalty to Mostin.”

Sho nodded; her expression was one of mild confusion. “Of course. He has been a source of unconditional support. Mostin is uncommonly *generous* for a wizard, *Ahma*. His absurd pomp and egotism are merely a *persona*. And he will always advocate for that thing which he values most.”

“And what might that be?” Eadric inquired, raising his eyebrows.

“Potential,” Sho smiled. “And the will to realize it.”

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The Embassy – the Fourth Effluxion of Kaalaanala – sat in her saddle and gazed north, her sight piercing all veils. The hood which framed where her visage might have been was empty: within was a blankness which admitted no light; an impalpable void. Disintegrating fire wreathed her; an aura wherein all trace of being was extinguished. Although the shape of her mount was equine, its nature was also chthonic: a powerful *anala* bound and confined by her terrible will to serve as the steed for the avatar of the Fire of Death.

Undead surrounded her in numberless droves, driven unconsciously by her intention into some coherence of purpose. Few amongst her living slaves might even approach her: Rishih and Naatha – feared potentates and great immortals in their own right – cowered in her presence. Anumid lavished praise upon her; an unctuous sycophant regarded with contempt amongst most of the remaining Cheshnite magnates, but still commanding the respect of the remnant of the Convocations. A fourth part of Dhatri’s host accompanied the Embassy. The rest, which moved with the bloated goddess and the entourage of the demilich Idyam had struck out toward the northeast and crawled or lurched toward Wyre: a great swell of hunger which, now beyond the darkness of the *Pall*, was revealed as a relentless tide of death and putrefaction which consumed everything in its path.

Galda was encompassed entirely; a cordon of rotting flesh at a distance of two leagues, beyond the ambit of the scions which nestled in the vale north of the town. The Embassy was acutely aware of the diminishment which the Oak and Elm would force upon her undead minions, and had prepared magicks to counteract the effects of the Trees on her troops; until she had positioned herself exactly for the assault, her spells were held in reserve. Three great hubs were established – south, northeast and northwest of the Wyrish defenses – which, although beyond the inner purlieu of the scions, still fell within the circuit established by the *ludjas*. Magical scrutiny by the Cheshnites was denied by quercine power within the area, and reconnaissance was achieved by flights of shadow demons, succubi and palrethees: fiends which, by virtue of their scarcity, were now viewed as a valuable resource by the immortal elite.

Choach – returned again from his concealed phylactery – had entrenched in the westernmost presidio. To Prahar’s chagrin, the Embassy had appointed the lich – despite his own clear seniority in such matters – as her general above him: Prahar’s own instability might make him a liability, and the situation was too precarious to risk a whimsical assault by the great death knight, whatever his own prowess, or that of his troops. The range east and north of Galda was commanded by Naatha, with a bulwark of magi beneath Rishih, together with many of the staunchest remaining demons and those troops whom Temenun had abandoned. The southernmost concentration – the largest by number, if not in native power – Kaalaanala’s avatar had taken to herself directly: a sea of rotten flesh which, when the time came, she would imbue with Void and ferocious hunger.

The Embassy bided her time for a while.

Void moved in deep, imperceptible currents.

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Soneillon lounged upon the bed within the main suite at Deorham, studying the glyphs etched into the tablet which Tozinak had bestowed upon her, and considered their import. Some agency was at work, although she could not determine precisely *what*; it was neither Kaalaanala, nor the Cherry itself – which, being comprised of lust, lacked volition in the conventional sense. Something hitherto unrevealed had prompted the wizard to transpose Jovol’s spell into a minor key; it was no parody, and the artistry in the dweomer was immediately apparent to her. It was also something utterly beyond Tozinak’s capacity to achieve. And Tozinak still had the original spell – *A Flame Precedes the Aeon* – locked somewhere within his Cherry-addled mind. *Vhorzhe?* She considered. The entity was capable, no doubt, although whether desirous was a different question entirely.

The Apparition strove to manifest; of that, there could be no doubt. And other chthonic forces were also active; impulses which she could not hope to fully comprehend. Soneillon began to wonder whether another *Bhiti* – one of an order comparable to the Fires of Death – might be implicated. If so, the *medium* through which it was operating was obscure; if Delirium or some approximal region of Dream, she should have felt it herself. If it were confined within the Green – as was Kaalaanala – then its presence would have been long known. Kaalaanala had been the reciprocal payment; the price forced by Void to tolerate the Abysmal *ludjas*. But what if some other balance had been struck?

The demoness rose and exited the chamber onto a small stoop which overlooked the curtilage below. All of the structural damage had been repaired, and Carasch had been dismissed – temporarily, at least. Most of her other minions had been slain or had fled, although a trio of succubi once sworn to Graz’zt – Mazikreen, Ilistet and Chepez the Vicious – still attended her. Around a hundred demons remained loose in western Trempa, making mischief; none were of a mind to submit themselves again to the former Queen of Throile, and eliminating them or driving them away would be necessary to appease the *Ahma* – whose current mood of contrition regarding her should probably be enjoyed for as long as possible.

