

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 07-18-2002

Nice, clean thread...

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First, Eniin 'Restored' Nwm.

Once the group was back in the Druid's glade, the Planetar invoked a 'Righteous Might' and grew to a height of twenty feet. He beat his wings powerfully, causing a downdraft as he took off.

Mostin almost passed out.

Nwm attuned himself to his torc, and perceived that both the remaining ground-borne Templars and the Inevitables were still approaching the glade. He wondered why – surely the innate location ability of the Inevitables would have revealed Eadric's presence as ten miles to the west, or just registered 'absent' during the time spent in Mostin's extradimensional space.

The Druid caught a whiff of smoke on the air. Sh*t, he thought. He quickly changed his perception and located his bear, Tostig, who seldom strayed far from the glade. He was two miles away. Nwm immediately whistled, and summoned a small sparrow, which alighted on his arm. He twittered a few times, and the bird flew off. He hoped that Tostig had not forgotten the routine.

Mostin looked the other way. Too many birds today, he thought. Too many.

Nwm invoked a storm through his orb, apologized to the Alienist, changed into the form of a giant eagle, and took to the sky. As he flew upwards, the voice of Eadric – somehow superimposed upon that of Eniin – echoed in his mind.

PLEASE EXERCISE RESTRAINT

The Druid looked westwards. Less than a mile distant, in a semicircle half a mile wide, fire was eating through the forest and advancing towards the glade.

Restraint was going to be difficult, he fumed.

"Can you cause me to fly?" Eadric asked Mostin.

"No," the Alienist replied. "I'm all out of those."

"I can do this." Tahl said.

Two Celestial Pegasi appeared.

"Very appropriate. That will do nicely," Eadric said. He and Tahl mounted the shimmering winged horses.

Yet more feathers.

"They travel very fast," Mostin warned him. "If you engage the Kolyaruts, beware of their 'Enervations.'"

"What else do they have?" Eadric asked.

"'Fear,'" said the Alienist. "'Hold Monster.'"

Tahl invoked a 'Negative Energy Protection' upon himself, and Eadric a 'Spell Immunity' to Enervations and Holding, and both took to the air.

"I want one," said Iua, pointing to the Pegasi.

Mostin looked apologetic, and flew off, followed by Ortwin and Nehael. Iua grumbled and drew on her elemental heritage, invoking an 'Air Walk.' It would have been painfully slow progress, but she bent her mind to the airs around her, and the wind began to blow powerfully at her back.

Within ten seconds, she overtook Mostin and Ortwin, smiling condescendingly as she flew, and leaving a gale in her wake. Having a Djinn as a father had certain perquisites.

"So, er, we'll just stay here then," Tatterbrand explained to the Templars.

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Eadric outpaced even Eniin, driving the Pegasus to its limit. As he flew, he drew Lukarn and invoked a 'Holy Sword.'

As they approached the enemy, the Paladin observed the Zelekhuts moving out of a rolling cloud of smoke to his left. The Planetar moved to intercept them. On the ground below, the Kolyaruts were targeting him with 'Enervations' and 'Hold' spells before they took to the air. They had dispensed with the 'Fear' effects, given his paladinhood. Eadric glanced behind him, to see that Tahl had drawn his flaming greatsword. Further back, flew Iua, and yet further, the Demoness, Ortwin and Mostin.

Nwm had banked off towards the Templars and Eadric hoped that he didn't do anything too drastic.

Mostin's voice, carried on a 'Whispering Wind' reached his ears.

"Oh, and 'Suggestion,'" the Alienist said. "And 'Vampiric Touch,' too."

Eadric sighed, urged his mount downwards, invoked the power of the Strength domain, and immediately cut the first Kolyarut from the sky.* The speed and momentum of his assault carried him onwards – safely, he thought – until his mount was simultaneously struck by three 'Enervations' and evaporated.

Tahl wheeled down after the plummeting Eadric, and Nwm invoked a mine of 'Poison Vines' on the five Templars, paralyzing one of them and entangling two others. He was exercising restraint, but expected some kind of retaliation. The Templars, however, made no resistance. All were watching the celestial spectacle in the sky above them.

As the Inevitables consulted their programming – unsure if the huge form of Eniin presented a threat or not – the Planetar spoke a ‘Holy Word,’ instantly banishing three of the five Zelekhuts from the Mortal Plane. The two remaining gyred and targeted the celestial with spells, which failed to overcome his resistance. Eniin struck rapidly with his greatsword – grown to a full three-fathom length – and reduced one of the flying Inevitables to its component parts.

Ortwin winced as he saw Eadric fall eighty feet, bounce off a conifer, and crash through the branches of an oak tree before he struck the ground with a ‘thud.’ Tahl followed rapidly and dismounted next to him. The Bard quickly unstopped a bottle and consumed a potion of ‘Haste’

Mostin cackled madly and detonated a sonic and a quickened ‘Magic Missile’, as he approached, and Iua realigned the winds around her into a spherical configuration. She began to tread downwards towards the ground. All of the remaining Kolyaruts were now descending upon Eadric and Tahl –two of their three designated primary targets, conveniently located next to each other. Abruptly, they winked out, invisible to all save Mostin and the Planetar. Tahl concentrated upon the Eye of Palamabron, which hung around his neck, and a ‘Zone of Revelation’ instantly brought the Inevitables back into sharp focus.

The six Kolyaruts crashed into Eadric and Tahl, and a brutal melee followed. Tahl evaded, and cast a ‘Greater Magic Weapon’ upon his flaming sword, even as they were pummeling him with vampiric attacks. Eadric hewed at them as they tried to overwhelm him, each successive attack draining more of his strength.

Iua leapt in from the rear and rapidly struck a Kolyarut five times with her rapier. Wholly ineffectively. Sh*t, she thought, and backed off. They paid her no heed, and continued their assault upon the Paladin and Inquisitor. Eadric dropped one.

Mostin arrived and ‘Disintegrated’ another, and let yet another quickened ‘Magic Missile’ off. Ortwin flew down and made quick work of a third. Still, undeterred, the three remaining Kolyaruts focussed their attention on Eadric and Tahl. Mostin threw another ‘Magic Missile’ – this time, not quickened. He was almost out of offensive spells, and his last sonic would have hit too many allies.

Iua summoned a burst of ‘Chain Lightning,’ and Eadric, Ortwin and Tahl hacked and slashed. By the

time that Nwm arrived, it was over. Strange components lay strewn around, and Mostin eyed them with interest.

"Where is Eniin?" Eadric asked.

"I believe he is remonstrating with the Templars," the Druid replied.

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At the celestial's command, the Templars presented themselves to Eadric.

"What is on the other side of the 'Prismatic Sphere?'" The Paladin asked.

"Urqual, a warrior-priest, was performing another calling," one replied. "He was opening a 'Gate' to Oronthon's Heaven. He planned to bring Enitharmon through, to punish you, although Lord Rede expressly forbade the calling of celestials."

"Did he now?" Eadric said, half-amused. "Why do you suppose that was?"

He was answered with silence.

It began to rain – hard – as Nwm's 'Control Weather' finally manifested itself. The fire in the wood was gradually quenched as the group – except Nwm, Mostin and Eniin- proceeded on foot to Kyrtil's Burgh.

Nwm returned to his glade, and spoke with Tatterbrand, Jorde and Hyne. As he stood there, Tostig – rather late – lumbered out of the trees, pushed him to the ground and licked his face. Tatterbrand was used to the scene, but Tahl's cohorts found it somewhat disturbing. Tostig was as large as an elephant.

The Planetar went immediately to the keep, and persuaded the remaining Templars to submit themselves to Eadric's justice before he departed.

Mostin remained in the vicinity of the battle, looking over the remains of the Inevitables. He picked up a severed arm, and inspected its complex mechanisms.

Fascinating, he thought.

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The hour which followed was grim and depressing. The charred remains of Eadric's servants, and the members of the garrison who had been captured, were pulled down from their pyres, and the smoldering logs were dowsed. Beneath the Steeple, those six who were incarcerated were released – apparently the Temple had stopped short of condemning the minors to death. All of the eleven remaining Templars were stripped of their possessions, and shown into the cells in their place. None lifted their voices in protestation.

Three hours later, the 'Prismatic Sphere' finally collapsed, the power of its magic exhausted. Eadric, Ortwin and Tahl ascended the Steeple, and stood on top of the Tower.

Three Templars – one of them Urqual, whom Eadric knew from his days in the Inquisition – sat motionless upon the roof. All were breathing, but none registered the presence of the Paladin or his friends. Stricken by some form of catatonia they rocked, and drooled, and babbled.

Their eyes were blackened pits, as if some terrible light had burned them from their heads.

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The most powerful known wizards in Wyre and its dependencies at the end of the Seventh Century

were, in no particular order of precedence, Jovol the Grey, Hlioth the Green Witch, Waide of Hethio, Mostin the Metagnostic, Shomei the Infernal and Tozinak.

They were, compared to those great names of history such as Tersimion and Fillein, a group of only moderate power. Nonetheless, they commanded considerable resources and, had they so chosen, could have exercised great influence in the temporal affairs of Wyre.

Jovol was never seen. An Ogre-Mage of enormous talent and power, he lived in a tower built upon an inaccessible aerie high in the Thrumohar mountains where he, presumably, performed some kind of research. No-one knew what kind. No-one had spoken to him for twenty years, and his only means of communication with his peers – who at other times doubted his existence – was through the medium of dreams.

Hlioth the Green Witch, who enjoyed appearing in the form of a wood-nymph, was the oldest of the group, and may have been immortal. She had abandoned the pursuit of arcanism years before and taken up the practice of druidry – something which most of the wizards in Wyre regarded as an insane departure from the pursuit of truth. She maintained no permanent home, but would occasionally be encountered by unsuspecting travellers in the deep forests of western Wyre, where her perverse sense of humour would manifest itself on those unfortunate enough to arouse her interest. Once every year, at midsummer, Hlioth would hold a revel which, occasionally, other wizards were invited to. The location and nature of the gathering was always a closely-kept secret until the day before, and her choice of guests apparently random.

In comparison, Waide, Shomei, Tozinek and, to a lesser extent, Mostin the Metagnostic, were more conventional in their outlook.

Waide was a Transmuter of high credentials, although criticized for his conservatism and lack of inventiveness. Through diligence, organization and the systematic pursuit of his art, he achieved notable results. Inspiration was a faculty he did not possess in great measure, but his sheer perseverance and bull-headedness ensured his inexorable rise to the ranks of the mighty. Every day, without fail, Waide would rise at dawn and enter his study. His laborious and time consuming methods of investigation slowly, little by little, gave results. Waide would retire, sleep for two hours, and repeat the same process day after day, year after year.

Shomei the Infernal, unsurprisingly, liked devils. She admired their organized nature, their ability to get things done, and had romantic notions about how badly they had been treated in the great revolt. Shomei, although not evil – at least in the conventional understanding of the word – had taken various diabolic lovers, produced a number of half-fiend offspring, and subsequently abandoned them. They were miserable creatures from whom Shomei constantly expected some kind of vengeful attack. Despite the protestations of the Church of Oronthon – who found her understandably suspicious – Shomei lived in a manse near the city of Morne. The Temple was in no way assuaged by the fact that the architectural style of the building was in many ways influenced by the palace of the Adversary in Nessus. Shomei possessed a second dwelling – an abandoned fortress on the Astral Plane – in which she spent an increasing amount of time. Devils could visit her there without going through the tedious procedure of compacting and calling. These included her latest infernal suitor, Titivilus, a Duke of Hell in service to the Arch-Fiend Dispater.

Tozinak never appeared the same way twice, whether through his own fancy or perhaps because of some magical experiment that had gone terribly wrong, the effects of which he had never bothered to correct. He dwelt in a modest house on an island in the still waters of Lake Thahan, and despite his constantly changing aspect was, in fact, a very affable and personable man. Illusion was his specialty but he did, at times, work magic for the local fishermen who regarded him as something of a demigod. His estranged sister, Qiseze, had been slain on the Elemental Plane of Fire by the Cambion Feezuu – Qiseze having retired from the Prime some ten years before. Saddened by the loss of a sister from whom he had grown apart, Tozinak was first gratified by the death of Feezuu at the hands of Mostin the Metagnostic, and then depressed again when he learned of her new incarnation. He brooded but did nothing because, despite his genuine good-nature, Tozinak was something of a coward at heart.

*

Mostin the Metagnostic was regarded with mixed feelings by the other great wizards of Wyre. Jovol paid him little or no heed – although in this regard Mostin differed little from the other powerful mages – and the Alienist had long since given up trying to contact the Ogre-Mage for the exchange of useful news, spells or items. Mostin had only once been invited to one of Hlioth's gatherings, and had found the Green Witch to be rather difficult company. Although her magical resources were extensive, her interest in arcana was not, and Hlioth's pursuit of druidry involved a definite evangelical side.

Cavorting with nymphs and dryads was all very well, Mostin had thought, and made for an amusing distraction, but it hardly constituted a worthwhile investment of time and energy.

Waide was a stuffy pedant, and hence closest to Mostin in disposition, although the Alienist cared little for him. He was moved by transmutation only – nothing else was of the remotest interest to him, and Mostin found this narrow-mindedness intolerable. After all, there was room for a good deal of eclecticism in magic, and a sound knowledge of other schools often informed theories in the field of specialization.

Shomei, on the other hand, was one with whom Mostin at once possessed a natural rapport. She shared his Goetic inclinations – although in her case, she had gone somewhat further than the Alienist deemed advisable – and was attractive to boot. Mostin was disturbed by her misalliances with a number of Infernal dukes, however, and had not paid her a visit in several years. His own mentor, the Alienist Vhorzhe, had been a frequent visitor to Shomei's manse until his unfortunate death**. It was from Vhorzhe that Mostin also developed a passing interest in diablerie.

Tozinak and Mostin were on polite, if not amicable terms. They shared little in the way of mutual interest, and the Alienist found the Illusionist's constant shape-shifting rather baffling. Nonetheless, it was difficult not to like Tozinak – he was agreeable and threw fine parties, at which wizards of varying ability and persuasion would hob-nob, boast of their accomplishments, and attempt to humiliate their rivals. Mostin would occasionally visit these congregations, although his eeriness and precise logic often left those with weaker wills feeling disturbed.

Aside from those six already mentioned, a number of other mages of noteworthy, if lesser, power existed. The Enchanter Idro, who dwelt deep within the forest of Nizkur, was an erstwhile acquaintance of Mostin, although the Alienist had not visited him since his attempted manipulation of Ortwin of Jiuhu to slay his rival, Troap. Idro was mean-spirited and grabbing, and exercised dominion over a number of creatures – mainly feys – in his locale. To be so old, yet to have grown so little in terms of aspirations and accomplishment, spoke of both a limited ability to master magic and a lack of diligence.

Troap, on the other hand, enjoyed a reputation for benign – if erratic – intervention in the affairs of the great forest. The Feys considered him kindly and, despite his goblin blood, even the Elves paid him little heed. Troap's existence was unknown to Mostin for many years, and the Alienist often wondered

how many other wizards pursued their art in utmost secrecy, preferring a wholly solitary lifestyle to even the most infrequent of contact with their brethren.

Idro and Troap, and others of their ilk – including Griel (an evoker), Dauntun of Gibilrazen (a diviner), Rimilin of the Skin and the Hag Jael – represented the ‘second tier’ of mages in Wyre. There were, perhaps, a dozen in all and in a few cases (notably Rimilin and Jael), they approached the great mages in terms of their power and resources. They possessed a range of specialities, and their characters – as viewed by the general populace – ran the gamut from benign and well-liked (like Dauntun) to ruthless and despised (like Rimilin). As a group, they demonstrated little cohesion, but most were known to each other and, barring vendettas traceable to real or imagined wrongs between them, they co-existed in relative peace.

Mostin brooded, and wondered if they would find out that he had broken the Great Injunction. He had been disguised – albeit in a minor way – and the captured Templars had, along with Tahl, Hyne, Jorde and Tatterbrand, been sworn to secrecy. Would any of them – maliciously or inadvertantly – let the news slip? Would divinations cast by other Temple clerics reveal him as the culprit? Would news of ‘sonics and devils,’ get out? Did any of the mages possess some kind of magic which alerted them to a violation of the Injunction? Did any of them care anyway? His paranoia, never far absent, reasserted itself as he considered an even more frightful possibility:

Would Ortwin get drunk, and spill the beans?

*This was one of those depressingly ‘Heroic’ moments. Spirited Charge + Holy Sword + Temporary Strength of 40 + Critical Hit = 104 points of damage.

**The circumstances of Vhorzhe’s death are still uncertain, but are known to have involved a pseudonatural Yuguloth. All corporeal creatures have pseudonatural analogues, even outsiders. I have

house-ruled that Alienists may summon either the 'standard' or pseudonatural version of creatures at their discretion, and Mostin's summonings tend to be split around 50/50. There is generally no reason not to summon the pseudonatural version, except for purposes of flavour - they are always at least as potent as their standard counterparts.

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"What happened?" The Bishop of Hethio asked Lord Rede of Dramore.

"We are still unsure," Rede confessed. "I detailed Asser with scrying the events as they unfolded at Deorham. It appears that a powerful mage intervened and, later, a Celestial of great potency."

"Mostin the Diabolist?"

"That seems likely," Rede concurred. "Devils were present. But why the Celestial? This is a terrible omen."

"It is conceivable that it was bound to Mostin's service unwillingly..." Hethio began.

"It was a Planetar for Heaven's sake," Rede responded. "That hardly seems possible."

"He has uncanny powers," Hethio said, "but I agree. More likely is that the scrying was somehow foiled. Powerful wizards can cause any image they desire to appear to an observer. Hence, we may never know the true course of events as they unfolded, or even if our sensor is revealing accurate information now."

"In which case," Rede said, "Mostin – if it was him – would have kept his own presence secret. This hardly seems consistent."

"Was he positively identified?"

"No. The wizard appeared in the guise of a Thalassine swordsman."

Hethio thought for a moment. "No matter. In any case, we should begin circulating the rumour that Mostin the Diabolist has violated their precious Injunction. If nothing else, it will serve to smoke the real culprit out if it is not Mostin – which I doubt."

"There is something else," Rede said slowly. "Tramst is gone."

"He is on retreat," Hethio explained.

"No, he is gone." The knot of doubt in Rede's stomach was quickly growing.

**

The next morning, Eadric sat in judgement at Deorham. Eleven Templars stood before him. Three more sat upon the floor, mumbling incomprehensibly in their madness.

"It's hard to know exactly what to do," he said with disarming honesty. "I suppose I could return you to Morne, to tell the others at the Temple what happened. I somehow doubt that any of you would be given the chance to speak, however. You would be considered 'enchanted' or 'seduced' at best, or maybe branded as heretics and anathematized - or worse.

"I had considered having you put to death: as feudal master of Deorham, let alone in light of my religious authority – which, hopefully, you now acknowledge – it would be well within my rights. You have committed murder. You illegally seized my estate. You have willingly closed your ears and eyes because it is the most expedient, convenient and easiest thing to do. Worst, you lack the courage to question your own convictions – which I don't expect you to understand.

"If I show leniency and mercy, there is a danger that it will be considered a political act, designed to elicit popular support, and you will be regarded with suspicion. If I am stern, you will become martyrs

to the cause."

The Paladin sighed.

"I have decided that Urqual and the others who were rendered insensible in their efforts to open a 'Gate' will be taken to the Abbey of Osfrith – with the consent of the sisters, of course. They will be well cared for, and may, hopefully, come to peace with themselves in time. Whatever judgement was exacted upon them is beyond my remit, and I will not interfere.

"The rest of you are free to do exactly as you please. There are no constraints upon you. You may return to Morne, enter monasteries, become farmers, leave Wyre, or remain in my service. I leave the choice to you. If you choose the last, then Tahl will intercede for you, and you may atone. How you expiate your sins is a matter for him, yourselves and Oronthon."

The Eleven Penants, who from that day dressed in unblazoned sable, became Eadric's fiercest proponents.

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Nwm, who had no stomach for the judgement – whichever course Eadric chose to follow – wandered with Nehael and Tostig in the trees near his glade. Three hundred acres were burned – although not all irretrievably. The largest oaks near his own sanctum were untouched, but he grieved the loss of many old friends as much or more than the Paladin's servants.

Determining through the medium of his torc exactly which trees were beyond his help, and would die despite any efforts he might make to save them, Nwm used 'Plant Growth' to cause saplings to shoot forth in their vicinity, and then enriched them with seeds of fertility.

"Now we just have to wait for two hundred years," he said to the Demoness.

"That's not long," she smiled.

"The Planetar laid its hands on me when it 'Restored' me," Nwm said.

"Yes. I hope it doesn't cause some kind of religious experience, and preempt your conversion to Oronthonianism. That would leave me looking rather stupid."

"That will not happen," Nwm grinned. "Did you speak with Eniin?"

"There was no need." Nehael said.

"What exactly is your relationship with the Celestials, Nehael?" Nwm asked archly.

"We are on amicable enough terms," she replied. "Rintrah invited me to return to Oronthon's Heaven, but I declined the offer."

"You have spoken with the messenger?" Nwm asked.

"Several times, since this began."

"Are you a double agent?" Nwm asked, half humourously.

"I am a free agent, Nwm. I am a contemplative, remember? Mysticism is mysticism at the end of the day. I care little for form."

"Then why Uedii?"

"She is kind," Nehael answered. "And gentle, and forgiving. And ruthless and violent and uncompromising. I appreciate the paradox – it leads to realization. It is interesting to me that you find the same dichotomy in Oronthon difficult to accept."

"I know Uedii. I do not know Oronthon."

"Mostin would say that 'gnosis' is not enough."

"Mostin is insane," Nwm said.

"Mostly," Nehael agreed. "But he is beyond all religious concerns. In that respect he is completely liberated."

"And you?" Nwm inquired.

"I am the voice of moderation," she replied. "I represent the 'Middle Way.'"

"And if there is no 'Middle Way?'"

"Then you make one," she answered.

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"She has conjured demons," Mostin said. "A goristro, a succubus, dretch, quasits, maybe others."

"And what, exactly, do you propose we do about it Mostin?" Eadric asked. "She is nearly two thousand miles away. If I were to hunt down every diabolist and demon summoner within two thousand miles, I'd have a very busy – and probably brief – life."

"Might I remind you that this particular demonist is the one responsible for Cynric's dea..." Mostin began.

"We don't know that," Eadric interrupted. "She may have no recollection of the events. I can hardly pass judgement on her for something that she would have done, had events transpired differently."

"In any case," Mostin continued, "she is afflicting the local populace with necromancy, child sacrifice and other unspeakable rites. Do you feel no compunction to help?"

"I cannot be everywhere, and do everything. I'm sure that there are agencies in Shûth which can deal with her, if they choose to mobilize themselves."

Mostin snorted. "I thought that you were supposed to fight wherever 'evil presents itself.' Two thousand miles is no excuse – with the mirror, distance is irrelevant."

Eadric sighed. "Perhaps you should open a gate to the Abyss, and I should go through and start a campaign. After all, there is plenty of evil there, and distance is irrelevant."

"Don't be absurd. There is a difference," Mostin said. "We cannot conquer the Abyss, and we can end Feezuu's threat. It would be doing a lot of people a big favour. The local community would appreciate it. The wider magical community would benefit from it."

"And you would get to keep your 'Robe of Eyes' without fear of reprisals," Eadric said sardonically.

Mostin fumed. "I've just violated..."

"...the Great Injunction to save my sorry ass," Eadric finished for him. "I know, Mostin, and I really appreciate it. And I appreciate the way that you dealt with Eniin, as well. But it doesn't change anything. I cannot simply drop my responsibilities here and go romping off to some necropolis in pursuit of someone who may or may not pose a threat at some point in the future. At least give me time until things have quietened down a little – we are in the middle of a war, in case you hadn't noticed."

Ortwin sighed. Times had certainly changed.

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Feezuu wondered who had sent the 'Prying Eyes' into her abode, and fear almost overcame her. Her assassin? An agent of Graz'zt? One of a hundred others that she had, at some time in the past, affronted or enraged? Or, perhaps, merely a curious local mage of some ability. Her divinations had come too late

– whoever the culprit was, they were undetectable, or had vanished.

The Succubus Kalkja, who had spied one of the eyes, had continued to act as if she was unaware, and for that Feezuu was grateful. Hopefully, whoever sent them didn't know that she knew she had been observed.

The Cambion had waited for an hour, during which time she prepared a number of minor divinations, and then exited the mausoleum. She had paced around the sand-worn tombs in the blazing heat of the afternoon sun, her magical sight inspecting the area for any lingering auras.

