

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 05-30-2002

Before the next phase of the campaign got underway, a few loose ends had to be tied up. The characters basically had six months of in-game down-time to play with, to come up with rationales for their munchkin ideas (just kidding, fellas).

Eadric had decided that he'd had enough of being a Paladin, and was heading for a Divine Disciple. He already met the prerequisites, and felt that it would reflect his Messianic status in opposition to his own church. He also figured he could wait another level for his fourth iterative attack, and instead wanted to pick up a bunch of domain spells and the ability to communicate telepathically with Celestials.

Mostin wanted to research some spells, and build a gadget or two. Otherwise he was headed for a Diviner 6 / Alienist 10. He desperately wanted to get his Intelligence up to the magic number of 26, as that would get him an extra 8th level slot.

Ortwin, in an act of pure, unadulterated munchkinism, for which there is absolutely no excuse, had decided to take a level of Ranger. He wanted a cool new off-hand weapon, and had already decided to blow his 18th level feat on Improved TWF. After the encounter with Feezuu, Ortwin decided that he liked melee more than anything else, and henceforth was going to concentrate on becoming a death machine. Rob can already smell those Epic levels.

Nwm was perfectly happy to remain a Druid (Good for you, Dave. Stick with it!) He also had oodles of XP left over, even after he'd levelled, so I agreed to let him make some magic items. As the lowest level member of the party (now 15th), I was prepared to cut him some slack.

Nehael took a level of Druid, and then a level of Contemplative PrC. Demons don't normally advance by character class, but she's hardly typical of the crowd. Besides, as Lombard pointed out in the previous thread, I like Contemplatives.

With these ideas in mind, I present the first part of the continuing story.

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Ortwin Alone

The evening after Eadric's departure, Ortwin of Jiuhu brought a set of drawings to show Mostin the Metagnostic in his chambers.

"I'm having this commissioned," he informed the Alienist. "It's a pick – similar to those used by knights. You know, light, one-handed, good penetration and all that. Can you enchant it for me?"

Mostin scowled. "No," he said.

"You can't or you won't?" Ortwin asked.

The Alienist sighed. "I always found the construction of enchanted weapons to be a rather vulgar art, and even the finest examples invariably end up in the hands of unappreciative hooligans. I never applied myself to the technique."

"Hmph," said Ortwin. "Do you know anyone who would do this? You've mentioned the witch Mulissu. Would she be willing?"

Mostin laughed uncontrollably for a few moments, before regaining his composure and shaking his head. "Even were she capable – something I doubt – Mulissu's most precious asset is time itself. That is the one thing she is most reluctant to sacrifice. This is true of most wizards to some extent: there is so much to do, to discover. A mountain of gold would not persuade Mulissu to undertake this project, when she could instead be unearthing the secrets of flachenblitz or plasma vortices. What enchantments did you have in mind?"

"Speed and Thunder," Ortwin said, "And enough punch to hit a Balor."

Mostin's eyes goggled. "Are you fabulously rich or something? Have you any idea how much something like that is worth?"

"Two tons of gold, give or take," Ortwin said calmly.

"Pah," said Mostin. "Gold is simply a convenient measure. It has no real value when compared to magic. Take your sword, your cloak and your armour. That is how much such a weapon is worth."

"I am willing to surrender my Iron Horn and my Winged Boots," Ortwin said. "I haven't used them for a year at least. They would cover some of the value."

"A third at most," Mostin sighed. "The mage Idro, who dwells near Jiuhu, would be capable of enchanting this pick to your specifications, but he will demand a higher price than you are able to pay. Anyway, why have another weapon? Your scimitar is sufficient."

"It's a style thing," Ortwin said.

"Ahh," said Mostin. He genuinely understood the Bard.

"This is important, Mostin," Ortwin said.

After liquidating his assets, Ortwin was taken by Mostin to see Idro in his tower, deep in the forest of Nizkur. After negotiating with several charmed servitors, the duo were shown to the topmost room in the tower - cluttered but comfortable, with a variety of odd items including homunculi in jars scattered around. Immediately, the Bard disliked the reclusive wizard, but hid his distaste beneath a veneer of glib charm.

"An Iron Horn, Winged Boots and a bag of emeralds to the value of twenty-eight thousand gold crowns," Ortwin said in a matter-of-fact way.

Idro swallowed in reflexive greed.

"What do you want from me?" Idro asked drily. "I have nothing to match these items in terms of value – and understand that the Horn, although potent, is nothing more than a curio from my perspective. I have no use for it."

"I wish to engage your services. Mostin informs me that you are accomplished in the art of enchanting weapons. This project will be your magnum opus in the field. You will leave an indelible mark on the history of the craft." Ortwin spoke smoothly and confidently. "These are the specifications." The Bard handed his draft to the aging wizard.

"Hah!" Idro exclaimed after glancing at the paper. "You'll need more than these baubles to cover the cost of this."

"I am open to suggestions," Ortwin grinned.

Idro thought for a moment, and then smiled wickedly.

"I have a rival in these parts, an enchanter named Troap," he said slowly. "He lives in a castle on a bluff within the forest, maybe two days from here. He has certain items which may offset the cost of this endeavour."

"Offset, or entirely cover the cost?" Ortwin asked.

"If Troap were to meet with an accident, AND you delivered both his crystal ball and his staff to me, together with the items that you have already shown me, I would consider the debt paid. I would begin work on your weapon forthwith."

Ortwin considered the offer.

"If Mostin is willing to act as arbiter in the worth of the items involved, I might be willing," Ortwin said. "After all, I wouldn't like to think that you are cheating me, Idro." The Bard smiled innocently. Idro grunted. Although a stickler for value, he knew that Mostin's reputation as a haggler was almost unparalleled. He glanced at the Alienist.

"Sounds fair to me," Mostin said. "Of course, I too will require a fee if my services are to be engaged in a professional capacity."

"Which Ortwin will pay," Idro said. "I have no need for such advice."

"Very well," the Bard sighed. He would rather be exploited by Mostin than Idro.

"Five percent," Mostin said.

"Two percent, and only of the value of the staff and ball," Ortwin countered.

"Done," said Mostin, "provided that I get first refusal on Troap's spellbooks. I will, of course, provide the full market value for any new dweomers contained in them."

Idro fumed. He had hoped for an oversight on the part of the Bard.

"Know also," Ortwin said blithely, "that my fee for assassinating powerful wizards is twenty-five thousand gold crowns. In the interests of mutual trust, I am willing to waive this cost, provided that, if the values are otherwise met, you concentrate on enchanting my weapon to the exclusion of other projects that would otherwise detain you. I don't want to wait ten years to acquire it, only to find that you went senile or died of old age before completing it."

"Agreed," Idro said.

"I thought that you felt assassination was evil," Mostin sniped.

"Nonsense," said Ortwin. "It is a political act. So, Idro - tell me of Troap..."

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Troap was a goblin. No more vicious or unpleasant than others of his kin – which is to say very vicious and unpleasant – who dwelled even deeper in the forest than Idro. He wove powerful enchantments and illusions from his castle and, aside from a retinue of Ogre Magi, shunned contact with the outside world.

Mostin had flatly refused to aid Ortwin for three reasons. Firstly, the Alienist did not want to gain a reputation as one who bullied and stole from fellow arcanists, whatever their faults – it paid to have an open mind when dealing with most students of magic. Second, to 'engage his services in a professional capacity' would have cost Ortwin a good deal of money – and Mostin did not feel that it would be responsible to undertake such a task for free. Finally, the Alienist really didn't care that much – he had far better things to do than chase after obscure goblin wizards.

Ortwin saw that Mostin could not be persuaded, and the Alienist returned to Trempa in order to begin

research into his permanent 'Magnificent Mansion.' The Bard commanded his winged boots to bear him aloft and flew westwards, into the skies above the deepest reaches of the forest of Nizkur. Ironically, he thought, he might also need to use his Horn as well.

Ortwin's boots carried him at a good speed, and after two hours the Bard had made nearly twenty miles without incident. He set down in a glade of elm trees and prepared to make camp for the night. This was something he'd missed for several years now – roughing it on his own with the minimum of magical support and bolstering. With Eadric gone for an indefinite period of time – seeking solace in the mountains - Ortwin also felt the need to reconnect with his own roots. He had determined to seek out the Elven community of Hithin, and enter a period of study there. A spell with the Elves – if he could find them* – would be recuperative, and he would master the twin-weapon style they were famed for. His music would be an adequate payment for them – in any case they cared little for material goods.

After stalking a young deer, which the Bard slew with a single, swift throw of his scimitar, Ortwin made a fire. He quickly but inexpertly butchered the carcass, dressed the meat, and spit-roast a haunch. The choicest portions of the remainder, he salted, wrapped and stowed in his pack. Unused parts of the carcass were left at a safe distance – a mile from his camp. The evening meal of venison, accompanied by wild cloudberry, dried cake and wine, left him feeling bloated but happy. He drew his cloak around himself, intoned an 'Alarm' spell, and fell into a deep sleep.

His reverie was disturbed several hours later by a Satyr, who had smelled the roasting meat and waited patiently to pilfer any items that might be present. Ortwin's simple ward alerted him to the presence of the Fey, and the Bard swore vociferously in Elven before chasing it off. The Satyr slipped into the woods, but Ortwin did not pursue it – he probably would have done the same thing himself had he been in its position.

"Go and find a Nymph to frolic with or something," he yelled after it.

Late next morning, his eyes bleary, Ortwin, flying out of the east, espied the castle of the Wizard Troop. It was a squat, ugly building, built of large blocks of brown stone, which grew from the crest of a rocky knoll. It seemed to be Hermetically sealed. Confident in his own abilities, the Bard drew his weapon and decided to set down upon the roof of one of the four towers. Just before he reached it, however, he was beset by invisible assailants.

A whistling noise passing by his head, followed by the sudden appearance of a huge, blue-skinned Ogre wielding an enormous sword, alerted Ortwin to the fact that he was being attacked. No problem, the Bard thought, until three more appeared around him. One of them drew blood with its weapon, foiling his cloak's displacement effects.

Ortwin pirouetted gracefully in the air, closed with one of the Ogres, narrowly avoided another swipe from its weapon, and with three swift strokes, dispatched it. It tumbled from the sky, fell fifty feet, and landed with a heavy thud upon the roof of the tower.

"One!" Ortwin announced in his best witty voice.

One of the Ogre Magi grunted something, and the two others backed off. Suddenly Ortwin was plunged into darkness – obviously they felt that his displacement advantage needed countering. A fraction of a second later, the Bard was assailed by blasts of ice from two directions. Through some miracle of foresight, Ortwin found a gap between the two cones in the blackness, and avoided the ill effects of both. The Bard plunged downwards back into daylight, avoiding the stroke of a greatsword, and arrested his descent an inch above the roof. Above him, a sphere of darkness floated. The corpse of the felled Ogre twitched upon the flagstones, and Ortwin quickly hacked at the neck with his scimitar. The severed head looked indignant, and tried to protest, but the Bard flung it over the battlements.

"HEEelp..." the yell faded away.

It was followed by the sphere of darkness – obviously whatever object that the spell had been cast upon had been thrown aside. But the three Ogres were invisible again.

Ortwin mused for a second and steeled himself, as two of the Ogres charged down from above. They appeared at the same time as their greatswords did. One missed, but the other hit solidly and painfully. Ortwin leapt forward, ducking under wild blows, and unleashed a frenzied attack upon one of the creatures. His scimitar bit into bone and sinew, but the Ogre still stood. As he wondered where the third Ogre had disappeared to, Ortwin was hit full force by another 'Cone of Cold' from one of those in front of him. He reeled backwards, as the other tried to lop his head off with its greatsword.

Ortwin regained his senses, and calmly and methodically pressed an attack against the uninjured Ogre Mage, his scimitar flicking out rapidly and precisely. As it collapsed, Ortwin grinned, only to watch the other, wounded creature assume the form of a gaseous cloud and begin to move away. Ortwin hurled Githla, which spun through the air and passed through the cloud, drawing ichor as if from nowhere in

its flight. The Ogre rematerialized and crashed to the ground.

"Two and Three, hah!" Ortwin declared, catching his scimitar, although his enthusiasm was somewhat diminished. He quickly doused the bodies of the three Ogres in oil and set a flame in them, all the while looking around suspiciously for the remaining creature. It did not reappear.

After tending to his wounds, Ortwin surveyed the roof of the keep, and looked over the battlements down at the walls. Odd. No doors and no windows anywhere in sight. Guessing that it was an illusion, the Bard mustered his will in an attempt to disbelieve.

Nothing changed.

Ortwin sighed, and began to systematically search the tower upon which he stood, tapping lightly with a dagger in concentric circles from the inside outwards. With no results.

He moved to a second tower and vainly repeated the process, and then a third. After a few minutes, the Bard located a loose flagstone, around a foot square.

Hmm, he thought.

Ortwin gingerly pried the flagstone up until it was ajar, keeping his face averted. He shot a glance towards the gap beneath the stone: there seemed to be a shallow depression. Ortwin grinned happily, lifted the flagstone out of the way, and looked in. Two levers, and between them, on a tile, some graven writing.

BANG!

Sh*t, thought Ortwin, brushing soot and debris from his face. I should've seen that one coming.

Each lever, he noticed, was set to the central point of three positions. That made nine possibilities.

Obviously, this was the "off" position of whatever they determined. But jointly or singly?

Hmm.

Oh well, the Bard thought, and pulled the left-hand lever towards himself.

There was a faint 'clunk,' like a well oiled gear moving, but nothing else happened.

Hmm. Definitely jointly.

Ortwin looped a rope around the second lever, and flew twenty feet away beyond the battlements before he yanked it in the opposite direction of the first. There was a grinding noise, and a doorway appeared at the base of the tower, revealing a dark space beyond.

That wasn't so bad, Ortwin thought, and cast a 'Light' spell on his scimitar. He swallowed, and cautiously entered.

*Elves are itinerant forest-dwellers and make no permanent homes.

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The town of Trempa, three miles from the castle-cum-palace where the Duchess lived, was a small, walled settlement of great age with quaint chapels and narrow cobbled streets. Its five thousand inhabitants were, for the most part, law-abiding and sedate. They paid their taxes, observed their duties, attended mass, and behaved in a generally responsible fashion.

It therefore came as a surprise to most of them that their well-regarded and philanthropic feudal mistress, Soraine, nineteenth Duchess of Trempa, had overnight become public enemy number two – the top position being taken of one of her bannermen, the Baronet of Deorham. The townsfolk – led by the influential Clockmakers' Guild – had a succession of meetings in order to determine the best course of action. The Duchess had made it clear that no-one who felt that her actions had been wrong was obligated to stay – she would recompense them for their property, and guarantee their safe passage from Trempa.

The Duchess, in her address to the Curia, had been careful to emphasise her abiding loyalty to the crown. Her secession, she maintained, was not a political or territorial act, but a religious one. She was, and would remain, a loyal vassal of the King. She deeply regretted the current situation, but could no longer identify with the label 'Orthodox' as long as the current Curia remained in control.

Assuming the styles of "Post-Dogmatist" and "Transaxiomatic Oronthonian," the first thing that the Duchess did upon her return to her fief was to disestablish the Church and eliminate the Temple's tax-gathering perquisites. She would not confiscate any wealth or property currently held by the Temple, but, henceforth, all donations were to be made on a strictly voluntary basis. Not only were the disproportionate levies exacted upon the Uedii worshippers – around a third of her subjects – to be abolished, but the Oronthonians were also to be exempted if they so chose.

Most of the Goddess devotees lived in the most marginal rural areas, and were delighted at the turn of events.

Her richest subjects, urban Oronthonians, also found that they had ten percent more money than previously. Suddenly, heresy didn't seem like such a bad idea. Besides, "Transaxiomatic" had a good

ring to it.

The Duchess dismissed the aging chaplain Trilgar from her service, and sent him back to Morne with a comfortable pension. Trempa was too small to boast a Bishop, but its Abbot and his staff were politely given the opportunity to join the fledgeling sect. Most decided to leave.

Of the twenty Templars stationed there, nine, after speaking with Tahl, elected to stay.

All were Paladins.

Tahl was enjoined to assume the leadership of the Fane at Trempa, a responsibility which he grudgingly accepted on a temporary basis. One of his first duties, he decided, was to ride to the Abbey of Osfrith – where Nehael had briefly stayed – in order to speak with the Abbess. He felt that he owed her an explanation.

To his astonishment, Tahl discovered that both the Abbess and the nuns were almost completely ignorant of events in the outside world. In a private audience with the Reverend Mother, the former Deputy Inquisitor tried to give as impartial an account as possible of what had transpired, leaving out mention of his personal revelations.

The Abbess sighed. "I suppose that I should tell the sisters, although I try not to worry them needlessly. But with winter approaching, and no funds reaching us from Trempa, it will be difficult."

"I will ensure that you receive adequate monies from the Fane's coffers," Tahl offered.

"That's sweet of you dear," the Abbess said, "but you are a heretic now – no offense intended. It would look terribly bad."

"But you accept private donations?" Tahl asked.

"Of course," the Abbess replied.

Tahl removed a gold ring bearing a large ruby from his finger, and placed it on the table.

"There you go," he said. "That should keep you going for a year or two. Don't worry – it doesn't belong to the Church."

The Abbess smiled and picked up the ring. "It does now," she said.

On the ride back to Trempa, Tahl brooded. This was only the beginning. Things were going to get much more complicated.

Ortwin Alone - Part 2

The corridor at the base of the tower was narrow and claustrophobic, and Ortwin gained the impression that it hadn't been used for some time. Whatever method of entry and egress that Troap and his servitors employed to and from the castle, this wasn't it.

Ortwin's mind raced with possibilities as he cautiously moved forwards, and he was in a state of high alert. Were Troap's defenses primarily magical or mechanical? It occurred to the Bard that his perceptions might be fooled at any time – Idro had indicated that Troap was an enchanter and illusionist of no mean ability.

Where had the remaining Ogre Mage disappeared to? Was Troap already alerted to his presence? It seemed likely. Ortwin perceived no magical scrutiny, but he was aware that his own faculties for detecting such observation were limited.

If Mostin were here, this would be over in five minutes, he considered.

He reached the end of the corridor – a small, circular, iron-bound door which bore no handle or lock. A meticulous inspection of the surrounding area revealed no visible mechanism by which it could be opened.

This is ridiculous, the Bard thought. To be foiled by so simple an obstacle.

He suddenly realized his overdependence on his friends' magic.

After due consideration, Ortwin decided that brute force was the only way past the door, and he slashed at it violently. His magic scimitar bit easily through the metal bars and wood.

It also made a huge amount of noise. By the time that the door gave in, Ortwin felt like a rank novice.

Beyond the ruined door, there was nothing but a small alcove, empty except for another lever, set in an 'up' position.

Hmm, the Bard thought. He increasingly disliked this place.

Ortwin looped his rope around the lever, and followed his footsteps back along the corridor, paying out the cord behind him. He exited the tower, stood in the sun to the side of the entranceway, and yanked.

There was a grinding noise, and the stone doorway to the tower promptly closed.

Although thankful that he was on the right side of the door, Ortwin cursed. He flew back up to the roof of the castle to see that the levers there had reset themselves. After repeating the entire process, and

retrieving his rope, the Bard found himself in exactly the same dilemma that he faced an hour before. How exactly did one get into the castle?

Ortwin mused for a while, and decided that the obvious thing to do was to quiz one of Troap's servants. He lamented the fact that he'd been so ready to kill the Ogres, and wished he'd spared one for questioning. He'd forgotten his most basic lessons, and become complacent and lazy.

And too dependant on magic, he thought again.

The Bard wondered how thick the walls were, and whether sound would penetrate into the interior of the castle. Perhaps some taunts were in order.

So Ortwin flew down to the base of the wall, alighted, and began to walk around the circumference of the castle, looking up and singing. His ditties ranged from subtle satirical jibes at goblins, to vulgar insults directed at Troap, which suggested that the Wizard had Elven blood, and that his pox-covered face ensured that he would never mate with the pigs that he was so attracted to.

On his third circumambulation, whilst passing the north wall of the keep, Ortwin noticed a purple pellet streaking towards him. He quickly ducked aside as a ball of violet fire exploded on the ground next to him, singeing his hair but causing no great discomfort.

The Bard looked up to see a small block of stone slide back into place and merge seamlessly with one of the larger sections of the wall.

Ha! He thought, and flew towards the source of the attack at top speed. He struck it with his scimitar as hard as he could, holding the weapon in both hands. A stone brick two feet square cracked slightly, its outline against the larger block revealed. He slashed at it repeatedly, and it slowly began to crumble.

There was a click, more gears moving, a grinding sound below him, and Ortwin glanced down to see a wide section of the wall had opened up. The largest Wyvern that Ortwin had ever seen burst out and took to the air.

Ortwin headed straight towards it. As it lumbered through the air in attempt to orient itself, Ortwin darted past it and into the chamber from which it had issued, even as the section of wall was closing behind it. Its sting, six feet long at least, flicked out and missed the Bard by inches.

Ortwin tumbled in, pulled himself erect, and inspected the chamber – illuminated by his glowing sword. It was heaped with rotting carcasses, offal and faeces, and the Bard suppressed the urge to

vomit. Aside from the false wall, there was also an iron door with a barred window. Ortwin dashed over and looked through. Beyond, was a torchlit corridor.

Yes! He thought.

He reached through the bars, groped down and felt for the lock. It felt pretty standard.

The section of the outer wall was opening again, and as he pulled a pick from his belt, Ortwin could hear the thunder of wings approaching from outside. With his right hand frantically and blindly working the lock, the Bard held his scimitar in his left as the huge maw of the Wyvern appeared and lurched towards him, rank and foul. Due to his cloak, it mistook his position and snapped around empty space.

The lock clicked, and Ortwin yanked the handle, rolling through to the opposite side of the corridor. The Wyvern's tail lashed through the doorway, and struck the wall, knocking a torch from its sconce. The Bard quickly moved out of the way.

Regaining his composure, Ortwin grinned cockily before he was struck full force by an empowered 'Lightning Bolt' which made his teeth shudder.

Fifty feet along the corridor, six goblins stood, weaving in and out of each other.