Hard beside the chapel, the Blackthorn scion dozed; snow sat upon its barbed limbs, and the textures of its twisted trunk intimated at the very process of dissolution. Soneillon glided down into the courtyard, folded her wings, and approached the Tree: its *attitude* toward her – if its disposition could be described in such terms – seemed benign; somehow sympathetic. She sighed. This *Treeishness* was difficult to fathom. She pressed her hands against its bark, feeling its energy; an inevitable

urge toward the *ending* of things. But not after the nullificatory fashion of Cheshne's unmanifest Shadow, the Apparition or *Aabhaasa* of Shûthite lore. More, a *délabrement* in a helical stream which did not deny new beginnings. *Cheshne was more than Her Shadow*; of this, the demoness had no doubt. *She* – the Void – was awake; no longer slumbering within the bounds of *ens* as tenuously described by her oneiric form. And Soneillon, in whom all infinities collided, might alone in her psychosis apprehend a great, dark, devouring love.

A sudden urge overcame her.

Soneillon gestured, and the door to the chapel creaked open. Inside, all was again ordered and pristine, though nonetheless still profaned; the guts and ichor which had spilled in from the conflict of the previous day had been scoured clean. She entered and extended tendrils which seemed to caress the floor, feeling the draught which issued from the crypt below.

Carefully, she lifted a three-hundred pound flag of granite and set it aside, revealing steep steps which led down into a narrow space with a low, vaulted ceiling. She descended slowly; a dozen sarcophagi were crowded into the sepulchre, along with smaller caskets and urns: Eadric's direct forebears, and uncles and cousins removed by degrees. She inspected those which seemed the most recent, brushing away cobwebs, until she found the one she was looking for: directly below the altar, a narrow funerary coffer of marble, unadorned except for its simple brass plaque:

THIOSTRI, Lady Deorham

628-656 TR

Dame of Witnung's Chase

Daughter of Nân of Jaive

Beloved Wife of Moad Saul, Baronet

And of Orm and Eadric, Mother

Soneillon folded her arms. "You would seem to have been a remarkable woman, Thiostri. Your elder son gave lessons to the Mind of Oronthon, and your younger is his Breath; the last prosopopeia of Radiance. And I do not believe in coincidences."

She knelt, and lit an offertory taper. It flickered uncertainly as it illuminated the space, wavering in the chill breeze drawn through cracks in the chamber's walls. The demoness focused and drew her knife, opening a deep cut in her palm. She squeezed her fist, and ichor dripped onto the sarcophagus. Potent magic coursed through her; even a vanished archetype might have responded to its entreaty.

"*Tyakh, asrij svaam*: an offering, my own blood. Were you a mortal woman, or one divine?"

There was no sound; no movement; no shade which spoke. No thing. The taper guttered and went out. Peace, and an utter stillness. The darkness was perfect; unmarred.

Soneillon sat in silence. *Pasyaami. Tvam jaane*: I see. Thou, I know.

She pondered for a long while before finally cursing, standing and exiting the crypt. Her form altered, and her wings retracted and vanished: no sense in alarming the Oronthonists beyond the necessary. The demoness clad herself in sombre black – a high-collared robe which encased her form with an appropriate propriety – and drew her hair back after the fashion of an Orthodox Sister. Throwing a great, atrament cloak about herself, she dreamed her way to Galda, manifesting discreetly beside the war pavillion of the *Ahma* – a large affair which had been erected after the

previous had been blasted away by Shomei. The daylight was waning; the voices inside the tent were intense, agitated and full of worry.

Soneillon opened a heavy curtain of canvas and entered quietly; Eadric was taking counsel with his captains: Saints, Talions, great magnates of Wyre and the chiefs among the Illuminated. She lowered her hood: her presence was at once both disquieting and magnetic. Her beauty – which familiarity had somehow caused the *Ahma* to forget – transfixed those who gazed upon her; silence fell within. Eadric squinted; he had not encountered this particular façade before. While her features remained unchanged, the masque of the coquettish peasant-girl was entirely absent, replaced by a solemn focus and composure. If anything, her assumed guise – which suggested modesty and abnegation – made the succubus even more alluring.

Saint Tahl the Incorruptible, who wore an *Eye of Palamabron* around his neck – the mate of that borne by the *Ahma* – glanced toward Eadric. Immediately, he had apprehended the truths which clashed within her, and knew who she was. Many others within guessed: Soneillon's eyes were apertures through which form and Void regarded one another. Around the table, a dozen hands came to rest instinctively upon hilts and pommels, although the likely futility of any such gesture was lost to none, and least of all to Eadric; he knew that she could kill them all with a fleeting thought.

Soneillon said nothing; her face was impassive.

“A brief recess, *Ahma*?” Tahl inquired diplomatically. Inwardly, he grappled with the multiplicity of forms which he could perceive in her.