She soon found a melange of every conceivable variety of magic, lingering signatures in the air which marked the passage of a number of powerful dweomered items. There were two 'streaks' of residual energy, each testifying to potent magic, both of which ended abruptly at the same point in space.

Not a 'Teleport,' she thought to herself. The residual signature appeared as some kind of conjuration, not a transmutation. A 'Gate' or portal? But from where?

Feezuu returned to her crypt and waited six hours, before venturing forth again. All of the signatures had disappeared.

Whoever they were – and the dispersion of residual magic had indicated at least two of them – they possessed powerful magical adjuncts (but of less than artifact status). Their means of arrival and departure had utilized an unconventional kind of magic.

The Cambion considered her options. She could relocate – either to another portion of the Prime, or to another Plane entirely. This was drastic, but might be warranted. She could fortify her position as best she could, and use what wards she had available to her. She could compact with a creature who could determine the source of the threat – maybe even the identity of her assassin. She could attempt to engage more allies – although she was rapidly running out of ways to pay them. She loathed the prospect of moving, especially as her higher spell valences were within sight again.

In the end, she decided to take a risk. Feezuu summoned one of her Quasits.

"You will 'Commune' for me," she said.

"'Communing,' is not covered in our compact," the tiny Demon said slyly. "Do you wish to renegotiate?"

"No. This is a one-time exercise. I will give you one larva."

"I require five," the Quasit demanded greedily. It was an outrageous sum, but Demons are seldom slow to seize a perceived advantage.

Feezuu hissed. "You would do well to remember that your kind are easily come by. I will give you one larva, or I will engage the services of another who is more tractable."

"Very well," it agreed grudgingly. "Which Lord do you wish me to contact?"

"Not a Lord or Prince," Feezuu smiled. "Demogorgon."

The Quasit shuddered.

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Another update.

There is a significant amount of backstory in this which will prove necessary to understanding subsequent posts. We played twice last week, and there is a lot to relate. I will attempt to post again tomorrow or the day after. Things are happening fast.

A nodality, as Graz'zt would say...

**

The peninsula of Ardan, which thrust eastwards into the Ocean of Iarn was, for the most part, a wild and inhospitable country. Its central uplands – at first sight, deceptively green and welcoming – were in fact riven with many steep-sided valleys, prone to flooding in the spring thaw. The grass, although covering the hillsides abundantly, was of the short, springy variety and bespoke a poor soil, unsuitable for little besides goat-farming. Westwards, the slopes gradually became less severe, the loams more fertile, and the woodlands more abundant until, finally, they gave way to the rolling hills of Trempa and Tomur in eastern Wyre.

Ardan itself was one of Wyre's 'satellites.' Never fully subdued, it technically owed tribute to its larger neighbour, although its numerous kings, lairds and chieftains – even those whose lands marched on Wyre proper – tended to be neglectful of their feudal duties. Ardan's inhabitants were fierce, independent, conservative in their customs and immensely jealous of their traditions. The fact that they were regarded as uncouth, mead-swilling bandits did not dissuade successive Wyrish magnates from hiring contingents of Ardanese cavalry: they were generally regarded as producing the best mounted archers anywhere north of the Thalassine.

Orthodoxy was, and never had been, popular in Ardan. Oronthon was worshipped, certainly, but he was an older, less developed aspect of the divinity who had been influenced by six hundred years of Wyrish dogma and sophistry. He presided over a small pantheon of saints and quasi-deities, each of whom embodied ideals germane to the Ardanese way of life. In generations past, the Archbishops had attempted to bring Ardanese practice more in line with that in Morne, and, in the period when the Mission's influence had outweighed that of both the Temple and Inquisition, proselytes had entered Ardan.

The fact that the Orthodox missions had accompanied punitive raids from the kings of Wyre for nonpayment of tribute, was viewed with natural cynicism by the Ardanese, who simply moved further into the hills and began protracted guerilla campaigns against their occupiers. The pattern continued for generations until, at long last, the Orthodox church gave up. The 'Ardanese Question' was left unresolved, and was eventually forgotten.

Ardan was, therefore, a natural choice for the communally oriented Urgic Mystics. The Urgics maintained that they represented an alternative interpretation of Oronthonianism. They made no truth claims, because part of their creed was that truth is subjective. Small groups had, with the blessing of

various Ardanese chieftains (many of whom viewed them sympathetically), established peaceful communities in the hills of central Ardan, where the land was poor and space was plentiful. They coexisted amicably enough with the natives, although they maintained a certain distance. Intermarriage was rare, due to the fact that most of the Urgic Mystics were celibate. Every once in a while, those worshippers dissatisfied with Orthodoxy in Wyre would find their way into Ardan and join a group of cave-dwelling heretics, and retire from the troubles of the world.

One particular cleric, having experienced some kind of revelation, made his way there. He wasn't entirely sure why.

"I had not expected it to be quite as easy to speak with you," Tramst said. He sat, dressed in his armour, on the floor of small cave. It was sparsely furnished and resembled a cloister in its austerity.

The cave's occupant - a man of forty years or so - was unwashed, sported a large, matted beard, long tangled hair and wore only a simple garment, made from a single piece of coarse linen.

"We are a community, not a hierarchy. Why should speaking to me be difficult?" The man asked.

Tramst grunted. "Rintrah has informed me..." he began.

"Why do you trust a celestial's message rather than your own insight?" The man interrupted.

"Lord Oronthon sent..." Tramst began again.

"Why do you trust a deity's words rather than your own insight?" The man smiled.

Tramst sighed. Why had the Messenger sent him here? What could it possibly accomplish?

"Important events are occurring in Wyre which..." Tramst tried again.

"I am well aware of the events you speak of," the man interrupted again.

Tramst closed his mouth abruptly. This made no sense. Rintrah had sent him to seek advice from those

who denied the ultimacy of the Celestial's –even Oronthon's - own words. His mind reeled.

"Good," Orm said. "That is the beginning. Paradox must precede understanding."

Tramst thought briefly. "Why am I here?" He asked.

"Why must there be a 'Why?'" Orm retorted.

"I am here," Tramst said decisively.

Orm shook his head.

"I am."

Orm said nothing.

"I?" Tramst ventured.

Orm slapped him.

(Silence).

Orm smiled.

**

At Tahl's behest – on advice from the Planetar Urthoon, with whom the cleric communed - Eadric consented to the calling of more celestials. The same morning that the Paladin passed judgement upon the Templars, the ex-Inquisitor performed a series of rites which brought four Movanic Devas with flaming swords onto the Prime plane. They were charged with remaining in the vicinity of Kyrtil's Burgh, to dissuade further efforts by the Temple to capture the keep. Remaining in invisible form, they

flew silently and tirelessly in the air around the castle: a warning to all those who had eyes to see.

"There is something else," Tahl informed Eadric. "I have appointed an Archon to guard you. It will remain ethereal, manifesting where required."

"Is that entirely necessary?" Eadric asked.

"It is a precautionary measure," Tahl said.

"Were you advised to do this also?"

"Explicitly," Tahl admitted. "Your life must be safeguarded."

Eadric sighed. The weight of responsibility and expectation was beginning to make itself felt.

"The Archon is called Zhuel," Tahl continued. "He has already revealed something rather disturbing, and communicated it to me."

Eadric looked quizzical.

"There are residual traces of taint in the ether nearby."

"Demons?" Eadric asked, swallowing.

"It is likely," Tahl said. He looked nervous. "Ed, they may have been there for some time. I hadn't thought to regularly scan the ethereal around you."

The Paladin groaned. He had a good idea who might have sent them to spy on him. "We have to tell the others – especially Mostin," he said. "He is not going to like it."

**

Mostin, of course perceived the Devas around Kyrtil's Burgh. What was felt as a stirring of the air by others present, was revealed to the Alienist as a statuesque winged form which gyred gracefully in the nearby sky, its wingtips often coming within a few feet of those standing on the battlements. They regarded Mostin with impassive, expressionless faces which nonetheless seemed to convey a judgemental quality.

"I am returning to my manse," he informed Eadric, Nwm and Ortwin, "where there are no birds. If you wish to..."

"We need to talk," Eadric said grimly.

**

Mostin sat silently and said nothing. Ortwin regarded him curiously, unsure whether the Alienist would cry, scream or explode a random object with a sonic.

"I think that it's a safe bet that whatever it was, it was sent to spy on me," Eadric said.

Mostin did not speak.

"Well?" The Bard finally asked.

"I'm thinking," Mostin replied.

Ortwin waited.

"I am trying to recall the times during which you and I were present together," Mostin said to the Paladin, "and I can't see that this adds any particular danger to my situation – aside from being scrutinized by the lackey of a Demon Prince. Assuming it was dispatched by Graz'zt, of course. If it – or they – were in the service of Feezuu, this might prove awkward for me."

"Zhuel said that the trace of evil was faint, and no Demons were at hand," Eadric said optimistically.

"Unfortunately, that means nothing," Mostin said. He gritted his teeth. "I will need to sniff around a little. I need to know which areas of the Prime are coterminous with the tainted ethereal. And I need to prepare several spells."

With the aid of Tahl and the Eye of Palamabron, who communicated with the ethereal Zhuel using gestures and body movements, Mostin located the residue of evil in the airs above Kyrtil's Burgh. Tahl gestured for Eadric – and, more importantly, the celestial who watched over him – to retire to a safe distance. The Alienist made an Ethereal Jaunt and invoked a Vision.

Upon his return to the Prime, Mostin looked exhausted. "The names of Chr'ri and Chomele were revealed to me – I am unfamiliar with either of them."

"They are Succubi in the service of Graz'zt," Nehael said gloomily. "They must have Plane Shifted with the help of a spell or device. Normally demons such as they – or I – cannot remain Ethereal for long periods of time."

Mostin sighed. Too many possibilities, he thought. He was beginning to feel like a straw blown about on the wind, and he didn't like it. Feezuu. Celestials. The violation of the Injunction. Now this.

"I am going to take counsel with Mulissu, as she is one of the few people I know who is wholly dispassionate," he said. "What are your plans?"

"To return to the marshalling grounds on the Blackwater Meadow," Eadric replied. "I feel that Deorham is secure. And Tahl needs time to inspect the scrolls confiscated from the Templars."

**

Tahl wind-walked back to the encampment with Ortwin, Iua and Nwm: this time the bear, Tostig, accompanied the Druid. Eadric led the penitent Templars and the others on horseback, and arrived two hours later.

Mostin walked to Nwm's glade, passed through the portal to his retreat, and scried Mulissu's abode

with the looking-glass of Urm-Nahat. He walked through the mirror, and was immediately confronted with the Mephit doorward.

"You must wait," it chirped. "The Lady Mulissu is occupied."

Mostin grumbled. Did he have to endure this farce every time he wished to speak with her?

Mostin sat twiddling his thumbs for three hours before he was finally admitted.

"My apologies," Mulissu said with surprising earnestness. "I gave instructions some time ago that, should you arrive, you should be admitted promptly. Evidently, Shrix forgot this."

Mostin scowled at the Mephit, who smiled smugly back.

"I have violated the Great Injunction of Wyre, have determined that a clone of the demoness Feezuu has migrated to the Prime, and I may have been subject to scrutiny from agents of Prince Graz'zt." Mostin announced theatrically.

"Really?" Mulissu asked, half-smiling. "I never understood that tedious Injunction. What will the other wizards do? Would you like some wine?"

"I don't know if they know yet," Mostin said. "Or even if they'll find out. I'll have a glass of that green stuff that you keep."

"Do you have any legal arguments prepared, in the event that they pursue you?" The Witch asked.

"I am under a death sentence from the Oronthonian Church for failing to leave Trempa – I acted in self-defense. I can cite my haranguement by zealous Oronthonians in Morne as testament to this."

"And if this fails?" The Witch asked.

"I am no longer a resident of Wyre, or even the Prime Plane. I spend more than fifty percent of my time in my extradimensional retreat, and am therefore no longer subject to the Injunction. This is a

technicality, but it may be pertinent."

"And if this fails?" The Witch asked.

"I am a transcended being, and no longer subject to the Injunction. I may act with Impunity. If the council fails to recognize this, I will demand that they pursue Feezuu forthwith or brand them all as hypocrites. The assassination of Cynric was a blatantly political act."

"And if this fails?" The Witch asked.

"My actions were against an overbearing, monotheistic regime which is implementing a virtual theocracy. Oronthonian dogma threatens the ability of mages to pursue their research peacefully, and my actions were in the interests of Wyrish wizards everywhere! I will encourage them to do the same, in order to protect their rights against an increasingly oppressive church."

"And if this fails?" The Witch asked.

"Even if found guilty, I will argue that the breach I made was a minor one, and does not merit the technical maximum penalty. I will appear contrite, and will try to bribe some of those who would condemn me. Well, what do you think?"

"I have no idea," Mulissu confessed. "I think a more relevant question might be: 'Do I have lots of magical gadgets that the other wizards want, and would they throw the book at me in order to get their dirty paws on them?'"

"Hmm," Mostin said. "You may be right. I hadn't considered that."

"What of Feezuu?" Mulissu asked. "Does she pose a real threat to you, or are you merely being paranoid?"

"I don't know that either," Mostin admitted. "I have no way of knowing how much of her former existence she recalls, and whether she has managed to fill the gaps in, so to speak. Which brings me to another question: how extensive is your Necromantic repertoire?"

"Somewhat underdeveloped," the Witch said. "One cannot pursue everything, and Necromancy has always struck me as a rather vulgar art."

"I concur," Mostin said. "But I assume that you would not turn down the opportunity of expanding it?"

"New dweomers are always pleasant," Mulissu confessed.

Mostin reached into his portable hole, and retrieved two slim volumes that he had pilfered from the body of the first Feezuu. The Witch inspected them carefully.

After some while, she spoke. "The value of these books is staggering," she said. "And I must admit that my greed outweighs any concerns that I might have about their owner pursuing me. Especially now that I have a permanent Magnificent Mansion – for which, incidentally, I am indebted. What do you wish in return?"

"Her permanent elimination. We could easily do it together, Mulissu."

"Mostin," she groaned, "We've already had this conversation. I am beginning to think that you are more than a little obsessed with her."

"Mulissu?"

"Oh, very well," the Witch sighed.

**

Prince Graz'zt rested in morbid meditation, absorbed in the dark abyss of his own thoughts.

Although aware of Feezuu's movements, he had allowed her to act as she would, secure in the knowledge that eventually, inevitably, she would succour either Ainhorr or himself directly for aid.

Ensnared on the Prime, she might yet prove of value in any plots that he had devised.

The bitch had felt that she had shaken off his yoke. He smiled coldly at the absurdity of it. As if anyone could. Ever.

Nehael, the Prince thought, bitterly. No longer under a celestial interdict – her atonement having taken a different route than initially expected – she was vulnerable again. She had precipitated a crisis in the church of the Enemy, at which Graz'zt had been perversely pleased, but now the tide was turning. His prognostications had revealed that the tide would inexorably shift in favour of the Paladin and his allies, even before Celestials had been brought into the equation. Oronthon was playing games with his followers, cleaning things up for some kind of renewal or revival. He must be thwarted.

A Planetar, Graz'zt seethed. On the Prime. His Foul 'Brightness' had gone too far, this time. His own spies, lurking nearby in ethereal form as they had for months now, had retreated at Eniin's arrival – even as they had at Rintrah's - waiting for the Planetar to leave. Now they could no longer safely return: avoiding the penetrating Eye which the cleric wore around his neck was one thing – they merely had to stay out of range, and he was not always present in any case. But an Archon?

Graz'zt cursed. Just one ethereal jaunt from Nehael – that's all it would have taken – and she'd have been fair game for the other succubi who lurked nearby. Damned Trumpet-Blower. His spies, who had reported to him instantly upon their return, had been dismissed, and they fled and left him in a mood of black contemplation.

But Graz'zt's foresight had already detected a nodality, a point in time when a number of unresolved events would begin to fall together and a pattern – which he must shape – would emerge.

Somewhat later, he summoned Ainhorr. The Balor bowed his forehead to the ground.

"What has happened?" The Prince asked.

"Sire, moments ago, the Cambion Feezue contacted me," Ainhorr replied. "She banished one of the demons that she had compacted – a Bar-Lgura – and instructed him to bring a message to me. She intends to call him back to the Prime. She sends greetings to her Dreadful Lord, and relays news that

she is building a base of power for his glorification. She awaits your orders."

"Doubtless," Graz'zt sneered. "And Kalkja?"

"She is continuing to make reports regularly. Feezuu used one of her Quasits to commune with the Ancient.* Kalkja extracted this information from the Quasit, under threat of annihilation. The Cambion now knows that neither you nor I were instrumental in her assassination."

"Bring the Bar-Lgura," Graz'zt commanded.

Ainhorr bowed, vanished and reappeared moments later with the hairy, ape-like Demon. It quailed in the presence of the Balor and his master.

"When your mistress recalls you to the Prime," the Prince instructed smoothly, "you will relate our fondest greetings, and thank her for the efforts that she has made in our cause. You will tell her that we have not forgotten her. We will send another message – and messenger - shortly."

Graz'zt waved his hand, and the minor Demon vanished. "Bring me Uzmi,**" he ordered Ainhorr. "She has endured for a year, and I am feeling benign."

Graz'zt stepped down from his throne and entered his sanctum – a void of unhallowed despair where his most potent magicks were wrought. At his merest thought, a dark pile of snow and ice appeared.

With his own bare, six-fingered hands, the Prince began to shape it into an effigy of himself.

*Demogorgon is not Tanar'ri, and his presence predates their occupation of the Abyss. His name is never spoken, even by the most potent of Demons.

******A Marilith punished for a minor slight that Graz'zt perceived. Uzmi was chained with adamantite dimensional shackles beneath a permanent symbol of pain.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 07-25-2002

"Well, what do you think?" Ortwin asked Mostin.

"I must admit, it is so deliciously simple that it just might work," the Alienist replied. "Has Eadric agreed to it?"

"He has already signed it," the Bard grinned. He handed over a single piece of parchment to Mostin.

It was a lease – for the use of the Steeple at Kyrtil's Burgh by Mostin the Metagnostic for private research purposes - signed by Eadric of Deorham. It was backdated around six months.

"Temple Clerics trespassed on your lawfully rented property and performed conjurations. You were perfectly within your rights to protect it. The Injunction was not infringed."

"Quite so," Mostin said. The perverse twistings of Ortwin's mind were a constant source of amazement.

"You should be aware that Eadric will not actually lie for you," Ortwin said. "But he understands that this document could be misinterpreted, if you were to choose to be less than honest about when the lease changed hands. And you owe him three hundred gold crowns for back rent."

Mostin raised a single eyebrow.

"How was your meeting with the Storm-Witch?" Ortwin asked. "Did she furnish you with sound advice?"

"Mulissu seldom gives advice of any kind," Mostin replied. "But she has agreed to help me finish Feezuu off. Would you care to participate in a raid?"

"Naturally," the Bard replied. "I am on her hit list as well, if you recall. Exactly when did you have in mind?"

"In three or four days. Lacking Sonics, Mulissu has opted for Necromantic assault. She is cramming some new spells, from Feezuu's own books, ironically enough."

"Her lightning?" Ortwin asked.

"Will be ineffective against demons," Mostin said, as though instructing a child. "But she has other tricks up her sleeve. Enchantments, Transmutations, Conjurations. We will need death wards and acid immunities again. I was rather hoping that Nwm would join us, even if Eadric does not. Where is he?"

Ortwin shrugged.

**

Lord Rede of Dramore sat alone on his stool, beneath the empty Archiepiscopal throne in the Great Fane of Oronthon in Morne. Even before the failure of the latest of the schemes devised by himself, Hethio and the other powerful members of the Curia, the Grand Master of the Temple had begun to feel a niggling doubt in the pit of his stomach.

His efforts to suppress it had been unsuccessful.

As he sat and mused on events of the past year or so, he regarded the corpse of Melion – still lying in sombre state beneath the northern altar in the temple. The Inquisition was leaderless – its Grand Master slain by a pagan, and its Deputy, an avowed heretic, defected to the Enemy. The Curia was in tatters, with the Marquis of Iald gone – a target for future Temple reprisals, if things continued the way that

they were going. The Bishop of Tyndur continually voted against any measures which he tried to pass, irrespective of their nature, simply in an attempt to sow as much discord as possible.

The old bastard had finally shown some teeth, Rede thought ironically.

And, latest in a catalogue of annoyances, raids by Uediian bandits in Hethio – the most dependable and Orthodox of all of the Wyrish provinces. Yesterday, a Temple caravan ambushed, the guards slain and its goods seized. This morning, a chapel burned – after its valuables had been ransacked, of course. Rede had dispatched a dozen Templars and twenty men-at-arms to deal with the threat, but was finding that he had fewer and fewer resources to draw upon. The Temple Precinct was all but empty, most of its fighting members either entrenched near Trempa or guarding access to Iald.

The Grand Master of the Temple did not notice the magical sensor which observed him.

Abruptly, disturbing his reverie, Rede saw a shadow enter the Fane through the Orangery door. Odd, he thought, no-one used that door at night.

Nwm the Preceptor walked calmly along the aisle.

"You!" Rede yelled, and with a speed which belied the weight of his armour, launched himself forward and drew the greatsword from his back in a single, fluid motion.

"Peace, Rede," the Druid said, holding his palm outwards. "This is hallowed ground. I will commit no act of violence here. Will you?"

"Guards!" The Templar roared – unnecessarily as, already alerted by his first yell, they were entering through the cloister doors.

Nwm cast a spell and both he and Rede were surrounded by a wall of thorns of great height and thickness.

"Deceiver!" Rede yelled, and charged towards the Druid. Before he reached him, however, creepers

had shot forth from the briar wall and pinned the Templar.

Nehael suddenly materialized.

"The Demoness! The Demoness is in the Fane!" Rede was yelling madly.

"Listen!" Nwm shouted.

But Rede, drawing on the immense Strength granted to him, burst through the entangling vines and clawed his way forwards.

Oh, for the Goddess' sake, Nwm thought. But he was prepared for this. Rede groped wildly for a vine to hold onto, failed, and flew upwards under the effects of a reverse gravity. He landed on the arched ceiling of the nave eighty feet above with a 'thud.'

"Now shut up, and listen," Nwm said.

**

Feezuu considered her position.

Her Bar-Lgura, called again back to the Prime, had delivered its short message from Graz'zt.

We have not forgotten you. We will send another message – and messenger – shortly.

The Cambion pondered on the meaning of the words. A thinly veiled threat, to be sure, and henceforth she should watch her step carefully. Of course, Graz'zt did not trust her, any more than she did him. Both of them knew it. This was the nature of Abyssal politics, and was hardly unusual. It was the messenger that concerned her.

Feezuu summoned Kalkja, and asked for counsel from the demoness.

"The Prince is attempting to exercise dominion over you, Lady. Will you allow this outrage?"

Feezuu did not reply, unsure of the Succubus' motives.

"What of your Assassin?" Kalkja asked, smoothly turning the attention away from the unanswered question. "Have you made further progress?" In fact, the Succubus already knew the answer to this, although she had heard no such admission from the Cambion's own lips.

"A mortal wizard," Feezuu answered bitterly.

"How did you determine this, Lady?" Kalkja asked slyly. But she was playing a dangerous game – Feezuu was no fool.

"Both of the Quasits communed for me. Some questions I directed them to ask Demogorgon concerning my assailant, some regarding Graz'zt and his plots, others about the loyalty of my compactee demons." Feezuu's face was expressionless, her eyes penetrating.

"Contacting the Ancient is a perilous enterprise," Kalkja effortlessly replied.

"I intend to have the Quasits commune on a regular basis," Feezuu lied. "Over time, a coherent picture will doubtless begin to emerge."

"They will demand high recompense," the Succubus reminded Feezuu.

"I will renegotiate their contracts with them," the Cambion said. "I find that I am no longer in the mood for counsel, Kalkja. You may depart."

The demoness bowed, and left. Feezuu watched her carefully.

Somewhat later, a Quasit appeared directly in front of Feezuu. It bore a seal made from the horn of some Abyssal creature in its hand.

Feezuu relaxed a little. Evidently, the Prince had not wished to send anything of great status through – it would have overtaxed him.

The tiny Demon grinned wickedly. "I have been instructed to inform you that you will call the Marilith Lady Uzmi to this location within one hour. You will not attempt to constrain her with magic. She bears important information which concerns you, regarding your assailants, an Oronthonian plot, and the whereabouts of at least some of your missing items. She is currently being briefed."

