

*Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 04-14-2003*

They had chosen a small hillock with a flat top, covered with short, springy grass, some sixty miles from Irknaan's fortified palace – technically beyond his immediate hegemony, or so Nufrut had told them. It had once been the abode of sprites according to Nwm, although none now lived there. It was an isolated area, and their nearest neighbours were a bevy of Nereids who dwelt in a small lake three miles distant, and a solitary Redcap – perhaps the most unpleasant and disagreeable of all feys – who had taken up residence in a crumbling structure that may once have been a tower. None represented a threat to the party, although the Redcap had succumbed to – or willingly embraced – the mixture of umbral bleed and Abyssal taint that seeped into Afqithan.

At Ortwin's request – and in keeping with the Bard's general scheme to exhibit as much blustering grandiosity as possible – Mostin summoned a group of Djinn and had them erect a modestly-sized pavillion and several smaller tents on top of the hill, complete with banners and pennants which fluttered in the gentle breeze. Ortwin had chosen the device of a scarlet basilisk surrounded by nineteen oriels, which, although promising some esoteric heraldic significance, was in fact as vacuous as his own claim to nobility. Loroctoh's dragon-head sat upon a pike: the grim trophy of a hunt successfully – albeit painfully – executed. Presently, however, the camp was blanketed by a *screen* cast by Shomei, until their defenses were established. All, with the exception of Iua, maintained their respective disguises.

The group discussed the peculiar traits of Afqithan – notably its enhanced magic, and the implications of the shadowstuff which seemed to exist in varying concentrations. The demiplane was anomalous: according to Shomei, there were portals which linked it to Faerie proper, and at certain times sympathetic resonances would allow passage between the worlds. But, excepting powerful magic, there was no way of accessing the Prime other than through Shadow – which was an uncharted and likely perilous route.

"Shadow and Faerie are not mutually coextant," the Infernalist explained. "Afqithan should be seen as a threshold between two realities which do not normally interact."

"And the taint?" Eadric asked, sighing.

"I suspect that *that* was here long before Graz'zt took an interest in the place. Perhaps other fiends have had connections here in the past. Perhaps a legion or two of damned spirits fell through here on their way to Hell, and the gravity of their passing caused a bubble to break away from Faerie. I have no idea. As I have said, within Irknaan's palace there may be a *Gate* to the Abyss. But this combination of shadow and taint has been owned by the Loquai, and others – such as the Redcap who lives four miles yonder."

"And the chimera," Mostin rasped, still suffering from dehydration. "As I see it, we are dealing with a notoriously tricky group of creatures who have been rendered even trickier by the local conditions. They will be difficult, at best. How many of them can invoke *horrid wiltings*, for example? Shomei indicated that their leaders may possess as much magical potency as she and I. If one factors in control of the umbral and demonic energies, we may be heavily outmatched in terms of sheer power, although not in utility and versatility. And there is another question – the passage of time here is altered, so do we retreat to Wyre in order to prepare, or do we take advantage of the natural empowerment of magic that Afqithan offers? We need to weigh the benefits of the two options."

"We can do both," Shomei said. "I will return to the Prime – although *not* to Wyre – and perform my conjurations. A day here is a week there – and I can accomplish a great deal in a week. I assume that areas of Shadow which are coterminous with Afqithan also suffer from the temporal dilation – Shadow will reflect the local conditions on any plane it touches. As far as the power of the Loquai is concerned, I agree that we must tread carefully: the one thing to remember is that many Sidhe focus on enchantments – the *mind blanks* are likely to prove useful in that regard."

Mostin grumbled, and shook his head. "All it takes is for each of them to know just one evocation, and we're in trouble. They're bards and sorcerers, and they can drop as many *empowered maximized* whatevers on us as they like. And there *is* no spell that effectively protects against *horrid wilting* without negating our own effectiveness."

Shomei nodded. "It was never going to be easy. And it's *enervations* that I'm afraid of."

Eadric groaned. "This place is rapidly beginning to lose its charm. And if a week in Wyre passes for

every day that we spend here, that is doubly concerning. And you speak of conjurations, Shomei. Why does this give me a bad feeling, I wonder?"

"I admit that there may be a certain moral ambiguity – from your perspective, at least."

"It's not that I dislike you. It's just that I don't entirely trust you," Eadric explained.

"*Ahma*, I am returning to the Prime. If you wish, you may accompany me, and we can visit Morne, and you may confer with the *Sela*. If he instructs you to discontinue our acquaintance..."

"He will not," Eadric smiled grimly, "as you well know. I am both sanctioned and expected to exercise my own judgement. Which is difficult," he added wryly, "when I lack the clarity of vision possessed by Oronthon's proxy."

Shomei laughed. "*Saizhan* requires a great deal from its practitioners. It is ruthless and uncompromising in its demand for self-perfection."

"Your view is partially correct, but..." Eadric began.

Ortwin held up his hand. "*No philosophy*," he demanded. "It will only lead to unhappiness, and one or both of you will end up upset or frustrated. We need to concentrate on the matter in hand."

"That sentiment is always true," Nwm added wryly.

"We need to think to defense. Can we be attacked from Shadow?" Ortwin asked.

Mostin swallowed. "Probably," he nodded.

"Can we do anything about it?" The Bard pressed.

"I need to think about that," the Alienist sighed. "It depends on how accessible the Plane is to the locals."

"Very accessible," Shomei said, looking slightly apologetic.

"Can they teleport in?" Ortwin asked.

Mostin grimaced. "When they have determined our position – which shouldn't be too long, when we reveal our gaudy tents – that will be a possibility, I suppose."

"I will *hallow* this area," Nwm said, "and will tie it to a *dimensional anchor* that Mostin will cast. We have done something similar before, if you recall. We will designate those currently present as being unaffected by the *anchor*. Hallowed ground will also allow me to repair the long-term damage from the chimera's attack."

"Very inventive," Shomei nodded approvingly.

"In which case," Mostin grumbled, "someone will need to procure the relevant herbs and oils. Which means I need to return to Morne, I suppose."

"I will go to Magathei," Iua offered. "You can buy anything and everything there."

"Hallowed ground here will be rather a giveaway, don't you think?" Ortwin asked.

"Only if they think to look for it," Nwm replied. "And, let's face it, would you?"

Ortwin grinned.

Eadric sighed. "*If. If. If.* There are too many *ifs* for my liking."

"Relax, Ed," Ortwin said. "I've pulled off bigger lies than this one before."

"Have you?" Eadric asked. "Which ones?"

"My memory fails me," Ortwin replied.

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After Shomei had departed and Iua had returned from a brief excursion to Magathei on the Plane of Air, Nwm *hallowed* the hilltop in a long rite, until it became an island of brighter Green amidst a sea of long shadows.

"Where is Ortwin?" Iua asked Mostin, as the Alienist sat outside one of the smaller tents. Half of his attention was directed to Nufrut, whose disembodied head leered from out of her crystal prison, and half was focused on Nwm, who had begun to pace in a circle, mumbling the spell.

"He is reconnoitering," Mostin said distractedly. "He is *invisible* and flying, so he will be quite safe from casual observation. Sem has accompanied him – hopefully the avian's eyes should see anything before it or they see him. Barring sidhe hunting parties, of course." The word *avian* was spoken with ill-concealed loathing.

Iua raised an eyebrow, and made an educated guess as to where Ortwin's 'reconnoitering' had taken him.

Mostin ignored her and returned his attention to Nufrut, whose face seemed to be caught in a continual scowl.

"What can you tell me of Irknaan, o happy one?" Mostin asked drily.

"What do you wish to know?" The Marilith pouted.

"The means by which his connection with your master is maintained; the number and disposition of his forces; the extent of his personal magical power; his resources – does he, for example, possess any rarities which might interest me? Any information, in fact, that I might have overlooked which may prove useful."

"These questions are late in coming," Nufrut observed.

"I know or can guess the answers to most in broad terms, but now is the time for specifics," Mostin replied. "Is there an Abyssal gate within his fortress?"

"Yes," Nufrut answered grumpily.

"If you are more forthcoming, your incarceration will be briefer!"

"That is not in our agreement," the Marilith objected.

"Nor is your reticence or dissembling," Mostin replied. "I assume that the gate is a permanent, two-way portal?"

"It is periodic."

"And the length and regularity of its period?"

"This information is not known to me," Nufrut replied.

"I should remind you that even a single lie will render our agreement void, and you will remain in your sphere for the rest of your days. Do I need to ask the *Ahma* over? The Eye of Palamabron penetrates all counterfeits, they say."

"A period of twenty-four hours springs to mind for some reason," Nufrut said. "Although I may be thinking of another gate entirely."

"Would that be twenty-four hours here, or in the Abyss?" Mostin asked archly.

"I suppose it would be here," the Marilith said sourly.

"And it opens in Zelatar, I expect."

"That would certainly be logical," Nufrut conceded.

"Does it open in Zelatar, Nufrut?"

"Yes," the Demoness answered.

"Just making sure," Mostin said acidly. "How long does the portal remain open, *in local time*, Nufrut. Try to be precise."

"Three hours, twenty-five minutes and forty-two seconds," the Demoness said sarcastically.

"Thank-you," Mostin said with dry condescension. "That wasn't so hard, was it? Are there other gates, other than the one within Irknaan's stronghold?"

"There are many gates in Afqithan to many worlds," Nufrut answered.

"Are there others to Zelatar?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"To other regions of the Abyss?"

"Perhaps. If there are, I am not privy to them."

"Good," Mostin sighed, finally feeling that he was making headway. "Now let's speak of Irknaan himself. He reveres your master, as do many of the Loquai. What does he gain in reward for his loyalty?"

"Power, you fool," Nufrut sneered.

"More specifically, please. And you may dispense with the insults, they do not make me sympathetic to your plight."

"Prince Gra..."

"Hup!" Mostin interrupted. "You will henceforth refer to him as *my master*, if you please."

Nufrut raised an eyebrow in an expression of amusement. "If you are concerned about him hearing his name, bear in mind how many billions say it every day in a billion worlds."

"Nonetheless, I would prefer not to take the risk. Most of those billions are not high on his list of 'people to be dealt with.' As I was asking, what does Irknaan receive as a boon from your master?"

"Irknaan is particularly favoured. The Loquai in general enjoy the attentions of succubi – or incubi – depending on their gender and preference. They have learned the secret language. They have demonic allies and servants. My master and his minions have taught them many arts – Irknaan most of all."

"And they crave erotic sensation above all else?"

"All sensation is erotic if you learn how to experience it," Nufrut answered.

"We can engage in such philosophical speculation at another time, Nufrut. For the time being, let us confine ourselves to Irknaan. Which arts do you speak of?"

"Efficacious magic, Mostin. Violated magic."

"And in return, what has the Prince received? How far does Irknaan's loyalty extend? Are there Loquai within the Lord of Azzagrat's retinue? Do they pay him tribute?"

"There are sidhe within his armies, yes. Many are capable warriors. Your encounter with Xerulko\* is testament to my master's eclecticism."

"How many Loquai dwell within Irknaan's fortress?" Mostin persisted.

"Perhaps two hundred."

Inwardly, Mostin groaned. "And the location and disposition of his principal vassals within Afqithan?"

"They are numerous," Nufrut answered.

"Other fortresses of Loquai, or other creatures who support him," Mostin said, somewhat exasperated.

"Yytryn, a powerful Duke, two hundred miles to the northeast of here; the Queen Menicau; the Lamia Jetheeg; Threxu, the Wasted Nymph; King Samodoquol; the Wurm Crosod..."

"A *Wurm*? Of what kind?"

"A black one. He often flies to converse with Irknaan."

Mostin recalled the very first time that he had looked through his mirror with Shomei into this twisted world. Something huge had passed across the stars in the distance. *It could have been a dragon, I suppose*, he thought.

"And Crosod has embraced the umbral taint, no doubt?"

"Most certainly," Nufrut smiled.

"And within Irknaan's fortress: are there other individuals who might pose a particular threat to us, beside the king himself?"

"His queen and consort, Nhura. His captain, Shupthul. He is served by an elite guard who may be more than a match for your puny gang. Fiendish umbral griffons, maybe a dozen succubi and several glabrezu at any one time. Who knows, Mostin – perhaps even a kelvezu or two?"

"You seem to be enjoying this."

"I must take my recreation when it presents itself to me. I am not equipped to go and find it myself."

"Nhura is a succubus, I assume?"

"No, indeed," Nufrut smiled wickedly. "Nhura is a rare creature indeed. She was once a Lillend."

Mostin's stomach tightened in a knot.

Eadric spent much of the day, if it was a day – there was neither sun nor moon to mark the passage of time – in prayer and contemplation, still unaccustomed to his sidhe form. He meditated upon their current predicament, and the absurdity of it struck him: they were in a foreign world, full of potent magic, where taint was rampant, and with no overarching plan or purpose. As usual, Ortwin didn't seem to be taking things very seriously, and Shomei was a nagging source of concern. Penetrating her motives was impossible. Mostin seemed to trust her, but Mostin's perspective was more skewed than anyone else that Eadric knew, and was little cause for comfort.

*Thank heaven for Nwm*, he thought, as he emerged from his reverie. The Druid still paced, chanting quietly under his breath. Iua practiced impossibly complex maneuvers nearby.

As Mostin approached him, the Paladin resigned himself to the inevitable complications that the Alienist always managed to find. His demonic visage was distinctly unsettling.

"I have good news and bad news: which would you first prefer?" Mostin casually swung the globe containing Nufrut's head.

"I would rather not hear the bad news at all," Eadric replied.

"Then I will tell you the good news: Nufrut is a veritable mine of information! Shomei was inspired when she suggested her name."

"I was an ambassador to many worlds, you imbecile! What do you expect?" The Demoness snapped from her prison.

Mostin opened his *portable hole* and dropped her inside. "She is, however, somewhat irascible, and is prone to petulance."

"What other good news is there?" Eadric asked.

"None," Mostin admitted. He proceeded to recount all that he had learned, drinking deeply from a waterskin at regular intervals.

"I do not like umbral fiendish black wyrms," Eadric moaned. "This is a disturbing development."

"I am in agreement," Mostin nodded, "but we can rest assured that such a creature will register in Nwm's mind long before it finds us."

"If he is looking," Eadric added.

"Nwm immerses himself in the Green on a fairly regular basis, so I have no concerns there. Irknaan sounds well entrenched, however: finding any to oppose him is likely to be difficult."

"This is no revelation," Eadric sighed. "There are those here which the taint has not touched, according to Nwm. They may be potential allies."

"Pixies and Grigs?" Mostin laughed hoarsely. "Dryads? Satyrs? Nymphs and Nereids? Squeakers, Buckawns and *Wood Gnomes*? You cannot be serious! Even if these were normal Sidhe that we were dealing with, Eadric, that would be an ill-advised course of action. The Loquai are not such easy targets."

"Don't let Ortwin hear you speaking thus," Iua interrupted, "he is, after all, King of the Feys in Wyre."

"Any fool can make that claim, and I'm sure he's not the only one to covet that title," Mostin said drily.

"Where is he, anyway?"

Iua drew a dagger from her boot. "About now," she said coolly, "I expect he is discovering whether his attempt to seduce one, or perhaps all, of the three Nereids who live yonder has been successful."

Left-handed, she hurled the blade with strength and precision at Lorochtoh's head, where it sank into the skull between the dead chimera's glazed draconic eyes.

*Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 04-29-2002*

The succubus Lehurze – who regarded herself as an occasional ally of Graz'zt, rather than his abject thrall – adjusted her visage to her satisfaction before pressing the face of the *cubic gate* which was keyed to Afqithan. She was unwilling to wait for two days until the portal opened, and even more loath to ask her Abyssal master to expedite her transit: the Prince's mood had been particularly dark and violent of late. This was no special cause for concern in and of itself, but neither was he known for granting boons at such times. And had he been reminded of her, and chosen to slake his lust upon her instead, she feared that it may have resulted in her demise – over the aeons, more than a few succubi had been annihilated during or after the act of passion, whether or not they had begged a favour from him. Best not to draw attention to herself, she thought.

Lehurze played a dangerous game. Graz'zt knew that she was on amicable terms with Pazuzu, but was content to allow her to pass tidbits of information to agents of the Aerial Prince as long as the flow back towards the Lord of Azzagrat was greater in both volume and quality. Demons generally expected disloyalty and duplicity, and, in fact, became suspicious when it seemed absent.

Graz'zt also knew that Lehurze was still close in the confidence of his former ally and paramour, Soneillon – the abstruse and enigmatic succubus whose dark designs may have rivaled even his own. During their aeon-long association, Soneillon had initiated a number of demons nominally loyal to Graz'zt into her clique of followers, of whom Lehurze was one. Lehurze had seized every shred of knowledge which was presented to her, and developed a sorcerous talent of some ability – which she carefully hid from those around her. Lehurze was shrewd enough to appear to reveal the majority of her findings regarding Soneillon to one of Graz'zt's agents – a Glabrezu named Shonchuk – who paid her handsomely for her information. She knew that Shonchuk was retained directly by Graz'zt – despite the fact that the other demon masqueraded as an informant for one of the Dark Prince's frequent supporters, Lord Kostchtchie.

Lehurze was therefore surprised when events unfolded as they did. Irknaan, one of the warped sidhe kings from Afqithan, had issued the Nalfeshnee Maihodrot a *sending*, requesting information on a kelvezu and a group of rogue sidhe who had entered his realm. Maihodrot, the demon who oversaw events in Afqithan and with whom Lehurze at times found collaboration beneficial, had intimated that unusual events might be passing in the little demiplane. Upon further probing he had suggested that Irknaan – whose name was known to Lehurze – might be concerned that Prince Graz'zt bore him some unknown enmity. Lehurze was silent when quizzed by the other demon – her mind working furiously, as she tried to piece together possible scenarios. Many things were known to her, and she was privy to the plots of a number of Abyssal magnates.

Irknaan, she knew, had genuine cause for concern: if Graz'zt had discovered that the Loquai were also sponsored by the demoness Rhyxali, he may have acted to suppress the potential rivalry. Or he may have known for some time, and determined that things had reached a critical juncture. Her curiosity was piqued. Nonetheless, the succubus would have ignored the entreaty, had it not been for a quasit dispatched from her erstwhile mistress in Throile – the disputed Abyssal jungle where Graz'zt and Soneillon warred interminably with one another:

*Inquire into Afqithan. A captured Devil has indicated that interesting events may be transpiring there. Shomei the Infernal is somehow involved.*

Never one to believe in coincidence, Lehurze had slain the quasit without a moment's thought, and approached Maihodrot again. After indulging the Nalfeshnee's violent desires, she had secured the temporary use of the *cubic gate* which Maihodrot used to access Afqithan and a number of other worlds which he was charged with supervising. Unaware of the greater patterns which were moving, but nonetheless suspicious of the motives of the succubus, Maihodrot agreed to allow Lehurze to act in his stead – confident that he could extract at least a few scraps of gossip from her upon her return. From the Nalfeshnee's perspective, Afqithan was a tedious and complex world, and he was wise enough to know that he lacked the guile necessary to wheedle anything substantive from Irknaan.

As she stepped through the *gate*, Lehurze felt a frisson of excitement: as much as she felt at home amid the tortuous intrigues of Azzagrat, occasional escape from the place, if merely to a pocket Faerie, was always desirable.

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Iua was only partially correct in her suspicions regarding Ortwin. The *polymorphed* and *invisible* Satyr had made his roundabout way to the nereids' pool, where he sat upon a rock and watched the three feys cavort happily in the water. Those with eyes to see would have observed an inane grin of huge proportions fixed onto his face.

After an unknown time had elapsed – it may have been minutes or hours – and seeing no abatement to the nereids' antics, Ortwin removed his pipes from his belt and began a haunting melody of such enormous poignancy that, had he had tear ducts, Sem – who sat upon a nearby branch – would have begun to weep. The water-nymphs stopped abruptly, seized their shawls from the bank of the pool, and vanished into its depths.

Ortwin raised an invisible eyebrow, and continued to play – the tempo and mood of his music changing to become lighter and less melancholy, although still graced with a sweetness and depth which belied his own fickle and superficial nature. He concluded the tune, and waited.

And waited.

Ortwin frowned, and replaced his pipes at his belt. He pulled his small harp from its case on his back, and struck up another tune – this time accompanying the music with a voice which he hardly recognized as his own. Sidhe vocal chords had a smoothness he was unfamiliar with. He measured the passage of time by the songs that he played, and perhaps a further half hour had elapsed before he sighed and ceased his music. He waited again, glancing up at the eagle – who appeared to have dozed off. He picked up a stick and threw it at the bird, who screeched indignantly.

"Come on," Ortwin picked himself up. "We're going."

"Better luck next time," Sem replied sarcastically.

"You are no Loquai," a honeyed voice said from the water at his feet. "And you play the pipes passably

well for a sidhe – did a satyr teach you?"

Ortwin started, and looked down to observe only his own reflection in the water. He smiled ironically – apparently the *invisibility* had worn off at some time during his performance.

"*Passably well? I am a satyr, lady,*" he said with quickly recovered charm. "I am Ortwin the Great, King of the Feys of Wyre and the Northern World – not *your* world, I hasten to add. I am currently in disguise."

"That is an implausible tale."

"But nonetheless true," Ortwin answered, surprised that less than fifty percent of his claim was a lie.

"And why are you here by our pool, 'King' Ortwin?"

"I have lustful urges," he admitted, "but that is not the only reason why I'm here. I am looking for information. What can you tell me of the Loquai?"

"Now you make me suspicious that you are a spy," the voice replied with acid humour.

"Please understand that I mean you no harm," Ortwin insisted. "If I had wished to, I could have stolen all of your shawls and forced you into submitting to all manner of lewd acts, and into divulging whatever I wished to know. I am looking for allies. I am the enemy of Irknaan, and his sponsors, and of the umbral bleed, and the taint which lies upon this place. Can you help me?"

"I cannot," the voice replied. "Now begone!"

"What is your name?" the Bard asked. But there was no response. She had fled.

Ortwin cursed.

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Mostin watched as Nwm made his final invocations on the hilltop. "If you did that every day for ten thousand years, you might make a small impression on this place," Mostin scoffed, as he cast a *dimensional anchor*.

Nwm ignored him, and repaired the damage caused by the violated *horrid wilting* that they had sustained. He waited until Mostin apologized before attending to his needs: in the meantime, the Alienist had consumed several gallons of water in his unquenchable thirst.