Eadric nodded.

When they were alone, Eadric approached her and gave an inquiring look. “Perhaps I should thank you for not appearing naked upon the conference table. Are you here to ensure my fidelity?”

She offered a hand. “Now is not the time for levity, Eadric. Come to Deorham.”

“Soneillon, we have only hours before the assault begins.”

“Come,” she insisted. She was nervous. “There is something you need to *see*.”

He narrowed his eyes; this trepidation was most unlike her. “I assume I should be prepared to be upset?”

“You should just be *prepared*,” Soneillon advised. “Although, in retrospect, everything makes perfect sense.”

“As you are making little,” Eadric opined.

“You spring from Void, Eadric; the Sun is born in the dark.”

He swallowed; the memory of his own, isolated, second death still haunted him: a monad bereft, surrounded by night. “If this is some effort to distort...”

Soneillon hissed. “Trust me, or do not! The choice is yours; and the *via negativa* is an artifact of *Saizhan*: this is *your* description of truth, not mine.”

“Really?” He asked sceptically. “And how might you characterize that?”

“*Ni thatuh, jah thata; ni bai, jah nih,*” she half-smiled.

“You are most vexatious.”

“*Waihtai ni, wairthi.* The epistemic must become the ontic – or rather the meta-ontic.”

“And now even Soneillon would wax philosophical?” He groaned.*

“Only when all else fails,” she said drily. “How much do you really trust me, Eadric?”

Eadric looked at her, and shifted uneasily. He guessed her purpose. “You are proposing annihilation; that if I strip myself of my self, my Self will kindle? You have offered me this before, although its guise was more sinister at that time; the outcome crueller.”

“Times have changed.” She drew close; her fingers trembled as she reached out and touched his face. “Are both *saizhan* and extinction not unattainable? It can be sweet, Eadric; death and climax. But *saizhan* – if it is the transmetaphysic it purports to be – will sustain you.”

He sighed. “Must *everything* be couched in terms of death and sex?”

“Eventually. Am I not Soneillon?” She laughed. For a moment, the playfulness returned. “And I already hold you longer than I should.”

He looked at her curiously.

“Consider the Sun, Eadric. What is the *Ahma* – the manifest Breath of Oronthon in the World – if not that light? That is your legacy. This time between the winter solstice and the vernal equinox should be yours; you will be Nehael’s from spring until midsummer. Properly, I do not get you until autumn.”

He gawked. “And the summer months?”

“That would be your *short friend*.”

“It might have been nice to have been consulted in this arrangement,” Eadric grumbled. “And if this is the ‘empty quarter,’ so to speak, then why am I still beholden to you?”

She stared at him, her eyes penetrating to his core. “Because I am the jealous one, Eadric. I will always find it hard to let go. Besides, we started late this year. And this is your *arrangement* – or an arrangement made to accommodate *you*. Now, will you come to Deorham? Your third passing need not be final, merely complete.”

“And you would then call me back?” He asked. “You suggested before that if I jumped, you might catch me.”

“No,” Soneillon shook her head. “You must bring yourself back; Self-emanate *ex nihilo*. I can only make a cradle for you; ease your passage into oblivion with soft words and a warm embrace.”

“This would seem a task of more than middling difficulty,” Eadric remarked ironically.

“The *Ahma* is sempiternal, and will exist for as long as the World endures. I cannot destroy it,

although I can deprive it of its physical dwelling. If *Saizhan* is what you claim it is, you may cross the Abyss with impunity and wake on the other side.”

“Awaken to what?”

“To Regency, Eadric. To your own incandescence.”

“And what does that *mean*, exactly?” He asked.

“Amongst other things, that I will have cause to fear you,” she said ruefully. “Well?”

He sighed. “Do I need to bring anything?”

“Your self only.” Soneillon gave an ironic smile. A sacrificial robe appeared in each of her hands. “Now. Would you prefer black, or white?”

A mile to the south, Nehael paused briefly; the *Ahma* had all of the tools he needed: what he did with them was up to him. She drew; her bow sang rhythmically again in the dusk as she continued to loose arrow after arrow into the hordes of ghouls which pressed ever closer.

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Eadric sat cross-legged upon the sarcophagus and glanced suspiciously at the ichor which stained it: a testament to Soneillon’s previous necromancy. “And here I was, thinking there were no taboos left to break.”

Soneillon said nothing, and lit a black *candle of invocation*. Its flame burned the color of soot.

“What, exactly, are you invoking?” He inquired.

“I believe you know the answer to that,” the demoness replied. She wore her most malefic aspect now: a shape of terrible darkness; ravenous, clawed and fanged, with pinions which stretched to fill the chamber. Soneillon moved, and tendrils of madness and oblivion writhed about her. She slid forward suddenly, and Void held him in a vice. *Kaalakamala*, the Lotus of Death; she was delirium, and despair.

Eadric swallowed. “Somehow, I think I like you best like this.”