Ortwin sighed. "Not that old chestnut," he said, leaping forwards. He struck one of the images and it promptly disappeared.

PUT DOWN YOUR WEAPON a voice boomed in the Bard's mind.

Ngahh! Ortwin shook off the attempted spell. "Not bloody likely," he said.

Five 'Magic Missiles' appeared instantly from the interweaving illusion and pummeled Ortwin.

Undaunted, he struck out again three times. Two more images vanished, but now the remainder all seemed to be bleeding from a cut on their respective left arms.

The Balor Ainhorr appeared behind Ortwin, filling the corridor with flame and darkness. The Demon brought its terrible Will to bear upon the Bard.

Gods, thought Ortwin, that has to be an illusion. But Ainhorr remained, and blood ran from the Bard's temples and he trembled, before the vision disappeared.

"GET OUT OF MY MIND!" He screamed, lashing out at the cluster of goblins in front of him. Two more figments evaporated under his attack. Now only two remained. Each held up a glass prism.

Motes of light appeared in the air around Ortwin, flashing in brilliant hues and patterns.

Mmm, pretty colours, the Bard thought.

They started to move back down the corridor towards the door through which he'd come.

Mmm, they're so pretty. I must follow them.

Ortwin shambled off, and then vaguely remembered that there was a Wyvern on the other side of the door.

Ngahh! He shook off the spell.

As Ortwin turned back to face Troap and his illusory twin, another 'Lightning Bolt' crackled towards him. This time he ducked in time, and it fizzled past his head.

Ortwin hurled his scimitar and charged down the corridor in pursuit of it. It whistled ahead of him, striking the remaining illusory goblin and causing it to vanish. As the Bard closed on Troap – the real Troap, he thought – the Wizard waved his hand at Ortwin, grinned, and disappeared with a 'pop.'

Ortwin caught Githla, and seethed.

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Mostin's chambers at Trempe became cluttered and untidy – a situation which the Alienist, pedantic in the extreme in his desire for cleanliness and organization – found increasingly irritating.

At his request, the Duchess permitted Mostin to erect his portable manse in a seldom visited corner of her pheasant forest, alerting her gamekeepers to the presence of the Alienist and warning them to stay away from him. This situation proved to be to the liking of both the Aristocrat and the Wizard – Mostin could work in relative seclusion, and the Duchess did not have to tolerate his eerie and discomfiting presence at court. Several cartloads of items – oddments accumulated by the Alienist during his stay – were transported along a narrow track into the woods by nervous but well-paid teamsters.

Mostin had engaged the services of a number of the best craftsmen in Trempe to provide him with alembics, crucibles, lenses, strange clockwork devices and a host of other more mysterious items constructed to his specifications. He confined himself to research in his library, and, in time, was all but forgotten by the court. The much anticipated retribution which Mostin feared Feezuu would exact,

diminished from a threat upon which he continually brooded, into an ever-present knot in his stomach, and finally subsided. Nonetheless, the Alienist spent much of his time within warded areas, and always had a quickened ‘Dimension Door’ on hand in case things went awry. Sometimes it paid to be paranoid.

Nwm returned to Eadric’s castle of Kyrtil’s Burgh at Deorham, and gently persuaded the Inquisitorial deputy and his staff who had taken up residence there to depart – not a difficult task, as the company were preparing to return to Morne in any case. Nwm’s presence did, however, spare the keep from the Inquisition’s wrath – they had been instructed to burn the castle of the Heretic prior to their departure. The Druid reassembled the former staff, reinstated them at the keep, and recompensed them and their families for their troubles. Nwm then ‘Awakened’ two oak trees of enormous age and girth, and instructed them to guard the keep.

Next, the Druid completed a number of much-needed repairs upon the place. Over six days, and with the judicious use of several ‘Walls of Stone,’ the Druid repaired the curtain wall and underpinned the foundations of The Steeple. Using ‘Transmute Rock to Mud’ and its reverse in carefully selected places, and with the aid of his animated trees, Nwm made the keep unassailable from three directions, and reached by only a narrow bridge of sculpted stone from the fourth. Multiple applications of ‘Stone Shape’ and ‘Wood Shape’ finished most of the detail work on the keep, including a new gate, wooden hoardings on the battlements and a number of much-needed new doors.

Finally, Nwm engaged the services of a team of twenty industrious Rock Gnomes to complete any minor repairs that he might have overlooked. By the time that they had finished, Kyrtil’s Burgh looked as though it had been built yesterday.

Nwm sighed. He missed the ivy. A few spells saw to that.

News from Morne still reached Trempa on a regular basis, and although some tension existed between the more zealous and partisan adherents of Orthodoxy and the Duchess’s nominally heretical subjects, things for the most part proceeded as normal. The movement of people from Tempa to Morne in order to distance themselves from association with the Duchess, was more than matched by an influx of new people eager to enjoy the new tax breaks which life in Trempa offered. Mobile members of the middle classes with no particular religious affiliation looked towards the liberal regime as an enlightened

model of rulership, and within the town new faces opened new businesses and injected fresh vigour into a flagging economy.

The Temple was not impressed.

They sent a number of envoys, demanding the reinstatement of their tax benefits, to confer with the Duchess. She entertained them grandly, saw to their every need, and then sent them back to Morne with the answer "No." Veiled threats were issued, but the Duchess was still unmoved.

After her anathematization was officially ratified, the Curia found itself in the difficult position of having banned itself from further discourse with Trempa – consorting with heretics was, after all, a heretical act in itself. No more envoys were dispatched – something which the Duchess regretted. As long as the lines of communication had remained open, the Temple was not pursuing a military solution to the problem. Now, however, it had backed itself into a corner. Whatever liberal elements remained within the Curia, it seemed that their voices had been lost or drowned out.

Until the Marquis of Iald seceded.

The news did not entirely surprise anyone, although its timing did. Iald, the "One Devout Layman" who was represented on the Curia – renowned for his holiness and piety – had voted against the initial impeachment of Eadric. He had failed to appear at the motion which was passed criticizing Cynric, as his carriage-driver had mysteriously disappeared on the journey from Iald to Morne, only to be found in a roadside inn enjoying a selection of expensive wines.

Iald's snub to the Curia arrived during the inauguration of Lord Rede of Dramore – the Grand Master of the Temple – as the interim protector of the Orthodox Church in the absence of an Archbishop. Motions had been pushed through, supported by Melion, Hethio and a number of others, to allow Rede executive powers, allowing the Temple to act independently of Curial sanction. There were historical precedents for this, although they had not been invoked for several centuries.

Iald, of course, had voted against the motion but, apparently in the interests of unity, had attended the inaugural ceremony in any case. Although a layman, as a member of the Curia he was afforded a conspicuous position during the inauguration, and looked splendid in his white velvet and ermine

robes. In an act which was quickly afterwards attributed to an outburst of madness, Iald grabbed the ceremonial greatsword from the altar and attacked Rede with it. Iald was an old man, and was easily divested of the weapon by the Temple Guards. He was escorted forthwith from the premises to confinement whilst he yelled:

"Rintrah commanded me to do this."

The Marquis never reached his cell, however, as his henchmen intercepted his escort, rendered them unconscious, and sped the aging nobleman back to his fief. Apparently his outburst had been better planned than was initially assumed.

Upon his return to Iald, the Marquis promptly denounced the Curia and declared his support for the Duchess of Trempa.

**

Ortwin had been hacked at, frozen, blown up, blasted with lightning, and had ruptured blood vessels in his scalp shaking off the 'Phantasmal Killer' invoked by Troap. He patched himself up as best he could with his remaining curative magic, and proceeded into the Goblin's castle. The Bard considered that Troap was now, in all likelihood, depleted of his major spells, and this cheered him somewhat. He wondered what the staff that Idro had requested was capable of, however.

Ortwin inspected the corridor where Troap had ambushed him. It was well-illuminated by torches, and besides the iron portal which led into the wyvern's den, boasted several other doors. The Bard carefully searched for other hidden mechanical devices as he progressed systematically, from chamber to chamber. A storeroom, an armory, a pantry in which the freezing temperature ensured the freshness of meats, a room full of broken and disused alchemical equipment. The final door, at the end of the corridor upon the left, was graced by a 'Magic Mouth' which spoke to Ortwin as he carefully checked it for booby-traps.

CONGRATULATIONS ON SUCCESSFULLY PENETRATING THE OUTER DEFENSE, it intoned. IF YOU'RE PHYSICALLY CAPABLE, IT'S RECOMMENDED THAT YOU NOW RETREAT, BEFORE YOU DIE PAINFULLY. YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED.

Quite civil, really, Ortwin thought as he picked the lock. The well-oiled door opened noiselessly, to reveal a short corridor with seamless walls, which terminated in single, square, doorway which was open, and led to a space beyond. Sitting on a cushion, in clear view, was Troap. The Wizard waved in an annoying fashion.

Ortwin ducked back behind the doorway, and considered his options for a moment. This was obviously a trap, but how best to proceed? The bard rummaged at his belt, found a vial, opened it and drank the contents. He quickly became invisible.

Commanding his boots into flight, Ortwin charged through the door at top speed, only to be stopped by an invisible barrier which he struck with considerable momentum. Troap smiled, muttered something from a scroll, and walked calmly over to where the invisible Ortwin hovered. His purple robes and neatly trimmed beard looked somehow out of place on a Goblin. The Bard backed off, but found that his exit from the short corridor had been neatly sealed by another 'Wall of Force.'

"Before I decide how best to deal with you," Troap said calmly, "perhaps you could enlighten me as to your presence here. What do you want? Who told you of this place? What, exactly, have I done to you that warrants this burglary and the murder of my servants?"

"I have come seeking the fabulous Talisman of Sill," Ortwin lied quickly. "I was told that the Goblin Necromancer Troap, and his wicked giants dwelt here and perpetrated all kinds of vile acts on the surrounding countryside. The Cleric Godfrith, a holy man, told me to rescue the Talisman and put an end to this tyranny – I assume you are Troap, although I have yet to witness any of your necromancy."

Troap considered for a while. "You are either an accomplished liar or very naïve," he said. "I have little time for either. For your information, I am neither vile nor a necromancer. I possess no such talisman, as you may or may not already know. I have never heard of this Godfrith, and, if he exists – which I am sceptical of – I am afraid you have been misinformed. My whereabouts are unknown to most, and I have my suspicions as to who may have sent you here. Have you, perchance, heard of the mage called Idro?"

"The name is unfamiliar," Ortwin lied.

"Hmm," Troap grunted, and waddled out of sight for a moment.

He returned bearing a long staff, more than twice his height.

Sh*t, Ortwin thought. Whatever he plans to do with that, its going to be bad for me.

The Bard pulled his Iron Horn from his belt, and winded it. The Bard became visible again. On the other side of the wall, the outlines of two large, hairy men appeared, bearing swords.

Troap struck the end of his staff upon the ground, and spoke a single word.

Ortwin, who had been prepared to command the shadowy barbarians into battle with Troap, suddenly and inexplicably had a change of heart. Troap was a nice little fellow, after all. He had such a pleasant smile, and Ortwin wondered why he had threatened his friend, old Troap, in such a mean way.

"Be nice to Troap," he instructed the summoned warriors. "Get him a cushion or something."

One of the grizzled barbarians raised an eyebrow, and complied.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 06-03-2002

Another alignment crisis looms. Ah, the poor players...

**

Eadric's assertion that the Temple would not prosecute a military expedition into Trempe before spring proved to be only partially correct.

The first snows already lightly dusted the ground, and the air was chill, when a group of sixty knights and men-at-arms – led by the Templar Brey of Methelhar – entered the bounds of the Duchy, passing along the main road from Trempe to Morne.

They bypassed Deorham which, although guarded by only a small retinue, had been rendered invulnerable by Nwm to anything less than a protracted siege or magical assault. Brey's entourage

lacked both the numbers and expertise to initiate either – they were more of a posse than an army – but they bore a collection of impressive seals and warrants which, they hoped, would cow the townsfolk of Trempa and give the Duchess pause for thought.

The first indication that something was awry was not revealed by magical scrutiny, but by frantic guards who had comprised the border watch at the gatehouse of Hartha Keep – two small towers which guarded a bridge over the River Nund, which marked the borders of the Duchy of Trempa – bearing news back to the Duchess. Brey had dismounted from his destrier and, invoking some divine strength, had grown to a prodigious size and physically ripped the postern gate from its hinges, causing the small border garrison to flee in terror.

Fearing that the wrath of Oronthon had been loosed upon them, the guardsmen consoled themselves in a variety of ways. Some rode hard for Trempa, some fled to be with their families in case they needed to evacuate their steadings, some earnestly prayed in the closest chapels, and some headed for nearby inns in order to forget the disquieting scene that they had just witnessed. At Brey's command, the lightly armed outriders who supported his knights did not pursue the levies – he preferred to have rumours circulate which would instill a righteous fear into the seething hotbed of heretics and apostates which, in his mind at least, comprised Trempa.

When the exhausted messengers reached the castle of the Duchess, having ridden hard all night, they bore news of Brey's passage into Trempa. The Aristocrat immediately summoned her council, as well as Nwm, Tahl, Mostin and Nehael. Mostin's response to the crisis was not well received.

"I can do nothing," the Alienist insisted calmly.

The Duchess was livid. "What do you mean?"

"This has passed into the realm of politics. I am forbidden."

She looked perplexed.

"The Great Injunction applies," Mostin explained regretfully. "I may be one of the most potent spellcasters in the world, but I will not risk the wrath of the Council.*"

"Bah!" The Duchess exclaimed. "I suppose this means that you will not use your power at all in the coming months?"

"Not necessarily," Mostin replied, "but I must be able to reasonably cite self-defense. I may also use auxiliary magics and act in an advisory capacity."

She was flabbergasted. "No blasting?"

"Believe me," Mostin said, sadly, "no-one regrets it more than I."

"We must formulate a plan quickly," Nwm mused. "Who is this Brey?"

"One of Rede's deputies," Tahl replied. "He is dangerous. The messengers indicate that he is already sending the message of 'Righteous Wrath' across the countryside. Retribution is his specialty."

"We should engage him in full public view," Nwm said. "He must not win the propaganda war. If Eadric were here, a debate of Oratory might be possible."

Tahl shook his head. "It is neither necessary nor desirable to debate with heretics," he said.

"But he cannot storm the castle," Nwm said. "What is his purpose?"

"Fear," said Tahl.

Brey sounded his horns outside of the castle. The drawbridge had been raised and the walls thronged with onlookers – guards, knights, courtiers, handmaidens and servants. Nwm stood discreetly to one side of the Duchess, able to watch the proceedings but inconspicuous.

Brey unrolled a long scroll, and his voice carried clearly and forcefully up to those upon the battlements. The announcement was received with horror.

"To Soraine, Duchess of Trempa; Eadric of Deorham and Tahl, formerly of the Inquisition, and to those heretics and blasphemers who have been seduced by their lies; from Rede, Grand Master of the Temple, acting for the Curia of the One True Orthodox Church, a warning.

"Let it be known that in their infallible wisdom, the Curia have passed motions roundly condemning the actions taken by the heretofore mentioned heretics, as well as their followers, servants and subjects. In their merciful and enlightened bounty, the Curia have decreed that they are willing to extend their leniency to those, both great and small, who forthwith depart from Trempa and its adjoining lands, and seek immediate confession and penance with representatives of the True Faith in Morne. If the ringleaders in this affair submit themselves to ecclesiastical law, they will be dealt with in Oronthon's justice and the misguided masses will be spared."

Mostin made an arcane gesture, and a noise like a loud fart issued across the field. Several people on the walls tittered. Brey fumed before continuing.

"If the Duchess Soraine, Eadric of Deorham and Tahl fail to surrender themselves, those who remain, by their actions will have placed themselves irrevocably beyond the salvation of the Church. As unrepentant apostates, heretics, idolaters and blasphemers, and by the sanction of Royal Decree..."

At this point, Brey held up an impressive sheet of vellum bearing the King's seal before continuing.

"...I am authorized to inform you that the entire adult population of Trempa will be condemned to burn.** The sentence takes effect one week from today. At that point, the borders will be closed and access to Trempa will be sealed until the righteous fury of the Temple descends upon it, and the rule of law is reestablished."

Even Mostin was staggered. Nwm was furious.

"What of the Uedii worshippers?" The Druid asked. "They are not part of this."

Brey smiled. "The pagan element within Trempa has long been a source of concern to the Temple," he said. "Like lapsed Oronthonians, they may atone and convert. Their catechesis into the True Faith will be warmly received."

"Is this true across Wyre?" Nwm was incredulous.

"It soon will be," replied Brey.

"Then f*ck you!" Shouted the Druid.

And Nwm unleashed a Fire Storm.

Those few who survived the initial fury of the Druid were consumed in further pillars of green flame which rose from the ground to meet them. All, with the exception of Brey, were immolated. Nwm spared the great Templar.

"Give him a horse," Nwm barked at Tatterbrand, who stood nearby. Brey's own steed had perished in the flames. Eadric's squire quickly complied.

"You may return to Morne," Nwm's voice cut like a whip. "Inform the Curia that I will not tolerate

this."

Shaking, Brey mounted and fled. Nwm turned and left, and people moved quickly out of his way. The Druid felt sick. He had drawn the first blood in the war that he had longed to avoid.

*Some explanation may be required. The Great Injunction is a time-honoured convention which is defied by mages at their peril. Excepting acts of self-defense, a Wizard may not use his power for political or temporal ends, particularly on the battlefield during war. This prevents the escalation of magical warfare, and the casual employment of wizards to fling 'fireballs' around upon the battlefield. The Great Injunction is a magical détente which transcends all considerations of race, gender, power and alignment. It is inviolable. "Grey Areas" – for example, if Mostin were to scry on behalf of the Duchess – certainly exist, but Mages must be cautious lest they push the limits too far.

The "Council" which Mostin refers to, is nothing more (or less) than the sum total of all of the Wizards in Wyre and its dependencies. In fact, no formal body of mages exists.

The Great Injunction is based upon "Morgen's Edict" – a similar idea appearing in certain novels by Jack Vance.

**Note that there is a real-world precedent for this: during the Renaissance, the entire population of Holland was sentenced to death by the Spanish Inquisition. The Historical Inquisition were far less lenient than the Oronthonians are.

Originally posted by Sepulchre II on 06-04-2002

**

The Duchess was not happy.

"What the hell did you think you were doing?" She asked Nwm. "This does NOT aid our cause – especially as I now suspect that those knights you just butchered will be regarded as martyrs to the cause. A peaceable solution now seems impossible."

Nwm spoke coldly. "When I require your advice on how best to protect my religion, I will ask for it. For what it's worth, I think that the likelihood of a peaceful solution decreased sharply when the Curia sentenced everyone in Trempa to death."

"But a slim chance is better than no chance," she retorted.

Unexpectedly, Tahl came to Nwm's defense. "They will not parley with us – we are anathema. Nwm's actions sadden me – there were knights among that group who I knew to be just and honourable. But they made their choice when they closed their eyes and ears to the corruption in the Temple. Many more hard choices lie before us, and we must not waver."

The Duchess groaned. "All of this religious zeal is making me feel queasy," she said. "Did it occur to either of you that Brey and his followers deemed themselves equally justified. That, from their perspective, they were acting in the greater Good?"

"Philosophical sophistry is irrelevant!" Nwm snapped. "They threaten my faith, which I know to be un-dogmatic, peaceful and non-proselytizing. I don't give a damn what their reasons are for their actions. And the same goes for you, Tahl. Frankly, right now, your whole stinking religion with its schizoid, patriarchal God just makes me puke. The only reason that I regret my actions is because I just killed sixty human beings – whether they are considered 'just' or 'honourable' in your f*cked-up perspective has no bearing on the matter. The fact that you don't see it that way only makes it clearer to me just how far off the point you are. This conversation is over. If you need me, I'll be in the grove at Deorham. Nehael, are you coming?"

"Will you show me the trees?" The Demoness asked gently.

Nwm smiled sadly and nodded. Her question bought him back to the moment. Without judging, it simultaneously comforted him, reminded him of his duty as a teacher, grounded him in his beliefs, and instructed him in the best way to proceed.

Ah, she was wise, this one. Skillful.

After they had departed, the Duchess turned to Mostin. "Where the hell is Ortwin?" She asked.

The Alienist shrugged. "He was dealing with a mage called Idro. Afterwards, he said something about visiting the Elves."

Mostin realized that he hadn't thought about the Bard for some time. He wondered what Ortwin was doing.

**

After scrying Ortwin's location, and with a broad smile on his face, Mostin made additional inquiries regarding the wizard Troap. He conferred with a skittish and irascible centaur who dwelt within the forest of Nizkur, and then with a group of sprites who lived nearby. It appeared that Troap was quite well regarded by the local population of Feys, and that Idro's account of the Goblin was rather biased. Mostin sighed. He should have made more of an effort to discern the truth before leaving Ortwin to his own devices.

The Alienist stepped through the Looking Glass of Urm-Nahat and appeared in front of Ortwin and Troap.

"Hello, Mostin," Ortwin said.

"You must be Mostin the Metagnostic," Troap said brightly. "Ortwin has mentioned you. It is an honour to meet you. Will you take tea with me?" The Goblin seemed quite unfazed.

"Certainly," Mostin replied.

"More tea please, Ortwin, there's a good fellow," Troap instructed the Bard.

"That is a potent dweomer that you have laid upon Ortwin," Mostin observed. "He has been missing for three weeks."

"It is a triply extended 'Charm Monster,'" Troap explained. "One of my staff's higher powers."

Mostin nodded. "No wonder Idro desired it so much."

"You knew of this treachery?" Troap was aghast.

"I regret that I did," Mostin confessed. "Ortwin required services from Idro, who insisted on the staff and a crystal ball in payment. I put them in contact with each other. But if you have charmed Ortwin, you will have found that out already."

Troap grinned sheepishly, and dropped his expression of faux offense.

"I am thinking of retaining Ortwin's services indefinitely," he said. "He killed three of my servants, each of whom was tenured for a year. He is a useful fellow to have around, and sings excellently."

"I regret that is not possible," Mostin said. "Ortwin is a good friend of mine, and I am obligated to

ensure his release."