When Shomei returned, it was in the company of four ecalypses that she had enlisted as steeds – six-legged horses native to Shadow. Mostin guessed that the Infernalist had struck deals with other creatures, although Shomei did not mention them, and the Alienist did not press her: she looked exhausted, itself an indicator that she had busied herself with *summonings* and *callings*.

To Eadric, Iua and Nwm, the witch handed small vials containing a transparent liquid which smelled vaguely acidic.

"Consume these," she instructed, sighing.

Eadric looked suspicious.

"They will allow you to master the beasts – currently, they are *charmed*, but you need to bond with them. The draught will simply allow you to stay on them while you break them. Ecalypses are notoriously willful."

"Where did you procure these potions?" The Paladin asked. The flasks had a faint aura of taint which clung to them.

"Abriymoch," Shomei grimaced. "But they were not made in the Hells, *Ahma*, only purchased there – with some difficulty, I might add."

"Does every choice that you present to me compromise my principles and threaten to erode my

integrity?"

"That is for you to decide."

"And why do you inconvenience yourself for us to such an extent? Do you require payment for your services?"

"No," she said flatly. "And *my* debt to Nwm is still unsettled: I would have died had he not intervened."

"There is no debt," the Druid said easily.

"Yes," she replied, "there is."

Shomei opened yet another *magnificent mansion* to corral both the ecalypsés and the two remaining nightmares – now that the hilltop itself was *hallowed*, they could not freely tread there.

"Where is Ortwin?" Shomei asked.

"He is reconnoitering," Mostin replied, avoiding Iua's gaze.

"Is he warded?"

"Somewhat," the Alienist answered.

Shomei sighed. "We need to be more careful, Mostin. One of my devils is missing."

Mostin raised an eyebrow. "Which one?"

"One of the erinyes, named Aoloz. She was the one I dispatched to Throile."

"This complicates matters," Mostin said drily.

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Lehurze arrived in Afqithan only moments after Ortwin had begun his flight back to the encampment, and immediately *teleported* to the gates of Irknaan's palace. She was granted an audience with the King in private, and was greeted by his customary mixture of inscrutability and condescension. Their exchange was civil, as each probed the other for possible weaknesses. For the most part, Lehurze remained demure, sensing the power of the dark perception that the sidhe possessed – he was ancient, and as cunning as an Abyssal Lord, and she knew that she must tread carefully. Potency and command flowed effortlessly from him, but seemed to find no purchase on her – Lehurze had long since mastered the art of utter passivity, and transformed it into an effective tool for domination. She absorbed all. Soneillon had taught her well.

When the succubus casually mentioned the demoness Rhyxali, she was unsure whether she caught the merest flicker in Irknaan's impenetrable gaze. She smiled inwardly, as she knew now that the King's thoughts would be turning rapidly, seeking to make connections and attempting to place her within the larger picture.

Lehurze made no mention of the kelvezu, nor of the sidhe hunting party, until Irknaan broached the subject at the gruesome and shadowy revel which was held later that evening. Nine other succubi were present – compacted to Loquai nobles of varying station – as well as the glabrezu Tebdeluz and Narab, advisors and lovers to Nhura, Irknaan's beautiful, sinuous, and deadly consort. The presence of Lehurze was a cause for doubt amongst the other demons – the succubus had a reputation for intricate and tangled schemes in Azzagrat, and they, themselves, suddenly felt under scrutiny. Lehurze delighted in the fear that she evoked, and many of the lesser sidhe to whom she spoke, despite their subtlety and guile, were no match for her shrewd and circuitous interrogations.

Irknaan watched her as she mingled. He was confident that he had gauged her correctly: here was one with the ruthless determination and ambition typical of her kind, but also with the skill and patience to actualize her goals – a much more valuable commodity. After their satiation of blood, and grim pleasure, and exquisite pain, Irknaan's court retired for meditation or private indulgence.

The King and Queen – the latter flanked by the hulking presence of the two glabrezu – remained and

questioned Lehurze, who seemed unfazed by the penetrating gazes of the two huge demons. All regarded each other with mutual distrust and cynicism, and beneath an opaque veneer of civility and etiquette, deals were struck, information was exchanged, and secrets were alluded to.

But when Shupthul entered at a late hour with his report, none could have expected the news that he brought with him. He bowed before Irknaan, Nhura, and their guest.

"My Lord and Lady, there are devils at the gate. They seek an audience."

The King's eyes widened in an uncharacteristic display of surprise. "Their number, arrangement and purpose?" He asked.

"There are thirteen of them, Lord. Their purpose they would not divulge. Ten are Narzugons who wear many honours and decorations."

"And the three remaining?"

"Furcas, Murmuur and Titivilus, my Lord. Infernal nobility."

Irknaan turned to Lehurze. "Perhaps you possess some insight into the presence of Devils in my realm?" He asked acidly.

"I have no more information than you," the Succubus lied, as she considered Soneillon's mention of Shomei.

The King's eyes narrowed, and he pondered briefly. "Tell them to return in a day," he instructed Shupthul. "I am disinclined to deal with them presently."

"Offending them too much may be unwise," Nhura said, "at least until we discover their purpose. We should send them a token, and grant them the privilege to hunt, at least. There may be others in their wake."

Irknaan gave a cursory nod. Thirteen devils – even ten knights and three Dukes of Hell – were no

particular threat to him in his own fortress, but he was nonetheless cautious. And like Lehurze, King Irknaan did not believe in coincidence. The image of the unknown sidhe hunting party was still fresh in his mind.

*Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 05-05-2003*

Iua had sat largely quiet during the discussions, her emotions churning rapidly, but conscious of the inappropriateness of an untimely confrontation with Ortwin, who evinced his usual swagger and nonchalance.

When the Bard had recounted his encounter with the nereids – speaking no falsehood, but leaving sufficient room for all kinds of inference – she had sighed inwardly, aware of his capacity for gross insensitivity. Mostin had fidgeted uncomfortably, and Nwm had kept his eyes diplomatically lowered. Eadric, as always, had retained an open and accommodating expression which did not suit his current sidhe features. The duelist was glad that he would be wearing a helm – subterfuge was not one of the Paladin's strong points. Subtlety, and reading others' moods, however, could be.

"You should be cautious of roaming too far afield," Eadric said vaguely to Ortwin. "It may have unforeseen consequences."

Ortwin squinted, unsure of the Paladin's meaning.

"It is important to maintain the group's cohesion and unity of purpose," Eadric continued obliquely. "And one of us alone is too easy a target – *invisibility* is no protection against the sidhe, or a passing dragon, for that matter. Forays should be made in pairs – preferably in the company of a spellcaster – in case a speedy retreat is necessary."

"Good idea," Ortwin nodded. "Perhaps Nwm should come next time. You like nereids, don't you Nwm?"

"I am reluctant to categorize my feelings towards an entire race of creatures in such simple terms," Nwm replied evasively.

"Nonsense," Ortwin said archly. "When you were younger, Nwm..."

"Alas, I am no longer young," the Druid interrupted.

"But when you *were*," Ortwin persisted blithely, "you frolicked with nymphs and dryads and nereids and sirines with the best of them. You were never stuffy, like Ed is."

"Nor was I as selfish and hedonistic as you," Nwm snapped. "Just because I don't have Eadric's..."

"Hang-ups?" Ortwin suggested.

"*Perspective*," Nwm continued. "Bah! What's the use? You wouldn't know what *sacred* meant if the Goddess pissed in your face."

Shomei shot Mostin an inquiring look.

*Yes, it's usually like this*, was the Alienist's unvoiced reply.

The Infernalist clicked her fingers. "Tactics," she said.

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Mostin's intellect was amplified to a level he had never before experienced, and his mind was awash with powerful spells. They seemed to compete for space, and threatened to spill over. Almost every one of his higher valences was occupied – four more castings of *mind blank* had actually relieved the pressure on his consciousness.\*

Every spell – arcane and divine – that the party possessed would be deployed to maximum effect. They had spent over an hour discussing strategy in an attempt to coordinate their resources. Eadric would be contributing *death wards*, and even Ortwin's paltry collection of spells would be used in order to free up some of Shomei's lower valences.

The Alienist had prepared *gate*, *prismatic sphere*, *Mordenkainen's disjunction*, *time stop*, *reality maelstrom*; a chained *phantasmal killer*, a chained *polymorph other*, five *disintegrates*, and four sonically substituted *fire orbs* – he was intent on not having the targets slide out of the way again, as the chimera had done. He had prepared a pair of *dimensional anchors* in case they ran into anything that they didn't want to get away, and two *banishments* in case they encountered anything that they *did* want to go away. He had prepared an *insanity* spell, his usual utility spells and divinations, and for his *summoning* he favoured pseudoimmoths – the idea being to conjure six or seven of them, and then ordering them to begin a magical barrage of their own. He had also prepared a chained *flesh to stone* spell – a tactic he had never before employed. He held a *plane shift* in reserve in case a speedy retreat was necessary.

Aside from two *squamous pulses* and a *finger of death* in the event that they met the dragon, Nwm would be acting primarily in a support role and providing a variety of wards, augmentations, and healing spells. Shomei was split between offense, defense and general utility, and would be deploying extended *stoneskins* and doubly empowered *endurances* – further augmented by the ambient magic – and two *effulgent epurations*, to limit the power of the initial assault if it came. She had a host of minor buffs, numerous abjurations and several powerful conjurations prepared – *power word stun*, *maze* and *gate*. She boasted a *horrid wilting* which would be empowered through her rod and further magnified – to truly stellar proportions – by the enhanced magic of the plane.

"If you thought that the chimera's attack was bad," she said to Mostin, "you should wait until you see this one – if I have a chance to get it off."

"What is an *effulgent epuration*?" Eadric asked.

"You will see," Shomei half-smiled.

Mostin turned greedily to the Infernalist. "Perhaps that spell is tradeable?"

Shomei shrugged. "Maybe. Hopefully, it will not come to blows in any case – one of my highest valences will be invested in Ortwin. His charm is what stands between us and an unpleasant situation."

"And I assume that your *gate* would be to bring devils here?" Eadric sighed.

"Not necessarily," Shomei replied. "I am not above calling on other entities if required."

"And yours, Mostin?" The Paladin inquired.

"It's a surprise," Mostin said, displaying a demonic grin.

Shomei shot him a glance filled with trepidation, before *summoning* a succubus and dispatching it to Irknaan's fortress.

In its hand, it held a cordial invitation to hunt, from Duke Rhalid and his consort, the Auran Princess, Iua.

The *screen* which protected the encampment was lifted, and the hilltop – with its collection of tents – suddenly became visible.

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Irknaan inwardly scowled, although his face betrayed no expression of his irritation. He stared from atop his tallest tower, a hundred fathoms above the base of the rock pinnacle upon which his castle was built.

The edifice, which had appeared at some stage in the past few hours, was less than a mile from his gates. Needle-sharp, black, lusterless and seemingly unpierced by any door or window, it vied for dominion of the sky with his own fortress.

Irknaan briefly considered whether allowing the devils into his own court may have been wiser than forcing them to 'make camp' outside of the walls. The infernal tower was, predictably, impervious to divinations of all kinds. Irknaan brooded about what was transpiring inside: they had opened at least one *gate*, as testified by the presence of sharp-eyed spined devils, in tireless flight about the place. And spinugons were the least of his concerns.

The three Dukes – technically one Duke, one Count and a Nuncio – who were, presumably, still closeted within the tower somewhere, had not shown themselves since Irknaan's denial of an audience. Their actions, whilst provocative, were not entirely unexpected, and a good deal of posturing could be expected on both sides before any real communication of intent or purpose occurred.

Duke Murmuur, Irknaan knew, was the senior member of the diabolic envoy, although in guile and subtlety both Furcas and Titivilus no doubt outshone him. Whilst Murmuur was a relatively straightforward opponent – albeit a fierce and capable warrior – the others, both vassals of Dispater, were intellectuals without peer amongst the middle-ranking aristocracy. The Narzugons – Knights of the Order of the Fly – were Murmuur's retainers, and were potentially dangerous opponents, although Irknaan's own bodyguards were likely a match for them.

*In any case, Irknaan considered ironically, if the Lords of Dis or Malbolge really want this place, what can I do to stop them?*

Abruptly, Lehurze appeared behind him. Her words were a gamble.

"Will you petition Rhyxali for aid? Or Graz'zt?"

The King's face remained emotionless. "You presume a great deal for one who has been here less than a day."

"I sometimes favour speed and efficiency of purpose over diplomacy," the Succubus replied.

Irknaan gestured briefly, and Lehurze was *held* with a look of astonishment upon her face. Suddenly, pain more intense than she had experienced in a aeon overwhelmed her. Her skin began to peel off in strips from body and her spirit screamed, but her mouth – clenched and unmoving – was incapable of

vocalizing.

Irknaan waited until she was almost dead before he released her. Lehurze collapsed upon the marble flags of the rooftop, ichor pouring from her ruptured form. She lashed out at him with a *power word*, but space rippled around him and the syllables evaporated impotently.

He *held* her again. "You'll have to do better than that," he said. "You're one of Soneillon's whores, aren't you?"

*I was.*

"And whom do you serve now?"

*Myself.*

"But you still remain in communication with your former mistress?"

*Amongst others. I have many contacts.*

"I think that it is time that you were honest with me," King Irknaan smiled thinly.

*There are a number of demons whom I can sue for help.*

But at what cost? Irknaan mused. His grip on Afqithan, although relatively solid, would rapidly become tenuous if powerful demons with unknown agendas began appearing. *More* powerful demons with unknown agendas, he considered, as he observed Lehurze.

"What do you suggest, Lehurze?" He released her again, and her form became limp. She coughed dark bile.

"An alliance, whilst it remains to our mutual benefit."

"If you seek to supplant Nhura, then I would warn you: she is deadly. Do you have designs on

Afqithan?"

"Every succubus desires to be a queen, Irknaan."

He had read her accurately – perhaps more accurately than she had read herself. Arcanists who came to Afqithan always reacted the same way. Whatever their initial view of the little demiplane – a parochial backwater, inward-looking and insignificant – they rapidly became enamoured.

The exhilaration of spellcasting was too much to resist. The magical power which coursed through everything. The effortless joy of manifesting. The dark, brooding beauty of the place.

A feeling of enormous poignancy threatened to overcome Irknaan. He would rather die a thousand times than surrender his kingdom to any other.

"I do not trust you one iota," he said to her.

"That is wise," she replied.

So he laid a *geas* on her, and bound her to him, which suited Lehurze well enough. Passivity was her oldest friend, and her greatest ally.

\*Mostin rarely, if ever, fills every spell slot in the morning, preferring the flexibility of a quick fifteen or thirty minutes to cram another spell if required. He is usually at around two-thirds capacity. That morning, he was fully primed, and had an intelligence of 40 (he was under the effect of a trebly empowered *fox's cunning*, further empowered and maximized by the magical trait of the plane): save DCs against his spells were as high as he could get them. He had just reached 20th level, and was relishing the power that it afforded: if it came to blows, the general tactic was to deploy fortitude-targeting spells, negating the *evasion* ability of the umbral feys and simultaneously forcing their weakest save.

*Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 05-27-2003*

This post demonstrates how obscenely overpowered *time stop* is when it is cast in Afqithan, and why I will never again allow its effects to stack with *haste*; how things like 'EL26' and 'CR22' in fact mean diddly-squat; and how, what the DM thinks are overwhelming numbers - designed to force compliance or retreat from the players - are, in fact, nothing more than a minor annoyance.

The title of this update is therefore devoted to not just the *theoretical* possibilities that a spell offers - which had been long known - but to actually putting it into practice for the first time.

### **Mostin Discovers *Time Stop***

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Crosod's immense pinions powered him forward at unnatural speed, and his sinuous body – which seemed to devour all light and belch it forth again as a cloying darkness – shivered with potency as space parted around him. Within his ebon form his eyes were lidless voids, filled with age, and wisdom, and infinite malice. Clinging to his foreleg, perched above his razor-sharp talons and exalting in the wind as it rushed over her was Threxu, the Wasted Nymph with whom, at times, the Dragon consorted. She was a lithe, supple shadow, whose delicate and beautiful form seemed incapable of performing the acts for which she had justly acquired her terrible reputation.

Below them, unaware of the passenger that he carried, wood-gnomes and sprites of every kind cowered, fearing that the slightest breath or movement would draw the Dragon to them. Crosod smelled them but had no interest in them – they offered little in the way of nourishment, and there was no time for sport.

Threxu, however, was thirsty. She glanced greedily at the forest below her.

"Here!" She yelled at Crosod, and pointed. The Wyrn banked abruptly, his wings emitting a thunderous crack which shook the treetops, before descending effortlessly to the forest floor and crushing a tump which housed a dozen grigs and pixies.

Threxu leapt from his leg and sank to the ground, pressing her lips to the soft grass. She drank voraciously, and rapidly – although only temporarily – she satisfied her thirst.

As the pair took to the sky again and made their way towards Irknaan's fortress at the behest of their liege, the feys in the woods below wailed and cursed. Dryads wept in desperation, in the sure knowledge that, within a day, they, like their trees, and every other green thing within the blighted swathe that Threxu had left, would be dead.

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The unknown sidhe had returned, it appeared.

Irknaan had been unable to capture their messenger and interrogate her – a *summoned* succubus – before she vanished back to her Abyssal abode. His attempts to *scry* the group had been unsuccessful, and *clairvoyance* of the locale that they described revealed only a collection of tents, with no inhabitants or owners. Nearby, one of Lorochoh's heads sat upon a pike.

They were warded, the King knew. Possibly even *mind blanked* – and that would prove awkward. His thoughts raced. Evidence of powerful spells had been left at the site where the corpses of the nightmares had been found, and the loss of four steeds had seemed to do little to diminish their effectiveness.

They were not Loquai, but they had followed the chimera to Shadow. They had chosen a particularly isolated locale, in a region unclaimed by any noble and with few inhabitants. One of them at least possessed a magical ability which rivalled or even outstripped his own – the pursuing scouts that he had sent after them after their initial appearance had heard sonic detonations of great power. And the

succubi that Lorochoth had *summoned* to deal with them had been dispatched with distressing ease – their charms apparently ineffective. And the kelvezu – where did *it* fit into the scheme of things? A retainer? He reluctantly approached Nhura, whose knowledge and wisdom regarding many things was deeper than his.

"Have you heard of Duke Rhalid?" He asked.

"No," she replied.

"An Auran Princess named Iua?"

She scowled. "The name is distantly familiar," she replied.

"Take one of the succubi. Go first to Faerie, and make inquiries of this Duke. Spend no more than an hour there. Go then to the Plane of Air. Find out what you can regarding Iua. Return as speedily as you can."

She squinted, and nodded curtly.

After the departure of the Lillend – if that was, in fact, something which Nhura could still be called – Irknaan called Shupthul to him and instructed his Captain carefully. Somewhat later, Shupthul left the fortress in the company of the succubus Iemazai – his compacted mistress, and one of the wilier members of Irknaan's court. They were accompanied by a dozen Loquai mounted on tenebrous griffons; the witch Koilimilou and her *called* and *bound* servitors – currently a trio of Jariliths – as well as six quicklings of particularly evil aspect, and thirty hell-hounds.

Koilimilou – cantankerous and eccentric – was one that Irknaan seldom approached, as the witch was dangerous and preferred her own company, or that of demons, to that of the Loquai. Under threat of *flensing* however, she acquiesced to Irknaan's demands, and stirred herself from her reveries. She possessed a powerful item which, amongst other things, would expedite the passage of the hunting party. In the past, Irknaan had used it to wage war on his rivals – and only Koilimilou could unlock its secrets.

Shupthul would make preliminary contact with the group of interlopers, and assess their strengths and weaknesses – inviting them to the castle, if he deemed it appropriate. Lehurze would attempt to reopen negotiations with the devils who were now entrenched nearby – they had yet to declare their purpose. In the meantime, Irknaan had ordered several of his most powerful vassals to attend him: the Wyrn, the nymph Threxu, King Samodoquol with eighty knights, and Duke Ytryn with thirty more.

After deliberating, Irknaan had yielded to his desire for demonic assistance, but reluctant to directly embroil either Graz'zt or Rhyxali had, at the suggestion of Lehurze, scried Soneillon in her abyss of pain and depravity.

Darkness.

"She is there," Lehurze assured him, "and she knows you are watching."

Irknaan issued a *sending*. The enigmatic demoness did not reply.

Irknaan brooded. Soneillon was less dangerous than either of his patrons, but dealing with her still required considerable caution and a clear head. Although he trusted no-one – be they ally, subject, thrall or open enemy – the King had millennia of experience in dealing with some of the most devious and manipulative entities in creation.

He inwardly hoped that it would be enough. Any sign of weakness would be exploited by one or more of his own servants or allies.

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"Should we send another one?" Ortwin asked irritably, an hour after the succubus had been *summoned* and dispatched to Irknaan's fortress. "There's still no reply." He stood tensely, arms folded, whilst the others sat nearby upon ecalypsos and nightmares which champed restlessly.

"He is no doubt machinating," Mostin replied.

"In which case," Nwm suggested, "we probably shouldn't give him too long. In case he prepares *too* well."

More time passed. Nwm's thoughts reached out in an attempt to discover perturbations in the Green nearby, but to no affect.

When they arrived, it was suddenly and without warning. They manifested at the base of the hillock where the party had set their tents, outside of the dimensionally anchored area. Shadowstuff swirled around them, gushing from the aperture through which they came, before sinking slowly into the ground. Ortwin immediately fell into character, resisting the urge to gape, and regretting that he did not have time to quaff his *philtre of glibness* without drawing attention to himself.

The Loquai were tall, elegant figures, their individual features rendered vague by the umbral energies which had suffused them. They appeared as dark shades, clad in darker armour and bearing lances, bows and long swords; they sat upon black-winged monstrosities that would have been griffons, had they been possessed of more real matter and less shadowstuff and taint. Tiny motes of sooty darkness darted about the riders: fiendish umbral quicklings, with only pinprick red eyes to lend them semblance of shape and form. Hunting demons – Jariliths – prowled amongst them, their maws full of sharp teeth. Hell-hounds bayed around them.

Their leader wore a helm and breastplate of jet, although the captured twilight hinted at other shades hidden within. Upon closer observation, his face – beautiful even for a sidhe – seemed serene; delicate features revealed in a thousand shades of insubstantial grey. In his left hand he carried a bow of impossible lightness, a slender dart nocked easily between his long fingers.