Feezuu's inwardly heaved. Was there nothing that she had kept secret, or was not already known to Graz'zt? She suspected a mole in her midst, and there was one obvious suspect. And the Prince had carefully placed the burden of expending magical power on her: he could have shunted Uzmi to the Prime by himself, although the diminishment in his strength might be of an unacceptable level.

Uzmi better not try anything funny, or the Cambion would blast her to pieces. Or die trying.

**

Nwm had rather more than a minute to get his argument across: not before the Templars had hacked their way through the wall of thorns – that would take them far longer. But until Rede fell back to the floor again.

"How is it possible that a demoness stands on hallowed ground?" he said calmly to Rede.

"Tainter! Corrupter!" Rede screamed back at him.

"Examine her for taint yourself," Nwm said.

Rede struggled with his sword.

"You are a coward," Nwm said scornfully. "Look at her. LOOK AT HER!"

"Why have you come here?" Rede shouted down.

"Unlike Eadric of Deorham, I am not bound by the dictates of your God. I may intercede where I wish, and need no celestial fiat to act. I have come to show you the Truth, Lord Rede. Look at the Succubus."

Rede closed his eyes and prayed fervently for Oronthon's intervention.

Nwm sighed, and Nehael flew upwards towards where the Templar was suspended – taking care not to fall within the gravity well. She smiled benignly at him.

"Temptress! Begone!"

"Your faith is weak, if you will not examine me for taint," Nehael said reasonably.

Rede continued to mumble prayers through his lips.

"Please look at me Rede," she spoke softly.

"Bah!" Nwm shouted. "This is useless. He is blind and arrogant beyond belief. We should go." He touched a wooden pew, and it transformed immediately into a wooden ladder which grew up towards the ceiling.

The Druid began to dissolve into mist. "I will not warn you again, Dramore," he said. "You will desist from your persecutions, or I will level this building to the ground, and it will become a hallowed pile of rubble. We are currently in a state of enforced peace. You would be wise not to jeopardize it. If any more anti-Uediian legislation is passed, and you fail to repeal that enacted already, I promise that you will answer for it in Hell."

Nwm drifted away like smoke.

Nehael remained somewhat longer, and tried once again, even as the Templar was clambering down the wooden ladder to the floor of the Fane.

"You have lost His grace," she said sadly to him, and vanished.

By the time that the other Templars had cut through the wall, they found Rede in a somber and introspective mood.

"Remove the pews," Rede commanded dourly. "Flush everything in holy water. Fetch Asser – the Fane must be resanctified. The taint must be washed away." But his words sounded hollow even to himself. It helped little, when a young Paladin said brightly:

"There is no taint here, Lord Rede."

The Grand Master of the Temple and Interim Protector of the Church of Oronthon turned away, and vomited.

**

The Bishop of Hethio brushed it off. "Don't let it concern you. It was probably the Diabolist – or one of his mortal allies - in disguise. That would explain the lack of significant residual evil."

Rede ignored him. "I am resigning from the Curia," he said. "I have already sent out an order that it should convene tomorrow, where I will announce it. I am also leaving the Temple."

"You cannot be serious!" Hethio was aghast. "The Temple needs strong leadership now more than ever. You cannot let the Heretic intimidate you with his wiles."

"I have decided. Good night Hethio."

"Rede..."

"YOU ARE DISMISSED!" Lord Rede thundered.

The Bishop nodded and left. His mind raced with possibilities and, had he had time to consider carefully, he may have chosen a course of action other than that which he did. But panic drove him, and desperation guided his deeds.

He must act quickly! He passed through the doors of the exchequer, descended a flight of stone steps, and entered an arched chamber lit with sconces.

Two paladins stood guard there.

"Greetings, Lord Bishop," one said. "This is a late hour to be visiting the vault."

Hethio nodded, and held up his seal in a perfunctory manner. He passed into the guarded maze, negotiated its hazards, entered the treasure room, and stuffed his purse full of fire opals. He grabbed a random piece of parchment and, exiting the vault, waved the scroll and raised his eyebrows at the two guards as though he had absent-mindedly forgotten it. They smiled sympathetically.

Returning to his chambers, the Bishop drew a hooded cloak about himself and pressed a panel in the wall. A doorway appeared. Lighting the lantern inside the opening, he closed the door behind him, and proceeded down a seldom-used tunnel which exited the Temple grounds to the west, within a quiet cemetery reserved for the city nobility.

He knew where to go, who to speak to, and what to say. He hoped that they had some people good enough to do the job quickly and effectively.

For the sake of the Church, he lied to himself.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 07-30-2002

**

Feezuu reflected upon the news brought to her by Uzmi.

Mostin the Metagnostic, responsible for her death? It hardly seemed possible. He was, from reputation at least, a prudish book-worm. Apparently, he was somehow embroiled in the Rurunoth affair as well – he may have imprisoned the Demon, or perhaps slain him.

Even Graz'zt's divinations had been unable to locate the Balor.*

Mostin, by Uzmi's account, was an associate of the Paladin toward whom Graz'zt bore a particular vendetta. The one responsible for the death of Cerothumulos. The one who had turned Nehael. Eadric was now the leader of a revivalist faction within the Church of Oronthon, and had acquired some kind of Messianic status.

She had heard rumour of the troubles in Wyre, of course, but they hardly seemed relevant to her situation.

"Why now?" The Cambion had demanded of the Marilith.

"It is not your place to ask such questions, half-demon," Uzmi had hissed venomously.

Feezuu had almost lost her temper, and blasted the demoness.

Uzmi had sensed the antagonism, and smiled. "You would be well advised to keep your loathing for me under control. I am the Prince's ambassador, and if you assail me you will have more than me to deal with. You will not engage Mostin until Graz'zt's appointed time. Your opportunity for revenge will come soon, however."

"We seem to have a problem of authority," Feezuu spat. "I will not yield to yours."

"Nor I to yours," Uzmi replied. "It is not an issue. Graz'zt will shortly be sending another who will assume command."

Feezuu goggled. It would have to be a Balor, but which one?

"He risks celestial retaliation," the Cambion said. "And why shunt a Demon through, when he could have me call one?"

Uzmi sneered. "He is a brinksman. He will push it to the limit, and beyond. What does he care if a thousand of his generals perish in a war with heaven? But he has not revealed all of his plans to me. Perhaps the one he plans to send is beyond your ability to conjure, little witch."

He would not dare send Ainhorr, Feezuu thought to herself. But she had to concede the Marilith's point. There were always more demons, as they said in the Abyss. She suddenly felt very expendable.

**

Mostin had an unexpected visitor.

She was a young woman, probably no more than thirty, although her exact age was rather difficult to gauge. She wore a hooded cloak of an indigo so deep that it was almost black. Her dark hair, cropped at the shoulder, framed a face with pointed features which bespoke a fey or elven heritage. In her hand she carried a rod of black iron that hid an unknown potency. She waited patiently on the doorstep of the Alienist's manse, until Mostin had exited his extradimensional retreat.

He scried her, and wondered what she was doing there. Thoughts about the Injunction raced through his mind. He buffed, straightened his collar, and opened the door.

"Shomei. This is an unexpected pleasure," he said.

The woman strode in. "Firewine," she said. Mostin was unsure whether she addressed him, or one of the numerous unseen servants who waited in attendance. She walked into his drawing room and sat in his favourite leather armchair, resting her chin upon her hands, her rod upright beneath them. She was, as usual, intense and preoccupied.

"Well. Did you or didn't you?" She asked. Shomei always spoke a little too quickly for comfort.

Mostin tried to look blank and uncomprehending.

"There are rumours abroad in Morne that you stand in contempt of the Great Injunction," she said, peering at him.

"I would argue that I did not," Mostin replied smoothly, opening a cabinet and retrieving a dusty bottle and two glasses.

"Your continued association with this Oronthonian faction does little to enhance your reputation," Shomei observed. "I hope that you haven't been drawn into the world of mundane politics, Mostin. It would be most unbecoming."

"Eadric is my landlord," Mostin answered. "And Soraine has been, also. One has to live somewhere, when one is on the Prime."

"Do not put too much store in your Transcendence, Mostin," Shomei said archly. "There are wizards who covet your mirror."

Mostin swallowed. "What is the purpose of your visit?" He asked.

"A routine inquiry," Shomei replied. "Your actions have aroused interest in certain quarters."

Mmm, Mostin thought, unsure what Shomei was referring to.

"Where is the Balor, Rurunoth?" She asked abruptly.

"Is he missing?" Mostin asked. "Perhaps he got lost."

"Mostin," Shomei said more slowly, "you are a loose cannon. Your actions are unpredictable and, in the extreme, perverse. As such, you are a worry to wizards and may cause concern in other quarters." The last words were spoken with exaggerated emphasis. "Powerful extraplanar entities take an interest

when one casually disposes of a Demon of Rurunoth's status. When one summons Barbazu on a regular basis. When one calls Planetars to the Prime. Are you following my drift, Mostin?"

"I am unaligned," Mostin said carefully. Ahh, those quarters, he thought.

"That is the problem that I am referring to," Shomei replied. "If you continue in this vein, sooner or later you will require patronage, Mostin. If you try to do it alone, without reliable help, you will come unstuck. I have acquaintances..."

"I am well aware of your 'acquaintances,' Shomei," Mostin said.

"But you understand that my dealing with them is in full consciousness – I am not easily duped or misled. I have a certain sympathy with the diabolic, it's true, but I'm hardly green or naïve. We – and they – simply have an understanding with one another. Their access to information is staggering, beyond even your conception."

"I doubt that," Mostin said.

"Perhaps I could demonstrate. A token of goodwill, shall we say?"

"Go on," the Alienist said suspiciously.

"Your defeat of Feezuu is well known in the higher echelons of the magical community in Wyre. It has gained you a certain degree of respect – which is no bad thing. But how long do you think will pass before the Cambion herself finds out that you were the one responsible. Her network is expanding."

"I have already given this much thought," Mostin said.

"She knows already, Mostin," Shomei said earnestly.

"How do you know?" Mostin asked, aghast.

"Not all of the Yugoloths in Graz'zt's employ are effectively monitored by his own loyal vassals,"

Shomei explained. "Information passes quickly between the Abyss and the Hells."

"How long has she known?"

Shomei drew a pocket watch from her jerkin. "As we speak, around an hour. I knew that she would find out before the message was sent to her. Have you heard of Uzmi?"

Mostin wracked his brains. "A Marilith?"

"A Marilith," Shomei confirmed. "Formerly in the retinue of Lord Baphomet, but now engaged by Graz'zt. She is currently on probation. She is on the Prime with Feezuu."

Mostin raised his eyebrows. "And a wayward Daemon discerned this?"

"Yes, an Arcanaloth, named Xerulko. He leads sixteen companies of Yagnoloths in a mercenary agreement with Graz'zt. But the Prince does not trust him, so he has him watched. Xerulko is a potent sorcerer, however, and Graz'zt's grip is not as strong as he likes to think. Demons are, ultimately, disorganized." Shomei spoke with unconcealed disdain.

"And Xerulko informed one of your 'acquaintances?'" Mostin asked.

"He sold the news to Titivilus."

"And Titivilus is your lover?"

Shomei laughed openly. Mostin was surprised – it was a genuine, heartfelt mirth that was difficult to associate with one who had such dangerous connections. "I don't really think 'love' entered the equation, Mostin."

The Alienist frowned "What do you mean, entered? Why past tense?"

"I don't expect you to keep abreast of my Infernal dalliances, Mostin. Sometimes I hardly can myself. I allowed him to become bored with me."

Mostin looked quizzical.

Shomei smiled. "One does not 'dump' a Duke of Hell, Mostin. It is impolitic. The initiative could hardly have come from me, could it?"

"I suppose not," Mostin agreed. "Then how did you find out?"

"One of his messengers informed me. The Duke and I are still on amicable terms, and he owes me a few favours – his compact is not yet expired."

"You compacted a Duke of Hell?" Mostin was incredulous.

"Yes," she said, nodding. "It is not as hard as you might think."

"I won't ask you what his price was," the Alienist said.

"No, it's probably better if you don't know," Shomei agreed. "The point is this, Mostin. Feezuu has powerful allies. You do not. You are vulnerable. I know that you find diablerie seductive and exciting – I certainly do. You have the strength of will and the wherewithal to tread that path, Mostin. Devils are powerful tools."

"A plough is a tool, Shomei. A Devil is an evil extraplanar monster."

"In any case," Shomei said. "Graz'zt has less interest in you than he does in the Paladin and the Succubus called Nehael."

The Alienist thought for a moment. "Hmm. I don't suppose that you could be a little more specific about his plans?"

"Not really," she said. "But Graz'zt is not well-liked in the Hells – he is considered something of an upstart with ambitions far beyond his station. His actions are too wayward. He is not methodical. He is not efficient."

"He is a Demon, Shomei. What do you expect? And he is effective for all of his quirks. He has consolidated power quickly since his release."

She shrugged and stood up. "Consider this an offer," she said. "If you wish for patronage, the Lord of the Fourth extends his hand in friendship."

"Belial?" Mostin asked, confused. "I thought that Dispater was your patron."

"I am merely a message-bearer, Mostin. I said nothing about my patronage, and my own inclinations are not open for discussion."

"Before you leave, Shomei. Your rod – what is its function?"

"You have your mirror, Mostin. I have my rod." She smiled, and abruptly vanished.

Sh*t, thought Mostin. That was a quickened teleport.

**

"We must strike now!" Mostin said to Eadric, Ortwin, Nwm and Tahl. They were standing on the field beneath Hartha Keep. "We cannot allow her to seize the initiative. You must see the need for this, Eadric. She has called a demoness of great power – greater than Cerothumulos. Than Rurunoth, maybe. And they are holding back until they are fully prepared."

"Mostin, I..."

"NOW dammit. If they 'port in and catch us singly, then we're all dead."

"Is this Shomei reliable?" Ortwin said. "She is an Infernalist."

"I believe so," Mostin replied, exasperated. "I don't doubt that she has other motives. But we go back a

long way."

"What was her price, Mostin?" Eadric asked.

"None," Mostin replied flatly. "Although she suggested that I might benefit from a diabolic patron."

"Mostin!" Eadric gasped.

"Don't worry. I'm not about to take her up on it. But one must grab allies when they present themselves. I suggest that all of us retire to my Magnificent Mansion and make the necessary preparations. Nehael should remain within it – she is particularly vulnerable. Feezuu has met her, and she may be scried."

Eadric sighed. "Mostin, this is extremely bad timing. I have just received news that Lord Rede of Dramore was murdered in his bed last night. Naturally, I am the prime suspect. The fact that Nwm paid a visit to the Temple yesterday evening hardly helps matters." Eadric stared stonily at the Druid, who smiled apologetically back.

"Ngaaaaarh!" Mostin screamed. "I don't give a sh*t. I'm going anyway. Eadric, if I have to compact Pit Fiends to do this, then I will. Do you read me?"

"You won't," Eadric groaned. "I never said that I wasn't coming. Just that it's bad timing."

Mostin shook, and tried to calm himself. "Let's just get things ready shall we?"

"And Mostin," Eadric said remonstratively, "No Devils. Do you understand?"

"Eadric, be assured that if I summon them, they will be of the strictly Pseudonatural variety."

"Is that good or bad?" Ortwin asked.

**

"I thought it was supposed to be the day after tomorrow," Mulissu complained. "I am not ready."

She stood in Mostin's study, resplendent in a gown of blue samite interwoven with hundreds of precious stones. Around her neck, she wore a collar which bore a single sapphire of enormous proportions, which Mostin recognized as that which had once belonged to the Xorn Krygnasz. The mirror of Urm-Nahat showed the scene of the courtyard in her own castle.

"Who are these people, Mostin?" She asked.

"Nwm, you have met," Mostin said. "This is Ortwin of Jiuhu, who considers himself to be the greatest liar in the world. This is the Succubus, Nehael, of whom I informed you. This is Tahl the Incorruptible, lately of the Oronthonian Inquisition. This is Eadric of Deorham, who is the anointed proxy of the aforementioned deity. This is your own daughter, Iua, whom I trust you remember."

"Aah, yes," Mulissu smiled vaguely. She stepped forwards and arranged Iua's hair, causing the girl to pout. "You should be careful of the company you keep, Iua," Mulissu said laconically.

"Well?" The Witch asked.

"The schedule has been moved forwards a little. I hope you don't mind too much."

"If we could get this over with, then I can return to my work," Mulissu sighed. "What is the plan?"

"We have a Marilith to contend with, in addition to those foes that I had previously determined."

"Mostin..."

"We are more than adequately equipped to deal with any threat which presents itself," Mostin said. "We have more firepower than I have seen gathered together since...well, for a long time, anyway. What can you prepare, Mulissu?"

"I was thinking along the lines of Reality Maelstrom, Finger of Death, Great Shout, Horrid Wilting and

Disintegrate - obviously. I also have the spell of Skeletal Deliquescence which is rather amusing. And the excellent, if unpredictable, Prismatic Spray."

"What about the 'Big Ones?*" Mostin asked tentatively.

"Power Word, Kill, Dominate Monster and Gate," she replied nonchalantly.

Great Goddess, thought Nwm. Who is this woman?

"Before I do anything, Mostin, I absolutely insist on being rendered invulnerable to Acid, to be warded against Death effects and to be Mind Blanked. There's no point in saying that you don't have the last spell – I've seen your books, remember?"

Mostin grumbled. That was one less big sonic that he'd have.

"Where would you open a Gate?" Ortwin asked Mulissu.

"Obviously, Heaven," Eadric replied.

"Hell," Mostin said. "Oops. Did I just say that?" He smiled innocently at the Paladin, who shook his head and sighed. Mostin grinned. Sometimes, Eadric was an easy mark.

The discussion on exactly how they deployed their combined spell potential took two hours.

All of them rested.

**

"The Marilith may be able to summon more Demons," Mostin cautioned them. "The Bar-Lgura also may be able to bring in others of their kind. There is an outside chance that the Succubus may be able to drag a Balor into the fray - it is unlikely, but we should be prepared for the contingency. Even the Dretch can pull others of their ilk in – en masse, they can be annoying. Furthermore, it is possible that

Feezuu herself has Bound more demons – she will not have had time to compact with them, however, so she may be unwilling to meet their demands for service."

Eadric groaned. He knew that this had to be done, but took no joy in it.

Tahl was stoical. He had agreed to act primarily in an auxiliary capacity – at least as far as his own spells were concerned. But he was a capable combatant, and his scourge would be deployed against the creatures it was designed to destroy. He already knew everything that Mostin was saying – for twelve years he had served in the Inquisition.

Iua sat methodically absorbing the information.

Ortwin shifted restlessly – eager to be underway and unconcerned with the details. Whatever happened, happened.

Nwm was prepared, and would be the mainstay in terms of support. He had several powerful summonings prepared in addition.

Mulissu sat and worried about her untended experiments.

"As soon as I scry her with the mirror," Mostin said, "she will become aware of the observation. We must act instantly, at that point. Each of us knows what to do. We have primary and secondary targets. We should begin the buffing procedures now."

Ortwin shook his head in desperation. Mostin was in militaristic mode – the Bard envisioned the Alienist with a map and a pointer, explaining tactics in detail.

**

Feezuu sat, aware of the sensor which had kept her under observation for several hours. Uzmi had warned her not to attempt to dispel it. The Prince had said that he would be observing her, for his own,

inscrutable reasons.

Feezuu did not like it.

Suddenly, another sensor appeared to her inner sight. Within a second or two, all hell seemed to break loose.

Graz'zt smiled. The proffered bait had been accepted, and now the trap could be sprung. Xerulko would be well-rewarded – he had enjoyed the challenge of posing as a Cornugon.

But Graz'zt had not counted on Mulissu.

*I ruled that Rurunoth's essence, imprisoned in a gem, was not subject to the discern location spell when the Balor himself was its target. This may seem arbitrary, but the tendency for discern location to be a game-breaker is well-known.

If discern location was directed toward "the pearl containing the essence of Rurunoth," that would be a different matter. Of course, only those who had actually seen the gem would be capable of such a spell.

**i.e. 9th level spells.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 07-31-2002

It was a gambit, but moving everybody through the portal opened by Mostin's mirror would have taken too long, and would have left them vulnerable during the period that it remained open. Instead, they appeared in three teams, organized for mutual support, triangulated around the crypt in which Feezuu and her allies were located.

Mulissu teleported into the northwest of the chamber with her own daughter, whilst Mostin appeared in

the northeast with Ortwin and Tahl. Eadric and Nwm charged through the portal from the south.

They appeared simultaneously. All were acting with uncanny speed.

Iua immediately leapt forwards and began an earnest assault upon Uzmi, caught off-guard by the duelist's awesome precision and reflexes. Ortwin and Eadric, from opposite directions, both sprang at Feezuu. Nwm, in the form of an enormous bear, leapt at the ape-like Bar-Lgura.

The first thing that Mostin did, after Eadric and Nwm were clear, was to erect a wall of force around the extradimensional opening. The idea of Feezuu – or any other fiend present – escaping back through it (and into his study) without effort would have been too much. He looked around quickly: neither the Succubus nor the Goristro appeared to be present. All of the others were..

Mulissu, desiring to return to her work as quickly as possible, decided that the easiest thing to do would be to Gate in a Solar. A Prismatic Spray issued from her hand, striking several Dretch down quickly. To target anything else with the spell would risk affecting allies.

Light flooded into the sepulchre as the Celestial manifested.

"Holy sh*t," said Ortwin, hewing at Feezuu.

Eadric smiled. "Good choice," he shouted, and hewed at Feezuu. White light erupted from his blade.

Oh, no, thought Mostin.

"Eliminate nearby fiends," Mulissu commanded the Solar. "Big ones first."

The Solar nodded, and suddenly vanished, which was, initially, somewhat confusing.

Tahl invoked a Righteous Might and grew to a height of twelve feet. He drew upon the power of the Eye of Palamabron and invoked a Zone of Revelation – his intention being to reveal any invisible fiends which were present. The sight that it unveiled was terrifying: the ether around them was alive with demons, their misty shapes hewing at the Archon, Zhuel, who had Teleported to the area of the

Ethereal Plane coterminous with Eadric. The Solar was suddenly revealed engaging with them.

Iua had adopted a screening position, and was thrusting repeatedly at the Marilith, her enhanced blade easily penetrating the demoness's natural defenses. Uzmi had still not reacted.

Feezuu herself, however, had mastered her confusion quickly. Reeling from the initial assault by Eadric and Ortwin, and perceiving that her death was imminent unless she acted quickly, she cast a Dimension Door and vanished.

"Naaaargh!" Mostin screamed.

Ortwin span around, brandishing Githla and his pick, leapt forwards, and ripped with devastating power into Uzmi's flank. His scimitar whirled and an enormous BOOM echoed through the crypt as his pick plunged deep into the torso of the Demoness. She collapsed.

Eadric turned and, with three great strokes, cut one of the Bar-Lgura down. Nwm, his jaws and claws enhanced, shredded the other ape-demon and ripped its head off with his teeth.

A voice whispered in Mostin's ear. "Protect me, Alienist. Save me from the Paladin." The succubus, Kalkja, had appeared behind him.

"Not bloody likely," Mostin said, shaking off the enchantment. He struck her with the primary Sonic from his enhanced chain lightning, with secondary arcs crashing down and eliminating all of the remaining Dretch. Kalkja was badly mangled, but Mostin ignored her. He cast a Discern Location followed by a quickened Dimension Door and vanished.

"What the...?" Ortwin grumbled. "Nice one Mostin! Just piss off and leave us, why don't you?" But there was nothing left standing in the crypt except the Succubus and two quasits – at least on the Prime Plane.

Within the Zone of Revelation, Nalfeshnee demons bore down upon the Solar, and the shape of a Balor of enormous size appeared, its phantom outline as terrifying as its real presence, as Ortwin remembered it from their brief encounter on Limbo.

"Ainhorr," he whispered, and recalled the visions that Troap had evoked in his mind.

Without warning, another Gate opened. A statuesque demon, perhaps nine feet tall, with eyes that glowed an even brighter green than Mostin's, stepped through. His skin was as black as midnight, and in his hand he held a huge, wavy-bladed bastard sword. He, also, was acting with great speed.

Looks of amazement crossed the faces of those present. Each of them, including Kalkja, thinking: That is not possible. It is against the rules. He cannot be here.

He smiled viciously, but did not attack. Instead, he spoke a spell. Mass Manifest.

Ainhorr, and four Nalfeshnees appeared on the Prime Plane. The immense presence of the ancient Balor filled the chamber. Terrible heat radiated from him.

Mulissu's eyes almost popped out of her head. Mostin hadn't mentioned Demon Princes and huge Balors. She targeted Ainhorr with two Disintegrations and a cluster of Magic Missiles. He grunted.