She regarded him closely. “That is well.”

“Will there be pain?” He asked dubiously.

“If you like.” Her claws, razor-sharp, pricked the skin on his back.

“And if I don’t?”

“Then there won’t.” She relaxed her grip.

“That might be preferable,” he nodded.

She arched an eyebrow. “If you are having second thoughts, Eadric, now would probably be a good

time to articulate them. Would you like to reconsider?”

“Yes. No. Proceed.”

As you wish, Ahma.

Talons sank into the granite lintel above his head and wings encased him, cocooning him in unbeing. Around him, form and substance disintegrated; he felt his strength begin to slowly ebb away. Like a heady wine, Soneillon drank *ens* from him, savoring its potency, until his brilliance had dimmed to the merest flicker, a guttering lamp borne above a yawning chasm without root or essence. The magnitude of the Void was immeasurable; its profundity, unguessable.

Without fear or rancor, the *Ahma* gazed long and deep into the Abyss; she held him at the brink of annihilation for what seemed an eternity: Aeons wheeled past him as infinities were born, unfolded and died. He would have remained there indefinitely, and the impetus to go further finally arose not from himself, but from her: she urged him on without her, and he blessed her for it. Beyond Nothingness, he beheld the shining emptiness which neither was nor was not: the Fundamental without category.

Seek the Dragon. She is waiting. Void clenched softly, and snuffed out the last iota of light. Ecstasy and death converged, and in that fraction of a second Eadric understood her absolutely: what drove her, what she represented, what she must give up. He was awestruck; the *kius* was resolved, complete. His body was instantly consumed; no trace remained, save a scarf of black samite only. Soneillon – drunk with radiance – lay down upon the tomb, her wings draped over its sides, and silently wept.

Finally, reluctantly, she roused herself and stood, once again assuming her human form with its funereal garb. She now had the bitterest task of all. Bile rose in her throat. She clenched her teeth, closed her eyes, and reached out with her mind.

[Soneillon]: It is done. Nwm must conjure his herald in the hour before sunrise. Look to the Blackthorn at Deorham.

[Nehael/*Eleos*]: (Empathy). Soneillon...

[Soneillon]: Save it.

The demoness mindfully folded the token, placed it within a pocket, and climbed the steps into the chapel. She closed the door behind her and entered the courtyard. The air was cold and the night was moonless; the stars glistened above, whispering expectantly to one another. Soneillon took *Pharamne's Urn* and placed it carefully within the bole of the scion; immediately, she was diminished as its power left her. Veiling herself in shadows, she prepared to launch herself skywards: for almost nine months, she would walk on dark paths until the Sun fell within her orbit again.

The slightest breeze alerted her to the sudden presence of another; a statuesque figure who towered above her. She turned and gave an inquiring look.

“It was indicated that you might like some company,” Irel bowed.

“Indeed?” Soneillon gave a small smile. “And yet it is not midsummer. Why has your mistress dismissed you?”

“I was never compacted, if you recall; she merely intimated that I might come. I believe the *Sela* spoke with her and suggested it. I will leave, if you prefer.”

“I did not say that,” she said wryly. “But it may be that you cannot endure where I am to go. I will wander through nightmares, Irel; into Delirium and beyond; Outside; through the space between the stars and into the Void.”

“Then you must strive hard to keep me safe,” the deva replied with an even humor. “That I might prevent you from straying too far.”

Soneillon looked up at him and sighed. “Thank-you, Irel. I think I should like that very much.”

Eadric was gone, reduced to nihility. But the *Ahma* abode in *saizhan*. He would ignite with the dawn.

A dawn which was still six hours away.

*Translational Note:

Ni thatuh, jah thata; ni bai, jah nih: Neither this nor that; neither both nor neither.

Waihtai ni, wairthi.: That which is not, becomes.

**The original *kius* regarding Eadric’s relationship with Soneillon was framed as *Hwa Soneo ith ni bai afhwapnan jah saizhan thau ni maht ist laiston?* , i.e. “What is Soneillon, if both *saizhan* and extinction are not unattainable?”

*

Effluxion – Part 2: Small Hours

The night air was motionless, and stifling. The stench of death filled it.

Wyrish troops manned the towers and parapets of Galda town and the nearby camp; elite companies of Templars mustered within the inner perimeter. Nehael – Red Nehael – rode alone along the outer rampart, her gaze turned south. Before her, a sea of undead seethed and roiled. Her mind’s eye, which could glimpse ten times further, encountered the same horror magnified a hundredfold.

Still, she shot; each dart which she loosed now caused the earth to convulse, or grasses and vines to grow in explosive violence. Her enemy perished by the battalion; legions replaced them.

[Hlioth]: Now. Shoot [here]

Nehael shot.

