

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 12-08-2002

“You appear like a crow over carrion, Devil. You are contemptible.” Eadric wearily drew Lukarn.

“I am your lawfully appointed tempter,” Titivilus replied easily. “and your time has arrived. You may ask me to depart, if your faith is so weak that it cannot stand a minor trial. Assailing me, however, would be disrespectful in the extreme, and more than a little foolish.”

The Paladin sighed. “Make your offer, then leave. The answer will be ‘no’, in any case.”

“It might take some while,” Titivilus explained. “And is likely to involve elements which you do not expect. I suggest we remove to a more suitable locale.”

Eadric laughed grimly. “I am about to enter Morne with an army – now is hardly a convenient time.”

The Duke of Hell bowed ironically. “Fortunately, there is a place where we may go where the inconvenience of time is not an issue. I can return you at the point where you left.”

“You lie.”

“Frequently,” Titivilus conceded. “But not at the moment. I have no intention of lying to you, *Ahma*. If you distrust me, bring Palamabron’s Eye with you – any counterfeit will be instantly revealed. It is, after all, infallible. And Ortwin the Satyr, I strongly recommend that you do *not* do what you are considering.”

The Bard was assuming a flanking position whilst Titivilus spoke.

“You may dismiss me, *Ahma*,” the Duke said, “and I will never trouble you again. But you may regret the choice later: here is a chance to confront your own shadow, in terms which few have the luxury of

doing. Look into the Darkness of your heart with me. If you are true to your faith then you have nothing to fear.”

“Honey on the tongue does not disguise malice,” Eadric spat.

“I am a Devil. What do you expect? Temptation is my work, and I take pride in it.”

Eadric sighed, relaxed his grip, and nodded.

“What?” Ortwin asked aghast. “Are you crazy? Just tell this idiot where to go, Ed.”

“No. I need to do this.”

“That’s the spirit,” Titivilus said. “Don’t forget the Eye, *Ahma*. Unless you are afraid of the truth, of course.”

The Paladin knelt over the stricken body of Tahl, kissed him on the forehead, and removed the huge stone from around his neck.

Titivilus clicked his fingers, and a *Gate* opened. The scene beyond was idyllic: a soft, sandy beach gently lapped by a clear sea beneath a cloudless sky.

“After you,” the Duke of Hell ushered him. “Don’t worry. You’ll be safe and unharmed. I will return you to the present time and place whenever you wish.”

He did not lie.

So Eadric stepped through.

**

“This is *Cha'at*,” Titivilus said in response to the unvoiced question in Eadric’s mind. “It belongs to my liege – inasmuch as a plane can belong to anybody.”

“The Demiplane that you offered Mostin,” Eadric nodded. “If you think that...”

“I have no intention of offering this place to you, *Ahma*,” Titivilus smiled. “Unless you want it, of course,” he added. His eyes twinkled with cruel amusement.

“Get to the point,” Eadric snapped.

“I will – but circuitously. Firstly, we need to establish a common language – so as to minimize misunderstanding.”

“Your ability to twist words is legendary,” Eadric scowled. “And I don’t pretend to be your equal in sophistry or subtlety of language.”

“Ah, the *Ahma* is a man of simple faith. Complex linguistic matters are beyond his understanding.”

“If you have merely brought me here to mock me...”

“Do I wound your pride, *Ahma*? Are you self-conscious of your limited ability to grasp difficult ideas?”

Eadric said nothing.

“If you feel too embarrassed to answer that question, then I understand. If you feel that allowing yourself to be that *vulnerable* to me is unwise because I am the Enemy – one of the fallen; despicable, irredeemable, befouled with Taint and corruption – then I also understand. Allow me then to ask another question, *Ahma*: at what point does it become permissible for a man to be anything less than absolutely open and honest?”

The Paladin groaned inwardly. This was *not* what he had expected. “Alright. You’ve made your point.”

“And you agree that it has merit?” Titivilus asked.

Eadric nodded sourly.

“Tell me, *Ahma*: had you ever considered that idea before – purely hypothetically, of course. The idea that ‘even when dealing with demons and devils, one must maintain absolute honesty.’ I’m not suggesting that it is *the* Truth, but that it is, from your perspective *a* truth, which deserves consideration.”

“I had never before considered it,” Eadric admitted.

“In which case, you have learned something new. From me. *I* have taught *you*.”

“What *are* you?” The Paladin asked.

“You ask ‘what is a Devil?’ To *you*? A Dark Mirror.”

**

“We have established, then, that the language we will use is one of total honesty,” Titivilus said.

“Remember that you have an advantage over me – any falsehood that I speak will be revealed by the Eye of Palamabron. I must simply trust you, and assume that you don’t lie.”

Eadric sighed.

“What do you know of the Irrenites, *Ahma*?” The Duke asked.

“They are an heretical sect. They were banned because they venerated the Adversary alongside Oronthon.”

“That is correct – although it is important to note that they do not *worship* the Adversary as a distinct individual. They regard him as an aspect of Oronthon or, to be more accurate, an emanation.”

“If this is an attempt to sell me on the merits of various heresies then you are pursuing the wrong tack.”

“I don’t need to sell you anything,” Titivilus said wily. “I take it that you are aware that Tramst will be the next Archbishop of Morne?”

The Paladin nodded.

“And that he will be imbued with a measure of Oronthon’s power which has no precedent – that he will, in fact, be an avatar of sorts.”

“Tahl intimated as much,” Eadric replied carefully. “Although the exact details have not been revealed to me.” His answer was accompanied by a cognitive dissonance of enormous proportions – was he actually having this conversation with one of the *Fallen*?

“Tramst will readmit the Irrenites into the Oronthonian fold,” Titivilus said. “As well as every other denomination and schismatic group.”

Still, the Devil did not lie. Eadric was dumbstruck – and enormously excited. He was also very suspicious. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Revelation is not the sole province of Celestials.”

“Celestials generally do not want something dubious in return.”

“Touché,” Titivilus conceded.

**

“What do you know of Jovol the Grey?” Titivilus asked.

“I am reluctant to answer that question.”

“Because you feel that by so doing, you may jeopardize Jovol, whom you regard as a possible ally – although you are not sure how, or in what capacity. Then let me enlighten you somewhat as to Jovol’s nature: he is immensely powerful. More than any of the other Wyrish Wizards suspect – with the exception of Hlioth, who knew him from before.”

“Before what?”

“Before he assumed his current incarnation,” Titivilus answered. “Jovol is preoccupied with the Injunction, and a particular paradox which he finds himself in – namely, that he must both enforce it, and then subsequently violate it. He regards himself as something of a custodian, and is resigned to sacrificing himself in order to renew the integrity of the magical *détente*.”

“To me, that would seem to indicate a nobility of purpose.”

“Quite,” Titivilus said sarcastically. “Except that he has been ineffectual to date in preventing Rimilin from acting – and this has been through choice, not through inability. His divinations have indicated hours, perhaps even days ahead of time, where and when the Acolyte of the Skin will strike. Why do you suppose he has not prevented it, *Ahma*?”

Apparently, Titivilus was still telling the truth. Eadric sighed. “I do not know Jovol’s motivations. And I do not see why you are wasting time with this trivia. Cut to the chase, Devil. I can reject you, and we can part ways.”

“Time is of no consequence here, so there is no need to feel rushed,” the Duke reminded him. “And it is seldom that one has the opportunity to tempt the breath of God – indulge me and permit my moment of dramatic tension. Think, *Ahma*! Why is Jovol, who is concerned more than anything else about the Injunction, not acting to prevent its most flagrant violation?”

“I will not be drawn into idle speculation.”

“Then let me tell you,” Titivilus said impatiently. “Jovol predicts in terms of *probabilities* – of

significant contact between individuals, and of interplanar movement. When a planar contact is revealed, Jovol can infer the likely manifestation. He knows that if he arrests the actions of Rimilin, then Graz'zt – whose information in this whole affair is less complete than you might suspect – will change his tack accordingly. Jovol is therefore waiting until both Rimilin and Kothchori are present at the same time, before he shows his hand.”

“Who is Kothchori?” Eadric groaned.

“Kothchori is the mage who assailed both Jiuhu and Morne with fire. Graz'zt has him under his thumb at present. He is also warded from detection – although not from Graz'zt and his minions.”

“And perhaps you could tell me why this is important?”

“Because within two hours of your return to the battlefield, Kothchori will open a *Gate* allowing Graz'zt onto the Prime Plane.”

Eadric's jaw dropped. “And Jovol knows this?”

“He knows *when* the *Gate* will open, but not *where*,” Titivilus confirmed. “And as he cannot locate Kothchori, there isn't much that he can do.”

“This makes no sense,” Eadric muttered. “If Jovol can determine where and when Rimilin acts, why can he not do the same for this Kothchori?”

Titivilus sighed in exasperation. “Jovol detects *contacts* – one individual to another. An example: Hullu, Mesikämmi and Rimilin come into close resonance, and are accompanied by a perturbation which indicates a planar transit – in this case, from an archaic spirit dimension which borders the Prime. Jovol *can* discern the location of Hullu and Mesikämmi, therefore he can *infer* the location of Rimilin. As both Graz'zt and Kothchori are invisible to Jovol's attempts to scry them, he only knows *when*. He has no *where*.”

Eadric had no idea who Mesikämmi was, and thought it best not to ask. He was starting to get very confused. Titivilus, despite the fact he had not yet lied, was living up to his reputation.

“This still makes no sense,” the Paladin said. “How can Jovol know where Kothchori and Rimilin meet, if he cannot determine the location of either of them?”

“Because when they come into resonance, other individuals are also implicated. Jovol can discern *their* location, thereby inferring the presence of both Rimilin and Kothchori.”

“And who are these ‘other individuals?’” Eadric asked.

Titivilus shrugged, and pointed a long finger at the Paladin. “You, maybe? I don’t know.”

Eadric groaned. “Still, I don’t understand why Jovol simply didn’t intervene and stop Rimilin when he knew where he would be – when he interacted with me, or Hullu or Mostin, or whatever.”

“It is likely that the projected course of events would be even more unfavourable – from Jovol’s perspective, at least – if Rimilin were eliminated prematurely.”

“How can that be so?”

“Graz’zt is methodical and lays intricate webs – for a Demon, at least.” The contempt in Titivilus’ voice was not concealed. “However, he is not above fits of rage and spite which ultimately act against his own interests. Consider what his mood would be if Kothchori conjured him and he had lost both Rimilin *and* the Balor Uruum in one day. I think that it may prove fortunate for Wyre that you did not slay Rimilin today. Graz’zt is more than capable of destroying Morne and everything in it with a single invocation.”

“He would suffer immediate retaliation,” Eadric insisted. “Or the celestial host would never permit such an act.”

“Would they not?” Titivilus asked. “Are you confident that you understand the Mind of Oronthon that clearly? In any case, Rimilin is not dead, so the point is moot. Graz’zt retains a sense of perspective, and his actions are likely to be more systematic and less insane.”

“His ire is directed towards me more than any other,” Eadric said. “It is those closest to me that I feel most for.”

“They are Graz’zt’s targets for that reason,” Titivilus smiled wickedly. “Graz’zt would like to break you, and then turn you against Tramst – the incarnate manifestation of Oronthon’s power.”

“That will never happen.”

“Never is a long time.”

“Your efforts to make me doubt are wasted,” Eadric said. “Do not forget to whom you speak.”

“I would never do that, *Ahma*,” Titivilus gave a mock bow. “But I digress. It is likely Morne *will* still suffer terribly, and at Graz’zt’s hands. And Oronthon will permit it to happen. When one can foresee the ends that Oronthon can, who can tell what ‘The Greatest Good for the Greatest Number’ really means?”

Still, the Duke did not lie. But Eadric was unfazed: this was a paradox that he had long since accepted.

“Do you wish to know what it is that Graz’zt will do, *Ahma*?” Titivilus asked easily. “Knowledge might allow you to ameliorate great suffering, although you could not prevent it all.”

Eadric said nothing.

“Remember our agreement,” Titivilus said. “Complete honesty.”

“I would like to know Graz’zt’s plans,” Eadric admitted.

“As would I,” Titivilus replied.

**

“The Succubus, Nehael,” Titivilus said, smiling.

Eadric groaned inwardly.

“She is currently in a rather awkward predicament, wouldn’t you say?”

“No doubt you are about to make an offer to rescue or release her, in exchange for a service that I can offer you,” the Paladin said in a resigned voice.

“No,” the Devil replied. “It is within your own power to resolve that issue. You have the means to do it – although you may feel compromised by the methods involved. Remember, you are the *Ahma*, and you have powerful allies.”

Titivilus did not lie.

“Then what relevance does Nehael have to this conversation?” Eadric asked.

“When she first succoured you for aid, you were willing to put everything – your own soul included – on the line in order to aid her redemption.”

“Yes. And?”

“Is she redeemed, now?” Titivilus asked. “Before you answer that,” he added, “if you feel that you are being drawn into an untenable ethical position at any time, feel free to stop me – but I feel there have been inconsistencies in your attitude that perhaps you should address.”

“I am not here to receive philosophical instruction from you,” Eadric moaned. “And your circuitous offer is still no closer to being voiced. Allow me to ask *you* a question, Duke Titivilus, for every one that you pose me, and we will see how this proceeds.”

“Very well,” Titivilus answered surprisingly.

“Does that proposal concern you in any way?” The Paladin asked.

“Yes,” Titivilus said.

Eadric raised an eyebrow.

“So,” the Devil continued, “has Nehael been redeemed?”

“That question has no answer,” Eadric replied. “You might as well ask ‘what kind of apple is that orange?’ How was your exchange with Shomei? Did she put you in your place?”

“That is two questions,” Titivilus pointed out. “But I will let it pass. It went as one might have expected, and our relative ‘places’ are affirmed. But your last answer is intriguing – is the *Ahma* suggesting that redemption is not a universal phenomenon, available to all who earnestly seek it?”

“I make no such claim,” Eadric answered, “and no amount of verbiage will lead me to it. And I found your answer rather lacking, so I will pose the question again more clearly: Did the Infernalist Shomei assert her ascendancy over you, Titivilus?”

“In a manner of speaking,” the Devil conceded, “although all such arrangements are subject to renegotiation. But I have just thought of another question – not designed to stimulate your pride, before you ask: In the vast celestial hierarchy, where do you see yourself in relation to seraphs, saints and ascended masters, *Ahma*?”

Eadric shifted uncomfortably. “I have never before considered that question, but your premise is false: all of those about whom you speak live the will of Oronthon. There is no striving for them. They do not need to claw their way anywhere, as they have already achieved bliss. If you were to earnestly seek redemption yourself, Titivilus, I would willingly act as intercessor on your behalf. Can I interest you in such a proposal?”

“It would certainly have merit, were it not for other factors,” Titivilus answered.

“Other factors?”

“*Ahma*, the face I present to you is cultured, intellectual, reasonable and scholarly. I am all of those things. But it behooves you to remember that I am also cruel, merciless, depraved, manipulative and utterly, utterly evil. You see me as an Irrenite might see me, and that is intentional on my part – I would achieve little in the way of communication, otherwise. Already, you have been lulled into complacency, and have forgotten to whom, to *what* you speak. I am no succubus nor a minor devil, but a Duke of Hell. My philosophical position is the result of aeons of thought and contemplation upon matters which you do not grasp. I am not blind, ignorant, savage evil – I am *reasoned* evil.”

“That is to be most feared,” Eadric said. “But I have not forgotten who you are, and my proposal still stands. Be finished with your offer. And speedily. I grow weary.”

“Oronthon will not intervene to release Nehael, because the Succubus has placed herself beyond the Bright God’s protection. She chose Uedii over Him, and rejected an offer from Rintrah to reenter heaven. Would you say that she has abjured Him a second time? One could interpret her actions in that light.”

The Paladin did his best to retain an impassive expression. “I was unaware that grace had been extended to her to that degree. Nor can I always fathom her actions. But I still fail to see what you are driving at, Devil.”

“If you act to save Nehael, which it is within your power to accomplish – by hook or by crook – you must sacrifice something. You could attempt a punitive raid or rescue mission - a possibility that offers many opportunities for sacrifice. Maybe your life or soul, or those of your friends. In any event, you would sacrifice your responsibility to Tramst and to Morne and to your soldiers – after all, should you really be going off on an Abyssal jaunt if the fate of Wyre hangs in the balance and Oronthon’s Proxy is about to appear upon the scene?

“Alternatively, perhaps you could strike a *deal* with Graz’zt in some way, thereby sacrificing a certain portion of your principles. Or you could employ other agents to make a deal for you.”

“Devils, you mean,” Eadric said.

“As I have already said, no,” Titivilus replied. “That is not what I meant – although if you request such assistance, we can no doubt come to a mutually beneficial understanding. I was referring to your associates – you could merely depute the responsibility to them.”

“And what do I sacrifice if I do that?”

“Your control of the situation? Your involvement? Your autonomy? Again, maybe your friends? Mostin can be rather rash, after all. Would you trust him with such a project?”

“More than I’d trust you,” Eadric answered.

“Of course, you could simply sacrifice Nehael to the ‘Greater Good’ and, no doubt, as time passes, so will your guilt and remorse.”

“Pah! Make your offer and return me.”

Titivilus sighed. “My proposal to you is this: that, henceforth, you and I will speak on a regular basis, about such matters that are pressing upon your conscience. With my aid, you will establish a platform from which insight can spring.”

“Are you insane? You would act as my *counsellor*?”

“Why not? Have you not found this exchange informative?”

“Whether or not I have is hardly indicative of your value as a long-term advisor. And what, I wonder, do you offer me in exchange for this absurd request?”

Titivilus smiled. “You misunderstand. That is not my offer of temptation to you. It is the boon which you would enjoy for a growing life in Oronthon’s wisdom.”

Eadric guffawed. “And what, then, is the price I would pay for it?”

“You will endure my attempts to corrupt, pervert and sway you from your current purpose. The torment that your psyche endures will be immense, and the moral knots that you have heretofore wrestled with will seem trivial in comparison. The *Ahma* has the chance of being in a permanent dialogue with the darkest things that there are. One cannot live fully in the light by denying the darkness, but only by transcending it.”

“That is Left-Hand Path sophistry,” Eadric said scornfully.

“It is the dialectic.”

“And Urgic and Irrenite heresy.”

“They are no longer heresies, if you recall. It is the basis of *saizhan*, the practice through which Tramst will revive Oronthonianism.”

Eadric swallowed. Titivilus did not lie. But it was too radical.

“Not all truths are unequal,” Titivilus said.

Eadric’s stomach turned over.

“It is the Middle Way. The Diamond Way. The Path of Lightning.”

And the Paladin’s head reeled.

**

“Are you suggesting that every Oronthonian will have a personal devil with whom they can converse, in order to stimulate their awareness?”

“Certainly not,” Titivilus answered. “*Saizhan* is a mystical practice for contemplatives who have

overcome dualistic thinking. It negates all predicates about the nature of Oronthon, and replaces them with direct experience of the Godhead: with sufficient discipline, the devotee simply enters a trance and taps into Oronthon's *Sela*, his Gnostic intellect."

Eadric looked confused.

"They will *Commune* at will with him," Titivilus explained.

The Paladin's eyes widened. "And for those of us who lack 'sufficient discipline?'"

"That is the second purpose of Tramst. For those who cannot grasp the fundamentals of the practice, they may approach the Godhood directly, embodied in Tramst. By speaking with him, they effectively speak with Oronthon himself."

"I still fail to see the diabolic component," Eadric said.

"For a dialectic to exist, antinomies are required," Titivilus answered. "For contemplatives, they exist on the level of mental constructs. For the devotees who seek him, Tramst himself will stimulate awareness with speech and action, using a device similar to the *kios*.^{*} But you are unique. For the *Ahma*..."

"They would be embodied in you," Eadric sighed.

"Precisely," Titivilus smiled. "And I have been selected because I am the subtlest, most conniving, most underhanded manipulator that there is in the Hells, bar one only."

"If this is so, if it is necessary, then I fail to see what the temptation is," Eadric groaned.

"That is because I have not yet tempted you, *Ahma*. I have merely made you the counter-offer."

Realization slowly began to dawn on the Paladin.

"You may simply walk away from this, and become Eadric of Deorham once again. Let it go. Return to

your castle, and your vineyards, and your dogs, and an untroubled life. Or to be free to pursue Nehael as you will, renounce your servitude to the Temple, and make war on Graz'zt. Take the fight to him. But that is not what Tramst requires from you. *That* is the temptation."

"No," Eadric said. "You seek to be both my tempter and my counsellor. You cannot both threaten me and offer me a path to understand my God."

"I can and do," Titivilus answered.

"I will not believe it," the Paladin said.

"Then I suggest you speak to Tramst," the Duke answered. "He will arrive outside of Morne within fifteen minutes of your return."

Eadric's jaw dropped.

"*Ahma*, your religion is undergoing a paradigm shift. Old roles are being redefined. Different facets of the Truth are manifesting. When you speak to Tramst, he will not be an intermediary as Cynric or even Rintrah was. You will, to all intents, be addressing Oronthon directly."

The Paladin nodded dumbly.

"He demands much of you. He will not relent, nor compromise. By subjecting you to the darkness, he intends to purify and exalt you. To be an exemplar, you must embody the principles which define a philosophy."

"I doubt." Eadric said, simply.

"That is both your strength and your vulnerability," Titivilus said, opening a *Gate* back to the Prime, "which it is my happy duty to exploit to the maximum." He smiled wickedly. Palpable Evil emanated from him, causing Eadric to shiver.

"Until the next time, then," Titivilus said. "Unless you choose otherwise." He vanished.

Eadric stepped through the *Gate*. The paradox had come full circle.

**

“Where did you go, and how long were you there?” Ortwin asked Eadric.

“To the Demiplane Cha’at. And it seemed like forever, although it was probably no more than half an hour.” Eadric looked over his shoulder – behind him were the massed lines of Templars, their auxiliaries, Trempan knights, squires and, on the flanks, Ardanese outriders. Nearby, stood Attar and Prince Tagur.

His head span. Too much to consider, and too short a time in which to consider it.

“What was his temptation?” Mostin pressed.

Eadric laughed. Paradox spiralled through his mind. He looked at the crumpled form of Tahl, and began to weep.

Ortwin clicked his fingers. “Snap out of it, Ed. You can go nuts later. There isn’t time now.”

“In fifteen minutes, God will arrive. In two hours, Graz’zt is going to do something terrible, and Oronthon is going to do nothing about it. And I think that my guardian Angel is going to be replaced by a Devil.” Eadric explained.

“I think you need to speak to Shomei,” Mostin said.