"I am Shupthul," he said in a soft voice. The words resonated, and seemed to hang in the air like smoke after he had spoken. Behind him, an invisible sensor hung – Irknaan was doubtless watching.

"I am Rhalid," Ortwin replied, nodding politely. His eyes darted quickly over those others present. A succubus – currently without wings, yet unmistakably demonic – although not a threat, given their *mind blanked* state. Twelve knights, akin to Shupthul but lacking, Ortwin suspected, the magical gravity of their leader – whether in spells or enchanted items. And then he saw *her*.

*Beautifulohgodssheissobeautifulihaventeverseen...don 't look at her...*

Shades seemed to flash around her, but in her face was *colour*. Koilimilou was untouched by the shadowstuff which invaded Afqithan, although she bore more than a hint of the demonic.

Ortwin tore his eyes away from her, after they had rested the merest fraction of a second too long. She stared impassively back at him.

"I am hunting," Ortwin continued in a matter-of-fact way, his heart pounding silently. "I assume your master received my message? Would he care to join us?"

"It is customary to pay one's respects to a lord, before one engages in a hunt on his land," Shupthul said humorlessly.

"For which, I apologize," Ortwin said, with what seemed like complete sincerity. "I suspect we became over-excited, and neglected to observe the customary niceties. Please convey my deep regret for any offense I might have caused." The Bard removed his diamond circlet, and casually offered it to Shupthul. "A token of good will to your King," he said openly.

Under his hood, Mostin raised an eyebrow.

Shupthul said nothing, but gestured – causing Shomei to immediately ready a spell in preparation. Instead, on his cue, one of the quicklings darted forwards to snatch the coronet, and delivered it to Shupthul's hand within the space of a heartbeat.

Abruptly, the Captain switched into another language – full of grating sound and harsh syllables – and addressed Mostin. "What is your purpose?"

"That is no concern of yours," Mostin replied, somewhat shocked at hearing the Abyssal Tongue, but maintaining his composure.

Ortwin swallowed. This was *not* supposed to happen.

"Who is your master?" Shupthul continued.

"That..." Mostin began.

But Ortwin quickly realized that if he let this line of inquiry continue, then Mostin would betray them – although dishonest enough in his own mean way, the Alienist was not practiced in the art of subterfuge.

"SILENCE!" Ortwin screamed at Mostin, "how *dare* you speak? My apologies, Shupthul," he continued in Sylvan, seeming to master himself, "but this demon is compacted to me. He may speak only with my approval, and currently I do not grant it."

Shupthul sat silently. Ortwin hoped that the Captain was already developing a set of complex misconceptions.

"Allow me to introduce the rest of my companions," Ortwin continued nonchalantly, attempting to divert attention before more questions were asked about Mostin. "My consort, Iua; the witch, Aotheen," the Bard waved a dismissive hand towards Shomei; "my counsellor, Jhondrosokaur," at which Nwm nodded gravely; "Munhulmurliom the Dour," Ortwin remembered the name of an *awakened* oak tree that he had once encountered and randomly bestowed it upon Eadric; "and the demon Erizren. We are here to hunt, and although our arrival was not intentional, the quarry here present some interesting challenges."

"Afqithan," it was the female sidhe who spoke, the name rolling from her tongue and echoing in Ortwin's mind. *Aaf-kee-thaan*. "This place is called Afqithan. Tell me, Duke Rhalid, does it strike you as an unusual coincidence – given your accidental arrival here – that of all the places that you might have appeared in this wide realm, by lucky happenstance your *gate* opened in the airs above King Irknaan's fastness?" The words *duke* and *accidental* bore the slightest hint of irony.

"If it were coincidence," Ortwin quickly dissembled, "then I would call it lucky." His charm was effortless. "But our means of transportation is unconventional – we are drawn inexorably to existing portals and loci of power, siphoning a fraction of their energy in order to expedite translation. I can only assume that such a focus exists within your King's walls?" It was a bold riposte, which elicited

another question.

"Indeed? I would be fascinated to inspect such a device, if it exists. Will you show it to me?"

"I regret that the power exists within Aotheen herself. It is a unique ability, the secret of which is, unfortunately, lost to posterity. She is the last of her kin." Ortwin's voice remained calm, with subtle overtones of condescension, as though he were patiently explaining a self-evident fact to an inquisitive child.

Inwardly, Eadric grimaced. They had just made contact with the Loquai, and already Ortwin had sown a convoluted web of lies which could only get worse as time went on. Behind his visor, the Paladin scanned the group of umbral feys and demons, looking for subtle cues and pointers to their motivation with regard to the interlopers.

The reek of taint which hung over them all was palpable. Shupthul was reticent and suspicious: the captain was a warrior who, no doubt, excelled in battle but – for a sidhe, at least – was relatively unpracticed in gauging the purposes of others. The woman was a different matter altogether, Eadric mused, and was opaque at best – although her inquiry regarding their imaginary means of transportation was couched in terms which could not disguise a tell-tale preoccupation with matters arcane. The succubus was silent and utterly inscrutable, and Eadric wondered what her role was – advisor, consort, spy, compactee – she could be any or all of those things. Eadric suspected that she was as focussed on penetrating their own motives as he was hers.

Shupthul spoke again, the merest hint of malice in his voice. "King Irknaan has issued instructions that you should attend him forthwith. We have been sent to escort you to his presence."

*Sh\*t*, Ortwin thought. He smiled graciously. "I regret that, at present, such a visit will be impossible, as today, I hunt. Perhaps in a day or two. My proposition stands, however: King Irknaan is most welcome to join us."

"You misunderstand," Shupthul said menacingly. "Afqithan's King requires your presence. Your hunt must wait."

"I..." The Bard began, but never finished.

Because Mostin, whether in a fit of paranoia, or anticipating an inevitable coming to blows, acted unilaterally, and made a decision which would change the way that the travellers related with the inhabitants of Afqithan. To the others, it also demonstrated the power that an arcanist of Mostin's stature could wield in Faerie or any of its orbiting demiplanes. He spat a number of syllables out, prompting bows to be drawn or shot, and eliciting a desperate but ineffectual gesture in response from Koilimilou.

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Ortwin experienced a strange sensation which lasted less than a fraction of a second – the merest flash in his mind. Shomei immediately recognized it for what it was – a temporal discontinuity in their vicinity. After it had passed, there was a colossal discharge of magical energy, and the tapestry of reality threatened to rupture completely before it rewove itself. Echoes of Sonics hung in the air.

The three Jariliths, Shupthul, the Succubus and twenty-six of the thirty Hell-hounds had vanished: the Captain's empty armour and arms collapsed to the ground in a noisy rattle. Eleven of the Loquai had been petrified, along with six of their griffon mounts – some frozen with grotesque expressions of terror upon their faces. One other sidhe was dead from fear, and all but one of the remaining steeds had likewise been slain by a *phantasmal killer*. Each of the umbral quicklings had been reduced to a pulp by sonic attacks. The female sidhe sat upon a stone griffon with a vacant expression on her face.\*

The last griffon attempted to flee with its petrified rider, along with the four hell-hounds. Mostin turned them into flounders, which flapped impotently in the air before suffocating.

Eadric gaped, a mixed expression of awe and horror on his face. Shomei looked mildly irritated and cast a *dimensional anchor* on Koilimilou. "Dammit, Mostin, was that really necessary? Ortwin can you restrain her? She might regain her senses at any moment."

The Bard and Iua both dashed forwards to bind and gag Koilimilou – the single remaining member of

Shupthul's party.

The Alienist's head swam, as the full impact of his actions dawned on him. He glimpsed a vision of his future self – effortlessly commanding that kind of power had a definite appeal. To the arcanist, Afqithan was like a heady wine, and Mostin had just tasted it for the first time.

Nwm was staggered. "Mostin, you just killed the ambassador. And his whole embassy, in fact."

"They would have attacked us," Mostin replied simply.

"You don't know that," Ortwin grumbled, expertly tying Koilimilou's hands behind her back, and pushing one of his gloves into her mouth. "Gods, Mostin. I concoct an elaborate ruse, and you go and petrify everyone."

Mostin sighed. "As the alternative was to submit to Shupthul's demands to accompany him to visit Irknaan, I fail to see what the problem is. Unless you would rather have been dragged off to the Loquai stronghold, to take our chances there. I have merely tipped the scales in our favour somewhat."

"Eadric?" Ortwin asked desperately.

The Paladin sighed. Unexpectedly, he came to the Alienist's defense. "Whilst I don't necessarily agree with Mostin's methods, I have to admit that his reasoning is sound. It would have come to violence – either here or later. They were jealous of our power and lustful of it. They bore only malice towards us, and the desire to exploit us for their own ends. And the stench of taint and corruption was almost overwhelming."

"Bah!" Nwm snorted. "This is absurd. I mean, look at us. You're here because of some vendetta you've got with Graz'zt..."

Mostin winced as the name was spoken.

"Ortwin just thinks it's a big game," Nwm continued, "and this crazy bastard," he pointed at Mostin, whose kelvezu features seemed mildly offended at the insult, "wants to demonstrate to himself how

dangerous he's become. As if we didn't know already."

"We are not in some *nice* sylvan glade in Nizkur," Mostin said irritably. "Wake up! This is a *bad* place, Nwm. Many of the inhabitants are *bad*. You are letting your sympathies for feys dictate how you think we should act – and the Loquai are feys in name only. They are no less wicked, vile and irredeemable than Rurunoth, Feezuu or any one of a host of others we have dealt with."

"And don't moralize with me you hypocritical sh\*t," Nwm hissed. "As far as *irredeemable* goes, might I remind you why we are here – ostensibly, at any rate. Does anyone recall Nehael? And Ed, if you're going to judge people on how much *lust for power* they possess, at least be consistent about it and start with Mostin."

Eadric groaned. "The question again now is 'what next?' I hope someone has some ideas, because I'm fast running out."

"Well, it would seem that any prospects of subtlety have been complicated by Mostin," Nwm squinted. "Are we waging war, now?"

"Frankly," Eadric said, turning to the Bard, "I find open conflict less complex than your schemes, Ortwin. What do you suggest?"

Ortwin grinned despite himself. "We should offer an apology to Irknaan for the 'minor misunderstanding.' We should send our regards to him, and hope that this incident does not provoke a 'diplomatic impasse.' Obviously, we hope that he will still join us in hunting."

Eadric opened his mouth in disbelief.

"I'm serious," Ortwin continued, rapidly recovering his braggadocio after the incident. "It will demonstrate the contemptuous ease with which we can deal with Irknaan's henchmen."

"He will throw everything that he's got at us," Eadric said.

"Maybe," Shomei replied. "But you are assuming that he will want to *remove* us. He is not motivated

by some 'honourable' desire to avenge his retainers, nor is he saddened by their loss – except insofar as it undermines his own power. If he can see a way to harness us, it might be preferable to eliminating us – from his perspective." She retrieved her *dimensional shackles* from within her pack.

"Good idea," Mostin said, as Shomei affixed the chains around Koilimilou's wrists and ankles.

"I don't know why you didn't just kill her with the others," Shomei grumbled. "Are you becoming sentimental for a pretty face in your old age, Mostin?"

The Alienist sniffed. "She is not one of the Loquai, but a Cambion Sidhe. I thought that she might provide an interesting perspective on things if questioned."

"So you rendered her insane?"

"That is remediable."

"Not without cost," Shomei sighed. "Will you meet it?"

Mostin scowled. "I suppose I'll have to." His eyes scanned their captive.

"You're not very subtle," Ortwin jibed.

"I'm looking for magic, you dunce," Mostin snapped. He removed Koilimilou's belt pouch, and unclasped a pendant from around her neck which bore a single, trapezoidal stone of greyish colour. In the pouch was a small box, perhaps three inches on a side, engraved with indecipherable glyphs.

*Hmmm.* Mostin thought.

Koilimilou's eyes suddenly gained a fresh clarity, and she struggled vainly in her shackles and tried to bite Mostin, before lapsing into a stupor again.

"An all-too brief moment of lucidity," Nwm remarked drily.

Ortwin picked up his diamond coronet, blew dust – part of the desiccated remains of Shupthul – from the circlet, and set it jauntily on his head again. "Let's send another message to Irknaan, and *then* go hunting."

Eadric screwed up his face, and wondered if Afqithan's taint was having a detrimental effect on certain of his friends.

\*\*

In her sanctum of unlight, nestled deep within Throile, Soneillon meditated briefly before conjuring an obsidian thought-span of profound delicacy, and passing into the region of dreams. The name of *Shomei* – revealed by the captured Erinyes – was still fresh in her mind. Further inquiries across several worlds had also yielded the names *Titivilus* and *Ahma* – amongst others – in association with the Infernalist: an interesting coincidence as, according to her spies, the Infernal Duke was currently present in Afqithan. Apparently the Breath of Oronthon kept acquaintances which were unusual for a holy warrior.

Eadric of Deorham, the *Ahma*. Who had already indirectly aided Soneillon in her struggle with Graz'zt – her spies had indicated that it was he who was responsible for the removal of at least two balors. He was the sworn enemy of her greatest enemy. Certainly a potential friend – at least by demonic standards. Soneillon idly wondered how he could be used to her advantage.

\*Mostin's attack consisted of a *time stop*, empowered and maximized by the magical trait of the plane to 6 rounds of virtual time, during which he cast *haste*, a chained *flesh to stone*, a chained *phantasmal killer*, two *banishments* directed at the demons and hell-hounds, *disintegrations* targeting Shupthul and

the Succubus Iemazai, an *insanity* on Koilimilou, and various sonics. There were multiple redundancies in the spells – some of the Loquai were struck by both the *flesh to stone* and *phantasmal killer*. Shupthul avoided petrification but was *disintegrated*. Koilimilou succumbed to *insanity*. The save DCs were 25+ spell level because of Mostin's augmented Intelligence, and even with the chained spells, most of the targets needed to roll 20s. Koilimilou initially attempted to counterspell the *time stop* with a *greater dispelling* she had readied, but failed.

*Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 06-15-2003*

Shomei had elected to *feblemind* the incoherent Koilimilou, in the event that one of her episodes of clarity returned: a glove stuffed into her mouth and a set of *dimensional shackles* might be proof against vocalized spells and interplanar escape, but did nothing to restrain the sidhe-cambion from using her arsenal of other powers and abilities.

Whilst watching approvingly, Ortwin idly considered where this creature stood in the grand cosmic scheme. The sidhe were capable of reaching near-godlike power. According to Nwm, in the past, wars had routinely been fought between feys – led by the sidhe and their kin – and various pantheons of minor nature deities with their attendant spirits. This one was less than a goddess, but the gap between her and the mortal race might be larger than that between her and divinity. Feys were strange creatures, seemingly capable of infinitely more variety of manifestation than men. Just so much more interesting, really, Ortwin thought.

His expression changed to one of disappointment when he considered what she had been reduced to. Ortwin wondered what her name was, how she ate, slept, sang, danced, laughed and fornicated. He wondered what her temperament was like – the apathy of the sidhe would be offset by a powerful demonic desire for satiation and experience. Probably a refined sense of the macabre. Intense eroticism. Had she resisted or rejected the umbral taint, or succumbed only to certain aspects of it?

For a perverse instant, Ortwin felt more of a connection with the Cambion than he did with anyone else present.

The party briefly discussed the implications of the sensor which had observed Mostin's annihilation of Shupthul's party – exactly what it would have witnessed before it vanished, and what the observer could have inferred from those that he could not directly see. As a precautionary measure, Shomei cast a *nondetection* upon Koilimilou – in the event that Irknaan attempted to later target her with another *scrying*. A *mind blank* would have been preferable, but neither the Infernalist nor Mostin were capable of casting the spell again that day, and Shomei was loath to draw on her bracelet's power until she had further knowledge of Irknaan's abilities.

After securing the most valuable items from the vanquished Loquai – including Shupthul's armour and bow – Koilimilou was trussed across Mostin's saddle. The delay in action – close to half an hour – would prove decisive.

\*\*

Irknaan – still in a state of concealed shock at the obliteration of his envoy – paced within his dark chambers, waiting for Nhura to return with whatever information she had gleaned about Rhalid and his party.

The King had briefly contemplated an immediate retaliatory demonic assault with those forces still available to him, but quickly dismissed the possibility. Unsupported succubi would be no match for the interlopers if they were *mind blanked*, and he had no doubt that they would make short work of Nhura's glabrezu cohorts – assuming that they chose to obey Irknaan at all. Their loyalty to him was, at best, questionable.

King Irknaan was, however, immensely powerful. If need drove him, and he had time to act, he could mobilize an impressive group of allies. When another *summoned* demon brought him an apologetic message regretting the misunderstanding, and hoping that the King could join Rhalid's party for a future hunt, Irknaan squinted. If they meant him serious harm, surely they would have pressed on and attacked him in his fortress? What was their agenda? Obviously, they were overconfident, or stupid, or both. Did they think he was toothless? Irknaan snorted, and issued seven *sendings* in quick succession.

To King Samodoquol, Duke Ytryn and the Wyrn Crosod, he gave instructions not to fly to his demesne, but instead to pursue the rogue party of sidhe. Compacted demons, daemons, and demodands in the service of the other Loquai nobility were also to be sent to Irknaan's fortress immediately. He recalled Lehurze from her diplomatic efforts with the Devils ensconced only a mile away. He instructed Nhura in straightforward terms to resolve her inquiries in Faerie as hastily as possible: *Be quick. We hunt.* He alerted Jetheeg – a lamia Sorceress of no mean ability – to the presence of the rival group and instructed her to track them down. He dispatched the ten succubi who remained to locate them, and sent dozens of umbral quicklings in pursuit – they were *not* to engage the enemy, but to bring back news if they were located. The demons were to coordinate their efforts and stay in contact every ten minutes. His last *sending* was directed towards Duke Murmuur and the Devils, asking if they would care to join Irknaan in a hunt in one hour.

The King descended into his summoning room, intent on calling yet more demons to aid him. It was utterly black within, and the odour of musty tomes and incense hung in the claustrophobic air. Irknaan lit a single tall taper which emitted a greyish radiance, and purposefully strode to retrieve a book of forbidden names from a gloomy alcove. Suddenly, he was aware of another presence within the chamber. It stretched and challenged his perception of the real, and evoked a mixed feeling of terror and awe: a consciousness that was dark, sinister, and worshipful. *Soneillon*, he thought. She was a void, who promised either power or annihilation.

"It would appear that my wards did not prohibit your entry," he said without emotion.

"Your insouciance is tedious, Irknaan," the Demoness responded, "and your comprehension of the current situation is feeble and ill-informed. Wheels turn, and you have no conception of them."

"Perhaps you would care to elucidate," the King replied laconically. "Who are these newcomers, and why are there Devils in my realm?"

"That information has a price." She stepped forwards, and the intangibility which surrounded her evaporated. Her assumed form was supple, and her skin was possessed of a dusky, silken quality.

"And what would that be?"

"Throw in your lot wholesale with Rhyxali. I can promise you aid and protection from Graz'zt in your efforts. Instruct your forces to follow my lead and apprehend the sidhe who threaten you, then turn them over to me."

Irknaan sneered. "You ask a great deal for a few tidbits of gossip. Since when did Soneillon act as a broker for Rhyxali? And what interest does this group hold for you?"

"They may be useful to me."

"Then deal with them yourself, if it is not beyond you!" Irknaan snapped. "I have no interest in your wider schemes: do not embroil me in them."

Soneillon smiled darkly. "It was *you* who contacted *me*, Irknaan. What did you expect? An exchange which cost you nothing?"

"Ten thousand souls is my offer."

The Demoness threw back her head and laughed – a disturbingly genuine and heartfelt display of mirth. "That is a trifling, Loquai, which I have no use for. Listen to me: Afqithan is less secure than you might think. You juggle two Abyssal magnates as your sponsors. Your subjects are recalcitrant and imperfectly subdued. And if Graz'zt discovers your duplicity, then you will find that the *gate* to Zelatar is no longer the boon that it has proven to be in the past."

"My grip is tight enough. And do not think to threaten me with passing news to Graz'zt – he despises you more than he mistrusts me. What does he care if, out of the five hundred worlds he lays claim to, the King of Afqithan entertains fiends who are not his own slaves? If you were to betray me to him, then I would willingly abase myself before him, for the chance to bring him your head on a spit. My offer stands – your aid would be welcomed, but only a fool would let this group fall into your hands without knowing more."

"I have no designs on your dismal little realm, Irknaan," Soneillon was becoming impatient, "but I recognize your potential as an ally. There is much that I can teach you. With my aid you could quickly

beat down any resistance that remains to your regime. I can ensure the permanent destruction of the *gate* to Azzagrat. Even if Graz'zt were to translate here himself with his most powerful servants – which he would not – he would be hard pressed to assail you."

"I think you underestimate Ainhorr and his ilk."

Soneillon gave a wry smile. "And I think you are somewhat behind in events. Ainhorr's sword is shivered. Choeth, Djorm, Uruum and Rurunoth are no more. Only Irzho remains – and he is hiding. Both from his peers' assassins and, I suspect, from Graz'zt himself."

"This was not known to me."

"They are not facts about which Graz'zt encourages speculation. His position is the most insecure that it has been since his return. His efforts at consolidation have received a serious setback – and you must know that you were not the only one of his thralls to seek new patronage in his absence." Her last words hung in the air temptingly – it was not a fact that Irknaan had previously considered. The Loquai were insular, at best.

Sensing doubt, Soneillon pressed on. "I can contrive a spell which would alert you to any incursions into your realm, Irknaan. No *gate* could open, no translation could occur into Afqithan without your knowledge. There could be no quiet assembly of demons poised to exact revenge on you. And as to your compactees..."

Irknaan feigned disinterest.

"...I can ensure servants who are more powerful and more versatile than succubi – although I have enough of those to spare as well."

"I have no interest in Rhyxali's shades," Irknaan answered, "if you are indeed acting as a go-between."

"I am not. But she and I are on favourable terms – our spheres of interest do not overlap. Not shadow demons. I have descended into the deepest abyss, Irknaan. There are things in the uncharted regions, whose names are long forgotten. They would be yours in blood and spirit. Even a balor would pause

and take thought before it confronted one – or would shrink from it in fear."

Irknaan wavered.