The arrow struck the Earth, which shuddered. Hlioth, Teppu and Mesikammi set forth their power: a

jade light began to kindle. First, as a pillar, it then erupted as a curtain of shimmering, emerald fire which tore a course six miles in circumference, describing a circle centered on the Elm scion to the north. Nehael watched impassively as it encompassed Galda and penetrated deep into the undead host, stretching upwards into a dome; her deific perception felt it sink beneath her feet. The Green Witch had encapsulated them, sealing off a great multitude of the enemy within. There was a slow surge; a building vibrancy: Viridity coursed. Every atom was energized.

A million undead within the sphere desiccated: a charnel vapor which swiftly dispersed on a purifying wind. An uncanny green light and a profound silence prevailed – none other amongst the enemy might penetrate the barrier and enter within.

[Hlioth]: We'll see how long that holds. But I am already weary. And Teppu is empty; Shomei has *much* to answer for.

[Nehael]: I see the emanation beyond the curtain. And she, I: she is less than a league distant. She is angry.

[Hlioth]: I imagine I would be wasting my time if I advised that you wait till sunrise?

Nehael spurred her horse, *Sura* over the parapet, and rode toward the Embassy.

Cautious, and as yet unprepared for confrontation, Kaalaanala's Fourth Effluxion withdrew.

**

The spirit of the *Eleos* soared above the World. Dimensions – which were no more than perspectives – cycled below her: Wyre, Faerie, Mulhuk, Throile; the Viridescent Heaven of the *Ahma*. The infarction which was Kaalaanala; and beyond, a great clamor at the Veils, as their Mistresses hurled magicks of awful power. The Tree: enduring; oblivious.

On a mountain, the goddess manifested an avatar – a slender maiden, dressed in white – and sat beneath the Yew-*ludja* in perfect *saizhan*. Turning her thought to a prior infinity, she grasped an idea, and Magnitude welled suddenly around her. A tempest of Radiance ensued, the *Ansin Leoma* or Lambent Presence of Oronthon: it illuminated the heaven with such ferocity that Light alone might be perceived. Its currents surrounded her, suffused her, became her.

Her focus narrowed, and a passageway opened. Enitharmon, Marshal of the Host, stepped through. He abased himself before her.

“*Faheth*,” he breathed. The light receded.

“Yes,” she said unsurely, shook her head, and gestured – she had always been *Faheth*. The seraph rose smoothly; his frame – of perfect, titanic proportion – dwarfed her. But his countenance remained lowered in obeisance: he would not, or could not, meet her gaze.

She smiled and stood. “You might kneel,” she suggested.

He did so.

“That we might regard one another, not in deference,” she raised an eyebrow. The *Eleos* reached up

and cradled his massive visage within her hands, inviting him to look at her. “Your sword, if you please.”

Mindfully, he drew his weapon – more than twice as tall as she – from its scabbard across his back, and proffered it upon open palms before her .

“Good,” the *Eleos* touched it gently. “This is no longer required.”

The blade, *Shard of Thought*, shivered instantly and was broken, its fragments wheeling slowly and eerily through space before dissolving into a fine mist. She stretched up on her toes and kissed his forehead, and the *Seal of Truth and Agency* which he bore vanished, flaring briefly in her hand before being absorbed.

“The Thought has changed.”

Enitharmon sighed, as a great burden and responsibility left him forever.

“Your tenure is ended; all of your duties, discharged. I am now Sovereign; you may rejoin your peers.”

The greatest of celestials wept as joy overcame him. His spirit soared, engulfed by Magnitude.

The consciousness of the *Eleos* shifted; the scene changed abruptly: the *Ash-ludja* towered above her, deep within Nizkur. She was Green again.

*

She reached out with her thought and touched the Enforcer. Presently, a shape appeared before her: a goddess of dark aspect with flaming red hair.

The *Eleos* scrutinized her. “I have a favor to ask. You succored Nehael once before with regard to this one; will you aid me again?”

Gihaahia scowled. “You are the *Eleos*; you may mandate whatever you please. Why are you asking?”

“I am appealing to the Claviger: for a broader interpretation of the Wyrish Injunction, so to speak. Is your Law not dynamic?”

“Yes. But I am its executrix, not its architect.”

“The Self begins its reascendance; you may find that you cannot not shirk responsibility for the choice.”

“The Self will be the cause of my demise – one way or another. Even now, the Claviger prepares to cleave to the Aeon. This is precisely to contain the ascendant *I*. The Morphic must be preserved!”

“Let me mediate that exchange,” the *Eleos* smiled. “I will lend you a Tree in the meantime. Now, will you help me?”

“Yes,” the Enforcer sighed.

**

It was an hour past midnight; the eerie green light evoked by Hlioth prevailed at Galda. Yeqon, the Fifth Prosecutor, together with the once-seraphs Armen and Tumael and nineteen former episemes, knelt in the posture of *saizhan* before the *Sela*: he seemed to be bestowing some kind of benediction.

“This is becoming increasingly surreal,” Ortwine whispered. “What is going on?”

“Shomei has released them,” Nwm explained quietly. “It would appear that these devils are predisposed to adopt the meditational practices of *Saizhan* with relative ease; Nehael indicated that their mental discipline gives them a certain advantage.”

