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Church and Steeple - Part 1

The chapel at Kyrtil's Burh was a compact space, perhaps twenty-five feet in its longest dimension, which abutted the main keep. Like the rest of the castle, its exterior – recently repaired by Nwm's efforts – was smothered in an ivy of an unusually prolific variety, which required continual management and pruning. And pruning seldom happened within the Burh.

There were two entrances to the sanctuary: a pair of stout oak double-doors which led into the courtyard, close to the archway at the base of the Steeple; and a smaller lintel, constructed of steel, which joined the portico in the keep proper. The metal door was hidden in a concave, behind the plain white arras which formed a backdrop to the altar space – raised upon a low dais reached by three shallow steps. The area below the dais was clear, except for a thick carpet some twenty feet long which stretched to the main doors, two low benches, and a dozen or so prayer cushions – some of which were extremely threadbare.

Ortwin sat in the centre of the floor, uncharacteristically tense. He disliked the chapel for a number of reasons, not the least of which was the draught – barely noticeable – which issued from beneath the floor covering: cold air from the crypt, finding its way through cracks in the flagstones. Nwm had specifically instructed the gnomes who had restored the rest of the keep's interior to leave the chapel untouched: it was Eadric's sanctum, and the Druid had felt that it would have been the worst breach of etiquette to engage in unapproved remodeling. Whilst Eadric appreciated the gesture, he had privately wished that Nwm *had* done something about the chapel. The austerity which had marked his earlier years had given way to a more balanced outlook, and sometimes comfort was no bad thing. Somehow, the chapel hadn't caught up with him.

The Satyr grumbled about the cold. "Can't we light a fire or something?" He watched as Shomei placed a *dimensional lock* in the centre of the sanctuary, barring all forms of extraplanar movement. The Infernalist had already invoked a *screen* upon the whole of Kyrtil's Burh – it appeared as nothing more than a rugged outcrop of rock to magical scrutiny.

Eadric sighed. "Perhaps if you ask Mostin nicely, he will modify the temperature."

"Why are we here, anyway?" Ortwin continued. "Doesn't the place need to be reconsecrated or something? I seem to recall there being a demoness of some power in here several hours ago."

"Yes," Eadric sighed, "it does. It is still the most defensible place in the keep, however."

"Consecration is highly advisable," Mostin said morbidly. "The Succubus might be tempted to turn your dead relatives into vampires."

"That is in particularly poor taste," Eadric replied nervously. "But you have a point. I will send to Morne for someone to come here as soon as possible. Probably Asser. Unless Nwm would care to do the honours*?"

"I had assumed that you would require someone of 'true faith' to perform the rite."

"I am more flexible in that regard than I was previously, as the definition of 'true' is now revealed to be somewhat ambiguous."

"Perhaps Mostin could *gate* a solar," Ortwin suggested. "It could perform the necessary magic, and would be a reassuring presence."

"For you maybe," Mostin said acidly. "And I am not sure that Gihaahia's subsequent punitive visit here would contribute to the sanctity of the place. We are safe enough for the moment, barring Soneillon herself – and I suspect that there is *no* precaution which we could take that would bar her if she were determined."

"If you had prepared a *magnificent mansion*..." Ortwin began.

"Or if *you* had spent your time studying magic instead of fornicating and drinking firewine," Mostin snapped irritably. "We will be fine. Those hideous cohorts of Eadric are outside keeping guard. Ungrateful creatures. At least they could of thanked me for dispelling their paralysis."

"They are grateful," Eadric reassured him. "But tend to communicate little. I was surprised that Soneillon didn't destroy them."

"She is wooing you," Nwm said wily. "Killing celestials would make a bad impression, I'm sure."

"So is he safe?" Ortwin asked, with a wicked grin, "Or will she invade his dreams and cause him to experience impure thoughts?"

Mostin shrugged. "Good question. Technically, the *dimensional lock* should prevent a creature in dream-form from gaining ingress. I say *technically* because she may have tricks that we do not know of. And Dream is odd, to say the least."

"In 'dream-form?'" Ortwin persisted. "You mean she may be nearby?"

"Coterminous? Why not?"

"She is not," Eadric said. "At least, not *very* near. The Eye of Palamabron would reveal her if she were."

Ortwin smiled sarcastically and scratched his haunch. "Then your thoughts will remain pure! How blessed you must feel! You must teach me the secret someday."

Eadric sighed. Ortwin was beginning to get on his nerves. He closed his eyes, and experienced the frustration. He sighed again, stood up, and walked towards the doors.

"Er, where are you going, Ed?" Ortwin asked.

"The Steeple," Eadric replied.

"Excellent idea! You have a stash of fine firewine, and..."

"Alone, Ortwin. I am going alone."

"Oh."

Mostin *mind blanked* him first.

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Outside, the wind had picked up and the rain had begun to fall. Nwm's storm – as promised – had arrived, and Eadric hoped that it wouldn't prove *too* violent. He ascended sixty of the seventy-seven steps of the Steeple, passing through a small door into the chamber situated below the open roof.