The Solar and Zhuel reappeared upon the Prime, even as Ainhorr's whip lashed out and wrapped itself around Tahl, dragging him against his body. His immense flaming sword crashed down upon Eadric, biting into him with Unholy power. Fire issued from the Balor's nostrils.

The voice of the great celestial echoed through the minds of those present: That is not Graz'zt.

Could've fooled me, Ortwin thought.

The Nalfeshnee sprang into action. A nimbus of rainbow light began to kindle around one of them, and an Unholy Aura erupted from another, bathing the fiends in protective blackness. More fiends materialized, as the remaining Nalfeshnees invoked summonings. Three Vrocks appeared, and immediately leapt at Eadric, attempting to rend him with their claws.

The two Quasits were flapping around Mulissu, trying to sting her and break her concentration.

Tahl called on the power of the Strength domain and, with difficulty, broke free of the Balor's whip. His own scourge cracked in his hand, and bit into Ainhorr. Iua threw herself into the fray, reeled from a passing strike from the Balor, and began fencing with the black-skinned demon who, apparently, was not Graz'zt. Ortwin joined her.

Seeing his chance, and drawing on the power of his God, Eadric yelled, hefted Lukarn, and brought it full force down upon Ainhorr's flaming sword. The Balor turned it with contemptuous ease. Eadric struck again, and a splintering sound was heard, sparks flying as the blades crashed together. He struck again, and Ainhorr's ten-foot greatsword shattered, hewn at the hilt.* Shards flew across the chamber. Eadric smote the demon, and he screamed.

Nwm spoke two summonings in fast order. A large salamander with a longspear materialized, and a huge Earth Elemental grew from the floor. He threw them both immediately against the Nalfeshnee with the nimbus around it.

Kalkja unsuccessfully attempted to persuade Mulissu to disintegrate Eadric.

The demon who was not Graz'zt slashed at Iua, the force and speed of its strokes too great for her to avoid or parry. Gaping wounds appeared all over her, and she staggered backwards and collapsed.

Mulissu screamed, targeted the monster with two Disintegrations and the Simulacrum's diminished resistance failed it. It vanished. One of the Quasits who was buzzing her succumbed to a burst of Magic Missiles. The Solar dramatically decapitated one of the Nalfeshnees with its greatsword, and cut another one down with three swift strokes, in an attempt to close with Ainhorr. Zhuel engaged the third.

The Great Demon spoke a single word of power, and another Balor appeared.

"Oh, for heaven's sake," Ortwin moaned, before he imploded.

Unable to physically engage with Eadric – Ainhorr and the Vrocks now fully surrounding the Paladin – both Nalfeshnees targeted the Paladin with Feebleminds. Simultaneously, the rainbow coloured nimbus around one of them erupted in a burst of energy, causing Nwm to reel. Eadric's mind collapsed under

the pressure, and he sat down and began to drool.

**

Feezuu had not gone far – into a chamber only a hundred yards or so away. When Mostin appeared nearby, she was already mounting her Nightmare.

"I don't think so," the Alienist said, and launched two doubly empowered sonically substituted lightning bolts and another quickened sonic at her.

"Almost," she said. And died.

But Mostin had exhausted his transportation spells. Rather unconventionally – for him at least – he had to actually run back to the chamber where the others were gathered. He crashed through a door, straight into the Goristro.

"Oops," he said. Fortunately, the Demon was even more surprised than he was. Mostin quickly summoned a trio of Pseudonatural Dire Bears.

"Kill," he pointed, and waited for a chance to sneak past.

**

Tahl, clawed and buffeted by attacks from the Vrocks, pushed through and interposed himself between Eadric and the Balor. Ainhorr slammed him with an immense, fiery fist, but Tahl's spirit did not waver. He spoke to Eadric's sword, which sat limply in the Paladin's grip, and closed his hand tightly around it.

"Lukarn. Heal him." The Cleric commanded.

Nearby, on the ground, Nwm – still in the shape of a huge bear – hallucinated wildly. The Salamander was stabbing at one of the Nalfeshnees, whilst the Earth elemental pummeled it.

Kalkja grabbed at Tahl, and he lashed out at her. She pulled his head back, and kissed him. His knees became weak.

Mulissu darted over to Iua and, touching her neck, determined that her daughter was still alive. She was still livid. She opened another Gate, and a second Solar stepped through.

"What is your command?" It asked.

"I have none. Do as you wish." She cradled Iua's head in her lap.

The Solar smiled, and opened yet another Gate. A cascade of white light began.

The Demons fled, as the Celestial host descended upon the ancient Necropolis of Khu, and hallowed it.

**

As the power coursed into him from Lukarn, Eadric looked around himself to see dozens of perfect winged forms standing in silent vigil. He wondered if he was dead, until he glanced across to see the crumpled form of Ortwin lying nearby. Tahl was tending to Iua, and Nwm stood pensively stroking his beard.

Mostin burst in, ready to fling sonics. He looked around, and fainted.

Eadric stood, walked up to a Planetar, and pointed at Ortwin.

"I don't suppose that you'd..."

"Not even were he one of the faithful," the Celestial replied.

"He died fighting demons," Eadric pointed out.

"As have many others," the Celestial replied sympathetically. "Except in unusual circumstances, death tends to be final."

Bugger that, thought Nwm.

**

"Mmm," Ortwin looked in the mirror. He was a satyr.

"It could have been a lot worse," Nwm said. "A badger, or an owl, for example. Mulissu is willing to return you to your original form – for a hefty price, no doubt. I think you look quite dashing, and you must admit – it has a certain appropriateness."

"Yes, yes," Ortwin agreed enthusiastically. Mmm. Nymphs, he thought.

*Crit.

In answer to the 'buffs' question: all were hasted and death warding, and had protection from acid on them. Ortwin, Eadric, Iua and Tahl were also under protection from sonics in the event that Mosin needed to drop area spells on the melee fighters. Ortwin and Tahl were both under an enhanced bull's strength, Iua under an enhanced fox's cunning - useful for a duelist. Mulissu was Mind Blanked.

Greater Magic Weapon was on Iua's rapier, both of Ortwin's weapons and Tahl's whip. Eadric had a holy sword cast upon his own sunblade, and was also warding with a stoneskin.

Nwm had Greater Magic Fang upon both sets of claws, and his teeth.

There may have been others.

It's worth pointing out that as soon as the second Solar appeared (actually, maybe even the first), that it was a foregone conclusion.

My wife was running Mulissu during the session. She does, from time to time.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 08-07-2002

**

"I think that some kind of disguise might be in order," Ortwin said, scratching one of his hairy haunches with his left hoof. "Don't get me wrong – I like it and everything – it's just, well, conspicuous isn't it? Being a Half-Elf was bad enough if I want to be – er – incognito, if you catch my drift, but this is rather harder to hide."

"I could make you a Hat of Disguise," Mostin offered. Since the death of the Cambion, he had visibly relaxed.

"Mmm, yes," Ortwin said. "Of course, it wouldn't look like one of your hats, would it Mostin?"

The Alienist sniffed. "Obviously, you lack the panache to carry off something as distinguished as one of my hats. But such a hat would appear however you wished it to, as would you – within generally bipedal constraints, of course."

"That sounds splendid," Ortwin said. "How long would it take you to enchant such a hat? How much would you charge me for it?"

"Well, Change Self..." Mostin began.

"Alter Self would be nicer," Ortwin smiled disarmingly.

"So would Shapechange," Mostin said sarcastically. "I had planned to give it to you, as a favour, but because you've been so rude..."

"Change Self will be just fine, Mostin," Ortwin interrupted. "And thank-you, that's very decent of you."

"Yes, it is," the Alienist agreed haughtily.

**

Unfortunately for Ortwin, none of Feezoo's considerable wealth found its way into his purse. Upon discovering her cache of gold and silk, Eadric had asked a squad of devas to distribute it equitably amongst the outlying encampments nearest Khu, prior to the Celestials' departure.

Paladins, the Bard had sighed.

Groups of nomads were surprised – and, after their initial terror, delighted – to find winged messengers depositing bags of precious goods outside of their skin tents. Most had suffered losses from Feezoo.

Mostin had inspected the glass tube he had taken from Feezoo's corpse. It still contained fifteen motes – soul currency with which transactions on the Lower Planes were made. He had slipped it into his pocket, but a look of stern reproof from a Planetar, whose true seeing had immediately recognized the morphed larvae for what they were, had persuaded him to render it to the Celestial.

"Er, here are some souls," Mostin had said, looking away and holding out his hand.

The cells beneath the vaulted chambers of the mausoleum and crypt had contained a grizzly collection

of body parts, live subjects being drained of blood, and an uncompleted flesh golem. When subjected to the Eye of Palamabron, other secrets had been revealed. The lowest chamber, warded against the most powerful of divinations, revealed an incomplete phylactery which Feezuu had been attempting to construct.

Mostin swallowed. As a lich, there was no doubting who would have finally prevailed in their feud.

After the prisoners had been tended and released, Nwm used his power to open the roof of the mausoleum, and light flooded in. Celestials descended into the lowest catacombs, and purified them.

The Ancient Gods of Shûth dreamed more easily.

**

In the days which followed the assassination of Lord Rede of Dramore, the Grand Master of the Temple and Interim Lord Protector of Orthodoxy, the remnant of the Curia met to discuss the ongoing situation. A variety of proposals were made, although rulings upon their truth were postponed until the current hubbub subsided. Neither the Bishops of Kaurban or Jiuhu attended, leaving the five episcopacies to mull over policy. Unexpectedly, Hethio did not attend either, apparently succumbing to a bout of sickness. Delighted at the absence of one who had become his arch-nemesis, the Bishop of Tyndur – who had ‘found his teeth,’ as Rede had put it – sowed as much discord as possible amongst the remaining Bishops. The consensus was still against him, but the zeal which had characterized earlier meetings was absent.

Rede cannot have fallen from grace, else the Curia would have been incorrect in its initial backing of him – which was patently absurd, because the Curia determined what the truth was. Rede must, therefore, have been a martyr to the truth and, like Melion, deserved beatification.

The Temple and the Inquisition – both arms of the Church Magistratum – were now leaderless. Brey was the logical successor to the Temple, although arguments were made that the Magistratum should now be consolidated into a single body, and Brey was not the man for the job.

The presence of the pagan, Nwm, and the demoness, were generally agreed to be connected with Rede's murder, although in what capacity none could guess. The Templars who had been present related events as they remembered them, although no full picture had emerged – the wall of thorns had blocked many details of the exchange between the Druid and Rede. But no Taint had been detected by the three Paladins amongst them.

Should the Curia authorize the further use of the scroll cache amongst the warrior-clerics again? They were rapidly running out of casters of sufficient power to even attempt their safe use.

Since the disappearance of Tramst, no clergy of adequate ability existed to use appropriate divinations with regard to the murder of Rede.* And with Oronthon's continued silence, communion with the Deity was impossible.

How long would that last? Many wondered.

More mundane issues were discussed. The deployment and provisioning of the Temple troops in Tomur, those in the Nund valley near Trempe, and the continued blockade of Iald. Finances were not inexhaustible, and the king was still delaying in committing royal resources. Wars and sieges were expensive.

Meanwhile, whilst the four Bishops spoke candidly about the dilemmas which beset them, Hethio was dealing with his own remorse. His sickness was feigned, and he spent a good deal of time in acts of self-mortification in order to expunge his guilt at the murder of Rede.

Because, when the Bishop of Hethio had attempted to approach the hallowed altar of the Fane in Morne, he found that he could not. Centuries earlier, Tersimion had placed potent wards upon the dais, and, suddenly, Hethio found himself subject to them.**

Hethio knew what it meant, and should the gaze of even the lowliest Paladin be directed towards him, he knew what it would reveal.

Still, he rationalized whilst striking himself across the back with his scourge, the Taint was surely of a

temporary variety. He had, after all, acted in the best interests of the Temple.

**

Mostin made the hat for Ortwin in two days, became bored, vacillated, and decided to visit Shomei.

He thought that, rather than simply arriving on her doorstep and waiting, issuing a sending would be politic. He had not had a chance to use the spell since his acquisition of it from Feezuu's books.

Greetings Shomei. Your information useful, if flawed. I suspect you were duped. I would like to confer. I will scry, then teleport to your location.

Within seconds, the return message arrived.

No. Resolving other matters. Meet me at my manse in one hour.

Hmm, Mostin thought. He wondered what the 'other matters' were. Still, it behooved him not to pry too much. He waited impatiently for an hour, and stepped through the mirror of Urm-Nahat.

He appeared outside of the huge, wrought iron gates of her estate, three miles from Morne. Moments later, they swung open noisily, and Mostin began to trudge down the gravel driveway, flanked by enormous, brooding trees of a species not native to Wyre. Or the Prime, for that matter, he thought. A whispering wind reached his ears.

Do not leave the pathway

Not likely, he thought.

Shomei's mansion was vast, of a size comparable to the ducal castle at Trempa. It boasted six hundred rooms, and was squarely situated within a thousand acres of land, at the centre of a great bowl in the hills. Devils had, purportedly, been employed in its construction, and the great, sweeping balustrades

and buttresses, of an infinitely complex design which seemed to defy gravity, lent credence to the theory. The doors, fashioned from black iron and carved in intricate relief, opened noiselessly as the Alienist approached.

A spined devil waited for him, its wings flapping as it hovered in the air. It gestured, and Mostin followed it through a winding maze of corridors, hallways and antechambers, into a large but comfortable drawing room. A purple fire burned in the hearth. Mostin sat and poured himself a large glass of brandywine from a crystal decanter, threw his boots off, sank into a couch made from fiendish leather, and waited.

Shomei appeared only a minute later, through a door that Mostin had not noticed in the east wall. She moved, even here, as though she was in a hurry.

"My apologies," she said immediately. "I discovered that I had been subjected to a ruse only yesterday. The devil who brought me tidings turned out not to be a devil after all, but, in fact, the duplicitous Xerulko."

"Graz'zt is cunning, as I said," Mostin reminded her. "And bolder since his freedom."***

"Thank-you for the lesson," she said ironically. "But the daemon will be causing no more trouble. Impersonating a diabolic herald is a risky enterprise."

"Devils have punished him?" Mostin asked, amazed.

"Not exactly," Shomei explained. "I have trapped him within a thaumaturgic diagram. Perhaps you would like to come and inspect him?"

Mostin raised his eyebrows. "Shomei, I appreciate the gesture, but the business with Feezuu is resolved permanently. I have no need of your 'help.'"

She scowled. "I have not entrapped Xerulko for your benefit, but for mine. Such a deception cannot go unpunished, or I would lose all respect. He has slighted me, and I must exact revenge.

"Mostin, listen very carefully to me. There comes a point in a mage's career when, willing or no, he or she begins to attract the attention of those who may perceive in him or her a prospective ally, or a potential threat. This is doubly true of those who specialize in summonings, and bindings and callings. You are at that point. You are on the verge of mastering the most potent of dweomers. You need dependable allies. If not devils, have you considered celestials?"

Mostin laughed uneasily.

"Exactly," Shomei said. "Mostin, you are a natural Goetic Magician. You do not need an external locus of morality to tell you which acts are 'Good' and which are 'Evil.' Devils are wicked, but very, very efficient. If you bind them to your Will, you can achieve a great deal. They are tools. They can aid you in your quest for apotheosis. Vhorzhe understood as much."

Mostin shook his head. "But Vhorzhe did not rely solely upon any one kind of outsider. And I have surpassed him now. You are right: I do not need to be told the difference between good and evil. But I will not be subject to any other's agenda – including yours, Shomei. You are shackled, whether you admit it or not, and you cannot move without considering the reaction it will evince in the court of Dispatier, or Belial, or whoever else is granting you favours. Your independence is compromised. I could not abide that. I must determine my own fate."

"Perhaps you underestimate my resourcefulness," Shomei said slyly. But she seemed troubled. Mostin felt that he had touched a raw nerve.

"Perhaps I do," Mostin admitted. "But I would no sooner be indebted to a Devil than a Celestial. Although I freely admit that Celestials are scarier."

"On that much we agree, at least," she nodded. "Who will you look to for help, Mostin?"

"The Pseudonaturals," the Alienist replied. "As always. Shomei, I am only just beginning to apprehend them. Beyond those that I have dealt with already, there are those of truly awesome power."

"They are monstrous, Mostin. And those others that you speak of cannot be summoned."

"No," he replied. "But they can be called. And bound."

"Vhorzhe tried, and failed," the Infernalist said.

"I am not Vhorzhe," the Alienist replied. "I am Mostin, the Metagnostic."

**

Whilst Mostin spent a week with Shomei, discussing esoteric matters and renewing a friendship that had been allowed to drift apart, Eadric drilled his troops and prepared for the message from Rintrah that he knew must soon come.

Tahl and those who had defected with the Inquisitor from Morne, as well as the penitent Templars and the Paladins who had remained in Trempa, now formed the steel core of his supporters. At every available opportunity, Eadric spoke with the more agnostic members of Trempa's aristocracy, impressing upon them the need for unity, and the holiness of his mission. He diplomatically addressed their frippery, and their laxity, and enjoined them to commit themselves fully to purging the Temple of the corruption which beset it.

His persuasive arguments, combined with his force of personality, slowly began to bear fruit amongst the nobility. Still, Tahl reminded him that until he was tested upon the battlefield, the overarching unity of purpose that the Paladin sought would not be realized.

Ryth had ridden in haste from the north, where his archers were engaged in what seemed like would turn into a dirty, protracted guerilla conflict with Temple troops in Tomur. The enemy were sending raiding parties across the Nund and continually testing the resolve of the Uediian militias there. Eadric – in Soraine's name - immediately summoned the aristocracy for conference. In fact, the Duchess was gradually and subtly relinquishing her nominal command of the effort to the Paladin.

Ryth, who had spent three weeks in the field and had shed quantities of enemy blood, was less

belligerent than previously.

The meeting was still fraught, however. The western side of the Nund, beyond a narrow swathe owned by the Duke of Kaurban, was a royal demesne. Whilst it seemed possible that the King would not intervene in a strictly internal Temple affair, as soon as it spilled over onto lands owned by the crown, some form of retribution could be expected. Once the cells of Temple troops had been ousted from their encampments – assuming they could be – any pursuit would draw Trempa's forces across land owned by the King. And it was already well-known that the Temple was petitioning for royal aid – the King himself was, after all, supposed to be an exemplar of Orthodoxy.

And then there was Morne itself to consider.

Any attempt to invest the city would be met with overwhelming force, and Eadric held no illusions about what would happen if he met the royal army in the field.

"We are interested in the Temple, not Morne itself," Tahl remarked.

"I doubt the King will see it that way," Eadric observed laconically.

"We should go and chat with him," Ortwin said casually. "It's long overdue. I've met him once or twice before. He seems nice enough, if a little petulant."

Ryth spat. "He is a spineless boy."

And therein lay the problem. The reason that no royal intervention had occurred. The reason that the powerful magnates of Wyre were roaming around with private armies in the true fashion of 'overmighty subjects.' The reason that no cohesive policy had emerged in the temporal governance of Wyre for more than a decade. The reason why Temple power had gone unchecked for so long. And probably the reason that, heretofore, he has been mentioned in this story only in passing.

Because the King of Wyre, Tiuhan IV, was a spoiled boy of twelve years, manipulated by relatives who comprised the bulk of Wyre's greatest aristocracy.

Eadric sighed. Unfortunately, Ortwin was right.

*Tramst (Cleric 9 / Divine Oracle 2), who had stood on the very spot where Feezuu had slain Cynric, had interacted with her Taint and used a legend lore to determine her identity. Note that Divine Oracles within the church of Oronthon aren't necessarily as 'wayward' as the PrC in Defenders of the Faith would appear. Historically, oracular vision has been a vital adjunct to the Inquisition's work.

**The High Altar in the Great Fane is protected by a Permanent Antipathy towards creatures of all evil alignments.

***The Binding of Graz'zt – an act accomplished by the Wizard Fillein and his cabal - over three hundred years previously, and a seminal example of cooperative magic. The Great Mage had drawn on the abilities of six other spellcasters of significant power.

Graz'zt was chained for fifty-five years. When he finally gained his freedom, he was irked to find that all but one of his former captors had already died.

Fillein himself had disappeared, and was never found.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 08-08-2002

Naming Conventions in the Wyre Campaign

This is in answer to a question that someone asked a long, long time ago, but which I hadn't gotten around to answering. It's kind of complicated, so bear with me (if you're even vaguely interested). Firstly, the PCs.

Eadric is an Old English name, which was useful from my perspective – in terms of consistency. I'll

explain in a while.

Ortwin is the name of a character appearing in the *Niebelungenlied* (Ortwin of Metz), so I guess its Middle High German.

Nwm is "Quasi-Brythonic" or "Quasi-Celtic." It rhymes with the Welsh word *Cwm*, which transliterates as "Coombe" in English. A *Cwm* is a glacial valley, if I remember my highschool geography. If "*Nwm*" has any meaning, then I don't know what it is.

Mostin, I think, is a proper name anyway. I'd guess that its roots were Middle English or Norman French, but I might be wrong. This is also very convenient for me.

In Wyre itself, there are three different linguistic complexes.

The oldest, consists of a group of languages which are represented by a variety of Celtic or Quasi-Celtic roots. *Nwm* is one such name, *Cambos du'la* (the hill where Nehael atoned) is another. Such names are relatively uncommon, and tend to be found amongst Uediians or at sites venerated by them. *Bagaudas* – the name assumed by Hullu's guerillas – is an ancient Gaulish word meaning, unsurprisingly, "Guerilla Fighters." *Uedii* itself is also Gaulish, and has connotations of "Prayer, veneration."

More recent, although still of great age, are names represented by a variety of Germanic roots. *Eadric*, *Cynric*, *Brord*, *Asser* etc. are all Anglo-Saxon in form. *Tahl*, *Thrumohar*, *Ekkert*, *Streek* are all adaptations of Old Norse names. A larger number of names – *Tramst*, *Tiuhan*, *Hethio*, *Thahan*, *Tomur*, *Gibilrazn* derive from ancient Gothic. I like Gothic.

Deorham is Anglo-Saxon in form, and means "Village Where the Deer Live." There is a village in Somerset in England called *Dyrham*, and its older form in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle was *Deorham*. A *Burh* (as in Kyrtil's *Burh*) is a burgh/burg/castle.

The most recent, in terms of Wyrish history, are names represented by "Pseudo Norman French" or "Pseudo Middle-English" words. These include *Wyre*, *Morne*, *Soraine*, *Melion*, *Brey*, *Trempa*. etc. In

the older language, 'Wyre' would probably be *Weorh*, but that's beside the point.

The names of Wizards are, for the most part, utterly fantastic. *Shomei*, *Tersimion*, *Jovol*, *Tozinak*, *Kothchori*, *Qiseze* etc. There are a few exceptions: *Hlioth* is Old Norse in form, *Waide* is passably Middle English (ish). *Mulissu* is ancient Assyrian, and does not fit the mould – but she is from the Thalassine. Mulissu is a complicated figure in Mesopotamian belief, a kind of sky-goddess, but also a name given to the transcendent aspect of Ishtar, or the feminine spiritual principle in general.

As mentioned in another post (by Lombard), the names of the celestial host are influenced by Blake's poetical names: *Enitharmon*, *Rintrah*, *Palamabron*, *Oothoon* (=Urthoon), *Enion* (=Eniin).. The name *Zhuel* is quasi-Blake. *Rurunoth*, *Ainhorr*, *Uzmi* are also passably quasi-Blake, although the intention with the last names was to evoke a 'darker' feel. *Feezuu*, *Xerulko* are invented. *Nehael* has the root "-el" which means "God" in various Aramaic languages, and appears in the names *Gabriel*, *Michael*, *Raphael*, *Sammael* etc.

Oronthon is utterly imitative of Blake's names.

Completely inconsistently, the name *Kalkja* – the succubus compacted by Feezuu – is actually Gothic in form. But I couldn't resist. In Gothic, *Kalkja* means "whore."

Tun Hartha - the plateau north of Wyre - is a compound Old Norse + Gothic name, which means 'sweet hardship.' It's inhabitants call it *Linna*, however, which in their language means 'enclosed space.' The language of the Tunthi is based on Finnish. *Mesikammi*, the shamaness encountered by Nwm, is a poetic word found in the Kalevala meaning 'Bear, honey-paw.' *Tietaja* means 'sorcerer, shaman.'

Thalassine is from Attic Greek, and means "Blue-Green," as in the colour of the sea. Many Thalassine names are derived from Middle-Eastern or Greek roots.