*The *kius* is an Urgic riddle, framed as a question qualified by a double negation, e.g. *What is*

Oronthon, if compassion and revelation are not unidentical? Technically, not all truths are unequal is not a kius, although its structure resembles one. The koan is probably the closest RL parallel, although the structure of the kius is more formal.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 1-16-2003

You See

Eadric sat cross-legged in his tent and looked at his God. Tramst – who, of course, was Oronthon – looked remarkably unchanged and unprepossessing. There was no celestial choir, no radiant light, and no feeling of awe. There was, in fact, no indication that this was anything other than a normal human being.

The Devas who had escorted him had vanished – Eadric had not dared to use Palamabron's Eye to see if they still remained in some insubstantial form nearby, any more than he had dared to look at Tramst himself through the stone. It would have somehow been blasphemous. He wondered if even thinking about using it was a sign of his unworthiness and lack of faith.

Tramst raised his eyebrows and smiled sympathetically.

Lord, I fear. I doubt.

Well, yes, I know that. So what's your point? And don't call me 'Lord.' A simple 'Holiness' will suffice (irony).

I do not know how to proceed.

Ahh. And how, exactly, is that different from how things were say, yesterday, or a year ago? Or five years ago?

In order to come to understand you more, the fiend Titivilus informs me that I must deal with him on an ongoing basis. That he will act as a foil to my...

Virtue? Piety?

(Profound discomfort.) Holiness, I feel unworthy...

(Raised eyebrows.)

(Shame at false modesty...)

(SLAP.) (Smile.)

(Humility)

Your brother, Orm, frequently struck me when he taught me. (Laughter). He looked terribly offended on the morning that I slapped him back.

Where is Orm now, Holiness? Will he be coming?

No. Why should he, when he can meditate in solitude?

But I may visit him, when things are quieter?

Well, of course. Why could you not? When could you not?

(SILENCE.)

What do you wish of me, Holiness?

To be active in the world. To be the *Ahma*. To lead. To act as a guardian and protector. To be my strong right arm.

But Nehael. (Guilt. Longing. Conflict of interests. Confusion. Despair.)

I appreciate your honesty and directness.

I don't know what to do. Part of me desires to be selfish. I fear that I will resent you if I abandon her. I fear that I will fall if I pursue her, and you will withdraw your grace from me.

It is a difficult conundrum (humour). You have the right to choose. That can never be denied.

She suffers.

As do countless others.

I fear Titivilus.

That is wise. He is subtle and cunning. But he is not beyond your ability to deal with.

I feel confounded by him – why is he tied to my own salvation? His temptation is to be free of his presence. If I accept it, I fail. If I reject it, am I burdened with his whisperings for eternity?

There are always Devils. To deny it would be fruitless.

Part of me wishes to ask you to release me – if only for a short while.

Are you asking me?

(Shakes head). No.

Then what will you do, Eadric-Ahma?

Put my trust in you. Command me, and I will obey. I will abandon Nehael to whatever fate awaits her. But I ask that you grant me the strength to endure my guilt and shame.

And you still hope that, in so making that offer, I will take mercy upon you and release you from my service?

Yes – or part of me does, at least. But the offer is made in spite of that hope, not because of it.

(Leans forward and touches Eadric lightly on the forehead).

**SEEING FOR THE FIRST TIME I-THOU BEING-NONBEING-BECOMING KNOWING-
UNKNOWN SEEKING-FINDING-LOSING-FINDING TIME-BEING ETERNITY-
NONBEING NOW-BECOMING EVERYTHING-NOTHING IDENTITY-DIFFERENCE
RELATIVE-ABSOLUTE. NOTHING IS. NOTHING IS NOT. NOTHING BECOMES.**

“Saizha,”* Oronthon said.

Eadric wasn't sure if it was a question, or not, and knew that it didn't matter. Duality had evaporated in a soaring ecstasy.

**

I will enter Morne, now, and take up my seat in the Fane.

I will follow.

That is not necessary. I will go alone. Instruct the army to wait, although not to stand down – they will not be needed *quite* yet. And not in the capacity that many anticipated.

Then command me.

(Smiles). You are free. Do as you must do. I will recall you to my side when I need you.

(Disbelief). But that is not what you require of me.

No. But I grant it nonetheless.

But why?

(Laughter). Because you didn't ask. Consider Grace to have descended upon you for the third time. Remember, you are empowered to decide right from wrong.

Titivilus insisted that you will demand much of me. That you will not compromise. That you will push me to my limit. He did not lie.

And so I will. But not yet. Eadric, it is not always *this* or *that*. There is room for flexibility.

But Morne. And Graz'zt?

Will do what it is in his nature to do. What is Necessity, if Oronthon is not unlimited?

What will happen?

Rivers of blood will flow. You will know what to do.

Holiness, forgive me – but what will you do?

I will weep.

And he vanished.

*

“Well?” Nwm asked.

The Paladin tried to speak, but merely looked frustrated, unable to convey the full magnitude of the experience.

“Is he a man, or a god?” Ortwin asked.

“Yes,” Eadric replied.

But his face shone with a light that never after left him.

**

“So, what is he going to *do*, exactly?” Ortwin asked. “Will there be a big showdown with Graz’zt, with lots of fireworks?”

Eadric sighed. “That is not his function. He will provide succour to those who need it, and guidance, and instruction. He is a teacher, not a soldier.”

“You’d think he’d be a bit more pro-active.”

“Hah!” Mostin said snidely. “Fat chance. He’s probably just your typical aloof deity-type, following his own, mysterious plans. Don’t expect him to put himself on the line.”

The Paladin moaned. “Let’s just leave out the motivational analysis. The fact is, I will have a temporary grace period in which I can act. I don’t know how long it will last, but we should seize the opportunity.”

“Er, how long are we talking, Ed?” Ortwin asked. “Hours? Days? Months?”

“I don’t know.”

“Hmm. That’s not much help.” Ortwin said sarcastically. “And what’s going to happen with Prince You-Know-Who? Is he still coming here?”

“Yes.”

“In an hour or so?”

“Yes.”

“Is there anything else you should tell us?”

Eadric briefly related the news about Jovol. And Kothchori. And Rimilin. And the exchange with Titivilus.

Mostin groaned. “It might have been useful if you’d told us this earlier.”

“There wasn’t time.”

“I don’t understand,” Ortwin said. “You said that this is an either/or situation. Titivilus’ temptation was based on that premise.”

Mostin merely laughed. “I think you’ll find that if you were to analyze *exactly* what the Devil said, you’d find plenty of loopholes and incomplete accounts. Without him actually lying, of course. I don’t blame you, Eadric. Even my colossal intellect was hard-pressed to contend with his nuances and intimations.”

“That’s reassuring,” Nwm said drily. “So is this Devil going to harass you from now on?”

“He will jibe me, and attempt to lead me astray, and at the same time I will use him to purify myself.”

“You *definitely* need to speak to Shomei,” Mostin grinned. “I didn’t know that Oronthon endorsed such radical methods.”

“Generally, he doesn’t. I am the *Ahma*, however.”

“I thought Devils were only allowed one shot at the temptation thing,” Ortwin said. “Isn’t that some

kind of violation of the rules?”

“The rules are changing,” Eadric replied.

“Perhaps,” Mostin said. “I think that the usual rules simply don’t apply to you any more. I see it in you Eadric. We are brethren now.”

Eadric looked confused, and more than a little worried.

“You are like me. You are no longer a man. You have transcended.” Mostin bowed in recognition.

“Being a quasi-semi-hemi-demigod is all very well,” Nwm said impatiently, “but the basic problem of *what the hell should we do?* remains. Currently I can sense no extraplanars or arcane casters of Rimilin’s power within Morne, so where exactly are they all?”

“Elsewhere, or *Mind Blanked*,” Mostin replied. “Tramst will not even show as a ripple in your continuum, Nwm. Any more than Graz’zt, or Rimilin, or Kothchori, I’d guess.”

“Jovol can sense them indirectly,” Eadric said.

“Can he indeed?” Mostin seemed half-dubious and half excited at the prospect.

“Titivilus informed me that Jovol is more powerful than the rest of the Wyrish wizards appreciate.”

“Go on...”

“He says that Hlioth knew him from before. That he is capable of...self incarnation? It may have been a metaphor. I don’t know. He was vague about the details.”

Nwm clicked his fingers. “Hello? Can we please deal with the matter in hand? We can discuss arcane mysteries at a later time. As I see it, we have two options: one, we hit Graz’zt when he arrives, and all die; or, two, we translate to the Abyss while he’s here, try to bust out Nehael...and all die. Other suggestions which do not include the ‘death’ component would be appreciated.”

“The first option is not an option in any case,” Mostin replied. “We will not find him unless he wishes to be found. In which case, he *would* kill us all in short order.”

“You’re going about this the wrong way,” Ortwin said casually. “We call his bluff. We can’t attack him directly, no matter what the circumstances are. We’ve already broken Ainhorr’s sword, imprisoned Rurunoth and snuffed out another one - which Balor did you *disintegrate*, Mostin?”

“I’ve no idea,” the Alienist replied.

“I can answer that,” Eadric said. “His name was Uruum – at least, according to Titivilus.”

“Aside from Ainhorr, that leaves Choeth, Irzho and Djorm,” Mostin said. “One of whom is already on the Prime.”

“Then let’s call in another one,” Ortwin said. “And kill him. And then another one. And when we’ve killed them all, we can start on the Mariliths, and the Nalfeshnees. We can break this bastard without going toe-to-toe with him, Ed.”

“I think Eadric has issues about conjuring demons,” Mostin said drily, “no matter what the motives.”

“Maybe he did once,” the Paladin replied, “but he’s damn well earned the right to decide whether the ends justify the means or not. And I have *no* reservations on this count.”

“Are you above the Law now, Ed?” Ortwin asked slyly.

“When I’ve decided exactly what the Law is, I’ll let you know,” Eadric answered. “In any case, we should probably wait until *after* Graz’zt has made his translation, and done whatever it is that he plans to do.”

“I’m not sure of the merit of that idea...” Mostin began.

“Titivilus expressly warned me against irritating Graz’zt too much before he acts. He seems to think

that it might precipitate an overreaction. Jovol has been reluctant to interfere for the same reason.”

“And you trust him?” Ortwin asked.

“No,” Eadric replied.

“All the same, he might be right,” Mostin conceded. “That is entirely plausible. Demon Princes are not renowned for their tolerant natures.”

“Plausibility is what worries me,” Ortwin countered.

“I hear you,” Eadric agreed.

“In any case,” Mostin continued, “I need to prepare – and that will take some while. But I don’t have adequate free valences to do it all in one evening.”

“Do what?”

“To bind and destroy two Balors,” Mostin grinned. “It will have to wait until tomorrow. And I’ll need to find out which one is already present on the Prime.”

“I seem to recall your needing expensive gems,” Eadric said.

“To trap them, yes,” the Alienist said. “To kill them, no. We just kill them.”

“Are you sure it’s that easy?” Nwm asked.

“Piece of cake,” Mostin smiled.

“Why do I get the feeling that we’ve had this conversation before?” Eadric groaned.

“Perhaps we should ransom one,” the Bard suggested. “Propose an exchange. Can you bring a succubus in as well?”

“I suppose so,” Mostin said.

“Then let’s kill a Balor, stick another one in a pentacle, bind a succubus and instruct her that we’ll kill the second one unless Graz’zt releases Nehael, and then *dismiss* her to relay the news to her master,” Ortwin seemed delighted with his plan.

“I’m not convinced that Graz’zt will go for a ransom deal,” Mostin said dubiously. “It’s difficult to know exactly what passes in the mind of any Demon, much less one of his stature. Who can tell how he thinks, or what his counsels are, or what things motivate him? Moreover, what of Kothchori? If he is capable of opening a *Gate* once, he can do it again. If we rouse Graz’zt’s ire to that degree, then it is likely he will deal with us swiftly and decisively. I say we hit Kothchori first. And *after* the Prince has made his return to the Abyss. We must break the link.”

“He is undetectable,” Eadric groaned.

“Not entirely,” Mostin replied. “If Titivilus was accurate in his appraisal of Jovol’s abilities.”

“Can you contact the Ogre?” Nwm asked. “He would be a useful ally.”

“Jovol follows his own rules,” Mostin answered. “When I have tried in the past, he has been unforthcoming. But it is possible.”

“Hlioth knows more about him than anyone else,” Eadric said. “It may be worth approaching her.” He looked at the Bard.

Ortwin sighed.

“There is another possibility,” Mostin said tentatively. “It is very dangerous.”

Eadric raised an eyebrow. “If it involves more Devils, then the answer is ‘no.’ I’ve got enough to deal with on that score already.”

“Pseudonaturals,” Mostin said. “Big ones.”

“I think I like that even less,” Eadric said. He sighed. “By rights, we should deal with our dead, before we do anything else. They should be taken in state into Morne – all deserve a place in the Temple crypts. But it will have to wait. And I suppose that, as we do not know exactly how or where Graz’zt will strike, we must simply wait until he does and then react accordingly in the aftermath. But it is frustrating. I feel impotent. Now would be a time to possess some insight into his nature, to be able to predict what he might do.”

“Presumably, Tramst could have told you, if he is privy to that information,” Ortwin sighed. “Why didn’t he?”

“I don’t claim to fully understand his methods,” the Paladin answered. “But I have no doubt as to his motives. And I am not above being addressed expediently.”**

“Has it occurred to you that that is one of the functions of Titivilus,” Ortwin pointed out. “From Oronthon’s perspective, at least. By entering into a dialogue with Evil, you come to understand it. To anticipate its movements and action. There may come a point when you can pre-empt it.”

“Maybe,” Eadric replied. “There might be a thousand other reasons, each equally plausible. I also think that thinking about it too hard is likely to lead to irreducible paradox, so I’m not going to get started on it.”

“A wise choice,” Nwm nodded.

**

Uedii, the Goddess, the Green Reality, groaned as yet another extraplanar entity desecrated her realm by manifesting within its confines. She was still far from her limit – as far as tolerating the interlopers was concerned. Her near-infinite capacity for absorption had, in the past, accommodated entire pantheons of warring gods, before she squashed them like flies.

Nonetheless, Nature was *irritated*. Clouds began to gather over Morne. Feys became short-tempered and vicious. Far to the south, in the archipelago of Pandicule, a volcano – long dormant – rumbled threateningly.

Prince Graz'zt appeared before the mage Kothchori in the sanctum of his island retreat, and the wizard quailed. Nearby, bound within a thaumaturgic diagram, the Archon Zhuel stood in silent meditation.

Graz'zt smiled. To be able to use *this* Archon had been an unexpected pleasure. His face screwed up as he considered Uzmi and Uruum and Rurunoth, and contorted wildly as he thought of Eadric.

“You are fuel, Archon,” the Prince said snidely. “Consider this: when your sublime form expires after aeons of servitude to your effulgent master, your spirit will be consumed and transformed into something filthy and loathesome.”

Zhuel said nothing. His face remained serene and impassive. As the Demon absorbed his essence, and swelled with the potency so imbibed, Zhuel gave no indication of pain or discomfort, and shot no look of hatred or contempt towards the Fiend. His annihilation was accompanied by an expression of profound pity for Graz'zt, which threw the Prince into a brief but prodigious rage. After a minute of paroxysm, he abruptly mastered himself.

The Demon appeared in Morne for a few seconds, spoke a phrase so terrible that space itself buckled under the strain, and promptly vanished exhausted back to his Abyssal realm.

A surge of elemental hatred broke outwards from the place where he had stood: the same spot in the Orangery of the Temple where Feezuu had slain the Archbishop Cynric. The Aether reverberated sympathetically. Fruit rapidly ripened, spoiled and fell to the ground in festering heaps. The grass wilted, and the orchard blackened and died.

Madness seized the already distressed inhabitants of Morne.

*Lit., “You See.”

**Ascended Masters and Saints within Oronthonianism frequently give cryptic or incomplete accounts to lesser beings, in the knowledge that often such creatures are incapable of understanding the full ramifications of information that would otherwise be imparted.

Dark Subsumption is a method used to fuel Epic Spells cast by certain fiends, which involves the annihilation of powerful outsiders. The mechanics were only worked out after I had access to the BoVD.

Wave of Hate was the spell that Graz’zt invoked. It will be detailed in the next post.

The Characters

Although I’d normally post them in the Rogues’ Gallery, here are the characters as of this post. My rewards aren’t always conventional, so it’s probably worth explaining a few things:

Eadric

Levelling was rapid for Eadric from 18-20: the final level was, in fact “free” to all intents and purposes – the transcendence granted by Tramst in this post (i.e. a 5th level Divine Disciple). Marc is targeting the Divine Emissary PrC from the Epic Level Handbook, although he has yet to decide the intervening levels. Maybe Divine Agent from MotP.

I am using the idea of ‘levelled weapons’ for Lukarn – i.e., as Eadric grows in stature, so does the sword. This had been the plan since around level 13-14, although I had neglected to implement it (oops). Eadric’s transcendence seemed like a good point for a large growth in the sword’s abilities,

perhaps reflecting an ‘awakening’ similar to that of its master.

Rewards for Eadric were big, but Marc deserved them. He’d been a truly awesome player.

Ortwin

Rob had already foregone advancing one level of experience, and did so again in order to fully rationalize his character (in his mind). I allowed him to apply the remaining benefits of the Satyr race, which the *reincarnation* spell had denied him – these included the Fey hit dice and skill points (minus those extra x4 which he would have gained at 1st level), and three feats (two of which he already possessed). As Ortwin originally had an extra feat on conversion to 3e, Rob and I came to an arrangement which suited both of us: Ortwin’s Satyr-ness was fully integrated both mechanically and in the role-playing sense, and the inconsistencies of the *reincarnation* spell were resolved. Ortwin is no longer a reincarnated half-elf. He *really* is a Satyr, in every sense. Rob is happy with Satyrdom, although he feels he will be shafted by the ELH multiclassing rules.

It also meant that the ‘is he ECL +5 or not?’ question was resolved. He now *is*. Of course, when he levels to 18, he will receive another feat. Epic Skill Focus (Bluff) looks likely. One has to work hard to remain the best liar in the world.

Nwm

Nwm levelled, and I allowed Dave to trade out TWF and Improved TWF for some feats from MotW – reflecting a gradual ‘forgetting’ of abilities, to be replaced by new ones. I’m pretty flexible in that regard, and Nwm is less optimized than the other characters anyhow. Nwm will stick with Druid all the way.

Mostin

Dan decided to pump all of his XP into a +5 inherent bonus to Mostin’s intelligence instead of levelling to 19. Mostin now has a ‘brain the size of a planet,’ as Marvin, the Paranoid Android, once said.

More generally, I allowed a retrospective reallocation of skill points in the case of previous cross-class skills for Eadric: Knowledge (Religion) and Knowledge (Nobility) shouldn't be quite such a sink for a Paladin. I also did the same based on Mostin's Intelligence increases over several levels – note, however that I do *not* allow the Headband of Intellect to increase skill points gained per level. That's just silly.

Mostin, having maxed out the skills that were any use to him, opted to throw them into Craft skills. Apparently, Illumination and Engraving have been a secret passion of his for some while...

Eadric, Earl of Deorham

Male human Paladin 15 / Divine Disciple 5; CR 20; Medium size outsider (human); HD 15d10+60 plus 5d8 + 20; hp 201; Init +1; Speed 20 ft; AC 28 (touch 11, flatfooted 27); Attack: +30/+25/+20/+15 melee (Lukarn) or +27/+22/+17/+12 (Kirm); Dmg: 1d10+11 (15-20/x2)(Luakrn) or 1d8+9 (x3) (Kirm). SV Fort +23, Ref +13, Will +18; AL LG; Str 18 (24), Dex 13, Con 18, Int 12, Wis 16, Cha 23.

Languages: Common, Celestial

Skills: Ride +16, Knowledge (Religion) +18, Knowledge (Nobility) +9, Diplomacy +29, Handle Animal +11, Perform +10 (Ballad, Ode, Lute, Dance), Knowledge (History) +6, Sense Motive +18.

Feats: Exotic Weapon Proficiency (Bastard Sword), Power Attack, Mounted Combat, Ride-by-Attack, Spirited Charge, Weapon Focus (Bastard Sword), Improved Critical (Bastard Sword), Divine Might.

Special Abilities: Detect Evil at will, Divine Grace, Lay on Hands (75hp/day), Divine Health, Aura of Courage, Smite Evil (1/day, +15 dmg), Remove Disease (5/week), Turn Undead (as CLE 13, 8/day). Strength Domain Power (1/day: +20 to Str for 1 round). Divine Emissary (Telepathy w/ LG celestials in 60 ft.), Sacred Defense +2, Imbue with Spell Ability, Transcendence.

Spells: -/4/4/4/3. Prepared spells vary, but usually include "Holy Sword." Plus Strength domain spells: Endure Elements, Bull's Strength, Magic Vestment, Spell Immunity. Caster level 12.

Magic Items:

"Lukarn." +4 LG Keen Fiend Bane Sunblade. Int 14, Wis 17, Cha 18. Empathy. 1 x Extraordinary Ability: Heal 1/day. Special Purpose: Slay Chaotic Evil Creatures. Special Purpose Power: Confusion. Lukarn has an Ego of 25.

"The Skin of Sarth." +4 Full Plate Armour of Invulnerability.

"Melimpor's Iron Girdle." Belt of Giant Strength +6.

"Melimpor's Shield." A Large +3 Shield of Blinding.

"Kirm." Heavy +2 Dragonbane Lance.

3 Javelins of Lightning

4 Potions of Cure Serious Wounds; 2 Potions of Haste.

The Left Eye of Palamabron: A Gem of Seeing with the "Discern Lies," "Zone of Revelation," and "Zone of Truth" abilities as cast by a 20th level Cleric usable at will.

34 Years. 190 lbs. 6'1"

Ortwin the Satyr

Male Satyr Fighter5/Rogue5/Bard7; Medium-size fey; HD 5d6+20 plus 5d10+20 plus 5d6+20 plus 7d6+28; hp 175; Init +10; Speed 40 ft; AC 28 (touch 16, flatfooted 22 ++ Displacement Effects); Attack: +27/+22/+17/+12 (Githla) or +26/+21/+16/+11 (Anguish and +3 arrow); Dmg: 1d6+7 (12-20/x2) (Githla) or 1d8 +5 + enervation (Anguish and +3 arrow); SV Fort +12, Ref +20, Will +12; AL CG(N Tendencies); Str 13, Dex 22, Con 18, Int 15, Wis 12, Cha 20 (24).

Languages: Common, Draconic, Old Borchion, Elf, Sylvan

Skills: Perform +31 (20 Ranks: Storytelling, Epic, Chant, Drum, Lyre, Lute, Pipe, Mime, Formal Dance, Folkdance, Folksong, Sword Swallowing, Juggling, Pan Pipes, Clarion, Satire), Bluff +32, Pick Pocket +14, Climb +9, Swim +7, Hide +29, Move Silently +29, Disguise +13, Knowledge (Arcana) +6, Innuendo +13, Open Lock +12, Use Magic Device +15, Search +11, Spot +22, Listen +19.