Troap bristled. "But I have been assaulted and offended by him. I demand recompense."

"And I agree that you are owed it," Mostin said. "Please, Troap. It is a pleasure to meet you, and I hope that we can do business in the future. I also notice that you have not deprived him of his own possessions."

"I asked him, but he was reluctant to render them up. I didn't press the point as I didn't wish to risk disrupting the spell. His scimitar is sharp."

"I will convince him to give you adequate payment," Mostin said. "Besides," the Alienist added cunningly, "I don't think that you want Ortwin around. Have you heard of the Necromancer Feezoo?" Troap swallowed. "Rumours only," he said.

"You don't want to be near Ortwin when she finds him," Mostin said.

The Goblin nodded.

Or me, thought Mostin.

**

"You did WHAT?" Ortwin asked Mostin in disbelief.

"Ten thousand gold crowns is a trifling consideration when weighed against indefinite servitude," Mostin replied.

"The spell would have failed soon enough," Ortwin countered. "And then I would have had his staff and ball. Now I'm back to square one. I thought you wanted Troap's spellbooks. What of Idro? What of my magic pick?"

"You can stuff your pick up your a**," said Mostin. "Troap turns out to be an intriguing little fellow, and I'm glad I met him. Allies of any hue are hard to come by these days, and besides Idro, I don't know any half-decent enchanters."

"I can't believe how selfish you are," Ortwin complained.

"We both are, Ortwin," said Mostin. "That's why we get along so well. But, having rescued you from an embarrassing situation, I think you owe me. And we don't want this little story to get out, do we? Your reputation would suffer terribly."

Ortwin raged for a while, and then passed a handful of emeralds to Mostin. Sometimes he really hated wizards. They were only ever interested in themselves and each other. There was a lesson here somewhere, but the Bard couldn't work out what it was for the life of him.

**

"Your revised proposal is rather more modest," Idro scoffed. "I assume that you failed in your attempts to secure the staff and ball, and that Troap still terrorizes the forest?"

"Can you enchant it, or not?" Ortwin spat.

"Of course," Idro said smoothly. "I will consider only fifty percent of the nominal value of the horn, however. As I said, to me, it is little more than a curio, although it may have later use as a trade item."

"Eighty percent," Ortwin haggled.

"Sixty."

"Seventy."

"Sixty-five, and not a copper penny more," insisted Idro.

Ortwin handed over his horn and most of his remaining money.

"I have decided to keep the boots," Ortwin said, sniffing the air. "I am now going to find the Elves. I will return in three months."

And Ortwin flew off.

**

The snows fell early that year, barely a month after the Equinox had passed. Nwm maintained a pocket of more clement weather in the area of Deorham where, with Nehael's help, he pursued a project which consumed him in his grief and guilt after his actions outside of the gates of the castle at Trempe. He had, and never had had, any confessor or arbiter of his morality to whom he could turn, besides his own conscience and the Green Reality which he conveniently labeled 'Goddess.' He decided that keeping a low profile was probably the best course of action.

Nonetheless, news of Nwm's defiance of the Temple, and his merciless encounter with Brey and his knights spread rapidly amongst the farming communities of the Duchy. Many sought him out, asking for apprenticeship or tutelage, pleading with him to defend them against the threat which would, sooner or later, issue from Morne.

"Teach me to wield the Green Fire," they begged.

"Ask the trees," he snapped.

Midwinter came and passed, and still no sign of Eadric had been seen or heard. Neither Ortwin nor

Nwm appeared at the court of the Duchess for the Yule feast, and the affair was lackluster and uninspiring. Mostin contented himself with his researches and, despite his urge to scry and spy, refrained from locating the Paladin. Nehael had warned him in no uncertain terms to leave Eadric alone.

"Or celestials will visit, and remonstrate with you," she had said.

Mostin shuddered at the thought of their feathery wings and decided that the Demoness probably knew best.

Tahl organized the defenses of the castle, instructed his paladins, oversaw the Fane, and made several journeys to visit the Marquis of Iald, five hundred miles distant, on the other side of Wyre. Similar threats had been delivered to Iald, and although, as yet, no action had been taken against either fief, tensions ran high. Both Tahl and the Duchess were determined to keep the lines of communication open, and the Marquis was the only declared ally that they had.

As the days lengthened after midwinter, the cold intensified and the snows piled deeper and deeper. Even at Deorham, a frosty rime settled on the land. Nwm incanted feverishly, day after day, focussed solely upon a thin torc of serpentine which consumed his time and his power. Nehael saw to his needs, and dealt with zealous Goddess worshippers who would otherwise disturb his work.

Ortwin returned to the castle after his spell with the Elves in the forest, bearing the pick that Idro had wrought for him.

Mostin finished one project and moved onto the next, and the next. His Blue and Scarlet Ioun Stone, and his Circlet of Blasting, won only after hard bargaining, he traded away without a second thought to his new friend, Troap for mundane gold and items to pursue his research. He contrived what he felt would be the ultimate defense against the Cambion who haunted his dreams: the permanent 'Magnificent Mansion' and an amulet capable of spell absorption. His final project, his 'Headband of Intellect,' was finished even as the thaw began. When he placed it upon his head, his consciousness expanded dramatically, and new valences of spell energy were revealed to him.*

Only a few days later, Nwm finally finished his own great work. He was tired beyond any exhaustion he had previously known. Now, at last, he could relax.

After sleeping, bathing and eating, he gingerly placed the torc around his neck, and fastened its golden

clasp. He spoke a single word of power.

The Green Embraced him. For miles around, every fold in the landscape, every great tree, every animal, every fey, every human heartbeat, every nuance that he desired to focus upon, was revealed to him.

**

Two weeks passed before Eadric walked into the castle at Trempa. He was filthy, haggard and had grown a long beard.

"Nice beard," said Ortwin.

"Thanks," Eadric replied.

"You're two months late," said Nehael.

"Er, yes. Sorry about that."

*Someone on these boards, long ago, proposed a quantum theory of magic in order to address the 'Vancian' problem. Spell levels are analogous to the quantum shells occupied by electrons orbiting the nucleus of an atom, in that they can only have discrete numbers (1,2, etc.). This is a simple, elegant, wonderful idea. Whoever you are, I am indebted to you.

Note: Nwm's Torc reproduces a 'Commune with Nature' spell when activated.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 06-06-2002

Unfortunately, my notes on Wyre are about as organized as the rest of my life - which is to say not very. I think publication is unlikely.

Honestly, its a pretty standard campaign world in a lot of ways.

Thanks for the kudos, though

**

"What did Rintrah say to you?" Nehael asked.

The Succubus sat with the Duchess, Tahl, Ortwin, Mostin and Eadric in a small reception room near the great hall. Nwm was absent.

Eadric looked surprised.

"Have you consulted with him?" The Paladin asked.

Nehael smiled. "What did you learn?" she inquired.

"That things are very simple," Eadric said. "I was alone in the mountains for ninety-nine days. I found an abandoned cottage, near a small stream, and decided that it would be sufficient to my needs. I prayed, undertook the repair of the building and erected a small shrine. I ate fish and, for the first few weeks, berries. Later, I gathered nuts. As the snows deepened, I became colder and more tired. Finding dry wood for a fire was difficult, but I did not invoke the protective aspect of the deity."

"He required that you suffer?" Ortwin asked. Typical, he thought.

Eadric shook his head. "I was gathering my strength," he said.

"After six weeks," the Paladin continued, "an old man joined me. He said nothing. He stayed with me for only one day. But during that time, he ate all of the fish that I'd frozen in the ice, consumed all of the nuts that I'd gathered, and burned all of my wood in a large fire. I did not complain – although I was tempted. He smiled, and left me. He had not spoken a word. I guessed that he was a Celestial.

"I went to gather the few remaining nuts that still clung to the trees, although by this time most were rotten. When I returned, the old man had reappeared. He was pulling the stones from the wall of the house. He pulled the whole cottage apart, brick by brick, until there was nothing left except a pile of rubble. Then he departed again."

I'd have smacked him, Ortwin thought, Celestial or no.

"I took the remaining stone that I could, and built a modest shelter," Eadric said. "The few timbers that were left, I laid across the top of the walls. There were still some cracked clay shingles, and I tied these with twine across the timbers to form a rude roof. I made a door of deerskin. There was barely enough room to sit up inside.

"I went to try and catch another fish, but with no success. When I came back, the old man was sleeping in the shelter. He looked well-fed and content. When I tried to enter, he kicked me and rolled over to the door. He wouldn't let me in. That night I slept in a chimney between two rock faces. I nearly froze.

"The next morning, I returned to the hut. The old man was sitting outside. He had built a fire, and was roasting a suckling boar. I was famished. I sat down and said nothing, but waited patiently. After the meat was cooked, he consumed it all. I was left with skin and bones. I sucked the marrow out, and chewed on the burned hide. He watched me eat in silence."

Mostin thankfully considered the fact that he was not religious.

"Finally," Eadric went on, "the old man spoke to me.

"'Do you know who I am?' He asked.

"'I believe that you are a Celestial,' I replied.

"'Is that significant?' He asked.

"'I do not understand,' I said.

"'Meditate upon the question,' he instructed, and left.

"He returned a day later, and asked me again.

"'It is not significant,' I replied.

"'Why not?' He asked.

"'Because, whoever you were, I should still have given everything to you without complaint,' I replied.

"'Why?' He asked. More questions followed. Day, after day, after day he returned. 'Why this?' and

'Why that?' and 'What if?' Midwinter came and passed. The questions gave way to instruction and tutelage. Finally, one morning, as the days were lengthening, he said to me,

"'Taking the life of another human being is never, under any circumstances whatever, a justifiable act. It is the ultimate sin. You must take the lives of many, and some of them will be wholly innocent. Do you understand the paradox?'

"'No,' I cried.

"'Nor do I,' he smiled. 'Not all things are revealed to me.' His visage changed, and his form grew tall and statuesque. His pinions unfolded, and his light almost overwhelmed me. It was certainly Rintrah. When he spoke again, it was from his mind to mine.

DEFEND TREMPA, he commanded. DO NOT ALLOW IT TO FALL. BUT INITIATE YET NO WAR BEYOND ITS BORDERS. THIS IS YOUR FIRST TASK. I WILL CONTACT YOU AGAIN. And then he vanished."

Mostin twitched reflexively. Nobody spoke for a moment, until Ortwin piped up.

"That's all very nice," the Bard said flippantly. "If you're religious and all. Speaking of which, Ed, I suppose someone ought to tell you about Nwm..."

**

"Sixty?" The Paladin asked Nwm.

"Sixty," Nwm groaned. "The poor bastards never had a chance. Only a handful survived the first few seconds."

The pair sat at Deorham in the newly-refurbished reception room. A gnome, covered in stone dust, sauntered past whistling.

"Are you nearly done?" Nwm asked the diminutive mason.

"All but," the gnome replied.

"What's the damage?" Nwm asked.

"To you, Nwm, a flat five thousand," the gnome replied.

"That's a damn good deal," Eadric gasped.

"I did a lot of the big stuff with magic," Nwm explained. "I also agreed to help them out if exorcists from the Temple descended on their warren."

"I hardly think that's likely," Eadric scoffed.

Nwm shrugged. "Times are changing. People are getting zealous or paranoid, or both. The feys are

becoming jittery – they don't like organized religion. Anything is possible."

"I will protect the rights of the Goddess worshippers in Trempa, Nwm," Eadric said.

"It's those in the rest of Wyre that concern me," Nwm sighed.

"No persecution has occurred yet, though?"

"Not unless you include another thirty percent tax-hike," Nwm grunted.

"Increasing the incentive to convert?" Eadric asked.

Nwm nodded.

"You need to decide how you're going to deal with this," Eadric said.

"Yep," the Druid replied., "I know."

**

A vision long before imagined by Eadric came to pass.

Ortwin was drunk.

The Bard leaned heavily on the bar of the "Three Ploughs", the largest inn in the town of Trempa, and recounted his exploits to a rapt audience. The plan had been to have a quiet drink with Nwm, in an attempt to bring a smile back to the Druid's face. Ortwin had conveniently overlooked Nwm's tolerance of alcohol, and matched him drink for drink.* Nwm didn't mind. He had adopted his preferred alter ego – that of a toothless crone – and was content in his anonymity. Besides, watching Ortwin make a fool of himself was usually a cheering distraction.

Mostin sat stiffly next to the Druid – he wasn't generally one for inns, much less rowdy, semi-rustic ones. He, too was disguised – since his transcendence, his eyelids had fallen away, leaving pupil-less, emerald orbs which unsettled those who looked at him. He sipped daintily at a glass of wine with a sour expression upon his face.

Ortwin was delighted at his reception, and played the crowd like the professional that he was, pausing to sip his firewine at critical moments which made the onlookers wait with baited breath until he resumed his account. His audience was varied and, for Trempa, cosmopolitan. Locals, merchants, entrepreneurs, travelers from the South who defied the ban. The initial hysteria which had followed Brey's appearance and proclamation had subsided, three months had passed and, although the borders of the Duchy had been sealed, no act of war had been launched by the Temple. Either complacently or,

perhaps, realising that the good times would soon end, the townsfolk of Trempa – swelled by many who had entered the fief soon after the Duchess had rebelled – were determined to enjoy themselves while they could.

Ortwin recounted the summoning and imprisonment of Rurunoth, his stirring the citizens from their apathy in Morne before the trial of Eadric, and the assault upon the Necromancer Feezuu (called ‘Glissin’ by Ortwin). In all cases, he effortlessly placed himself in the central role, whilst downplaying or altogether failing to acknowledge the ‘help’ that his companions had given him.

Mostin sighed. At least the Bard had had the good sense to use a pseudonym for the Cambion – not that those gathered here would have ever heard the name anyway. The old hag – Nwm – sitting at the table cracked a toothless smile, more out of pity than amusement, as Ortwin’s stories became more and more improbable and his voice more and more slurred. How could anyone thrive on this, the Druid wondered.

"Tell us another, Ortwin," they said.

"Yes! More! More!" They yelled.

"What would you like to hear?" Ortwin asked in response. "I have a thousand stories at least." He bragged.

"Have you never been outsmarted, Ortwin?" Someone asked.

"Certainly not," Ortwin lied. The crowd laughed approvingly.

"Tell us about your encounter with the wizard, Troap," a single voice carried above the din in the bar room. The inquiry had issued from a young woman with olive skin and clothes which testified to her foreign origins – most likely from the Thalassine far south of Wyre, an area of many islands surrounded by warm, shallow seas.

Ortwin shot an accusing glance towards Mostin, but the Alienist shook his head in denial. He hadn’t told anyone.

"Alas, I know no Troap," he lied, "although I have met many wizards. The conjurer Ephrael, for example..."

"That’s not what I heard," the woman persisted. "I heard that he bound you as his sex-toy, and you had

to wear a skirt and make tea for him."

The crowd, including Nwm, laughed uproariously. Mostin cackled despite himself: the part about making tea was true, at least, but how did she know?

Ortwin laughed along with the others, giving the impression of genuine amusement.

"I fear that you must have mistaken me for someone else," the Bard said convincingly. "Sadly, there are many ortwins in the world although, of course, only one Ortwin..."

"For that, at least, let us be thankful," the woman smiled, holding her glass up.

"I do not know your name, madam," Ortwin said smoothly. "You have me at a disadvantage."

"I fear that your knowing my name would not remedy that," she replied with equal ease.

The crowd laughed again.

Ortwin nodded with mock gravity, and looked deeply into his own glass.

"I am afraid that firewine, in fact, renders me insensible," he said. The audience laughed appreciatively, but the simultaneous innuendo which accompanied the statement was: DESIST NOW, OR I WILL KNOCK YOU OUT.

"Firewine has little or no effect on me," she said, "but I will gladly share some tea if you care to make some. Lemon, but no sugar, please."

The crowd went wild, but completely missed the counter-entendre veiled by the biting satire: YOU COULD NOT, IF YOU TRIED. MY BLADE IS SHARP.

Ortwin held out his palm. "Shall we?" He said.

The woman smiled, stood up, and drew her rapier.

As the less brave hearted amongst the audience hastily exited the inn, and others moved back to the walls and placed bets, Mostin looked at Nwm.

"Did I just miss something?" the Alienist asked the Druid.

"It's a game," Nwm sighed. "Ortwin just upped the stakes. I should have known that he was itching for a fight. He wants to try out his new pick"

"Should I disintegrate her?" Mostin asked.

"No. That's against the rules."

"Ahh," Mostin nodded. It all seemed very esoteric to him.

Nwm, retaining his crone form, stood up, hobbled over to Ortwin and cast 'Neutralize Poison' on the Bard. His drunkenness evaporated immediately, to be replaced with a mild hangover.

The woman held up her hand. "Hey," she said, "what do you think you're doing? You know the forms,

Ortwin."

"I am eliminating the alcohol from his system," Nwm said.

"So you claim," she complained. "How do I know that its not a ward or magical protection."

"You don't," said Nwm. "But bear in mind that I just dissuaded that man, there," Nwm pointed to Mostin, "from disintegrating you."

The young woman nodded. It seemed like a fair point.

As Nwm sat down, Mostin spoke again.

"It hardly seems reasonable," the Alienist pointed out, "that wards are disallowed. Ortwin bears two potent enchanted weapons – surely that alone constitutes an unfair advantage."

"I agree," Nwm nodded, "but the rules are the rules. Rules are seldom sensible – although I suppose that a 'Stoneskin' or 'Ironguard' would unfairly tip the scales. These are among the few rules that Ortwin observes."

"Has he done this before, then?" Mostin asked.

Nwm's expression said everything.

"Either of us can yield and forfeit the match at any time." Ortwin said to his opponent. "Nwm will be second to us both, as death is not a desirable outcome for either of us. If we are rendered unconscious he will use his powers to resuscitate us. You don't mind, do you Nwm?"

The Druid sighed.

"Nwm?" People in the crowd whispered. "Nwm the Preceptor? Here?"

Oh Sh*t, thought Nwm.

The woman hopped onto a bar stool and, with a slight shift in her weight, effortlessly moved it onto one leg whilst maintaining perfect balance.

Hmm, thought Ortwin.

"Are you ready?" She asked.

Ortwin nodded.

Her speed was breathtaking.

*Druids of sufficiently high level are, of course, immune to all organic toxins.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 06-11-2002

As his opponent rapidly closed with him, Ortwin felt the strange sensation of a light breeze which seemingly issued from her. It wafted coolly over him, simultaneously agreeable and disquieting. She had an exotic quality which he could not place.

Ortwin, who rightly considered himself one of the most accomplished swordsmen in Wyre, immediately found himself on the defensive against his opponent's slender blade. She launched into a series of maneuvers which Ortwin had only read about in the most advanced theoretical textbooks, penetrating his guard three times in her opening flurry and striking with deadly accuracy. Where the point of the rapier penetrated his flesh, a numb feeling remained in his body, as though nerve endings were deadened. The Bard's acute instinct, honed by years of practice, was shamed by her perfection of form and technique. From the outset, he knew he was outclassed..

Those who observed saw only a flurry of steel, which raced faster than their own thoughts. Mostin, who had indulged himself in learning to use the rapier from an early age – more through whimsy than due to any natural talent – was speechless. He invoked a spell in order to ascertain the extent of her magical armamentarium, in an effort to distinguish her natural ability from any augmentations that she might carry: casual observation was impossible due to the speed of the exchange.

After her initial onslaught, Ortwin recovered somewhat and adopted a defensive stance with his scimitar and pick flashing through the air in a complex dance of warding actions whilst he considered his options. His sword flicked out once during the period and struck her, drawing a long but shallow welt on her forearm, but failed to elicit even a grimace of discomfort.

Noticing his posture, Ortwin's opponent smiled and assumed a counter-screening position whilst her rapier flicked out in rapid succession – tap-tap-tap-tap-tap – oh Gods, thought Ortwin, that's too fast she's trying to – SH*T.

His pick dropped from his left hand and fell to the floor.

"Aaargh!" Ortwin screamed, lurching forwards.

Her weapon flashed, penetrating his shoulder. Holding his scimitar in both hands, the Bard smashed it

into her rapier with all of his force. And again. And again. Each time she turned the assault, and sparks flew. But now a look of horror mixed with disgust crossed her face.

"That's a cheap trick, you bastard," she said, "now I'm going to fill you full of holes." But she eyed the scimitar with a look of renewed caution. It had a reputation almost as notorious as the Bard himself.*

Lunge-thrust-stab-stab-jab. Her rapier was everywhere, stabbing at his hand, his neck, his shoulder, his leg, his face. And it was leeching him, somehow. Ortwin noticed that the wound on his adversary's forearm had almost closed up. He looked at his own body. He WAS full of holes. Ugh. But he could break that cursed rapier – he knew it. Just one, solid contact – that's all it would take. Githla could cut through damn near anything.

But she was right. It was a cheap trick, and proved nothing.

Ortwin lowered his weapon and yielded. He bowed with a flourish.

"My gratitude for the instruction," he said smoothly.

"You're welcome," she said, and walked straight past him towards Mostin.

"Mostin the Metagnostic, I presume?" She asked. Her breeze floated over him.

"Aargh!" Cried Mostin from underneath the floppy, wide-brimmed hat which covered his face. He cast a quickened 'Dimension Door' and vanished.

**

"My name is Iua," she explained after the now heavily-buffed Alienist had been located by Nwm and a partially healed Ortwin, and brought back to the Inn. "You have met my mother."

"Ngarrgh!" cried Mostin, and began to cast 'Disintegrate.'

"Mulissu..." the woman said quickly.

"Aah," said Mostin, interrupting his spell and relaxing a little.

"My mother sends greetings, and congratulates you on your transcendence. She hopes you are well."

"Perfectly fine, thank-you," Mostin said, tightly. He was still nervous.

"I also suspect that she would approve of your caution, although it is rather disturbing to me. She wonders if you have heard of the mages Kothchori and Qiseze?"

"By reputation, although not personally," Mostin replied. Kothchori dwelt on an island three thousand miles to the south, and Qisesze had long since retired to her elemental hideaway.