Shuth is a Sanskrit word. Sanskrit was originally intended to form the basis of the Language of Shuth, but I never followed through with the idea.

Graz 'zt is canonical, of course.

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**

Nwm sped westwards in vaporous form.

After his return from Khu, the Druid had felt depressed at sinking back into the routine on the Blackwater meadow – the pavillions, and tents, and feasts and objectionable behaviour of many of Trempa's nobility. The tedious wait for Rintrah to manifest himself to Eadric, and instruct the Paladin on his next course of action. Nwm had *scried* Hullu, and determined to find out what the Tunthi warrior – and unlikely star in the Uediian resistance in Hethio – was doing.

He arrived, after a three-hour flight, in an isolated glade deep within an area of forest dominated by elm trees of large size. Around a hundred people of both sexes had formed an encampment. Nwm was surprised at its organization, until he remembered that Hullu's experience extended beyond the lonely plateau of Tun Hartha – he had served as a mercenary as far afield as the southern Thalassine.

A trench had been dug, and a dike raised, encircling an area of around three acres. A wooden rampart had been built and a catwalk ran along its length, and the outer wall of both the trench and dike had been faced with stone gathered with labour from nearby streams. As the Druid descended, he moved through plumes of smoke issuing from a large smithy, and the sound of hammers ringing reached his ears. There were stables, a granary, latrines and a dozen other buildings, constructed hastily but efficiently from timber.

Nwm materialized in front of Hullu, who was teaching a girl of around eight years how to shoot a longbow.

"She's a bit young, don't you think?" The Druid asked.

"No," Hullu replied. His unmistakable accent reminded Nwm immediately of his strange experiences upon the plateau.

"You've been busy." Nwm said. "I'm surprised that you've had time to conduct raids as well."

"Half of the camp is currently out on a mission," Hullu said, stretching. "They are dealing with a punitive exercise mounted by the Temple. My informants told me about it three days ago – the night that you visited the Temple."

Nwm arched an eyebrow. "News travels fast," he said.

"Did you kill him?" Hullu asked.

"No," the Druid replied.

"Pity," said Hullu. "I can't offer you anything to drink, I'm afraid. The beer won't be ready for another two months."

"You are making *beer*?"

"Certainly," Hullu grinned. "The brewery went up before the stockade was even finished. Priorities are priorities, after all."

"Yes, I suppose so," Nwm agreed.

**

"We have over a hundred *bagaudas* who are battle-worthy here," Hullu said. He sat, cross-legged upon the floor of a modest hut with sparse furnishings. "Maybe fifty more who are untested, but enthusiastic. The rest are children."

"Victims of persecution?" The Druid asked.

"Indirectly, for the most part," Hullu replied. "Many were forced from their homes when the tax burden became too high – they fled rather than face indentureship. A few were targeted by Oronthonian zealots, and had their homes burned. Ironically, these were the wealthier ones."

"I wonder why you yourself are not on the raid that you mentioned," Nwm said.

Hullu laughed. "Perhaps I am a coward at heart. Or perhaps I recognize the need to depute responsibility, and foster a sense of autonomy in those who follow me," he said acidly.

"Sorry," Nwm apologized. "I don't mean to question your leadership skills. Who is leading the raid?"

"A woman named Tarva. She is being advised by one of yours, a Druid called Bodb. Do you know him?"

"I can't say that I do," Nwm replied. "Is there anything that you need? Anything that I can provide? Resources that you lack?"

"Mail shirts. Leather goods. Harnesses for horses. Blankets. Another three or four fletchers. Saws and axes. Rope. Oil. Around half a ton of cast iron. Bows. Knives, daggers and swords. Pikes. Shields and helmets. Livestock."

"Hmm," Nwm said. "I'll give it some thought."

"We've raided several chapels and ambushed a few caravans," Hullu pointed out. "So we've got silver and gold to pay for it. Transportation is awkward, though, and it takes a long time to make these things from scratch. I've tried to discourage my *bagaudas* from stealing from the Oronthonian farmers, however. I see them as largely blameless in this affair."

"I understand," Nwm replied. "I'll do my best. But please, Hullu, the others here must *not* find out that I am provisioning you."

"As if they could possibly think that," Hullu remarked drily.

When Nwm exited the cabin, a hundred people stood in awed silence and gazed at him: something which seemed to justify Hullu's cynicism.

**

"Greetings," Mostin said. "I've never met an Arcanaloth before."

Xerulko, cloaked and jackal-headed, stood within the thaumaturgic diagram devised by Shomei. His hauteur, combined with a vicious sneer, bespoke one used to command, at ease with his own power. The Alienist's curiosity had compelled him to meet the daemon.

Hmm, he looks tricky, Mostin thought.

"Aah, the little Alienist. The *Xenomagulus*." Xerulko mocked. "Have you come to tempt me with sweet offers?"

"Hardly," Mostin said, sitting in a comfortable chair. "I just came to gloat. Shomei is the one you should be worried about."

"She and I will strike a bargain before long. I know her sort. You, however, Mostin the Subgnostic, are now officially on Prince Graz'zt's wish list for 'items required delivered.' I think you rank around fifth or sixth, after the Paladin, the Succubus, your elemental friend and, probably, one or two others who were present. After all, you aren't that important."

Mostin shifted uneasily. He hadn't intended to draw Mulissu into the equation.

"If Graz'zt continues in this vein, he will quickly find himself running out of powerful vassals," Mostin said. "He has already lost a Succubus, a Marilith, two Nalfeshnees, his favourite Cambion and a Balor to this enterprise. And poor Ainhorr has a broken sword. Perhaps Prince Big Ears can let him borrow his, for a while. I do trust they made it back alright? Being chased by Celestials can be quite harrowing."

Xerulko said nothing, but gave a condescending smile.

"As for you," Mostin continued, "I believe that you are due to be collected in a few hours. Titivilus will be arriving through a *Gate* opened by Shomei, with a group of Pit Fiends to escort you back to Dis. I'm sure that a suitable punishment will be devised for you."

Xerulko hissed, and then laughed. But Mostin had already anticipated his next words.

"If you do somehow convince your captors of your new loyalty," the Alienist said, "remember this: you are easily called, bound and obliterated. I do not fear you. Remember Rurunoth."

The Arcanaloath peered at Mostin through narrow eyes.

Mostin turned away, and grinned to himself. But before he left Shomei's manse, he spoke with the witch again.

"Some of what you have said has merit, Shomei. You could impress upon the infernal embassy that I have no quarrel with Hell, and my work will henceforth concentrate on the Far Realms. Give my respects to Duke Titivilus."

"Will you not stay, and meet him?" Shomei asked, disappointed.

"I think not," Mostin replied.

**

"I will need to borrow your *Portable Hole*," Nwm said to Mostin. "And your mirror, if you please."

Mostin scowled. "The hole. You will be putting armour, and weapons, and provisions in it?"

"Yes," the Druid replied. "I have made arrangements with a number of merchants in Fumaril. I *Wind Walked* there yesterday. With your mirror, I can make the quick transports that I need. I chose the Thalassine, so as not to attract any attention. And the quality of goods is high."

"Oh very well," Mostin said. "But make it quick."

"I will be done in an hour or so," Nwm said. "Oh, and I'll be transporting pigs as well. And chickens. And a cow. Or three."

Mostin gaped.

"Fresh milk is important in a healthy diet, Mostin."

Mostin gaped again.

"I'll clean it out afterwards," the Druid assured him.

"Damn right you will."

Nwm's transports turned out to occupy most of rest of the day, and half of the next. Around twenty thousand Wyrish crowns – much of it in the form of hard currency, but a considerable portion of it in church icons – found its way from Hullu's encampment into the pockets and chests of several Thalassine merchants of dubious repute. The Druid assumed the guise of a Wyrish agent employed by a mercenary cadre working out of Jashat – an utterly plausible ruse, given the ubiquitousness of such organizations in the Thalassine itself.

After consulting with Hullu, Nwm purchased forty heavy crossbows in addition to the longbows which the Tunthi tribesman had initially requested. As Hullu pointed out, any idiot could shoot one of those, and even the untrained members of his group could dish it out to mounted soldiers if they ambushed them with crossbows.

Hullu's *bagaudas* were suddenly better armed than most Temple auxiliaries.

**

Eadric sat within the tower room of Hartha Keep with Mostin, Nehael, Ortwin and Nwm.

Diplomacy was the topic of conversation.

"I should speak to the King as a concerned Fey," Ortwin suggested. "Fear of Temple persecution, fear of woodlands being ruthlessly burned – those near Deorham being a good example. That sort of thing."

Eadric looked sceptical. "It's rather duplicitous, don't you think."

"Why?" Ortwin asked. "I *am* concerned, and I *am* a Fey. It makes perfect sense to me. Don't the Feys make occasional trips to Morne?"

"I've never heard of it happening," Nwm said. "Fairs near small market towns at Midsummer, yes – and even then, usually in disguise. Morne, no."

"Well, perhaps it's about time they did," Ortwin grumbled.

"Feys are connected with the Old Religion," Nwm said. "They are part of Wyre's 'Pagan Past.' I'm not sure that they'd be very well received at the Royal Palace, especially given the current feelings toward Uediians. You might just as well ask a Demon to make a representation – no offense intended, Nehael."

"None taken," the Succubus replied.

"In any case, getting an audience will be difficult," Eadric pointed out. "Usually, as a landed Aristocrat, the king would be obliged to grant me a hearing. Given our heretical status, however, I'm not sure that would apply. Besides which, he is under no obligation to grant me an audience *soon*. Some members of the nobility – notably those who have fallen out of favour, or those with minor titles and estates – wait months for a five-minute hearing. I'm afraid that I fall into both categories."

"You could always marry Soraine," Ortwin said. "As Duke of Trempa, you'd have some clout."

"Ortwin, Marriage is a sacrament, blessed by..."

"Or perhaps you're just afraid to carry out your matrimonial duties," the Bard continued unashamedly. "After all, she is, what, seventy now? But you'll have to start thinking about this kind of thing soon, Ed. Marriage is a powerful political tool. If you want to stay in the arena, you'll end up wedded. Its inevitable."

"Shut up, Ortwin," Eadric said. "What would you do, Mostin?"

"If I were a political animal – which, of course, I am not, because that would violate the Great Injunction," he coughed, and stroked Mogus. "If I were, however, I would marry the Duchess, storm and secure the palace, assassinate the king, usurp the crown, and retroengineer all of my bloodlines to validate my claim to the throne. I would then begin to ruthlessly suppress any resistance to my rule, and have all of my chief rivals murdered. That's the way it's usually done, isn't it? Except, in your case, you could claim divine right as well. I would declare myself Eadric I, Holy Emperor of Wyre and the Voice of Oronthon on Earth. I would unite Church and State into a single, seamless body. I would also issue commands to the effect that all avians must be shot on sight. A golden, birdless era of peace and prosperity would dawn across Wyre."

Eadric sighed.

"However," Mostin continued, "I realize that you may not have the stomach for such an enterprise. I would therefore speak to whoever holds the reins of power. The King is largely an irrelevance."

"That's true to a point," Eadric conceded, "but his approval is still required for any course of action that is proposed."

"Who are the movers and shakers, behind the scenes?" Nwm asked.

Eadric thought for a while. "Besides the Temple influence at court, which is considerable, there is Tagur, both the Prince of Einir and Tiuhan's cousin; Sihü, the Duchess of Tomur; his Chamberlain, Lord Foide of Lang Herath; Jholion, the Marquis of Methelhar – Brey's Uncle, incidentally; Shiel, the

Duke of Jiuhu – who is much more conservative than that town's Bishop; Attar, the Warden of the Northen March; Skilla, the..."

"I get the picture," Ortwin interrupted. "Who can we apply leverage to?"

Eadric shrugged. "It's a shame that both Soraine and the Marquis of Iald are now *personae non gratae*. Both were once held in high esteem in the court."

"Is Soraine related to the king?" Nwm asked.

"They *all* are," Ortwin groaned. "It's just one, big, in-bred family party with generations of feuding thrown in for good measure. They're a bunch of back-stabbing, worthless scum who leech off of everyone else. Except Ed, here, obviously." The Bard grinned charmingly.

"If I were to pick one to 'apply leverage' to, as you put it, it would be the Prince of Einir," Eadric said.

"Then we should go to Gibilrazen and speak with *him*."

"He has a summer palace outside of Morne, as well," Eadric said.

"I'm sure he does," Ortwin said sarcastically.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 08-13-2002

Which is, to say, Eadric's modifier to the skill.

Sorry for the extended absence - making time to both play and write and mindlessly browse this site is difficult. Also had a long conversation with Dan about Mostin.

Oh, and RL stuff too. Almost forgot that



I'll post again in the next couple of days, and also post Mulissu to the Rogues' Gallery, as requested. I've bumped her up a level since the ELH came out, but its in-game plausible.

Ahh, retrofitting. Don't you just love it? (Sarcasm)

**

Mostin felt a sensation akin to a *twitching* in his mind. He swallowed.

He stood up quickly and unsteadily. "I have to go," he said to the others, and rushed out of the door. After he had left, Eadric gave a quizzical look and was met by shrugs and blank stares.

Descending from the tower, the Alienist pressed through the campsite below, heedless of the drunken Ardanese mercenaries who swayed around, pushing mugs of mead into his face, and hustled the quarter-mile to where he had erected his manse.

He walked through the entrance, staggered inside, and closed the door, leaning heavily on it and breathing quickly. He entered into his *Magnificent Mansion*, and sealed the portal behind him.

Mostin lurched into his study, pulled a cushion from a couch, and curled up on the floor. He vomited. Fire burned in his mind. Mogus gave an empathic croon.

It lasted for three hours.

*

Somewhat later, having regained his composure with some dry toast and a stiff drink, Mostin sat cross-legged on the floor of his study.

His mind swam with potency.

He reached into the *Belt of Many Pockets* which he had looted from Feezuu - the first time he had killed her, he noted ironically - and produced a number of scrolls. Shomei had traded them for the spellbook that he had looted from Feezuu the *second* time that he had killed her,* along with a number of other minor items.

Mostin opened the first. It had been scribed quickly but elegantly in Shomei's own hand.

Gate, it read.

Mostin took a pen, and his own books from his *Portable Hole*. They smelled faintly like a farmyard.

Mogus gave a worried squeak. Things could only get more dangerous from here.

**

Prince Tagur, who administered Einir - nearly ten thousand square miles of land centered around the city of Gibilrazen – was the son of Theiwho, the paternal uncle of Tiuhan, King of Wyre.

Tagur was a man of immense power. An aristocrat with a pedigree the equal of the King himself, a noted swordsman, an able administrator and one with an uncanny ability to penetrate others' motives and drives. The Prince considered himself something of a philosopher, albeit one with a pronounced stoical bent. He was generally inclined to wear simple, unpretentious clothes, indicative of his no-nonsense, puritanical approach to life. He despised frippery in all of its forms, and loathed the spendthrift habits of much of Wyre's aristocracy. Tagur was a profoundly practical man.

In his own fief, Tagur had implemented a curious regime. Whilst mercantile enterprise was encouraged, overt displays of wealth were not. The Prince had a penchant for simplicity, and tried to foster the same sentiments amongst his subjects. He regarded Einir as his own, private kingdom and, although a

steadfast supporter of the official regime in Morne, was irritated by any dictates which issued from the capital which conflicted with his own personal view of *what was right*. Fortunately, from Tagur's perspective, this seldom occurred: his own hand was often found behind policy which issued from the Royal Palace. Unfortunately, any vision which the Prince possessed had to be ratified by the Royal Council, and by the King himself. By the time it had been amended, and endorsed to the mutual satisfaction of all of Wyre's great magnates, it was often nothing more than a statement of intent.

Tagur was not a spiritual man, and found religion in all of its forms a rather pointless exercise. Nonetheless, he attended the chapel, and was conscientious in his efforts to at least give the right impression where religious matters were concerned. His relationships with the Bishop of Gibilrazen, the Curia and the Temple were cool but not antagonistic.

The Prince had observed the events in Trempla in the manner of a disinterested scholar. When Rede had petitioned for royal aid, Tagur had felt ambivalent – perceiving that it was an internal affair which the Church should deal with on its own. Acutely aware of the way things worked at the Royal Court, Tagur had allowed the other great aristocrats to infer that he supported royal intervention. Suspicious of his motives, the Lord Chamberlain and the Duke of Jiuhu had moved to block the measure, thus resulting in the impasse which Tagur had, in fact, desired.

He was therefore surprised one sunny morning in his study, several weeks after the Spring Equinox, when his nuncio – a spry and quick-eyed man called Mallaus – informed him that the Baronet of Deorham, chief instigator of the current Temple crisis, sought an audience with him. Tagur placed his pen – a plain and unremarkable quill – upon his plain and unremarkable desk, next to a large pile of papers through which he was diligently working.

Prince Tagur screwed up his face. "What for?"

"He would not say, Your Highness." Mallaus drawled. His manner of speech – which irritated many of Tagur's cohorts – was something that the Prince himself was so intimately familiar with, that he no longer noticed it.

"You mean he's here?" The Prince was incredulous. "Tell him to make an appointment, like anybody else. In fact, no. Just tell him to go away."

"He respectfully requests that he speak with you concerning the current state of affairs at the Temple. He has two others with him: a pagan priest and – er – a Fey. He is most insistent and – er – persuasive."

"A *Fey*?" Tagur vociferated. "What is this, some kind of practical joke? And why did you even speak to this man, Mallaus? You are not the door-ward."

"He was admitted by the door-wards into one of the antechambers, and I encountered him – or them, I should say – on my rounds."

"Who was on duty at the time, Mallaus? Suspend their benefits immediately. This is intolerable."

"Please, not on my account," Eadric said stepping into the room.

"Get out, or I'll have you hanged," Tagur yelled. "How dare you. Guards!"

"Please, Your Highness, I need only a few minutes of your time. Will you hear me out?" His manner was calm, confident and, apparently, completely self-assured.

For some reason, Tagur desperately wanted to say *yes*.

"Make an appointment," the Prince muttered, waving his hand at Eadric.

"This afternoon?" Eadric asked openly.

"No!" Tagur replied. He grunted. "Speak to the secretary, down the corridor, on the right."

Eadric bowed and left.

Prince Tagur returned to his paperwork, but found that he could not concentrate. He had been fazed by the exchange. An hour later, his scribe brought his book of appointments for the day into the Prince's study. He looked through it, until his eyes fell on a single line.

Eadric of Deorham.....3 pm

"What is this?" The Prince asked, exasperated.

"I switched him with the Thane of Storbine, who you were due to speak with this afternoon. The Baronet said it was very important, so I said we could squeeze him in. You don't mind do you, Highness?"

**

"Alright, Deorham. You've got five minutes. What do you want?"

The Paladin smiled. "Thank you for speaking with me, Your Highness. I want you to help me convince the King to allow my troops passage across royal land," Eadric said with disarming candour. "I would also like you to lend your weight to discourage the Royal Council from intervening in the current Temple crisis: it may be necessary for me to lead over a thousand troops into Morne to secure the Temple compound."

Tagur raised his eyebrows. "Are you quite insane? 'It may be necessary?' What do you expect us to do – open the gates and just allow you to walk in?"

"Yes," Eadric replied.

"Deorham," Tagur explained drily, "I appreciate your honesty. I'm sure that you feel that you have been selected for a special task. But I will say this once: at present, you are under an interdict which issues from the King, as well as the Church. It was he who signed your warrant. Were they here, Temple troops would be arresting you, and I would not prevent that arrest – they do, after all, have Royal approval."

"Then technically, you should exercise your responsibility, and have me held," Eadric said

unexpectedly.

"This is an ecclesiastical matter," Tagur shook his head. "The King merely sanctioned the Curia to act. And I'll be damned if I'm getting involved unless I have to. As far as I know, you've broken no civil law."

"And if I had?" Eadric asked. An idea was beginning to form in his mind.

Tagur immediately read his intention. "You cannot use a charge of treason as an excuse to speak with the King, Deorham." *Who was this lunatic*, he asked himself.

"Would you agree that the current legal framework in Wyre is a complete farce?" Eadric asked Tagur.

The Prince frowned. The Paladin's directness was uncanny. "I agree that it is not perfect. No legal system is. However, it serves its purpose, to protect most of the people most of the time."

"In Trempa, the Temple has been disestablished. It has no legal jurisdiction whatever," Eadric said. "All law is decided by civil courts. There is no Temple tax."

"I am well aware of Soraine's actions – which are, in fact, legally questionable in and of themselves with regard to *civil* law in Wyre. She is not empowered to disestablish the Church."

"But she has, nonetheless," Eadric said. "I would see the same arrangement made throughout Wyre."

Tagur was baffled. This was hardly the tack that he had expected Deorham to take: he was a fanatic, some Messianic type or other. Why did he wish to diminish his own power? And he had assumed that Trempa's curtailing of the Temple's power had been made on political, rather than ideological grounds. He grunted.

"Do you trust me, Prince Tagur?" Eadric asked openly.

The Prince laughed despite himself – an uncommon occurrence, as those who knew him well could have testified. "I distrust everyone with equal vigour, Deorham."

"I do not lie, Your Highness. I work for the renewal of the Church, the abandoning of outdated dogma, the restoration of the Prelacy and the spreading of my faith. However, I also support the removal of the Temple's legislative powers and the institution of a voluntary system of contributions."

"In which, I can and will do nothing to help you, Deorham," Tagur replied.

"You already have, by listening to me," Eadric smiled. "And I think you believe me."

"Enough!" Tagur snapped. "You should remember your station. This audience is now over." He gestured for Eadric to leave.

"Your Highness," Eadric bowed.

Tagur waved him back. "Before you go, Deorham, two questions. The murder of Lord Rede of Dramore. No charges have yet been brought against you, but they may be. Were you instrumental in his death?" The Prince fixed Eadric with a penetrating gaze.

"No, Your Highness," The Paladin said without wavering.

"Do you know who was?" Tagur asked.

"The Bishop of Hethio," Eadric replied simply.

"How is this known to you?"

"Tahl the Incorruptible is in communion with Lord Oronthon," Eadric answered in a matter-of-fact way.

The Prince sighed. Revelation held little weight in his scheme of understanding. "Also," he went on, "the Archiepiscopacy. Do you have designs on it?"

"I will do as decreed by Oronthon," Eadric replied. "I have ruled it neither out nor in. I am a servant of His will, and nothing more. And not all things are revealed to me."

He bowed again, and departed.

*The items rescued from Feezuu's crypt included her replica spellbook (which Mostin took, and traded. He'd already learned the ones he'd wanted from her original set), several potions (which Eadric took), a *Robe of the Void* (Allows wearer to see in any darkness, sustains without air. Taken by Iua), and scrolls taken by Mulissu of spells that she and Mostin already possessed, but still had trade value, as well as several minor items that had once belonged to Chorze. As usual, Nwm didn't want anything, and Ortwin was, at that point, dead. He complained afterwards, naturally, until Nwm pointed out that he was 'no longer dead, and should shut up.'

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 08-15-2002

Time for another update.

Ahh, my poor players.

**

"So?" Ortwin asked Eadric. He and Nwm had been waiting for Eadric to finish his hearing with the Prince.

"He may be an ally," the Paladin said. "Or at least a voice in the King's ear which urges moderation in the Temple's action. He didn't seem too keen about the idea of my leading troops into Morne."

"That isn't entirely surprising," the Bard said wryly. "Will you speak with him again?"

"I will try," Eadric said. "Perhaps in a week or so. He should have a chance to breathe, or I'll rapidly become an annoyance."

"And if you lead troops across the Nund without royal sanction?"

The Paladin considered. "Initially, nothing," Eadric replied. "The western part of the valley is owned by the Duke of Kaurban, and it's a pretty marginal tract. He is unlikely to object with force, although he may petition the King – and that would cause problems. But as soon as an army sets foot on the royal estates – and they are massive – then I commit High Treason."

"We can bypass them if we go through Thahan," Nwm suggested.

"It only delays the problem," Ortwin countered. "All of the land adjacent to Morne is owned by the crown. Right, Ed?"

"Except that owned by the Temple itself," Eadric nodded.

"I assume magical transportation is not a possibility?" Ortwin suggested.

"I think Mostin is unlikely to help us in this endeavour," Nwm said. "However, if I expended my entire spell capacity, I could transform a sizeable number into birds. We could fly in."

Ortwin raised an eyebrow. "How many?"

The Druid made a quick calculation. "Around two hundred or so."

But Eadric shook his head. "Even if we secured the Temple compound, we could not hold it. We need support – both from the crown and the people. Mounting a clandestine operation to seize the Temple will irritate a lot of people. Furthermore, I have yet to receive celestial approval – I will not act until that happens."