Mostin snorted. “Shomei has released *herself*. She has also dismissed Ugales and her other responsibilities. Whatever these guilt-ridden devils subsequently choose to believe is entirely their own determination; at least the burden of their development is no longer hers. She has isolated herself; the library – and the prior infinity – is currently closed. She is entirely focused on her own Perfection.”

“And how long is this gnostic reverie likely to last?” Ortwine inquired.

“Seconds? Millennia? I have no idea.” The Alienist shrugged.

Nwm scowled. “I hope the latter, for all our sakes.”

Unexpectedly, Mostin nodded in agreement.

“Oh?”

Mostin touched his nose with a finger. “Whilst the pursuit of the *Urn* might preclude *Perfection*, it does not hold that one who is *Perfected* cannot successfully pursue the *Urn*.”

“You believe she will resume her quest for the *Urn*?” Nwm was aghast.

“Yes. And she will surely succeed,” Mostin replied.

“And then?”

Mostin considered. “She will subsume Hummaz, banish the Claviger and rewrite the Arcane Morphic so that it is more to her liking.”

Nwm raised his eyebrows inquisitively. “Then she will *Green-ify*?”

“Certainly not...” Mostin hadn’t before considered the possibility. If she absorbed Hummaz *what would actually happen?*; where the *Web of Motes* had promised an answer, the Aeon would not permit him to look. “I believe any expression of Hummaz as part of a ‘composite’ entity in defiance of her Will would be deemed a failure by her.”

A vibration.

“She will assert *quickly*,” Ortwine hissed. “The Hazel stirs.”

Nwm swallowed nervously. “And Nercamay?” He nodded toward the infernal muse; she sat in tranquil reflection some distance from the others.

“Nercamay is eccentric, to say the least,” Mostin observed. “Eadric may have confused her beyond saving.”

Nwm smiled. “Our soteriological notions diverge.”

[Nercamay]: I concur. Actually, I am saved beyond confusion.

[Mostin]: ! Are you eavesdropping, Nercamay?

[Nercamay]: I am merely paying attention.

[Nwm]: Pay no heed to my cynical associates, Nercamay.

“I believe you are rather fond of this fiend, Nwm,” Ortwine raised an eyebrow. There was a time when her nature would have branded her anathema.”

“I have learned to make allowances,” Nwm looked pointedly at Mostin. “Besides, the World is more *secure* these days.”

Mostin tilted his head and stared. “You stand upon a mote of dirt which bobs in an ocean of pseudoinfinities and *I* am branded insane because I don’t cling to it?”

[Daunton]: You might want to return to the tower.

[Mostin]: What now?

[Daunton]: The Enforcer...

[Message interrupted]

[Gihaahia]: Make some tea, Mostin. I don’t have all night. And bring the Preceptor.

Mostin swallowed.

**

The Tiger dreamed his way west. Sharing his mind, thirty rebel *Anantam* and a clique of succubi – former initiates of Soneillon. The Throile Cabal itself had grown to a more than a dozen bickering covens, and included many once subordinate to the exiled queen, as well as evil wyrds, lamias, hags and eccentric once-devils. Loyalty was nonexistent and alliances shifted rapidly, as the Cherry’s transient urges to satiation were manifested through the Cabal. The faction which supported Temenun represented only one of many diverse and conflicting interests; he had no illusion of maintaining its cohesion for long.

Visions sped past: horrors and phantoms which lurked on the edge of nightmares; residual energies from Dhatri's massive necromancies which still lingered in the dreamscape. Temenun drove through them and skirted a deeper layer: the net of magic woven by the Claviger about Kaalaanala's Second Effluxion. Its surface seemed absorptive and malleable.

The Cherry – which fed his desire – moved through him. As always, his basest instincts were tempered: his was to contrive a rational program to achieve his object of lust. The goal: to rule unthreatened in idle and despotic languor within a balmy paradise, where his every whim was instantly met. A modest enough ambition in the prior infinity, but one now which might prove less easy to realize. The Embassy, the largest threat to his designs – even Kaalaanala herself – must be diverted: Temenun, in essence, preferred a period of easement to a moment of destruction.

He squeezed around the bubble which isolated the dream larva, perceiving a continual pulse of ultramarine and sapphire which sustained its cage, emanated by the Claviger from the deepest arcane substrate. The Tiger strove to regard the source of the spell, but the Claviger seemed as but a lens for the Dream of Magic itself, and indistinguishable from it. And to a Dream, from beyond the Infinitudes, even the Aeon must bend.

Temenun corporeated. The scene around him was one of madness: a sea of slaving mouths and claws and undead flesh. A hundred yards away, ghouls were turning to dust in swaths before they could approach their target: a goddess in red who bore a slender blade. She had dismissed her steed, and now fought on foot amidst a dense press. Those few who could withstand her presence were quickly dispatched by her steel as she danced serenely amongst them.