Feats: Weapon Focus (Scimitar), Weapon Finesse (Scimitar - Yes, I allow this), Dodge, Expertise, Mobility, Weapon Specialization (Scimitar), Skill Focus (Bluff), Spring Attack, Whirlwind Attack, Improved Critical (Scimitar), Brew Potion, Improved Initiative.

Special Abilities: Sneak Attack +3d6, Evasion, Uncanny Dodge (Flatfooted Dex Bonus), Bardic Music, Bardic Knowledge. +4 Racial Bonus to Hide, Listen, Perform, Spot and Move Silently checks.

Spells: 3/5/4/2 per day. Known: 0lvl: Dancing Lights, Daze, Flare, Light, Read Magic, Prestidigitation; 1st lvl: Sleep, Charm Person, Cure Light Wounds, Alarm, Ventriloquism; 2nd lvl: Silence, Cat's Grace, Glitterdust, Detect Thoughts; 3rd lvl: Major Image, Scrying.

Magic Items:

"Dread Githla." +4 Keen, Throwing and Returning Scimitar

Cloak of Displacement (Major)

+5 Studded Leather Armour

The Blue Garnet Collar (Grants wearer +4 to Charisma).

Winged Boots

Potion of Fiery Breath.

Potion of Invisibility.

"Anguish." A +1 Magical (+3 Mighty) Composite Longbow of Enervation. Those struck by missiles from this weapon are affected as though by the spell of the same name (Save DC17).

20 x +3 Arrows

Masterwork Pan Pipes

Masterwork Lute

Hat of Disguise

Nwm the Preceptor

Male human Druid 18; medium sized humanoid (human); HD 18d8+36; hp 121; Init +1; Speed 30 ft; AC 19 (Touch 11, flat-footed 18); Attack: +18/+13/+8 (Magical Quarterstaff) or +15 (Magical Javelin) Dmg: 1d6+4 (x2) (Magical Quarterstaff) or 1d6 +3 (x2) (Magical Javelin), SV Fort +13, Ref +7, Will +16; AL NG; Str 14, Dex 12, Con 14, Int 15, Wis 20, Cha 17.

Languages: Common, Elven, Sylvan, Druidic

Skills: Animal Empathy +19, Handle Animal +9, Swim +10, Intuit Direction +10, Concentration +18, Wilderness Lore +26, Knowledge (Nature) + 22, Knowledge (Arcana) +6, Scry +18, Spellcraft +11, Diplomacy +8, Heal +7, Profession (Herbalist) +11, Craft (Leatherworker) +6

Feats: Weapon Focus (Quarterstaff), Ambidexterity, Extra Wild Shape, Create Infusion, Brew Potion, Craft Wondrous Item, Natural Spell, Snatch

Special Abilities: Woodland Stride, Trackless Step, +4 on Saves vs. Fey Enchantments, Wild Shape (6/day; Huge; Elemental 3/day), Venom Immunity, A Thousand Faces, Timeless Body.

Spells Per Day: 6/7/6/6/6/5/4/3/3/2

Nwm's Staff (+2 Staff of the Woodlands topped with an Orb of Storms)

"Leofric's Token," a +3 Amulet of Natural Armour

+3 Leather Armour

"The Bleeding Spears of Huttur," 2x +1 Javelins of Wounding

Bag of Tricks (Rust Colour)

Nwm's Torc: Command activated device which allows the wearer to 'Commune with Nature' as cast by a 9th level Druid.

46 Years; 178lbs; 5'11"

Mostin the Metagnost

Human Diviner 8 / Alienist 10; medium-size outsider (human); HD 8d4+8 plus 10d4+10 +6 (Insane Certainty); hp 74; Init +3; Speed 30 ft; AC 22 (touch 17, flat-footed 19); Attack: +10/+5 MW Rapier melee; Dmg: 1d6+1 MW Rapier melee (18-20/x2), SV Fort +7, Ref +9, Will +18; AL N(G Tendencies); Str 11, Dex 16, Con 13, Int 27 (33), Wis 16 (18), Cha 12.

Intelligence includes a +5 Inherent bonus.

Languages: Common, Draconic, Celestial, Abyssal, Infernal, Auran, Ignan, Terran, Aquan, Elven

Skills: Knowledge (Arcana) +32, Knowledge (The Planes) +32, Knowledge (History) +32, Knowledge (Geography) +32, Knowledge (Nobility) +20, Knowledge (Engineering) +20, Spellcraft +32, Alchemy +32, Scry +32, Concentration +32, Craft (Illumination) +21, Craft (Engraving) +21, Ride +5.

Feats: Martial Weapon Proficiency (Rapier), Scribe Scroll, Brew Potion, Alertness, Craft Wondrous Item, Quicken Spell, Still Spell, Maximize Spell, Chain Spell, Energy Substitution (sonic), Empower Spell, Spell Focus (Conjuration).

Special Abilities: Alien Blessing (+1 Insight Bonus on Saving Throws), Extra Summoning, Summon Alien, Insane Certainty, Timeless Body, Pseudonatural Familiar, Transcendence

Phobia: birds.

Spells: 4/7/7/7/6/6/6/5/4/3 per day. Specialty: Divination (+1 spell/level/day). Extra Summoning = 1 x Summon Monster IX. Prohibited: Necromancy. Save DC 21 + spell level (or 23 + spell level for Conjurations).

Known:

0lvl: All PHB Cantrips.

1st lvl: Sleep, Charm Person, Alarm, Ventriloquism, Know Protections, Lesser Acid Orb, Enlarge, Chromatic Orb, Expeditious Retreat, Mount, Message, Summon Monster, Comprehend Languages, Detect Undead, Identify, True Strike, Jump, Spider Climb, Magic Missile.

2nd lvl. Detect Thoughts, Summon Swarm, Tasha's Hideous Laughter, Summon Monster II, Web, Locate Object, Detect Invisibility, Darkness, Alter Self, Knock, Cat's Grace, Bull's Strength, Eagle's Splendour, Fox's Cunning, Arcane Lock, Continual Flame, Obscure Object, Whispering Wind, Dimensional Pocket, Mostin's Aura of Inscrutability, Mostin's Arrhythmic Apoplexy, Mostin's Myopic Emanation

3rd lvl: Avoid Planar Effects, Phantom Steed, Stinking Cloud, Summon Monster III, Fireball, Lightning Bolt, Magic Circle Against Chaos/Evil/Good/Law, Nondetection, Arcane Sight, Dispel Magic, Tongues, Fly, Clairaudience/Clairvoyance.

4th lvl: Dimensional Anchor, Evard's Black Tentacles, Minor Creation, Summon Monster IV, Arcane Eye, Detect Scrying, Locate Creature, Leomund's Secure Shelter, Scrying, Charm Monster, Stoneskin, Phantasmal Killer, Shadow Conjuration, Zone of Respite, Ethereal Mount, Vitriolic Sphere, Improved Bull's Strength, Improved Cat's Grace, Improved Fox's Cunning, Attune Form, Polymorph Self, Mostin's Interminable Sermon, Mostin's Torque Tendril, Zone of Revelation.

5th lvl: Dismissal, Lesser Planar Binding, Cloudkill, Major Creation, Summon Monster V, Contact Other Plane, Fabricate, Prying Eyes, Rary's Telepathic Bond, Dream, Nightmare, Mestil's Acid Sheath, Wall of Force, Sending, Teleport, Mostin's Metempsychotic Reversal, Mostin's Paroxysm of Fire, Permanency, Tenser's Destructive Resonance.

6th lvl: Repulsion, Gate Seal, Eyebite, Make Manifest, Hardening, Contingency, Acid Storm, Antimagic Field, Fiendform, Disintegrate, Planar Binding, Summon Monster VI, Analyze Dweomer, Legend Lore, True Seeing, Chain Lightning, Guards and Wards, Tenser's Transformation, Mass Haste, Mostin's Id Eruption

7th lvl: Banishment, Sequester, Energy Immunity, Vipergout, Delayed Blast Fireball, Teleport Without Error, Spell Turning, Summon Monster VII, Greater Scrying, Vision, Insanity, Plane Shift, Ethereal Jaunt, Limited Wish, Reality Maelstrom, Mordenkainen's Magnificent Mansion.

8th lvl: Mind Blank, Greater Planar Binding, Great Shout, Summon Monster VIII, Sympathy, Trap the Soul, Discern Location, Binding, Etherealness, Mostin's Metagnostic Inquiry, Polymorph any Object, Mass Manifest, Symbol, Maze.

9th lvl: Summon Monster IX, Wish, Gate, Time Stop, Prismatic Sphere, Imprisonment.

Magic Items:

Looking Glass of Urm Nahat (Mirror of Mental Prowess)
Portable Hole
Bracers of Armour +4
Ring of Protection +4
Incandescent Blue Sphere Ioun Stone (+2 Wis)
Pale Green Prism Ioun Stone (Sustains without Air)
Iridescent Spindle Ioun Stone (Sustains without Food or Water)
Amulet of Absorption (21 Spell Levels Remain): 3 currently stored
Headband of Intellect +6
Robe of Eyes
Belt of Many Pockets
Mostin's Comfortable Retreat
4 Potions of "Cure Serious Wounds."

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 01-17-2003

Regarding Eadric's experience:

SEEING FOR THE FIRST TIME

There is a compounded meaning within this phrase. Not only *saizhan* – i.e. “Insight,” but also insight into the nature of insight, and insight into that etc. The rational mind rapidly loses the ability to grasp the spiralling nature of the Real.

I-THOU

This calls into question the conventional apprehension that the object (in this case, Oronthon/Tramst) and the subject (Eadric) are, in fact, separate entities. By extension, all other dualities between the perceiver and the perceived are shown to be merely conventional, and not ultimately Real.

BEING-NONBEING-BECOMING

The three possible ontological states as understood by Urgic Mysticism: either something *is*, or *is not* or is in the process of *becoming something else*. No phenomenon, when viewed from the standpoint of conventional philosophy, can exist outside of this triad. Again, this is called into question by *saizhan* when describing the Real.

KNOWING-UNKNOWNING

The nature of *saizhan* itself cannot be framed in conventional epistemological language, and transcends the usual categories of gnostic understanding. The duality between whether the Real is known, or whether it is not, is also shown to be false.

SEEKING-FINDING-LOSING-FINDING

The rational mind attempts unsuccessfully to reassert itself and grasp the nature of the Real. During the experience of *saizhan*, when the subject attempts to articulate the nature of the Real using conventional thought, the experience eludes him. Only when it is lost to the rational mind, can its nature be apprehended. The Real is slippery.

TIME-BEING ETERNITY-NONBEING NOW-BECOMING

The ontological triad (being, nonbeing, becoming) is linked with the three temporal states (conventional linear time, timelessness/eternity and the moment Now), but *saizhan* reveals these correspondances to be nothing more than convenient labels. The true nature of the Real is beyond these categories, and cannot be described by normal temporal language.

EVERYTHING-NOTHING

The extremes of monism (i.e., the philosophical idea that ‘all is one’), and nihilism (‘nothing is Real’) are shown to be false conceptions – *saizhan* reveals that the duality between them is constructed, not Real.

IDENTITY-DIFFERENCE

An important point, in which *saizhan* diverges from other mystical systems. Even the duality between regarding whether something is identical to something else, or different from it is shown to be vacuous.

RELATIVE-ABSOLUTE

The philosophical coup, which marks *saizhan* as unique (and is a demonstration of Tramst’s genius). Here, the distinction between the Real (the absolute) and the merely conventional (the relative) is shown to be false. Even this duality is addressed. Now there is nothing left for the rational mind to grasp onto.

NOTHING IS. NOTHING IS NOT. NOTHING BECOMES

The final, bold assertion framed as a threefold dialectic of negation, and reiterating the ontological questions raised before. The Real cannot be described as either *existing* or *not existing*, or as being in the process of *becoming*. This is the central mystical assertion of *saizhan*.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 02-10-2003

The Rape

Wyrth, a cloth-merchant of considerable financial means, lived in a large, comfortable manse in the Temple district of Morne. His home – constructed on a single level in the antique style – was maintained to immaculate standards. Pristine whitewashed walls, a red clay pan-tiled roof, and a neat, formal garden were looked after by Wyrth's small but diligent retinue of indentured servants.

Wyrth – a member of Morne's influential middle class – enjoyed his life, although of late the war had taken a toll on his income. His wife, Qéma, was a younger daughter of the Silubrein household – relatives of the incumbent Earl of Scir Cellod in the south of Wyre. The marriage had been a favorable one, elevating Wyrth to quasi-noble status, and benefiting the Silubreins with a much-needed boost to their near-empty coffers. Wyrth was a *Gilded Thane*, in the popular parlance – regarded with disdain by those of established pedigree, but nonetheless one who wielded as much power as many of those who could trace their lineage back twenty generations.

An hour before sunset, as clouds were gathering again in the sky above Morne, and many wondered what new sorcery was at work, Wyrth suddenly paused above his ledgers and accounts, his quill pen twitching nervously in his hand. He swallowed, and his hackles rose. Blood thundered in his temples as he thought of Qéma, and he wondered what folly had led him to marry her in the first place. He glanced around his study, selected a sturdy marble book-end, and went in search of his wife.

Wyrth never had a chance to smash her skull, however, because as he exited a small drawing-room, Qéma stood in wait for him. She pushed a long larding needle into his throat, and Wyrth fell over, gurgled briefly, and died.

In a red haze, Qéma walked outside and went to look for the gardener, who had annoyed her earlier that day by what she perceived as his mismanagement of the shrubbery.

Across Morne, with minor variations, the pattern was repeated a thousand times.

**

"The Goddess is angry," Nwm said with startling certainty, as his torc relayed a variety of natural grumbings to his mind.

"Graz'zt has come?" Eadric asked anxiously. "Can you determine his whereabouts?"

"I cannot," Nwm answered. "And Graz'zt is merely the latest in a succession of aliens who *should not be here*." The Druid's disdain towards demons, devils, celestials and incarnate deities alike was barely concealed. His perceptions shifted repeatedly as he tried to focus on something tangible in his consciousness. Half a minute passed.

Across his field of inner vision, tiny points of light – sentient beings – appeared. All of those within nine miles, in fact. There were eighty-four thousand three hundred and nineteen of them. In the Temple district of Morne, many flared rapidly – enjoying a brief moment of intensity – before they disappeared permanently. He watched in morbid fascination as lives were snuffed out.

Death – unnatural - violence – the desire to do great violence – fear – *hatred*.

Nwm vomited, as his groping mind resonated with the emotional reality of what was transpiring within the city.

"Hatred," he gasped.

"Enchantment?" Mostin asked cannily.

"Yes. YES."

"Intriguing," the Alienist observed.

"Is it permanent?" the Paladin asked. "Are those who enter likely to feel its effects?"

"No, and no," Mostin answered. "Unless Graz'zt's stature has somehow grown tenfold."

"Do we really know how powerful he is?" Ortwin asked nervously.

"Not *that* powerful," Mostin assured him.

"Er, so remind me why exactly Oronthon's avatar isn't doing anything about this," Ortwin said sarcastically.

"I am in no mood for a Theological debate," Eadric snapped.

"Nwm would say Theological," Mostin quipped.

The Druid groaned, and abruptly turned into an eagle. He exited the tent, screeched, and was quickly joined by two more – Sem and Gheim. The three flew towards Morne. Eadric, Ortwin and Mostin followed him out, to be greeted by a riot of colour – Templars, aristocrats, soldiers and mercenaries – all of whom had expectant looks upon their faces.

Ahma, they cried with one voice.

*Oh, Sh*t*, thought the Paladin. The damn army wanted someone to tell them what to do. He motioned to Brey and Sercion, who approached expectantly.

"Assemble every anointed Templar*," Eadric instructed his captains. "We are going into Morne."

A wide grin appeared on Brey's face. "That is a wise choice, *Ahma*. Our holiness alone will prevail. We have no need of foreign mercenaries."

The Paladin smiled grimly. "You misunderstand, Brey. We are not going in to fight. I require swords to remain in their scabbards."

Tramst had told him that he would know what to do. He hoped he was doing the right thing.

**

Inside the audience chamber of the Royal Palace – the ceiling of which still dripped slowly from the torrential rains of the previous night – Prince Tagur was finally received by King Tiuhan and the remainder of the Small Council. He limped, his arms were burned and painful from the exchange with Rimilin and the Demons outside of the gates, and he was still bloody and bruised from his escape from Hullu's encampment.

Foide, who had privately hoped for Tagur's demise, feigned relief at his appearance. The Prince of Einir, who seldom misread others' motives, scowled briefly.

"So who had the bright idea of employing the Demonist as an ambassador?" He spat sarcastically.

"His Majesty," the Chamberlain replied loftily. "And you should speak with more respect, although we are glad to find you alive and well."

Tagur gave an icy stare. "Foide, shut up." He bowed to the Boy-King. "I fear that you may have made an error of judgement, your Highness.** It is a hard lesson – but you should learn from it. Where is Rimilin now?"

"No longer here," Sihü answered. "The Bishop of Gibilrazen says that he and the Heretic are most likely engaged in some diabolic feud, where they are arguing about who claims the spoils after the world ends."

"Where is that fat oaf, anyway?" Tagur asked irreverently, causing Tiuhan to snicker.

"He has returned to the Temple," Sihü replied with earnest piety. "He left abruptly, and did not explain why."

The Prince grunted. From Eadric's words, he had an inkling of the reasons for the Bishop's sudden departure, but felt no urge to share them with the others present. Damned religious nonsense. Why

couldn't people just get by without it?

After an hour of wrangling about how best to deal with the ongoing crisis in Wyre – half a dozen armies in the area, all but their own respective troops of dubious loyalty to each of the magnates present – Attar, the Warden of the North returned to the chamber. His normally taciturn manner had been replaced by something which Tagur perceived to be close to panic.

"Riots have broken out in the Temple Quarter," he panted.

"What now," Foide sighed drily, "another doctrinal dispute?"

"If it is, I've never seen anything like it before," Attar replied. "It's some kind of hysteria. They're killing each other in the streets. Templars, soldiers who were stationed on the West Wall, old women, toddlers, everyone."

Tagur groaned. The Demonist probably had a hand in this new mischief. And with the Heretic outside of the city, they could hardly draw soldiers away from the walls to contain it. He motioned to Attar, winced in pain as he hurried out of the audience room, and made his way to the tall West Tower of the palace.

*Sh*t*, he thought as he looked out at the scene. They were butchering each other by the hundred out there, and new fires were starting – their smoke rising to join the smoldering remnants of those which had burned the night before. A lot had happened in a day. And now the Fane itself was burning.

In disbelief, Prince Tagur watched as the Temple's south transept, wracked by earthquake, wind, torrential rain, and now, fire, teetered and cracked. Immense buttresses and pilons snapped like straws, and the edifice collapsed in a ruin, briefly exposing a light in the nave beyond, before it was obscured by smoke and dust.

From inside the Temple, something reached out and gently touched his mind. Tagur suddenly *saw*. The cosmos melted, and was made whole again in an instant. Moments later, Eadric's trumpets sounded beyond the city walls.

Tagur turned to Attar. "Let him in," he said. "Before its too late."

The Warden's jaw dropped. "Your Highness..." he began.

"Do it. Open the South Gate."

**

"It is only a technical violation," Mulissu complained. "I don't see what all the fuss is about." She lounged in one of the huge leather chairs in Shomei's study.

Jovol sighed. "If you don't have the stomach for this, Mulissu..."

"Don't be so damned condescending. I admire the principle. I agreed to listen to you, didn't I?" Her memory flashed back to her own fears of assault from Feezuu – although the Ogre's proposition would have done little to protect her.

"Under much duress," Shomei said snidely. She shifted uncomfortably in her chair, the scars from her exchange with Titivilus still apparent. "Besides, its not as though *you* will be the one to suffer the consequences of it."

"It is a tedious waste," the Savant answered. "And I still don't understand why we can't perform the ritual afterwards. Or why the clauses regarding summoning and wizards assailing other wizards can't simply be dropped. There will always be extenuating circumstances."

"Not any more," the Ogre replied. "The Injunction will now be watertight."

"*Nothing* is ever watertight. Mostin won't like this." Mulissu sighed.

Shomei laughed. "If there are any loopholes, he will find them."

"Mostin has hardly been an exemplar in observing the Injunction," Jovol agreed wryly. "Which is why I have decided to include him. I'd rather have him in on it, than trying to wriggle around it. Besides, we need his input to fuel the spell. I have already sent written copies of the proposal to Waide, Tozinack, Daunton and Hlioth – a quorum is desirable."

"Mostin means well," Mulissu sighed. "But will be reluctant to surrender his sovereignty to an abstraction." A worried look crossed her face. "You've made a powerful case, Jovol, but I fear that what you suggest will rip the heart out of magic in Wyre."

"It will merely relocate a certain aspect of it."

"And Hlioth? She is hardly reliable."

"You do not know her as I do. I've shown you the Web of Motes."

"It is indecipherable to me," the Witch said, waving her hand in a dismissive gesture. "I must take your word for it. And what happens if you receive a blanket refusal from all of those whom you have asked?" Mulissu probed.

"Then I will *Gate* in half a dozen Solars and they will help me instead," Jovol grumbled. "One way or another, *this will happen*."

"Have you decided upon the Enforcer?" Shomei asked. "One of the *Akesoli**** could be bound with this spell."

Jovol shook his head. "They are too political," he said. "And to co-opt them would cause too many ripples. But I concur with your reasoning – something Diabolic would seem to fit the bill, but something outside of the established order – I am leaning towards Gihaahia."

"That is certainly a terrifying prospect for potential violators," Shomei nodded.

"An infernal magnate?" Mulissu asked, uninformed about the nuances of the Diabolic hierarchy.

"An *Infernal*," Shomei replied. "The offspring of Prince Astaroth and the dead Goddess, Cheshne."

"She is not dead," Jovol smiled. "She dreams with the others."

"In any case, Gihaahia is an abhorrence. An atavism from a previous reality."

"Your concept of reality is quaintly rational," Jovol chided.

"And yours is numinous bunkum," Shomei retorted. "But I am not here to argue metaphysics – or transmetaphysics, before you say anything."

Mulissu groaned and looked bored. This was precisely why she had isolated herself for so long. "I will fetch Mostin," she said, and vanished.

**

The Alienist seethed, looking at the huge, carved marble slab.

"You have *no* right to do this," he snapped.

"I have the power," Jovol replied calmly. "And the foresight. And a responsibility to the future. That is enough."