"Then perhaps its time that I stirred things up again," Ortwin grinned. "I had half of Morne in my pocket before your trial. It would be a simple matter to rouse the rabble again."

"Hmm," Eadric said. "As I remember you were arrested as a dissident."

"My tack would be more indirect this time," Ortwin explained sardonically. "After all, you aren't in imminent danger of being turned into a human candle this time."

"No," Eadric said. "But you might be."

"I will go incognito, and appear in a variety of guises. My new hat will be invaluable."

"Do try not to cause any riots," Eadric beseeched him. "And I'm sure that Nwm would be upset if you fuelled the Uediians with crazy ideas again."

"Bah! Nwm's perspective has changed," the Druid said. "He thinks that the Uediians could do with a good kick up the backside. Fire them up, Ortwin."

The Bard smiled broadly.

"As for me," Eadric said, "I think its time that Brey and I had a little talk: he's had nearly a month to stew in the field, and his troops are probably almost as depressed as mine. I will lead an embassy to speak with him."

"Across the river?" Nwm asked. "I thought you were waiting for the divine say-so."

Eadric sighed. "Rintrah's instructions were 'initiate no act of war' not 'make no diplomatic efforts.' Otherwise I wouldn't be here, would I?"

"Fair point," the Druid conceded. "I might tag along."

**

The trio *wind-walked* back to the mustering grounds on Blackwater Mead, only to find that Mostin had disappeared, along with his portable manse. A patch of brown grass was all that had indicated the Alienist's presence.

"He has moved around six miles to the east, my lord" Tatterbrand explained to Eadric. "He said that things were becoming too noisy, and that the camp was upsetting his equilibrium, or somesuch. He found a nice meadow by a stream in the woods, and has - er – assembled – his mansion there."

"Did he rent it from the owner, or is he just squatting?" Eadric asked.

"Actually, it technically belongs to you, sir" Tatterbrand said. "It is in your game forest, southwest of Deorham."

"Hmph."

"I know the meadow," Nwm said, concentrating on his torc. "I hope the Sprites go easy on him."

"I don't," Ortwin said.

"He also left these," Tatterbrand said, producing three envelopes, addressed to each of them in Mostin's flamboyant script. Ortwin opened his, and read it.

To Ortwin the Satyr, formally of Jiuhu, from Mostin the Metagnostic, Greetings.

You are cordially invited to attend a grand triple celebration, to be held in honour of my forty-second birthday (which is imminent), my realization of the higher valences (which has just transpired), and my transcendence of the limited form which blights so many others, such as yourself (which occurred some time ago, but has yet to be fully rejoiced in).

As I am one seldom wont to hold parties, you should, of course, realize that you are greatly honoured by receiving such an invitation. Many great dignitaries in the field of Wizardry will doubtless attend, so you must ensure your correct behaviour at all times. They must not be affronted!

I will expect you at 7 o'clock sharp, two nights after the New Moon. Feel free to bring a guest.

Mostin

"Cheeky bastard," Ortwin said. "When is the New Moon?"

"Last night," Nwm replied. "Did he say anything to you about this?"

"No," the Bard replied. "But I have a feeling that he may be facing down the Mages of Wyre. Defying them, maybe. Showing them that he is unafraid, or has done nothing to merit their concern or intervention over the Injunction. It's a bold move. I rather approve."

Nwm grunted. "I hope it passes without a hitch. If they show up, there will be enough firepower concentrated in his house to blow half the country away."

"The question is, why did he invite us?" Ortwin asked.

"Unlikely as it might seem," Eadric replied, "I think that this is Mostin's method of asking for some emotional support."

**

The Sprites had proven to be no trouble. Mostin had spied several Grigs and Pixies with his magical sight, and had stepped forward and announced in a loud voice:

"I am Mostin, the Metagnostic. I am glad to share this wood with you, and I am gratified that you feel

the same way. If you hear loud noises issuing from my abode, do not be alarmed! The screaming, the rattling of chains, the uncanny moans: these are not Feys that I am binding to my powerful will. You need have no fear on that count! The Demons and Elementals that I bind here are subject to my command, and are quite safe as long as I do not lapse in my diligence. Regrettably, I am a poor dancer, and I fear that were I invited to join you, the strain of concentrating on my footwork would inevitably cause some of my captives to escape, a state of affairs that we should all deplore."

The Sprites took his point, and decided to leave him alone.

Mostin fretted about his invitations, and wondered who would attend. He had issued *sendings* to Tozinak, Troap, Hlioth, Waide, Idro, and Griel. He had conjured a Succubus and sent it with tidings to Rimilin – whom he despised but knew he should invite – and a Horned Devil was dispatched with an invitation to Shomei: both were of the Pseudonatural variety, as Mostin was treading carefully. He even sent a *Dream* to Jovol, although he doubted that the great Ogre would make an appearance. Half a dozen others were also enjoined to attend.

He gave some thought to providing fare for his guests. Although a *Magnificent Mansion* would have been a simple solution, it was rather too easy and might imply that he had made no effort.

The Alienist *summoned* three djinns to make the preparations for the gathering. Whilst impressed with the copious quantities of wine produced by the genies, the food was rather uninspiring and had to be modified by several cantrips before it passed Mostin's strict approval. The judicious application of the *fabricate* spell – new to Mostin's repertoire – produce an immense oak table in the meadow from a nearby tree to support the viands, as well as wooden chairs, bowls, goblets, ewers and plates. A large canopy was raised above the area and lit with several torches that issued a *continual flame*. The Alienist grumbled as he sprinkled expensive ruby dust upon the flambeaux in order to invoke the magic.

Mostin considered entertainment, entered his cellar, and used a *Planar Binding* to call a Lillend. Her beautiful blue and green feathered wings almost caused the Alienist to throw up, as he spoke to her in an unsteady voice. The outsider was subdued, expecting an onerous task to be demanded of her.

"I am having a party," Mostin said. "I should like to engage your services for twelve hours or so. You

need only sing, recite poetry, play your lyre, relax and impress my guests with your..." he swallowed, "...beauty. If you agree to this modest proposal, I will give you some emeralds which complement your...feathers." He shuddered.

The Lillend, taken aback by the ease of the proposed task, agreed forthwith. Mostin lamented the sacrifices that one had to make on the treacherous path of social climbing.

**

Less than an hour before things were due to begin, Eadric arrived on Contundor.

"I don't remember leasing this meadow to you, Mostin," he said, dismounting.

The Alienist smiled uneasily, unsure whether the Paladin was joking.

"Who exactly is attending this gathering," Eadric asked. "That is, to say, am I likely to be in violation of my oaths if I make an appearance?"

Mostin coughed. "Well, perhaps, if you strictly interpret your personal code."

Eadric raised an eyebrow.

"Shomei the Infernalist will be here," Mostin replied, "although she is not evil, per se," he quickly added. "Umm, yes".

"And?" The Paladin asked.

Mostin sighed. "I have also invited Rimilin. He may or may not come, but I could hardly snub him. He is a thoroughly unpleasant character. For what it's worth, I don't like him either."

"What does he do?" Eadric inquired archly.

"He is a demonist," the Alienist muttered, "an Acolyte of the Skin."

"Mostin..."

"Eadric, you need to understand that we – wizards, that is – do not use the same criteria as you to decide friendship and acquaintance. We are no less judgmental, but we operate using a different paradigm. Those of us who profess a certain philosophical stance – morally and ethically speaking, that is – must coexist in relative peace with one another. We are forgiving of each others' idiosyncrasies."

"And Feezuu?"

"Feezuu went too far," Mostin said. "She was a disruptive influence, who threatened the 'Body Magical' – if you understand my meaning. She slew several other mages in her bid for power and revenge. That is unacceptable behaviour. Besides, she was a Cambion from another Plane – that puts an entirely different slant on things."

"I'm sorry Mostin. I'm afraid it would compromise me too much. I cannot freely associate with evil creatures."

Mostin sighed. "And Nwm and Ortwin?"

"Are you kidding? Ortwin wouldn't miss a party. And Nwm is both more curious and tolerant than I. You should get Ortwin to perform."

"He needs no encouragement from me. Besides, I have temporarily contracted with a Lillend for the purpose." Mostin replied.

"A *Lillend*? I have never met one. Perhaps before I go..."

"And Rimilin may not come at all," Mostin said brightly. "You can always depart immediately if he does."

So Eadric remained, ready to leave as soon as Rimilin – or anyone else upon whom he detected Taint -

arrived. Several wizards of modest ability were flying in from various directions, and a cacophonous roar accompanied by a blinding flash of lightning announced the dramatic appearance of Mulissu. She floated effortlessly fifteen feet above the ground, and her skin crackled and crawled with electricity for a moment before dissipating.

"Why was I not invited?" She snapped.

Oops, thought Mostin. "I had assumed..." he began.

"Presumed, I think you mean."

"Yes," Mostin said apologetically. "If I might inquire, what method did you use to arrive?"

"I am surprised that my daughter has not shown you the scrolls that she 'borrowed' from me.*"

"Oh?" Mostin said. "Would you like a drink?" He tactlessly changed the subject.

**

All in all, things went rather well for Mostin. Nwm, Ortwin, Nehael and Iua all attended. Despite their feud, Idro and Troap – who had flown in on his enormous Wyvern – managed to remain civil with one another. Hlioth arrived in the form of an elfin maiden, and promptly disappeared into the woods nearby to cavort with the Feys – pursued by a certain lusty Satyr. The Lillend was well-received, and the gathering was praised for its 'rustic charm.'

No mention was made of the Injunction, and no dire threats were issued – although a phrase from the humourless Waide made the Alienist pause for thought:

"Good party, Mostin. Glad to see nothing controversial here."

Tozinak arrived late, and only his cloak gave away his identity to those who knew him. He entertained people with a number of lewd but amusing illusions until Mostin asked him to stop.

Predictably, Jovol was absent. Neither Griel, nor the Hag Jalael made an appearance, and neither did Rimilin - for which Mostin was grateful. At least Eadric could relax.

But, just as the Paladin was leaving, Shomei appeared with her guest – rather later than Mostin had anticipated. Both arrived in a blaze of fire.

Mostin was right - the trace of evil around the witch was so faint as to be almost undetectable. Her guest, however, was another matter entirely. He was a handsome man who possessed a poise, elegance and natural ease which thinly veiled what seemed to be a core of raw power and evil. The reek of taint was so profound, so deep, so *primal*, that Eadric was almost overwhelmed by it. One of the Fallen, without any doubt. He drew Lukarn and light surrounded him.

Zhuel immediately manifested from the Ethereal Plane and interposed himself between Eadric and the newcomer.

Mostin looked horrified at the prospect of some dreadful scene occurring.

The man held up his hand, palm outwards. "Peace, Archon," he said to the Celestial. "I am here by calling, have committed no evil act, and violate no laws. This is legitimate business, and there is no coercion involved. I am within my rights as determined by the Accord."

Zhuel hissed.

The man bowed low, more a gesture of mockery than respect. "Greetings, Eadric of Deorham, Blessed of Oronthon – your circumstances are well- known to me. Greetings, Nehael – it has been a long, long time. And greetings, Mostin the Metagnostic – this is a pleasant soirée. Perhaps we could make time to speak later?"

Mostin glowered at Shomei, and then turned to Eadric. "I think you'd better go," he said. "You're unlikely to ever feel much more compromised than this."

*A reference to the spells which Iua had attempted to bribe Mostin with. Mulissu's *Passage of Lightning* is an 8th level Transmutation [Teleportation] which allows instantaneous interplanar travel to a specific location. A kind of refined *Plane Shift*.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 09-12-2002

So: I've decided to start a new thread, as the old one is getting a bit cumbersome.

It goes without saying that a *huge* amount has passed since I last posted, so there is a lot to catch up with. Please note that posts will probably be more infrequent than previously, so as to avoid burnout in actually recounting stuff. Its been nice to actually have time to plan, and play.

As I mentioned previously, there is a kind of natural lacuna in the story after those events at Khu involving Feezuu, Ainhorr and the Celestial descent. If you can suspend your disbelief, and attribute events that happened after that to the third book - this one - then I think that it flows together more naturally.

Of course, I didn't know what to call it then, because the events which characterize it hadn't occurred. They have now - at least to a point.

Lots of bad things happen, and loyalties are shaken and upset. The first post, relatively light in content, is not at all typical of the sessions that we have since played.

And the point is made that whatever story arcs I devise, my players (and occasionally die rolls) tend to force things into better ones.

**

Mostin Gets Philosophical, and Ortwin Goes a-Courtin'

It was the morning after Mostin's party, and the Alienist joined Eadric and Nwm in the hall at Kyrtil's Burgh. He pointedly avoided the invisible Devas, who looked even more stern and judgmental than usual.

"Before you start," the Alienist held his palms up towards Eadric, "I had no idea that Shomei would be bringing an infernal guest. I would have discouraged her from attending if I had."

"Who was it?" Eadric asked. "And what 'legitimate business' was he referring to?"

"Duke Titivilus, and temptation," Mostin replied. "Specifically, of me."

"And you accepted?" Eadric inquired. "If so, I think our friendship is at an end, Mostin."

"I did not," the Alienist snapped. "Although, I must admit, I *was* tempted. But I know from experience that such arrangements tend to come at a higher price than is immediately apparent."

"What did he offer?" Nwm inquired. "Something suitably seductive, I hope?"

"Yes," said Mostin, cryptically.

"And Shomei?" Eadric asked. "What was her part in this? I assume that your association with her is at an end?"

"Certainly not," Mostin replied indignantly. "Shomei is a good friend, and by hearing Titivilus out, I may have helped her extricate herself from a tight spot."

Eadric looked confused.

"She has almost discharged her compact with him, Eadric. He has furnished her with certain... perquisites...and she has been instrumental in facilitating his sojourns on the Prime. By agreeing to act

as mediator between Titivilus and myself – a facilitator in the Temptation process, if you will – Shomei is close to ending their misalliance."

The Paladin was aghast. "And you don't resent her for that? I am constantly confused by your motives, Mostin."

"Initially, I was offended," Mostin confessed, "but Shomei explained her circumstances after Titivilus departed. She feels that it is hazardous to be involved with two Devils at once."

"Two?"

"Her loyalties are currently split between Belial and Dispater. She has overreached herself. She is attempting to sever her connection with Dis and Titivilus as diplomatically as possible."

Eadric groaned. "This woman sounds like a barrel of trouble, Mostin. She will drag you on the path to perdition if you are not cautious."

"No," the Alienist said. "She will not. You do not understand her. I'm sorry to pull rank on you Eadric, but there are some things that you will simply *never* comprehend, because your faith dictates that reality is a certain way, and no other. Her reality is not yours. Her guidelines are not yours. Nonetheless, she is highly principled. A left-hand path adept, if you will. Do not make the mistake of judging her by your morality."

"I cannot understand this," Eadric said.

"I know," Mostin smiled sympathetically. "For what it's worth, I think that compacting with Devils is unwise, but for different reasons than you. Shomei regards them as tools – I would argue that there are more efficient and less hazardous ones."

"Tools for what? Power? Dominion?"

"Only in the hands of the weak," Mostin replied. "That's not to say that I haven't had my fair share of power fantasies, because I have. But they are aberrant. Incomplete. It is an extension of the same ethos

which informs the Great Injunction: the quest for power is ultimately futile, and is a misapplication of personal resources and energy."

"Knowledge, then?" The Paladin asked.

"Partly. But beyond gnosis, there are states so profound that there are no words to describe them. Why do gods, devils, demons - or whatever - meddle in human affairs?"

"I'm sure you're going to tell me," Eadric said drily.

"They are afraid of us. They seek to limit and control us, Eadric. We threaten them, because we possess something which they do not: infinite potential."

"To become like them?"

Mostin shook his head. "To utterly transcend them."

"And magic is your vehicle in this process?"

"Magick. Yes."

"And what is this 'final state' which you aspire towards, Mostin? What is 'Metagnosis?'" Eadric was intrigued. He had never heard Mostin speak as openly and as coherently about his own philosophy before.

"You misunderstand," Mostin replied. "There is no 'final state.' There is only *becoming*. Infinite becoming."

"That is a somehow disquieting prospect," Eadric said.

"Yes," Mostin concurred. "It should be."

"I'm just glad that I don't agree with a word that you've just said," Eadric smiled.

Mostin shrugged.

"But what did the Devil *offer*?" Nwm asked. "I am curious."

"A Demiplane called 'Cha'at.' Not very large – around sixty miles across, or a hundred thousand cubic miles. But very nice: perfect elemental balance, one access point only, benign flora and fauna. It is comprised of an island surrounded by warm, shallow seas. There are olive groves, wild vines and sandstone hills – at present. All morphics are, in fact, alterable. And its temporal morphic is alterable, also."

"Immortality?" Nwm was incredulous. "Frankly, I'm surprised you didn't take it. I'd have been sorely tempted."

"And his price?" Eadric asked.

"My loyalty. I am even more suspicious of open-ended deals with Devils than I am of those which contain ten pages of impenetrable small-print."

"You spoke of Shomei's involvement with him being 'almost at an end.' What else is there to come?"

"She must facilitate a final translation for him," Mostin explained. "He will attempt another Temptation."

"Of you?" Nwm asked.

"No," Mostin replied. "The rules of the Accord are very strict. He may only attempt to seduce a single mortal once."

"'Accord?'" Eadric asked. "That is the second time I have heard that word in the past day. What Accord?"

Mostin screwed up his face. "Do you not know? Has Zhuel not told you?"

"Zhuel is not empowered to tell him," Nehael said, entering the chamber unexpectedly, "and despite his holiness has an incomplete understanding of the truth. Temptation is the lawfully deputed province of Devils, Eadric. It is an enterprise blessed by Oronthon himself."

"That is rather a Heretical viewpoint," the Paladin said, "although not entirely a surprise to me, given the number of other revelations that I have had to accept. I need 'official' verification, of course."

Nehael raised an eyebrow. She had expected more resistance to the idea. His passivity to Oronthon's Will seemed complete. She would inform Rintrah.

"It goes beyond a tacit understanding, Eadric. There are formal rules, which Devils never break – although they constantly attempt to reinterpret them. They play by the book. Demons are less observant of the rules, and while the Bright God tolerates their machinations, he does not sanction them. The difference is vitally important." She smiled.

Eadric grimaced. "I assume that this Duke's final Temptation will be directed towards me?"

"That would be my guess, also," Mostin nodded.

"When should I expect it?" The Paladin asked.

"When it is hardest to decline," Nehael replied.

**

Ortwin reclined against the bole of a tree in the afternoon sun after a particularly passionate bout of cavorting with Hlioth, the Green Witch. She had organized the weather to their mutual satisfaction, replacing dreary grey clouds with a warm, balmy sunshine. Despite his physical satiation, Ortwin was frustrated.

"I'm bored," the Bard said. "With life," he added quickly afterwards, so as to not offend her. "Ennui. Dissatisfaction. That kind of thing. Little seems to grab my attention these days."

"Of course you're bored," she said unhelpfully. "You're a Fey. Ennui and melancholy are the perpetual bane of Feys."

"I mean I was bored before," he said. "I have no sense of purpose or direction. No inspiration. No goals to pursue. No great plan towards which I work. I feel listless."

"You are a selfish cynic. What do you expect?"

"Hmph," Ortwin sighed. She was being less than sympathetic. "You seem content enough to have no ambition. What's your secret?"

"Simple," Hlioth replied. "I just have no ambition. It's not something that I cultivate, or try to maintain. It's just the way I am. There is nothing missing from me."

"And there is from me?" Ortwin asked, somewhat offended.

"Your words, not mine," she countered. "Is there no cause to which you can attach yourself? No movement for you to champion? Have you considered religion?"

"Certainly not," the Bard replied.

"Politics? The military?"

"Gods, no. The thought is abhorrent."

"Then I am afraid that your existence is doomed to be shallow and unfulfilled, unless you can come to realize that ambition itself is futile. If you can accept this, then you will begin to appreciate a simple, uncomplicated life."

"You sound disturbingly like Nwm," Ortwin said.

"Nwm is wise," Hlioth laughed easily.

"He regards you as – eccentric," Ortwin replied. "Neither a witch nor a druidess."

She shrugged. "I have no great desire to fit in."

"How old are you, Hlioth?" Ortwin asked.

"Why? How old are you?" She replied.

"Forty-four," he replied, "or at least I *was* forty-four before my, uh..."

"Transmigration?" She suggested.

"Yes, quite," said the Bard.

"Then I am older than you," Hlioth said vaguely.

"There is a rumour that you are immortal," Ortwin said. "Is it true?"

"How should I know? I'm not dead yet. You, however should certainly have a long life – providing that you are careful, of course."

"What do you mean?" The Bard asked suspiciously.

"Put it this way, dear: have you ever heard of a Fey dying of old age?"

"No, I suppose not," he conceded. "Then what kills them?"

"Melancholy. Ennui. The lack of will to go on." And Hlioth looked profoundly sad.

"Great," Ortwin said sarcastically. "Thanks for the optimistic words."

"Oh, snap out of it Ortwin! Stop being so self-indulgent. You have a perspective that no other Fey I know has – in that you are not *entirely* a Fey at all. Play to your strengths. Be less self-centered." She sighed. "What excites you most?"

"Women. Sword-play. Witty banter. That's the problem. I'm eminently shallow."

"Are you satisfied with your fencing style?" Hlioth asked.

"I had been, until my encounter with Iua," Ortwin replied. "She is a genius. I am merely exceptional."

"But you are less..." Hlioth considered... "overspecialized. Do you resent the fact that she is a woman?"

"No," the Bard replied honestly. "I resent her because she is far better than me at something which I have always felt I am very good at."

"Do you find her attractive?" Hlioth asked unexpectedly.

Ortwin peered quizzically at her. What was she up to? "I am suspicious of your motivation in asking that question," he said.

"That is because you don't understand me, Ortwin of Jiuhu. I do not care for rivalry. I am Hlioth – and I am utterly free."

"In that case, yes. I find her attractive."

"Have you made advances towards her?" The Green Witch probed.

"Not exactly," Ortwin said. "I have had lustful thoughts, and, unfortunately, she perceived them. Look, Hlioth, I don't know where this line of inquiry is going. Would you please enlighten me?"

"Think about it Ortwin: she is your ideal match. She is a beautiful woman. She is bold, restless, and

confident. She is your equal, if not your superior, in wit and badinage. She is a performer whose abilities compare favourably to your own. She is also perhaps one of the greatest living practitioners of the Thalassine rapier style and, like you, needs a focus. Unlike you, however, she is not cynical and has not forgotten her idealism. Her mother is an Evoker of singular power, her father is a Djinn prince..."

"A *prince*?" Ortwin asked. "Since when?"

"Several hundred years at least, I'd guess," Hlioth said drily. "Did you never think to inquire about Ulao?"

"She is reluctant to discuss her parentage. I didn't want to press her. Is he rich?"

"Fabulously, I'd imagine," Hlioth sighed, "if such things are important to you."

"Money is never a bad thing," the Bard remarked.

"Hmm," Hlioth grunted. "The opposite is true in my experience. Has she evinced any romantic interest?"

"Not in me," Ortwin said, smiling. "Which is, in my humble view, a sign of madness or aberration in itself."

"An interest in anyone else?"

"Not to my knowledge," Ortwin said. "Perhaps she is very discreet."

"Or perhaps she is waiting for you to show a sign of your interest. Why else would she be still here? Why do you think that she crossed swords with you, if it were not to test your suitability as a potential mate?"

"Do you have to make it sound quite so *functional*? I have delicate sensibilities, and am easily upset. In any case, she seemed quite comfortable humiliating me in our duel – I suspect that that was her main motivation."

"Goddess, you are a cynic, Ortwin!" Hlioth said. "Maybe she needed to assert herself and her independence. It must have been difficult for her to confront you. She may be somewhat in awe of you. I think that you underestimate your reputation."

"I *never* underestimate my reputation." Ortwin grinned. "But the point is well-made. However, my hirsuteness and hooves may be an obstacle to any romantic entanglement now. Besides, she can be a spoiled brat. I think she has been indulged too much, and is too used to getting her own way."

Hlioth shrugged. "Think on it. In any case, I am returning to Nizkur later today, but fear not! We still have time for dalliance. I've ordered a lightning storm. I thought it might be stimulating."

Ortwin gazed upwards. The clear blue sky had vanished during their conversation, to be replaced again with an impenetrable grey veil. A huge thunderhead was forming above them.

**

Ortwin never thought about anything for too long.

"I want a rematch," the Bard said to Iua. She was performing improbable acts of balance, in the meadow next to Mostin's manse.

Nwm, standing nearby with Eadric, grimaced. He knew what was coming next.