"Regrettably Qiseze is now deceased," Iua informed him, "desiccated and burned with acid. Kothchori is deranged, and suffers from the effects of a powerful enchantment. He had been due to meet with Mulissu, but never showed. Kothchori had a reputation for excruciating punctiliousness and my mother, who was suspicious after he was five minutes late, made a rare translation to the prime to investigate. She found his stronghold infested with demons who were roasting one of his servants.

"Mulissu drove off the fiends and rescued the servant – an unfortunate sprite by the name of Orolde. He informed her that Feezuu – with whom I believe you are acquainted – had stormed the castle. She stole Kothchori's spellbooks. The mage himself was finally located in the Western Ocean swimming with a pod of whales – he makes little sense when spoken with. Orolde said that Feezuu first attempted to barter with his master before laying waste to the stronghold. Apparently Kothchori demanded that she leave in no uncertain terms, and this angered the Cambion."

"When did this happen?" Mostin asked.

"Three days ago," Iua replied. "My mother visited me in Fumaril and instructed me to warn you. She procured a number of items in the city before making a translation to the Plane of Air. I have ridden hard to reach you."

"Very hard, apparently," the Bard remarked drily.**

Iua ignored the comment.

"Did Kothchori possess the 'Discern Location' dweomer?" Mostin asked, aghast.

"I have no idea," Iua replied. "He was a powerful Transmuter, but I don't know the details of his auxiliary powers. Mulissu has also speculated that Feezuu may be in pursuit of the spell."

Mostin considered for a while. "I must confer with your mother," the Alienist said.

Iua grimaced. "She will not admit it, but I suspect that she is feeling nervous herself. She has no way to ward herself from sustained magical sight and, although her location is known to only a few, it must have crossed her mind that Feezuu may try to pinpoint her as a candidate for possession of the spell."

A spell which I gave her, Mostin mused. The irony was not lost on him.

"What do you mean, she cannot ward herself?" He asked.

"Neither abjurations nor illusions are within Mulissu's capabilities," Iua said hesitantly. "I think she herself regrets some of the hastiness of her youth when she made choices about the path she would take."

Mostin shook his head. Something didn't add up. "When I scried your mother some time ago, she dispelled my sensor – although I admit that I was surprised to find that she was not already warded. How is this possible if abjuration is proscribed to her?"

"At great personal cost," Iua replied. "She can still alter reality to suit her whim. I suspect that she would rather do that than admit to weakness in any area."

A 'Limited Wish', probably, Mostin thought. No wonder she had been annoyed with him. "Why was she travelling to the Elemental Plane of Air?" The Alienist asked.

"She was attempting to petition my father, in the hope that he prove less evasive and unforthcoming than usual."

"Er," said Ortwin, "who is your father, if you don't mind me asking?"

"A djinn, called Ulao," she sighed.

Nwm stroked his beard. Mostin had some rather peculiar acquaintances.

After the Druid and Alienist departed, Ortwin purchased another flagon of firewine and nursed his battered ego.

"You are a most capable swordsman, Ortwin," Iua said condescendingly.

Ortwin grinned venomously.

"I have been keeping abreast of events here in Wyre," she continued. "Tell me, are you committed to the Transaxiomatic cause?"

"Why?" He asked. She was digging, and he didn't like it.

"I'm merely curious," she said. "I find all restrictive regimes tedious, and although I have no particular vested interest in the way things turn out here, it would be a shame to see this opportunity for libertarianism fail."

The Bard sighed. She was still young, and probably idealistic.

"No," she replied to his thoughts. "I am a thrill-seeking opportunist, like you."

"That is very rude," Ortwin said. "Please get out of my mind."

"Look around, Ortwin. Trempa is normally a sedate, respectable town. Look at all of the other thrill-seeking opportunists who are here. All of these disreputable people, descending on the place. Have you forgotten what it's like to be in the thick of it?"

Ortwin tried to suppress a grin. If only she knew.

"But of course, I do know," Iua said, causing the Bard to scowl again. "How would you like to strike a blow for the rebel movement which you half-heartedly support, and make a fabulous amount of money at the same time?"

Ortwin raised an eyebrow. "You've piqued my interest," he admitted. Denying it would be futile.

"We need a mage. A very powerful one, like Mostin. Can you persuade him?"

Ortwin groaned. This sounded irresistibly dangerous.

"Good," Iua said, raising her glass. Ortwin raised his own, and, for a second wondered why he just couldn't help himself.

Before grinning and resigning himself to his basic nature. He looked at Iua.

"No," she said, "you may not."

Ortwin shrugged. It was always worth a try.

**

Mostin and Nwm sat in Mulissu's glass refectory.

"Nice pad," the Druid had remarked.

"She had no right to disclose that kind of information to you," the Witch snapped at Mostin. Minute sparks flew from her head, ionizing the air and causing the two mephits who fluttered nearby to clap their hands gleefully.

"Ooh, she's angry Mostin," one said.

"Yes, Mostin," the other chimed in. "Be careful."

Mostin ignored them. "How could you be so short-sighted as to eschew abjuration?" He asked her.

Mulissu shrugged. "One cannot master everything," she sighed, her characteristic languor quickly returning, "and I have no interest in making enemies. I just want to be left alone."

"Your daughter is intriguing," Mostin tactfully changed the subject. "When I saw her fight, it was the finest example of swordsmanship that I have ever witnessed. Her elemental heritage sits well with her."

Mulissu smiled sadly, and shook her head. "If she'd studied magic, her powers would have surpassed mine by far. But she is too fickle and undisciplined."

Mostin said nothing. Fickleness came in many forms.

Nwm coughed, and looked at the Alienist. Mostin winced, and gritted his teeth. "I haven't been entirely forthcoming with you, Mulissu," he said.

The Witch stared at him impassively.

"When I made the translation to Limbo in an attempt to eliminate Feezoo, I encountered her master – a demon named Ainhorr."

Mulissu raised an eyebrow.

"I may have angered him. I should remind you that your pocket paradise is not the Prime. It is not forbidden to him."

"My evocations are primarily electrical, Mostin..." she said.

"Yes," he replied. "That may prove unfortunate, under the circumstances."

Mulissu seethed, and for a moment, Mostin thought that she was about to cast a spell on him. He readied himself for what might be an overwhelming magical assault, but did not flee. Although

changeable, as a potential ally Mulissu was without peer. He must not show any sign of weakness. The Witch did not blast Mostin. Instead, she shouted at him.

"You have been selfish and irresponsible, Mostin," she yelled, "and have lacked all foresight in this matter. You capture Rurunoth, and imprison him, thus demonstrating your potency. The point is made. Well done. But you do not stop there. Feezuu. Ainhorr? Even I have heard of this Balor, Mostin, and I am no demonologist. This must cease, or you will be dragged screaming to the Abyss. My own security is now jeopardized, and you make flippant remarks. The time for wit is long past, Mostin."

Even the Mephits ceased their careening to watch their mistress. Mostin spoke carefully.

"I apologize, Mulissu, if my actions have precipitated this series of events. But if circumstances had been kinder, then I would have eliminated Feezuu permanently, curbed her fiendish influence across several worlds, and removed a painful thorn from the collective ass of the magical community. You told me yourself that it was within my power to accomplish this."

"Had I known the byzantine intricacies of your own situation then I might have been more cautious." She snapped.

"What's done is done," Nwm said softly. "I, too encouraged Mostin to assault Feezuu, and I feel some responsibility in the matter. The question now is 'how do we proceed?'"

"I think that there is no 'we' in this, Druid," Mulissu said sardonically. "I am not being drawn into the political mess that you are in. I certainly have no interest in demons. Or celestials for that matter. I am surprised that you do."

"Then why did you contact me?" Mostin hissed.

"To give you fair warning," Mulissu said. "If Feezuu approaches me for the spell, I may be inclined to trade with her."

"You cannot be serious!" Mostin exclaimed. "You despise her."

"I am wary of her also," Mulissu said. "Ulaos will not aid me. Feezuo's acid evocations combined with a fiendish resistance to my spells make me nervous. If she conjures demons, or is accompanied by them, my power is effectively curtailed. And I cannot resort to Sonics in the same way that you can. In terms of raw power, I am virtually unmatched, but I have few wards."

"A pre-emptive strike by the two of us..." the Alienist began.

"No!" Mulissu exclaimed. "Have you been listening to a word that I've been saying, Mostin? I am NOT being drawn into this."

The Alienist thought for a moment. "If you insist on the quiet life, Mulissu, I may be able to help you," he said.

The Witch looked quizzically at Mostin.

"I have not been idle since the failed assault upon Feezuo," he explained. "I have found a means to render 'Mordenkainen's Magnificent Mansion' permanent."

Mulissu's jaw dropped.

"Are you willing to trade the formula?" The Witch asked.

"I will give it to you," Mostin replied. "I owe you that much, at least."

The Alienist thought of Qiseze and Kothchori, mages whom he had never met, yet the loss of whose unique intellects he nonetheless lamented. In his abstract, cerebral way, he felt something akin to remorse.

**

The Great Hall of the Ducal Palace thronged with armoured warriors, their retainers and servants as the Duchess, Eadric, Tahl, Nwm, Nehael and Mostin took counsel together with the knights, captains and bannermen of Trempa. Foremost amongst them – the handful of Templars who had deserted with Tahl,

and the Paladins who had elected to remain when the Fane was taken over – crowded Eadric with a look of religious awe on their faces that made him feel uneasy. Their fervour was not shared by many of those present.

"We must resign ourselves to the inevitability of war, but we may not, ourselves, initiate any action..." the Duchess began. She was immediately interrupted by Ryth, the Thane of Har Kumil.

"Bullsh*t!" He exclaimed. "We should catch them while their pants are down. Tomur is within range and I can lead a mounted sortie to storm the Bishop's Palace."

Several voices were raised in support.

"Shut up, Ryth," said Nwm. The Thane, an avowed pagan, although loyal to the Duchess, was not renowned for his subtlety. Although Nwm liked the middle-aged nobleman, he found his bloodlust somewhat depressing. As a Uediian, Nwm felt that he should have at least some respect for the Druid's opinion. Ryth was an iconoclast in all respects, however.

"If you got off of your priestly arse and did something to help us," Ryth retorted, "then we'd have no problem. You could burn them up for us, and we could finish them off."

"Aargh!" Nwm yelled. "Will you SHUT UP. All possibilities will be discussed, but the agenda of this meeting is not going to be dictated by you."

The Duchess waited for the clamour to subside before continuing.

"We must not initiate any act of war beyond Trempa's borders. That much has been revealed to Eadric in his visitation."

The statement was greeted by assenting murmurs from the Oronthonian knights, scepticism from amongst the more agnostic members of the nobility, and by open disdain from Ryth and others in the Uediian party.

Eadric sighed. It was going to be a long day.

*Ortwin's blade, Githla, was forged by the Azer smith Jodrumu at the behest of Druhmo of Borchia, one of the precursor states of modern Wyre. Jodrumu was considered one of the greatest smiths of his age, prior to his enslavement by the Fire Giants. When he refused to capitulate to their demands, he was maimed before being released. Unable to create more of his masterpieces, Jodrumu wandered for years before finally going mad and taking his own life.

**Fumaril, also the original home of Mulissu herself, is eight hundred miles from Trempa in the Thalassine.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 06-13-2002

**

The debate raged all morning, and the Duchess, Soraine, called for a recess for an hour after noon. Her head jostled with half a hundred different views, and scenarios which she had not previously considered made her feel ill and depressed.

"The Temple alone can field a thousand knights. If they can convince the king to fully support them, he will muster all of Wyre against us."

"What if they march on Iald first? Are you saying that we may not act?"

"Will Tyndur remain neutral? Will Jiuhu declare for us? Ecclesiastical influence is less entrenched there, but their nobility are notoriously conservative."

"Whatever you decide, as a Uediian I assert my right to protect my people by whatever means I deem necessary. You can stick your Bright God up your arse. It is my feudal duty, and may not be denied by you or anyone else, Soraine."

"We need more men."

"This is a Holy War. We will prevail."

"We need more weapons and armour. We need Thalassine engineers, artillerymen and light cavalry."

"We need more money."

"The hand of Oronthon guides our actions. We must have faith."

"We need to restore the tax burden."

"Nwm needs to take a lead, and unite the Uediian priesthood."

"We should have had this meeting six months ago, but the 'Instrument of God' here decided that he'd have visions in the wilderness instead."

And so on, and so forth. The poisoning of wells, guerilla tactics, the likely powers of the Templars on the battlefield, siege warfare, the disorganized and cellular nature of Uediian priests, grain supplies, finances, mercenaries, levies and fyrdsmen, conscription, training regimens. Money. Money. Money.

Eadric and the Duchess spoke privately during the two hour long recess.

"Ryth is right about Nwm," she said. "If he took a lead, persuaded the other priests to unite, they could make a formidable contribution to the effort."

Eadric merely shook his head. "It's not going to happen," he said. "Nwm despises organized religion with every atom in his body. And he recognizes the potential for disaster: Uedii worshippers are less bound by political allegiance than by ties of kinship and culture. Any movement that he started in Trempa would soon spill over into the rest of Wyre. He must follow the dictates of his own conscience. But he will act when he decides to act, and when he DOES act, then he will not pull his punches." The Duchess nodded, and recalled the scene outside of her own gates when Brey had been defeated –

seemingly quite casually – by the Druid. And Nwm had been largely unprepared for violent conflict.

"Soraine," Eadric said, "our camp is eclectic, to say the least. Not everyone is interested in the religious agenda. You need to unite them, because I cannot – at least not yet. I am most effective on the battlefield, and when that time comes, Tahl tells me that they will rally to me. Until then, this remains in the realm of politics, at which I have little skill."

"When will the Temple act?" Soraine asked. "You must have some idea."

"The pressure is already building," Eadric replied. "Mostin has scried the precincts of the Great Fane on several occasions. Their debates are now over, even as ours are only beginning, and they are arming. We will know soon enough when they march. And I know where the first blow will fall: it is symbolically apt, from their perspective, and is closer to Morne than Trempa itself."

"Deorham," the Duchess sighed. "I'm sorry, Ed."

**

Mostin, who had said little during the morning's discourse – simultaneously finding the proceedings boring, and lamenting the fact that he was forbidden to blast people by the Injunction – retired to his manse for luncheon.

His walk through the Duchess' pheasant woods, agreeable at any time of day, was unusually pleasant. The snows had melted, croci and daffodils were beginning to peek through, and the air was warm – at least in the sun. His reverie was not to last long. As he approached his porch, his magical sight* revealed an invisible quasit sitting on the step pulling the feathers from the wings of a bird that it had captured. The quasit, sitting in plain view but confident in its magical screen, looked at Mostin, quickly twisted the bird's neck, and vanished.

Mostin's heart pounded. Where was she? She must be here somewhere. He quickly 'Dimension Doored' into his cellar and walked through the magical portal into his extradimensional retreat, sealing it behind him. Removing the Looking Glass of Urm-Nahat from his portable hole, he invoked its

power, and began to scry the interior of his own home.

Nothing had been disturbed. No evidence of any intruder. He widened his search.

The quasit was no doubt compacted**, he mused, as his magical sensor roamed. Were there other demons nearby? He grunted. The thought was not appealing. Several minutes passed.

There, on his porch. Feezuu. How beautiful she is, Mostin noticed for the first time. Skin like alabaster, her hair deep indigo, and large, almond eyes. And more eyes. And more. Her robe was covered in them. She bore a compound bow of exquisite design across her back, and a longsword hung from her hip.

Feezuu smiled and looked straight into the sensor.

"I know you're watching, Mostin." She spoke in Abyssal. "I mean you no harm. I have come to trade with you – I have much to offer. I seek a certain spell. I am generous. Will you speak with me?"

Mostin's mind boggled. Was this a genuine offer, or some duplicity? She was, after all, looking for two creatures posing as devils, and had no reason to suspect him if she did not already possess the dweomer. He waited.

"I must have the 'Discern Location' spell, Mostin. You are a powerful diviner. Do you possess it?"

Mostin swallowed. He had no means of communicating with her, unless he left the extradimensional space. He made a mental note of acquiring the 'message' spell as soon as possible.

"I am growing impatient, Mostin," she said. "I know little about you, but have already discovered that you are rather timid. I have no quarrel with you."

Mostin let the mirror go blank, and cast an empowered 'cat's grace,' a 'stoneskin' and 'haste,' and wished that he'd prepared more wards. He grasped his amulet, prayed that its absorptive abilities would work, and exited the 'Magnificent Mansion.' Stepping into his cellar, he could already hear crashing sounds upstairs – demons, most likely, rifling through his possessions. Several sets of explosive runes detonated. The Alienist smiled. This time he had the advantage of being on his home turf.

Mostin teleported himself onto the porch. Feezuu stood in the doorway. Behind her, an uridezu rat-demon, several dretch and a dozen quasits were running and flying around inside causing mayhem.

But this time, the Alienist had the jump

Mostin flung an empowered sonically substituted burst of 'Chain Lightning' which almost blew the Cambion off of her feet. Inside the house, quasits dropped like flies from the secondary arcs.

Incanting, the Alienist summoned three bearded devils.

"Kill the woman, then the demons," he instructed. "Try not to smash the house up."

As Feezuu turned to see the devils rushing at her, her face suddenly revealed an expression of understanding. She gaped.

With the merest gesture, Mostin hurled another quickened sonic bolt before she could react. Her resistance held, and Mostin grasped his amulet and braced himself.

Feezuu cast a quickened haste, hit Mostin and the devils with an empowered, maximized acid substituted 'Fireball' and then aimed a 'Finger of Death' at the Alienist. One of the devils vanished, consumed in acid. The necromantic spell was absorbed harmlessly by the amulet, and Mostin thanked several random deities. He looked down to notice that his skin was dripping off of his arms.

The two bearded devils ploughed into the Cambion in a frenzy with their glaives slashing violently at her, causing her to stagger backwards. Mostin cast a quickened 'magic missile' and another sonic.

He arrested his 'Disintegrate' when he noticed that Feezuu was already lying on the ground.

The uridezu dashed past one of the barbazu in an attempt to escape, but, already suffering from the effects of 'Explosive Runes' and the first Sonic, was felled by the devil's glaive.

The Alienist walked cautiously over to the Necromancer's body as the devils chased the one remaining quasit around inside his hallway. She was not dead, but teetered on the edge of unconsciousness.

"You?" She laughed. The Sonics had ruptured her internally, and she coughed blood and bile.

Mostin drew his rapier.

Feezuu smiled. "'Cloned,'" she said.

He plunged it through her neck.

After he had dismissed the devils, the Alienist limped back down the steps into his cellar, selected a bottle of thirty-year old firewine, took a large crystal goblet from his glassware cabinet, and sat on his porch for a minute to gather his thoughts. He glanced inside: his unseen servants were already tidying up the mess, neatly arranging his papers and sweeping up broken glass and porcelain.

He looked at Feezuu's body. Even if she had already made a simulacrum of herself, he didn't care. She probably wouldn't remember any of what had happened, and would be diminished in both personal potency, and influence amongst the fiends of Graz'zt's Abyssal court. And without her magical items, it would take years for her to regain her power, if she managed it at all.

Mostin downed a glass of firewine, and hobbled over to the corpse. He stood over it like a vulture, before bending down and pulling the longbow free and unfastening the sword belt. A 'Robe of Eyes.' Mostin could barely contain his excitement. She bore a ring on each hand, and wore a belt which sported many pockets. He opened one, and was delighted to see that it was an extradimensional storage space of modest size. Rifling through them systematically, he located her books – 3 slender tomes, with neatly written spells filling them.

Mostin spent the rest of the afternoon sat on his porch, absorbed in the books, locating dweomers which he could add to his collection. Two volumes contained only Necromantic spells – of no use to Mostin, but of immense trade value. The third was filled with her auxiliary spells, including many that Mostin did not possess. He flicked to the back, where the more potent dweomers were scribed: 'Gate

Seal,' 'Hardening,' 'Contingency,' 'Acid Storm,' 'Eyebite,' 'Energy Immunity,' 'Vipergout,' 'Delayed Blast Fireball.'

Mostin stroked Mogus, and the hedgehog crooned appreciatively.

When Eadric and Nehael rode up at four o'clock in the afternoon to investigate his absence from the council, they were shocked to find Mostin with several layers of skin burned off, sitting and drinking firewine next to a corpse. The Demoness looked at the body.

"Feezuu?" She asked, aghast.

Mostin raised his glass. "Yes, indeed," he said.

*Mostin has a permanent 'See Invisibility' cast upon his person.

**Compacting is a way of getting around the restrictions on the various 'planar binding' spells. The Demonist or Diabolist makes peaceful contact with the outsider prior to casting the spell, and they strike an agreement. Payment is usually made in Larvae, the universal currency of the Lower Planes. When the 'planar binding' is cast, the conjurer purposely breaks the 'magic circle' and allows the outsider to gain its freedom. The demon or devil is now secure upon the Prime Plane and, unlike the various 'Summon Monster' spells, can remain for an indefinite period.

Needless to say, compacting is very hazardous, and only very powerful spellcasters employ compacts with the higher demons and devils. Not only does it involve an implicit degree of trust between the fiend and the summoner (a rare thing), but also, if overused, has the danger of attracting the attention of celestials – obviously, something which most diabolists would rather avoid.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 06-13-2002

In which Nwm's player, Dave, again demonstrates his ability to create new story arcs out of thin air.
Thanks Dave.

**

Ortwin scratched his head. "So, this time, she really is dead, then. Right? I mean, Nehael and Ed saw the body. There is no risk of her coming back?"

Mostin smiled. "She said 'Cloned' to me. By this, I assumed she meant that she had a simulacrum prepared for her spirit to inhabit. 'Discern Location' revealed this to be the truth."

Ortwin banged his head. Necromancers seemed difficult to kill.

"The question most pertinent to us," Mostin continued "is 'when was the simulacrum prepared?' If it was made before we launched our first assault upon her, it will retain no memory of our attack: she has, effectively, never met us. It may also retain no memory of the murder of Cynric – effectively meaning that the Feezuu who now exists is not guilty of it."

Eadric sighed. "Is this likely?" he asked.

Mostin shrugged. "It is possible that the clone was grown during the intervening months, but I feel it is unlikely."

"How do we know," Ortwin asked "that we didn't, in fact, kill Feezuu the first time we met her, and that you just killed another clone."