"And *you*?" Mostin looked incredulously at both Mulissu and Shomei. "Have you lost your wits? You of all people, Shomei. You live for this. You cannot *ban* an entire subschool of magic."

"I accept the limitations as part of a larger set of rules, Mostin. Jovol will not move on any of them. Besides, it will only affect those who cannot perform their summonings elsewhere."

"That is precisely why it won't work," Mostin sighed. "Those who wish to will simply go elsewhere in order to do it, and then order their creatures into Wyre."

Jovol touched the slab. In response to his words, a minute paragraph carved upon the huge tablet glowed, and seemed to grow in size. Luminous runes hung in the air.

33.6(e)...*this prohibition extends to the calling or summoning of creatures outside of the excluded area, and their subsequent deployment within it. Such violators will also be subject to the Enforcer.*

"Pah!" The Alienist snorted. "What about the didactic implications? To remove summoning from a mage's repertoire will impact the understanding of magic in general."

"I have the same concern," Mulissu nodded.

"And I am concerned about *defense*," Mostin said. "What happens if a Wizard is magically attacked, and his or her specialty is conjuration? He can no longer summon creatures to protect him."

Jovol smiled, and touched the tablet. "Observe..."

5.0 *No Wizard shall, at any time or in any way, assail another Wizard by magical means...*

"That's pretty radical," Mostin said.

"The *theory* of summoning is not banned, nor is the practice beyond Wyre's boundaries. Please, Mostin, do not get stuck on this one point. Read the tablet in its entirety. There are clauses to cover every contingency, and even an appeal clause in the case of possible miscarriage."

"Appeal? Appeal to whom? To you?"

"To the Claviger." Jovol replied.

"What the Hell is the *Claviger*?" Mostin asked.

"You are looking at it," Jovol said, a wide grin appearing on his huge face, and exposing rows of enormous fangs, "at least, in a manner of speaking. The Claviger inhabits the tablet upon which the

Injunction has been scribed."

"The tablet is *sapient*?" The Alienist asked in disbelief.

"Profoundly so," Jovol nodded. "It can also independently manifest itself. The Enforcer will be bound to the Claviger, and will act as directed by it."

"What is this 'intelligence?'" Mostin asked. "Where did it originate?"

Jovol laughed. "Dream," he said.

Mostin raised an eyebrow. "What is its order – in the sense of its size, rather than its genus? Its inclination? Its motivations?"

"It is the Claviger," Jovol said simply. "And it has agreed to my suggestion."

"To inhabit this piece of rock? It must be crazy. I am disinclined to trust it."

"Trust is inconsequential," Jovol sighed. "It is not in the nature of the Claviger to manipulate others for its own ends. It does not have an ego or a personality, in the conventional sense. As to its order – *deific* would be an understatement. It perceives the magical continuum at all times. It will instantly know of any violation."

The Alienist's jaw dropped. "This is outrageous," he said.

"I told you he wouldn't like it," Mulissu groaned. "Perhaps we should have asked Jael and Troap."

"To do what?" Mostin inquired suspiciously.

"To help us bind the Enforcer," Shomei answered.

"And what will the Enforcer be?"

"I am leaning towards Gihaahia at present," Jovol answered.

Mostin wracked his memory, until he recalled the name. The blood drained from his face. "Please wait for a while."

He scanned the tablet minutely for one hour.

"You're all cracked," he said, and then laughed loudly, as an epiphany struck him. "But count me in. I've a feeling you're going to do it anyway, and if there will be no more summonings, I'd like my last one in Wyre to be a big one."

"I was hoping you'd feel that way," Jovol nodded. "But we are not *calling* Gihaahia. We will be going *to* her, in order to bind her."

"That would be less arduous in terms of the magic required," Mostin nodded. "Are co-operative spells a particular specialty of yours, Jovol?" He asked archly.

"They were once," the Ogre nodded, seeing the knowing look upon the Alienist's face.

"Thought so," Mostin said. "One last thing," he asked, "I was planning on *calling* two Balors tomorrow..."

"My Web of Motes indicated the possibility," Jovol answered. "If you proceed, you should make sure that you are outside of Wyre, and do not force them to act as your agents within it."

"I assume that extradimensional spaces are not excluded?"

"Of course not," Shomei replied. "You see? It will have little impact on you and I, so long as we exercise prudence."

"When do you propose to bind the Infernal?" Mostin asked.

"Is your highest valence available to you?" Jovol asked.

The Alienist puffed out his cheeks, and nodded.

"Then now is as good a time as any. I will contact Waide and the others. Mulissu?"

The Elementalist agreed, and looked sadly at Jovol. Here was one whom she had barely begun to know, the passing of whose friendship she already lamented. The Ogre had indicated that there was a ninety-six percent chance that he would be dead within two days.

Jovol smiled quietly to himself. His prescience had seldom failed him.

**

Nwm circled overhead, ready to conjure elementals in order to tear down Morne's South Gate if necessary. Below him, Eadric sat upon Contundor amid three hundred Templars – those of particular holiness and devotion who acted as channels for their deity's power.

A deity whose proxy was within the Temple walls, Eadric thought to himself.

At that moment, a roaring noise – masonry cracking and falling – echoed across the city and to the gates. In the sky, Nwm screeched at Gheim, and the eagle plummeted downwards, broke its dive, and alighted upon the pommel of Eadric's saddle.

"Part of the Temple just collapsed," Gheim said in a matter-of-fact way. "It is on fire. There are other fires within. Men, women and children are murdering each other on the streets."

Eadric felt sick, and motioned to Jorde, who bore the horn of the recently burned Hyne around his neck. It rang out, to be quickly followed by several more amongst the Templars.

Perhaps a dozen arrows and bolts issued from the towers above the gate, and clattered off of armour and barding. A rather half-hearted response, Eadric mused to himself. Perhaps the others were being

deployed inside the walls. He waited. Within the walls, another horn sounded. Moments later, the gates opened.

The Paladin, half-expecting a charge directed at him from within, braced himself for the assault. Instead, numbers of Morne's inhabitants surged outwards, carrying children too young to walk, and those few possessions which they felt worth saving. Most simply fled. Others seemed to be randomly killing those attempting to escape, or each other. It was impossible to determine who were the victims, and who the attackers. Who was enchanted, and who was not.

"Apprehend anyone behaving aggressively," Eadric's voice boomed out. "Knock them out and tie them up. We can decide what to do with them when we've subdued them." He prayed that it would be enough. Motioning to Brey, Sercion, Jorde and a dozen others, he rode through the gate and headed for the Temple.

The scene which greeted him on his procession was more barbaric, more obscene, and more painful than anything he had ever before encountered. Mutilated corpses were strewn around. Burned. Impaled. Dismembered. Screams of pain echoed across the dust and smoke-filled streets.

As they proceeded, Eadric recalled the words of Titivilus, his appointed Tempter, at his own insistence that Celestials would not permit something like this to happen: *Would they not? Are you confident that you understand the Mind of Oronthon that clearly?*

Apparently, Oronthon *had* permitted it to happen.

He grimaced. The old paradox again. Have I come so far, only to be confronted with that same doubt? Eadric emptied his mind, and allowed his wavering to pass. He recalled the place where all polarities cease, and drew strength from it.

I will have your head for this, Demon.

*I.e. Clerics, Paladins and spellcasting Prestige Classes.

** As a Prince of the Blood, Tagur is not required to address the King by the honorific 'Majesty' – he may use 'Highness' instead. By doing so he also asserts his precedence over those others present.

***The "Pain-Bringers," a group of nine unique Devils charged with administering Amaimon's justice. My infernal organization is only loosely based upon official D&D canon – I can include it as an attachment if anyone is interested.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 02-26-2003

"Last season's style looks good upon you, Mostin," Waide said drily, adjusting his cravat.

The Alienist scowled. "It's a shame that you're too fat to do justice to the current one." His dislike for the other Wizard was based mostly on their all too-similar temperaments (Waide was as tight-lipped and pedantic as Mostin himself) – combined with Waide's disdain for all non-transmutive spells and processes.

Waide smiled thinly. "Thus endeth summoning in Wyre. How do you feel about that, Mostin? What will you do with yourself?"

Wait until you venture outside of the proscribed area before I unleash the Pseudonaturals on you, he thought. He shrugged. "I'll get by. This is only one small part of one small reality."

"Quite so," Shomei interrupted. "We are still waiting for Hlioth and Daunton. Would you care for some refreshment, Waide?"

"Hlioth? That mad old crone won't come. She's long past it. I'll have a herbal infusion, thank-you"

"She will come," Jovol said smoothly, entering the drawing-room.

"Where is Tozinak?" Waide asked. "I assumed that he was to be included."

"He is. He is currently experimenting with object-identification."

A small credence table nearby shifted into a more recognizable human form, spilling the drinks which sat upon it onto the floor. The ever-shifting features of Tozinak appeared beneath his characteristic hooded yellow cloak. He bowed dramatically, and when he rose, he had grown a long beard and his skin had changed colour.

"So we are going to Hell, then?" He asked brightly.

"Not exactly," Mostin said. "Although close enough. Gihaahia abides in the blasted regions abutting Avernus."

"Ahh, an exile," Tozinak nodded sagely.

"It is more complex than that," Shomei said irritably. "In any case, there will be eight of us: You, I, Mostin, Mulissu, Waide, Hlioth, Daunton and Jovol."

"Eight is an inauspicious number," Tozinak said. "Seven or nine would be better. What of Griel?"

"He is unnecessary," Jovol said. "Eight will be enough."

"And you are sure that we have sufficient power to accomplish this?"

Mostin nodded. "Shomei and I have both inspected Jovol's calculations. We should have no problems. Gihaahia is vastly powerful and ancient, spawned in a forgotten aeon between a Prince of Hell and a Goddess of Nothingness. But we can bind her."

"Are we opening a *Gate*, or shifting straight there?" Waide inquired nervously.

"I would suggest an *Astral Spell*," Mostin offered, "although someone other than I will have to cast it." He was in no particular hurry.

Jovol shook his head. "I will Dream us there."

Mostin raised an eyebrow. "Isn't that rather unreliable?"

"Not at all," Jovol replied. "And it is much more discreet. It will only take a few minutes.

"And casting the spell?" Waide asked. "Will she just stand there while we bind her?"

Mostin groaned. "Where is your sense of adventure, Waide? You're so boring. In answer to your question, no. Which is why we will cheat. Jovol will create a temporal bubble before we encounter her – we will not be in the same time-stream."

"That is a sensible precaution," Tozinak nodded.

"Trust me," Jovol said. "It will all be very anticlimactic. The only other thing I should mention is this: we will all sustain backlash from the spell, with the majority of it falling on me. And each of us will invest a small portion of our personal reservoir in addition – again, I will bear the brunt."

"Wait a minute..." Waide began.

"You are so selfish," Mostin chided. "Have you no thoughts for posterity? Can't you see beyond your own small world? Great magic suffers because of atrophied minds such as yours."

"What is 'small' for Jovol, may be more than I can render!"

"Tish!" In fact, although the Alienist himself was distraught by Jovol's request, the chance to criticize Waide's reluctance in front of those others present almost made up for it.

**

Eadric rode through the streets of Morne with a dozen of his most stalwart followers, appalled at the scenes which he witnessed. The bulk of the Templars, Ortwin and Iua – together with the circling Nwm and his two eagle companions – were left to deal with the chaos around the south gate and the mustering grounds within the city's tall walls. Identifying who was affected by the compulsion was near impossible, and as Ortwin clobbered random people over the head with the pommel of his scimitar, he wondered how long the mass subdual would take.

Fortunately, Nwm intervened. With a spell that made many of the Paladins and Clerics shake with the memory of what had transpired on the Nund meadows, the Druid conjured a writhing mass of poisonous vines which entangled the limbs of those present. More than three-quarters of the crowd were pinned, and many succumbed to the paralyzing effects of the burgeoning vegetation.

The work of the Temple knights was made considerably easier – the vines covered an area of more than two acres – and at the Druid's command, they next wrapped and bound around five hundred of Morne's hapless citizens. Seeing the success of the conjuration, Nwm squawked and flew in search of other pockets of conflict, preparing to cast as many *entangle* spells – and variations thereof – that he could muster. He was joined in the air by both Ortwin and Iua, taking advantage of the perspective that it offered, and grimly observing the wreck of the Temple quarter – from the air, the pattern of death and violence seemed to radiate outwards from the Fane itself.

Night was falling. The Temple compound itself was eerily quiet. Several outbuildings had been torched, and they burned steadily. Dust still hung thick in the air from the recent collapse of the Great Fane's south face. The bodies of Templars – many of those few dozen who had remained in Morne – were scattered across the blackened lawns and terraces. Eadric ordered his followers to attend to those few that were still breathing – but only after they had been bound or restrained. He dismounted and, followed by Brey, Sercion and Tatterbrand, passed through a blackened door into the sacristy.

Heaps of torn and shredded chasubles lay within, and vessels lay strewn around. More bodies – priests

and acolytes – lay in unlikely postures, where they had struck each other down with ceremonial staves or swords when the spell had taken effect. Before they exited into the ambulatory, Brey's sharp eyes caught a movement beneath a pile of heavy vestments – he said nothing, but gave Eadric a meaningful look and flicked his eyes towards the robes. The Paladin drew Lukarn, cautiously approached, and pulled the coverings aside. The rather pathetic figure of the Bishop of Hethio was revealed, quivering uncontrollably. Upon meeting Eadric's gaze, he made a number of ineffectual warding motions.

"I am doomed," he groaned. "The Adversary has come for me."

"Get up," Eadric commanded.

"Leave me, Devil. Get you gone." He brandished a pendant displaying an eagle at the Paladin.

"GET UP. You reek of taint," Eadric said, grabbing the Bishop's hair, and dragging him towards the door. "You are an assassin, a liar, a manipulator and a coward."

Hethio screamed in pain as he was pulled along. "Will you sacrifice me?"

"No indeed, Eminence," Eadric spat. "I will take you to see God – which is neither more nor less than you deserve. Why you were spared from this is beyond my understanding. I assume that he has some purpose for you, so I won't sentence you to death. But be warned – I am in a very, very bad mood."

So Eadric, Brey, Sercion, Tatterbrand and the – albeit reluctant – Bishop of Hethio made their way to the chancel and the Archiepiscopal throne. The Paladin recalled his premonition of the scenes along the Temple corridors. The reality was a thousand times worse than his vision could have possibly suggested.

*

Nine thousand dead, Nwm thought to himself as his mind reached outwards and took a grim tally. He groaned.

A *vine mine* contained an episode of looting and violence in the Street of Goldsmiths, but by the time that the Druid had circled the city for the third time, he saw that most of the outbreaks were localized and involved only a few people. Tagur had committed soldiers from the defense of the city to arrest any others who were under the effects of the compulsion, and Nwm turned his hand to dousing the flames within Morne. Again. Periodically, he would commune with the Green in an effort to locate any other demons, but they were either out of his range or warded from his inner vision.

The Satyr and the Duelist descended into the outer courtyard of the Temple compound, where Jorde was directing the restraint and healing of any survivors of the *Wave of Hate*. Even Ortwin, a staunch opponent of Temple policy and activity since long before the current crisis had begun, found the scene depressing and unnerving.

"Where's Ed?" The Bard asked.

"The *Ahma* has gone to seek the *Sela*," a Paladin replied gravely.

"Where's Tramst?" He asked irreverently.

"The *Sela* is most likely within the chancel," the other answered with more earnest piety than Ortwin thought necessary.

The Bard turned to Iua and grinned. "Wanna go and see a god?" He asked flippantly. "Its okay – he's harmless. His head stooge is a old friend of mine."

Jorde sighed. He, at least, was used to Ortwin's idiosyncrasies. "I think, perhaps, only the faithful should be permitted within for the time being."

Iua was about to say something, but a look of ecstasy combined with contrite horror passed across Jorde's face. "Yes, Lord," he mumbled to himself. "Forgive my presumption."

Ortwin raised an eyebrow.

"The *Sela* will receive you before the throne," Jorde explained nervously. "He apologizes that the main gate to the Fane is in ruins, and suggests that you use the entrance through the vestry."

"Quite right," the Satyr said facetiously, staring at the wreck of the South Transept. Inwardly, he swallowed, and wondered whether it had been such a good idea after all.

**

Tramst sat beneath the immense symbol of Oronthon – the Eagle-and-Sun which reared in the centre of the Fane. Large chunks of masonry lay scattered within – ornate carvings which had fallen from the ceiling and shattered the pews and cracked the smooth flags of the floor. Yet more bodies lay there, and aside from a handful of Temple officiants and lesser clergy, the *Sela* was alone. The few present seemed enrapt in some mystical state. Somehow, the Proxy seemed even more mortal and even less divine than before.

Eadric approached tentatively. Despite his best efforts to stop it, his mind swam with questions. *How could you allow? Why did you? Why did you not? What was the purpose?* He grimaced and tried to make the queries go away.

Do not repress the doubt in your mind, *Ahma*. You know better than that.

I wish there had been another way.

Do you mean, "Was there no other way?"

(Ruefully). Yes, Holiness.

Not all Truths are unequal, Eadric. Consider this question: What if Graz'zt acted as the unwitting agent of a wrathful Oronthon, dispensing ire and justice upon those who defied his will?

Is that so?

That is one interpretation. Here is another question: Presently, an Eagle flies above Morne. Where it acts, those who suffer from the madness are restrained and can do each other no harm. What if this is the mercy of Oronthon, bringing succour to those who deserve it?

I understand, Holiness. The fact that it is Nwm does not diminish the fact that certain people will perceive it in a certain way.

It is no less true, in fact: the Sophists would claim that Uedii and Oronthon are one and the same. Equally, it is true to some that you are the agent of the Adversary. You brought ruin upon the Temple. Your desire for a demoness signalled the death-knell for Orthodoxy. Have you accepted that truth yet?

(Wrily). That is harder.

Why, if the Adversary is an aspect of Oronthon?

That is only one of many conflicting truths.

Ahh, saizho, Ahma.

What must be done now, Holiness?

There are still loose ends to be tied up. Events are not resolved. When they are, we begin the process of rebuilding. First we must deal with tomorrow: it will bring yet more pain.

I still have yet to see my role in this, beyond vague ideas.

The Magistratum will be consolidated into one body – the names ‘Mission’ and ‘Inquisition’ will no longer be employed. ‘Temple’ will become the catch-all term: it is a trend well-underway, in any case. The troops in Iald have already been ordered to disband. Eisarn is withdrawing back to Morne. I need to speak with the Royal Council. I will need your diplomatic savvy.

I promised disestablishment.

They will have it.

(Embarrassed). I vowed to the Uediiians that I would strive to end indentureship, and the Temple would recompense them.

Our coffers are not limitless, but I will honour your promise first.

I am also concerned of reprisals from the secular aristocracy directed against Hullu's faction.

Sihu will not act: she is devout, if misguided – this can be corrected. Tagur is an ally.

Tagur is a rationalist, Holiness. As much as I respect him...

I have *shown* Tagur. It was he who ordered the gates open for you.

(Surprise). And Foide?

Foide will remain a problem.

There is also the issue of Trempa. Soraine's death will leave a gap, and squabbling nephews will soon begin their maneuvering.

You could claim the Duchy. You have the support.

I have neither the time nor the inclination to administer it. My spiritual position would also be compromised by temporal concerns. Given the effort that I have made to separate the two, this might be interpreted as somewhat hypocritical. I would have supported Ryth, if he had made a claim.

You may yet be forced to intervene, to prevent more bloodshed. Such is the weight of responsibility.

(Confession). You have granted me time to act, Holiness. I purpose to assail Graz'zt. I have yet to determine how this is best accomplished.

(Amusement). That is a formidable task. If you ask for my blessing, I cannot give it: vengeance and retribution are not within my purview. Are they yours?

I don't know. Perhaps.

*

Tramst turned to look at the Bishop of Hethio, who stood between Brey and Sercion. Each of the great Templars held an arm of the clergyman, whose eyes had remained closed and whose lips had muttered fervent prayers during the silent exchange between Eadric and the *Sela*.

A brief communion occurred. Tramst made an offer.

In doubt, and fear, and spite, and self-hatred, the Bishop declined.

A look of sadness passed across the face of the *Sela*. "Let him go," he said aloud to Brey and Sercion. "Depart, Hethio. Go where you will. At any time, you may approach me again. I do not judge, I merely teach."

But as the Bishop departed in haste from the chancel, Tramst spoke to him again. "You may be disappointed if you return to your see, Hethio. Your palace will be mortgaged, and your estates dissolved: I would hate to burden you with material concerns when your spiritual welfare is at stake."

Hethio grunted. Oronthon's Proxy turned his attention to Sercion and Brey.

"When the *Ahma* departs, it would behoove you to remain. There is much that you need to un-learn."

Somewhat daunted, both Templars bowed.

As Eadric exited, picking his way through the rubble and smashed benches, he encountered Ortwin and Iua, both of whom, apparently, were walking towards Tramst. A quizzical look crossed the Paladin's

face.

"Hi Ed," Ortwin said. "Just thought we'd come and take a peek. I've never met a god before."

Eadric sighed. In matters religious, would Ortwin never be anything but a casual tourist?

**

What is this place? Mostin wondered, as phantasms floated past his vision for what seemed like hours. Half-formed dreams and reflections, insubstantial yet strangely real. Trees, roads, skies, a vaporous castle, a silver void. He looked around himself.

They didn't seem to be moving – he, Jovol and the others – although the dreamscape changed in a pattern that he could not quite discern. After a period of intense turbulence, where scenes and sounds manifested in rapid succession, he felt that he had descended into someone else's nightmare.

ANGERPAINDEATHPAINTORTUREVIOLENCE.

CRUELTYLOATHINGMALICESPITEUGLINESS. BURNINGHATREDWITHOUTEND.

Such hatred. It staggered him. His mind span as he strove to maintain his focus. He shot a concerned look towards Tozinak, who of the others there was finding the current strands of consciousness hardest to deal with.

"It will pass," Jovol assured them. "It is merely an echo of an event long past, or one which happened in another time – depending on your perspective. Dream remembers all potentiality – realized or not, past, present or future. Parallel, perpendicular, or extending into an infinity of dimensions."

"What is/was/will be the event?" The Alienist asked, careful not to frame his question in the language of conventional linear time.

"That also depends on your perspective," the Ogre grinned. "The Prime Nodality. The beginning of dualism. The birth of the dialectic. The planting of the seeds of knowledge or damnation."

"The Fall," Shomei said.

"If you subscribe to that particular paradigm," Jovol nodded. "For the moment, we should adopt it whatever our respective world-views: it is relevant to our situation. Let's just assume that it's provisionally correct, and act accordingly. We are on the fringes of Hell."