It was a comfortable space – once a round guard room, but since adapted to the function of a parlour. During the garrisoning of Kyrtil's Burh, it had briefly enjoyed a return to its original function, although the Templars stationed there had done nothing to alter its furnishings. A single window of lead glass in the west wall admitted the remaining light of the failing day. The room, and those below it, had been those 'rented' by Mostin in his attempts to fabricate a plausible story following his violation of the first Injunction – before the Claviger had acquiesced to act as the guardian of the moral fibre of Wyre's Wizards.

Eadric lit an oil-lantern – the flame of which flickered unsteadily in the draught before he closed its shutter – threw off his armour, opened a tall cabinet, and retrieved a bottle of firewine. He smiled at the fact that Ortwin knew where he kept it – and poured himself a small glass. He was mildly amused that it should still feel such an indulgence to him: he had violated so many of his vows that ignoring the precept which warned against alcohol seemed utterly trivial in comparison.

Sitting on one of the three narrow pallets which served as the room's couches, Eadric set Lukarn down next to himself, reached into his belt-pouch, and retrieved a tiny piece of tightly-rolled parchment. He opened the lantern hood, and thrust the paper into the flame, holding it between his fingers and watching as it quickly burned to nothing.

Soon after, a *gate* opened, and Titivilus stepped through.

"Thank-you for your prompt response," Eadric said.

The Devil smiled laconically. "Hello, *Ahma*. I had hoped to run into you in Afqithan but, alas, you fled before we had a chance to speak. If you had answered my *sending* then things may have advanced at a faster pace for you."

"I was reluctant to place myself in your hands at that time," Eadric raised an eyebrow. "And who would arbitrate between the arbiter and his client?"

"I have a friend called Furcas who might volunteer in that capacity," the Duke replied caustically.

"You have friends? That surprises me."

"You are correct," Titivilus answered. "In fact, I despise him. But we are working together for the moment. This is a cosy little chamber. I almost prefer it to your study in the keep."

Eadric narrowed his eyes, unsure of whether the Devil jibed him or not. "I require advice, and perhaps mediation. If there is a price, then I would be grateful if you informed me of it prior to further communication."

"There is no price, *Ahma*," Titivilus replied easily. "Although my perspective is a little different from yours, and the advice I give may not necessarily be that which you seek. As both the voice of your conscience and your divinely ordained tempter, I have more than one agenda to maintain. I presume that your inquiry concerns the demoness Soneillon?"

Eadric sighed, and nodded.

"She is something, is she not?" Titivilus laughed. "And, I should say, she is *nothing*, if you understand my meaning. It was whispered in the narrow streets of Zelatar that she could bring a corpse to orgasm – forgive me, *Ahma*, I do not wish to offend your sense of propriety. I am sure that your interest in Graz'zt's former concubine is purely pragmatic."

"You know her then? You have met her?"

"Perhaps. I do not recall." Titivilus replied vaguely.

"She is a potential ally," Eadric said.

"So I hear," Titivilus smiled.

"Does Graz'zt know of her interest in me?"

"Graz'zt has an extensive network of spies, but he is ultimately ill-informed and disorganized. I would hazard that he does not, but I make no assurances to that effect."

"If a confrontation occurs between the Prince and myself, I would – if possible – prefer to keep it out of Wyre and the World of Men. Do you think Afqithan would be a suitable locale?"

"It offers greatly augmented magic. Mostin – and Shomei, to whom, incidentally, you should extend my warmest regards – would benefit from this. As would Graz'zt himself, of course. I suspect that the risks would be greater, but the possibility of victory higher."

"Soneillon has powerful allies – and dangerous, it seems. She denies direct association with them, or rather seems reluctant to admit responsibility for their actions."

"This is not unusual for a Demon Queen," Titivilus replied drily.

"She subjected me to an extremely powerful compulsion. Could a *mind blank* have warded me?"

"Perhaps, although doubtless she possesses dweomers that can circumvent such magic. For a creature of her age, with her power, what can she *not* do, *Ahma*? Magic is formulaic, and in practical terms holds a finite – albeit astronomically large – set of possibilities. There might be a quintillion combinations which she is technically capable of manifesting alone. If she has unlocked merely a hundred thousand of them – the most efficient, given a certain set of circumstances – how versatile do you think that makes her?"

Eadric swallowed. The Devil's premise was plausible. "And Graz'zt? Could the same be said?"

"To a lesser degree. He possesses more raw native power, but lacks that which Soneillon draws freely and most heavily upon – *unbeing*. I do not claim to fully understand it."

Eadric stared hard at Titivilus. "You are unusually forthcoming. I wonder which of your numerous agendas you are serving by sharing this information."

The Duke of Hell smiled.

"I have other questions," Eadric said unsurely, "and I would be interested in hearing your perspective – or the *Adversarial* perspective, if you are towing a particular line. I should also, at this point, like to seek further assurances that there are no hidden fees, contracts, compacts, reciprocal obligations or responsibilities involved."

Titivilus raised an eyebrow. "Your caution is admirable, *Ahma*, but you are somewhat over-concerned. Ask away! There is no obligation upon you."