Mostin shook his head. "That is impossible. If the Feezuu which I just killed was a clone, it would have retained no memory of our original attack. Thus, it would have never met us. Thus, it would not have recognized my Sonics and the devils which I summoned. Nor would acquiring the 'Discern Location' dweomer have benefited it, as it can only be used with regard to things which the caster has encountered. We may therefore concur that we simply failed to kill her during our initial encounter."

The Alienist smiled at his own tortuous logic.

"In any case," Mostin continued, "it is likely that 'Feezuu II,' if we can call her that, has a duplicate set of spellbooks stashed away somewhere in her hideaway in Limbo. It is also likely that her most potent dweomers are no longer available to her. Unfortunately, the location of the spellbooks she stole from Qiseze and Kothchori may never be revealed – she did not have them on her person, and 'Feezuu II' will have no recollection of where the original Feezuu secreted them."

"Unless she hid them on Limbo," Ortwin remarked, "in which case the clone has awakened happily to a cache of spells that it could not previously cast, and wonder where they came from."

The Alienist nodded. He hadn't considered that possibility.

Mostin drew the attention of the others to the items which he had pilfered from Feezuu's body.

"This," he gloated, "is a 'Robe of Eyes.'"

"Really?" Nwm remarked sarcastically. "I'd never have guessed."

Mostin sniffed. "I'm keeping it," he said. "It's mine now. These other items are also interesting, and I will discern their full abilities in due course. The sword is called 'Melancholy.' It is an Anarchic weapon of great potency."

"It is a Slaadi blade," Ortwin said, unexpectedly. "May I?"

The Bard picked up the scabbard, and closed his hand around the slender hilt of the sword.

Insane visions and scenes of entropy filled his mind.

"Ngraahhh!" Ortwin forced his hand to uncurl from around the quillons. "It is sapient. It wants to kill you, Eadric. It quite likes me, though."

"Oh, joy," said the Paladin, "that's all we need. What do you plan to do with it, Mostin?"

The Alienist lifted his hands in an expression of confusion. "I honestly don't know. No wizard will

want it – most can barely wave a stick in self-defense, much less a longsword. If I trade it, I won't get anything like its full value. I assume you don't want it, Ortwin, even at a bargain price?"

The Bard shook his head. "Githla is my blade."

"In which case, I suppose I will just hang onto it until an idea springs to mind. It's a shame it's not a rapier, else I could use it myself."

Eadric thanked Oronthon that it wasn't a rapier.

"The bow is likewise a conundrum," Mostin said. "It possesses a Necromantic aura, although it is not evil."

"I can shoot a bow passably well," Ortwin said. "Furthermore, I won't give you anything for it – consider it ample payment for putting my neck on the line during that abortive Limbo fiasco. Feezuu was our target, after all. Not to mention all of the other trouble that you've gotten us all into." He smiled charmingly.

Mostin started to bluster, but thought better of it.

"Speaking of which," Ortwin continued, "I seem to remember Nwm casting a dozen wards or so on us before we translated to Limbo. Don't you think you owe him something as well?"

"Don't push it," said Mostin.

"Don't worry about it," said Nwm.

"Don't be so damn selfless, Nwm," said Ortwin. "Come on, Mostin. What's fair is fair. What will you have, Nwm, of all the things here?"

Mostin looked aghast.

Nwm considered for a while. "The Sword," he said, finally.

Everyone looked at him as though he were mad.

"Not for me," the Druid explained. "But for someone who has the conviction and the strength of will to wield it. A Champion. A Uediian. I would use it against the Temple."

Mostin nodded. "Then let it be noted that all accounts are hereby settled." He handed the weapon to Nwm, and breathed a sigh of relief.

But Eadric swallowed. Hard.

**

Over the next two weeks, Nwm travelled the length and breadth of Wyre, disguised as a crone, or a boy, or a young man, making inquiries without attracting suspicion to himself. He 'Wind Walked' over three thousand miles, and 'Tree Strode' a hundred more.

The Druid spoke to farmers and cotters in rural Trempa, Tomur, Hethio and Iald. He talked to woodsmen deep within the forest of Nizkur and to mountain-men in the uplands and foothills of the Thrumohars, the nigh-impenetrable range which marched on Northern Wyre. He spoke to trees, and to rocks, and to animals. In the process, he gathered a huge amount of information about the widespread and diverse pagan community. Goddess worshippers, but also those who revered local gods and deities. Animists, pantheists and heathens of every shade. He discovered their needs, their concerns, their fears and their expectations.

His inquiries were subtle. As a crone, he would say:

"Would that we had heroes again, like in the days before the rise of the Temple. My grandmother's grandmother remembered the time before the taxes. When your beliefs were not threatened."

Or as a boy, appearing wide-eyed and naïve, he would ask:

"Are you a great warrior? Is there a great warrior in this village?"

And whilst his questions were usually met with mirth, occasionally he would be pointed in the direction of one who could wield a sword but, finding them, discovered that they were old, or drunk, or that their reputation was based on hearsay rather than fact.

Until, in the foothills of the mountains, he met a shamaness. She joined him as he was 'Wind-Walking.'

"I am Mesikämmi, the Honey-Eater," she said in broken common.

"I am called Nwm the Preceptor," he replied. "I am looking for a hero."

"Good luck!" She said, and flew away.

Nwm chased after her. "Wait," he shouted, "you must know of someone, or at least of someone who might know someone."

She laughed. "Over the mountains, onto the plateau," she shouted. "Speak to the Tunthi.*"

So Nwm flew over the Thrumohars, past their vast, ice-covered crags, and passed onto the plain of Tun Hartha.

**

Iua, Mostin and Ortwin sat closeted within the Alienist's drawing room.

Iua had a large schematic with intricate diagrams, runes and designs written upon it. Her own scrawled notes covered the remaining blank spaces, and sometimes overlapped with the more meticulous writing beneath.

"The Temple vault was designed by the mage Tersimion..." she began.

*Nomadic hunter-gatherers who dwell at an altitude of over 8000 feet, the Tunthi are widely regarded as being crazy.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 06-15-2002

**

Enitharmon, tomorrow is the meeting with Enitharmon, was the first thing that she thought. Before slipping back into unconsciousness.

Only a moment seemed to pass before her eyes opened. She was surrounded by a living, viscous fluid which seemed to penetrate her mouth, and stomach and lungs. She panicked, and struggled wildly before sitting bolt upright, gasping for air. She coughed and vomited for what seemed like an aeon, breathing desperately, trying to empty herself of the foul tasting lavage.

When she finally gained her equilibrium and opened her eyes, a nightmarish scene greeted her. Gross, contorted body parts hung around her, and blood dripped incessantly from a sagging ceiling above her head. A dull, red glow filled the place, and the walls rippled as though they were made of liquid.

Feezuu relaxed. She was home.

As she pulled herself out of the ghoulish bath, she wondered how long she had been dead. She stood for a moment, naked and covered in fetid slime, before walking across the pulsing floor to a tall cabinet, carved from the femur of some terrible beast. Upon it was engraved a rune of death. She spoke a single word.

The door opened. The space beyond was empty.

Feezuu cursed silently. Her robe, gone. Her weapons also. And her belt. The fact that she was not surprised made her no less angry.

Taking a moment to reflect upon her own consciousness, she observed that her highest valences were diminished, and her psyche was empty of magic.

She seethed insanely before finally regaining her composure.

Mustering her will, the Cambion reached down and sank her hands into the floor at the base of the cabinet. Blood, warm and vital, embraced her forearms. She smiled grimly and groped for a moment before her fist closed around a handle. Tugging hard, she pulled a small iron case up through the liquid floor, dragging blood with it which splashed over her. The surface ebbed strangely for a while, before resuming its pseudo-solid state.

Feezuu opened the case, and gazed inside. She pulled a neatly folded robe out, woven from a material that was darker than black, and drew it around herself. At the bottom of the case were several scroll tubes, vials, and a single spellbook which contained her most useful dweomers. Also, there was a glass tube of curious design. Inside it, within tiny cells, motes flickered about restlessly. Larvae that had been morphed for easy transportation.

As she placed the contents within the hidden pockets of her robe, a shadow fell upon her from behind.

She turned to see her cohort, the slaad called Khrgz standing there. His vast, bluish form obscured the doorway. He was flanked by a group of eight of his lesser kin.

Feezuu snarled. "How dare you! Depart at once."

Khrgz smiled, displaying a maw full of sharp teeth. "You are weak, Feezuu," he said.

Not that weak, she thought. Her innate nature still counted for something.

A wave of Necromantic power emanated from her, desiccating three of the red slaadi, but failing to overcome Khrgz.

Another blue slaad materialized. And then two more reds.

As they closed upon her, the Cambion swore. Even if she summoned a demon, she could not stop them from ripping her to shreds. She quickly pulled a scroll from her robe, even as their claws rent her and their teeth sank into her. She spoke four words and vanished.

She aimed for the city of Jashat in the Thalassine, but instead arrived four hundred miles to the south in the deserts of Shûth. The Prime Plane was dull, but safe, she thought. She began to walk northwards across the arid erg.

She stopped before dusk on a platform of rock, in the lee of a tall pinnacle of desert stone, worn into strange shapes by the passage of wind and sand over countless years. She sat, and meditated.

When she emerged from her reverie, the stars had kindled in the sky and the moon was rising in the east. The air was windless. Taking her book from its velvet sheath, Feezuu pored over it, and the moonlight illuminated the dweomers on the pages. So few, so few. And even some of these were denied to her. Word would soon spread of her ousting from her stronghold, and no doubt a Death Slaad would seize its opportunity and take control. They resented her as much as she despised them. She silently cursed whoever was responsible for her current predicament, and vowed revenge.

Feezuu cleared the area of debris, until a circle perhaps eight feet across was made on the rock shelf, sweeping it with a sprig of gorse pulled from a desert shrub. She carefully inscribed a diagram, and with a spell, anchored it. She began to pace around the periphery, incanting fiercely, until her voice reached a screaming climax.

Fire erupted in the diagram as an equine shape manifested itself. Its hooves and mane kindled, and smoke billowed from its nostrils. It thrashed wildly in an attempt to escape. The Cambion smiled.

"I am Feezuu," she said. "You will serve me. I will show you more death and madness than you dreamed was possible."

**

The next morning, riding the nightmare, she descended on a desert caravan. Before slaying the merchants, she learned that nearly nine months had passed. She loaded a bag full of gold, silks and

spices, and continued northwards.

Nine months!

She wondered if Ainhorr had betrayed her after the embassy with the Celestials. Why were they due to parley, she wondered. The Balor had told her little, but had instructed her to prepare to translate to the Prime after the meeting.

Graz'zt had been angry. She shivered. Rurunoth had disappeared – the rumour was that he was slain or ensnared.

Nehael. It all had something to do with Nehael. She had been commanded to seduce a paladin. Something had gone wrong.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 06-18-2002

Last update for a week or so - I'm off into the mountains hiking with my wife.

**

Tersimion, a mage of extraordinary genius, had been an enigma.

Unlike the vast majority of his peers, whose religious sentiments ran the gamut from indifference to disdain, Tersimion had possessed faith in the judgement of a single deity. What had further distinguished him from the other members of the magical community – most of whom regarded him as sadly misguided – was that his conversion and catechesis arrived late in life, well after he had established a reputation as a spellcaster of prodigious power.

His contributions to the Oronthonian cause had been numerous and diverse, but his final gift, the vault beneath the Temple at Morne, was the one for which he was rightly best remembered.

The vault was, in fact, a series of miniature nested demi-planes, impervious to magical travel of any kind and warded against scrying with the most potent of spells. It was known to possess areas of

antimagic, it was roamed by golems and axiomatic manticores, and boasted sophisticated mechanical traps to boot. Its single entrance was guarded by four paladins whose sole duty was to prevent unauthorized access – more to protect the innocent, than through any fear that those who did somehow pass them would penetrate the vault's mysteries. The knights took shifts – two of them guarded the portal for twelve hours at a stretch, whilst the other pair rested and prayed. The Temple Exchequer had maintained this tradition for two hundred years.

Mostin was reticent. "Although I have no objection to larceny," he told Iua, "and I am also intrigued by the intellectual challenge that this poses, I am wary that any involvement by me – especially given Ortwin's history with the Temple – might be construed as an overtly political act. I do not wish the ire of the council to descend upon me for violating the Injunction."

"I agree," she said cautiously, "that we must tread carefully. But the rewards are staggering. As well as the sheer volume of coinage – over one hundred thousand gold crowns are maintained as a floating balance – every promissory note and record of transaction is kept there. It would send the Temple finances into utter chaos if ..."

"Wait!" Ortwin said. "I thought that you said this was about opportunism, not striking some political blow for an abstract cause that I'm not sure I have any time for."

Iua shrugged. "We may as well sound the trumpet for liberty and freedom while we're there – it's not as if it'll be much extra effort. A gallon of oil and a tindertwig will do it. Assuming that Mostin isn't willing to cast a 'Fireball.'"

Ortwin eyed the girl suspiciously. "I'd rather not burn the Fane down. I don't think Ed would be all that impressed." He had the sneaking suspicion that Iua was a closet idealist after all.

Mostin snorted. "If we managed that, it would be the first interplanar conflagration in history. My main problem is that I don't feel that the reward is ample to the risk involved – money is merely money. Are there magical devices stored in the vault? Artifacts?" His eyes gleamed greedily.

"Not to my knowledge," Iua confessed. She reached into a pocket and produced an ivory tube. "But if you are willing to forego a percentage of your cut, then another kind of remuneration might be agreed

upon." Iua uncorked the tube and pulled a bundle of papers out. Unrolling them, she handed the top one to Mostin. It was a spell, which read:

‘Mulissu’s Passage of Lightning.’

The Alienist was about to say something, but Iua handed him another scroll. It read:

‘Mulissu’s Rhapsody of the Clouds.’

Mostin swallowed reflexively. She handed him another scroll:

‘Mulissu’s Quasi-Elemental Transformation.’

And another:

‘Mulissu’s Instantaneous Elemental Tempest.’

And finally:

‘Mulissu’s Ultimate Plasma Evocation.’

Mostin looked at them and hyperventilated for a few moments before he regained his ability to speak.

"You stole these from your own mother?" Apparently the young lady was quite unscrupulous.

"They are copies," Iua explained. "Made by her, of course. And I am not entirely unscrupulous."

Mostin was still shaking. The last two dweomers were beyond even his ability to manifest, but he understood the principles. And the Plasma Evocation could be modified into a sonic...

But if Mulissu ever found out...

He couldn’t help himself.

"We have a deal," the Alienist said. "And Iua..."

She looked at him.

"A mage's mind is his private domain. If you ever try to read my thoughts again, you will suffer the consequences. Do you understand?"

"Noted," she said.

**

Nwm and a young Tunthi shaman sat together near a fire. As neither could speak the language of the other, and neither possessed any spell with which they could be made intelligible to each other, Nwm had taken the logical step of using an eagle to translate. After all, both present COULD speak with animals. And eagles were relatively articulate as far as avians went.

They were waiting for the older shaman, Tietājā, to return from a dream-quest, in which he was speaking with his deceased ancestors and looking for guidance. The other members of the Tuern – a type of extended family group numbering sixty souls – had retired to their rude skin huts, leaving the Druid alone with the initiate, Sarajoa. He was young, Nwm mused, but already possessed more wisdom than most of the clergy in Oronthon's church. His closeness to the land was manifested in his speech and mannerisms, and he felt no pressing need to make small talk, or muse on the meaning of life, or engage in pointless philosophical banter. For most of the time, the eagle stood silent.

These people can teach me, Nwm thought.

When Tietājā finally emerged from his hut, he looked tired but satisfied. He hobbled over to the fire and drew his cloak around himself, before pouring mead into a cup carved from birchwood and drinking deeply.

"I ascended to the fires," he said.* "I spoke with my grandfather. I asked him if my Green was your Green, or whether they were different."

"What did he say?" Nwm asked.

"He said that they are neither the same, nor different, nor both, nor neither," Tietäjä smiled ironically.

"Which is another way of telling me not to think with my head, but with my stomach."

"What does your stomach tell you?" Nwm asked.

Tietäjä laughed loudly. "It tells me that I am getting too old to eat this much meat, and I should change my diet. I like you Nwm, but this struggle that you speak of is a long way from here. I cannot FEEL it, it does not move me. Only rarely do my people leave the Linna.** But when they do, they take something of it with them."

Nwm said nothing, but listened.

"There is another Tuern, whose territory lies three days from here towards the sunrise," the Shaman said. "They are not our enemies, nor are they our friends. Five years ago, several of their men – great warriors – left their family to travel to the warm lands. My grandfather told me that you seek one of these men. His name is Hullu."

Nwm nodded. "Where can I find this Hullu?" he asked.

"You must speak to the people in the other Tuern," Tietäjä said. "They will answer your questions. You will need to find a token that belonged to Hullu, and then use your magic to locate him."

Nwm stood and bowed, preparing to leave.

"Beware of their shaman. She is dangerous."

Nwm nodded, and dissolved into mist.

**

"How many?" Eadric asked.

"Eight hundred Templars and around four thousand auxiliaries," Mostin replied. "They left at dawn."

Eadric groaned.

"There's more. Two smaller forces also marched this morning – one from Tomur and another from Thahan. They are also heading for Trempa, although from the north."

Eadric nodded grimly. "I'll speak to Soraine. We'll need to act quickly."

*The Tunthi believe that the polar aurora is the seat of all wisdom.

** Lit., "Enclosure." The Tunthi name for the desolate plateau on which they live, Tun Hartha.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 06-22-2002

On a warm spring morning, a day before the Equinox, Eadric of Deorham rode from the gates of the Duchess's castle with his paladins. A quarter of Trempa's knights, thanes and bannermen, as well as five hundred or so mounted man-at-arms, accompanied them. The cavalry was protected by a screen of Ardanese mercenaries – horsed archers whose fierceness in battle was matched only by their capacity for mead – and foreshadowed by hand-picked scouts from the fiefs of thanes Ekkert and Streek. Eadric had led out the army post haste – his main objective being to hold the crossings over the River Nund – until Tahl arrived with Soraine and the bulk of Trempa's armoured aristocracy.

Most of the Uediians – including the skirmishers and longbowmen – had been dispatched northwards under the command of Ryth of Har Kumil. The Thane, although bloodthirsty and itching for war, was no fool. He was to conduct a guerilla campaign of attrition against the forces advancing from Tomur – a task for which he was amply qualified. His orders had been clear: Do NOT cross the Nund. Do NOT invest Tomur.

Eadric sighed. He doubted whether Ryth would remain within his remit. He also wondered whether

Rintrah's instructions* applied to him personally, the troops under his command, or everyone in Trempa involved in the war.

In the rearguard, aside from Togull, the Laird of Rauth Sutting, to whom nominal command fell, rode a motley rag-tag of soldiers-for-hire, libertarian idealists, religious zealots of uncertain persuasion, romantics, poets, artists, and Ortwin of Jiuhu. Next to him, sullen and uncommunicative, Iua sulked. She sat upon a remarkable horse whose feet did not seem to touch the ground, but rather the legs of which ended in cloudlike wisps of vapour.

Mostin the Metagnostic rode nearby, his uncanny green eyes peering out from underneath the most outrageous hat that he possessed, made from purple velvet and topped with a wing-feather from a lillend. The brim was a full three feet in diameter. The robe of eyes which he wore dispelled any remaining doubt in the minds of those who saw him that this was someone of arcane power, and to be carefully avoided.

Despite her protestations, Iua had not been able to dissuade Ortwin from riding. She had pointed out that now – with virtually every Templar absent from the Fane – was the ideal time to raid the vault. The Bard had half surprised himself when Eadric had asked:

"We leave in the morning. Are you coming?"

And Ortwin had replied "Yes."

No doubts, no equivocations, no procrastinations. Iua's scheme could wait – after all, the vault would still be there in a week. Here was a chance for songs, glorious deeds, bloodshed, and a boost to his recently battered ego. His reputation demanded that he be in full prominence, inspiring people with exaggerated braggadocio and tales of daring. In the final analysis, being in the limelight was the most important thing in the world to him. And, after all, he couldn't let Ed down, he added as an afterthought.

Iua had commended the Bard, but pointed out that there were other ways of striking a blow to the Temple – that a financial crisis would cause pandemonium quickly and effectively. She missed the crux of the Bard's motivation, however – the unchecked desire for self-aggrandizement – and by the time

she had realized it, Ortwin had made up his mind and could not be deterred. Iua had pouted, and decided that she'd continue to pester him until he acquiesced.

Mostin's reasons for being there – in an 'advisory capacity,' of course – were more straightforward. He'd never seen a battle before. He hoped that someone would overlook the fact that he was a wizard and assault him, thus provoking 'reasonable self-defense.' And he wasn't letting Iua and those scrolls out of his sight for one damn minute.

After a nine-hour march, the army halted on the meadows near the village of Hernath, halfway between the town of Trempa and Deorham. As tents were pitched, guards were posted and horses were picketed, Eadric visited Mostin. The Alienist - excited by the prospect of battle but rejecting the inconveniences that campaigning brought – had erected his portable manse some distance from the camp, and was scrying for enemy movements.

"What exactly are you permitted to do, Mostin, and what does the Injunction forbid?"

"I have been musing upon the same question myself," the Alienist replied. "As no mage has ever violated it, it is difficult to answer."

"Never?" Eadric was amazed that here, apparently, was a law that had never been broken.

Mostin smiled. "Despite my urge to fling magic around on the battlefield, I am in general accord with the premise of the Injunction. Wizards have far better things to do with their time than demean themselves with temporal politics, and I think everyone would agree that the prospect of mages being used as artillery is a terrifying one."

"But you spoke of using 'auxiliary' magics. What do you mean by this?"

"Divinations are permitted," Mostin replied. "And whilst auxiliary to most mages, they are, in fact, my specialty. Which is good for you."

"And 'reasonable self-defense?'" The Paladin further queried him.

"That is equally vague," Mostin sighed. "I think that placing myself in the centre of a battle would probably constitute some kind of provocation, and I doubt that I could use it as a defense for evoking a 'fireball' for example. I intend to remain on the margins of the fight, acting for the most part as a passive observer. If anyone is foolish enough to target me with their lance or sword, then I will retaliate, and my role will become that of a 'participant-observer.' At that point, I am treading on very thin ice as far as the Great Injunction goes but not, I think, in open violation."