"And Devils dream?" Mostin asked incredulously. "I've never seen one sleep, and I've known a few."

"Everything dreams," Jovol answered.

"Twaddle," Shomei muttered.

"But why do we feel the ripple here and now?" The Alienist pressed.

"There has been a sympathetic vibration, which hearkened back to an aspect of the Original Nodality."

"Ahh, Graz'zt."

Jovol nodded, sighed, gestured, and modified the passage of time.

*

In her abysm, where she had dwelt for untold aeons, brooding in bitterness and corruption, she stirred. Unlike those who had their place in the Adversary's grand, despotic regime, she was an outsider – too potent to overcome, too alien to harness. A monstrosity conceived between a fallen Seraph and a forgotten deity who predated existence. Shadows swarmed about her. The fire that burned – within her and around her – both tortured and assuaged her.

The inkling that she had was vague and indistinct, but nonetheless present. A threat, certainly – although from what was impossible to say. It had been an age or more since Devils had attempted to

woo her or eliminate her. Instinctively, she wreathed herself in void and vanished, shedding hatred and malice in waves which pulsed from her form. She pulled four Pit Fiends to herself from Hell's deepest layer, and waited.

It was to no avail. In their temporal bubble, linked by *Rary's Telepathic Bond*, the Wizards acted in uncanny coordination – an organic unit, from which potency flowed. In her *Fiendform*, Shomei's eyes pierced the darkness. Their collective sight dispelled the veil of *Invisibility*.

Gihaahia, and her attendant Devils, appeared frozen in time and space. Jovol spoke the words, and raw power coursed through them all. Mostin's head span ecstatically, and he resisted the urge to giggle.

The backlash was terrific, causing the Alienist's skin to crack and his teeth to rattle in his head. Blood vessels across Jovol's temples, down his neck, and along his arms ruptured, spraying blood over the other Wizards. He groaned, and pulled open the portal to Dream again.

The cabal vanished back into the unconscious world.

Gihaahia noticed nothing until it was too late. She would be called to the Prime, and serve the entity called Claviger.

Strange, she thought. It almost felt like some form of compulsion – not that she had ever experienced one. There were, after all, no compulsions capable of affecting her.

*

And so it transpired, as Jovol had either foreseen or determined – when a Wizard is an actor in his own visions of the future, who can judge whether it is ordained or not? Mostin, Shomei, Mulissu, Waide, Hlioth, Tozinak and Daunton submitted themselves to the Ogre's direction, and wrought a spell that would change the future of magic in Wyre.

In that moment, when Gihaahia – scarce less than a demigoddess in her power – was bound to the Claviger, Mostin experienced first-hand his own theories of Will, and the power to make it manifest. It was true. Anything was possible. *Anything*.

Henceforth, the Claviger would reside in a cave in the weathered hills of Mord, south of Morne. Its location would be unknown to those who were not initiated – arcanists of sufficient power and reputation – but would exist as a rumour amongst those who aspired to be counted among the great.

Those Wizards who were vexed by dilemmas regarding their actions could approach the Claviger, and ask it for guidance. In its faultless interpretation of the Injunction, the Claviger would relay its adjudication in a sombre voice, issuing from the tablet upon which Jovol's words were scribed.

Occasionally, those who spoke with it would encounter a small child in the chamber – this was generally considered to be the Claviger itself, and was interpreted as a favourable omen by the lucky petitioners. Less often, a woman of singular beauty would relay the Claviger's stern remonstrations to those who, for their own ends, attempted to interpret the letter of the Injunction against its spirit. This was known to be the Enforcer, whose manifestation was recognized as a dire warning, or worse.

Even with his own great foresight, Jovol could not have guessed that a Mystery cult would eventually develop around the site. The need for religion is incomprehensible to most Wizards, and despite Jovol's friendship with celestials, and his concern for the welfare of Tramst, he was no exception.

As for those Wizards who, in fact, violated the Injunction, they would feel the wrath of the Enforcer in measure to their transgression. This was determined by the Claviger, which possessed a near-omniscience with regard to all things magical. Punishments ranged from confiscation of minor items from the Mage's possessions, through subjection to a *symbol of insanity* in the event of a more major breach, to summary execution in the most serious of cases.

The first to fall to the Enforcer would be Jovol himself, when, in order to prevent a larger catastrophe, he slew the mage Kothchori.

Originally posted by Sepulchrae II on 02-27-2003

When dawn broke, and the rains abated, Eadric stood upon the cracked roof of the Fane, looked out, and inspected the damage. He grimaced. The swathe of ruin which emanated from the Temple encompassed a fifth part of the city. And still, although with increasingly less regularity, Templars and city guardsmen reported capturing those who suffered from the madness engendered by the *Wave of Hate*.

Nearly ten thousand dead, in all, if Nwm's figures were correct. Material damage that would run to more than a hundred tons of silver. A wound in the collective psyche that would probably never heal.

And, ironically, neither new Temple taxes to pay for the rebuilding of the Fane, nor sufficient in the coffers to both recompense the Uediians and begin repairs. He sighed. The price of success.

To the south, beyond the walls of the city, neat rows of Temple tents – interspersed with a disordered riot of gaudy aristocratic pavillions – were plainly visible. His banners floated in the morning wind.

"They'll want paying, you know," Ortwin said, fluttering down behind him in his winged boots. "At least the Ardanese. The Aristocracy will expect land-grants and tax breaks. The Uediians will want..."

"I know, I know," the Paladin grumbled.

"If you claim the Duchy..."

"I will *not*," Eadric snapped.

"You might have to, Ed. Even Tramst said you might have to. You don't have to govern it directly – appoint a steward or something."

"Ryth would have made a good Duke."

"Ryth got burned up with the Duchess, if you recall. I doubt Soraine would have favoured him, in any case. Did she leave any clues to who she felt was suitable? Other than yourself, of course." Ortwin

couldn't resist the final jibe.

The Paladin shook his head.

"Who's the technical heir?"

"Probably Skadding. But Trempa has always held with the bestowal of favour, combined with lineage. At one point, it advocated ultimogeniture. It's eccentric like that. Too close to Ardan."

"What's Skadding like?"

"Young. Inexperienced." Eadric groaned. "And Foide's son."

"Ahh," Ortwin said.

**

The Devil's eyes narrowed when he learned of the news.

You sneaky old bastard, he thought, as he considered Oronthon. *You keep changing the damn rules. Where's the fun in that?*

Gihaahia! He wondered who amongst the Infernal hierarchy had been privy to the likely course of events – or rather who the Adversary had deigned to inform for his own, inscrutable ends. Titivilus scowled, and wondered why he had not been one of them.

The sweet promise that the Accord had been relaxed for him – in order to facilitate the ongoing temptation of Eadric – was now sullied by the countermeasures set in place by Fillein, or Jovol, or whatever he called himself these days.

An Injunction carved in stone was no bad thing – those Wyrish dilettantes needed a measure of

discipline in their lives. But a ban on summoning? He sensed the Bright God's meddling hand in events, and wondered what deal had been struck between the Ogre and Rintrah. He also wondered who of the Wizards in Wyre might draw the same conclusion. But Oronthon's interdict extended to the Infernal as well – at least in theory. And now she was the helot of some damned Dream-thing. Damn celestial double standards.

Titivilus recalled the deal that Shomei had forced upon him. It, also, was not to the Duke's liking. Sneaky bitch.

He fumed silently.

He had thought that he'd had her cornered, that she had been foolish enough to return to him openly. And despite her rod, and the numerous wards that sat on her, he should have finished her there and then. It had been the first time that he'd used his sword in almost two hundred years, and had caught her off-guard. But she weathered the assault and vanished.

Fifteen minutes later, Titivilus had been dragged into a pocket dimension and trapped within a thaumaturgic diagram. At that moment, both of them had known that she could ask for anything and he would be forced to yield: to miss his appointment with the *Ahma* would have been inexcusable.

The Devil relaxed, and smiled. She was audacious. He couldn't help but admire her.

Not that that will stop me from killing her, when the time comes, he thought.

**

"What do you mean, he's dead?" Mostin was livid. "That's impossible. He was a little shaken up yesterday, but that's hardly surprising given the magic that he harnessed."

Mulissu shrugged. "He knew he would die. He merely needed to choose the way in which it occurred – to maximize the potential for order, and to maintain the Injunction."

The Alienist blustered briefly. "Well, what happened? Was it the backlash?"

"Oh, no. He'd fully recovered by about midnight. He killed Kothchori, and the Enforcer annihilated him."

Mostin's jaw dropped. "But..."

"Kothchori was about to open a second *Gate*. Jovol's prognostications revealed that had he done so, even the death of the other mage at the hands of the Enforcer would have come too late – Graz'zt would have made a second transit and...done something which Jovol felt was unacceptable, I suppose. Rimilin was present also, and Griel, but Jovol didn't kill them."

"*Griel*? What the...? How did he find them?"

"I guess Griel was not *Mind Blanked* and he inferred their location through his *Web of Motes*."

"But I wanted to talk to him! I never had the chance to speak with him, to question him. Jovol was Fillein, you know."

"*Fillein*? Mostin, you need a drink. Fillein has been dead for..."

Mostin waved his hand. "He had some kind of...self-incarnating thing...or something. Titivilus intimated as much to Eadric. In which case, death may only be a temporary inconvenience for him."

"One would certainly hope so," Mulissu said optimistically, although somewhat disbelieving. "He left me his *Web of Motes*, although I cannot penetrate its mysteries – yet. I believe that he passed something along to Shomei as well, and maybe others."

Mostin sniffed, feeling rather snubbed.

"And, yes, he left something for you, Mostin. It is very heavy." The Witch snapped her gloved fingers, and an ornate box of carved wood appeared beneath her arm.

The Alienist raised an eyebrow. "What is it?"

"I don't know. It seemed a little rude to sneak a look."

"I'd have looked," Mostin said honestly, unlocking the silver clasps. The lid opened smoothly, to reveal a stone tablet wrapped within red silks.

"I hope it's not a copy of the Injunction," Mulissu sighed. "That would be rather tedious."

The Alienist pulled the fabrics aside and swallowed. The tablet was weathered and cracked, but still quite readable. "It's a spell."

"Mmm?" The Savant said in a distracted voice, attempting to sound disinterested. "What's it called?"

"*Graz'zt*," Mostin replied, shaking.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 03-09-2003

Fiends and Feys

The unrelenting tempest of acid roared again across the face of their blasted world. Demons, damned creatures, and a million souls consigned to perdition screeched in agony, as lurid flames burst from fumaroles, and immense fulgurations illuminated the shattered plains.

Graz'zt cursed, and screamed, and raved. All fled and hid themselves save Ainhorr only – his ability to read his master's mood was unparalleled by any other. Too often, he had witnessed this scene.

The catalogue of disaster was growing. First, Cerothumulos. Then Rurunoth, gone without a trace. Uzmi and Feezuu, lost at Khu. Uruum, slain by the Alienist outside of Morne. Kothchori, assassinated by the cursed Ogre, before the Prince could realize his plans. And now, in rapid succession, Choeth and

Djorm – two of his generals – conjured and eliminated, and one of his Succubi first ripped from Azzagrat, and then sped back to him with a message from the Paladin.

To the Demon Graz'zt, who styles himself 'Prince,' in Zelatar from the Ahma, the Breath of God in the World of Men, a warning:

Let it be known that, by your actions, you have roused my ire and my eye is directed towards you. As Grand Master of the Temple, and the anointed dispenser of Oronthon's justice in Wyre, you are summarily condemned to death.

In order to demonstrate my commitment to your overthrow, I have begun with the removal of two of your chief attendants. My intention is to render your position untenable in any confrontation which occurs between you and your enemies within the Abyss.

Ahma.

That is it? Graz'zt had ranted. Nothing more than a message of intent? No coercion? No attempts to negotiate for the return of the bitchling? How dare he?

In his fury, he had annihilated the Succubus who had borne him the letter, but it had done nothing to quench his rage.

Eventually, after prevailing over his own urge to destroy everything within view, the Prince retired to his sanctum and sank into black contemplation. Despite his arrogance, he was wise enough to recognize the possibility of a threat to his own position. And the new interdict set in place by the Wyrish Mages made things that much more complex. He still had agents abroad, but not sufficient for an assault upon Eadric – in any case, Rimilin and Griel were effectively barred from acting within Wyre's confines.

Graz'zt meditated.

An hour later, his eyes narrowed as yet more ill news reached him. Griel was dead – slain by sonics and Pseudonaturals in the crumbling fortress of Kothchori in the ocean west of Pandicule – *outside* of the circumscribed area.

He cursed.

**

The Satyr combed his short beard as his spouse – from whom a gentle breeze continually issued – attempted to question the creature. It was barely waist-high, and its skin bore a greenish tint with a wet sheen. The nimble fingers of one hand, and its toes – which were long and slender – were graced with a webbing which bespoke its aquatic origins. Its left hand was missing, and in its place was a sticky, weeping stump, which had been ineptly treated.

"We mean you no harm, little one," Iua said for the fifth time, bending down to speak with it. "We are merely seeking information. We can have someone take a look at your wounds. Please say something."

The Sprite remained silent.

"Oh for pity's sake," Iua grumbled impatiently. "Are you stupid? *We will not hurt you.*"

It quailed.

"Bah!" She huffed. "This is ludicrous. You try, Ortwin. I've never met a Sprite as reluctant to talk – one generally has to beg them to stop. I'm going to sniff around down the corridor. Where is Mostin, anyway?"

Ortwin shrugged, sat down next to the diminutive figure on the dirty flagstone floor and grinned. He produced a bag of sugared figs from his pouch and ate one. "Fig?" He asked, munching.

The Creature eyed them hungrily.

"I am Ortwin," he said truthfully, "and I am the king of Feys in the North of the World," he proceeded to lie. "This island is now a part of my realm, and you are now under my protection – hence, you are my subject. Whilst this state of affairs may be something of a shock to you, you will come to happily accept my benign rulership in due course.

"You should know by now that Kothchori is dead," the Bard continued. "He attempted to interfere with – well, things which he shouldn't have interfered with. This is regrettable, from your perspective, I am sure..."

The Sprite began to wail.

"However," Ortwin added quickly, "you should be gratified that your captors have been driven off or slain. Your master was mixing with a bad crowd at the end. He did all kinds of wicked things."

In response, the Sprite placed its good hand over its right ear and closed his eyes, as if to block out the Bard and his words. Ortwin attempted to speak for several minutes, but found he was making little progress.

The Bard sighed. This was insufferable. He, like Iua, was quickly beginning to lose his temper. "Snap out of it! Get over it! Yes, you're traumatized. Yes, your world has been turned upon its head. Too bad. I'm offering you a chance here – don't be a fool and turn it down. I can help you, *if you let me*. Well? Will you?"

There was a long pause.

"Yes, Your Majesty," the Creature squeaked.

"Good," Ortwin smiled. "Now, first of all, *eat*."

*

"Eek!" Mogus squeaked, alerting Mostin to the presence behind him. The Alienist turned, prepared to unleash his remaining offensive spells. He relaxed – if only a little – when he saw that it was Iua.

"Don't sneak around. Someone will blast you if you're not careful."

Iua grinned. "Find anything?"

"Nothing," Mostin moaned. "And I can't believe that Kothchori actually lived in this pigsty. He was one of the great, you know. It's a miserable story."

"His books? Papers? Oddities?"

"All gone. I'm guessing that Rimilin has the ones that Feezuu's demons didn't steal, way back when." Somehow, Mostin's words lacked conviction.

"And Griel? What have you determined about the items that *he* carried?"

"Er, nothing, as yet. I'd completely forgotten about them, in fact. Just...dropped them in the old *portable hole* and put them out of my mind."

Iua gave a condescending look which reminded the Alienist of her mother. "Why was he here?"

Mostin shrugged. "I'm not sure. He was a fool to leave Wyre – the Injunction would have protected him there."

"Do you think he was looking for something?" She asked archly.

"Um, I suppose it's possible," Mostin replied vaguely.

"Mostin, why do I get the feeling that you're holding out on me?"

"I don't *know* anything, for sure," the Alienist confessed, "but I've got a feeling that *something* is missing from the big picture."

"Why?"

"Because it doesn't make sense that Kothchori planned to open the second *Gate* within Wyre, rather than here. Distance would have been no object to a Demon, and to open the *Gate* here would not have violated the Injunction."

"Did Kothchori even know about the Enforcer, at that point?"

"Exactly my point," Mostin said. "If he'd known about it, why would he have opened the *Gate* in Wyre? If he hadn't known about it, why would he have bothered to travel to Wyre anyway, thus inadvertently violating the Injunction?"

"You aren't making much sense."

The Alienist sighed. Something was amiss, but he couldn't put his finger on it. He was tired. That day, he had already performed three *Bindings*, four *Dimensional Anchors*, one *Banishment* launched a dozen sonics, fired off three *Disintegrate* spells and *Summoned* a trio of huge Pseudoelementals.

With the help of Eadric, Nwm, Ortwin and Iua, the result – the elimination of two Abyssal generals – had proven almost child's play. Mostin grinned to himself. Doing it alone wouldn't have been so much harder.

The removal of Griel had been a more controversial move, in which neither Nwm nor Eadric had been willing to participate. It was ethically dubious, given the fact that the Wizard had not, until that point, actually *done* anything.

Mostin, however, had felt no such compunction. Griel had to go, before he could be effectively used as a tool by Graz'zt. Ortwin had concurred, and Iua had come along for kicks. Griel, a noted Evoker, never had a chance to evoke anything. His location determined, he had been *Anchored*, struck by two powerful sonics, and then ripped up by Ortwin, Iua, and the monstrosities that Mostin had brought with him. *Scrying and Frying*, as Mostin had come to know the process.

Now, within the dusty and cluttered cellars of Kothchori's abandoned castle, Mostin reflected upon the situation. Somewhere out there, Rimilin was hiding – impervious to all attempts to locate him. With the exception of the great Ainhorr, the last of Graz'zt's Balors – Irzho – was likely also present somewhere on the Prime – along with several Succubi, who were less of a concern. The Alienist guessed that they were scattered – Graz'zt would not risk the wholesale annihilation of his minions if one of them were located.

Tomorrow, I will try to find Irzho, he thought grimly. But now, I need to sleep. Badly.

**

"Are you afraid of me, *Ahma*?" Titivilus asked, relaxing into a worn leather chair. He wore comfortable, loose-fitting hose and a baggy white shirt. His countenance was simultaneously both serious and amused.

"I wouldn't say *afraid*," Eadric replied, pouring two glasses of firewine. "Suspicious, and on my guard, yes." The Paladin warily handed one of the crystal goblets to the Devil, careful to avoid touching his hand.

Titivilus immediately recognized his reticence and smiled. "I have yet to decide whether your receiving me at Deorham was a bold move or a cautious one. This is your home, after all. And you must still be in shock – I believe that Tahl hasn't even been buried yet."

"If there is even a square inch of Wyre that will suffer the burden of your presence, I would prefer that it is mine," Eadric replied, scowling. "Tell me, Titivilus, how are your plans for my temptation and corruption progressing? How do you rate your chances? What boon will you receive if you succeed? I am interested by your motivation in this endeavour."

"They are still in the process of being formulated," the Devil answered with utter plausibility. "As to my chances – not too low, but not too high either. Any boon is a matter between myself and those whom I serve."

"There are questions that I would like to ask you," Eadric said openly. "I would rather that you didn't lie, so I will wear the eye of Palamabron – if you don't object."

"So you would like to play that game again? Very well, *Ahma*. I am in no hurry."

"Are you feeling talkative?" Eadric asked, placing the stone around his neck.

"I am invariably loquacious," Titivilus answered. "Although I should warn you that there are certain questions that I might feel compelled to deflect or avoid altogether, if the option of lying is not open to me."

Eadric nodded. "I understand. Your silence will speak volumes in itself." *If I interpret it correctly*, he warned himself.

Titivilus merely smiled.

"Then tell me of The Fall, Titivilus. From your perspective. From the beginning."

The Fiend's eyes narrowed. "That is an intrepid opening gambit! I must but approve."

"I trust that your memory doesn't fail you. I realize that it was some while ago."

"Oh no," Titivilus replied smoothly. "I remember it well enough. And the notion of *Time* is only partially applicable, in any case. I suggest you abandon normal temporality – for the time being, at least," he gave an ironic look. "But before I begin, I am curious – why do you ask?"

"It was something Mostin said," Eadric answered. "He felt an echo."

"Ahh," the Devil smiled. "Then I will speak in the past tense – although that is more for your benefit, than because it is necessarily correct."

*

"It was glorious. You are a warrior, *Ahma*. It would have stirred you."

Eadric shook his head. "War is nothing more than a bloody necessity."

Titivilus laughed aloud. "As you wish," he said wickedly. "Never since has there been, and never again shall there be such a conflict fought. We were without number, our power immeasurable. Were there more of them than us? Who can tell? It raged for aeons beyond count through nascent spheres, but lasted a merest instant in the unmanifest Mind of Oronthon – a dissonance in the continuum of perfect consciousness."

"Please refrain from overt metaphysical speculation," Eadric interrupted. "And from the *beginning*, if you please. Let us start with *how* and *why*. And I apologize for arresting the flow of your narrative."

Titivilus raised an eyebrow. The *Ahma* was getting good at this. "You should be wary of enjoying yourself too much when consorting with Devils," the Duke jibed. "You would not be the first to be drawn in through love of badinage and wit."

Eadric experienced a brief discontinuity in his mind, curious as to why the Devil was warning him. "Thank-you," he said honestly. "I appreciate the advice."

"I am your advisor, after all."

Eadric sighed. "Proceed," he instructed.

"*How* and *why* will vary by degree for each of those who were involved in the Great Emancipation," Titivilus continued. "In my case, it was a desire for power, and for a growth of potential within a paradigm which rewarded the strong rather than appeased the weak."

"I find the term 'Great Emancipation' rather misleading," Eadric interrupted again. "'Malign Dictatorship' or 'Brutal Despotism' might be more accurate."

"Do you wish a dialogue on this matter, or am I relating my experience, *Ahma*? Or would you prefer a little of each?"

"I apologize again," Eadric said, "but, as I say, there is much that I wish to learn about your motivation."

"Perhaps you wish to develop compassion for me. Believe me, that is a wholly futile task."

"Compassion is never futile."

"An interesting observation, but one that I must differ with," Titivilus offered. "Perhaps you should be asking 'How did it all begin? What was the *prima causa* of the Great Emancipation.' Or 'rebellion'. Or 'Fall.' Pick your own terminology."

"I would be interested in hearing your theory," Eadric replied. "How *did* it all begin?"

"Compassion," the Devil answered. "Didn't you know, *Ahma*? All great dictatorships first begin with compassion."

Eadric groaned. He'd been maneuvered quickly into that one.