"If he is willing," the Bard continued, "Nwm will..."

"Yes, yes," the Druid said. "Patch up the holes. I know. You must be insane, Ortwin."

"Not entirely. There are new rules. No magic is to be employed. No spells, potions, buffs. No thought-reading devices. No magic armour or protection devices. And no magic weapons. A test of skill, pure and simple. Scimitar against rapier. Conventional armour is permissible to both parties, of course. Do

you accept?"

"I find armour rather cumbersome," Iua replied. "Had you intended to wear field plate as an added precaution?"

Eadric guffawed.

Ortwin looked somewhat affronted. "I think a leather vest and buckler will suffice. Well? I hope you aren't entirely dependent upon your Vampiric rapier, Iua. Because we both know, nobody is *really* that fast, are they?"

She bit her lip. "No," she confessed, "but you will still lose. Allow me an hour to prepare. I need to locate a suitable weapon."

"As do I," Ortwin said. "And there aren't many Elves in these parts.*"

"What's this about, Ortwin?" Nwm asked the Bard, after she had left to enter the house. "You *know* that she is better than you."

"Yes," Ortwin admitted. "But I need to know how much better she really is. How old would you say Iua is, Nwm?"

The Druid shrugged. "Seventeen? Eighteen? Not more than twenty, in any case."

"What do you think of her?"

"She is remarkable, in every regard," Nwm replied. "Why?"

"I am considering courting her," Ortwin said.

"*Courting?*" Eadric asked, astounded. "That term seems somehow incongruous when it comes from your lips, Ortwin."

"Chivalry is a farce which any idiot can hide behind," the Bard said acidly, "but that is not what I am referring to. I simply intend to be thoughtful and reserved."

Eadric scratched his head. The whole world had suddenly gone mad. "Is this some springtime thing, Ortwin? Do Satyrs suffer from an imbalance in the humours when the blossom is on the trees?"

Nwm laughed heartily at the Bard, who looked mildly offended. "Besides," the Druid said, recovering, "I thought you had some arrangement with Hlioth."

Ortwin scowled.

"Hey," Nwm said defensively, "If you mess with the weather on my turf, don't expect it to go unnoticed. I check that kind of thing out."

"You *spied* on us?"

"No, indeed. I was merely aware of your presence." The Druid tapped his torc.

"Actually, it was Hlioth who suggested that I could do worse than pursue Iua."

"Hlioth is a crazy old witch," Nwm said. "Be careful of her."

"She is sensitive and caring, although a little strange, I'll admit," Ortwin said.

"In that she suggested that the best way to pursue Iua would be to try and lop her head off in a duel?" Eadric asked ironically.

"No. That was my idea, actually." Ortwin replied.

"Ahh," Eadric nodded knowingly.

"Don't be so sarcastic, Ed. It doesn't become you. This is about the independence of the spirit – something which I really don't expect you to understand."

"Peace," Nwm said quickly, holding up his hand. "Time is moving on, and we have to find Ortwin a weapon. Eadric, do you have a scimitar in the armory at the Burgh?"

"Several. Tatterbrand knows where to look."

"And get me a buckler and a leather jerkin," Ortwin said.

Nwm nodded, stepped into a tree, and vanished.

**

Tatterbrand rode hard from Kyrtil's Burgh to bring the scimitar to Ortwin, despite the fact that Nwm had offered to return with it. The squire was traditional that way.

"Anyone care to wager?" Mostin asked. "My money is on Iua."

Eadric coughed, and Nwm looked at the ground.

"Thanks for the support," Ortwin sniped.

Iua appeared bearing a small buckler and a rapier of fine quality, forged from good Thalassine steel.

"Where did you get that?" The Bard asked disconsolately.

"Er, it's mine," Mostin said apologetically. "I lent it to her. Don't worry – it isn't dweomered."

"Hmph," Ortwin grunted. "Shall we start at, say, twenty feet apart?"

Iua looked pointedly at Ortwin's hooves. "If you are trying to maximize your tactical advantage, you have just miscalculated," she said sarcastically. "Perhaps you would like to reconsider?"

"Twenty feet," Ortwin said through gritted teeth. Gods, she could be annoying. He drew the scimitar, and briefly inspected it. *Good choice, Tatterbrand*, he thought. It was of superior workmanship and, like other weapons kept in Eadric's armoury, well-honed and well-oiled.

Iua saluted him in a most condescending manner.

"I will give the sign for the fight to commence," Mostin announced grandly. "You will not fail to recognize it. If anyone would care to wager, now is your last chance."

"Oh very well," Nwm said. "Fifty crowns says that Ortwin lasts at least twenty-five seconds."

"Done!" Mostin said, delighted.

Ortwin squinted at the Druid, who looked back apologetically. Mostin gestured briefly and an enormous *boom* echoed across the meadow, causing the ground to tremble and chest cavities to vibrate.

Iua moved like a liquid. In a heartbeat, she dashed forwards two paces, launched herself into the air, curled into a ball, span the remaining distance and landed squarely in front of the Bard.

His mouth opened in disbelief as her rapier instantly found a gap in the leather vest that he wore, and cold steel bit into him. As he reeled, Ortwin expected her momentum to carry her onwards, but somehow she had arrested it. Her weapon was everywhere. Again.

"Remarkable," Mostin said in wonder. "And to consider that she is unaugmented. Do you think she might be the best living practitioner?"

"It's hard to say," Tatterbrand replied. "The rapier is not my *forté*, and there are many different styles. Although for sheer speed, I've yet to see her match. But rapier and buckler is actually considered a rather old-fashioned technique these days in Fumaril."

Mostin looked quizzical.

"You know. Main gauche, rapier and cloak, rapier and scabbard. It's all the rage."

"Oh," Mostin said.

"Look at Ortwin, though," Tatterbrand pointed. "He's actually very good."

The Bard had adopted a considered pose, with a thoughtful expression upon his face. He wondered whether he could wear Iua down: in terms of physical stamina, and the sheer ability to withstand the blows, he suspected that he outmatched her. He was also beginning to realize that having a hairy hide had certain benefits: her last blow, although penetrating both his guard and his armour, had failed to break his skin.

Abruptly, his scimitar lashed out furiously, causing the girl to move to block it. She misread it, the Bard dove and twisted, and the blade bit into the girl's arm in a single, well-placed strike. He grinned.

"It's also worth considering that Ortwin is a far better bullsh*tter than she is," Tatterbrand remarked. "She will now adopt a different tactic. Observe."

Iua assumed the impenetrable screening position which had vexed Ortwin during their first exchange, causing the Bard to grimace in recognition. He held his scimitar tightly as he anticipated her next maneuver.

Tap-oh no you don't-tap-no-tap-no-tap-no. Hah! Ortwin was amazed to see that he still held onto his weapon. Iua pouted and then looked more determined.

Deciding that a different strategy might be in order, and aware that her screen was near invulnerable to attack, Ortwin suddenly turned, erupted into a burst of speed, and galloped away from Iua, his hooves taking him out to a distance of eighty feet. He threw down his buckler and gripped his scimitar in both hands.

As Ortwin turned, his weapon held in front of him, the pose made Mostin feel distinctly uncomfortable, reminding him of a certain Duke of Hell.**

"Sound tactics, Ortwin," Nwm called from the sidelines. "Hang onto your sword."

"Yes, run away Ortwin," Iua goaded him as she walked calmly towards him. "Trot off into the woods." She smiled wickedly, and then gestured provocatively for him to charge her.

Ortwin charged, covering over sixty feet of open ground with remarkable speed, his scimitar flailing wildly above his head. He thundered into Iua but despite his blow, she held her ground.

Tap-not this time, I've got two hands on it – *tap* – *slide* – *twist* – *flick*. Dammit. The scimitar dropped to the ground, and Iua stabbed him twice in the thigh for good measure. Ortwin winced.

"Alright, that's it," he snarled. "I've had enough of this."

Iua expected a headbutt, and was surprised to find Ortwin groping at her rapier. She stabbed him in the arm.

"Ow!" He said as his hands closed around the hilt of her sword.

"That's cheap," Mostin said to Eadric.

"But effective," Eadric observed, as Ortwin wrested the slender blade from her grasp and poked at her with it.

"Do you give up?" Ortwin asked, gripping the rapier in both hands.

"Are you nuts?" Iua replied. "I could beat you blindfolded. Besides, look at you."

Ortwin noticed that he was bleeding from half a dozen different wounds. He suddenly felt very weak.

Iua crouched, drew a slender poignard, and grinned. "You were better off with your scimitar," she said. "I'll tell you what, I'll let you retrieve it, and I'll use this. Won't make a scrap of difference to the final outcome, but you might save some face."

"Don't be so damned patronizing," Ortwin complained. "A little modesty would sit well on you."

Iua goggled at the irony of the comment. "Coming from anyone but you, Ortwin, I might heed that remark."

The Bard gave his best charming smile. "I concede the bout. Again. Mostin, pay up. Eadric, thank-you for the loan of the sword. Is there any firewine nearby?"

Iua walked up to the Bard. "What, exactly, is this about Ortwin?"

"I thought I might court you, with your consent."

"You have an odd way of suggesting it," she countered.

"I recognize that your fragile ego needs to be nurtured and supported," the Bard remarked drily.

"I have no objection," she said in a matter-of-fact way. "But of course, you will need my father's permission. He is rather traditional in that regard. Besides, what happened to the Green Witch?"

Ortwin groaned.

Later that same evening, when everyone else had retired, Eadric sat by the fire with his hounds in the hall at Kyrtil's Burgh.

When Rintrah appeared, and told him what had to be done, his stomach sank.

"Do you doubt?" The Planetar asked him.

"Yes," Eadric replied. "My ability, not Oronthon's judgement."

"That is acceptable," Rintrah replied.

"And I fear the machinations of fiends," the Paladin said.

The Celestial laughed openly and warmly. "I'm afraid that will *never* change," he smiled.

**

It was a wet, grey morning in late spring when Eadric ordered that the horns be sounded, and he rode with his captains and paladins across the bridge at Hartha Keep to parley with Brey. He did not bear the message that he had originally intended.

He took thirty men with him, including Nwm, Tramst, the Penitents who had sworn loyalty to him in the aftermath of the battle at Deorham, Thanos Streek and Togull, and the Uediiian Ryth of Har Kumil. Jorde, formally of the Temple, bore Eadric's banner – a three headed silver phoenix on an azure field.*** Tatterbrand rode close behind the Paladin.

The bridge – Aaki's Bridge, as it was named – was ancient. A vestige of Old Borchia, the state which predated Wyre, it was a weathered, moss-covered affair which had improbably stood the test of both time and the numerous inundations of the river. A long causeway led up to it from both the eastern and western sides, elevating the road above an uninviting bog, before the track narrowed and traversed the dilapidated cantilevers of the span itself.

At exactly the midpoint, alerted by the horns which had rung from Hartha Keep, a contingent of Templars waited patiently for Eadric to arrive with his knights. The river, still swollen by the thaw and the spring rains, coursed rapidly below, only a few feet beneath the peak of its arches. It carried driftwood with it, and foamed and gurgled around the stone pilons.

Eadric evinced some surprise at the group waiting for him, the more so when they sounded their horns indicating that they were an embassy. He had expected a more belligerent reception, and wondered whether new orders had issued from Morne regarding the means by which Brey should deal with him. As they closed, Nwm spoke with him.

"Brey is there. Should I leave? I think he holds little love for me."

"He probably wonders why he is still alive," Eadric said ironically. "Please refrain from killing everybody except him – this is an embassy, after all."

"You don't understand why I did what I did, do you Ed?" Nwm asked.

"I am beginning to," the Paladin replied unexpectedly. "I understand that you did what you thought was necessary."

"But was it?"

"It is easy to make judgements with hindsight," Eadric replied. "Would you do it again, if events repeated themselves?"

"That question is meaningless," Nwm answered.

"Precisely," the Paladin agreed.

"I could win this war alone," Nwm pointed out. "Break the Temple. Obliterate it. I have only recently come to understand that."

"And gain what?"

"Nothing that would endure after me," Nwm said sadly. "How are you going to deal with this idiot, anyway?"

"Not how he - or even you - expects," Eadric replied.

**

"That's quite far enough, Heretic," Brey shouted at a distance of around thirty yards. "You can bring Tahl the Corrupted with you, but the other pagans and blasphemers can stay where they are."

Several of the Penitents were almost overcome with zeal, and prepared to spur their destriers into a charge. Eadric restrained them, before riding on alone with Tahl.

Nwm carefully considered the sky, and felt reassured that he had already primed it, just in case he needed to blast anyone.

"Greetings, Lord Brey," Eadric said politely, and without rancour. "I trust you are well?"

"What is the purpose of this parley?" The Templar asked haughtily.

"I've come to see if you're amenable to negotiations," Eadric replied. "I'm surprised that you're even talking to me. Has the policy in Morne towards Trempa changed?"

"The Temple staunchly defends Orthodoxy in all of Wyre," Brey answered.

"Yes, quite," Eadric sighed.

"Unless you are prepared to atone for your sins, and accompany me to Morne for judgement, I doubt that there is little common ground here. Is that your purpose?"

"No." Eadric said. "But there are words that I would have you convey to your superiors in the Curia. First, I hereby assume the titles of Grand Master of the Temple and Inquisitor General, as both posts are currently vacant. Second, I demand that all Temple troops and resources be surrendered to me until the new Prelate is invested and ascends the throne. Third, I will enter Morne in one month. Please make the necessary preparations."

Brey laughed uproariously. "This is no embassy, it's a farce." He turned his horse and began to ride away.

"This is your final opportunity, Brey," Eadric called after him sadly. "I doubt death will spare you a

third time."

The Templar ignored him.

"So be it," Tahl said grimly.

*In the Wyre game, the scimitar replaces the longsword as the quintessential Elven weapon.

**Dan pointed out the picture of Titivilus in the 1e Monster Manual II.

***This device was adopted by Eadric after his return from the wilderness and his meeting with Rintrah. Symbolically, the phoenix of course represents rebirth, but it is also the 'higher octave' of the Eagle – the traditional symbol of Oronthon. One head looks left towards Law, one right towards Good, and the third straight ahead, representing the synthesis of the two principles through the dialectic of insight.

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**

Soraine mused.

"I thought that you had decided upon a 'softly, softly' approach," she said to Eadric. "This hardly seems consistent with it."

"That had been the initial plan," Eadric agreed, "but Rintrah commanded a more direct tact."

"In which case," Soraine replied, "I should relinquish control to you formally – if you think you can handle the nobility of Trempa."

"Fewer of them have doubts now, and the ones that do are less distrusting and intractable. Although it will prove difficult. I have already required Ryth to bring his skirmishers south to join the main force."

"It will leave the northern flank vulnerable to assault from Thahan. I am reluctant to..."

"I will ask Nwm to deal with it," Eadric said simply. "Besides – we cannot have him present and active in the main force. It would be too controversial, and would give an unwelcome slant to what is essentially an internal Temple affair."

Soraine was staggered. "You need him with you. Even if you displace the Temple troops across the river – which is by no means certain – if the royal army is deployed against you, he is your best assurance against defeat. And any attempt that you make to woo Tagur's sympathies now is likely to be met with hostility: you may have lost a potential ally, there."

"It can't be helped," Eadric shrugged. "I have been instructed to march on Morne as soon as is feasible. The Bishop of Kaurban is interceding on our behalf with the Duke – Tahl has spoken with him. He has always been sympathetic to our cause."

But Soraine shook her head. "The Bishop has been neutered by this whole affair. He has little temporal power left. I can't believe that you told Brey of your intentions – a surprise assault would have been much more effective. Now they have time to prepare."

Eadric raised an eyebrow.

"Alright, forget I said that," the Duchess smiled. "But I find this whole enterprise to be very worrying. Even if you get as far as Morne, you still have to get *into* Morne."

"I am hoping for popular support," Eadric admitted ruefully. "If I only had the opportunity to *speak* with people..."

"I fear the common man will view you as simply another potential oppressor."

"I was thinking of speaking more to the Temple troops, actually," Eadric explained. "I may be able to turn large numbers of them towards our cause. Brey is misliked. Melion, Rede, Irian and Hembur are all dead. Rumours are abroad of the encounter with Eniin at Deorham, and the Templars who have rallied to me are well-respected..."

"I suspect that the view amongst many is that you have seduced them. There is also the matter of Rede's assassination – Nwm is implicated, and thus, you."

"That is another reason why he may not accompany me in this," Eadric sighed. "Tahl is investing me as Grand Master of the Temple tomorrow morning."

"That may be a hollow title," the Duchess remarked drily. "I don't imagine it will carry too much weight – he could anoint you as Oronthon incarnate, for all that it's worth. A name is worth little without the resources to back it."

Eadric shrugged. "I have been restrained for long enough. It is time to assert my spiritual authority. It will not be easy – I still have doubts about my abilities."

"That, at least, is reassuring," Soraine laughed. "I will summon the nobility. It's time that we met in conference again – and all should be present for the ceremony. When did you plan to lead the assault?"

"In four or five days," Eadric answered. "I will attempt to speak to Tagur again in the interim."

Soraine raised an eyebrow. "Good luck," she said.

*

As a clear dawn broke the next morning, before the assembled aristocracy of Trempla, Eadric took oaths and was blessed by Tahl. He assumed the titular command both the Temple and the Inquisition, and

chose the unassuming title of 'First Magistrate' for the unprecedented dual leadership. He also reclaimed the title of 'Protector of the Nineteen Tenets,' which had been stripped from him at his trial.

In a second ceremony, which followed shortly afterwards, Soraine conferred the estates of Hernath and Droming upon the Paladin, appointed him the chief of her *comitati* – those knights, thanes and bannermen sworn to her service – and raised him to the rank of Earl. He was ceded absolute command of Trempa's forces. This was a formality as far as Eadric was concerned, although Soraine's legitimacy was unquestioned in the eyes of those present – unlike Tahl's.

But before the day was out, in a development which left Eadric feeling extremely uncomfortable, all such titles were forgotten. The Paladin did not determine the source -although he (wrongly) suspected one of the Penitents to have started it - but a new appellation was given to him: *Ahma**. It spread quickly amongst the zealots, and was picked up by the more secular aristocrats and even the Uediians. Eadric attempted to have the name forbidden, but it was too late. To him, it verged on blasphemy. He spoke to Tahl, and the Inquisitor shrugged as if it were an inevitability. He related his concerns to Nehael.

"Actually, I began it," the demoness smiled.

"But why? It is a profanity."

"Applied to anyone else, perhaps. But you are an emissary. A vehicle. Your ego is of no concern. You are simply the agent of Oronthon's will: nothing more, nothing less. Soraine said that you needed to exert your spiritual authority. You cannot do that in half measure, *Ahma*."

"Do *not* call me that," he snapped.

She slapped him. He winced. "See?" She said. "Don't worry – you're still a man."

**

"This is a development I could have done without," Eadric said to Nwm regarding his new name.

"Your modesty is becoming, Ed," Nwm said, "but this is a religious war. You're bound to get some weird title or other foisted upon you, if you play the role of Oronthon's chosen representative. Don't worry about it."

"But I don't feel I deserve it. It makes me uncomfortable."

"Good," Nwm said unsympathetically. "The moment that you feel happy about it, is the moment that you become crazy."

"I hope that you will continue to offer a critical perspective regarding all of this, Nwm. It's good to look from the outside in. Let me know if things are going too far. I can't believe that Nehael started it."

"She has an expanded perspective," Nwm grinned. "Trust her. And you may count on my brutal objectivity."

"She talks of surrender. Of forgetting my ego. Of agency." Eadric sighed.

"What do you expect?" Nwm laughed. "She is a mystic. She is also, of course, correct. Relax, Ed. Let go of your concerns. Let it – whatever *it* is - *flow* through you. Forget your own judgements and preconceptions. Zhuel can be your guide in this. It is actually ridiculously simple."

Eadric sighed. "I've recalled Ryth's longbowmen. I need you to sort out the Temple troops in northern Trempa. Can you deal with it?"

"Yes, but..."

"I cannot have you with me, Nwm. It compromises my position too much."

"I understand that," the Druid said. "It's hard, though."

"I will take Nehael, if she is willing – assuming that's alright with you."

"She is a free agent," Nwm laughed. "I have no authority over her. It is a good choice: she is an able counsellor."

"It seems appropriate that she should be present in whatever transpires," Eadric explained. "After all, this whole mess started with her. Did you know that she is in contact with Rintrah?"

"She mentioned as much to me," the Druid admitted. "I trust her implicitly, but her motives are quite unfathomable. She seems equally comfortable dealing with the Goddess, and most of the Uediians are willing to defer to her authority in matters religious. I think she works to preserve openness and communication – in all of its forms – more than anything else. She spoke to me of a 'Middle Way.'"

"With regard to what?" The Paladin asked.

"Everything?" Nwm suggested. "Who knows? She is eight billion years old, and has a lot of experience to draw upon. She foresees ends which we cannot. Are you still, you know...?" The Druid waved his hands vaguely.

"I don't know," Eadric mused. "I haven't really thought about that for quite some time. And at the moment, it seems like a bit of an unnecessary distraction. Before you head north, I need you to take me to Gibilrazen – I'm going to try talking with Prince Tagur again."

"Tact or honesty?" Nwm asked.

"The latter, unfortunately," Eadric said.

"Be careful. I doubt he'll appreciate any threats."

"No more equivocating. It's time to act decisively."

"There you are," Nwm jibed. "Being the Breath of God is easy. You don't mind if we drop in on a friend of mine on the way, do you?"

Eadric looked puzzled.

"Yes, *Ahma*, even I have friends," Nwm said sarcastically. "Hullu. I need to keep abreast of his progress. And you should meet him – he may be a potential ally."

**

"You can use this," Iua said to Mostin, giving him a plain silver ring. "It used to belong to him."

The Alienist grunted. "Very well. Normally, of course, I would demand a fee..."

"Oh just hurry up and do it, Mostin," Ortwin interrupted. "I thought we'd got beyond all of the 'fees for this' and 'fees for that' business."

"We have," Mostin agreed, "but it doesn't hurt to remind people once in a while of my generosity and magnanimity."

The Alienist clasped the ring in his hand, and stood before the looking-glass of Urm-Nahat, invoking its powerful magic yet again. The mist upon its surface – eerie and supernatural – gradually gave way to clouds which appeared more natural in origin. Wisps broke in them, to reveal a sky of such bright, perfect azure that Mostin had to squint. There was no sun, but the air seemed to glow with an inner light.

Ortwin gasped in wonder. The scene before him was utterly fabulous: a vast island of rock, suspended in mid air, supporting a city constructed entirely of white marble. Towers and pinnacles stretched high into the sky, and domed roofs glistened with silver and gold. Gardens and orchards of fruit trees grew in profusion: each, apparently, meticulously nurtured and tended. Water ran freely through pristine aqueducts, and accumulated in pools and open cisterns.

"What is this place?" Ortwin marvelled. He felt that he had been missing something for both of his lives.

"It is called *Magathei*," Iua replied. "It is Ulao's capitol. Around ten thousand Djinn live there – but it is not the largest of their cities on the Plane of Air by some way."

"I have visited Kalkinassus," Mostin bragged. "This is a backwater compared to that place. I first met Mulissu there."

"And attempted to seduce her?" Iua asked archly.

"Mostin!" Ortwin said with mock gravity. "I didn't know that you were capable. And she rejected your advances? Inconceivable!"

"Yes. Quite." Mostin agreed, perfectly seriously. "I will accompany you, if that is acceptable – a day or two here will make for a pleasant outing. And there are a variety of interesting inhabitants. It may be worth my while."

"What can the Djinn offer you?" Ortwin asked.

"Not just Djinn," Iua explained. "Elementals, Mephits, Sylphs, Aerial Servants, Stalkers, Vortices, Arrowhawks and Wind-Walkers. Wizards and sorcerers from who-knows-where. Not to mention Auran analogues of every creature that you can conceive of – and more. And creatures from other Elemental Planes. It is a very cosmopolitan city."

"I always thought the Djinn were rather parochial," Ortwin mused. "That is good news: I assume your father's progressiveness extends to his daughter's potential suitors?"

"Hmm," Iua sighed sceptically. "In any case, do *not* attempt flight with your boots whilst there – you will be ridiculed. A gift of some kind would be appropriate – overt displays of generosity are well received. Be tolerant of unusual customs. And you should be aware of my name."

Iua pronounced a long string of sibilants and aspirated syllables.

"Iua is easier," Ortwin remarked.

"Ulao will simply call me one-eight-six. He has many children."

"But you are the only non-Djinn?"