"And exactly what would happen, if you were to flagrantly violate the Injunction?"

The Alienist shrugged. "As I say, in five hundred years, no-one has ever done it to my knowledge. I suspect that, after news got out, then divinations would be made and I would be revealed as the culprit. I would, at the very least, be shunned by the magical community. If my behaviour continued, I guess that a cadre of mages would form in order to arrest my deviancy. The technical penalty is 'Imprisonment.'"

Eadric gave a quizzical look. That didn't sound too bad. But he didn't understand that Mostin was referring to a spell, or what that spell involved.

"Why the sudden interest?" Mostin asked. "I hope that you aren't trying to persuade me to summon pseudonatural entities to aid you."

Eadric was aghast, and held his hand up. "No! Certainly not. I'm curious, that's all. I know little of the world that you move in, or the rules by which it operates. Why exactly are you here, Mostin?"

The Alienist sighed. "Intellectual curiosity? Ennui? Maybe even loyalty and camaraderie. Who knows? I try not to question my motivation – it tends to be unproductive, and leads to irresolvable paradox. Especially when one possesses a logical faculty as titanic as mine. Incandescent genius brings its own worries, you know."

Eadric rubbed his cheek. Mostin seemed quite serious.

**

Nwm flew south over the hilly uplands of Iald. He was exhausted, and needed to recuperate his magic. The contest with the shamaness Mesikämmi had proven almost beyond his abilities. Why hadn't she told him, when he'd first encountered her in the foothills of the Thrumohars? Why send him into the wastes of Tun Hartha, only to have another shaman redirect him back to her? Her reasoning was mysterious, and Nwm wondered whether she was somehow testing him, making time to gather her own strength, or merely teasing him for her own perverse entertainment. The Tunthi! Their customs and motivations seemed impenetrable.

"Our allies will contest with one another," she had said. "If yours prevail, then I will render an item of Hullu's to you, and you may scry him. If mine are triumphant, then I will take your torc, Nwm, and you will depart forever. Will you rise to the challenge?"

The Druid had wondered what she meant until, showing forth her power, she summoned a fire elemental of prodigious size. If he'd had time to prepare, Nwm knew that he could have conjured a larger one, and the contest would have been over before it began. As it was, he was pressed to match the elemental in terms of power, and instead elected to summon three salamanders. Mesikämmi had thrown another elemental into the fray, and Nwm had invoked the powers of his staff in order to bring yet more salamanders into being. Pillars of interweaving fire scorched the frozen tundra, causing great plumes of steam to erupt as the magical allies fought each other fiercely.

When Nwm finally prevailed, the shamaness had returned to her hut, and reluctantly given the Druid a carved aurochs horn, which he gratefully accepted.

"Perhaps I should have required your staff as payment, had I won," Mesikämmi had ruefully remarked. But, in the end, the contest had cost her little and she had had much to gain.

Nwm had flown on and, passing again through the mountains, had found a cold, still pool and scried Hullu.

There. In a small cabin in the woods, in Iald. Nwm had set out immediately.

**

The Druid rematerialized next to a great boulder, deposited ages before by a glacier, and walked towards the simple house. Smoke, issuing from the chimney, alerted Nwm to the fact that Hullu was home.

Swallowing, the Druid strode up to the door and rapped loudly upon it with the base of his staff. There was no reply. Nwm knocked again. Still nothing. He gingerly pushed the door inwards, and glanced to see a rudely furnished interior, before someone sprang at him from the shadows and grappled him to the ground.

The face, with its narrow eyes and beardless chin, was certainly Tunthi. He was small, but wiry, and immensely strong.

"Peace, Hullu," Nwm said quickly.

The grip did not relax. "Who are you?" Hullu barked with a thick accent.

"I am Nwm, a Uediian. I seek your aid."

"I am no longer for hire." Hullu snapped, standing up. "You may leave, now."

"I offer no money," Nwm said, pulling himself to his feet, brushing off his cloak, and smiling benignly.

"I merely require your aid. I want you to offer it freely and willingly, with no thought of gain for yourself, and to risk death if necessary."

Hullu looked incredulous. "Are you mad?"

Nwm grinned. "I have spoken to the shamans Tietäjä and Mesikämmi. Your name was suggested to me."

Hullu hissed. "Why were you in the Linna? And what does the Honey-Paw have to do with this?"

"I am tired and hungry, Hullu, and I smell something agreeable roasting inside. This would be better discussed with a full stomach."

"You are unbelievable! You have never met me before."

"No," agreed Nwm, nodding. "Do you have any mead?"

**

"It is simple," Nwm said, relaxing in the smoky interior of the cabin and holding a full belly. Hullu eyed him suspiciously – the Druid had proven to have a healthy appetite. "The Uediians are scattered, disorganized, leaderless and need a figure around whom they can rally."

Hullu snorted. "Then do it yourself. I am not even Wyrish. And I don't buy into this Goddess nonsense either."

"Nor do half or more of those who are labelled 'pagan,'" Nwm explained. "Tell me Hullu, you revere the spirits of lake and tree and mountain, don't you?"

"Yes, but..."

"In fact," Nwm continued, "you are Tunthi. You live it and breathe it. It runs through your veins naturally and effortlessly, a memory of a world which we in Wyre have forgotten."

"If you mean to suggest that I am more primitive, just come out and say it," Hullu snarled.

"No," Nwm abruptly snapped. "I have much to learn from your people. They are not decadent. They are focussed, in tune with nature. They are in the NOW to an extent which a settled, agrarian lifestyle crushes. Few amongst us now can evoke that momentless moment, when Nature is gloriously unified."

"And you are one of them?" Hullu asked archly.

"Yes," the Druid replied honestly.

"Then lead your people," Hullu said simply. "This is not my fight."

"When the Inquisition arrives and demands your conversion, will you accede? Will you bow down before their god – or, more likely, the aspect of their god which demands blind obedience and unthinking acceptance of dogma? Or will you flee into the forest?"

"The last is more likely," Hullu replied.

"Then you will live like a fugitive until they find you, and then you will convert, or burn."

"You will not cow me into any course of action," Hullu rose to his feet. "These words are meant for the ears of the ignorant. I have served as a mercenary from Morne to Bedesh. This is not the way of the Temple, and as oppressive as they might be, there has never been any forced conversion."

"As an unrepentant subject of Iald, you are already under a death sentence for heresy," Nwm told him.

"That is absurd," Hullu said. "I don't believe you."

"You have been alone in the woods for too long, Hullu," the Druid said.

And Nwm told him the whole story, from beginning to end, leaving out no detail.

**

"So this is the sword?" Hullu asked, brandishing it.

"It is called 'Melancholy,'" Nwm replied. "It was forged by the slaadi and belongs to a half-demon called Feezuu. She will likely wish it back at some stage."

"I don't like the name. And what do you suggest I do with it?" Hullu asked.

"Head for Hethio, and rally the Uediians there," Nwm replied. "It is the heart of the Temple's power, and the place where they least expect resistance to arise. Organize the cells of pagans into a coherent

body. Show them a direction."

"And why can't you do this?"

"Because I will not subject my faith to theocratic despotism, however well-intentioned it might be. There needs to be a groundswell of opinion, not the mindless observance of commands that I might give."

Hullu smiled ironically. "But you are willing to manipulate them using other means? Using me?"

"That is the only choice remaining," Nwm confessed.

"What makes you think that they will trust me? That they will follow a barbarian from the north?"

"It is two days until the Equinox," Nwm replied. "We will make a suitably dramatic appearance."

**

The dolmens at Groba had, for centuries, been a place of worship for the pagans of Hethio. Even with the rapidly growing stigma attached to the Old Religion, the stone temple, interspersed with oaks of enormous size, was thronging with worshippers. Because most of the Inquisitors and Templars were in the East, mustering for the war with Trempa, many of those who would have otherwise been reluctant to attend did, in fact, show their faces. A number of druids led them in prayers and supplications to assorted woodland spirits, deities of rocks and streams, and the great fertility Goddess, Uedii.

Nwm arrived at dawn, the climax of the ceremony, in the form of an eagle with a fifty-foot wingspan, bearing Hullu between his huge talons. It was a carefully orchestrated piece of showmanship, designed to evoke a complex reaction – the eagle was, after all, the symbol of Oronthon. Regarding it as a portent, some of those present tried to flee, others fell to their knees. The druids, uncertain of the meaning, stood and waited.

Nwm's pinions beat mightily, causing a great downrush of air which made those below shield their

eyes and hold onto their cloaks. He deposited Hullu atop the highest of the menhirs, and then alighted on the ground next to him. His head was level with the Tunthi warrior, twenty feet above the earth.

Nwm screamed out a spell, and suddenly the air around was full of spirits, whispering encouragement to those gathered there and dispelling their fears.

The Druid resumed his human form.

"I am Nwm, the Preceptor," he announced in a clear voice. "I am not here to lead you, but I bring someone who can and will. He is a warrior from the North. His name is Hullu. If you won't accept him on my recommendation, then that is all well and good: in time, he will prove himself capable and you will follow him. His names are not our names, but he believes as we do. He knows much that we have forgotten, and he can teach us. He can show us how to remember. He can give us direction in the war against oppression and persecution. I leave the choice as to how you deal with him to you."

"I am now active in this fight," Nwm continued. "Not as a leader of men, but as myself. I have no desire to command, and I will reject any attempts to persuade me to do so. I will act according to my own conscience, wherever I decide the need is greatest. I am beholden only to the Goddess: do not succour me for aid, lest I reject you and you resent me for it. I ask you to remember one thing only: it is the Temple that oppresses you, not the Eagle." The last words were in a hope that peaceful Oronthonians would not be targeted.

One of the druids stepped forwards. "You are arrogant beyond belief, Nwm. You are acting outside of your remit."

"I act according to my conscience, as should you," Nwm replied, simply. He resumed his aquiline form and took off, flying eastwards.

Late on the morning of the Spring Equinox, the eagle was sighted over Morne, and people stopped in the streets to wonder what it might portend.

Nwm followed the road from Morne to Trempa, and saw that it was churned up by the passage of numerous horses and wagons. The army had already left.

On the evening of the same day, fifteen miles from the border with Trempa, Nwm spied from a great height the smoldering remains of a dozen bodies by the roadside. He descended and stood grimly, before pulling down the corpses. He summoned a Xorn, instructed it to dig a grave, and buried them.

It had already started, he sighed to himself.

He took to the air again and before long saw, far in the distance, a thousand tiny campfires glowing on the meadows on the western side of the Nund. Engineers were building pontoons by torchlight, working to find ways of moving the troops as quickly as possible in the event that the Templars could not win the main bridges: at Hartha Keep and Moath Gairdan. Nwm screeched a spell as he flew, and clouds began to gather.

When he descended again, he brought thunder and death.

**

Deorham was only half a day's ride from the crossings of the river, and Eadric had garrisoned Kyrtil's Burgh with thirty knights and a hundred men-at-arms before moving swiftly onwards. The keep, which had not seen war for a century, echoed to armoured footsteps - something which the Paladin found somehow disagreeable.

Reports brought back by scouts and the Ardanese outriders indicated that skirmishers had already crossed the river, and were setting ambushes and burning crofts along the eastern banks of the Nund. Eadric cursed, and dispatched contingents of light cavalry to seek out and engage them, before splitting his remaining forces to secure the crossings. He himself rode to the southern bridge at Hartha Keep. He instructed Togull to remain to the rear on the Blackwater Meadow, and to use his own best judgement as to how to deploy the reserves – "Throw them at whichever bridge looks like it will fall first," he said ironically.

When evening came, Eadric paced to and fro restlessly in his armour, on the top of one of the two small towers of the shell keep. Plumes of smoke rose from the enemy camp, less than two miles away.

"It's getting humid," Ortwin remarked casually whilst practicing complicated maneuvers with his scimitar. "It's going to rain."

*The Planetar had instructed Eadric to "initiate no war" beyond Trempa's borders until commanded to do so.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 06-24-2002

Quote:

Any chance of this wonderful story being made available in a single downloadable format??

Eventually.

I will try and answer other questions that I've been ignoring ASAP.

**

Brey gazed skywards and observed the quickening clouds. They were moving at an unnatural speed and, seemingly, converging from all directions simultaneously. A huge thunderhead was forming directly above the camp.

The Druid, he thought, cursing. Apparently, the rumours that the Nature-Priest had no stomach for the fight were wrong.

The Templar ran towards Melion's tent, barking orders as he moved. "Go to ground. Get

everyone back from the waterfront."

Brey burst in to the command tent where Melion sat stiffly, his age apparent, unaccustomed to the armour that he was wearing for the first time in twenty years. The Inquisitor General was in conference with the Templar Lords Irian and Hembur, Rede's deputies and ascendant stars in the new administration.

Melion growled. "Lord Brey, might I remind you that your probationary period is not yet over. A little more decorum would be appreciated."

"Nwm is here," Brey said simply.

Melion swallowed and, anticipating a firestorm, warded himself against the possible ill effects..

The Temple knights and soldiers looked up and saw the eagle descending upon them, and as it swooped, the clouds parted from the gale which issued from it. Many of the more ignorant cowered, thinking that Oronthon's wrath had descended upon them. Rumbles of thunder echoed across the field, and lightning flickered across the cloudtops.

Melion shouted across the meadows. "It is a pagan trick – do not be dismayed. We are favoured!" His voice, thin and reedy although it was, carried conviction and confidence.

Nwm circled at an altitude of fifteen hundred feet, his pinioned form naked against the clouds except for a sprig of mistletoe which hung from one huge talon. He screeched a spell, and giant eagles appeared around him. They plummeted downwards.

Melion cursed. The Druid fully understood the use of appropriate symbolism and propaganda, it appeared. And he was currently out of range. The Inquisitor summoned four celestial griffons and dispatched them to intercept the eagles.

Nwm resumed his human form – a speck against the grey clouds. He began to drop rapidly, but was unperturbed. Many of the more quick-witted amongst those on the ground drew bows, and scores of quarrels and arrows were shot towards him, only to be deflected harmlessly away by

the tornado-force winds which emanated from the Druid.

There. Melion. Nwm concentrated as the air rushed around him, and evoked the effects of a spell already cast. The sky crackled, and a single stroke of lightning, fed by the living storm and immensely potent, arced downwards and struck the Inquisitor, dropping him instantly.

As Templars crowded around Melion in an effort to revive him, lesser clerics began to cast spells at Nwm. He shook off the effects of three attempts to silence him, and no trace of concern crossed his face as a dozen celestial hawks and eagles, two celestial pegasi and several minor elementals began to manifest across the field. At a height of forty fathoms, feathery wings sprouted from the Druid's back and he arrested his fall.

No pity, he thought to himself. I must show no pity.

Nwm began to fly upwards again, and invoked another spell. Vines sprang up, covering over an acre at the centre of the camp, in an area where the tents were most densely crowded. They wrapped around arms and legs, pinning many of those within a one-hundred yard circle, and impeding all of them in their efforts to move. Across the infested area, dozens of soldiers began to sicken and fall from the poison in the toxic vines.

The Druid looked downwards and observed that the celestial birds and elementals were closing on him slowly and beginning to converge. He smiled grimly – he knew that they could not penetrate the winds around him. He spoke a potent summoning, and the sky nearby began to move and distort: the vague outline of something huge and nebulous appeared next to him. It began to move towards the ground effortlessly and with great speed.

No mercy, he reminded himself.

The Druid drew his staff from across his back and clasped it tightly in his fist. He spoke a word of power, and continued his ascent. The orb on the staff crackled darkly as its ultimate power manifested.

Below the thunderhead, an area of blackness formed, shot through by purple lightning and

moving with wisps of dark vapour. A huge shadow appeared above the camp, and peals of thunder broke out, deafening those below. On the ground, the elemental conjured by Nwm was ripping a swathe through those who tried to resist it. It had begun to spin on its axis, flinging tents on the periphery of the camp in all directions. It moved slowly, deliberately and systematically eliminating those who did not flee.

But the most brutal effects were yet to come. Nwm flew on, maintaining concentration upon the unnatural cloud, and acid began to rain down. The Druid glanced down to see Brey and two other Templar Lords standing impotently over the body of Melion. He didn't know their names. He didn't care. Irian perished, obliterated by three bolts of lightning which simultaneously struck him from above, Hembur almost died, struck by three more.

In the hail which followed, Lord Hembur did die. So did eight hundred others, many entangled in the poisoned vines, and unable to move.

As the minor elementals closed on him, Nwm swerved down to meet them. They, and then the celestial animals were blown out of the Druid's path.

Nwm banked around and flew back towards the camp. He circled around the periphery, looking for those who might still be standing. Many were fleeing north and south, parallel to the river's course, whilst others were routed to the west. A few brave souls dared the river itself. Still, the huge elemental moved unchecked through the camp.

No mercy, Nwm swallowed.

The Druid, from a safe height, blocked off the egress from the north of the field, where many were attempting to escape, with a vast cloud of swarming insects. Over a period of half a minute, in a four-hundred foot arc which spread west and then south, pockets of grasses and weeds sprang up, entangling many and causing others to flee in panic away from them, lest they were poisonous. Nwm began to descend, but before he could cast another spell, he was enveloped in silence. Swearing wordlessly, he began to climb again, reached a height of a thousand feet, and circled slowly, waiting for the spell to wear off. The Druid waited patiently – the clouds were already pregnant with energy again. Two minutes passed. Three. Four. Five.

Suddenly, the noise of the wind and storm flooded again into Nwm's ears as the magical silence evaporated. He concentrated on his torc, seeking mentally for powerful spellcasters. Their whereabouts were determined in an instant. Two of significant ability.

Leading Templars were attempting to rally their knights and auxiliaries and order the retreat from the field. Nwm ignored them, his gaze shifting to a lone figure. A cleric in shining plate was performing a ritual desperately, beside of the wreck of a tent. Nwm spoke a word, and another streak of lightning flashed down, targeting the cleric. It dissipated harmlessly around him, and he continued to intone.

Warded, Nwm thought, and powerfully. The Druid ignored him and began to beat his way downwards.

Hundreds were fleeing southwards and westwards now, as all other ways were effectively blocked. Nwm intoned yet another spell as he closed, and a curtain of green fire, three hundred feet long, sprang up. Intense heat blistered skin and caused people to shy away again – most of those few foolish enough to try and pass through were immolated.

Chaos reigned upon the ground, and had they stopped to think amid their panic, the fleeing troops would have recognized that the Druid, with his spells, had created an immense funnel upon the ground, and that they were being herded into it.

Nwm flew down, and prepared to invoke a succession of flame strikes and flaming spheres, emptying his magical arsenal.

Abruptly, in the eye of calm air at the centre of his personal hurricane, Eadric and Mostin materialized. Mostin floated easily, and Eadric was supported by a pair of winged boots, borrowed from Ortwin.

The Paladin looked grim. "Please stop, Nwm. You've made your point."

**

Brey, now nominally in command of the whole force, was trying to establish a modicum of order. He cursed the Druid, and wondered again why he himself had not been killed. He glanced upwards, only to see three small figures flying east over the river.

**

Tramst was a devout man. A good man. As he knelt in his armour, his hands clasped to his chest and feverishly intoned, he knew that his prayers would be answered. Amid the wreck of the camp, he tightly gripped his eagle-and-sun, the symbol of his faith.

Oronthon heard his supplication, and answered. A light appeared, emanating from a deva armed with a flaming sword. Tramst bathed in it.

"What would you have of me?" The celestial inquired, "and I will appoint a task for you in return."

"That you invoke just retribution upon the Heretic and his pagan friend. That you punish them for their misdeeds, and slay them as they deserve."

The deva nodded. "If I do this, then here is your task in payment: you will willingly endure the torments of the lowest hell for eternity, secure in the knowledge that your perfect faith will sustain you, because you have never done an impure deed or thought an impure thought."

Tramst looked astounded.

"A different task, perhaps?" The deva asked.

DM Note:

The spells cast by Nwm that day were, in this order:

Wind Walk (in effect from previous day)

Big Sky (at the dolmens)

Summon Nature's Ally IV (Xorn burial)

Control Weather

Greater Call Lightning

Control Winds (spherical emanation type)

Summon Nature's Ally VI (5 giant eagles)

Master Air

Poison Vines

Summon Nature's Ally VIII (Greater Air Elemental)

Storm of Vengeance (From the orb)

Insect Plague

Entangle (x5)

Wall of Fire

Nwm also had 3 flame strikes prepared which, unfortunately, he didn't get a chance to use. He was maxed out for offensive spells.

'How could you have let that happen?' You might ask. Aside from story considerations (it makes good drama, after all), it is not that improbable: consider 5000+ people and a thousand horses contained in an area a quarter mile wide and half a mile long with little or no means to defend themselves against sustained magical attack: when the panic begins, it's going to get messy.

As you can imagine, running this was extremely difficult, and involved several arbitrary decisions about reactions – especially wrt. Melion's use of his Protection from Elements: a fire ward did, in fact, seem reasonable given Nwm's previous attack. Note that the 'Greater Call Lightning' bolt summoned by Nwm – 15d10 – was devastating to Melion, an old man with very poor constitution. He failed his save and suffered around 80 points of damage. He would have hit Nwm with a 'Sunburst' had he had the opportunity, the only long-range spell available to him. I asked Dave what he would have done had he been blinded – he thought for a second and said "Wildshape to bat."

Clerical divine magic is all but useless at long range – take a look through the PHB. Druidic firepower is excellent at long range, however.

The total area affected by a "Storm of Vengeance" is around 10 acres – the entire camp was only 80 acres or so. As everyone in the storm takes 6d6 damage with no save (acid and hailstones), and it was evoked above the centre of the camp, your average 1st-3rd level warrior or cleric and 1st-2nd level fighter or paladin is going to die outright. 800 casualties seemed a little conservative, if anything.

And buggered if I was going to roll that many dice.