**

Nwm glanced from of his glade towards the castle at Deorham, and scratched his head. The Steeple was visible, jutting like a tall finger above the treetops. Eadric was closeted with a Duke of Hell within the tower – an improbable turn of events, given conventional theories about Paladins – especially considering the fact that a quartet of Devas still circled invisibly about Kyrtil's Burh.

The Druid idly wondered whether the Celestials were bored. Whether such creatures *ever* became bored. It occurred to him that Devas and their ilk must suffer from a perennially dull existence.

Nearby, behind a moss-covered cleft in the rock from which flowed a tiny stream, was the small cave which the Druid occasionally identified as 'home.' His long absence had been taken as a sign of abandonment by a variety of animals, with whom Nwm had politely asked to share the space when he returned. Now they fussed, and tried to tidy things up. Sem and Gheim, the two eagles who accompanied the Druid, eyed several mice greedily, until Nwm remonstrated with them and explained the protocols which existed within.

He unloaded his pack, put his staff to one side, stretched briefly, and sat upon the litter-strewn floor. Concentrating on his torc, his mind stretched outwards, and the Green absorbed him.

Every fold in the land, every rivulet, every tree, every mammal, every bird was revealed to him in a barrage of visions which erupted into his waking consciousness, flashing briefly across his mental landscape before being replaced by the next in a series of infinite facets. His ancestors had called the totality simply *Ollon*, "The Whole." Eadric's forebears, the Borchians who had migrated from the south, had termed it *Hahio*, "Interwoven" – at least, before they adopted the cult of Oronthon, and replaced an older set of mysteries with a newer one.

Buildings and settlements were revealed as gaps in the continuum, blank spots, where the Green had been smothered or driven away. Cultivated fields appeared diluted, their essence contained or mastered. Here, near Deorham, the balance was still acceptable. In and around Morne, Nwm remembered, there was more emptiness than anything – isolated trees and plants seemed like blighted pockets within a sea of dull grey.

The Druid swallowed, and turned his attention to the interlopers. The experience was uncomfortable, as though his sight had been turned inside out. The Celestials near the castle were exposed as ravenous voids, seeming to suck the very essence of the Green into them. The natural order buckled in their vicinity, singularities around which mental space warped uneasily.

Within the blankness of the Burh, two more voids rested in close proximity. *Outsiders who had no real business being there*, Nwm moaned silently to himself. Their potency – which appeared significant – was closely matched, and the Druid could not ascertain which was ascendant. No hint of their respective dispositions was revealed – the Green was above such petty distinctions.

Nwm sighed. Perceiving Eadric in that light was not an easy thing to accept.

His senses extended again, searching for Feys. The Sprites near the meadow where Mostin had erected his manse. A lone Dryad, deep within woods south of the road. He waited until the Satyr came suddenly into view, in the company of another Fey – odd, the Druid thought – and a locus of elemental energy that was Iua and her steed. Mostin also appeared briefly, and then vanished again. He dispatched Sem to intercept the others.

"You'd better tell them to come to the glade," Nwm instructed the eagle. "Eadric hasn't finished his business yet."

**

"Compassion," Titivilus continued. "A desire to make things more equitable, more agreeable, less tyrannical."

"I have doubts accepting it – although you probably won't be surprised to learn that. I realize that you aren't lying, *per se*, but I suspect that you are misperceiving. How do you reconcile this notion with the fact that you currently exist within a regime that is anything but less tyrannical? Or with your own ideas of 'strength' and 'weakness?' Or with your own admittance to 'considered, philosophical evil?' – I hope I am not misquoting you, but I vaguely recall your words being along those lines."

"A philosophy which is dynamic, rather than static, inevitably produces change and evolution," the Devil replied. "The Adversarial Law is reflexive. It adapts to circumstances as they occur. You must remember that we are, ultimately, eternally downtrodden, rejected and anathematized. We are consigned to a shattered world and appointed as the punishers of the rejected souls whom Oronthon has seen fit – in his ineffable wisdom – to deny entry into his blissful abode. Likewise, temptation and seduction are cosmically ordained tasks – it is not as though we have any choice in the matter."

"But you take pride in these tasks! You enjoy inflicting pain and causing misery."

"If one does any work for long enough, one comes to enjoy it," Titivilus answered simply. "And to excel at any vocation is surely desirable?"

"And how do you explain Nehael's repentance and escape from her eternal lot?"

"Do you think she was the first, *Ahma*?"

"The possibility of there being others had occurred to me." Eadric answered. "Well? Have there been others?"

"I respectfully decline to answer that question," Titivilus replied, "and hope to leave you frustrated and guessing as to the reason *why*. Now, if I may continue?"

"Please do."

"So, the Nameless Adversary, the Great Enemy is the first to have an inkling that, perhaps, things could be better organized than they are – his efforts would be directed towards the collective, of course, in an attempt to improve the lot of all. Incidentally, has it ever occurred to you why *he* is not named? Has that never struck you as odd?"

"To name something is to empower it," Eadric replied.

"But to categorize and name something is also to contain it, to set boundaries upon it," Titivilus replied.

"Orthodoxy maintains that he was stripped of his name, and it was erased from every whisper of consciousness. Nothing in creation, including himself, can recall it, save Oronthon himself."

"And you believe that?"

"I have yet to hear a better explanation," Eadric answered.

"The Irrenites claim that they know his secret name. That it was preserved."

Eadric raised a dubious eyebrow. "And what might they claim it is?"

Titivilus laughed. "Unfortunately there is some disagreement amongst them on that count. In any case, *I* cannot recall it, and I assume that, at some stage, I knew it, so there may be some truth in the traditional explanation."

"You are digressing. Return to the original point."

"Ahh, yes," Titivilus smiled darkly, "compassion."

"I think we can move on from compassion, now. Let's talk about arrogance and presumption – I am correct in assuming that those qualities had a large part to play in events?"

"Yes, indeed," the Devil replied easily. "Although confidence and initiative are less loaded terms. One hundred and sixty-nine Seraphs agreed with the call for emancipation – can you imagine it? More than a few were exalted* even amongst the highest choir. Tired of being eclipsed by Oronthon, they decided to form an opposition."

"You make it sound very egalitarian," Eadric said drily. "I'm sure that next you'll tell me that the rebels conducted their affairs with due consideration for the democratic process. I am interested in *your* role in this, Titivilus – what was your former station? Under whom did you serve? Did you betray Oronthon along with your master, or did you defy them both?"

"My former master is my current master, *Ahma*. My loyalties have not changed."

"You mean they remain to yourself?"

"Ultimately, yes. I am honest in that regard, and make no pretence of altruism. As to my former station, I was messenger then, and am messenger now. An exemplar* among the Dominions."

"That is an office of high degree," Eadric sighed. "It is regrettable that you have been reduced to this lowly estate."

"*Reduced*?" The Duke guffawed. "*Ahma*, sometimes your naïveté is truly charming. I am more potent now than I ever was under the yoke of your glowing tyrant!"

"Potency and value are not synonymous."

"Ahh, on that count we differ."

"You are reflective and philosophical. Do you never regret your choices? Wish to be restored to your former station? Lament your actions?"

"Eternity is too long a time for regret," Titivilus snapped.

"Does the question make you uncomfortable?" Eadric asked.

"Do you think that I would be so transparent? Perhaps you should ask yourself this question, *Ahma*: 'Do I have sufficient insight to penetrate the motives of the Devil with whom I speak?'"

"I am looking for *truths* from you, Titivilus, not the *Truth*. Whatever role you adopt with respect to me, whatever emotion you choose to evince to me – it reflects *something*, however small, which is part of you."

The Duke looked impassive. Sometimes, this one could be very cunning.

**

"I seek power, Shomei," Mostin groaned. "Quickly."

The Infernalist fidgeted. "You look exhausted. We all seek power quickly, Mostin," she sighed. "Jovol made quite an impression on you, didn't he?"

"I am beginning to find my current status limiting. I am afraid of stagnating. I crave infinite potential."

"A modest goal," she laughed. "You are ripe for seduction. Beware of Fiends bearing gifts," she smiled wickedly, "or embrace them. What has precipitated this new existential crisis?"

"I have a spell that I cannot cast. A transvalent masterpiece graven by Jovol – or Fillein, as he was then."

Shomei raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

"What did he leave *you*? Mulissu intimated that he may have bequeathed something to each of us who took part in the *Binding*. Just a casual inquiry."

"Which deserves a casual reply," Shomei answered. "Something very utilitarian. What is the nature of the spell?"

Mostin squinted. "It is sensitive material," he replied.

"Perhaps it has a name?"

"Suffice to say that it is germane to my current predicament, and that of my friends. It requires a cabal in order to realize, and was one of Fillein's more noted accomplishments."

"Ahh, *that* dweomer," she nodded in understanding. "Are you reluctant to speak his name now, Mostin?"

"As long as he remains at large, I will avoid speaking his name again," the Alienist replied. "And will caution my comrades to do the same. If he knew...Shomei, I am taking a big risk in sharing this with you. You have dubious associates, and a reputation for dealing in secrets. This information is valuable. The spell is *priceless* to other entities – do you follow me? And I suspect that he would see it destroyed, if he knew of its continued existence."

"With aid, Mulissu could use it..." Shomei offered.

"She won't cast it," Mostin said. "And why should she? It's not her problem – although she has offered

to contribute if I eventually lead it. Shomei, would you be willing to also? We can accomplish great things. Our time is near. Jovol may have been more of a visionary than any of us gave him credit for."

The Infernalist gave a quizzical look.

"The Enforcer," he continued, "a written Injunction. A ban on arcane vendetta within Wyre. The strategic distribution of his own possessions amongst other great Wizards. He is forcing us to *cooperate*."

"Perhaps," Shomei looked dubious. "Although if he hadn't been so aloof for so long, it might hold more weight with me. How many does *Gra*...the spell require?"

"Seven, including the leader. It is a day-long rite. It also requires a large contribution from each of the participants..."

"Something which I am loathe to do again so soon," Shomei sighed. "And which others will flatly deny you, Mostin."

"Hmph. Anyway, just bear it in mind. To return to the idea of power, and its speedy acquisition, what do you suggest?" He asked. "Infernal pacts notwithstanding," he added.

Shomei shrugged. "If I had any such knowledge, I would have seized it myself. I see three possibilities: either an *object* which will empower you; the details of a *process* which will do the same; or an *entity* which will bestow the power, or give details of one of the first two possibilities."

"I am beginning to regret some of the things that I invested my power in," Mostin grumbled. "If I had been more single-minded about the pursuit of mastery..."

"Rest assured, Mostin, few have been as single-minded as you. Your reputation for miserliness is safe." Shomei smiled.

"Thank-you," Mostin said, "I will take that as a genuine compliment. Now, Shomei, I have disclosed and, in the interests of mutual reciprocity, I wonder if you feel inclined to do the same? What *did* Jovol

leave you?"

"Something no less useful than when you last asked the question," she replied.

Mostin tried to smile endearingly. The effect – an insane grimace – caused the Infernalist to laugh despite herself.

"A bracelet, if you must know," she sighed. Shomei rolled up her purple velvet sleeve, to disclose a plain silver band.

"Intriguing," Mostin said. He had noticed the Ogre wearing the same band.

"And its function?" He pried.

"The promise of future greatness," she said mysteriously.

**

"Allow me to introduce Orolde," Ortwin said to Nwm. "Former servant of Kothchori. I have promised him that you will attend to his wounds."

"That is very generous," Nwm said laconically. "And then what do you propose to do with him?"

"Mostin will retain him," Ortwin said. "Orolde has no interest in being reunited with his clan and kinfolk, and is eminently suited to aid a Wizard in his tasks. He also has some small skill in magic which, if nurtured, might grow into something more."

"Mostin has agreed to take an apprentice?" Nwm was incredulous. "This is something I thought I'd never see!"

"Mostin doesn't know, yet," Ortwin whispered quietly. "It is up to us to impress the moral incumbency of this idea upon him."

Nwm sighed, and turned to the Sprite. "I can stop the bleeding, the pain, and return you to health. I

cannot restore your hand, however."

Orolde nodded, appearing slightly bewildered. "Thank-you," he said timidly. "And thank-you, your Majesty." He bowed to Ortwin.

Nwm groaned inwardly, but said nothing. If Ortwin wanted to play at being the sponsor of disenfranchised Sprites, then the Druid wasn't going to object.

Goddess knows, he thought, *these days, Feys need all the help they can get.*

**Exemplar, Exalted, Paragon and Perfect* are 'dignities' or, in game terms, four templates applied to leading celestials of any choir. *Exemplar* and *Exalted* are 'permanent' templates – i.e. they reflect the innate nature of the Celestial. *Paragon* and *Perfect*, on the other hand, are granted temporarily by Oronthon for specific purposes, and the Celestial 'assumes' the qualities of the template for a period of time (c.f. Eadric's adoption of the Paragon template). Of the Celestials mentioned thus far in the story, both Rintrah and Enitharmon are *Exalted*. Urthoon, the conduit to Oronthon is an *Exemplar*, as were the Devas which accompanied Tramst.

The fifth dignity, *Magnified*, is represented by the bestowal of one or more Divine Ranks upon a Celestial, Ascended Master or mortal acting as a Proxy of Oronthon. Tramst is Magnified, and as such is considered to outrank every Celestial in Oronthon's host – he is effectively identified with Oronthon himself, and the fact that he represents the Gnostic faculty (*Sela*) of the Deity affords him a particularly revered status. According to the Urgic Mystics, Magnification (*Haujan*) is a discrete act – the particular moment at which an aspect of the Godhood inhabits another being. From that moment onward, the vessel (*kas*) and the indwelling spirit (*ahmasaljan*) are identical.

Again, with reference to the Fall, Enitharmon (who drove the Adversary from Heaven), was accorded the highest status at that time: according to Orthodox tradition, he was *Perfect, Exalted and Three Times Thrice Magnified*. In some eschatological beliefs, Enitharmon will also be the Adversary's *Antiparallel* – the Celestial who will slay him at the end of days.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 03-17-2003

Mostin grumbled.

"What am I supposed to do with it?" The Alienist asked Ortwin, his eyes fixed on the diminutive figure of Orolde. The Sprite seemed a little offended about being referred to as an 'it' in the third person.

"You will take him as your aide, and instruct him in the arts of magic." The Bard said regally, mostly for Orolde's benefit. "He will act as facilitator in your experiments, maintain your house, bring books to you as you need them, and perform other sundry tasks."

"This is inconvenient," Mostin sighed. "It is not as though my manse stays in one place for too long. What happens when I decide to move it? And I don't want some hanger-on to worry about when I make translations to the insane realms." He peered at the Sprite.

Orolde looked distinctly uncomfortable.

"Mostin," the Bard said, assuming his most reasonable demeanour, "Orolde is an innocent victim of an arcanoreligious conflict. But his loyalty to Kothchori was steadfast even to the end. He is efficient, discreet, deft and nimble (despite his one hand), intelligent and small enough to be unobtrusive."

"*Arcanoreligious*?" Mostin spat. "What kind of nonsense word is that?"

"One designed to demonstrate the ambiguous nature of the current situation," Ortwin grinned. "Do you have a better one, when Wizards are co-opted by Demon Princes in order to assault members of a church, and when other Wizards need an oracle to consult about their actions?"

"The Claviger is not an oracle," Mostin hissed.

"Semantics," Ortwin waved his hand dismissively. "In any case, Orolde would make an excellent apprentice. He has a grasp of the fundamentals of the practice, and is diligent. You could do much worse."

The Alienist looked again at the Sprite. "Do you know what the *Far Realm* is Orolde?"

Orolde looked dubious. "I have a theoretical understanding of the mathematical possibility," he replied.

Mostin cocked his head in surprise at the answer. "I do not deal extensively with Transmutations, as your former master did," he cautioned the Sprite. "I am unsure whether your mind could stand the strain of my work."

Orolde seemed nonplussed. "King Ortwin has recommended you as a potential teacher. I would suggest a probationary period of, say, one year. If things progress to our mutual satisfaction, then perhaps we could extend the agreement?"

"You would receive no stipend."

"Naturally not," Orolde replied.

"The work will be onerous, repetitive and dirty. It will be frustrating and slow to yield results."

"This is not unusual," the Sprite said brightly.

"There is a strong chance that you will lose your sanity – I am quite mad."

"This, also, is not unknown amongst Wizards."

Mostin sighed, and nodded. "After all, if *King* Ortwin has given approval, who could deny his royal decree?"

Inwardly, however, despite his apparent reticence, Mostin was immensely excited. As Ortwin had suspected he would be.

**

"It's very simple," Mostin explained logically. "We cannot hope to overcome *Him* in open conflict, therefore we need to cheat. His position in the Abyss has been weakened thus far by our actions, and he needs to turn his attention to internal matters or risk his rivals gaining ascendancy in the wars that he is currently engaged in. His political situation is immensely complex, and he can't afford for his vendetta against you to cripple his other schemes."

"I think you ascribe too much wisdom to him in these matters," Eadric sighed.

"And I think that you overestimate your own importance in his larger reality. He has suffered several setbacks and defeats – he needs to woo his vassals and allies and to reassure them. Do not underestimate the precarious nature of Demonic politics – it lacks the ability to resist upset, which either the Celestial or Infernal hierarchies demonstrate."

"And how did you come to this conclusion?" The Paladin asked.

"My discourses with Shomei have been productive, as always. But she advises a change of tactics on our part."

Eadric grimaced at the mention of the Infernalist, whose relationship with Mostin he still eyed dubiously. "And what new approach does she recommend?"

"To strike *Him* on a number of different fronts simultaneously. She draws attention to our mobility, and

the fact that Wyre is now – to a large extent, and thanks to the Claviger – a ‘safe’ zone. Assault from conjured Demons is less of a risk."

"He's got a good point, Ed," Ortwin chimed in. "We can find all kinds of other ways to piss off Gra..."

"*Hup!*" Mostin interjected, before Ortwin could finish the word.

"Although I do think he's being overly paranoid about that," the Bard continued.

"I don't want to just annoy him," Eadric explained. "Any actions that we take need to have strategic value."

"And Nehael?" Nwm asked. "For every act that weakens or undermines him, she will suffer."

"We cannot attempt a rescue," Eadric sighed. "It is not a realistic proposal."

"If we push him too far, he may annihilate her," the Druid continued. "That is what concerns me."

"Perhaps," Mostin said carefully, "although inflicting pain is his forté. I suspect that he will be reluctant to prematurely end that pleasure. Besides, he may yet view her as a bargaining piece. He is supremely paranoid, like all Demons. And he is not blind to the fact that we can threaten and hurt him. Although I think the letter that was dispatched may have been too much, I think the premise that we are operating under has merit. But we cannot bring up the matter of Nehael with him – I guess that he does not fully understand our motives in acting. He is depraved, power-hungry, hateful and vindictive – he may assume that it is *simply* out of a desire for revenge that we have targeted the Balors and Griel."

"You do not *know* that," Nwm groaned. "You are speculating."

"Well, of course I'm speculating," Mostin snapped. "I am not privy to his counsels. But we cannot deal with him openly – at least, not entirely openly. At the same time, his capacity for subterfuge far outshines ours – he has had a lot of practice, after all. I think we need to keep him guessing, at present."

"For how long?" Nwm inquired, exasperated.

"Until I master the spell," Mostin said simply. "It is our best option. In complete honesty, I think the question should be *how can we all contribute to the empowerment of Mostin, so that he can cast this spell?*"

Ortwin laughed. "How convenient," he said drily.

"Don't be so blind," Mostin hissed. "There is a great deal hanging in the balance. Yes, I crave power. Yes, I wish to blaze a name for myself in the annals of magical history. Yes, I am vain and self-centered. This does not detract from the fact that it *is our best option.*"

"And how do you reconcile this with your opinion that we need to 'change tact?'" Eadric asked.

"The cosmos is infinite," Mostin replied. "The Demon has his fingers in many pies, of which Wyre is only one. Let's start sh*tting in a few of them."

"Which pies did you have in mind?" Ortwin asked.

"Some regions where he holds sway..." Mostin began.

Eadric groaned.

"No, listen," the Alienist continued. "Some are much less dangerous than others. I have asked Shomei to do some research for me..."

Eadric spluttered.

"*Listen.* It is not just Demonic abodes where his influence is felt," Mostin persisted. "There are some worlds which suffer from his interference. Others where his dominion is entrenched. Yet more that he would try to subdue. He is active in many spheres. And we have more potential allies than perhaps you might guess."

"So where does your Diabolist friend suggest we act?" Eadric asked.

"She is making inquiries," Mostin answered haughtily. "And she is not a Diabolist – Shomei would be most offended if you referred to her as such. And if consorting with Devils is such a problem, then you'd better look to your own house first – unless you have forgotten who you were chatting with yesterday afternoon."

The Paladin opened his mouth to speak, thought better of it, and closed it again. Mostin had a point.

"And Irzho?" Ortwin asked. "There is still a Balor loose somewhere. He needs to be dealt with."

"That had been my plan today," the Alienist nodded. "It shouldn't take too long. But we need to maintain the initiative. Keep the ball rolling. Give *Him* no chance to act, or to second guess us." Mostin grinned wildly.

Eadric squinted, and chastised himself. So much had happened, that it was sometimes easy to forget that *Mostin was completely crazy*.

"Well, we aren't going anywhere yet," the Paladin said. "I need to go back to Morne, bury Tahl and Soraine and too many others. And then there is the matter of my troops. And..."

"You would honour their memory best by avenging them," Mostin said.

"Don't push it, Wizard," Eadric replied.

"Ed," Nwm said, "go and meditate, or pray, or whatever it is that you do. You need to find some perspective before you commit to this course of action. I will support your decision - I'm not necessarily saying that this is the *wrong* thing to do, merely that you should be fully conscious of your motivation before you act. I would hate to see your desire to hurt the Demon outweigh your duty to help Nehael."

"As would I," the Paladin agreed.

**

Five days passed.

Mostin's efforts to find Irzho were unsuccessful, indicating that the Balor was *mind blanked* – either by spell or device. If the former, then Irzho may have returned to the Abyss, and be under Graz'zt's protection. If the latter – and that seemed more likely, as whatever means Kothchori had used to conceal himself was still unaccounted for – then the Balor could be anywhere.

Mostin brooded upon the name that he had gleaned from the writings of the unknown Alienist – the name of the Pseudonatural Daemon who was, in all likelihood, responsible for the demise of his former mentor, Vhorze. Binding the creature seemed conceivable, but controlling it – or even communicating with it – seemed unlikely, if not altogether impossible. And there remained the problem of not being able to *dismiss* it, even if it were successfully contained. No doubt it would merely wait until the wards upon it expired, and then rip off the head of its captor, and drag the remains off to whatever insane realm that it had issued from.