"And you may keep Lehurze," Soneillon added. "She is mine to give."

The King scowled. From his perspective, at least, the succubus was already his. Still, a formal compact could do no harm.

Soneillon stepped forwards, and her very being seemed to flicker on the edge of consciousness, a dark vision, the existence of which Irknaan half doubted. "Irknaan, if Graz'zt falls, his wealth will be free to all comers. Ainhorr cannot hold Azzagrat, and neither can Kostchtchie."

"Now you lie, even if you did not before."

"No." Soneillon was emphatic. "I have perceived the burgeoning tendril of possibility. It must not be allowed to perish."

"I have no faith in your auguries," Irknaan said derisively. "Nonetheless, your argument deserves consideration. What aid would you give me? I do not speak of temporary allies. They must be compacted, and they must be *mine*."

"That is negotiable," Soneillon smiled, content that she had won a victory. "But it will be enough. First, we must secure the weapon. Command your minions to help me restrain the sidhe who currently vex you, and I will speak with them."

"They have knowledge of this weapon?"

"They *are* the weapon. They are not what they appear to be."

The King's eyes narrowed. That much, he had already guessed. But now he also knew that Soneillon feared to deal with them alone – that they *were* very dangerous – and that Graz'zt had not sent them to deal with him. Inwardly, he breathed a sigh of relief.

"Give me a sign of your commitment," Irknaan said, "and I will consider your proposal."

Before she left him, the Demoness gave Irknaan a single name – a token of her good will, she claimed, and the first of many to follow. He conjured the creature to whom it belonged, and when the King ascended from his sanctum into his throne room, it accompanied him. Lehurze and an assortment of other monsters waited for him.

The Succubus saw what towered behind Irknaan and smiled quietly: she knew that Soneillon had come and gone. Nhura's glabrezu cohorts were filled with doubt.

"Ready the hounds," Irknaan commanded.

\*\*

The armour which Eadric wore was marvelously light – constructed of a Fae metal of unknown type. It barely inhibited his movement, and its smooth contours – at first glance a seamless, absorptive sable – were, in fact, graven with exquisite cunning and subtlety. When the dim light caught it, shades of indigo and vermilion *almost* appeared, as if his mind wanted to perceive them, but his eyes would not cooperate. The casque which complemented the breastplate bore a crest which resembled some primordial bird, and a half-visor, covering the eyes and upper face, was formed by the creature's cradled wings.

Ortwin, flying next to the Paladin, eyed the armour jealously.

"You can have it, if you want," Eadric said openly.

"It is too restrictive," Ortwin grumbled.

"Not at all," Eadric replied.

"For *me* it would be too restrictive," Ortwin sighed. The Bard fell back and hovered alongside Nwm,

who sat awkwardly upon his ecalypse – the umbral steed moved with a disconcertingly smooth gait through the air.

"Haven't you found anything yet?" Ortwin asked excitedly.

"No."

"There must be something out there."

"I'm sure there probably is," Nwm said irritably. "Can't you be patient for once?"

"No," Ortwin replied. "Aren't there more chimerae? Manticores, maybe?"

"If you think that a single Redcap is worthy of your attention, then I can direct you to it. We are in a sparsely populated area. Frankly, Ortwin, I find your enthusiasm for hunting sentients – of whatever persuasion – rather distasteful. I have no particular moral compunctions, and I appreciate the need for the ruse to appear genuine, but do you really have to enjoy it quite so much?"

"Hunting is an agreeable pastime," the Bard retorted.

"Hunting *deer* is an agreeable pastime, Ortwin. Hunting umbral fiendish whatever-they-ares is tricky and – as we have already discovered – potentially lethal."

"Pah! This time, we're prepared. I've got more wards on me than I can count. And...."

Nwm closed his ears to the Bard's ramblings and focussed on his torc again, his perception stretching outwards, and sifting through the vast quantities of information which flooded his consciousness. Ten minutes passed. The Druid gave a quizzical look.

"...despite the fact that she was naked," Ortwin concluded. "What do you think, Nwm?"

"I think you did the right thing," Nwm replied. "By the way, there is a dragon around eight miles behind us. It is following us. It has probably caught our scent. It is heavily tainted – I suspect it is the

wyrm that Nufrut mentioned."

"Crosod," Mostin said. "Is he closing?"

"Oh, yes. He will reach us," Nwm made a quick calculation, and his jaw dropped, "in a little over four minutes."

"Is he *wind-walking*?" Ortwin asked.

"I don't think so," the Druid answered, somewhat amazed. "He is just flying...very fast. There is another..."

**[Execration. Abomination. Anathema.]**

Nwm shook, and resisted the urge to vomit. "There is something terrible with him."

"Should we turn and engage him?" Eadric asked. "Or try to flee? If Iua..."

"I cannot summon a wind to move us that fast," the Duelist replied.

But the blood drained from Nwm's face as his inner vision perceived demons manifesting ahead of them and around them – they blinked in and out of his sight, successively *teleporting* to effortlessly pace the party, and remaining out of the reach of even their furthest-reaching spells.

"There is more bad news," Nwm said, and explained. "They are medium-order: probably succubi or vrocks."

Eadric immediately invoked a *zone of revelation*, and realities overlapped around them. To his partial relief, nothing was stalking them through the coexistent Shadow. At least, not yet.

"I don't like this at all," Mostin mumbled. "We should be ready to flee back to the Prime if necessary."

Shomei cast a *mass haste* and transformed herself into an erinyes devil, causing Eadric to splutter and

Ortwin to grin eagerly.

Nwm scowled. "Crosod is still closing."

Gheim squawked irritably. "How high up is he?"

"Only three hundred feet." Nwm answered.

"Well, I can't see him," the eagle muttered.

"Nor I," Sem added. "He must be *invisible*"

"This is a trap," Eadric groaned. "They are probably waiting for reinforcements."

"They are coming," Nwm said. "Goddess. What is *happening* out there?" Powerful extraplanar entities were manifesting across his psychic landscape.

"I suspect that they do not know that *we* know of their presence," Shomei said. "We may still have something of an advantage. I will deal with the Dragon – it will even the odds somewhat. Mostin, for what I am about to do, I sincerely apologize."

Drawing upon the power of the arcane bracelet that Jovol had bequeathed her, Shomei quickly opened two *gates*. Eadric clenched his teeth in trepidation.

Light flooded through. Two Solars appeared.

Mostin screamed at her. "No! Not again! Not you as well!"

"Do you know who I am?" Shomei asked the celestials.

"You are a devil," one of them replied. "Why have you called us?"

"I am Shomei the Infernal. You cannot perceive my form because I am *mind blanked*. The sidhe with the winged helmet is Eadric of Deorham, the *Ahma*. Do you believe me?"

But Eadric had already reached out with his mind and reassured them.

"Do whatever he tells you to do," Shomei instructed the celestials. She turned to the Alienist. "Be very sure that you know what you are doing if you open another *gate* Mostin. You know what I'm speaking of."

Mostin gurgled incoherently.

"How far back is the Dragon, Nwm?" Shomei asked.

"Twelve thousand feet or so."

She tested the direction of the wind and vanished, leaving her steed riderless.

A look of amazement still sat upon Eadric's face at the Infernalist's choice of allies. Catching it, and regaining his composure a little, Mostin spoke shakily.

"They are tools to her, Eadric. Nothing else."

\*\*

Crosod and Threxu, upon receiving Irknaan's *sending*, had sped their way to the scene of Shupthul's *disintegration* and Koilimilou's capture. The Dragon had launched into a furious pursuit of 'Rhalid' and his party – his speed augmented by a spell, and rendered invulnerable to death magic and any elemental assault by the Wasted Nymph's power.

Crosod had issued a *sending* of his own to Irknaan upon catching the party's scent, and sneered in contempt when he received the return message:

*Do not attack. I want them alive. Coordinate fully with the demons.*

What game was the fool playing now? A sensor appeared nearby, and the Wyrms' lidless eyes glistened with anger. As much as he resented the Loquai King, he was wise enough not to defy him. Within a matter of seconds, ten succubi appeared in the air nearby. Lehurze was with them.

"Where is he?" Crosod growled.

"He is on his way," Lehurze replied. "I have instructions for you."

Resentfully, the dragon formed a series of mental bonds with all of those present and rendered them *invisible*. They *teleported* away and, within five minutes, visual contact had been made with the intruders. The succubi and the dragon – now in common telepathic rapport – acted with a frightening focus and purpose.\*

Meanwhile, Irknaan cursed. Events were moving faster than he had anticipated: Nhura and the remaining succubus, returning to Afqithan, had appeared over a hundred miles distant from his own palace and eighty miles from where Crosod now tracked Rhalid's party. It would take her nearly two hours to reach the area where events were unfolding, even if she magically sped her passage.

The king gritted his teeth. He needed her there, and the only way to accomplish it was to draw heavily on his own reservoir of power. He instructed the forty Loquai who accompanied him to return to the fortress: at their speed, they had no hope of intercepting the intruders now. Irknaan lamented the loss of Koilimilou and her *box of shadows* – now it would have proven most useful. Reality bent around him as he cast two powerful spells, and made his way first to Nhura and then returned with her to where the other fiends were assembling.\*\*

When he arrived, as instructed, the creature that he had compacted less than an hour before was waiting for him.

Irknaan issued yet another *sending*: this time to Soneillon.

\*\*

The erinyes appeared three hundred yards behind Crosod, down-wind of him, *invisible*, and out of the range of his blindsight.

Unfortunately, the dragon was also hidden from her mundane vision, and out of the range of her perception – save for the gale and reek created by his passing.

Shomei opened another *gate*, exhausting her bracelet's power. She waited nervously – somewhat longer than she was accustomed to. Finally, after what seemed an age – although it was less than five seconds – another solar appeared.

"I am Zhorion," the Cherub announced.

"I am not interested in your *name*, celestial," Shomei said irascibly. "I have a task for you."

The Solar ignored her. "Oronthon is curious why Shomei the Infernal has elected to open three *gates* to the Divine Sphere in less than a minute."

Shomei gaped.

"And do not think to use your association with the *Ahma* as an excuse for *your* actions. Reciprocity is required."

Shomei was flabbergasted. "I have no time for this," she snapped. "You are under compulsion by both magical law and divine mandate!"

"When you return to Morne," Zhorion continued, "you will seek out the *Sela*. He will instruct you in the correct application of the dialectic."

"How can there be a 'correct...'" She began. "Oh, forget it. I probably understand *saizhan* better than you ever will. Alright. Whatever. Just help me kill the damn dragon."

Shomei sighed. Meaningful philosophical discourse with most solars was impossible. They were stubborn, unyielding and – ultimately – intellectually incapable.

She *teleported* two thousand feet ahead of where she suspected the dragon to be, and invoked an *effulgent epuration* – the silvery motes which hovered around her instantly betraying her location to Crosod's remarkable eyesight. Shomei felt as though a gale was approaching as, *invisible*, he powered his way towards her at uncanny speed, and banked away before coming within range of her own magical sight. As his head turned and he finally became visible, he discharged an immense gout of corrupted acid and struck her with a *horrid wilting*. Simultaneously, from the slender shadow perched on his foreleg, yet another *wilting* struck her, and in the air palrethee demons began manifesting, *summoned* by both the Nymph and the Dragon. Evidently, Crosod was taking no chances. An *effulgent epuration* meant a very powerful spellcaster. He called mentally to the ten succubi with whom he was telepathically bonded.

*Sh\*t*, Shomei thought. The acid burned her despite her diabolic resistance, and most of her *epuration* had already been denuded in the initial assault. She wondered wryly if she had bitten off more than she could chew. She flew rapidly forwards, gripped her rod, and struck Crosod with a potent *enervation*: twice empowered, magnified through her rod, and then twisted and amplified yet further by Afqithan's magical trait. He reeled under the assault, but still survived the *disintegration* which followed.

Succubi were beginning to manifest all around Shomei as Zhorion descended and engaged with Crosod – a bright speck in the sky, dwarfed by the Dragon's dark, titanic form, his slender brand flashing rapidly in his hands. Crosod screamed as the blade bit into him, and ichor poured from the wounds that the Solar delivered to his neck.

The Wyrms' head stayed firmly attached to his body, however, and he gave a hideous grin. He said nothing, but brought his terrible will to bear upon the celestial.

A look of horrified fascination crossed Shomei's face as, despite the palrethees who were now around her and hacking with their flaming swords, she watched black fire first kindle, and then cascade over Zhorion.

The Solar, dignified by Oronthon's grace since before time began, perished in an unholy nimbus which consumed all trace of his existence. For the merest moment, the skies of Afqithan seemed to darken yet further, and swag with agony and wrath. Pain exploded over Shomei as Crosod thundered back towards her, calling forth an *acid storm*, heedless of his own *summoned* minions. Two *flame strikes*, evoked by Threxu, struck the Infernalist in series.

Before the succubi could descend upon her and tear her to pieces, Shomei *teleported* away.

She reappeared, burned and blasted, at the spot where she had left the others, only to find that the real battle was about to begin.

\* Crosod used three castings of *Rary's telepathic bond* with the succubi, acting as 'anchor-man' in their efforts to pinpoint Ortwin and the others. The succubi made multiple *teleportations* until one located the party, the news was passed to Crosod, and the Dragon related it to the rest of the demonesses. One of them *teleported* back to Irknaan's fortress to inform the king of their exact whereabouts.

\*\*Irknaan used two *limited wishes*: one to *teleport* to Nhura's location, and another to bring them both to the vicinity of Crosod. Neither Irknaan nor Nhura were capable of instantaneous transport using more 'conventional' means. Six more succubi, a palrethee, two vrockes and a shator – compactees of the other Loquai nobility – had also now joined the pursuit. The shator – Ghuluk – was King Samodoquol's majordomo.

\*\*This was another nasty combo. The *enervation* – quadruply empowered and maximized – resulted in nine negative levels for Crosod. Luckily (from his perspective) he made the subsequent saving throw against the triply heightened *disintegrate*.

*Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 07-06-2003*

"Have you determined where the leader is?" Eadric asked Nwm. The party were descending towards the ground.

The Druid nodded. "There is a clutch of extraplanars half a mile ahead of us. Some are very powerful, Ed. We might be well advised to retreat."

The Paladin gritted his teeth. They had come a long way, in order to merely run away at the first sign of serious resistance. He glanced briefly at the two solars who flanked him. Surely, nothing could overcome them. They were safe, as long as the celestials were present.

As if in response, something dreadful flickered across Eadric's perception, and reality darkened for a moment. The celestial to his left, the solar Taruz, *communed* briefly, and then spoke directly into his mind.

***Immeasurable grief. Zhorion destroyed.***

*Zhorion?*

***A third solar, conjured by Shomei***

Eadric gaped. "Shomei. Is the dragon gone?"

"No," Nwm replied, pointing backwards.

Far behind, but closing rapidly, Crosod's vast and now-visible form thundered through the air.

Shomei reappeared. "Not good," she said. "He's too fast. Mostin, if you get a chance, hit him with a *disintegrate*. You might be luckier than I."

"I have no intention of staying around," Mostin answered. "I'm going to open a *gate* back to the Prime..."

"Wait," Eadric interrupted. He gave a quizzical look as he received a *sending*.

*One down, two to go. How many cherubs can the Ahma kill in one day? If you require arbitration, I am available. Titivilus.*

"Titivilus just issued a *sending* to me."

"Screw that," Mostin said. "Are you ready?"

And everything became dark.

\*\*

It was an impenetrable, cloying blackness of an altogether unnatural kind, stagnant and suffocating. Everything seemed to drift listlessly, and sounds were muffled.

The *greater dispelling*, which then struck the party from an unknown source had a devastating effect. The *mind blanks* which sat upon Iua, Eadric, Shomei and Nwm evaporated, the glamour upon Ortwin disappeared, and Mostin suddenly found himself vulnerable to death magic. A green ray struck him, *anchoring* him and then another, targeting Shomei, also found its mark.

"Sh\*t," Mostin exclaimed.

"Nwm, do something," Ortwin groaned, "I can't see anything."

"I see them," Shomei announced. "There are two of them. Eighty yards. Two o'clock to you, Mostin."

The darkness vanished abruptly as Taruz broke the spell which caused it. Mostin gasped as his vision returned and his magical sight rested on its source – a succubus, and a *something*, which seemed to

flicker on the edge of reality. Something which, partially at least, *was not*.

Mostin's mind reeled as he tried to absorb the paradox. Ortwin discharged a rapid volley of enervating magical arrows at the succubus, who lurched in the air.

The second solar, Pharanthe, was incanting under his breath, as Eadric turned his head to see a Loquai of unusual beauty flying towards him upon an umbral griffon of prodigious size. He was accompanied by a sinuous winged shadow which flew gracefully through the air – Irknaan and Nhura, no doubt, Eadric mused.

Shomei screamed and desiccated into a wrinkled corpse as the party were overwhelmed by two powerful *horrid wiltings*. Nightmares and ecalypses perished – through foresight, this time, the group were protected by magical flight. More wards collapsed as another *greater dispelling* ripped across them all and Ortwin – still fortunately *mind blanked* – shrugged off a *feblemind* spell which would have otherwise utterly overwhelmed him. All around, succubi, palrethees, daemons and demodands were manifesting – and there was another *something* which was partially non-existent. Drawing Shupthul's bow, the Paladin shot five arrows which burst into flame, thudding into the flank of the umbral lillend. She reeled in pain.

Mostin swore profusely, quickly erected a *wall of force* around them all, and opened a *gate*.

"Everybody get through," he screeched. "Nwm, you have to get this damned *anchor* off of me!"

The Druid glanced briefly at Shomei's body, and nodded. She could wait – they needed to get out of there, and quickly. "Get the rod and bracelet," he instructed Sem and Gheim. He quickly incanted a *greater dispelling* upon Mostin, but the *dimensional anchor* remained firmly in place.

Mostin swore. "Go!" He commanded. Nwm and Iua dashed through the *gate*, followed by the two eagles.

Inside of the protected area, another *gate* opened, conjured by the solar Pharanthe. A third solar stepped through. Mostin screamed again.

The *wall of force* shuddered briefly as a magical assault was absorbed, and several demons *teleported*

within its confines. Mostin raised an eyebrow as the barrier quickly dissipated when a subsequent *disintegrate* struck it. It was followed by a violated storm of sound which tore at the flesh of those present, and another *disintegrate*, which reduced Ortwin to his component atoms.

Iua screamed.

From within her protective void, Soneillon hissed. Lehurze was going *too* far. She would have strong words with her after this. If she had killed the *Ahma* by accident...\*

Taruz shot a barrage of *fey slaying* arrows at Irknaan, who was closing rapidly on their position. Several found their mark, but the Sidhe-King shook off their death magic, used a *limited wish* to shut the *gate* and pronounced a quick *dismissal*.

Two of the solars abruptly vanished.

Nhura's will rested upon Eadric and Mostin in succession, attempting to immobilize them both, but failing to effect either. Palrethees hewed at both the Paladin and the Alienist as Mostin squawked at Eadric.

"Sh\*t. Get close."

Shooting yet more darts at the Loquai king, Eadric moved towards Mostin, who shook his head, *plane shifted* Eadric, and invoked a *prismatic sphere*, encapsulating himself.

The protective bubble, scintillating with colour and power, hung motionless in the skies of Afqithan, thirty feet above the umbral canopy of its dense forest.

The remaining solar, Taruz, beset by demons, and upon the escape of Eadric, promptly vanished.

"Great." Mostin said.

Through the shifting colours of the sphere, demons could be seen moving outside. The wizard sighed, and wondered whether if, jointly, his enemies had the wherewithal to penetrate his defenses.

\*\*

The *gate* opened in the courtyard of Kyrtil's Burh, at the base of the ivy-covered Steeple. Iua was shaking.

Nwm turned back to the portal, to see if anything else was coming through, but it abruptly dissolved.

"Ortwin..." Iua began.

"Will be fine," Nwm said. "He is merely experiencing a temporary disembodiment."

"When can you..."

"Tomorrow," Nwm answered. He scowled – around them, the devas appointed to guard the castle were gently alighting and manifesting. Their swords, rippling with flames, were already drawn.

"This is holy ground," one of them declared. "You should not be here."

Iua closed her eyes and clenched her jaw, and then breathed deeply for several seconds.

"Do *not* piss me off," she said.

\*

Eadric appeared beneath an ancient beech-tree, the branches of which hung over a small stream which chattered over smooth pebbles. Around him, a forest, with its late summer colours enhanced by the dusk, was visible in all directions. He hardly felt as if he had moved.

The Paladin wondered where he was. Somewhere in Wyre, presumably. Hopefully.

He briefly contemplated the likely inaccuracy of Mostin's *plane shift*, and decided that, wherever he was, Nwm would find him before he himself could do anything positive about finding Nwm.

Eadric set down his shield, removed his arms, took off his helm, and, laying his sword across his knees, meditated.

\*

Irknaan glowered in disgust as he flew his griffon around the *prismatic sphere* before descending to the forest floor. Several *summoned* fiends were vanishing back to their respective glooms, although the compactees – of whom there were nearly a score – remained hovering in the skies nearby.

Soneillon approached, and assumed a stable form. Nhura eyed her suspiciously.

"Can you penetrate it?" Irknaan asked.

"Not without more preparation," the Demoness answered.

The king of the Loquai briefly considered his cloak – it might offer sufficient protection to enter. There again, it might not. And Irknaan was too old and cautious to test its powers to that extent.

"Then we have an impasse," Irknaan observed. "The *dimensional anchor* will fail before the sphere does. Who do you suppose the kelvezu is?"

"Either Mostin the Metagnostic or Shomei the Infernal," Soneillon answered. "I presume the former – I suspect that Shomei is dead."

"And the Weapon?"

"It would seem that the Weapon has eluded us," Soneillon remarked drily. Two of the palrethees approached with armfuls of items garnered from the treetops and forest floor – Ortwin's cloak, scimitar, bow and leather jerkin; and Shomei's pack, which contained a variety of fabulous items. Nhura inspected them, and drew the scimitar from its scabbard.

"This is *Githla*," she said. "The Azer Jodrumu forged it. It has a long history."

"Even all of these items do not suffice as a weregild for Shupthul and the others," Irknaan snapped.

"There is also a half-sidhe, strapped to a dead nightmare," the Palrethee reported. "She still lives."

Koilimilou, Irknaan smiled to himself.