Instantly, she apprehended him. She leaped the distance between them, and landed before him, the point of her sword poised at his throat. She read his purpose in a heartbeat.

“Greetings, old cat.” Nehael spoke calmly, and lowered her weapon.

“Goddess,” the Ak'Chazar inclined his head politely, backward palms clasped before him. “If agreeable, you will be my liaison with the Uedian Preceptor and the Wyrish Academy. I should like to meet with them. I will offer nine hundred now, for a return of two thousand split into four parts – the largest no more than seven hundred – within one month. I will also require certain guarantees.”

“Is this an admission of my authority, Temenun?” Nehael asked.

“By no means,” the Tiger smiled, baring many fangs. “Merely a recognition of your *power*, which is considerable. I have issues with any authority which is not my own.”

Nehael sighed. “You'd better behave yourself. And don't provoke Mostin; he is anxious to obliterate you. As to my prerogative – when I choose to wear black, be assured that you will be the first to know it.”

“It would suit you very well. Will you guarantee the oaths to which we testify?”

“For my enemy, you assume many favors.”

“Yeshe invoked the Goddess; now she is cocooned within Nizkur. I am cautious.”

“That was a different Nehael, to be sure,” Nehael smiled. “Have no doubt that if you betray *me* then I will spare you the indignity of incarceration.”

“Your compassion is noted.” Temenun spoke wryly.

**

“Had you even noticed that Oronthon’s *Ahma* is missing?” The Enforcer inquired. She had manifested as a lean, muscular goddess of early middle age. Nwm looked at her curiously; there was something *Green* protecting her.

“I had not,” Nwm admitted. “Is he safe?”

“He is dead,” Gihaahia smiled wickedly.

“Again?” Ortwine asked. “I did not realize that he and I were in competition.”

“And I did not realize that I had invited *you* to this audience.” The Enforcer tilted her head.

“I forgive the oversight,” Ortwine smiled benignly.

“You, of course, realize that you will have more than one effluxion to contend with before morning?”

Ortwine glanced sideways at Mostin.

“That would be unfortunate,” Mostin swallowed.

Gihaahia looked at Mostin as though her were simple. “If Kaalaanala is bending all her thought and will here now, necessarily all of her avatars will converge. This is obvious, yes?”

“Yes,” Mostin looked sceptical. “No, not really. What is your involvement here?”

She sighed. “Consider *function*, Mostin. The First Effluxion – the phaethon which ravaged Fumaril – is Kaalaanala’s obdurate ire directed toward – at that time, actually mostly the *Ahma* and Mulissu. Although I suppose also you, for your Tower and your *Ú*.

“The Second manifested in resonance with the Claviger’s *tuning* of the Morphic; this dream larva liberated many chthonics in the process. The Claviger has been forced to suppress its action; the avatar is effectively contained within a nightmare prison of the Claviger’s devising.

“The Third Effluxion is a reflex which embodies Kaalaanala’s frustration with the Law of the Injunction and its agent – namely *me*. You will notice that two of these emanations already chart courses running directly counter to my interests.”

“And the Fourth?” Mostin inquired. “The Embassy?”

“A much more rational manifestation of hatred,” Gihaahia smiled disturbingly. “The Great Dark Fire has assumed the shape of a human – at least a semblance of one; she deigns to enter the World of Men.”

“If this is leading somewhere specific...”

“A great *Bhīti* may efflux fivefold,” Gihaahia spoke impassively.

“There will be a Fifth?” Nwm groaned. “Why has it not already shown itself?”

“Its form will be contingent upon the stimuli which provoke Kaalaanala,” the Enforcer stared hard at him.

“She is holding an avatar in reserve,” Mostin sighed. “I can’t say I blame her – although I suspect her choice is visceral, not considered.”

“Do you know the form it will take?” Nwm asked.

“Yes,” Gihaahia nodded. “It will be nuanced.”

“You knew there would be a Fifth?” Nwm looked to the Alienist.

“I had my fingers crossed that there might not,” Mostin waved his hand. He turned to the Enforcer. “You have still to reveal your purpose here.”

“I will be going into a brief stasis,” Gihaahia spoke steadily. “I should warn you that any misdemeanors committed against the Injunction will be prosecuted enthusiastically when I reanimate.”

“But...” Daunton opened his mouth for the first time.

Gihaahia silenced him with a glance. “I have yet to devise a suitable penance for your sedition; involving yourself with Shomei’s *mischief*. Consider yourself on probation. Perhaps I should appoint a new president on my return?”

Tyrant, Daunton thought.

Her eyes flickered at him. He quailed.

“Why the hibernation?” Mostin asked.

“The Claviger needs that which has been lent to me returned to it – for a short while.”

“And who is supposed to uphold the Injunction in the meantime?”

Gihaahia shrugged. “The Academy must police itself. The Articles are clear enough.”

“We will need lawyers,” Daunton groaned. “How awful. Tyranny might be preferable.”