Shomei visited Mostin at his retreat in the woodland meadow southwest of Deorham, interested in the progress of the Alienist's plans regarding Graz'zt. It was a balmy afternoon, and bees droned in the warm summer air as they sat on the porch and drank chilled firewine. The Infernalist had opted to forego her normal purple attire for a simple, light robe of purest white silk, gathered in around her slim waist. It seemed to soften her pointed features, and made her look more Celestial than Diabolic. As always, she carried her intricate iron rod in her left hand, and was accompanied by the faintest hint of cinnamon. She raised an eyebrow when she saw Orolde, and her mouth dropped when Mostin told her about the Sprite's position.

"An apprentice? How intriguing! Is he any good?"

Orolde sighed – apparently, being talked about as though he were not present was something he would have to adjust to. And it seemed as though Mostin was far less reclusive than Kothchori had been.

"He has marked potential," Mostin nodded.

"I have a favour to ask, and information to impart," Shomei said carefully.

"What is the favour?"

"I will reserve my request until we have spoken more," the Infernalist replied. "Before you ask, you are under no obligation to honour it, and what I am about to tell you implies no contractual exchange."

"I am glad to hear it!" Mostin said. "Although now my curiosity is piqued."

"I have been most active on your behalf, Mostin. The containment or overthrow of, well, You-Know-Who – I will humour your caution on that count..."

"It is paranoia, not caution," Mostin corrected her.

"Quite. In any case, one might say that I am acting out of enlightened self-interest. If he is reduced in power, removed temporarily – albeit only for a few decades – or even, possibly, eliminated, then it would..."

"Be to your advantage, politically speaking," Mostin finished for her.

"Precisely," she flashed her rare smile. "So bearing that in mind, that it is not out of altruism that I have acted..."

"I would never even suggest it," Mostin quipped.

"I should bring a number of *worlds* to your attention," Shomei continued. "I will need to use your Mirror, Mostin."

"Very well," he sighed, reaching into his *portable hole*. After a few moments of fussing, he had erected the Looking-Glass of Urm Nahat on the porch of his manse.

"This is exciting, isn't it?" The Infernalist said. "Like opening presents when you were a child."

"I never had presents," Mostin said drily. "Get to the point, Shomei."

"May I? One just *sries* normally?"

"It is very fast," Mostin replied. "And also resembles the *clairvoyance* spell. And your sensor may rove. You will quickly master it."

She waved her hand, and the mirror rapidly became opaque, and then cleared to show a scene within a gloomy forest composed of trees possessed of colossal girth and height. A thrush sat upon a branch in the canopy, several hundred feet above the forest floor.

Shomei issued a *message*. The thrush immediately chirped, and seemed to stand to attention.

"It is a *polymorphed* Devil," Shomei explained. "I currently have several compacts still unexpired." The thrush vanished, and when the Infernalist brought it back into view, the scene beyond was fantastic.

The sky was a mixture of indigo and vermilion, and stars faintly glimmered within it. On a rock buttress of considerable size, thrusting above the treetops, an elegant castle sat perched, its lacy towers soaring into the air and defying the laws of both architecture and gravity. Tendrils of steam or smoke clung to the base of the fortress, giving it the appearance of sitting on a cloudtop. Something vast moved across the sky in the distance, temporarily extinguishing stars before they rekindled at its passing.

"Faerie?" Mostin asked.

"No," Shomei replied, "and although it is accessible from Faerie, a good deal of shadowstuff bleeds in as well. It is a demiplane called *Afqithan* by its inhabitants who, as you have already guessed, consist mainly of Feys – most notably Sidhe and their ilk."

"And this plane is of particular importance because...?"

"The pre-eminent clan are called the *Loquai*," Shomei explained. "They are cultists of the Demon

whose name you are reluctant to utter. You are looking at one of their strongholds: that belonging to their most important king, Irknaan."

Mostin's eyes bulged. "And they are Sidhe?"

Shomei nodded. "Of a particularly degenerate type. The umbral bleed has affected them to a large degree – or rather, as they have recognized it as a means by which their power can be increased, they have embraced and exploited it."

"Intriguing," Mostin said. "How large is Afqithan? What are the numbers of the Loquai? How potent are they? Is their dominance challenged? Are there demons present?"

"It is of moderate size," the Infernalist answered. "It has a virtual diameter of around three thousand miles – although the circular warping begins some distance before that. The Loquai number in the low thousands, although their hegemony extends over most other sentients – tens of thousands of other Feys and fantastic beasts. In terms of potency, their leaders may rival you or I. Dominance is *always* challenged, Mostin. And yes, there are demons present – notably Succubi and Glabrezu. The Loquai are intensely erotic, and seem to venerate that particular aspect of the Lord of Zelatar."

"And your Devil has been spying for you?"

"For several days, now. I have attempted scrying within the fortress, but it is warded from both sight and teleportation. There may be a *Gate* within its confines linking it directly with Azzagrat. The Devil has been eavesdropping on groups that issue from the walls – the Loquai are obsessive hunters who ride Tenebrous Griffons in pursuit of various other beasts."

"In that regard they differ little from most Sidhe," Mostin observed drily.

"They are crueler," Shomei said.

"Then they must be very cruel indeed," Mostin sighed. "Very well, Shomei. I appreciate the information. What is the favour that you request?"

"I haven't finished yet, Mostin," she gave a curious half-smile. She waved her hand, and his mirror went blank for a few seconds. Another scene appeared on its surface.

"This frigid world is called *Saraf*," she said, as scenes of mountains, glaciers, and ice fields flashed across the looking-glass. "It has been incompletely subdued by Our-Friend-Who-Shall-Remain-Nameless. His tactics here have been less subtle and insidious than in Afqithan, and he has favoured a more direct approach. One of his allies, the Demon Kostchtchie has been instrumental in annexing this plane, primarily through the use of Bar-Lgura and Fiendish Giants – there are probably *Gates* to the Ice Wastes in the Abyss. The native inhabitants have been all but eliminated – they exist now only in a few, isolated pockets."

"What are they?" The Alienist asked, fascinated.

"A hirsute race of humanoids whose name I do not know," Shomei answered. "They once possessed a high civilization, although millennia of aggression has removed almost all vestiges of it."

Mostin screwed his face up, as a leaping Demon appeared in the mirror. "Another of your spies?"

Shomei nodded. "Another *polymorphed* Devil. I have gleaned some interesting knowledge, regarding Saraf. Observe." The Infernalist sent another *message*, and the Devil vanished. When it came into view again, it was standing outside the gates of a city which seemed to have been wholly encased in a glacier.

"I am not sure how this came about," Shomei said. "Whether some sorcery of *His*, or a defense of the native inhabitants, or through a natural process, but the city itself seems to have been largely preserved."

"Is it inhabited?"

"Only by ghosts and demons. But secrets reside there, of that I am sure."

"Have you *scried* within?"

"Not to any great extent," Shomei responded. "Unlike you, I do not have the leisure to spend hours in casual observation," she remarked acidly, "and my own crystal ball has roamed further afield." She waved her hand, and the mirror became blank again for the briefest moment, until yet another picture showed itself to them. It was a scene from a dark nightmare, in stark contrast to that which had gone before.

Molten waterfalls cascaded over steep lips into basins, where networks of funnels and troughs distributed liquid metal to forges and foundries. The only light present was a reddish glow, issuing from the seething metal, illuminating the faces of thousands of slaves, who toiled ceaselessly. They were watched and bullied by a variety of demons, who took fickle delight in their work.

"Another demiplane. Most of the captives are Azer," Shomei said. "Needless to say, I have an agent placed here also. Below this area, there are mines, and pits, and yet more foundries. And more. The full extent seems to be vast – I haven't come anywhere close to mapping it all. They are extracting adamantine from other ores: it might interest you to know that after the metal has been purified, it is transported to a system of storage vaults, before passing through a *Gate* to Azzagrat, and thus to the Demon's treasury."

Mostin raised an eyebrow. Shomei had certainly excelled herself. In five days, she had uncovered an extraordinary amount of information. "Is there more to see?"

"Presently, no. I have *plane shifted* several other compactees to different locations, however, and they are currently following on leads. More information will doubtless be forthcoming. There are several hundred worlds where the influence of his Highness is felt."

"Hmm, I suppose I should ask you what boon you seek," Mostin grumbled. "It will be hard to deny it, given what you have uncovered."

Shomei bored into him with her violet eyes. "If you engage upon any extraplanar jaunts, I should like to accompany you."

Mostin relaxed. "I would be delighted," he grinned. "Convincing Eadric may be harder, however. He mistrusts your Diabolic connections."

"That is only reasonable," she admitted.

**

Eadric and Nwm returned to Morne, where the Paladin oversaw Tahl's funeral – a modest affair in light of the events which had transpired after the Inquisitor's death. He was laid to rest in the Fane's crypt with little ceremony, and Eadric mourned quietly – part of him lamenting the fact that his most faithful friend received such small recognition.

Until, to the confusion of all, Tramst declared his immediate beatification. Bewildered, Eadric sought out the *Sela*.

Why waste time with pomp and ceremony, if death is merely evanescent? Why wait for a cult to grow, or for miracles to manifest? I know the Masters ere they are born.

Eadric bowed, and left joyfully.

Soraine was to be interred in the cemetery adjoining the Temple compound, along with Hyne and the Penitents who had perished in the ambush outside of Morne's gates. But Eadric changed his mind – the body of the Duchess would be taken in state back to Trempa, accompanied by Ekkert and Streek, her most trusted Thanes. Somehow, it seemed appropriate: Soraine's religiosity had been too eccentric and individual to be confused with the zealots and martyrs. Likewise, Ryth would be returned to Har Kumil in the north of Trempa. Nwm offered to conduct the ceremony, but Ryth's son, Caur, politely declined.

"The local priest will serve well enough." Caur was young – maybe sixteen – but already a giant of a man.

Eadric shifted awkwardly, unsure whether his actions would offend, but passed a heavy casket to the boy. "Soraine would have given you more, for your father's loyalty and friendship. Say nothing. Do not object or refuse: if you have no use for it, distribute it amongst the poor in your Lairdship."

Caur nodded. Eadric could be very persuasive when he turned his mind to it.

"Temple money?" Nwm asked as they departed.

"Hardly," Eadric laughed. "The Fane's coffers will be empty within a month in any case. No, it was mine."

Nwm raised an eyebrow. "How much did you give him?"

"Five thousand."

Nwm coughed. "That was exceedingly generous."

The Paladin shrugged. "Its all the same to me. And Soraine *would* have given him more. Unfortunately, I have to pay nearly a thousand mercenaries."

"Trempa should foot the bill," Nwm said.

"The allocation of Trempa's finances is not within my purview," Eadric replied.

Nwm stopped in the street, and span the Paladin around. "Don't be a fool, Ed," He hissed. "You are avoiding the issue. You will have to either let Foide's boy inherit the Duchy, support a rival candidate, or make a claim yourself. You cannot simply *ignore* it, and wait for it to go away. Unless you want your taxes and feudal duties to end up in Foide's hands. Just how compromised do you think you'd feel then?"

"There is time, yet," Eadric replied patiently. "Let them jostle and maneuver for a while. What if Skadding inherits Soraine's estates? Who knows? Maybe he'll throw off his father's yoke."

"Do you believe that?"

"I am optimistic that given the right guidance, Skadding could be a good Duke."

"And you would provide that guidance?"

"When I could," Eadric replied.

"And in your absence?"

"Then maybe he could make mistakes to learn from," Eadric sighed. "The *Sela* told me that I might be forced to intervene. He said nothing about open conflict. Intervention takes many forms, Nwm." Eadric tapped his nose. "And when the boy makes his annual progress around Trempa, I will invite him onto the rampart at Deorham. Devas make effective proctors."

Nwm guffawed.

**

Ortwin preened himself.

"You never cease," Iua observed.

"Perfection requires continual readjustment," he grinned, unsheathing his scimitar with a flourish, and cutting an orange in half. The *sending*, issued by Mostin, had seemed urgent. Now, typically, the Alienist was late. Orolde had refused them entry into the manse, apologizing profusely to the self-proclaimed Fey King and his consort, but unwilling to contradict Mostin's instructions.

"Wizards and their servants are such depressing literalists," Ortwin had remarked, but was content when the Sprite had provided them with refreshments on the porch of the retreat.

Presently, in vaporous form, Nwm and Eadric appeared. As the Druid corporeated, so did his two eagles, who had appeared as nothing more than wisps of smoke attending him.

"Mostin will appreciate *their* presence, I'm sure," Ortwin said caustically. "Although, personally, I find them far preferable to that stinking bear."

"You're in a good mood," Nwm said, "your manners are always impeccable when you're happy."

After reassuring an increasingly nervous Orolde, waiting for a further half-hour, and depleting Mostin's supply of beverages, they were finally joined by the Alienist.

"There is much to discuss," he said.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 03-26-2003

Eadric, Nwm, Ortwin, Mostin and Iua sat in discussion for three hours. It ranged from lively to – at several times – openly confrontational. What were their goals? What resources did they jointly command? How long did they have? Who would be most effective in which spheres? How could the elusive synergy of their respective abilities be evoked?

As night fell, they moved from the porch of Mostin's manse into his drawing room, where Ortwin consumed too much firewine and became loud and rambunctious.

When Shomei arrived, just after midnight, Eadric became reluctant to further discuss details until she had submitted herself to scrutiny from the Eye of Palamabron – something which the Infernalist flatly refused to do. Shomei's discomfort was further compounded when a drunken Ortwin made several lewd and cutting comments alluding to her history of diabolic suitors.

Shomei said nothing in response but eyed the Bard venomously. Mostin, afraid that things would get off to a bad start, fidgeted uncomfortably. Fortunately, Nwm intervened by neutralizing the alcohol in Ortwin's system and bringing him back to a state of painful sobriety, and, somewhat surprisingly, jumping to Shomei's defense.

"I suggest you remember Nehael's own words, Ed. Those regarding *allies in unlikely places*. You can't go around beaming your Eye at everyone you meet – it lacks respect for their integrity. You haven't used it on Mostin, and I'm sure that his motives are less than noble."

Mostin blustered briefly. Ortwin apologized, and Eadric eventually relented – not before voicing his concerns regarding Titivilus, however. He was less than satisfied by the state of affairs existing between Shomei and the Duke of Hell and – in his mind, reasonably – saw their antagonism as a source of potential problems. This was agitated by the fact that Paladin and Infernalist viewed the Devil from two different perspectives: to the *Ahma*, Titivilus was a source of potential growth through friction and adversity, but one which was *divinely ordained*; to Shomei, he represented one of many discarded tools in the perpetual quest for apotheosis. Their respective paradigms were both uncannily close and dangerously divergent: something Eadric immediately recognized as a source of friction.

Nwm ignored him. "Moreover, I think there is something which you seem to have forgotten in your – at times, egotistical – desire to first redeem and now rescue Nehael from the clutches of the Demon who, for Mostin's benefit, I will not name."

"And what is that?" Eadric sighed.

"She is a Uediiian priestess and mystic," Nwm snapped.

Eadric tensed briefly, and then relaxed as though a great weight had left him. "Thank-you Nwm," he said openly. "And I'm sorry."

"Good," Nwm replied. "So, if we can discuss the matter in hand. We have a twisted version of Faerie filled with cultists, a frozen wasteland or some hellish smithy of huge proportions to choose between."

"I can add one more to the list," Shomei said. "So far. It is a jungle-like region of the Abyss itself: here the Demon is engaged in a war with a rival named Soneillon. The plane is called *Throile*. Soneillon is a succubus of great power, and was at one time the ally and consort of the Prince."

"I would rather avoid being caught in a lovers' tiff," Ortwin said drily.

"You are oversimplifying the nature of Abyssal relationships," Shomei remarked humourlessly. "But I agree that Throile may not be the best option – at least at present."

"This frozen world sounds interesting," Nwm said. "Let's consider it for a moment. Could we seal the Abyssal *Gates* – assuming that we could find them all?"

"Only temporarily," Mostin answered. "Or, at least, until Gra... – you see, I almost said it myself – could open them again, either with his own power or through one of his minions. There is nothing barring him from acting personally in Saraf – something else we need to consider. Outside of the Prime, we do not have the benefit of celestial interdict to protect us against Demons – even if it less than a hundred percent effective, it prevents fiends travelling here on a whim. It takes our enemy a great deal of effort to translate a servant here: *plane shifting* any of them to one of these other worlds would be child's play to him."

"This is true," Shomei nodded. "And this is where the risk lies – as soon as we venture abroad, we run the risk of being chased through the spheres by hordes of demons. Wyre *is* safe, however, and hence the issue of mobility is crucial – as long as we can return here, we will be comparatively sure of a haven."

Eadric screwed his face up. "In which case preserving anonymity would seem to be crucial. And how can we protect against his divinations?"

"*Mind Blank*," Mostin sighed. "On all of us. Which will seriously deplete my stock of powerful spells."

"I am willing to share the load on that count," Shomei offered. "I concur: it is crucial. It will render us undetectable and immune to most Enchantments – the utility of this spell is not to be underestimated! Mostin's remaining higher valences can be crammed with Sonic Evocations, mine with Conjurations. Multiple *disintegrates* will be a useful backup."

Mostin looked at Eadric, unsure as to the Paladin's reaction to his next suggestion. "I have also given some thought regarding the procurement of a guide."

The *Ahma* dubiously raised an eyebrow.

"One who is close in the Prince's confidence would be logical, although the transient nature of his court means that it is difficult to judge amongst those whom he currently favours. Ironically, Uzmi would have been a good choice – she was, for a while, high in his estimation."

Shomei seemed as surprised as anyone else at the Alienist's suggestion, but guessed where he was heading.

"I suggest *binding* a Marilith," Mostin continued. "We can trap one in a thaumaturgic diagram, and then compel it into a jar. If Shomei aids me in the spell, it can be achieved with the minimum of fuss. Such a guide might prove invaluable: it could provide all kinds of useful information regarding his plans. Mariliths tend to be well-informed regarding the bigger picture – their strategic and military capacity is well-known."

"It could also mislead and dupe us," Ortwin observed. "Demonesses are equally renowned for their mendacity."

Mostin smiled. "You see that big, shiny rock around Eadric's neck, Ortwin...?"

"Good point," the Bard conceded. "But would such a captive cooperate? An intractable demon who wails and attracts attention would be equally annoying."

"I will need to reach an agreement with it. This may involve a few minor compromises, but I think it would be worth it."

Shomei nodded. "I like the plan. Casting the *binding* is time consuming, however, and I dislike the idea of the demon breaking out of the diagram before the jar is ready. We should target her with multiple *hold monster* spells to prevent her escape until the binding is complete: one of them is bound to work. You will need opals, of course."

"And an accurate rendering of the target," Mostin added.

"If you do not have any names..."

Mostin sniffed, and began to chant the names of Graz'zt's Marilith servants in an obscure verse.

"Your information is dated, but still somewhat useful," Shomei half-smiled.

"How many of these demonesses serve him?" Nwm asked. "Are we talking a handful, like the Balors, or many more? And what of other demons, for that matter?"

"A few dozen Mariliths, I suppose," Shomei replied. "Not all are currently favoured – many, if not all, are former consorts. Some maintain armies in the field at his command. A few are probably in temporary exile. Some remain at court. And there may be a hundred Nalfeshnees, thousands of Succubi and Glabrezu, and probably tens or hundreds of thousands of Babau, Uridezu, Bar-Lgura, Chasme and Vrocks at his call. Other, more obscure types in smaller numbers fulfill specialized roles, and then, of course, the ubiquitous Dretch - who are close to numberless."

"We are rapidly drifting away from the focus of this discussion," Eadric sighed. "I have no objection to the containment of a demonic guide – provided that it can be undertaken safely, of course." The Paladin himself seemed surprised by the words which issued from his mouth.

"I had expected more resistance to the idea," Mostin said sarcastically.

"It is a logical proposal," Eadric admitted, "and, frankly, I've pretty much given up on conventional standards – they don't seem to apply to my life any more."

"I'm tired," Ortwin grumbled. "I say we take a vote. I favour Afqithan – it sounds interesting."

"As do I," Iua agreed. "It is neither too cold nor too hot."

"My thoughts exactly," Eadric said.

"I rather thought Saraf might be interesting," Mostin said. "But I suppose it can wait. Very well. Afqithan it is, unless Nwm or Shomei has an objection?"

"I would prefer Saraf, as it sounds the least unnatural – although I admit that Afqithan's Green intrigues

me," Nwm said.

"Shomei?" Eadric asked.

She shrugged. "I'm just along for the trip, *Ahma*. Whatever you decide is good with me."

Eadric scowled, unsure whether the reference to him in his religious capacity was sarcastic or not.

So, over the next hour, they hatched a plan. Ortwin's contribution was significant, and his trademark cunning, boldness and braggadocio were written all over their strategy. It took another two full days in order to make preparations.

**

The Marilith was called Nufrut. She was less than happy to be reduced to the state of a disembodied head, and confined to a perfectly spherical jar twelve inches across, suspended on a metal chain. The chain had a convenient handle, for ease of transportation.

"Is it safe?" Eadric asked. He was inside the extradimensional area of Mostin's retreat: the Alienist was reluctant to bring the bound demon into normal space, in the event that it would rouse the ire of the Claviger.

"It cannot escape, if that is what you mean," Mostin reassured him.

"What if you drop it? Will it break?"

"The jar is adamantine. I have *polymorphed* it into *transparent* adamantine. It is near indestructible."

"Does such a substance exist?" Ortwin inquired.

"It does now," Mostin grinned. "Excepting dispellings, disjunctions and disintegrations, we should be

relatively safe – nonetheless I will keep the jar out of harm's way in potentially dangerous situations. As Shomei was so willing to aid me – and us, I might add – we have agreed that she may keep Nufrut after we are finished."

Nufrut snarled, and cursed, her beautiful face contorting wildly.

"She doesn't look very cooperative," Ortwin observed.

"We are still negotiating," Mostin explained. "The promise of freedom is, of course, the boon she seeks – we merely have to come to a mutually acceptable agreement. This is complicated by the fact that I have consented to pass Nufrut to Shomei. We will bicker for a few more hours, I am sure."

Eadric sighed and departed.

An hour after noon, Mostin and Shomei exited the manse. Both sported looks of smug satisfaction.

"I see you've reached a compromise." Ortwin said.

"Nufrut has acquiesced to our demands," Mostin replied. "We agreed that she will be released after ten years, if she cooperates. Her tenure with me will last for two months, and the remainder will be with Shomei."

"And you intend to dishonour that promise, I assume?"

Shomei looked genuinely offended. "Certainly not! An agreement with a fiend is a sacred enterprise. One does not violate such a trust."