"The celestials almost succeeded in a cascade\*\*," Nhura remarked. "More than three would have been a problem. This must not be allowed to happen again. Why is the *Ahma* in Afqithan, and why is my spouse and King consorting with Soneillon?" Nhura's quick mind and knowledge of obscure lore was rapidly piecing things together.

"It is a complex matter," Soneillon purred.

"Then explain it, demoness," Nhura hissed.

"The *Ahma* is in Afqithan in order to vex Graz'zt. He perceives Irknaan as a loyal subject of the Prince. He may be beginning to understand that things are somewhat more convoluted than that."

Nhura's eyes quickly scanned all of those present as she spoke again. In her peripheral vision, the shadow of the wyrm was moving rapidly. Her mind raced, and she elected to take an enormous risk.

"Lady Soneillon, you would find me more tractable than my husband," the Lillend said.

"Silence, bitch!" Irknaan screeched, as the full weight of his Will descended upon Nhura. Blood began to pour from her mouth, nostrils and ears, and the flesh began to peel from her.

Perceiving the truth of Nhura's words, and without hesitation, Soneillon spoke two dreadful words which echoed across Afqithan. The outer shell of the *prismatic sphere* quivered in sympathetic vibration, as the magical lattice of the demiplane was stretched closer to its dilational limit.

Irknaan wailed as his cloak's wards failed him. He burned rapidly into a black vapour, which was carried away on a frigid wind.

The Demoness bent down, slowly picked up the dark mantle, threw it over Nhura, and fastened its clasp about her neck.

"What will you do now, your Majesty?" Soneillon asked, half-amused.

"I think I will take a hunt to the Prime," Nhura replied.

"For what purpose?" Soneillon asked.

"If you have concerns that the *Ahma* might be dead," Nhura said, "you should put them aside. The sidhe who was *disintegrated* was not him – the sword of Eadric of Deorham is Lukarn, not Githla. I can deliver him to you. Demons are forbidden by the Interdict, but the Loquai are not. And neither is he," she pointed.

Crosod circled suspiciously at a distance of a thousand yards.

\*

Mostin fidgeted uncomfortably within the *prismatic sphere*, unaware of the events which transpired beyond the rainbow which surrounded him. Apparently, his enemies lacked a *disjunction* or the correct combination of spells to bring the ward down.

After forty minutes, the *dimensional anchor* which had barred his own passage from Afqithan failed. Mostin smiled ironically. He lacked sufficient remaining power to safely exit the demiplane. Gingerly, the Alienist thrust his head through the *prismatic sphere* before quickly retreating it back inside.

Demons. Lots of demons. Most were succubi, but some were very big, and dangerous. There were also a Shator, and two Nycadaemons. And a huge dragon.

Mostin swallowed. The sphere would last six more hours. Nearly two days in Prime Material reckoning. He wondered nervously if his friends could organize a rescue in that time.

He fidgeted again. Not good. Not good.

The Alienist briefly considered using his Mirror to escape, but the thought of leaving it in Afqithan while he fled was too painful.

He gritted his teeth, *hasted* himself again, floated through the sphere, and *teleported* to a location one thousand miles to the west, where he appeared in a dark and very remote corner of the shadowy realm.

Mostin's heart pounded in his chest, and his eyes flitted around as he waited to see if a sensor would follow him.

He uttered a profanity. There it was. He had to go. There was no other way, or they would be on to him.

Space buckled around him, as Mostin invoked a *reality maelstrom* and was sucked through into another dimension.

It didn't matter which one, he idly considered, as long as it wasn't Afqithan.

\*

Iua paced ceaselessly near Nwm's glade, as the Druid, who had resumed a form similar to his natural one, sat in silent reverie with the Green.

He was *infuriating* in the level of nonchalance that he was exhibiting.

"Get some sleep. Eat something." He had instructed. "There is nothing that I can do until dawn."

Dawn was ten hours away. Iua had scowled, and resumed her pacing. The sun set, the moon rose, midnight passed her by, and in the small hours of the morning, the duelist was gripped by terrible fear.

Nwm remained sitting. Erect, composed, and absurdly serene – as mice scurried over him and investigated his beard and hair.

As the first rays of the sun struck him, he mumbled for ten seconds, smiled and stood up.

"Well?" Iua asked.

"Eadric is in the forest of Nizkur. Mostin is southeast of here, over the ocean." Nwm seemed somewhat surprised by his own words.

Iua gave a hopeful smile.

"Alright," he sighed. He wondered if she would ever understand how much it would cost him.

Ortwin returned as a satyr – although not the *same* satyr. His hair was ruddier, and he seemed wilder and more unkempt. His grin was unmistakable, however.

"How was death?" Nwm asked.

"The same as last time," Ortwin said easily. "Do you have a mirror?"

"Your weapons and equipment are lost," Nwm remarked. "I think that you'd better try and adjust."

Ortwin opened his mouth in horror.

\*

When Shomei awoke, she screamed uncontrollably. Her form – although human and female – was unfamiliar. Nwm waited until the episode had passed before he spoke to her.

"I take it that death was an unpleasant experience?" The Druid asked.

She said nothing, but her face conveyed pain and trauma. She spent a moment inspecting the structure of her mind, noting the disposition of her higher valences.

"Nwm..." She began.

"You owe me," he said.\*\*\*

She nodded.

From under his cloak, the Druid produced her rod and bracelet.

"You *really* owe me," he added.

Ortwin scowled. "I should have died first. Your birds might have grabbed my cloak and Githla. What happens now?"

"We find Ed and Mostin," Nwm replied. "I know where they are. We simply have to retrieve them." The Druid turned to Shomei. "Can you get them here?" He asked.

"Not yet," she answered. "I have a duplicate set of books at my home. I need to consult them. But I'm sure that Mostin is quite safe. He is very inventive."

Nwm looked dubious.

\*\*

Mostin found himself in a churning whirlpool as the *reality maelstrom* deposited him in the Plane of Elemental Water. He groped around blindly for a moment, flapped his arms in an attempt to escape the vortex, and eventually retrieved an *Ioun stone* from his belt and set it spinning around his head.

His look of smug satisfaction was replaced by one of horror, as he glanced over his shoulder to observe three succubi, who had followed him *through* the maelstrom.

*These demons are crazy*, Mostin thought. Warily, he *disintegrated* one of the demonesses and struck another with his last *sonic orb* – the latter spell was wholly unimpressive after the spectacular magical effects which Afqithan had bestowed.

Both remaining succubi attempted to *charm* him, and although he shrugged off their efforts, Mostin swallowed nervously. It was only a matter of time before his luck ran out.

The Alienist observed in fascination, as the *reality maelstrom* continued to suck random matter from Afqithan into the water around him: branches, stones and dirt drifted by.

Another succubus rode through the planar rift and appeared ten yards away. It was the one who had *disintegrated* his previous *wall of force*.

Mostin cursed. He *summoned* three pseudomarids and instructed two of them to attack his assailants. The third, he ordered to *plane shift* him back to the Prime.

Lehurze spoke, and the waters seemed to warp as a *power word*, *stun* overcame Mostin, rendering him insensible. The demoness activated her *cubic gate*, and Mostin's eyes widened in terror as a portal to Afqithan appeared. The two other succubi closed and attempted to grapple with him as he floated impotently, whilst the summoned pseudoelementals struck at the demonesses.

Abruptly, the scene changed as the Alienist, together with the third pseudonatural genie, *plane shifted*. Half of the world seemed to become salt water above him, and half of it was air below him. Mostin bobbed upside-down in the water, stricken, at the interface of the two realms.

A minute passed, and the effects of Lehurze's powerful attack subsided. Gingerly, Mostin arose from out of the water and hovered above it. He dried himself with a *prestidigitation* and glanced around.

The ocean extended as far as he could see, in every direction.

Mostin quickly calculated the time differential between Afqithan and the Material Plane, and knew that it should be night-time in Wyre. He looked at the sun. It was mid morning. Apparently, he was over the Eastern Ocean, and Wyre was at least five thousand miles away.

Mostin sighed, and began to fly west.

\*

Eadric was drawn from his trance abruptly as a mote of light dashed across his field of vision. He glanced up, to notice the waxing moon riding high in the sky above him.

He scowled, and calling upon the Eye of Palamabron which hung around his neck, his vision penetrated the shadows which lay about. Nearly a hundred grigs, pixies, buckawns, sprites and other diminutive feys – either of obscure or unique type – were arranged in a wide circle around him. They watched him suspiciously.

Eadric smiled. He was, of course, a sidhe – at least to casual inspection. His observers seemed nervous of that fact: to say that the coolest and most civilized of feys were *infrequent* visitors to the World of Men would have been a laughable understatement.

The Paladin cleared his throat, and called out. "I am no sidhe," he assured them. "I am a mortal. My name is Eadric of Deorham."

For several seconds, there was no response. Then a shrill voice piped forth. "*Naheen nehaar eleel chellaath?*"

"I regret that I cannot understand you," Eadric admitted.

Noisy chattering followed for several minutes. Finally, a fat and singularly pompous-looking pixie fluttered forwards, attended by numerous moths of large size. When he spoke, his words ran together in an almost unintelligible stream, which Eadric found difficulty in understanding.

"It is most impolite to appear thus without invitation, and sit beneath the tree which is called *Nadholuridin*."

"Should I have chosen another tree?" Eadric asked wryly.

"You are most rude! Now you insult us with sarcastic comments.

We should make you dance until you drop dead from exhaustion!

You are fortunate that another has intervened on your behalf,

or you would feel our royal wrath descend upon you! Most gracious and kind and respectful he was,

and therefore we are prepared to be lenient. But before you leave you will apologize to *Nadholuridin*,

for the imposition that you have subjected her to!"

Eadric scowled, and wondered who had 'intervened on his behalf.'

The pixie raised his arm, and from somewhere behind him a tiny trumpet, more akin to a whistle than any other instrument, sounded forth.

A lone figure walked towards him from beneath the trees. His hair and beard were shaggy, and he wore a simple grey smock, drawn in loosely around his waist by a thin hemp rope.

Eadric gaped, and pressed his forehead to the earth.

Tramst, the *Sela*, touched him lightly on the shoulder, and the glamour which still sat upon the Paladin, hiding his true form, dissolved.

"And how are things with you, Eadric?" Tramst asked, smiling.

The *Ahma*, experiencing an upwelling of confusion, grief, and a sense of profound failure - mixed in unlikely measure with a feeling of complete safety in the presence of Oronthon's proxy - wept cathartically.

## NOTES

\*It seemed a reasonable tactic to use hit-point attrition – Eadric would probably be the last person standing, and the mages would get taken out first. Lehurze was still *geased* by Irknaan, and wasn't operating to Soneillon's complete satisfaction.

\*\*A cascade occurs when a wizard or cleric *gates* a solar to a plane (usually the Prime), and it, in turn, opens more *gates*. The new arrivals open further *gates* etc. An uninterrupted cascade can be very quick and effective – there were more than three hundred celestials present at Khu within a minute of the initial *gate*. Half were Solars and Planetars.

'Cascade' is a technical term used by arcanists – most of whom view celestial descents as unwanted extraplanar meddling, in stark contrast to the 'wondrous miracle' that the pious experience.

\*\*\*Nwm used a *true reincarnation* on both Ortwin and Shomei – there was no level loss associated with their deaths. Note that with the 9th level spell I simply allow the caster to choose the form that the new incarnation takes – fortunately, Nwm's player, Dave, is not prone to exploiting this power.

The spell spoken by Soneillon was *Be Not!*, an Epic Spell of her own contrivance:

## **Be Not!**

Transmutation

Spellcraft DC: 36

Components: V

Casting Time: 1 action

Range: 300 feet

Target: One living creature

Duration: Instantaneous

Saving Throw: Fortitude partial

Spell Resistance: Yes

To Develop: Seeds: slay (DC 25); destroy (DC 29). Factors: decrease casting time to 1 action (+20 DC); increase spell's save DC by +20 (+40 DC); no somatic component (+2 DC); gain +20 bonus on caster level check to overcome target's spell resistance (+40 DC). Mitigating factor: burn 10000 xp (-100 DC), 20d6 backlash (-20 DC).

The caster utters a single, terrible phrase, destroying the target utterly and removing all traces of it from existence unless it succeeds at a fortitude saving throw (DC 40 + relevant ability modifier.) If the target saving throw succeeds or it has more than 80 levels / hit dice, then it instead sustains 13d6 +20 points of damage. Note that even if the save is successful but the target is reduced to -10 or fewer hit points, its existence is similarly erased.

## **Other Notes:**

1. It's worth mentioning that I knew that the party was heavily outmatched, and they should have guessed as much. They ought to have fled immediately, but they *dithered*.
2. I ruled that although Mostin was *dimensionally anchored* he could still cast spells which allowed interplanar travel – he simply couldn't travel that way himself.
3. The idea to use *summoned* creatures to *plane shift* came a little late for Mostin. He would have saved himself grief if he'd thought of it earlier. Hats off for inventiveness, though.
4. Soneillon's spell *Be Not!* is an example of exactly *why* she is so dangerous – and why Graz'zt fears her so much. Chthonic demons pay no XP cost for spells which normally require it – in Mostin's terms,

her 'reservoir is limitless'. The 10,000XP burn becomes a standard mitigating factor. C.f.

## **Shattersoul**

Transmutation

Spellcraft DC: 38

Components: V, S

Casting Time: 1 action

Range: 300 ft.

Target: One creature

Duration: Instantaneous

Saving Throw: Fortitude negates

Spell Resistance: Yes

To Develop: Seeds: Transform (DC 21), Transport (DC 27), Ward (DC 14). Factors: transform into inanimate object (+10 DC); transform into seven components (ad hoc +30 DC); transport to extraplanar location (+2 DC); decrease casting time to 1 action (+20 DC); protect against *discern location* (+14 DC); increase saving throw DC by +10 (+20 DC). Mitigating Factors: burn 10,000 XP (-100 DC); 20d6 backlash (-20 DC).

*Shattersoul* instantly transforms a single creature into seven identical stone spheres of diminutive size unless it succeeds at a Fortitude saving throw (DC 30+ relevant modifier). The spheres are approximately six inches in diameter.

Each stone is sent to a random planar destination, where it remains until recovered. Only upon recovery of all of the stones is any kind of restoration possible for the victim of a *shattersoul* spell. A *wish* or *miracle*, or an appropriate epic spell which uses the *transform* seed may then be used to restore the target of the *shattersoul*.

All of the seven spheres are protected by a ward which renders them impervious to efforts to discover their whereabouts by means of the *discern location* spell. Epic spells which use the *reveal* seed must succeed at an opposed caster level check in order to determine the location of each of the stone spheres.

*Shattersoul* bends the rules close to breaking point but, hey, I'm the DM



*Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 07-14-2003*

The *Sela* and the *Ahma* sat beneath the beech-tree Nadholuridin deep within the Forest of Nizkur. Moonlight illuminated them both.

"Will you return?" Tramst asked. His question was simple and direct, and conveyed no sense of judgment.

"I don't know," Eadric replied.

"If you had died, would you have allowed Nwm the Preceptor to recall you?" The *Sela*'s question cut to the quick of another concern which had been nagging the Paladin. He had no doubt that Nwm would have *reincarnated* both Ortwin and Shomei: an act which – according to Orthodoxy, at least – verged on necromancy of the most dubious kind.

"I don't know," Eadric replied honestly. "I am tired of continually weighing the means against the ends, and guessing which is the greater good, or the lesser evil."

"Such is the weight of responsibility," Tramst smiled.

"Before the assault, Titivilus issued me a *sending*. What was its purpose?"

"Devils seldom have uncomplicated reasons for their actions," the *Sela* said cryptically.

"He offered to act as an arbiter – although for what dispute, I cannot guess."

Tramst said nothing.

Eadric considered for a moment, before asking a different question altogether. "I am curious as to your actions regarding the feys here. They seemed to regard you in a favourable light."

"I gave them honey-cake, and firewine, and a mechanical clock," Tramst explained. "I also asked their permission to visit you here."

"But that was not necessary. You are the *Sela*."

"It was, nonetheless, polite," Tramst replied.

"But had you said nothing, and merely appeared to me, they would never have known of your presence – or mine."

"That is likely," the *Sela* nodded.

Eadric scowled. There was a paradox there somewhere, and a lesson to be learned from it.

"May I ask a philosophical question?" The Paladin ventured.

The *Sela*'s eyes twinkled. "If you really must," he answered.

"Titivilus comprehends the dialectic which underpins the transmetaphysic of *saizhan*. Can he be said to possess insight? Or is compassion a necessary precursor to actualizing *saizhan*?"

"Your question is flawed, as it presupposes a difference between insight and compassion."

"They are identical?"

"I will answer that with the standard fourfold negation.\*"

Eadric laughed loudly – a sound that he realized had passed his lips too infrequently of late.

"Something is amusing?" Tramst asked.

"Forgive me, *Sela*, but getting a straight answer from you is harder than pulling teeth from a horse."

"This has been pointed out to me," Tramst nodded.

Eadric was silent for a moment, before asking another question. "Was there a specific reason that you chose to meet me now?"

"Merely to inform you that your actions have had consequences which you did not foresee. You do not exist in a vacuum."

"Is that a warning?"

"In a manner of speaking." Tramst replied. "Have you determined yet the purpose of your visit to Afqithan?"

"Not entirely," Eadric confessed. "But without other positive options, it seemed the obvious thing to do. What consequences do you refer to, *Sela*?"

"The challenging of Graz'zt's hegemony in the realm."

"I do not understand."

"Irknaan is dead, Eadric. And even before he died, he wavered. There will be much uncertainty as a new Queen asserts her dominion."

The Paladin looked astonished. "Did Mostin kill him?"

"No. Irknaan was slain by the demoness Soneillon, around two hours ago."

*The void*, Eadric immediately knew. "She was Graz'zt's concubine. We had considered Throile as a possible target. And she is now Queen there?"

"No. Soneillon has no interest in Afqithan – other than as a stick with which to taunt Graz'zt. She has a great interest in *you*, however. She perceives you as a vehicle through which Graz'zt's downfall may be accomplished."

Eadric shifted uncomfortably.

"If you were to ally yourself to her," Tramst continued, "then no doubt it could be accomplished."

"Are you recommending this course of action, *Sela*?" Eadric inquired uneasily.

"By no means," Tramst answered. "I am merely informing you of things as they are. You have condemned Graz'zt to death. You have vowed to release Nehael. You are dispensing Oronthon's justice – *my* justice, if you will – as you have determined appropriate and necessary. You may have to confront this choice."

The Paladin clenched his jaw in frustration.

"Do you resent the lack of direction that I offer you, Eadric?" The *Sela* asked.

Eadric hesitated.

Tramst struck him soundly in the face. "You cannot offend me with what you feel, *Ahma*."

"I apologize," Eadric said, nodding. His lip bled freely.

After a period of silence, the Paladin spoke again. "The Queen of whom you spoke – is it Nhura, or one of Soneillon's puppets?"

"I think that is not yet settled," Tramst responded. "There are several candidates. Nhura bears the title for the meantime." He stretched, and abruptly changed the topic. "You are not the only reason I am

here, Eadric. Another is due to arrive in a few hours. Which leaves us time to make some corrections."

Eadric looked quizzical.

"*Ahma*, your meditation posture is terrible."

"Ahh," Eadric said.

\*\*

Mostin sat wrapped in his *robe of eyes* by a small fire near Nwm's glade in the warm sunlight. He sneezed.

By the time that Shomei and the Druid had *wind walked* to her mansion, and the Infernalist had consulted her books and *teleported* to the Alienist's location, Mostin's *fly* spell had long since expired. He had been floating in the water, disconsolate, and drained of magic to an extent that he hadn't experienced in years.

"You should've asked the Marid to deposit you in a less inconvenient place," Ortwin observed whilst toasting a thick slice of bread.

"It was not the first thing on my mind," Mostin grumbled. "And I think you should put some clothes on. Your naked caprine form is less than agreeable to my current sensibilities. At least throw a cloak over yourself."

Ortwin's hand suffered a brief spasm, and he dropped his toast into the fire.

"I have to get my gear back," the Satyr wailed.

"That could prove difficult," Nwm said dryly. "As without your gear, it will not be easy to retrieve your gear, so to speak."

"And my dowry," Ortwin whined.

"*Our* dowry," Iua sighed. "Mostin, we have Shupthul's weapon – can you transform it into a scimitar?"

"I suppose so," the Alienist replied. "If we go back, we need to carefully consider our tactics, however. They were less than successful. I would guess that we are outmatched by two to one at least in spellpower. There isn't even any opportunity to close and engage with them in combat. But we *can* do this – given the chance to prepare. I am thinking that the strategic use of *antimagic* may be the answer. In which case, *no* weapon which is dweomered would be useful – and a *polymorphed* weapon would be worse than useless."

"To willingly have my spellcasting stymied thus is a daunting prospect," Nwm said sceptically. "I'm hardly an expert combatant."

"I am talking of the *skillful* use of antimagic, not a wholesale or blanket application," Mostin chided. "And I think that you would be better off unhindered. I had much time to consider this during my sojourn in the Eastern Ocean – watching fish becomes rather tedious after a while. One of us – either Shomei or I – would effectively act as a mobile protection device. We would be vulnerable to physical assault – all wards would be nonfunctioning. But this is somehow preferable to multiple *greater dispellings, horrid wiltings, destructions* and *power words*. Nwm and the other mage would remain outside of the field – and warded to a truly absurd degree – bear in mind that whoever was acting as the *antimagic* focus would have plenty of protective spells to lavish on those outside of the field."

"We have yet to witness the Loquai in physical combat," Nwm pointed out. "How effective are they likely to be?"

"If they are like the sidhe in general, then probably very adept. Also, probably *no* match for Eadric, Ortwin or I," Iua grinned. "I like this plan, Mostin."

"I advocate a full assault," the Alienist announced. Buoyed by Iua's support, he was beginning to get carried away. "We *scry* Irknaan's castle, *summon, bind* and *gate* a veritable army of extraplanar help. We use the Mirror to access a point outside of the stronghold. I blow a hole in the wall with a *great*

*shout*, send in the footsoldiers, and erect an *antimagic field*. We charge in, kill everything inside, and it's all over with."

Ortwin turned to look at Nwm, and raised his eyebrows.

The Druid shrugged. "Why not? Hell, we've tried subtlety and guile. We've tried a magical confrontation. What's left?"