The Temple forces consisted of

1) 4000 auxiliaries (mainly War 1-2, with some War 3+)
2) Around 300 engineers, armourers, weaponsmiths etc. (mainly exp 1-3)
3) Nearly a thousand 'camp followers,' including hangers-on, drovers, merchants, food vendors, etc. etc. etc., mainly on the periphery. Mostly low-level commoners hoping to make a few \$\$ out of the dirty business of war.

4) 800 Templars split thusly:

500 fighters, 120 paladins and 80 clerics of levels 1-3,

60 "Specials" – mainly fighters and paladins of higher level, but including some PrC Templars and Warpriests, 4 x 5th level clerics, 1 x 11th, 1 x 9th level clerics and 1 16th level clerical spellcaster equivalent (Melion). I had only the higher level clerics' spells prepared ahead of time.

40 Priests (Experts) – mostly support staff for the Temple and/or Inquisition

But Nwm can deliver just too many spells from a distance of 1000 feet.

My arbitrarily determined death total for the whole sordid episode was around a thousand – more than twenty percent of the army. In a pitched battle, this kind of loss would have been deemed utterly catastrophic.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 07-09-2002

Sometimes I hate my players.

I mean, the DAY AFTER I make the announcement on these boards that we're taking a break from the game, they arrive at my house (and I'm thinking that we're going to play the alternative campaign), and say that they're all suffering from withdrawal symptoms.

I was going to hold off this post (there is a lot of background info that they didn't know about), but now there is no need.

I am only 2 sessions behind now in the updates. We're slated to play again tonight. It will not run away with me, this time.

Feezuu brooded in the shadows of the ancient necropolis of Khu, near the cursed city of Siir Traag. Dead things surrounded her.

Over a period of two weeks, she had been far from idle. Her raids upon the caravans, owned mainly by affluent silk merchants, had provided her with a considerable sum of disposable wealth, and already given rise to stories of a demoness riding a hell-horse who plundered and slew without mercy in the desert.

She had seduced a Necromancer named Chorze – a mage of moderate power — and taken up residence with him in a mausoleum, where she experimented with blood and entrails. After

quickly growing bored of their ghastly couplings, the Cambion slew Chorze and inherited his paltry collection of spellbooks, a few minor dweomered items, and a square mile of sand-worn buildings above vaults, crypts and sepulchers.

It was better than nothing, she'd reflected.

How to proceed, she had mused. She had considered Ainhorr and other powerful Demons at Graz'zt's court with suspicion – had one of the Balors or Mariliths slain her in order to further its own aims? Had Ainhorr or even Graz'zt himself been instrumental in her death? Had celestials or some other force intervened? Whoever or whatever had killed her must have been either very potent, or very lucky, or both.

She must locate her books and items, but how? Now that her highest valences were denied to her, the 'Discern Location' dweomer was beyond her abilities – and she would have to acquire the spell in any case..

A vague deja-vu had flitted through her consciousness.

She needed allies. Her thoughts had drifted idly from Limbo, through the Abyss, across unnamed regions to Hell, and back again. The slaadi were unreliable, and hated her. Devils would be disinclined to do her bidding, and were too well organized and dangerous in any case. Yugoloths, demodands, and other creatures for whom Feezoo knew the names but few others did.

Demons. It would have to be demons. They might be fickle, perverse and depraved, but at least the Cambion knew what she was dealing with. But nothing too powerful, nothing that would threaten her own ascendancy – at least, not yet.

She had taken out her glass tube, and looked at the one hundred and nineteen motes of light which danced in it. One hundred and nineteen souls. Larvae in miniaturized form.

They wouldn't buy her much – all were of a poor quality. She had sighed wistfully. The essence of a single paladin or virgin would fetch her so much more.

Feezuu had buffed herself, mounted her nightmare, and 'Plane Shifted' to the Plain of Infinite Portals. She had compacted with a goristro, two bar-igura, fourteen dretch, two quasits and a succubus named Kalkja. None were minions of Graz'zt – at least to Feezuu's knowledge – and that was the way she was going to keep things, until she gained a clearer perspective on matters.

After, over a period of three days, she had conjured them to the Prime, the Cambion instructed the dretch to bring her fresh body parts from the outlying encampments of nomads, which she needed for her work. The quasits were detailed with gathering information, both about her immediate vicinity and the world at large – she was woefully out of touch with recent events. The bar-igura she kept close to her, and the goristro was appointed the task of guarding the entrance to the mausoleum – not that Feezuu really expected anyone to come within ten miles of the place. The necropolis had an evil reputation long before she had taken up residence.

Kalkja, whom Feezuu naturally distrusted, was appointed counsellor to the Cambion. From her, Feezuu learned much of the current state of Abyssal politics, and in an atmosphere of mutual need, greed and suspicion, they plotted. As part of their compact, Kalkja was given leave to pursue her own devices every ninth day.

**

Eadric was still deathly pale, although his fury had abated. Nwm was exhausted from his long flight, the battle, and the near-total emptying of his powers. He leaned heavily on his staff. Its orb was black, lusterless and dead.

They had been arguing for an hour. Dusk had passed into night. Outside the sparsely furnished chamber in the keep, a storm still raged – Nwm had thought to dismiss it, but decided to let it run its course. It reflected his own, dark mood.

"Many of them were innocent, Nwm."

"Innocence or guilt is YOUR construct, from YOUR religion. Do not sully mine with those ideas."

"Most were merely following orders..."

"Then they should open their eyes," Nwm snapped. "I am not responsible for the fact that people who attack my faith do so because they are ill-informed. Ignorance is no excuse."

"And the camp followers? The vendors and tradesmen? What of them?"

"Ah, yes," Nwm said sarcastically. "Because making a living from war is such a noble enterprise."

"I would have tried to spare the innocent," Eadric said. "And those who sought to flee. You butchered them."

"So others would not die in their place," Nwm retorted. "Might I remind you that your celestial mentor informed you that many who were 'innocent' would perish? Although none of those who died today were peace-loving farmers, were they? The persecutions have already begun, Eadric. I buried twelve Uediians on my journey from Morne. How many more have to die?"

"Twelve is less than a thousand," Eadric observed.

"Twelve is the beginning. I mean to ensure that it never gets much past that."

"You cannot make that kind of judgement," Eadric sighed. "You cannot foresee all eventualities."

"I accept full responsibility for my own actions," Nwm replied. "Which is more than you do, Eadric. You are a pawn in the hand of a deity with a personality disorder. You understand only one facet of his warped sense of morality, and you are playing out one of his psychotic episodes in the world of men, drawing the 'innocent' into the fray."

"Do you believe that?" The Paladin asked.

"No," Nwm confessed. "But none of this makes sense to me."

"What will you do now?"

Nwm collapsed into a hard wooden chair. "I don't know," he said. "Wait and see what happens, I suppose. This should send a pretty unequivocal message to the Temple. But then again, I thought that my attack on Brey when he first issued the threat would do the same."

"Mostin?" Eadric asked. The Alienist had been silent, waiting for the exchange between the Druid and the Paladin to run its course.

"I am no tactician," Mostin replied. "But a demonstration of magical power of the magnitude that Nwm evinced would give me pause for thought. They cannot use arcanists in retaliation – no wizard would defy the Injunction, no matter what the incentive, and few are sympathetic to Orthodoxy in any case. Also note that by taking you to stop Nwm, I may have been technically in breach, so I must tread carefully from now on.

"Their most potent spellcaster was slain in the first few seconds of the combat," he continued, "although he was old, he had enormous powers at his command, but no time to actualize them. As we left, my robe of eyes revealed another cleric who had called a celestial – a deva, I think, although it was hard to be sure from that distance." Mostin shuddered.

"That would be either Tramst or Asser," Eadric said. "Both are high in the Temple hierarchy. Both are also relatively young and healthy, and fit enough to bear arms. Both are good men." The last words were spoken sadly.

Mostin shrugged. "They cannot match a Druid of Nwm's power in the open without calling supernatural allies. How many are capable of 'Planar Callings?'"

"In the whole Temple, half a dozen at most," Eadric replied, "but I am not perturbed. Tahl tells me that no celestial will raise a weapon against us."

"There are other things besides celestials whom they may call upon," Mostin said.

Eadric shook his head. "Doing so would be an implicit admission that they had lost Oronthon's grace. If a celestial has been called, and it refused to act, then this will send shockwaves through the Temple. They will be hard-pressed to explain it."

The Druid snorted. "I'm sure there is a perfectly plausible doctrinal explanation, if you interpret certain words a certain way. Zeal blinds people to the truth."

In the event, both Eadric and Nwm were only partially incorrect. Mostin was closer to the mark.

**

Lord Brey ordered that the Temple troops withdraw from the river front, and disperse into the countryside west of the Nund but still within its watershed. Under no circumstances were so many soldiers again to be concentrated in a single encampment. He formed them into cadres of between two and three hundred, each under the command of a seasoned knight or Templar, and scattered them over an area of around fifty square miles. All were well-provisioned, and Brey knew that they could stay in the field for at least two weeks before he needed to think about reprovisioning them. He pitched his own tents six miles northwest of the crossings, near the village of Langdair.

Brey summoned Tramst – who had become sullen and uncommunicative – and detailed him to act as a messenger as soon as morning came and the storm broke. Most of the minor clerics remained in the vicinity of the stricken camp, tending to the wounded and performing rites on those hundreds who were less fortunate. All through the night, as the storm raged, engineers and soldiers hewed trees and dragged them into a great pyre. Kegs of oil were set in it, and the corpses – except for Melion – were drenched with it. The Inquisitor General's body was sent in state back to Morne.

When the rains finally abated, an hour before dawn, the fire was lit. It burned for days, carrying the stench of death eastwards over the river towards Eadric's camp.

Although none were privy to the exchange between Tramst and the Deva, Mostin had not been

the only one to witness the celestial. Rumours circulated wildly amongst the Temple troops as to its meaning: whether it was a favourable or inauspicious omen, a promise of victory or defeat, a warning, a punishment or some other sign. When Brey finally heard of it, he ordered Tramst to appear before him.

"Why was this information withheld?" The Templar fumed.

Tramst considered carefully before answering. "It is sensitive. I will speak only to the Curia of it."

"I would remind you that I am now in command of this mission," Brey replied. "You will relate what happened."

"I will not," Tramst said simply. "Feel free to arrest me if you feel the need. You will need to elect another messenger."

Brey was livid, but had no choice but to concede. After dawn broke, Tramst wind-walked northwards to speak with Eisarn, the commander of the smaller force advancing from Tomur. He was instructed to halt his march and disperse into the countryside until orders were received to the contrary.

Tramst then sped to Morne, and related events to the Curia. An emergency audience was called, and the cleric described what had transpired in great detail. Although he mourned the death of Melion, and the loss of so many devout Oronthonians, it was the exchange with the celestial which caused him greatest concern.

The Curial meeting which followed afterwards was held behind closed doors, and Tramst was not present to hear their counsels.

**

Within three days Tahl, Soraine, Nehael and the assembled thanes and knights of Trempa arrived at the Crossings of the Nund. The Duchess rode in a large bier, borne by warhorses, from which she barked orders at her captains, and terrified her troops. Retinues of squires, menservants, provisioners, smiths, tailors and members of a dozen other professions accompanied the armoured aristocracy, and gaudy pavillions jostled for space and preeminence on the Blackwater meadow.

Inevitable bickering followed.

Many of Soraine's subjects – powerful landed gentry in their own right – were eager to press onwards across the river, and rout the pockets of Temple soldiers who were entrenched in and around the villages there. The Ardanese mercenaries – always happy to wage war – were sympathetic to the demands of the secular knights. Eadric's paladins were insistent that divine authorization be issued before any further steps were taken. The few Uediians amongst those gathered there (most were in the north of Trempa with Ryth), although anxious to engage the enemy, were so awestruck by Nwm's actions that they refused to act without his consent, a fact which irritated the Druid to the extent that he refused to speak with any of them. His reticence did nothing to dispel their adoration, however, and merely added to the aura of mystery which surrounded him.

The exact strengths and dispositions of the Temple troops were known to Eadric and his allies, not through Mostin's scrying – in fact the Alienist had kept to himself since the "Night of the Storm," as it soon became known – but through the medium of Nwm's torc. All the Druid had to do was concentrate for a brief moment, the Green communion would absorb him, and, like blotches on his consciousness, the enemy appeared to his inner sight. Where permanent buildings appeared as voids, tents and temporary shelters manifested as a localized diminishment of the Green. Or he could shift the focus of his perception, and apprehend spellcasters, concentrations of iron, or whatever else struck him as pertinent. The information gleaned was pieced into a very coherent picture of Temple strength and deployment.

Eadric persuaded Nwm not to travel north. The Druid's original intent had been to succour Ryth and eliminate the army from Tomur. But news of their arrested advance and redeployment of forces spoke volumes to Eadric.

"The Curia will be in debate. Give them the chance of making a move towards ending this," the Paladin said.

"They will not take it," Nwm replied.

"Probably not," Eadric sighed, "but at least give them a chance, Nwm."

Nwm nodded. Inwardly, he was relieved.

**

No weighty doctrinal explanation was required to explain the celestial's reluctance to pursue Eadric and Nwm.

It was obvious. Oronthon, perfect in his understanding, was still served by entities who only partially represented his will. Although the godhead possessed a facet which was stern and judgmental, he also embodied compassion and forgiveness.

Clearly, Tramst had erred when he had required a celestial to pursue what was, in effect, an act of righteous vengeance against a mortal. Celestials were concerned primarily with countering the infernal threat, guiding mortals through revelation, and cultivating the nobler faculties of the human mind. For the deva, the task of just retribution was beyond its purview.

If there was any feeling within the Curia that these words, devised by the Bishop of Hethio, were a sophistry designed to extricate the Temple from an unjustifiable position, then none voiced a concern.

Eadric the Heretic. Eadric the Blasphemer. Eadric the Oathbreaker. And his chief accomplice in his attempt to disgrace the Temple, Nwm the Pagan. The conspiracy between the heretics and the heathens was all too clear and, no doubt, the hand of the Adversary manipulated everything from

below.

A thousand brave Oronthonians dead, martyrs to the cause, selflessly sacrificing themselves to save the One True Faith from the corruption and seductive lies perpetrated by the Heretic. Melion slain by the Pagan.

The Interim Protector and Grand Master of the Temple, Lord Rede of Dramore, immediately petitioned the King for aid against the threat which he had, previously, grossly underestimated. He requested the assistance of the royal army, and advised that a motion be passed immediately, banning Uedii worship outright, on pain of death. It was an insidious, ungodly cult which had no place in a civilized Wyre. An atavism, through which the Adversary worked his evil.

Entering the vault below the great Fane, bearing their seals, and speaking the correct passwords, Lord Rede and the Bishops of Hethio, Gibilrazen and Mord negotiated the tortuous passageways patrolled by golems, and proceeded to the inner chamber. The quartet held their seals aloft and a door appeared in the north wall. Unbeknownst to Iua - and Amachel the Damned from whom she had received the stolen plans to the vault - there was an eighth demiplane nested within. But Tahl would have known.

The Church Magnates entered a small, dusty room with shelves lined with scrolls. The work of centuries.

"The callings are here, powerful evocations and conjurations here, and so on," Hethio informed the others. He smiled grimly. "There is more than one Storm here. We should begin distributing them. We should give particular thought to the Callings."

"But not celestials?" Gibilrazen queried. "We have decided that it is not their place."

Hethio shook his head.

"Inevitables," he said.

**

Mostin scried. Carefully.

He was already treading a thin line with regards to the Great Injunction, and did not wish to incriminate himself further – hence he restricted his magical eavesdropping largely to minor functionaries within the Temple hierarchy. Many of the great magnates were too aware, too capable of penetrating his sensors.

Nonetheless, a fair amount of information filtered back to the Alienist. The emergency convening of the Curia, the descent of Rede and the three bishops into the Temple vault for an unknown reason, rumours of further anti-Uediiian legislation in the pipelines, a general downplaying of the incident with the Deva, brushed aside as a ‘bad judgement call’ by Tramst.

Tramst intrigued Mostin. A man who was unafraid to invoke supernatural allies of the most potent kind, and who had defied Nwm’s storm. In the aftermath of the battle, he had administered aid to stricken soldiers on the field, selflessly exhausting his reservoir of magical energy, had wind-walked to Morne the next day and was now, apparently, in a meditation retreat.

"Do you think he can be persuaded to join us?" He asked Eadric.

The Paladin scratched his head. "If I could speak with him, I might be able to persuade him." He smiled grimly. "But I somehow doubt that he would be open to discussion."

"He is in retreat," Mostin said. "The exchange with the Deva may have given him pause for thought – assuming that he requested aid and was denied it."

"I'll mull it over," Eadric said. "Keep a tag on him. Let me know when his meditation is done."

Before retiring, Mostin idly wondered about Feezuu. Almost on a whim, he invoked the ‘Discern Location’ spell, expecting to find her in Limbo, Pandaemonium, the Abyss or some equally unpleasant locale.

She was here, on the Prime.

Mostin cursed his own complacency. He had been very, very sloppy.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 07-11-2002

Things are very, very nearly up to date...

**

In the morning, four days after the equinox, Mostin assumed the guise of a Thalassine mercenary swordsman and, using the looking-glass of Urm-Nahat, travelled with Ortwin to the city of Siir Traag. The Alienist selected a quiet alleyway and opened the portal ten feet above the ground, in order to avoid the possibility of casual passers-by suddenly finding themselves transported fifteen hundred miles north. It was sweltering, and the wind which blew in from the erg was hot and brought no relief from the blazing sun.

It was the Bard's first time in the city, and he was eager for new experience. Mostin had visited Siir Traag on a number of occasions in order to procure rare items for his work, but found the place little to his liking. Besides the heat, the people were universally reserved and uncommunicative, and viewed anyone from further away than Bedesh with open suspicion. Mostin had no friends there, nor even any acquaintances who would remember him, even had he been travelling in his true shape. Still, a Thalassine sellsword was a plausible enough disguise, and would attract little or no attention – mercenaries from the city states were found in every corner of the world.

Feezuu, he knew, was only thirty miles distant, but the Alienist was reluctant to scry her – she would almost certainly detect him. He had decided that, in order to ascertain her reason for being there, a more indirect approach was required. He had briefly considered teleporting directly to her location and opening fire but, recalling the previous attempt to eliminate her that way, opted

for caution.

And, he reminded himself, diminished or not, she was still very, very dangerous.

Siir Traag, and Shûth in general, had an evil reputation in Wyre and the north. This was partly out of envy (Shûth boasted a continuity of tradition which predated Wyre by millennia), partly out of ignorance about the cultural differences between the two civilizations, partly out of their ungodliness (the name of Oronthon elicited blank expressions or raised eyebrows), and partly out of the regrettable practice of blood-magic that was still commonplace there.

Attempts by the Mission – the proselytizing arm of the Temple – to gain a foothold in Shûth had been almost universally unsuccessful. The few coastal cities where chapters had been established saw little traffic, and those worshippers who attended Oronthonian ceremonies did so as an adjunct to their older religious practices, rather than in place of them. The gods and goddesses of Shûth were ancient, potent and subtle. Oronthon was an upstart deity with a naïve and simplistic philosophy, and little or no place there, thank-you very much.

Siir Traag, deep in the desert, surrounded by the ruins and graveyards of a hundred dynasties, was perhaps the most traditional of all the cities in Shûth. Its inhabitants displayed the classical virtues of dourness, an obsession with pedigree and lineage, and nihilism. Legend stated that when the First Empire was elevated above the Earth, and received wholesale into the Realm of the Gods, only Siir Traag was left upon the mortal plane. Dozens of theories existed as to why that might be the case, but most of the inhabitants agreed that, whatever the reason, it was a bad thing.

The duo entered a number of establishments – including a number of particularly seedy drug dens – in an effort to garner information that might prove relevant. Ortwin's easy charm succeeded in loosening the tongues of several locals who, immersed in narcotic reverie, related a number of rumours and stories which were current. The Bard and Alienist retired to a quiet booth in order to discuss how best to proceed. Mostin warned Ortwin against trying the local *kschiff*, unless he wanted to be incapable of effectively defending himself for several days.

Raids on desert caravans by an all-too familiar sounding demoness, children dragged from tents

by bow-legged monsters, and some new foulness – the latest in a long line – taking residence in Khu.

"Why has she left Limbo?" Ortwin asked.

"Who knows?" Mostin replied. "Maybe a political thing. Maybe she's had some information suggesting that her items are on the Prime, and she's come to find them. Perhaps we should translate and find out."

Ortwin looked dubious.

"In any case," Mostin said, "the raids on the caravans began three weeks ago. Apparently she came here shortly after I killed her."

"And you didn't think to look," Ortwin chided.

"Immediately afterwards, yes. Then I kind of, um, let things slip."

"So what now? Do we assail her, or wait until she tracks us down? I've grown rather fond of her bow. I'd hate to see it ripped from my dead hands, so to speak."

"I'd really prefer to find out if she has any allies first," Mostin answered. "I don't want to 'port in and find another Balor waiting for us. I'd rather not risk that again."

"Here, on the Prime?" Ortwin asked.

"I brought one in, didn't I? And, let's face it, she's more likely to strike an appealing deal than I am. Even my substandard morals bar me from child sacrifice. I would never compact with demons."

"Devils, then?" Ortwin asked wickedly.

"They are more reliable, its true, but the answer is still 'no.'"

"That's good," Ortwin said. "Devils are far worse."

"Celestials are scarier," the Alienist replied.

**

Whilst the less serious members of Trempa's aristocracy held grand feasts in their pavillions and bards sang their praises, mounted archers from Ardan brawled with each other, and the rapidly growing army of camp followers touted their wares, Eadric drilled his knights tirelessly.

The Paladin sighed. He wondered how long he and Soraine could maintain the cohesion of their forces – armies needed to fight, or at the very least move, in order to stay focussed.

Nwm, the hero of the hour, kept himself aloof. He was still digesting the events of the previous few days, and pondering his next move. Periodically, he would allow the Green rapture to overcome him, as he maintained scrutiny on the enemy camps on the far side of the Nund.

The cadres of Temple troops had already dug themselves in to prevent assault from units of skirmishers. There was little they could do against magical assault – or so Nwm guessed – but, at Eadric's behest, held off from harassing them. Eadric had instructed Tahl to issue sendings to the Curia and to Brey, demanding that they recognize Trempa's religious autonomy, and had requested that the king reconsider his former proclamation in light of recent events.