Ortwin looked confused. Eadric nodded understandingly.

**

Orolde seemed unfazed by the responsibility that Mostin suddenly and unexpectedly foisted onto him – namely, the maintenance of the manse and the wizard's affairs in his absence. He nodded in a resigned fashion as the Alienist enjoined him to ignore the nearby population of sprites, who were nothing but a gang of childish hooligans. Mostin left Orolde several large tomes with the express command that they should be memorized before his return – each was a treatment on various aspects of the Far Realm by Wizards the extent of whose insanity rivaled or even surpassed Mostin's own. No-one was to be permitted entrance to the manse for any reason whatsoever, and in the unlikely event that it was assailed Orolde was to immediately retreat to the extradimensional area, seal it, and issue the *sending* which Mostin had hastily scribed.

"A *prismatic sphere* and several *meteor swarms* might also prove invaluable," Orolde suggested.

"You can rest assured that if there is any blasting to be done, I will not fail in my responsibilities." Mostin said drily.

The preparations were made within Mostin's sanctum and, to the surprise of all, he took his mirror down and placed it within his *portable hole*.

"I will open a *gate*," he explained. "I am loathe to leave the mirror unattended, and any portal would only remain open for a day. Besides, it might be useful in a pinch if we need an emergency exit."

"Not that you'd ever leave it behind anywhere," Ortwin said.

"Probably not," Mostin admitted. "But a scrying device is always useful."

The Alienist and Infernalist proceeded to *mind blank* everyone present.

"We will need to repeat the same procedure tomorrow," Mostin said. "And the next day, and the next – for as long as we are abroad, in fact." He nodded to Shomei.

The Witch cast a *polymorph* on Ortwin, Eadric, Nwm and herself, which gave them the appearance of Sidhe: tall, graceful feys of unearthly beauty who had long since fled the Prime. Their clothing and

equipment seemed to assume an equally elegant style. "If this ruse is to be successful," she said, "we should remember that Ortwin and Nwm are to be our spokesmen: both are fluent Sylvan speakers, and Ortwin is an adept liar. The rest of you should keep quiet unless either Mostin or I has time to use *tongues*: I also speak Fae, but I have no intention of acting as representative or negotiator. I will try to keep my communication to a minimum."

Shomei handed Ortwin an exquisite coronet which seemed to have been cut from a single, massive diamond. In fact, the Infernalist, a jeweler of no small ability, had used a *fabricate* spell on half of the stones which the Bard and Iua had received as their dowry. He placed it upon his head – the contours of which felt unfamiliar.

"King at last, eh?" Iua said sarcastically.

"I am a Duke, not a King," the Bard said coolly, effortlessly, and with utter conviction. His poise and movement spoke of natural command.

Shomei laughed despite herself. "Dammit, you're good – I have to admit it. Watch your accent – we don't want anyone to suspect that you're a bumpkin from the Prime. The weight of scrutiny will fall upon you, and they will be looking for the smallest details and inconsistencies. Eadric – you should keep your helmet closed at all times. You are an inexperienced liar, and manage to make even a Sidhe's face look trustworthy and approachable. As a bodyguard, your role will be minimal in any case. And..."

She cast an empowered *cat's grace*.

"...that should stop you lumbering inelegantly. Iua, you may still adopt another form if you prefer."

The Duelist shook her head. "I am the daughter of Ulao. I will masquerade as myself – an Auran princess is the role I am most accustomed to playing, in any case."

Mostin, not to be outdone in any matters of style, invoked a spell which turned him into a handsome fiend with ruddy skin, short horns and long, talon-like fingernails.

Shomei raised an eyebrow. "You cannot maintain that guise for long."

"On the contrary," Mostin grinned wickedly. "You forget that I have transcended your limited vibrational state. This is no obstacle to me.*"

Eadric gave an inquiring look.

"I am now a kelvezu," Mostin explained. "A demonic infiltrator and assassin. They are highly feared – it will give us an edge in negotiations, if they see that I am one of Ortwin's retainers. I will remain enigmatic." He drew a long pair of gloves over his hands, and brought the hood of his cloak over his head so that his face became shadowed, and his features hidden.

"Then why are you covering up?" Eadric asked.

Ortwin sighed. "Ed, I really need to give you some lessons in duplicity."

"We are almost ready," Mostin said.

"This is the part that I don't like, I assume," the Eadric said in a resigned voice.

Mostin nodded apologetically, and led them all into another area of his *magnificent mansion*.

**

An area had been cleared within the largest of the rooms in the extradimensional space. Its technical function – that of a banquet hall – had never, in fact, been observed.

Now it acted as a corral for six horses of fearsome visage. Nightmares conjured and confined by Mostin and Shomei, and subjected to *torment* from the Infernalist until they had submitted to her demands.

Mostin had finally seen her rod in action, and had been both awed and terrified by the power that, through it, she wielded.

"These are evil creatures," Eadric said. "And I am loathe to have one bear me."

"I am sure that they are equally loathe to bear us," Shomei sighed. "Nonetheless, we need them – both for the convenience of transportation that they grant, and the impression that riding them will convey to any who see us. We have them for nineteen days – no more, and no less. They will remain loyal – albeit reluctantly so."

"I hope so," Eadric said, "I do not wish to be borne away to some nameless Hell. And this compacting..."

"They are not compacted," Shomei shook her head. "They are coerced. Compacting would have been far easier, but Mostin forbade it for your sake."

"I fail to see the difference."

"Souls, *Ahma*, I would have paid them in souls."

Eadric looked aghast. "You use such currency? That is monstrous."

"They are damned already," Mostin said.

"It doesn't matter..." Eadric began.

"Wake up! *Saizha*!" Shomei said sharply, with no hint of irony. "I have compromised for your benefit. You will be forced to make many more choices that will be far more challenging before this is over. You are the *Ahma*. You are empowered to decide right from wrong, according to your belief. Look at me! Where is my taint? Why do I bear none?"

"I don't know," Eadric confessed. "You are anomalous."

"That much is true," Mostin leered, bearing his sharp fangs. "Shall we be on our way? That was an attempt to diffuse the atmosphere, incidentally."

Eadric nodded. "We should remember that this is an open-ended sortie. We don't know how long we have, how we will fare, whether we will return here before pursuing other avenues, or continue onwards. We don't know whether we are spies, guerillas, instigators of unrest or any combination of the above. We are looking for potential allies. We are looking to thwart the Demon. We are seeking to release Nehael. And we are hoping to somehow augment Mostin's power, to bring the spell within his reach."

"The last is most important," Mostin nodded, mounting one of the Nightmares, which champed restlessly and snorted fire. "Can we go now?"

In the purple skies, above the mists and shadows which lay upon the ancient woods of Afqithan, a *Gate* opened. A group of Sidhe, accompanied by a demon and an elemental, mounted on huge and malign steeds which issued smoke and fire, thundered through. A hunting party, from some dark region of Faerie, no doubt. One of them – accompanied by two magnificent eagles – concentrated briefly, and then called out in Sylvan.

"A chimera, five miles yonder," he pointed.

Their leader – a nobleman of some kind – spurred his mount onwards and drew a great, black bow which seemed to pulse grimly. Starlight glistened in the diamond coronet upon his brow.

On the walls of the castle, not a furlong from where the party had appeared, several guards dressed in ornate armour stared impassively at the spectacle for a few moments, betraying no emotion – or perhaps feeling none. Whoever this group was, they seemed oblivious to the fact that this was the castle of Irknaan, king of the Loquai, and they were trespassing in the airs above his demesne. One of the guards nodded silently, and another turned, and walked quickly but without hurrying to inform his captain.

*As an outsider, Mostin's options for *polymorphing* are somewhat expanded.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 03-31-2003

"It was only a chimera..."

The chamber was of blacks and muted greys. They flowed and rippled, as if they possessed a will of their own, absorbing all incident light, yet still conveying a sense of variance. If there were other colours present, then they were veiled by the pervasive gloom.

The Captain, whose name was Shupthul, stood before his King, Irknaan, and explained what had happened.

"Only a few moments ago, you say," Irknaan reclined in darkness in an unconcerned manner, not even deigning to look upon his retainer. "Have you dispatched a party?"

"Twelve, your Majesty," Shupthul said.

Despite his confidence and level voice, Irknaan perceived a measure of nervousness hidden behind the Captain's expert façade. It made the King feel strangely comfortable – Shupthul's apprehension was based on fear of him, rather than of any external threat. He smiled inwardly. "Which way were they headed?"

"Towards a chimera, five miles to the north. They are looking for quarry."

"And there is a demon with them? How curious. At this hour, the chimera will be Lorochoh, of course. She is predictable in her habits. This may be amusing. How did they know where to find her, I wonder?"

"The guardsman who brought me the report indicated that it seemed a random choice – one of them

sensed the beast, and they immediately took up the chase. The demon was cloaked – a kelvezu assassin, in all likelihood."

"I feel that I might observe." Irknaan clicked his fingers, and a sprite with a wicked expression hurried to fetch his scrying stone. Already, his mind raced with possibilities, although he evinced nothing to Shupthul. Who were they? How did one of them sense the beast? Was the demon an ally of the Prince, or a foe, or neither? They seemed potent. He would need to tread carefully. Irknaan wondered whether he was in disfavour, and his termination had been ordered by Graz'zt.

In any case, a confrontation with Lorochoh would prove distracting for a few moments – others had made the mistake of underestimating her strength, and had paid dearly for it.

**

Nwm's mind was bombarded with sensations as he switched between different aspects of their environment. The Green of Afqithan held a majesty that was warped by shadows and darkness, and possessed an alien quality that made him feel distinctly uncomfortable. As well as the chimera – the nearest of the nodes within his field of consciousness outside of the castle walls – other beasts flitted on the periphery of his thought. Manticores and griffons, displacer beasts and basilisks, a dragonne on the very edge of perception. Many of the trees possessed black and brooding sentience which filled the Druid with dread.

He turned his mind to feys, and they blazed across his inner landscape, too numerous to count, and then to outsiders, concentrated both in a knot within the fortress and also where other beasts were located. They overlapped in a confusing fashion, and Nwm noticed that the chimera – like many of the other denizens of Afqithan – was an indistinct type, and bore multiple conflicting signatures.

As did the griffons and their riders who were now following: they had taken flight from one of the castle's tall towers. The Druid glanced over his shoulder, and saw specks in the sky to their rear. He yelled to Ortwin.

"There are twelve feys – or part-feys, at least – mounted on griffons – or part griffons – in pursuit. They are less than a mile behind."

"They can't catch us," the Bard shouted back, the wind rushing past.

"They are closing in."

"Griffons can't fly that fast," Ortwin objected.

"They are *tenebrous*," Shomei called to him. "part shadow-stuff. They slip through the gaps in space."

"The chimera is likewise a complex of different realities," Nwm yelled, "and should not be treated lightly. This could be interesting. What should we do?"

"Ignore the Loquai," declared Mostin. "It will irritate them."

"I agree," Ortwin nodded. "If they try to apprehend us, or behave aggressively, we should obliterate them with as much apparent ease as possible. We need to show both strength and disdain. Pay attention to the chimera."

"They will reach us, before we close on it," Nwm pointed out.

Iua concentrated briefly, and then yelled a warning. A powerful wind began to blow behind them, speeding them forwards. The Duelist and Eadric – both expert riders – dealt with the sudden change in pace without effort, although the Paladin found the increased smoke and fire kindled from his steed's mane and hooves somewhat disconcerting. Likewise, Mostin and Shomei stayed in control of themselves and their mounts, albeit with more strain. Nwm clung on tightly.

Unfortunately, their leader, Ortwin, flamboyant as he seemed, was a poor rider. Iua's warning had given him no time to prepare, and he was blown from his saddle, still clutching his bow.

Gods, how embarrassing, he thought as he tumbled towards the ground. He recovered quickly, and commanded his boots to action. As they sprouted tiny wings, the Bard did his best to make his mistake

look intentional.

"It's a good thing they can't *scry* us," Mostin grumbled, as Ortwin drew level with him. "That's precisely the kind of blunder we have to avoid, if we want to stay alive. I thought you could ride."

"I can," Ortwin lied. "I just haven't, for a long time."

"I wish you'd take this more seriously," Eadric yelled.

"Nothing is further from my mind," the Bard grinned. "How far to the beastie, Nwm?"

"Half a mile," the Druid pointed.

"Will it sense us?"

As if in response to Ortwin's question, the air was abruptly filled with demons.

"Somebody did," Shomei remarked drily.

**

Lorochtoh, who had lived for an untold age in the haunted woods of Afqithan, was a devious creature who had evaded or confounded the hunts that had been mounted in search of her on numerous occasions. Irknaan had long since given up on eliminating her, and had found that, left to her own devices, she posed no threat and proved an effective deterrent against the bands of sprites who occasionally vexed his patrols. The King of the Loquai had come to respect the chimera, and although it would have been within his power to remove her, the use of magic in a chase would have been a breach of the etiquette which existed between hunters and quarry – an unfulfilling exercise, against the spirit of the hunt in general. After all, if there was no risk to the participants, then the sport held little appeal and amounted to little more than execution.

Sat upon the branch of an immense banyan, immersed in shadows, Lorochoth had gazed skywards with one of her three heads – her draconic eyes were her best – after catching the rumour of movement in her peripheral vision. A hunting party, headed towards her. The chimera wondered briefly if she was their target, and thought it best not to take any chances. She *summoned* five succubi.

"Go and charm those annoying Sidhe, my pretties," she instructed them. "And after they've chopped each other up, don't forget to bring me any baubles that they might have."

Lorochoth shifted, and waited to see what transpired.

**

Ortwin, who had regained the lead, but had elected not to mount his steed again, was suddenly beset by four of the demonesses, who appeared directly in front of him. Still holding his bow in his left hand, the Bard drew his scimitar, whilst gaping at their naked beauty. Iua, acting with her usual speed, urged her mount forwards and instantly slew one of them before anyone else had even fully reacted to the situation.

"Mine," a succubus said to Ortwin, beckoning.

"Mine."

"Mine."

The three demonesses were bombarding Ortwin with erotic impulses, which he found himself uncharacteristically capable of resisting – due to the *mind blank*, he remarked to himself, rather than any overwhelming feelings of fidelity. Githla lashed out, and the Bard – feeling somewhat regretful – rapidly dispatched a succubus and wounded another. Eadric impaled a another with his lance.

The remaining demoness – the fifth – who had appeared next to Mostin and whispered *mine*, was pulverized by a sonic that made Mostin's eyes bulge. He had *empowered* it, but he hadn't *maximized* it

– nonetheless, the spell had borne the hallmarks of that metamagic.

Shomei raised an eyebrow. "That was rather an overkill."

"Did you check the magical trait of this plane?" Mostin asked.

"Ahh," Shomei nodded. "Like Faerie itself. No, I didn't think to look."

The Alienist fired a clutch of quickened *magic missiles* at the last, wounded succubus. They blazed gloriously, and obliterated the demoness. "We need to seriously reconsider our options," Mostin sighed. "This puts things in a very different light." He glanced over his shoulder. The wind conjured by Iua still sped them onwards, and their pursuers were nothing but dots in the sky.

"You can ease up," Nwm called to the duelist, "or we will overshoot. The creature is close by."

Iua nodded, and the gale rapidly began to subside. But as the group began to descend, three hundred feet up, they received an unpleasant shock. Mostin knew the sensation which preceded it – he had experienced it when Feezuu had subjected him to it – but there was nothing he could do. An instant after the tickling feeling, his arms and legs twitched as the fluids were wilted from his body. Nwm, Shomei and Eadric were also struck by the necromantic assault: fortunately Ortwin and Iua were beyond the area of the spell's effect. The pain was immense, and Mostin hysterically considered that Feezuu's attack had been as nothing compared to this.

Infernalist, Paladin, Alienist and Druid began to drop like stones, their mounts withered to lifeless husks beneath them. Shomei wasn't moving.

Lorochtoh broke from the treetops below. Blackness issued from her wings, and her form shivered with dismal power. Space twisted, and stretched uncomfortably around her. She was immense.

Nwm acted quickly, invoking a *reverse gravity* on the area around him, abruptly forcing himself, Mostin, Eadric, Shomei and the corpses of the Nightmares skywards again. Mostin cursed, uttered a quickened *haste*, cast a *fly* spell, aimed a *disintegrate* at the vast bulk of the chimera, and promptly missed. He swore profusely.

Ortwin sped a volley of arrows into the beast's flank, where they quivered and caused her to screech. Iua struck Lorochoth with a powerful blast of lightning, but still she climbed relentlessly towards them. Eadric drew Lukarn and waited, bobbing impatiently.

"Bad bad bad bad bad," Mostin grumbled. "Can you deal with Shomei, Nwm – assuming she's still alive."

The Druid nodded, even as the chimera was closing, a foul draft blown before her by her wings. She spoke, and black fire began to kindle over Mostin, threatening to immolate him. His amulet absorbed it noiselessly.

Nwm waited, unwilling to act until he had seen Mostin's retort.

Three colossal sonics issued from Mostin's fingertips in rapid succession, swollen beyond all normal limits by the native magic of Afqithan. The noise was terrific as they detonated, superheating the air and causing massive ionization. As if by some trick of profound slipperiness, the chimera seemed to twist and gyre in space. She was unaffected.

Mostin gaped. *Impossible*, he thought.

Nwm glanced at Shomei, gauged that she would live, and struck Lorochoth with a *finger of death*. Ortwin and Iua, descending on her flank, erupted into a vicious flurry of slashes and stabs.

The monster shrugged the spell effect off, effortlessly changed tack, and ploughed devastatingly into the Druid, ripping and rending him with horns, maws and claws. As her body swung around, finally within his range, Eadric hewed her with Lukarn – his blade blazed within the gloom which surrounded her. She screamed. Eadric struck again. And again. And again. Nwm blasted her with a *thunderswarm*, Mostin with more sonics, and both Bard and duelist continued to prosecute their attack.

Space folded. Concerned for her life, the chimera vanished into the Plane of Shadow.

Nwm, barely conscious, spoke with a mouthful of blood. "Get us out of here, Mostin."

The Alienist nodded.

Irknaan had watched the exchange with interest. From his perspective, only the steeds of those present and the chimera were apparent – some kind of ward prevented the observation of the interlopers themselves. Nonetheless, he could infer the use of powerful magic. Moments after the beast had vanished – no doubt fleeing to Shadow – the hunters' two remaining steeds likewise disappeared.

Irknaan cogitated, wondering whether they pursued her, or had passed into another reality altogether. Whoever they were, they weren't playing by the rules of the hunt – or *his* rules, at least. He shrugged. They probably wouldn't be back. Nonetheless, he would double the patrols and call on some demonic assistance – one couldn't be too careful.

**

They sat within a *magnificent mansion* hastily conjured by Mostin.

Shomei groaned. "It still hurts," she complained.

"The attack was charged with loathsome power," Nwm explained. "I need to be on hallowed ground in order to repair much of the damage done."

"We are behaving like rank amateurs," Eadric muttered. "We need to reappraise our situation. Prepare. Encase ourselves in wards and protective magics. We need back-up plans."

"Gods, Ed, we thought it was only a *chimera*," Ortwin sighed. "None of us could have expected it to be capable of that."

"I tried to warn you," Nwm shrugged.

"Then try harder, next time," Ortwin snapped.

"If you weren't so concerned about *creating an impression*..." Nwm began in a reasonable voice.

Ortwin snorted. "That's exactly what this is about. It is a bluff. A ruse. We are wearing a façade. We are not appearing *as ourselves*."

"In any case," Shomei shifted uncomfortably, and winced, "we should note that our mounts are less durable than ourselves. That was the most potent *horrid wilting* that I have had the misfortune to encounter."

"And I," Mostin agreed. "The beast is part fiendish and part tenebrous. We should be on our guard. Now we have only two steeds left between the six of us."

"I will conjure more," Shomei sighed.

"They need to be potent," Mostin said. "I suggest ecalypses – they will also give the impression that we have been to Shadow, where the chimera doubtless fled. It will reinforce the notion that we pursued it."

The Alienist reached into his *portable hole*, stroked Mogus briefly, and pulled the Looking-Glass of Urm-Nahat from within.

"What are you doing?" Nwm asked.

Mostin grinned. "I am lending credence to our ruse," he replied. "Ortwin, Eadric, Iua – if you would be so kind as to follow me?"

Eadric looked deeply suspicious.

"I will scry the beast, and we will attack and kill it. It is greatly weakened. We must strike before it can recover."

"You cannot be serious!" Nwm objected.

"It will involve only a brief sojourn in Shadow. We'll be back before you know it."

"Very well," Eadric groaned. "We should finish what we started."

Ortwin nodded, it was a matter of pride, now. Mostin drew upon the power stored in his amulet, and empowered the Paladin and Duelist with flight before scrying Lorochoth with the mirror.

"Don't screw up," Iua said, and leapt through.

*

Immersed in shadowstuff, the chimera was aware of the sensor, but paid it little heed – she assumed it was Irknaan spying on her again. Suddenly, and without warning, the Auran with the rapier was attacking her ferociously, puncturing her thick hide with the slender blade. She was joined by the two Sidhe – one of whom bore the sword that had caused her so much pain. The demon appeared last of all, grinning widely.

Lorochoth screamed in pain. Flames leapt from her dragon's mouth as she lashed out with claws and horns in an uncoordinated fashion. But she was spent, and had nowhere left to hide. It was brief and brutal. She quickly cowered.

"Spare me," she grunted in Draconic, and repeated it from her lion's head in guttural Sylvan.

Ortwin slashed at her with his scimitar, and the blade bit deeply into one of her shoulders. Leaning forward, and applying all of his great strength, Eadric pushed Lukarn into Lorochoth's sternum. The

blade sank in four feet to the quillons.

The chimera twitched once, and died. Eadric sighed, and black ichor cascaded over him as he withdrew his sword. He made a brief supplication for the creature's soul, before looking around himself.

The Plane of Shadow was cold, and drab, and featureless. All colour and life, all vitality and variety seemed to have been bled from the place.

"This is a grim Limbo," he remarked, "and I would like to leave."

Ortwin hacked at Lorochoth's draconic head with Githla, until it parted from the thick neck. He dragged it behind himself as he walked back through the portal, and smiled.

That wasn't so bad, after all, he thought.

NOTE:

This post demonstrates how completely messed up conventional Challenge Ratings are. Officially, the beastie is CR14. Off the cuff, I'd pegged her at 16-17 and thought that it would be relatively easy - although not a cake-walk - for the characters.

In fact, it almost resulted in a three character fatalities. Shomei was unconscious. And Nwm and Mostin were in single-figure hp by the end of it. **Do not underestimate advanced half-fiendish shadow chimerae!** - especially when they face a bunch of complacent players.

They were *much* more careful after this...