\*\*

It was mid morning. Tramst clicked his fingers and pointed at the sensor.

"I do not see it," Eadric sighed.

"It requires considerable practice. It is there, however."

Seconds later, there was a displacement of air, and a single figure arrived. Eadric's mind suffered a cognitive dissonance as Shomei manifested. The Eye of Palamabron showed her true body – a youthful and fair-skinned woman – whereas his own eyesight revealed the figure that he was familiar with. As always, she bore her rod.

Suspiciously, the Infernalist looked at Tramst and readied a spell. "Who are you? Why did I not perceive you?" Shomei's *arcane sight* began to scrutinize the *Sela*'s form.

Eadric was about to say something, but Tramst raised his hand in a gesture which said *let her continue*.

"You are Oronthon's Proxy," Shomei said presently. Her head was spinning, and her heart was pounding hard within her chest. Her calm façade seemed stretched and shaky. She erected a *mind blank* almost instinctively.

"You are correct," Tramst smiled.

"Your form is disarmingly unprepossessing," Shomei continued, regaining her composure somewhat.

"Would you prefer my *ahmasaljan*\*\*?" The *Sela* inquired.

"NO!" Shomei said unequivocally.

"You fear me."

"I mistrust what you represent," the Infernalist replied.

"I think you misunderstand what I represent," Tramst countered.

"I do not seek redemption, whether you dress it in dialectic clothes or no."

"I do not offer it," the *Sela* said easily. "You are an Infernalist. I attach no moral significance to your chosen path. I can help you perfect your technique. Hone your spirit. Discipline your Will."

"Your attempt at expediency does not move me."

"Shomei," Tramst smiled, "if I were to be truly expedient with you, do you think you would know it?"\*\*\*

"I don't know. Would *you* know it?" Shomei replied wryly.

"*Saizho*," the *Sela* said, bowing.

"You bastard," Shomei sighed, as reality shifted.

"Your contract with Zhorion is fulfilled," Tramst pointed out.

Shomei cocked her head. "I neither sought you out, nor have I received instruction."

"You have demonstrated the Truth to yourself. What else can I teach you?"

The Infernalist gaped. "That is absurd. Nothing is that easy."

Tramst smiled sadly. "Yes, Shomei. It is that easy. Have you already forgotten, although it was only seconds ago? It will elude you as you reach out to grasp it again. And therein lies the tragedy."

Shomei swallowed, and scowled.

Tramst reached down, and picked a buttercup from near the base of the beech-tree. He pressed it into the palm of her hand.

Her world shattered into a billion fragments and reformed in an instant.

"You are not what I expected," she said.

Eadric wondered why it was that, for him, the *Sela* had made things so difficult, but for Shomei – who consorted with the unholyest of creatures – he had freely offered bliss and a vision of the Absolute.

He experienced a moment of impossible irony.

\*\*

Nufrut's disembodied face squinted at Eadric and Mostin from inside her transparent adamantine prison. The Eye of Palamabron illuminated her.

"I require information regarding the demoness Soneillon," Eadric stated.

"Mendacity would be pointless," Mostin added smugly.

"What do you wish to know?" Nufrut sighed.

"Her power relative to the Prince of Azzagrat," Mostin began, "both personal, and with regard to their respective subjects and thralls. The disposition of her servants in Throile. Her *modi operandorum*. Her motivations – beyond merely irking her former consort. Possible weaknesses which may be exploited. And her ontological status, which is a matter of some interest to me personally – from a purely academic perspective."

"This may take some while," Nufrut grumbled.

"Be as swift as you may," Eadric said acidly.

"Power is a difficult thing to measure when one speaks of Abyssal dignitaries," Nufrut replied.

"Absolutes are impossible to determine."

"Is she always this forthcoming?" Eadric asked Mostin, drily.

"Invariably," Mostin nodded.

"Perhaps we should make a translation to the vestibule of Oronthon's Heaven," Eadric suggested. "The Archons might have an easier time of persuading her to talk."

Mostin shook his head. "That is a journey I would prefer not to undertake. I can easily open a *gate* to allow you access, however."

"That will not be necessary," Nufrut interrupted. "I will try to formulate answers which are meaningful to your limited mortal perspectives."

"That is all we require," Eadric smiled. "Proceed."

"Soneillon's sorcerous power is, in some regards, greater than that of Graz'zt," Nufrut reluctantly admitted.

Mostin inhaled sharply. "I think that statement requires some explanation."

"She is touched by infinite nothingness," Nufrut snapped. The subject was one which evidently disturbed even her. "She is Demogorgon's spawn. A scion of Cheshne. She has entered oblivion, and returned from it."

Eadric blanched. The name of the Ancient was anathema. A taboo which none violated.

"I am speaking figuratively, of course," Nufrut added. "The wellspring of her power has no bounds – it is limited only by her own capacity to understand it."

"That is impossible," Mostin grunted.

"As you wish," Nufrut replied.

"Do not patronize me, Nufrut. Certain laws are inviolable within the bounded cosmos."

"If so, then this is not one of them," Nufrut said caustically.

"She does not lie," Eadric sighed.

"And it is borne out by your suspicions regarding her partial nonexistence," Nufrut continued. "I assume that was the reason for your inquiry about her ontic status?"

Mostin nodded wryly.

"I am somewhat confused," Eadric admitted.

"Soneillon has been to the bottom of the Abyss, and returned," Mostin explained. "She has tasted unbeing."

"The Abyss has no bottom, Mostin."

"My point exactly," Mostin replied.

"Hmph!" Eadric turned his attention back to the Demoness. "Please continue, Nufrut."

"Soneillon maintains few servants of any power – most of her closest attendants are succubi, and a handful of these are favoured and have learned sorcery from her."

"Such as the other who assailed us?" Mostin asked.

"As I was secure within your *portable hole*, I cannot answer this question with certainty."

"Names," Mostin demanded.

"Adyell, Helitihai, Orychne, Chaya," Nufrut replied. "Others of less note. No doubt also others, who are wholly unknown."

"I was struck by a *power word*, *stun* and a violated sonic *acid storm*," Mostin explained. "Who might that be?"

"Probably none of those four," Nufrut smiled wickedly.

"You are most vexatious," Mostin said irritably. "Would you care to speculate who might have access to such spells?"

"Many of Soneillon's former protégés have found positions in the courts of other demonic nobles. Many have also managed to keep their tutelage under her secret. It is hard to say."

"There was another demon who, like her, existed on the threshold on nonbeing. Who was that?"

"I do not know," Nufrut scowled. "There are others who have descended, and returned, but most of their names are not known to me."

"But some are," Mostin pointed out. "Be so kind as to share those you *do* know."

"I am loath to speak their names," Nufrut groaned.

"And I am anxious to hear them!" Mostin retorted. "And a brief description, if you please."

"Seven only are known to me."

"Speak!" The Alienist demanded.

So Nufrut spat their names out: *Saduch* and *Tavael* – shadow demons; *Xanoriz* – a glabrezu; *Tiqa* – a succubus, like Soneillon herself, but of less power than the Mistress of Throile; *Iarathym* – a babau; *Arhuz* – a nalfeshnee of tremendous power, who dwelt five hundred circles from Azzagrat in a palace of slime; and *Carasch*.

"Carasch?" Mostin inquired.

"A balor. Once. Perhaps a deva before that? Who can remember that far back anymore?" There was a hint of melancholy in her voice.

"Could it be him?" The Alienist asked nervously.

Nufrut laughed harshly. "You fool! Carasch, subordinate himself to any other? How little you know, Mostin. Graz'zt and all his minions would flee before him. Yea, *Ahma*, maybe even Enitharmon himself would think twice before challenging him. No, Mostin, it was not Carasch – or you would all be dead, and Afqithan itself might be no more."

Mostin sniffed. "I find it hard to believe that an entity of such power exists and I have never heard of him."

"You know *nothing*," Nufrut sneered. "And I know but little in comparison to others," she added wily. "Soneillon herself is well versed in the nature and disposition of more exotic Abyssal denizens. Pazuzu knows more than any other..."

"Return to the topic at hand if you would," Eadric interjected. "We do not have time for your random musings, Nufrut, although no doubt they are interesting."

"Soneillon is a dreamer, and a seductress without peer," the Demoness continued. "Her schemes and motivations are as impenetrable as the darkness which surrounds her when she wills it – no, Mostin, I do not dissemble. She is most enigmatic."

"And weaknesses?" Eadric inquired.

"None that I know of," Nufrut answered. "But if she has marked you, *Ahma*, then your life is about to become *very* complicated."

Eadric sighed. As if it wasn't already.

\*i.e. insight and compassion are neither identical, nor different, nor both identical and different, nor neither identical nor different.

\*\* 'Spiritual essence,' 'indwelling spirit' or 'perfect body.' Normally perceivable only through the divine version of *true seeing* or similar magic.

\*\*\*I think I may have touched on this before, but it is quite normal for Ascended Masters – and by extension the *Sela* – to dispense wisdom according to the understanding of those who hear it. Less enlightened souls might misconstrue this as an economy of truth, or even outright lies.

It is important to clarify exactly what happened in the exchange between Tramst and Shomei, as it is easily misunderstood:

*Saizho* means 'I see' (not 'you see' which is *saizha* – and may be either present tense or imperative).

Tramst is in no way 'bestowing' or 'forcing' a moment of insight or enlightenment upon Shomei.

Shomei's question 'Would you know it?' (i.e. would the *teacher* know if he were being expedient) stimulates an insight in the *Sela*. According to *Saizhan*, ultimately there is no 'you' that knows, and there is no knowing – there is only direct, unmediated experience of the Truth. True expediency cannot be conscious or premeditated, it must arise spontaneously and instinctively.

It is typical of the *Sela*'s teaching style that he will gracefully acknowledge an insight provided by someone else – usually a student – also implying that he, himself still has much to learn in the process. This is, however, a spiritual lesson in itself – doubly so in the case of Shomei: the 'Adversarial' philosophy endorsed by Shomei (and Mostin, although in a different way) is based on *infinite becoming* and perpetual self-transcendence. By accepting an insight provided by Shomei, the *Sela* implicitly endorses the validity of the Infernalist's philosophy and pays homage to *her* holiness and perfection, but at the same time asserts his own spiritual authority.

The paradox which results is a perfect expression of the dialectic of *Saizhan*: Shomei's mind no longer has anything tangible upon which it can find purchase. Inevitably, she experiences *Saizhan*, but brought about by her own words, not by those of Tramst.

When Shomei realizes this, she says 'You bastard.' It would seem that Shomei has somehow maneuvered herself into a glimpse of the Truth. Thus, Tramst *has* been expedient, because he has been effective. Moreover, he has done so spontaneously, instinctively and without effort.

*Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 07-24-2003*

After Mostin and Eadric had quizzed Nufnut, the Paladin related the news conveyed to him by Tramst in full. A bitter argument ensued.

"There is no *need* for us to return," Nwm sighed. "It would serve no purpose. We have – in a

roundabout way – succeeded in what we set out to do. Irknaan is dead. The Demon's precarious hold on the demiplane is compromised. *We have vexed him*. When we initially spoke of this, the plan was to assail him on as many fronts as we could. We should change tack accordingly now."

"My gear remains in Afqithan," Ortwin snapped.

"Forget your gear," Nwm replied unsympathetically. "Live with it – you *are* alive, if you would notice. Goddess, you're a selfish bastard, Ortwin."

"But we have already formulated a plan," the Satyr continued, ignoring the insult. "*We can do this. It will work.*"

"It would be an unnecessary waste of time and effort," Nwm retorted. "What would we gain? Eadric?"

"I don't know," Eadric admitted.

"Pah!" Nwm snorted. "This is absurd. Why Afqithan? *What's the point?*"

"It is some kind of key," Eadric replied.

Nwm looked exasperated. "Why? Have you had some kind of revelation?"

"No."

The Druid closed his eyes, and clenched his fists. "I have humoured you thus far, Eadric, but you need to seriously reappraise. Genuine visions I can accept, but some vague feeling is *not* sufficient."

"I trust vague feelings more than divinely inspired visions," Mostin said unhelpfully.

"I'm not suggesting that is *the* key," Eadric said. "But perhaps it is *a* key. Or perhaps we can turn it into one. There is the *gate* to Azzagrat..."

"Which opens both ways, I might remind you. And it is periodic – who knows what else has walked

through it since we were last there."

"Soneillon." Eadric said again. "She is pivotal – or could be, if we allowed her to be. She lusts after the fall of the Lord of Azzagrat more than anything else."

"Do not presume to understand the motives of demons," Shomei warned. "Especially one such as her. If you use her as a tool – if you use *each other* I should say – then she will exact a price which may surprise you at a later time."

"Do you then intend to strike a bargain with Soneillon?" Ortwin asked.

"I don't know. Titivilus offered to act as an arbiter – maybe for this purpose. Perhaps opening some kind of dialogue..."

"For me to regard something as questionable means that it must be *very* questionable," Ortwin said sardonically. "But I suspect that this is one barrel of maggots that you do *not* want to open."

Overcome by a sudden wave of irony, Nwm guffawed. "Eadric of Deorham purposes to compact with a Demon Queen? Ah, the world has changed. And maybe not for the better."

"There is opportunity, here," Eadric replied patiently. "And I am in the unfortunate position of having to decide the least evil."

"Do you have that authority?" Nwm countered. "Or sufficient information?"

"Yes, and no," the Paladin answered with a wry smile. "That is my lot. I am resigned to it. Things will unfold according to Oronthon's will, irrespective of my actions."

"That is a depressing fatalism," Nwm groaned.

"Not so," Shomei unexpectedly came to Eadric's defense. "To exert individual will and to submit to destiny need not be mutually exclusive perspectives. This is well established."

"Shomei, your philosophical sophistry is irrelevant to me," Nwm replied. "Your world-view is under assault. You are confused, and your intellect is trying to grasp at dialectical straws."

The Infernalist looked mildly offended, opened her mouth to say something, thought better of it, and clamped it shut again.

"Through sustained application of Will, we can force a confluence of events to occur in Afqithan," Mostin nodded. "We cannot control it, however. It may backfire. There are too many variables. We lack Jovol's prescience."

Shomei raised her eyebrows. "Your euphemism is transparent, Mostin. You are too anxious to unleash the Pseudonatural Horror."

"I am not *that* anxious," Mostin said. "Or I would have done so already."

"I still do not understand what this *thing* is, of which you speak," Eadric sighed.

"It is the creature which slew Vhorzhe – in all likelihood," Shomei answered. "And probably other adepts who thought they could control it."

"The Horror," Mostin nodded eagerly. "The *gate*. Titivilus. Soneillon. The Prince. The Spell – which I am close to capable of casting."

"Although not alone," Shomei pointed out. "And enlisting a cabal will be far harder than speaking the incantation."

Mostin shrugged. "We are going in circles. I have some possible solutions, if any of you have the stomach to hear them: bear with me before you shoot me down. First, Soneillon: I can *bind* her, although I doubt I can hold her for long. Second, the *gate*: we can use it, or seal it with a *disjunction*. Third, Mulissu: it may be that she has made progress in interpreting Jovol's *web of motes* – it may give us an idea on how to proceed which we have not previously considered. Fourth, the Pseudonatural: I can likewise *bind* it, and probably not hold it. Fifth, and I am loath to even suggest it: Shomei – or even I, for that matter – could enlist celestial support."

"There will be no cascade in Afqithan," Shomei said simply. "Tramst made that clear to me before I left him – this is no concern of the Host. And I have worries on that count which I haven't yet voiced: there is no doubt that – irrespective of Nhura's current inclinations – news of a celestial presence in the demiplane has already been reported to Graz'zt. Information such as that has a habit of spreading quickly."

"But would he have suspected who caused it?" Eadric asked.

"Perhaps not," Shomei conceded, "but the Prince is supremely paranoid, as I have said before. News of Irknaan's death has probably reached him already. Who can guess the loyalty of the other Loquai?"

"We need information," Nwm sighed. "And we need it badly. Things are finely balanced. Factions are forming faster than we can apprehend them. They change before we have a chance to begin to understand them. There is too much flux."

"We are dealing with *demons* and their allies," Mostin said. "What do you expect? Our own presence has skewed events rapidly."

"Everything in Afqithan seemed relatively stable before we arrived," Nwm said laconically.

"Chaos and inertia have a great deal in common," Shomei smiled.

"Then we should take one more day," Eadric said grimly. "One more day, before we decide to act – and then ten hours or so will have passed in Afqithan since our flight. As Nwm says, we need information – to garner as much as we can. And when we do act, it needs to be *decisive*. No more vacillation. Mostin, you are the Diviner – the onus lies on you. Can you contact Mulissu?"

The Alienist nodded. "I have yet to prepare my spells. But I had determined to make a *metagnostic inquiry* before anything else. This will involve a translation."

"How long will it take?" The Paladin asked.

"Exactly no time at all," Mostin replied. "I will go to the Far Realm."

\*\*

Beyond the glooms created by an uncounted number of fears – the terrors which lurked in the recesses of human souls, the darkest imaginings of demonic lust, and the nightmares of creatures which bore no shape or name – Soneillon dreamed a dream.

Annihilation, the threat of unbeing, the primeval void in which all meaning ceased, held no mystery for her. She was it, and it was she. From the blank tablet of unmanifest reality, the succubus drew forth a tendril of possibility. Fashioned by her dark spirit – which had, by the dubious virtue of sheer force of will, survived or transcended the insurmountable necessity of ontological cohesion – a shadowy phantasy began to coalesce.

She strove to give it form and meaning, to imbue it with qualities which marked it as real. Madness and meaninglessness flowed away. The numinous slowly subsided, and became the phenomenal. A vision of trees, of sky, of streams, animals, birds and men assumed tangibility. A small castle, with whitewashed walls, ivy-clad and perched upon a rocky knoll.

Paradox rapidly spiralled into infinity, and potentiality shrank to a single point in space and time. The interstices snapped, and unbeing retreated.

Soneillon stood in dappled sunlight, clad in flesh and blood. Nearby, an ancient oak-tree stood. The demoness glanced at Kyrtil's Burh, erected a ward around herself, and assumed a pleasing form.

Soneillon smiled. She smiled at the hopeless lot of mortals, like pigs who were destined for slaughter. She smiled at the pathos which she perceived in Graz'zt: his interminable wheedling and plotting and conniving for the slightest of transient gains. She smiled at Wyre, and its magical Law, embodied in the Claviger and its servant Gihaahia – in the full knowledge that she herself needed no agent to bring here there and, thus, no infraction had occurred. And she smiled at Oronthon, and the Celestial Host, and their Interdict against the millions that had rebelled before time began.

Once, she had been one of them. But no longer. Her paradigm had shifted. Unreality was hers, and she made her own laws now.

\*\*

The creature interrogated by Mostin was a writhing mass of matter which would have defied all attempts at classification, had the Alienist been inclined to attempt to categorize it. Two things only concerned him: it was of the lower order, and thus unlikely to resist his compulsion, and it was of reasonable intelligence – the latter inferred by Mostin who, *invisible* and *mind blanked*, had watched it interact with numerous other creatures of less stature than itself.

Transfixed, it swayed eerily beneath the Wizard's gaze, its pseudopodia stretching and rippling simultaneously through several overlapping dimensions.

Mostin's question was generic. He sought guidance, not definitive answers.

*Can you enlighten me with regard to the events and possibilities which currently preoccupy me?*

The creature's consciousness was catapulted into the deepest reaches of madness and euphoria, and a barrage of scenes and feelings flooded into Mostin's mind as it filtered them to him.

[Image] Graz'zt + [Image] a black tower + [Image] a satyr (or was it Titivilus?) + [Fear] Nothingness + [Image] peasant girl + [Image] a huge bird + [Incomprehensible] void + [Image] Steeple + [Image] dragon + [Image] a dreamscape: the Claviger; Jovol; Soneillon. [Image] the forest perishing + [Smell] acid + [Image] Lukarn + [Image] a million tiny stars + [Image] the Horror + [Fear] the Horror + [Terror] the Horror + [Image] a hundred souls, confined, deranged, screaming and gibbering + [Image] Vhorzhe + [Voice] *saizha*, Mostin?

Mostin quailed, and fled back to the bounded cosmos.

\*

"I think that a slightly more structured question may have been in order," Mulissu said sarcastically, as she poured a smoking liquid into a tall, blue flute, and handed it to Mostin. "You might as well have asked 'Can you please reveal all of my deepest fears to me?'"

The pair sat beneath the pomegranate tree in Mulissu's courtyard, as several mephits capered nearby. The dome of the sky was, as usual, a perfect, unbroken cyan.

"It is within my nature to risk frequent assault upon my psyche," Mostin replied shakily. "You may have a point, however."

"Did you uncover anything worthwhile?"

"That remains to be seen," Mostin downed his drink rapidly and held out his glass for another draught, "but I think so. Interpretation is always the hardest part. This is a fine beverage. What is it?"

Mulissu shrugged, and poured again. "I don't think it has a name. I acquired it from a passing Djinn. The pseudonatural entity seems foremost in your mind. Have you made an effort to contact it?"

"Not yet. I have not judged the time to be ripe. It soon will be, however."

"And you plan to *gate* it into this 'Afqithan?'"

"Perhaps. Or I may lose it against the Prince, if we ever have the misfortune to meet. Mulissu, I need guidance."

The Witch groaned. "I prefer not to dispense advice, where possible."

"Jovol's *web of motes*," Mostin persisted. "Have you made headway in understanding it?"

Mulissu sighed. "I have thought of little else. It continually distracts me from my work."

"But do you *understand* it?"

"No," she replied. "Or, I should say, I understand its principles and its function, but not how to read it – as you said, interpretation is always the hardest part. Would you like a demonstration?"

Mostin nodded. "Of course."

"Then we should go inside – it is best if we see it in relative darkness."

"I will bring the bottle," Mostin said. His mood was improving rapidly.

Mulissu had dedicated the space within the largest of the five minarets of her mansion-cum-castle to Jovol's device. When she activated it – a flat metal plate some twelve inches square – by merely passing her hand over it, Mostin's jaw dropped.

The darkness around them was suddenly illuminated by a hundred thousand points of light which coruscated in every colour imaginable. Some pulsed, and hummed, and seemed to move on unpredictable trajectories. Some quivered, some darted here and there, others stayed fixed, or orbited fathomless loci which could not be identified. Almost imperceptibly, slender threads wove them together, joining them for brief periods before they separated, or binding them tightly into pairs, triplets or larger clusters.