"Gods, no," Iua replied. "I've got elemental, half-elemental, half-celestial, half-fiendish and every other conceivable kind of bastard sibling. Ulao is quite indiscriminating in his lust."

Ortwin nodded. At least they had *that* in common.

"Wait," Mostin remembered. "I must get my hat."

**

"Damn, Nwm, how many does he have here," Eadric was astounded.

"More than when I last visited," Nwm said, equally surprised. "And that was only a fortnight ago."

Within seconds of their materialization from a vaporous state, the Paladin and the Druid were surrounded by dozens of men and women of all ages, mostly – Eadric noted – of the same racial group to which Nwm belonged.** They bore spears, bows and swords. Several were wearing chainmail shirts of Thalassine construction, others were clad in studded armour or hauberks looted from Temple troops and men-at-arms.

Nwm quickly held up a hand. "Peace. I am Nwm, the Preceptor. This is Eadric of Deorham. I seek Hullu." The Druid quickly realized that he recognized only one or two faces from his previous visit.

Their reaction made Nwm nervous. Some were suspicious, whilst others were confused – their awe of the Druid offset by what they considered to be the enemy in their midst: Eadric. Whatever the Paladin's own leanings he was, in the final analysis, a Templar from their viewpoint. And many of them lacked

the broader political perspective which may have made them more understanding. Trempa was two hundred miles away, and the troubles there had had little direct bearing on the situation of those present.

A woman in her early thirties, with a face worn with concern stepped forwards. She wore a byrnie of blackened mail, and in her hand she carried a powerful horn bow. She was girt with a bastard sword with aristocratic motifs on its scabbard – no doubt plundered from an unsuspecting Temple knight.

"I am Tarva," she said assertively. "Hullu is not present. He has mentioned you, Nwm. How may I help?" Her manner was cold.

"I wished to discuss strategy and progress with him," Nwm said easily.

"That will not be possible," Tarva replied. "He is briefing a mission. Is there anything else?"

Nwm was mildly irked by her attitude, but hid it. "Then I should like to speak with you, Tarva," he said.

"Not while the Templar is present," she said, turning away.

This has to be resolved immediately, Nwm thought. "That was not a request, Tarva," he said icily.

She turned back to face him. "By what authority do you command me – or any of us here – Nwm?" She said bitterly. "I have yet to see you suffer at the hands of the Temple. I have yet to see your support for us, beyond striking the enemy when and where your whim dictates. You cannot be depended upon."

"No, I *will* not be depended upon," Nwm snapped. "Do you think I should raze Morne for you, Tarva? Obliterate the Temple? Replace it with a grove of trees? I have more to consider than your immediate needs. My responsibility is to future generations. *Do you not think that I have considered all of this?*" His tone was one of exasperation.

"Then why did you begin all of *this*?" She gestured around at the stockade, the smithy, the dozens who were flocking to hear the exchange.

"To empower you," he smiled ruefully. "A little too effectively, it would seem. This is Eadric of Deorham, as I said. Have you heard of him?"

Tarva nodded. "The Heretic Templar with the Demon concubine."

Eadric coughed.

"He may be our best hope for a solution to this situation." Nwm explained "He plans to disestablish the Church, and remove taxation. *All* taxation – not just of Uediians."

"A reformer?" Tarva said sarcastically. "Big deal! Five hundred years of oppression aren't going to be removed by a few tax breaks. Uediians farm the most marginal land. They form the majority of indentured workers. There are five times as many Uediian tenant farmers as there are Oronthonians, but they only comprise a third of the population. Work it out!"

"I agree," Eadric said unexpectedly. "I will take an oath, here and now, that every Uediian household in Wyre will be compensated. I will empty the Temple coffers to achieve this."

Hmm, he thought. I hadn't planned to make that commitment.

"Promises are easily made," Tarva growled.

"I do not lie," Eadric said.

"I do not *trust* you," Tarva groaned. "I am tempted to have you captured and bound. You would fetch a fine ransom."

"You would fail," Eadric said in a matter-of fact way, shaking his head. "There is no man in Wyre who can withstand me in arms."

"I could," Hullu grinned, walking into the middle of the group. "Although, obviously, I'd prefer to avoid the demonstration. Greetings, Nwm – it's good to see you again. I regret that the ale is *still* not

ready, although we have mead, now. I am honoured, Eadric. Nwm seems to trust you - which is a rare thing in this dirty world – and therefore I am inclined to too."

Eadric glanced down, and his stomach turned. He had all but forgotten the sword, but there it was, hanging from the hip of the Tunthi tribesman.

"Don't worry," Hullu said, following his eyes. "She is firmly under control. I had thought about renaming her 'Merriment' or 'Exuberance' – after all, *Melancholy* is such a depressing name."

She? Nwm thought.

**

"You have achieved a great deal here, Hullu," Eadric said. "And in a very short period of time."

The Tribesman nodded. "Resistance is relatively easy to organize amongst the hopelessly disenfranchised," he pointed out drily. "But I am regarded as a kind of *cingetomaru* in their speech– a war leader, only. My customs mean that I suspect I will *never* be fully accepted."

"But you are mastering the old tongue quickly," Nwm said. "Your inflexion is close to perfect."

"I have a knack for languages," Hullu smiled. He grunted. "Don't be discouraged by Tarva, Nwm. She is a radical – even amongst these people. Most still regard you favourably."

"I admit that I am surprised that you have bestowed so much power on one so controversial."

"I'd rather have her close to me, than undermining me," Hullu explained. "Besides, she has remarkable energy and natural leadership skills – it is better to channel that ability than repress it. And she possesses political savvy."

Eadric nodded. This man was intriguing. *Much* more than a simple warrior. "How much strength can

you field?" He asked.

"From this camp, three hundred who are at least reasonably competent," he said. "But there are other cells establishing themselves – I admit that we reached capacity here more quickly than I had anticipated."

"And altogether?" Nwm asked.

"Close to a thousand, perhaps," Hullu replied carefully. "Even I am not sure of exact numbers. You have sown the wind, Nwm. It didn't take much."

The Druid shifted uneasily, and wondered whether he should assume a more active role before things ran away from him. "How do you feed them, Hullu?"

"I finally acquiesced to Tarva's desire to raid Oronthonian farmsteads," he admitted, but added quickly, "but only the largest and wealthiest ones. And not to the point of destituting the owners. I am merely skimming some of the fat off."

"That tendency may get out of hand," Eadric pointed out. "If you set a precedent for it, it will become stretched by need and spurious logic."

"They are more disciplined than you give them credit for," Hullu replied. "But the forest alone cannot support them – unless they spend all day hunting, of course. And boar are getting scarce in these parts." He grimaced. "We've messed up the balance of nature already, Nwm. It is an inevitable compromise, but it doesn't mean that I hate it any less."

The Druid nodded sympathetically. "Then you should move, before things get worse. Although your defenses here..."

Hullu laughed. "I can erect a stockade in two days, Nwm. That is no concern. It is the beer that worries me. I have already considered it: I will leave a skeleton garrison here, a store of provisions, and move the bulk of the *bagaudas* to a new site. It should also give the forest time to recover here."

"Where will you go?" Eadric asked.

"Eastwards. Maybe four or five days. The land beyond the forest is richer there, although more populous."

"Towards Morne?"

"Towards Morne," Hullu replied.

*Without getting too heavily into Oronthonian theology, the name can be roughly translated as "Breath of God." It also has metaphysical associations which are similar to *Sophia* or *Logos* or *Shabda* in RL religion. The first syllable is pronounced as in German 'acht,' 'machen' etc.

**These people are the descendants of the *Crix*i, one of the first racial groups to inhabit Wyre, before Old Borchia was founded. Although great individual variety exists, and bloodlines are much confused with later migrating groups, typical Uediians possess sufficient different features to distinguish them from Oronthonians in Wyre. Descendants of later migrants are taller, have fairer complexions and tend to be rather more slender. Nwm and Eadric conform quite closely to their respective racial stereotypes.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 09-24-2002

By the time that Nwm and Eadric reached Gibilrazen – a mere two hours after leaving Hullu - events had already moved quickly.

They were not to the Paladin's liking. Knights and soldiers were mustering both inside and outside of the gates.

Eadric remained airborne and vaporous above the Prince's palace, whilst the Druid descended into the courtyards in the form of a crow in order to glean what information he could. When he returned, an hour later, he related his findings to the Paladin.

"News of your claim of the Temple leadership is already current amongst the aristocracy," Nwm explained. "There are several Wizards present – one is called Dauntun. He has been engaged by Tagur to act as a messenger between here and Morne. I suspect that he is acting in the same 'auxiliary capacity' as Mostin is. Apparently, he is a Diviner of high credentials."

"Where is Tagur?" Eadric asked.

"He is already en route to Morne," the Druid replied. "But even at his best speed, he can hardly come there in less than a week."

"I'm an idiot," Eadric groaned. "I should have suspected that the nobility had access to Divination magic – what's good for the goose, and all that. Aristocrats – especially the more secular ones like Tagur – certainly aren't going to balk at using Wizards in the same way that the Temple itself might. Every nobleman in Wyre is probably apprised of the situation by now."

"What next?" Nwm asked.

"We locate Tagur," Eadric replied. "When did he leave?"

"Yesterday morning," Nwm answered. "He shouldn't be too hard to find."

So the duo sped eastwards again, although this time they stayed above the road, their eyes alert for signs of the Prince's passage. Another hour passed, before they finally caught up with him. Only twenty knights rode with Tagur – all were lightly armed and riding coursers of great stamina in order to make the best time possible to Morne. The Prince's device – a Golden Boar – floated in the wind above the troupe.

Eadric descended to the road ahead of them, rematerialized, and stood squarely in their path as they thundered towards him. He held up his hands in a gesture designed to make them arrest their gallop.

Tagur barked an order, and horses were spurred to greater speed. Swords sprang from scabbards, and lances were levelled: it was likely that at this distance that they hadn't, in fact, recognized the Paladin. And they were taking no chances.

Oh, sh*t, Eadric thought. Still, he didn't move. He made another gesture in the air with his hands, communicating with his ethereal guardian.

Abruptly, fifty yards ahead of him on the road, Zhuel manifested. The knights immediately became disordered: some veered away, some reigned in their horses, others - including Tagur – continued onwards.

The Archon sounded his trumpet. A single note of piercing clarity rang out.

Horses collapsed and men fell from their steeds – many struck with paralyzing awe. Tagur dropped to the ground, his bay courser overwhelmed by the sound. He landed unceremoniously in a puddle of mud.

Eadric walked forwards slowly, his armour bright in the afternoon sun. He spoke in a clear voice.

"I apologize for the demonstration, Prince Tagur. I hope neither you nor your men are too badly bruised. I need you to hear me out."

Nwm, perched nearby in the form of a hawk, shifted on his branch. Apparently, Ed wasn't pulling any punches this time.

Tagur staggered to his feet. Over half of his men and around two thirds of the horses were immobilized, and of those six riders who remained in control of their faculties *and* their steeds, none were pressing forwards towards where Zhuel hovered in front of the Paladin. Several had expressions of either disbelief or religious terror upon their faces – it was difficult to determine which. Tagur himself,

however, evinced no such awe.

"Deorham!" he thundered. "I am not impressed by your attempts to intimidate me. I don't give a damn whether you invoke the entire celestial host in this matter. You are *not* marching into Morne without a fight."

Eadric remembered Tagur's secular perspective, and wondered how best to proceed. The Prince was not an atheist – he simply did not recognize the overwhelming imperative of Oronthon's will. It was not relevant to his political viewpoint.

"What can I say, your Highness? I wish to minimize or avoid unnecessary bloodshed in this matter. I would have you return to Gibilrazen and demobilize your troops."

"How dare you?" Tagur asked, walking forwards. "You have no authority over me in this. You will not dictate to me how I should best determine the defense of Wyre. There is more at stake here than an internecine squabble in the Temple. Listen well: I will not allow thousands of armed men to enter Morne unopposed. Your religious agenda does not move me. That is not negotiable."

"I don't want to kill you, Prince Tagur," Eadric sighed. "And I don't want to see innocents needlessly suffer."

"Then *back off*," the Prince retorted. "Return to Trempa. Do not prosecute this aggression. Sue for peace – perhaps the King will be lenient."

Eadric read Tagur's expression, and although he did not say as much, the Prince was offering to intercede; to speak on Trempa's behalf on the royal council. Eadric felt that he had not misread Tagur's attitude towards him in their initial encounter: the Prince actually *liked* him. The Paladin almost wept.

"I cannot," Eadric groaned. "This is not my choice."

"It is absolutely your choice," Tagur said grimly. "Deorham, I am going to mount my horse again. Then I am going to Morne. I will advise the king to call a general muster unless you indicate to me now that you will not pursue this folly."

The Paladin inwardly heaved. Another concession from the Prince, because implicit in his statement, Tagur had just said: *I trust your word, Deorham.*

The hawk, who had been sitting on a nearby bough, and watching the exchange with interest, flew over and shifted into the shape of the Druid.

"I am Nwm, the Preceptor," he said.

"I know who you are," the Prince replied, walking away.

"Listen to me, Tagur. Change is coming. Upheaval. Maybe death and misery. But hope for something better. It is inevitable. You have to decide what your role in it will be, and why."

"I also know my role. I need no counsel from you."

"You *knew* your role. It is time to reappraise."

Prince Tagur returned to his mount, and attempted to revive her. Several of the other stricken knights and horses were now beginning to regain their senses. The bay staggered up, shaking, and Tagur calmed her. He retrieved his own banner, handed it to his herald, and climbed into the saddle.

"Unless you purpose to kill me now, or at least attempt to, I suggest you move aside."

Reluctantly, Eadric backed off of the greensward. As the riders made ready to move on, he spoke once again.

"Listen to me, Tagur. I am the *Ahma*. I am the Breath of Oronthon made manifest in the world. You must understand that, whatever logic dictates, you *cannot* withstand that. It is an irresistible force." His tone was imploring rather than assertive, but carried more conviction than any present had ever heard before.

Prince Tagur swallowed, turned, spurred his mount, and rode on towards Morne.

Dammit, Eadric thought.

**

Magathei had utterly beguiled Ortwin. Its intricate, carved marble reliefs. Its archways, buttresses, courtyards, winding streets, alleyways and markets. Its orchards of apricots, dates, pomegranates, oranges, figs and almonds. The music of water everywhere, carried to gardens, gathering in still pools, or welling up from fountains in the bedrock.

The inn chosen by Mostin, the Bard, and his prospective (lover? mate? fiancée? concubine? wife?) – well, whatever Iua was – was in the most fashionable and expensive district of the city. A city which was, by its very nature, fashionable and expensive.

Ortwin goggled at the price quoted to him by a languorous djinn smoking a hookah. It translated to around two hundred crowns per night. The suite included a bedchamber, a lounge, a steam bath, a private terraced garden, and two mephit servants, named Thispin and Goil. Mostin had elected to take more modest chambers.

The Bard inquired regarding the hookah which the djinn seemed to be enjoying immensely, wondering whether it contained a substance similar to *kschiff*, used in the country of Shûth.

The genie laughed, and muttered an unintelligible string of syllables in Auran.

"What did he say?" He asked Iua.

"He regrets that the sublime airy vapours of which he is partaking would prove far too volatile for your gross physical body, and would likely result in some kind of seizure, followed by death."

Ortwin grunted, and retired to his chambers, where he began working on an ode for the glorification of Ulao. According to Iua, the only thing larger than her father's treasury was the size of his ego. Deciding

that this might be the place to start, the Bard dispatched Thispin to procure a lyre of the finest quality.

"Cost is no consideration," he grandly (and stupidly) announced.

The Mephit clapped her hands gleefully, curtsied, and returned fifteen minutes later.

"On second thoughts," Ortwin said, "overt gaudiness is not entirely necessary. You may limit your transaction to five hundred gold pieces."

She sniffed, and disappeared again. Ortwin wasn't sure whether he heard her mutter the word 'cheapskate' as she flew off. The Bard groaned. This was likely to be an expensive outing. He hoped that Mostin had some spare cash, and was feeling more generous than usual.

He shrugged, and grinned. It didn't matter. He had no doubts that he would wow the locals. He was, after all, Ortwin.

*

"Er, how much have you got, Mostin?" Ortwin asked. "Just curious, that's all."

"Why?" The Alienist asked suspiciously. "How much have *you* got?"

"Around two thousand left," he confessed.

Mostin laughed.

"What?" Ortwin asked.

"You have yet to find a suitable gift for Ulao. It needs to be something unique."

"I am composing an ode in his honour," Ortwin reminded him.

"I suspect that he would prefer something more tangible."

"Is it true that magic can be openly purchased here?" Ortwin asked.

"Certainly," Mostin replied. "Although it is still hard to find, and the prices are rather inflated."

"Will you accompany me to find such a gift? I would appreciate your discerning eye."

"You mean you don't want to be ripped off?"

"Yes," Ortwin said. "Precisely."

"Two thousand isn't going to buy you much," Mostin sniped.

"No," Ortwin agreed. "But *this* will." He held his pick up.

Mostin shook his head. After all of the time, effort and trouble – not to mention the compensation paid to Troap – that the Bard had gone through to acquire the pick, he seemed remarkably keen to part with it.

"I thought that it was a style thing," Mostin said, pointing at the weapon.

"Honestly, Mostin. Fashion does change, you know. How much gold did you say that you had with you again?"

"I didn't," the Alienist replied.

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Three days after the ceremony in which Tahl had sworn Eadric in as First Magnate, and he had assumed control of Trempa's forces, Ryth's guerilla fighters arrived upon the Blackwater Meadow, exhausted after a forced march from the northern marches of the Duchy.

Six hundred battle-hardened, dirty and confident Uediians suddenly jostled for space along with Trempa's aristocracy, men-at-arms, Ardanese mercenaries and levies from across the fief. After nearly three hard months in the field, Ryth's men – consisting primarily of archers – naturally considered themselves somewhat superior to those who had been drilling in the pastures which abutted the Nund.

Eadric knew that he *must* move. Maintaining the cohesion of the forces thus far had been an act of supreme diplomacy on the part of himself, Tahl and Soraine: the more remarkable, because the Paladin had engendered a sense of camaraderie amongst the disparate troops which he would have considered impossible only twelve weeks before. But if they stayed where they were now, then the impetus would be lost, and the sectarian tendencies amongst those present would begin to reassert themselves again. After he had finalized the plans for provisioning the army – something which was already beginning to heavily afflict the economy of Trempa itself – he called a meeting of his captains and lieutenants.

Soraine, Tahl, Ekkert, Streek, Ryth, Togull and Banding of Gamall were present. Breama, the Countess of Thokastrond in the far East of Trempa, who, despite her age, still lusted for battle. Olann, the *de facto* leader of the Ardanese contingent, whose preeminence amongst the mercenaries was maintained more by his brawling ability than by his strategic competence. Jorde, his bannerbearer. And Nehael, whose mysterious presence still unnerved many of those there. Details for the effective deployment of troops were thrashed out into the early hours of the morning.

The main thrust would take place at Moath Gairdan – the span of the bridge was shorter than at Hartha Keep, and its girth would allow three knights to ride abreast upon it. Eadric himself would lead the main assault at this point – although it was still unclear whether Brey would attempt to hold the bridge, or allow passage and defend his bulwarks upon the far side of the river as necessitated by assault. Trenches and dikes protected over a dozen Temple enclaves, spread over an area of fifty square miles.

A smaller group would attempt to win Aaki's bridge – although the length of the crossing, combined with its narrowness and the causeways which led up to it, made this a much more difficult prospect. They would be supported by many of Ryth's archers, who would use small rafts and air-bladders to cross the Nund and harry Temple outriders south of the bridge, before attempting to secure its western end. It was a tactic which the Thane had used on several occasions in the north, but near Hartha Keep the river was both wider and deeper, swollen by tributaries which flowed down from the hills – the

largest and the closest of which was the Blackwater itself. Most of the Uediians were capable swimmers, but Ryth was worried about wet bows and ammunition. Oilskins were not entirely reliable.

Togull, Laird of Rauth Sutting and a man advanced in years, was astonished by Eadric's proposed course of action at the northern bridge.

"You plan to simply *cut your way across*?" he asked.

"Yes," the Paladin replied.

"You will be at the forefront?"

"Yes. I will not lead from the rear."

"Are you really that confident? That *good*? This is no tourney."

"I am aware of that," Eadric responded.

"But if you fell one, then another will appear, and another. The crossing will become jammed with corpses of men and horses in no time. Passage will be close to impossible, in either direction."

"We will bring ropes, to drag them off the bridge into the river."

"But the momentum..."

"Will be sustained," Eadric finished for him.

"And in the event that you should perish?"

"Then Tahl will lead," Eadric said. "And if he dies, then Jorde will lead. And so on, until we make the crossing."

Togull scratched his head. "You admit the possibility of death – how can this be, if you are the *Ahma*?"

"I am merely a conduit," the Paladin replied simply. "If I die, then Oronthon will choose another."

"Do you not fear death? The man who doesn't is a fool."

"Then I am a fool," Eadric smiled.

"A holy fool, but a fool nonetheless," Togull sighed.

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"Are they real?" Ortwin asked.

Mostin nodded. "At least, the vendor is not thinking about lying, and the dweomer checks out as being of the right variety."

The duo stood at a market stall, where a djinn of immense proportions touted his wares, flanked by two jann of dour aspect. Ortwin had been surprised to note that the elemental trader possessed feet, but decided it might be impolite to mention the fact – he had always assumed that genies were somehow *nebulous* below the waist. He had even pondered on the mechanics of Iua's conception, given that false premise.

Having found a suitable broker for his magical pick – an item which he found, in the event, he was loathe to part with – the Bard had sold the weapon for a good deal of money. Its thundering electrical dweomer was, after all, an attractive selling point given their location. He had immediately invested in silk pantaloons and shirts, several velvet waistcoats of varying colours, sashes, earrings and bracelets of gold, and a new scabbard of inlaid cherrywood for his scimitar. His purse bulged with precious gems. He looked, and felt, extremely wealthy.

In his hands, he held a pair of *Golden Lions* – figurines of power. He was tempted to purchase them – despite the prohibitive cost – until he considered his situation.

The djinn grunted unappreciatively as Ortwin handed back the figurines and shook his head.

"I need something unique," he muttered to Mostin as they walked away. "And buying something from someone here is not going to fit the bill – I mean, think about it: even if Ulao is ignorant of many of those who pass through his city – which he may or may not be – it's likely that he *is* aware of things sold by members of his own people in his own city."

"Other extraplanar entities frequent Magathei," the Alienist reminded him. "It is merely a question of locating a vendor and a gift. It will take time, patience and diligent inquiry."

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Eadric mounted Contundor. The dawn glow was muted by mists which clung to the ground in the wide Nund valley, muffling the sounds of armour and harness. The fog was a parting gift from Nwm, before he had flown northwards to displace the skirmishers who had crossed into northern Trempa from Thahan.

The core of those who would lead the assault with him were, to a man, religious fanatics who had no doubts about the divine nature of the Paladin's mission. Their zeal was a tangible force, and no notion of failure was entertained by any of them. Horses – both celestial and mundane – champed restlessly, eager to be underway.

At six o'clock, Earic's outriders returned with the news that both bridges were held: Brey, aware of the arrival of Ryth's troops the previous day, had immediately taken precautions. Temple engineers had set emplacements of stakes across the western ends of both spans, and Ryth's scouts had already shot dozens of men who had been undermining the pylons on the bridges, in the event that they would need to be collapsed. On the far bank, teams of draft horses stood ready to draw great chains which had been looped around the stone buttresses and supports.

Eadric quickly redeployed his troops, and called a hundred of Trempa's most able knights to himself. He assumed a position on the eastern bank, halfway between the two bridges, and waited for Tahl to

arrive: the Inquisitor was presently closeted in intense prayer.

The Paladin smiled grimly. He had hated to do it – to dissemble to his own captains regarding his plans – but it had been entirely necessary. He had no doubt that Temple spies were present in his ranks, and neither the time nor the inclination to weed them out: the fear and mistrust engendered would have been too high a price to pay. And the possibility of magical eavesdropping had also made him cautious. It was easier this way.

Tahl presented himself, and drew a scroll – one of those confiscated from the Penitents at Deorham – from his belt. He incanted briefly, and gestured.

Rapidly, a broad swathe of water began to drain away into the bedrock. A section of the river forty yards wide, stretching from bank to bank, vanished.

Trumpets brayed, and Eadric led the charge across the dry bed of the Nund. In the van were Tahl, and Jorde with the standard, renegade Templars, Paladins and Penitents. They screamed, and the cry was taken up by the host which rode hard on their tails.

Ahma!