“I am dispensing some *advice* before I absent myself,” the Enforcer sighed, staring pointedly at the Alienist. “The Embassy will need transvalents to penetrate your spellwarp, Mostin; you can endure her conventional magic – the same is not true of the rest of you; you will all die if she targets you with spells. On the other hand, Mostin, if you attract her attention ...”

“Such as by *not dying*,” Ortwine interjected drily.

“She will single you out...”

“And kill you, Mostin.” Ortwine finished.

“How do you abide this deity’s presence?” Gihaahia inquired of Mostin, glowering at Ortwine.

“I close my ears,” Mostin nodded sagely.

“My advice, regardless, is *give all thought to offense.*”

“Oh, I already had,” Mostin nodded.

“There is a spell.”

“There is?”

“It is for Nwm; hence I required his presence here.” [Spell]

Mostin scowled. “This is an Enochia. It is also of the *two thousand two hundredth order*. We don’t have that kind of juice; every reservoir is empty. We might get a twelve hundred with every caster – of every persuasion – participating.”

“And I will not invoke the celestial host,” Nwm said through gritted teeth.

“You could not if you tried,” Gihaahia smiled. “This is to conjure a sunwurm. Here is the mitigation.” [Formula]

Mostin looked sceptical. “This equation is illegal. You cannot simply cancel those infinities to balance it. And the backlash is preposterous. And where does this nine hundred come from?”

Gihaahia raised an eyebrow. “I make the rules, Mostin. Temenun will approach you with a deal. Accept it.”

“Are you insane? The Cherry’s agenda... ”

Nwm shook his head and nodded in understanding at the same time, his chin describing a figure-of-eight. “Not exactly an *agenda*. It will amplify his desire, and the Rakshasa is fundamentally lazy and vain; the Tiger wants to be left alone. Personally, I’ll settle for a cat-who-naps.”

“Until a higher paradigm asserts,” Mostin sighed.

“What is this sunwurm of which you speak? Its provenance?” Nwm asked.

“Mixed. Oronthon. Or Uedii. Or the Aeon emanates many forms. It is *new*.”

“A new despot?” Ortwine inquired.

“No. It is a herald; sometimes a rearguard. You must provide it with context.”

“A herald for whom?” Ortwine asked.

“The *Ahma*,” Gihaahia gave a ghastly grin. “You must invite him back, Nwm. The Sun.”

“Exactly how much backlash are we talking, here?”

[This much]

Nwm’s eyes widened. “Even I cannot burn that hot; I am a mortal: I would not withstand it.”

“Your mortality is not relevant,” Gihaahia said dismissively.

“I am but a man.”

“*Narh* is but a horse,” the Enforcer retorted. “Yet superior to most. Am I a goddess? If so, then heed my advice.”

“What do you suggest?”

“Choose a Tree,” the Infernal’s eyes narrowed. “Take refuge in it. You’ve been hedging your bets. It’s time you assumed a position.”

“I cannot align myself with some limited perspective; my purview must be broad.”

“I am talking of practical measures, Nwm, not philosophical commitments. There must be some quality which would be of benefit.”

“There are many.”

“Then *choose*. Now is your time. What *now*?”

Nwm sighed. “If one, then durity; the temper of the Ash.”

“Well, of course,” Gihaahia sighed. Her hand suddenly held a slender staff: it appeared as though hewn from a bough of living ash, with silver-grey bark still upon it. It drew Nwm’s mind in; its knots and whorls were harder than adamant.

The Preceptor held up his hands, and shook his head. “I do not *own*; I cannot accept such a thing.”

She pressed it into his hand. “This is no *thing*, Nwm. It is the limb of a *ludja*. And who said anything about ownership?”

His fingers curled around it, and his awareness exploded.

“You must hold something in reserve,” Gihaahia cautioned him. “These rest, not so much; although keeping enough of them alive might prove a challenge in itself.”

Nwm nodded, and gave the Enforcer a puzzled glance; he knew that the same *ludja* – at the behest of Uedii’s reflection – had extended its protection to her.

“The ascetic has a magic staff?” Ortwine inquired archly.

Without warning, Nwm struck her rump soundly with it, causing her to exhale sharply and her eyes to widen in indignation.

“No.” The Preceptor replied. “It’s just a stick.”

And so it was. The power was in him now.

“And when you return?” Mostin asked the Enforcer.

“I will resume my former duties. But the Claviger is binding itself to the Aeon; to Pharamne. The Morphic will be Transcendental and will not be overturned. Shomei cannot challenge it.”

“Shomei will find a way.”

“No, Mostin,” Gihaahia sighed. “She will not need to. She remains exempt.”

“And how long is this absence of yours likely to last?”

“As long as it lasts, Mostin.” Abruptly, Gihaahia vanished.

[Nehael]: Daunton. Mostin. Nwm. Temenun wishes to parley. He offers nine hundred – with certain stipulations, naturally.