"Every mote represents a packet of consciousness – an individual entity, or a single perspective. They are shown in relation to one another."

Mulissu looked around briefly, before locating a bluish mote which blazed more brightly than those around it. She touched it with an outstretched finger, and it grew noticeably. Thousands of other motes winked out, but new ones came into being in their place. A puzzled look crossed her face.

"You seem perplexed," Mostin observed.

"The mote which I selected represents myself," Mulissu said. "That much, at least, I have determined. Notice the bright mote which winks nearby. Its pattern seems random and insubstantial: I suspect that this is you, although I cannot read the significance of its behaviour."

"I am *mind blanked*. This may be reflected in the web's powers of scrutiny. How did you isolate the mote which represents you?"

"I just *knew*," the Witch answered. "Do not ask me to explain – I cannot."

"Eadric said that Jovol could *infer* certain things," Mostin speculated, "even when he could not accurately determine them. It may be possible to locate anyone or anything at any time, past, present or future – given a user with sufficient ability. Beyond even Jovol's powers, I suspect."

"Indeed," Mulissu raised an eyebrow. "Or mine. It may also be possible to advance or regress the whole web – currently, I believe it shows things *as they are*. It should be able to reveal things *as they were* or even *as they will be*. This is beyond me. Nor can I determine the spatial coordinates of any of the motes – that is to say *where* in any reality the individual to whom the mote belongs is located. Observe this."

The witch traced a thin tendril from her own mote with her finger. Around them both, lights flashed rapidly, as the thread twisted and gyred. Slowly, in the centre of the chamber, a deep, purplish radiance grew. It seemed somehow serene. Perfect in its shape and form.

From it, a thousand strings, gossamer-thin, radiated outwards, connecting it to a myriad of other motes – including, somewhat detached, the bright blue light which was Mulissu herself. Around the central radiance, slowly orbiting on its periphery, was a single spark of deepest red, filled with malevolence and conveying a sense of foreboding.

"Behold the Claviger," Mulissu smiled, "and the Enforcer. At the end of every tendril, there is a Wizard, Mostin. We are all bound together, and there is nothing we can do about it."

"But which is whom?" Mostin asked in awe.

Mulissu sighed. "That is the question."

The Alienist paused in thought for a moment, before reaching out to touch Gihaahia's mote, eliciting a doubtful expression from Mulissu.

"Mostin..." She began.

"Sshh!"

The Enforcer's mote grew, and that of the Claviger retreated, until the red ellipsoid outshone all others. A feeling of subservience – tinged with an ancient, ineffable anger – emanated from it.

"Remarkable," Mostin said. As the radicles which anchored it to other luminous points came in to view, its connection to the Claviger assumed a different shape – appearing as a long, tense cord, which glowered with coercive power.

Many of the motes were now black, or deep scarlet, or midnight blue in hue. From all, violence, and lust, and pain, and fear flowed forth – stifling and suffocating. Many flickered and seemed to jump unpredictably.

"Are we seeing reality from Gihaahia's perspective, now?" Mostin asked.

"I think these motes around her represent the contacts which she has made. The significant entities which have shaped – and maybe continue to shape – her reality."

Mostin's eyes darted about rapidly, following the tendrils which sprang from the Enforcer. *Where is the connection? It must be here. Is it this?*

A fuliginous mote, but somehow vague and indistinct came into view. He touched it. It grew, threatening to consume all else. Beyond it, past incomprehensible connections which spanned realities and stretched the bounds of apprehension, was a yet deeper void.

Mulissu touched him gently on the shoulder. "Stop, Mostin. It will not avail you, and madness lies that way. You do not have the understanding. Sometimes you need to accept your limits."

Mostin exhaled, and nodded.

*Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 07-24-2003*

They sat outside again. At Mulissu's command, a cool breeze had arisen.

"The dark mote that you evoked – what was it?"

"Cheshne, or her echo," Mostin answered. "At least, I think it was. Nothingness has been weighing on my mind recently. Tell me, Mulissu: is it possible for a demon to survive annihilation?"

Mulissu shrugged. "The ontological paradox holds no interest for me. Speculating about such things is pointless."

"Did you see the void beyond the void?" Mostin asked.

"Yes, Mostin, I did – and I am superstitious enough to say 'do not speak its name in my house.' Why does it interest you?"

"It is the key to understanding the demoness Soneillon. If I can locate the mote which represents her, and then the mote which represents Eadric, Tramst, the Prince of Azzagrat..."

"It is an exceedingly long and arduous task," Mulissu sighed, and stretched. "I have attempted the process of cross-referencing, but there are hundreds of variables, and isolating many of them is near to impossible."

"Cosmic entities are easy enough to locate, if you can find one they lead from each to the next – the Enforcer is an excellent place to begin."

Mulissu shook her head. "And if you locate Cheshne, or Astaroth, what then? Can you tell which of Shûth's accursed gods is which, or which Arch-fiend is Belial and which Amaimon? They flicker and shift."

"How did Jovol interpret it? Did he use a spell?"

"Perhaps. Or perhaps his insight was simply far greater than either of us."

*The bracelet*, Mostin thought at once, and struck his forehead with his hand.

Mulissu looked quizzical.

"I am an idiot," Mostin explained.

\*

Shomei eyed the mephits with an expression of weary tedium on her face.

"How can you tolerate their continual antics?" She asked Mulissu.

"They are acting according to their nature," the Elementalist replied.

"They are fractious and ill-disciplined. I would choose retainers who are more reliable."

"And no doubt far duller and more serious. Mostin says that the bracelet that Jovol bequeathed to you enhances perception in certain areas."

Shomei raised an eyebrow. "Evidently he has studied it more than I gave him credit for. Or his speculation is, for once, accurate. He is correct."

"I wish to borrow it for a short while," Mulissu said impassively – a statement which verged upon a command, or at least an expectation that she would not be denied.

"In order to better interpret Jovol's *web of motes*," Shomei nodded. "I, too, would like the opportunity to further realize my bracelet's potential."

Mostin sighed. He saw where this argument was leading. "It seems plain to me that your respective egos – colossal and yet simultaneously fragile as they both are – would require each of you to assert your right to first use the bracelet and web in conjunction. I can offer a solution to this impasse by volunteering my services – humbly, of course – thereby sparing each of you further embarrassment. I would also like to point out that I am, by native disposition and years of rigorous training, a Diviner. The web is likely to respond favorably to my benign aura."

"That is utterly spurious," Mulissu moaned. "and I will not even deign to refute it formally. Shomei, follow me – the honour is yours. Forgive my presumption."

Mostin squinted, and traipsed behind the two witches into the dome.

Mulissu floated three inches above the marble floor, arms folded across her chest, whilst Mostin half-sulked and half-scrutinized Shomei, who stood at the centre of the *web of motes*.

Points of light wheeled around her at incredible speed. She reached out, touched motes which arose, grew, merged, separated, shifted and winked out.

"What do you see?" Mostin asked.

"Wait," the Infernalist replied. "There are more potential viewpoints than I had anticipated." She touched a mote, and it blossomed.

"Well?" Mostin grumbled impatiently.

"There are numerous space-times represented by intersecting parabolae," Shomei answered. "All cosmoi are represented here. And the sum of all possibility."

Mostin looked dubious. "Can you find *any* mote? Find Nwm's mote."

Shomei glanced around, and interlocking systems rapidly flashed past. She touched another mote, and it assumed a central position and seemed to glow more brightly. The Infernalist laughed – predictably, it was green.

"Are you sure that's him?" Mostin asked.

"Oh yes," she replied.

"Where is he?"

"As I already know where Nwm is – at his glade near Deorham – that would hardly be a fair trial of the web's power."

"Let me try," Mostin said.

"I'm next," Mulissu smiled.

Mostin scowled.

After several frustrating hours, he finally got to play.

When the Alienist engaged with the web for the second time, he drew in his breath sharply in wonder.

New levels of complexity were revealed, and others suggested or hinted at. Nuances which had eluded him entirely during his first encounter were suddenly plainly visible: possibilities, probabilities, connections on levels which he did not comprehend. Visions shared, perspectives held in common,

affinities with concepts or geographical locations. Space, time and consciousness locked together in a latticework of impossible subtlety and intricacy. The *web of motes* was a true microcosm. A mirror of reality – or of many realities.

*What can this device not do?* Mostin wondered to himself. *Who – or what – constructed it? When? How?*

Quickly, he isolated the mote which he knew represented himself and examined it. Hundreds of connections emanated from it to other points of light: Eadric, Nwm, Shomei, Mulissu, Orolde, the Pseudonatural which he had only recently quizzed, the Horror and uncounted others.

Mostin concentrated, and the web receded. Motes flashed as time regressed, but larger patterns remained constant for long periods, as though some overriding principle – an organizing factor – was in play. When they changed, they seemed to do so sometimes slowly and deliberately, sometimes wholesale – imposing a new set of guiding rules and paradigms upon the interwoven gestalt.

Mostin observed Khu: realities collided where *gates* blazed open and celestials descended in legions. A maze of motes and taut connections which formed a huge knot with many facets. A nodality.

Mostin studied it for three hours, familiarizing himself with its patterns and undercurrents. A variety of hypothetical scenarios which had never been actualized overlapped with events as he remembered them: the death of Ainhorr, the death of himself, the successful flight of Feezuu, the failure of Mulissu to initiate the cascade. The reflection of Graz'zt – the demon's simulacrum – surviving the assault. Mostin selected an unrealized past future where Eadric had been slain, and gingerly advanced the web into chaos.

Feezuu carving out an empire. Tens of thousands of motes in bondage or annihilated. Her lichdom – which had been so narrowly avoided. Rapid bifurcation, and incomprehensibility.

Mostin sighed, and returned to the Now. He selected Graz'zt's mote and scrutinized it briefly – it seemed absurdly complex in its connections. It resonated closely with Eadric, with Soneillon – the demoness was now plainly visible to the Alienist – and with hundreds of fiends and powerful servitors or thralls. Another mote, which was burdened with suffering beyond the ability of any mortal flesh to

endure, was tightly enmeshed with the others.

Mostin swallowed, and touched Nehael.

A plethora of cosmoi wheeled in a pattern which bore an uncanny symmetry. Like a chiaroscuro in perfect balance, Nehael's picture revealed Rintrah, Eadric, Graz'zt, Soneillon, Nwm, Titivilus and even Mostin himself in orbit around her. She was the lynchpin, the focus of all activity, and the calm centre around whom infinities – Oronthon, the Far Realm, Unbeing, Dream, the Green, the Adversary – seemed poised through their representatives to assert their claims to reality. Her resonance with Tramst was extraordinary – like Oronthon's proxy, her role was to reveal all accepted truths as empty. Mostin tried to advance the web, but it immediately fractured into trillions of possibilities.

"Ngaarh!" He yelled in frustration.

Mulissu stood smiling, looking at him. "It is late, Mostin. I am hungry. Will you stay for dinner?"

Dumbly, Mostin nodded.

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The Alienist, Elementalist and Infernalist sat around a small hexagonal table within an airy refectory, dining on a sumptuous meal of delicacies prepared by the mephit Shrix – who, apparently possessed a degree of culinary expertise normally eclipsed by his perverse sense of humour as Mulissu's door-ward.

"This has been most productive," Mostin said through a mouthful of exquisite pastries stuffed with figs, almonds and pistachios. "We should meet more regularly."

Mulissu looked suspicious – her intolerance for frequent interruption was well known.

"Did you determine Soneillon's location?" Shomei asked Mostin.

The Alienist shook his head. "I became somewhat preoccupied by other matters. Why?"

"She is on the Prime," Shomei replied.

Mostin coughed. "This information would have been better shared earlier."

"I had assumed that she would be first to fall under your scrutiny," the Infernalist jibed. "I merely noticed it in passing – my attention was directed towards the Infernal realms. Incidentally, Titivilus is in Afqithan, along with Furcas and Murmur – although I didn't pursue that line of inquiry either."

Mostin almost choked.

"What *did* you look at, Mostin?" Mulissu asked. "I spent an hour minutely inspecting the Claviger and its connections and then proceeded to examine *Ha'uh* – a primal elemental with whom I should like to make peaceable contact, if possible."

Mostin raised an eyebrow. "The meta-structure of nodalities is fascinating. If I were to direct my energies in any one direction with regard to the web, then it would be here."

Mulissu sighed. "I think the dangers here are apparent – to be drawn in, and spend the rest of one's life observing or contemplating cosmic plans, patterns and connections. Was it productive?"

"Yes and no," Mostin replied. "I found that advancing the web beyond its current reflection of the Now to be unsatisfying. I could not project it into the future with any degree of certainty."

"Nor could I," Mulissu nodded.

"Nor I," Shomei agreed. "It may be that Jovol's bracelet is incapable of augmenting our faculties to this extent – his own native ability must have borne the brunt of his endeavours. It might behoove one of us to develop a spell for the express purpose of interpreting the web."

"I will do so," Mostin said, "when I have time."

"If it is ritualized I could easily perfect a formula in a matter of days," Mulissu said. "And with the minimum of fuss."

"My reservoir must stay unmolested," Mostin said sourly. "I want no repeat of Gihaahia's binding – it set me back by a month at least."

"Noted," Mulissu nodded.

"Splendid," Shomei smiled. "Then I say that we reconvene in one week to discuss our options – assuming that Mostin and I are still alive. And every month thereafter."

Mulissu scowled. "Every year would suit me better."

"Then I would suggest every quarter, as a compromise," Mostin said. "We three would form a potent triad. We are peers, and few others compare to us in power and ability. Mulissu should be our leader – the first among equals."

"Not for long, I suspect," the Witch said drily.

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"She is *here*?" Eadric asked, aghast.

Mostin gave a confirmatory nod. "There is more. Before we left, I inspected the web for a third time. It would appear that certain of those others whom we encountered have also made a translation."

Eadric looked sick. "Go on."

"Nhura. The Wyrn, and the Shadow who rode with him – most likely Threxu the Nymph mentioned by Nufnut. At least a dozen of the Loquai – including the one we briefly captured. The other chthonic *thing*. Nhura is accompanied by another creature: powerful, but heretofore unknown to us."

"A demon?"

"Demons may not enter the world of men unless called. The Interdict forbids it."

"But you just said..."

"It would seem that Soneillon has a way to circumvent it. Or perhaps it no longer applies to her. I would have said that perhaps she has an ally that we do not know about. One who brought her here – it would not be the first time. But the Enforcer would have intercepted a summoner and annihilated him or her. In any case, she is here."

"Where?" Nwm asked.

"Unfortunately, I currently lack the expertise to make an accurate assessment of her position without drawing attention to myself. Not that it matters – she can travel an unlimited distance at will."

"And the others?" Ortwin asked. "The Dragon?"

"Are split into two groups. I suspect one or more of them can *plane shift*: they may have arrived in two waves."

"I thought the sidhe were capable of that feat in any case," Ortwin said.

"Not the Loquai," Shomei answered. "They are bound to Shadow. Which is fortunate for us – several hundred of them would present a significant threat."

Eadric groaned. "We cannot allow them to remain here. They will cause untold damage."

Shomei shrugged. "It is *you* they seek, *Ahma* – your mote is replete with connections to them. Many minds are extended and focused in your direction. They may take some time to arrive here – the two groups are probably several hundred miles distant – both from us and each other. I don't think they will tarry to cause random mayhem."

"We need to intercept the Dragon," Eadric said.

Mostin nodded. "I will *scry* him shortly. But give me an hour to prepare the rest of my spells."

"An *hour*?"

"I cannot work miracles, Eadric! If I don't give this some thought, then the chances are that we'll all wind up dead anyway."

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In the chapel at Deorham, the four devas chanted in unison as they strapped Eadric's armour to him and girded him with his sword belt. He hefted Melimpor's shield – perpetually burnished to an unnatural sheen – and slid Lukarn into its scabbard.

The potent runes and wards on his weapon, girdle and armour would, he knew, be of limited use to him. In an area of dead magic, their power would be suspended: he was relying in large part on skill and force alone. He recalled his own words to Hullu – that he was the greatest warrior of the age, unmatched in arms by any other in Wyre. He swallowed, and wondered if it had been an idle boast.

From his armoury, the *Ahma* had selected two powerful horn bows – one for himself, and another for Iua – together with quivers full of blue-fletched arrows. Ortwin would be using Shupthul's bow – his own, *Anguish* – had been lost along with the rest of his equipment. Unlike the Satyr and duelist, however, Eadric would carry no further wards or augmentations.

Ortwin and Iua were highly mobile – it was expected that they would range beyond the *antimagic field*, attack, and retreat back within it again. Eadric would stay at the centre, protecting the locus of null magic – Shomei – by whatever means he could.

Eadric sighed. He could have commanded a dozen, or even a hundred of Wyre's most stalwart

Templars to accompany him, and didn't doubt for an instant that they would have followed. But his actions now were far beyond the purview of the Temple, and dragging them off to possible death – or worse – would have weighed on his mind for the rest of his life. This was not their fight. And there was no time.

He hoped that Shomei's assessment was accurate – that they were interested in him alone. His stomach turned. What havoc would they wreak here, in Wyre?

He closed his eyes, knelt, and prayed.

When he opened them again, he found that he could not rise. The celestials stood in unlikely poses near the altar, similarly paralyzed. Behind him, the Paladin heard gentle footsteps approaching.

A girl who was almost a woman, clad in the traditional folk costume of Trempa – a clean white dress drawn in around the waist, with brightly patterned hems – stood next to him. She leaned forward and lit an offertory candle from an oil lamp, which burned before the solar orb upon the small altar. The flame which kindled from the taper seemed to blaze with a colour that was darker than soot. Eadric's eyes strained to see her face, oval and framed with a riot of black hair.

She knelt slightly too close for decency, her perfume a heady combination of musk and spice. She turned her head, and her breath was warm in his ear as she whispered.

"Nothing becomes."

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## **Soneillon**

Soneillon shifted her position, placing a prayer cushion on the low dais before the Paladin, and sitting upon it – squarely in front of him – in the meditation posture of *saizhan*. Whether an authentic act, or in dry mockery, Eadric could not tell. She reached forwards, and cupped the *Eye of Palamabron* which

hung around Eadric's neck in her delicate hand, snapped the chain which held it between thumb and forefinger, and casually tossed the amulet aside. As she straightened again, her hair – which smelled of lotus and sandalwood – brushed his face. She smiled.

Her every gesture possessed an effortless allure, replete with innuendo, and the promise of annihilation which rested in her eyes – fathomless voids – served only to heighten her magnetism. She was infinitely desirable. And something about her, not her appearance, but in some way her *essence* – if she was endowed with such – reminded him of Nehael.

Eadric closed his eyes.

"*Saizhan*," she said gently, "demands that you admit to your feelings, take note of them, and allow them to pass peacefully from your mind without judging them. Repression leads to madness. This is why Orthodoxy failed. And erotophobia was among its greatest flaws. You may speak."

The compulsion which transfixed him relaxed just a little. He opened his eyes again, looked at her, and nodded. "There is some merit in that statement," he said shakily. "But If you wish to act as my temptress, you should stand in line – that position is currently filled."

Soneillon laughed, and Eadric was surprised to find that it was a pleasant and agreeable sound. The Paladin recalled Nufnut's words – *most enigmatic*, she had labeled the Succubus. He reluctantly found himself in agreement with the Marilith's assessment.

"What do you want, Eadric?" She asked softly. The question penetrated to his core, assailing him on all levels – existential, emotional and physical – at once. "I can help you recover your demon-lover. I don't doubt you have already speculated about how best to *use* me. You could have come to Throile and approached me directly – I am not unreasonable."

"And I am not in the habit of frequenting the Abyssal lairs of demonesses," Eadric replied. "Besides, I find far too many fiends far *too* reasonable. We determined early on that Throile was too high a risk."

"But you entertained the possibility," she smiled. "One of your allies – the devil Aoloz – is still interned there. The *Ahma* is wise to use fiends to do his dirty work – they are less conspicuous than solars, I

suspect. Although their demise is also less spectacular." Her words bit deep.

"I am not responsible for Shomei's choice of servants," Eadric sighed.

"Ahh." The fact that Soneillon evinced no sarcasm made her reply even more frustrating.

Eadric looked sceptical. "I'm surprised that you felt the need to discard Palamabron's Eye. Titivilus felt no compunction about allowing me to wear it. Perhaps you lack his guile?"

"Perhaps," she shrugged. "Or perhaps unequal truths do not concern me."

The Paladin scowled. "I find your oblique references to *saizhan* baffling. What are you trying to accomplish?"

"They are hardly oblique, Eadric. If I perceive a kernel of wisdom in an idea, then I am not above admitting it – no matter where its source lies. But I am no philosopher and have no interest in debate – I lack the patience. As to the Eye, I'd hoped that you would trust your own ability to judge me, rather than the obsolete lens of a dead cherub. The Truth has changed."

Eadric shook his head wily. "I can't trust the authenticity of my own thoughts and actions whilst under the effect of a compulsion. The Eye might allow me to retain some sense of perspective." He sighed. "You wish to use me against Graz'zt. What is it that I can accomplish, which you cannot?"

"Force of arms is not my forté – nor that of my servants. And you are singularly driven in your desire for vengeance. One of Oronthon's less 'noble' aspects, I would argue – but that's beside the point."

"And what of those you sent here – the Wyrms, Nhura, the Loquai. Why are you here now, if they have come to whisk me back to you?"

"I did not send them – Nhura determined to come of her own volition. And while I'm sure that ingratiating themselves with me is one motive, there are many others. Nhura needs to assert her ascendancy. Koilimilou desires the return of her *box of shades*. Threxu always longs for new forests to rape and despoil, and the Wyrms to cause as much mischief as he can. And the Loquai? The Loquai can

*hunt* – which is what they love best."

"But you command them?"

Soneillon smiled. "I have no particular attachment to them. You may relax, now. Do as you wish."

Eadric found that he could move again, and shifted his position accordingly. He stood uneasily, glanced at the quartet of unmoving celestials near the altar, at the door to the chapel, and at the demoness again – she looked strangely vulnerable. Somehow, Eadric felt even more uncomfortable than before. He could not read her. He looked at the *Eye of Palamabron* lying nearby, and sighed. On some level, her words regarding the amulet rang true.