Predictably, no-one had responded. It seemed as though they were still formulating policy.

Eadric waited for a sign. The sign that he received, however, was not the one that he expected.

An hour after noon, sixteen knights and thirty men-at-arms rode into the camp from the east: the remnant of the garrison that had been assigned to protect Kyrtil's Burh. Most were wounded, and all were exhausted. The armour of several knights was blackened and scorched, and their skin blistered. One, called Lome, who had been deputy to Sugis - the warden appointed by Eadric - immediately presented himself to the Duchess, the Paladin and their captains.

"Deorham is fallen," he gasped.

Eadric was dumbstruck. "How?" He asked.

"Templars. Wind-walked in. Seized the Steeple. Flame strikes. Took over the keep in a matter of minutes."

"How many?" Eadric asked, aghast.

"Thirty, maybe. It was difficult to tell."

"Thirty people wind-walked? That is absurd. And only a handful in the Temple can invoke flame strikes. Tahl?"

But the expression of the Ex-Inquisitor indicated that he guessed what had happened. "Were they bearing scrolls, Lome?"

The knight nodded, and Tahl explained.

"Why did you say nothing of this...cache?" Eadric asked Tahl.

"I did not even consider it," Tahl replied. "I have only seen the scroll-room once, after Melion appointed me. It is a repository, and the resources are to be used only in great need. The idea of them being used in this manner is abhorrent to me – most of the clerics will be invoking powers far beyond their ability to comfortably control."

"That should make for some interesting accidents," Nwm said sarcastically. "Come on, we'd better go."

"I have not prepared a 'wind walk,'" Tahl said.

"I have," Nwm replied. "Eadric?"

"Very well," the Paladin replied. "Although I wonder if the whole episode is a deception in order to draw us away. Tahl, can you send word to Ortwin?"

"It will take a while," Tahl replied.

"Proceed. Nwm, what is the current disposition of the Temple army?"

"Unchanged," the Druid replied.

"And spellcasting clerics?"

Nwm concentrated briefly. "Unchanged," he said again.

Eadric nodded. "Tahl should remain here in any case, in the event of an assault. I will take Iua, if she is willing. How many besides yourself can you accommodate, Nwm?"

"Five."

**

Mostin and Ortwin hovered above the ground in the intense heat of the afternoon sun on the outskirts of the necropolis of Khu. They had, briefly, returned to Wyre through the portal. Mostin had realigned the mirror, and selected a destination less than a mile from where he knew Feezuu to be.

Both were invisible, to protect them from casual observation – although Mostin was under no illusions that he was imperceptible to magical sight.

"What a dreary place," Ortwin remarked.

"Appropriately enough," Mostin replied. "Just a quick reconnoitre. Get the lay of the land, and all that. See what's out there."

The Bard looked perplexed as a message suddenly impinged on his consciousness from a great distance.

ORTWIN. URGENT ASSISTANCE REQUIRED. TEMPLARS IN DEORHAM. RETURN TO HARTHA KEEP. EADRIC AWAITS YOU. ASK MOSTIN ALSO. –TAHL.

Okay, Ortwin replied. He related the message to Mostin.

"How inopportune," the Alienist said. "I will remain here, and sniff around a little. Can you find the portal?"

Ortwin nodded, and after a few moments, his invisible form vanished from Mostin's perception. The Alienist grumbled to himself, and became incorporeal as an added precaution.

Mostin spent only another fifteen minutes there, but his 'Prying Eyes' relayed a wealth of interesting – and rather disturbing – information.

**

Nwm, Eadric, Ortwin, Tatterbrand, Iua and Nehael 'Wind-Walked' to Deorham. Although the Paladin had been reluctant for the demoness to accompany them – although he wasn't sure for what reason – she would act as the relay between them, staying within telepathic communication and coordinating their efforts if necessary. Her ability to effortlessly teleport would also prove useful – she could be anywhere she needed to be within a matter of seconds. It was a ten minute journey, during which Eadric apprised those who didn't already know of the situation.

"How many scrolls?" Ortwin asked the Paladin.

"Hundreds, according to Tahl."

"And you knew nothing of it?"

"I've never entered the vault," Eadric replied. "Generally, only the Lord Exchequer and his deputies go in. I've no idea what's down there."

"How do we know that there aren't other, more powerful objects in circulation now?" Ortwin asked worriedly. "Relics of Saints, that kind of thing."

"Tahl said that he knows of none – he is one of only a handful who've entered the scroll room. I suspect even the Exchequer don't know about it."

"I don't like this one bit, Ed. It puts a whole different slant on things."

Iua shot Ortwin a meaningful glance which nobody but the Bard saw.

"We are being scried," Nwm said. "They know we're coming." He concentrated again briefly.

"There are thirty-nine people in the keep but...no wait. There are thirty-three loci of steel that correspond to heavy armour, and sixteen much larger loci...wait...no...wait...automata of some kind...wait...wait...unnatural...wait...constructs-outsiders." Nwm's perceptions rapidly cascaded, as a dozen facets of the Green presented themselves to him.

"On, sh*t, not inevitables," Ortwin said gloomily. "Unless the Temple is going in for retrievers these days."

"There are six people in the cells beneath the main building," Nwm said.

Only six? Eadric thought.

As they approached, the party saw a plume of smoke rising from the keep – not from the buildings, but from the courtyard. Nwm suspended the spell upon himself and his material body gradually reformed. The Druid immediately shifted into the form of a small eagle. His eyes looked into the courtyard, and saw the charred remains of soldiers and servants smoldering at stakes.

"What do you see?" Eadric yelled over the rush of wind.

Nwm screeched incomprehensibly.

"Most of your servants and the remainder of the garrison are dead," Nehael said. "They were burned – presumably for heresy."

They didn't waste much time, Eadric thought grimly. He remembered his librarian, his stablehands, his groundskeepers, his cooks. Anger rose swiftly in him.

"We cannot afford to rematerialize in the keep – we will be too vulnerable during the process." Eadric yelled.

Nwm screeched again.

"He says that he can end the spell instantly," Nehael said "but we will not be able to resume this form."

"That's fine by me," Eadric said. "We'll start on the Steeple and cut our way down if necessary. Nwm should provide covering fire – I suggest we make for that copse, rematerialize, buff, dematerialize, wind-walk to the tower and start chopping up whatever is in there."

"That's not very imaginative," Iua said sardonically.

**

As they closed on the Steeple, Templars were standing on the curtain wall and tower in readiness.

A number of things happened in quick succession:

A cleric, standing on the Steeple suddenly spontaneously combusted as he read from a scroll, a backsurge of energy overwhelming him.

Eight Zelekhuts – winged, metallic, centauroid inevitables – launched themselves into the air from the battlements.

Two Templars, bearing greatswords, ‘air-walked’ towards the party at an uncanny speed – winds were blowing them onwards from behind.

A celestial with a greatsword appeared on the curtain wall. When the Templar who summoned it pointed it towards the group in the air, it wept.*

Even as Nwm was closing to within range of casting a ‘Fire Storm,’ a globe of coruscating colour enveloped the top of the Steeple, and flashed brilliantly: a ‘Prismatic Sphere.’

Finally, Ortwin exclaimed, "Holy sh*t! End the Wind-Walk on Nehael and me, Nwm, we can both fly."

Nwm complied.

"No, dammit, break away," Eadric shouted. "Disperse. Rendezvous at Nwm’s glade. We need to reconsider our tactics." A fraction of a second after he spoke, the eladrin materialized directly in front of him.

Nwm kept flying onwards, but changed his course towards the inevitables. He invoked a ‘Fire Storm,’ which blazed green for a moment, dropping one from the sky, injuring two others, but failing to even blacken two more who were caught within the conflagration. As he banked away, he was struck by three rays of enervation which sprang from the walltops – simultaneously, four more inevitables appeared as the invisibility evaporated from them. Another black bolt crackled past him.**

The celestial’s sword ripped into Eadric’s semi-corporeal form before he could turn away and flee. It bit hard. Three times. There was nothing he could do in retaliation, except see the look of anguish in the Eladrin’s face.

"I forgive you," Eadric spoke wordlessly into its mind.

Ortwin, supported by his winged boots, appeared suddenly to its flank, his scimitar and pick whistling with magically enhanced speed. The pick was ineffectual but Githla, as Ortwin knew, would penetrate anything. Celestial ichor, bright and warm, sprayed over the Bard and Paladin.

Eadric moved away.

The eladrin, despite its wounds, maneuvered effortlessly backwards in the air and Ortwin was struck by an intense bolt of electricity. His preternatural reflexes failed him, and secondary bolts arced out, striking both Nwm and Nehael – now winged – and the only other two targets still in range. Nehael, immune to electricity, was unfazed. Nwm, already weakened, was almost killed. But the ‘wind-walk’ was still active upon him. As he flew, he slowly began to resume his vaporous form.

Ortwin urged his boots to top speed and charged at the eladrin, his blade slicing through angelic flesh and sinew. A look of profound release crossed its face as its brief tenure on the mortal plane ended.

He looked behind him, and saw that the winged inevitables were closing fast. Four were doggedly pursuing Eadric, despite the fact that he was moving away from them at incredible speed. Three were pacing Nwm, and that worried the Bard. Both of the ‘Air-Walking’ Templars were making for Nehael, but Ortwin guessed that she could look after herself.

But, before she could ‘Teleport,’ she was struck by a ‘Banishment’ spell.

‘No!’ she screamed. She vanished.

The Templars shifted course and rapidly began to close on Nwm.

**

Mostin had been observing events through the looking-glass of Urm-Nahat.

What a c*ck-up, he thought.

"Dammit," the Alienist said. He cast 'fly' upon himself, stepped through the mirror, and acted in contempt of the Great Injunction.

*As a summoned (rather than called) creature, the eladrin was forced to comply. Note that any celestials can be LG in the Wyre campaign.

**Nwm (in small, eagle form) was particularly unfortunate to be struck by three out of four of these. He suffered 8 negative levels

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 07-15-2002

Quote:

Any chance you can start a new thred, Sep?

Just for you, GK, to save your ailing mouse finger. This will be the last post on this thread.

Mostin appeared directly in front of the wounded Nwm, still in his eagle form, although appearing increasingly insubstantial. The Druid screeched in surprise – Mostin was still in his guise of a Thalassine sellsword.

"It's me you idiot, relax," his condescension was unmistakable, but Mostin was shaking – Nwm was in the form of... a bird.

The Alienist touched him with an expression of revulsion on his face, and Nwm was instantly

‘teleported’ to his glade, three miles distant.*

Ortwin grinned when he saw Mostin appear and launched himself in pursuit of the four Zelekhuts who were flying southeast, but staying out of range of their spell-like abilities: he did not relish the prospect of being magically ‘held’ whilst flying..

One of the ‘air-walking’ Templars read from a scroll, and a puff of smoke appeared in the air near Mostin. The Alienist raised an eyebrow.

"Very impressive," he said, and blew both of them out of the sky with an empowered, maximized sonic fireball. Mostin backed off and cast ‘Haste’ upon himself before the Zelekhuts came into range. Two of them targeted him with ‘Hold Monster’ spells, one of them with a ‘Dimensional Anchor.’

Mostin’s amulet absorbed all three attacks, and he retaliated with three rapid sonic bursts which echoed across the sky, exploding two of the inevitables in a shower of components, and causing the third to lurch wildly in the air.

The Alienist quickly took the situation in. On top of the Steeple, a ‘Prismatic Sphere’ – he wondered what was inside it; one inevitable flying towards him – no problem, he could easily outpace it; four Zelekhuts pursued by Ortwin, flying after Eadric on a ‘seek and destroy’ mission; four more – Kolyaruts – on the wall: that could be useful. Half a dozen Templars on the curtain wall, presumably waiting for him to come in range so they could blast him. Oh, what’s this? His sight revealed four more invisible Kolyaruts exiting the front gate and moving across the bridge.

Probably assigned to terminate Eadric, he thought. They were so damned dogged. It would be twenty minutes before they plodded to Nwm’s glade.

Mostin outmaneuvered the Zelekhut, and moved towards the keep. Two of the Kolyaruts had ‘altered self,’ sprouted wings from their back, and were moving to intercept him, lumbering inexpertly through the air.

Bring on those enervations, Mostin thought. Charge me up.

As he gazed at the curtain wall, Mostin drew on the power stored in his amulet and invoked two bursts of empowered, sonically substituted ‘Chain Lightning,’ targeting each of the inevitables on the ramparts with both primary and secondary arcs. Through some perverse twist of fate, one of them was totally overwhelmed by the attack whilst the second was completely unaffected. The Templars, caught in a cacophonous volley of secondary detonations, were warded against fire and electricity, but, unfortunately, not against sound. Four of them died instantly. The two remaining were obliterated a fraction of a second later by another quickened sonic.

The Alienist hovered, waiting for the Kolyaruts to come within range. Mostin did a quick mental tally of his remaining offensive spells: he had already used his prepared empowered sonic ‘Chain Lightning,’ but still had a couple of other sonics and a few quickened ‘Magic Missiles’ up his sleeve. As well as a ‘Limited Wish,’ a ‘Disintegrate,’ a calling – if he had time to perform it - and a big summoning.

Predictably, the Inevitables targeted the Alienist with ‘Enervation’ rays – one missed (typical,

Mostin thought), and he soaked the second one up greedily.

What the...? Two enormous oak trees were attacking the four Kolyaruts who were on the bridge. Mostin laughed – apparently Nwm had left some surprises.** He banked away, and flew down towards the Steeple – he was considering undermining its foundations with a ‘Limited Wish’ and collapsing it..

A powerful ‘Flame Strike’ hit him, charring his clothes and skin and causing him to scream in pain.

At this range? He thought. Who the hell had written those scrolls? It must have come from within the Prismatic Sphere. Sh*t. He quickly backtracked, and flew out to over a hundred yards distance. Packets of mist were shooting from the windows of the tower, and launching into the air from the courtyard. There were fifteen of them, speeding after his friends.

‘Wind-Walking’ Templars, the Alienist thought. Dammit.

He all but emptied his amulet of its stored power, and cast his summoning three times. Seven Erinyes devils and a horned Cornugon appeared.

"Do nothing until I utter the word ‘execute,’" Mostin said in Infernal. "Follow and eliminate those ‘Wind-Walking’ Templars, using your abilities to the maximum. Use ‘Charm Monster’ to sow discord amongst them, overwhelm them with ‘Unholy Blights.’ Be as coordinated, inventive and effective as you can. Do not harm the ‘Wind-Walking’ Paladin with the sunblade – he is an ally and is not to be assaulted. You, Cornugon, do the same, but hold off using your fire and lightning attacks. As soon as the Templars are slain, intercept those Zelekhuts. Attack them with magic. Cornugon, you may use your ‘Fireballs’ and ‘Lightning Bolts’ on the Zelekhuts. Do not maliciously harm, or through your inaction, allow harm to come to anything else. And you Erinyes should change your wings to bat wings – I find your feathery forms distasteful. Execute."

The Devils took off in hot pursuit, making good use of their innate ‘Teleportation’ abilities.

Mostin turned around, flew back towards the portal, passed through, and reappeared in his interdimensional study. He was banking on the Devils effectively dealing with the Templars – in vaporous form, they were particularly vulnerable, he grinned to himself.

The Alienist scried Tahl through the mirror, and walked through. The Ex-Inquisitor was in conference with Soraine in his tent.

"Follow me," Mostin said. "Bring a couple of your heavies with you." The Alienist was referring to the Templars who had initially defected with the Inquisitor.

A blank expression crossed Tahl’s face. He was looking at a Thalassine mercenary with a comically blackened face and clothing.

"It’s me, Mostin. Come on. Hurry up."

"Eadric commanded me to stay here." Tahl said.

"Screw that. He's in trouble. Follow."

Tahl summoned two armour-clad 'heavies,' – called Jorde and Hyne - and followed the Alienist back through the portal.

"Er, where exactly are we Mostin?" Tahl asked, as he and his cohorts appeared in a room full of strange and disturbing devices.

"There is a mathematical solution to that question," Mostin mumbled, as he focussed on the mirror again.

Nwm appeared on the surface of the looking-glass, having resumed his human form. He had patched himself up as best he could, but still looked rather the worse for wear.

"Walk through the mirror," Mostin instructed. "You will appear in Nwm's glade. Do not, under any circumstances, 'Wind-walk,' or devils will attack you."

Tahl nodded. He didn't have a clue what Mostin was talking about, but he seemed earnest enough.

As soon as Tahl and the Templars had passed through, Mostin rifled through his portable hole and produced the amulet confiscated from Nehael so many months before. He grasped it tightly, and bent his will in search of the demoness.

After a few moments, she appeared on the surface of the looking-glass. She was on the Astral Plane. Mostin wondered if she was officially 'homeless' in the cosmic scheme of things – an equally valid case could be made for Oronthon's Heaven, the Abyss or the Prime being her native abode.

Mostin stepped through, grabbed her, and returned to his study again. Even cosmic distances were a meaningless concept to the Alienist.

By the time that Eadric, Iua and Tatterbrand reached Nwm's glade, the Druid, Tahl, Nehael, two ex-Templars and Mostin were waiting for him.

The Alienist looked insufferably smug.

"I am hoping that the devils I summoned will deal effectively with the 'Wind-walking' Templars..." Mostin began.

"Devils?" Eadric groaned.

"Yes," the Alienist said peremptorily. "Any surviving Zelekhuts will be here in five minutes. The Templars may well end the effects of the 'Wind-walk,' in order to retaliate against the infernal threat: in which case survivors will arrive in 10 minutes or so. There are still seven kolyaruts on the loose."

"I sensed thirty-three Templars before we arrived at the keep," Nwm said. "Wait," he said, and focussed on his torc. "I sense six in the keep still, five are advancing from the northwest on the ground with the Kolyaruts – seven of them seem to be intact. Five Zelekhuts in the air. The devils are gone."

"But they took ten Templars out, by the sound of it." Mostin said. "Good. I killed eight."

"One spontaneously combusted," Eadric offered. "That leaves three unaccounted for."

"I cannot penetrate the 'Prismatic Sphere,'" Nwm said. "They're probably in there."

"And performing callings," Mostin grumbled. "The trees were a nice touch, Nwm, but I'm afraid ultimately ineffective."

"I wasn't expecting Inevitables," the Druid mumbled through his beard. "Most of my spells are currently unavailable to me: although the damage I sustained from the celestial's lightning has been healed, I feel feeble."

"Then we need to recoup," Eadric said. "I have an idea."

The entire group passed back through Mostin's portal. The Alienist scried Ortwin – in careful pursuit of the Temple forces – stepped through, and grabbed him from the sky.

"Mostin," Eadric asked archly. "A while ago you mentioned the fact that you knew the names of many members of the celestial host."

Mostin looked suspicious.

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"You will," said Eadric.

"I won't," said Mostin.

"Yes."

"No."

"There is no danger involved, I assure you," the Paladin assured him.

"You have no idea what you're asking."

"This is an irrational phobia, Mostin," Eadric persisted.

"Of course it's irrational. It wouldn't be a phobia, otherwise, would it?" The Alienist retorted.

"It's not as if they are actually birds," Eadric said. "You don't even have to look. Just cast the spell, and I'll deal with the rest."

"I don't have time to inscribe a proper diagram," Mostin complained.

"Don't worry about it. It's not going to be an issue. Just do a quick one."

"I'll have to 'Anchor' it."

"Don't bother," the Paladin replied.

"Are you crazy? Besides, I don't have my most powerful calling prepared," Mostin groaned.

"Do what you can. But hurry. I can't stand here arguing all day with you."

So Mostin did it.

**

Form, in the traditional sense of the word, was not a characteristic that could be meaningfully ascribed to him. It was not that he possessed or did not possess it, more that the quality of 'Formness' was an inadequate paradigm through which he could be understood.

His shadow, they often sang, was brighter than the Sun. It was metaphorical, of course, because there was no source of light brighter than him. Nothing could cause him to cast a shadow.

Amongst the millions who basked in his presence, one, called Eniin, felt an impulse akin to a tugging. In less than an instant, he related the information to his master who, naturally, already knew.

GO

The Bright God commanded.

Eniin bowed and vanished.

**

Mostin, Ortwin, Nwm, Tahl, Nehael, Tatterbrand, Iua, Jorde and Hyne stood around the thaumaturgic diagram with Eadric. As the shape began to slowly coalesce within it, the Bard wily compared it to Rurunoth's fiery entrance. Even before the form had fully materialized, Eadric stepped forward and scrubbed out a portion of the chalk line which marked the border of the circle.

Really, that's just too much, Mostin thought. He closed his eyes three-quarters of the way, and

covered his face with his hands. He couldn't help himself from peeking – despite the fact that his legs were shaking.

Eniin stepped forwards from the diagram, and towered above them all. His perfect form radiated peace, power, and profound certainty. He knelt in front of Eadric.

"Instruct me," the Planetar said.

Mostin gaped at Eadric despite himself. Here was power, he thought. In this self-effacing man who constantly doubted his own decisions – characteristics which Mostin would not have automatically ascribed to a Paladin. Why him? Not in what he did physically – in fact, the Alienist mused, he had never seen Eadric actually strike anything in anger, ever since he'd known him. How strange. Events simply revolved around him. But to command these resources – that was something else entirely. Maybe it was the fact that he didn't abuse them, that made him so unique.

"Nwm needs healing," Eadric said simply. "We need some help dealing with some Inevitables. I would appreciate it if you spoke with some Templars and demonstrated the error of their ways to them."

"The latter is Rintrah's purview," Eniin said. "I am not permitted to intervene in the course of events that Lord Oronthon has prescribed."

"I understand that," Eadric said. "I do not require you to go to Morne, but to speak with those who are in or near my castle at Deorham. I would spare them if I could."

The Planetar 'communed' briefly.

"Very well," he said. He turned to look at Mostin. "I would advise you against the further summoning of devils," he said. "It will eventually corrupt you."

Mostin quaked.

*Mean DM that I am, I insisted that Mostin make a Will save in order to touch Nwm.

**Nwm had 'Awakened' the trees some months before.