"I would ask that you do not target my friends," Eadric said. "We are interdependent. If you eliminate them, then my effectiveness is diminished."

"I regret Ortwin's *disintegration*," she answered. "I didn't command it."

"And you will call your servants off."

"They are not my servants, Eadric. I am not responsible for their actions."

"You slew Irknaan for his intransigence."

"I slew Irknaan because he was an irritating bore," she replied.

She was maddening. Impossible.

"And what of the other demon? The one of your kind, who is now with Nhura? It is one of yours?"

Soneillon shook her head. "I suggested the name to Irknaan. Whatever compacts were arranged subsequently with Nhura are beyond my purview."

"You could ask the Lillend and her cohorts to return to Afqithan," Eadric said through gritted teeth.

"I could."

"Will you?" He asked.

"No," she replied. "Your actions have led to their presence here. They are your responsibility. And I would like to see how you deal with them."

"You would sacrifice them merely to gauge my suitability as an assassin?"

Soneillon stood up smoothly and stretched slowly, catlike. "If you need me, then call me with your mind when you are on the threshold of sleep. I will come to you."

"I need you to convince your allies to return to Afqithan."

"You know what I mean, Eadric."

He swallowed. "I think you should leave, now." *Do not look at me thus.*

"Until tonight, then."

"Go."

"Dream well," she smiled, and vanished.

Eadric shook, and cursed silently. He flung the doors to the chapel open, and stormed into the courtyard. The sun was bright, and caused him to squint.

"Nwm!" He thundered.

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They sat in the Great Hall at Kyrtil's Burh, around a huge oak table, stained and worn by centuries of feasts held by Eadric's forebears. Shafts of light from the high windows – opened for the first time in several months – revealed more dust than Mostin felt was healthy. The handful of servants had been less than conscientious in maintaining the interior of the Keep, content instead to deplete the Paladin's wine cellar. Eadric was unusually tolerant of their idleness – something which the Alienist found deplorable, but knew better than to mention. Mostin discreetly deployed a cantrip to clean the air and furniture.

"Perhaps you should have accepted Titivilus in his offer to act as mediator," the Druid said drily. "I suspect that he would have kept his head, and remained a little cooler. What is it with you and succubi, anyway?"

"Shut up, Ortwin," Eadric said, before the Satyr could open his mouth. The Bard gave a look of mock offense.

Nwm gestured airily. "She has demonstrated her power, in any case. It would seem to be considerable."

Shomei nodded. "I think we knew that – she has held the Prince of Azzagrat to a stalemate for millennia. That is no small feat."

"A simple protection spell should suffice to prevent her exercising further control," Mostin added. "Of course, if she determines that she really *wants* to – for whatever reason – then she can. We can smother you with wards, all of which would crumble before her magic."

Eadric groaned. "I had assumed that she had dismissed the enchantment."

"No," Mostin said ruefully.

"How long will it last?"

"I don't know. I could *disjoin* it, but I think we're probably better off just letting it run its course – I may need the spell. I doubt it's permanent – she was dominating the celestials as well."

"How did she appear?" Ortwin asked. "Was she pert, or curvaceous?"

Iua kicked him hard under the table.

"These are important considerations," the Satyr continued. "Would she be swayed by my not inconsiderable charms, I wonder?"

"Have you no principles at all?" Eadric asked. "The question is rhetorical – you need not answer it. As a girl of perhaps eighteen years. She was wearing a Trempan peasant's clothes – the kind reserved for festivals and holidays."

Mostin raised an eyebrow. "Intriguing. I had a vision of such, although its significance was difficult to determine."

"That is an agreeable persona," Ortwin nodded. "Did it elicit the *Ahma*'s approval?"

"Where is this line of inquiry leading, Ortwin?" Eadric looked through narrowed eyes.

"I am an accomplished seducer," the Bard declared. "I am merely attempting to deduce her tactics. I appreciate professionalism in the field of love – hence I've always had a soft spot for succubi."

"She is far more," Eadric said irritably.

"Than Nehael?" The question was brutal.

"That is not what I meant."

"I'm just making sure," Ortwin smiled disarmingly. "Eadric, forbidden fruit always tastes sweetest – trust me, I've plucked enough of it in my time. Your sorry lot is compounded by the fact that you are

driven by some religious urge to overcome duality – on whatever level it happens to manifest. Hence, I would speculate, your initial attraction to Nehael."

"They are hardly comparable circumstances."

"Let the Satyr continue," Mostin said. "This is interesting, and he may have a point. He is experiencing a rare moment of philosophical insight. Do not discourage him."

"You perceive the possibility of a union of opposites," Ortwin said.

"*Hierosgamos*," Mostin nodded approvingly. "The Alchymic Marriage."

"Quite," Ortwin raised an eyebrow.

"And she is playing to your understanding of *saizhan*," Shomei smiled, "to which the ontological paradox is central. Transcending the duality of *ens* and *non-ens* is one of the oldest conundrums of mysticism. Where does consciousness lie when it observes the duality? Does it exist or not? She promises oblivion, which attracts you."

Eadric grumbled. "If you are quite finished in dissecting my psyche..."

"I am not," Ortwin interrupted.

"Nor I," Mostin added. "Eroticism is dangerous because it clouds your perspective – you should exercise caution if you plan to pursue this route as a means to metagnosis. As a recreational activity, I have no problem with it."

"Enough!" Eadric snapped. "I have no desire to pursue 'metagnosis' so the point is moot. Can we leave now?"

"Soon," Mostin replied. "I would prefer to wait until they have passed over the deeper stretches of Lake Thahan – if the Dragon takes to the water, it may complicate things."

"I will go and put on that damned armour," Ortwin complained. "I want my gear back."

Outside, Iua turned to the Bard, exasperated. "Do you have to goad him so?"

"My Love, sometimes it is the only way to make him think."

"Do you have to *enjoy* it so much?"

Ortwin laughed.

Within the hall, Eadric turned to Nwm. "I was hoping that you might have some advice."

The Druid sighed. "It is difficult. I do not view carnality with the same suspicion that you do. Don't look offended, you know its true. Assuming that we survive this afternoon, then you will be tested again tonight."

"If I sleep within Mostin's extradimensional space, *mind blanked*, then I should be safe. Correct, Mostin?"

The Alienist looked dubious. "I suppose so. I am no expert in the way that Dream functions, but that seems reasonable. If she locates you, she can *dispel* the ward, though. And the fact remains: how long can you realistically avoid her, using this tactic?"

"I concur," Nwm nodded. "And I think that trying to place yourself beyond her ability to reach you might even be detrimental in the long run. It might pique her interest even more, if you set yourself up as a challenge. She seems to have a well-developed sense of humour – from what you've said, at least. No. You should retire as normal, *and* – you're not going to like this – maybe you should call to her."

Eadric's jaw dropped. "Are you crazy?"

"You cannot *avoid* this confrontation now, Eadric. Maybe you can delay it, but I don't think that would be productive. It will eat at your mind. You should ground yourself, embrace the paradox, and see

where it leads. You must act in full consciousness, not in partial denial. If you refuse her attentions, it must be for the right reasons. Talk to her. *Open a dialogue*, as you said yourself."

"Something which you were against, I recall," Eadric said ironically.

"But now she has made the first move," Nwm pointed out, "and we should reappraise. Reflexivity is required. I am not you, Eadric, and I lack your understanding in certain areas. Shomei seems to think that Soneillon is the most evil, blasphemous, corrupt, tainted entity that she has ever had the misfortune to encounter – she is an expert in such matters, and I am not, so normally I would defer to her opinion. However, you are the *Ahma*, and your perspective is less than conventional. You must act from instinct, or insight, or whatever you want to call it."

"Sometimes you are very wise, Nwm."

"Yes," the Druid replied. "Although, as a caveat, I would add that it is entirely possible that Mostin is right, your judgement is skewed, and you are rationalizing a basic sexual urge in terms of mystical inquiry."

"That is not helpful," Eadric sighed.

Nwm shrugged. "Sorry," he said.

\*\*

Mostin sat before the Looking-glass of Urm Nahat, idly commanding various scenes to appear upon its surface. Villages. Still, deep water. A small island with a rambling, ramshackle manse of modest proportions.

Eadric stood impatiently behind the Alienist. "What are you *doing* Mostin?"

"Patience," Mostin replied. He issued a *sending*:

*Whatever you are doing, desist. I will be in your study in five seconds. A matter of utmost importance.*  
*Mostin.*

The return message began:

*But...*

Mostin ignored it. Upon the face of the mirror, the scene of a cluttered workspace appeared. Alembics, heaps of papers, homunculi in jars, and devices whose function Eadric could only begin to guess at were scattered and strewn around. A girl – perhaps six years old and wearing a bright yellow cloak which seemed far too large for her – sat at a table, her tiny hands holding a tome almost as large as she was. She scowled into the sensor.

Mostin raised an eyebrow, and stepped through the mirror.

\*

"This is most irregular, Mostin," Tozinak said. "I have no party scheduled for three weeks."

"Pay attention," Mostin replied rudely.

Tozinak shifted into the form of a squat dwarf with chestnut skin, a bulbous nose and large, gnarled hands. He looked irritated.

"In approximately fifteen minutes," Mostin continued, "an enormous umbral fiendish dragon and several other creatures of an equally dubious nature will be passing some three miles from here – if they maintain their current course. I plan on intercepting them nearby."

Tozinak spluttered. "But..."

"Tozinak, if I thought there was any chance that you would aid me, then I would ask. You are renowned for your meek temperament – not that I am criticizing..."

"It sounds like you are to me," Tozinak grumbled.

"...but I thought I should warn you nonetheless. There will be magical fireworks in your vicinity – do not be alarmed. When Shomei and I..."

"Shomei is with you?"

"She will be. When..." Mostin paused, about to continue with his explanation – a white lie or two to draw the other Wizard's interest. Perhaps the Dragon had swallowed an ingot of adamant. Perhaps one of the other 'dubious' creatures possessed something Tozinak desired. Mostin sighed.

"Tozinak, I can't lie to you – you're just too damn *nice*. Will you help?"

"Well, Mostin, I'd love to but..."

"Never mind," Mostin said. "One cannot expect too much, I suppose. You are not your sister.\*"

"That is most unfair. Besides, you never even met my sister."

"Something which I deeply regret," Mostin replied.

"Bah!" Tozinak grunted, and transformed into a winged fey of uncertain genus. "I will do what I can. But then all debts are settled."

"Thank-you, Tozinak."

"Do not expect too much!"

"Don't worry, Tozinak – I don't."

\*\*

The inhabitants of Brinnan, a small fishing village nestled beneath the crags of the Gairu – a precipitous massif, which thrust far southwards of the western Thrumohars on the shores of Lake Thahan – did not, for the most part, notice anything untoward, unless it was the faintest acrid smell upon the breeze.

High above, *invisible*, Crosod, Threxu, Koilimilou and three Loquai champions upon umbral griffons passed rapidly through the sky. They ascended, the great, tenebrous wings of the Dragon somehow capturing the thermals, and granting him lift.

Disguised as a rock upon a granite outcrop, Tozinak shivered. With his magical Sight, he had observed them, and the spectre of the Wyrn – a vast, ravenous shape which ate all light – had almost caused him to fall into a catalepsy of fear and void his stony bowels when they flew overhead. His terror at their passing was matched only by his relief that they could not perceive him.

He swallowed, cast a *greater dispelling*, and immediately *teleported* back to his island retreat.

Crosod screeched as wards fell from him and he immediately became visible. He turned his head to locate the source of the spell, his blindsight rapidly scanning the scree. A small boulder vanished. The Wyrn cursed. He turned his head again and was suddenly overwhelmed by a *squamous pulse* which caused his two-foot thick armour to buckle and rupture.

The sound of his pain and fury was terrific. Rocks split under the force of the noise.

From another outcrop, some hundred yards distant, Eadric, Ortwin and Iua – *hasted* and *invisible* – began to launch a storm of enchanted arrows at the Dragon. From an unlocated source, Mostin struck him squarely with a sonic *meteor swarm*.

The Dragon still reeled, attempting to regain his coordination but Threxu, her face contorted in rage, reacted quickly. She rendered the Wyrn invulnerable to elements and invoked an *unholy aura* around

them both. Nearby, upon her griffon and still warded from sight, Koilimilou targeted the outcrop from which the arrows had issued with an intense burst of dark sound.

Two miles away, on the lakeshore, the fisher-folk of Brinnan stopped in the streets and looked towards the Gairu suspiciously. Thunder echoed in the mountains, but the skies were clear. A mile further out upon the lake, Tozinak quailed in his overgrown garden.

Crosod screamed again as two more *squamous pulses* caused his scales to twist and dig further into the flesh beneath them, and darts began to pierce his failing armour. Another immense sonic struck him, but harmlessly. He shook off a *disintegrate*. Above him, now revealed to his perception, a trio of birds descended towards him – two eagles, pulsing with magical power, and a roc of colossal size which dwarfed even his enormous form. The Wyrms' wings powered him upwards, he invoked a *haste*, and struck the roc with a quickened *destruction* which immediately rebounded back upon him, dissipating quickly in the form of black fire over his body.

Sem and Gheim, acting as vehicles of Uedii's distaste at the presence of the fiendish dragon in her realm, blazed with Green power as they outpaced the larger bird and tore into Crosod. Their claws and beaks ripped through his shivered scales, finding the gaps in his armour around his head and throat.

Shomei erected an *antimagic field*, and she, Eadric, Iua and Ortwin suddenly became visible upon a granite buttress. The mounted Loquai immediately dived at full speed towards them, leveling their lances. Threxu scowled – unsure of what their sudden appearance meant.

The Wasted Nymph lashed out with a *horrid wilting*, only to find that it evaporated harmlessly. Koilimilou took note, issued a *sending* to Nhura for immediate assistance – whatever and however it could arrive there – and quickly *summoned* a vrock which appeared in the air nearby.

Nwm, seething with powerful magic, broke upon Crosod at full speed, his immense claws and beak puncturing scales, muscle and sinew upon the Wyrms' back. Shomei gaped from her vantage point as she watched the Roc pluck the writhing Dragon from the air, and toss him with contemptuous ease against a jagged pylon of stone which reared nearby, smashing it to pieces. Threxu gripped onto Crosod's foreleg desperately, but was flung clear.

Now, upon the rocky platform, Paladin, Bard and Duelist found themselves engaged in a fierce melee with the Loquai and their griffons, trading blows in an area where wards were ineffective and all magic was suffocated. Shomei felt utterly vulnerable – as one unused to depending on the skill of others for her wellbeing, the voluntary surrender of power had been difficult to stomach. The Infernalists' fears were misplaced – the sidhe were revealed to be totally outmatched, and were cut down in a matter of seconds.

Mostin – wherever he was – targeted Crosod with another *greater dispelling*, followed by another sonic *meteor swarm* and a quickened, maximized cluster of *magic missiles*.

Shattered, Crosod lurched briefly, and vanished into Shadow. Threxu screamed – in frustration and betrayal – even as the pair of eagles descended upon her with their claws bared. They lacerated her umbral flesh in a frenzy, as she strove to fend them off.

Cursing, the Nymph gestured and malice flowed from her. She targeted the base of the buttress upon which Eadric, Ortwin, Iua and Shomei stood with an *earthquake*, caused granite to crack and groan, and vanished using a *dimension door*. As the stack collapsed, Ortwin rode a crumbling section of cliff-face downwards, leapt from it as it toppled outwards, rolled, and stood up smoothly.

Shomei, bruised and bloody, sighed as she observed the Satyr and Iua. The Duelist appeared similarly unscathed.

Koilimilou vanished in terror, even as her *summoned* servitor – following its orders – swept down towards Eadric. The Paladin sighed and hefted Lukarn.

Above, Nwm's mind reached out with his torc. Threxu was still within range, and although his Sight could not extend to discern her *invisible* form, he knew she was there. As he powered towards her and she came within view, Nwm shuddered as a *horrid wilting* coursed over him. It was her last, desperate effort.

Nwm spoke, and a column of viridescent fire erupted from the ground beneath Threxu. The Shadow burned away. For the briefest moment, Nwm fancied that he saw her as maybe she once had been, and then the Green gently reabsorbed her essence.

Before the demon reached Eadric, it entered the *antimagic field* which still emanated from Shomei, and winked out. Mostin alighted softly upon the ground and reappeared. He grinned wryly. Hovering in the air nearby were four sensors – obviously several parties were interested in their activities, but if one was Nhura, she was disinclined to reveal herself.

After they had returned to Kyrtil's Burh, Mostin gestured for the others to follow him back through the mirror.

Within two minutes, Crosod was dead: tracked to the Plane of Shadow, and butchered methodically, unceremoniously, and with surprisingly little effort.

\*\*

"Nhura will, no doubt, be reconsidering her options." Shomei closed her eyes and drank deeply from a crystal goblet, allowing the firewine to course through her veins and causing her head to spin.

"Koilimilou used a *limited wish* in order to *teleport*," Mostin sighed. "That could prove tedious – Irknaan may have used the same tactic. I suspect that she has joined Nhura and the other group. Still, if I were the Lillend, I would secure reinforcements before proceeding."

"I agree," Eadric nodded. "We are far from safe, but the Wyrms have been eliminated – frankly, he was my biggest concern. His sheer destructive potential was unmatched. The demon, of Soneillon's ilk – *chthonic*, Shomei called it: what is its power?"

"That is hard to gauge," Mostin admitted.

"And the other? The 'unknown'? Does it remain so?"

Mostin nodded. "But, whatever it is, it cannot be *that* fearsome – or else we would have been assailed already. I am reluctant to *scry* them unless we intend to attack immediately afterwards. If they are

warded – which seems likely – then a sensor may be ineffective in any case. When I discerned Nhura's location she was three hundred miles away to the northeast, over Einir. The *web of motes* revealed Nhura, the Demon, the other creature, and nine more Loquai 'stalwarts' in that cluster. Koilimilou has, doubtless, joined them."

"How long before they reach us, assuming we don't intercept them?"

"Six hours, maybe," Shomei answered. "But they may need to rest – even the griffons cannot fly tirelessly."

"The question is simple," Ortwin said. "Do we engage them here, or en route?"

"I favour the former," Nwm said. "We need to replenish our flagging reserves. Let them come. We will be ready for them. We should rest in the chapel. If they *teleport* here, it will be at great cost to them, in ineffective pairs or trios. And they will not fly in anytime soon."

"Why?" Eadric asked.

"Because I am going to conjure a large storm," Nwm replied. "So I suggest that you close your windows."

"The enchantment, upon the devas and myself..." Eadric began.

"I will *disjoin* it," Mostin sighed.

"Ahh, *free will* will be yours again, Ed," the Satyr said sarcastically. "Now, whatever happens, you have only yourself to blame."

Eadric scowled.

\*Qiseze, the Fire Savant slain by Feezuu. Feezuu herself was, of course, subsequently killed by Mostin.

\*\*Mostin had used a *discern location* to pinpoint Crosod some thirty minutes beforehand, but had opted not to use the mirror to *scry* him – it was likely that most of the enemy would detect the sensor, and react accordingly. Nwm used his torc to determine their path – there was much to-ing and fro-ing using the mirror, as the party assumed a favorable position. The mountains were chosen because they would afford a useful vantage for the archers, and were away from both forests and inhabited areas.

The two legendary eagles were very seriously buffed – *animal growth*, *bear's heart*, *greater magic fang*, *expeditious retreat* and *nature's avatar*. I didn't realize quite how dangerous they could be until this encounter – their melee attacks were at +40 something, and they were dishing out 30 points of damage or more with each attack.

Yet more of Soneillon's unreasonable Epic spells. She was under the influence the *Renewal of Purpose and Desire*, routinely invoked by her every month when she is in Throile – essentially a highly excessive buff spell. The *Renewal* involves the input of the four chief sorcerer-succubi who serve Soneillon. The compulsion afflicting Eadric and the devas, I had dubbed *Do What I Will* – a nod to the overt Crowleyanity which sometimes pervades the game.

## **Renewal of Purpose and Desire**

Transmutation

Spellcraft DC: 34

Components: V,S, XP, Ritual

Casting Time: 10 minutes

Range: Personal

Target: You

Duration: 672 hours

To Develop: Seed: Fortify (DC 17), Ward (DC 14). Factors: increase Cha bonus by +19 (+38 DC); increase duration by 3250% (+65 DC); gain +30 on caster level check to beat foe's *dispel* effect (+60 DC); ward against *disjunction* (+16 DC). Mitigating factors: increase casting time by 9 minutes (-18 DC); four other casters contributing 7th level slots (-56 DC); change from target to personal (-2 DC); burn 10,000 XP (-100 DC).

In a brief rite conducted every month (when the moon is new on the Prime Plane), the caster renews her focus and the ability to exercise her Will. She gains a +20 enhancement bonus to Charisma which lasts for one month – until the next invocation of *Renewal of Purpose and Desire*.

The spell itself enjoys a +30 bonus on the caster level check when targeted by *dispel* effects directed at it – effectively negating the bonus offered by *superb dispelling*. It otherwise requires two *disjunctions* to counter the *Renewal of Purpose and Desire* – the first eliminates the *ward* component of the spell, the second counters the enhancement bonus itself.

## **Do What I Will**

Enchantment (Compulsion) [Mind-Affecting]

Spellcraft DC: 40

Components: None

Casting Time: 1 quickened action

Range: 75 ft.

Area: 20-ft. radius sphere

Duration: 23 hours 20 minutes

Saving Throw: Will negates

Spell Resistance: Yes

To Develop: Seeds: Compel (DC 19); Contact (DC 23). Factors: Quickened spell (+28 DC); no verbal or somatic components (+4 DC); dismissible by caster (+2 DC); increase duration by 600% (+24 DC); change from target to 20 ft. radius area (+10 DC); compel unreasonable course of action (+10 DC); Increase spell's saving throw DC by +10 (+20 DC); Mitigating factor: burn 10000 XP.

The caster establishes an immediate telepathic bond with all creatures within the area of effect and issues a silent mental command forcing them to do her bidding. Each target is allowed a Will saving throw (DC 30 + relevant modifier) in order to resist the effect.

Once the compulsion is established, the caster may exercise her Will and telepathically command each of those affected – either singly or jointly – to perform actions as she sees fit. Distance is not a factor. Issuing subsequent commands is a free action, although only one such command may be given in any round. Even instructions which would normally result in the death of those affected by *Do What I Will* are followed to the letter.