"The Marilith Nufrut mentioned an entity named *Carasch*. Mostin was unaware of its existence. A balor which fell within the orbit of the Ancient Void, and then rose from it again. Is the name familiar to you?"

"Yes," Titivilus answered. He seemed unperturbed, but Eadric knew that gauging the Confuser's true reaction was close to impossible.

"What distinguishes one fiend from the next, insofar as some possess the ability to withstand annihilation?"

Titivilus laughed. "That is more profound than you understand. I do not *know*, Ahma. Perhaps they are endowed with a particular strength of Will which sets them apart from their peers. Perhaps they are lucky. Perhaps they apprehend some greater Truth which allows consciousness to persist, even in the face of nonexistence."

"Such an entity," Eadric continued, "Carasch. It would be as far removed from Rurunoth as Soneillon is from a succubus of the least stature."

"That is probably a reasonable parallel."

"How many of these entities – *chthonics*, as Shomei dubbed them – would you say exist?"

"I am not privy to that information," Titivilus admitted.

Eadric scowled. "Would you even hazard a guess? A handful? Dozens? Thousands? Millions?"

"I would not know, *Ahma*. I suspect we are talking in terms of relative infinities. How many fell from grace? How many fled to the Abyss? How many were enmeshed in the Ancient's power? Mere numbers cease to have meaning, after a certain point."

"Why is no reference made to them in texts – legitimate, heretical, magical or otherwise? I use those descriptors loosely – I do not wish to engage in a debate on the nature of heresy."

"Certain names and concepts are taboo. Unbeing, Demogorgon, existent nonexistence – this is an example of such. Before the Church of Oronthon was established, when it was still a tribal religion whose God vied with a dozen others – this was a taboo. It persisted."

"*Saizhan* addresses this issue."

"*Saizhan* claims to address many issues.'

"Is Oronthon then rewriting the past? Changing the Truth of what has gone before?"

"That is one possible interpretation. I do not doubt there are others."

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Mostin sat and leered at the effigy upon the altar – an eagle rearing above a solar orb – and felt a frisson of disgust at the avian symbol.

Nearby, Shomei sat in a contemplative trance, Ortwin snored loudly, and Iua – silent as a cat – practiced with her rapier, repeating maneuvers endlessly, each time with subtle variations on a complex theme. Nwm, apparently enraptured with the Green, paid no heed to any other.

The Alienist groped within his *portable hole* and retrieved an ornate box of carved wood from among the objects stored there. Opening it, he pulled the contents – a stone slab – from its red silk wrappings, and set it upon the rug in front of him.

Mostin closed his eyes, focussed inwards, and inspected his valences: nested shells which grew outwards from a central hub, rapidly blurring into an indistinct haze where no differentiation yet existed. He placed his mind beyond the order, beyond the haze, in the swirling, chaotic morass which surrounded it.

Tiny buds of potential were burgeoning, seeking to make contact with each other and the hub of consciousness at the centre. Deliberately, he focussed upon them, drawing on his reservoir. His mind opened like a sluice, pouring its contents forth. Rapidly, the buds blossomed gloriously, and bore fruit which ripened in a heartbeat. He shook, and sweated profusely.

The Alienist turned his attention to the tablet in front of him, his eyes scanning over it, and his fingertips tracing the etchings and designs upon it. There was a sudden *crack*, as the slab shattered, and the sound of grinding stone. An eddy of wind arose, and all that was left before him – a pile of dust – was blown across the floor of the chapel.

Shomei observed him with a mixture of envy and mirth.

"Congratulations," the Infernalist said drily.

"Thank-you," Mostin replied. "How long before you...?"

"A week at most. I had hoped to beat you to it."

"Hah! No chance. This means that I am – if only for a brief while – the most potent spellcaster in Wyre, and the first in two generations to achieve this notable achievement. I don't include Mulissu in that statement – she is not native, and doesn't count."

Nwm smiled quietly, but said nothing.

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As Mostin sat and contemplated the spell called *Graz'zt* – designed by Fillein-who-would-later-be-Jovol in the heyday of his power and influence – he shifted uncomfortably. Something was amiss. Within the perfectly executed formula which comprised the spell, there was no room for error: each component and factor was optimized for an efficiency of purpose which Mostin deeply appreciated, both functionally and aesthetically.

Fifty-five years. The Prince was bound for fifty-five years, if the stories are true. Why? Why was he not bound permanently? The dweomer indicates no provision for an expiry.

"I am uneasy," he whispered to Shomei.

"I am tired, Mostin. If you are having an episode of paranoia, then talk to Nwm."

"This is *important*," the Alienist hissed. Nearby, Ortwin grunted in response, and turned over in his sleep. Mostin resumed a quieter voice. "The spell which now resonates in my mind preoccupies me. There is an inconsistency."

Shomei yawned and gestured impatiently.

"The incarceration should have been *permanent*. Why was it not? According to tradition he was bound for fifty-five years. This leads me to three possible conclusions, none of which are particularly pleasant to entertain: One, the effect 'wore off' over time; two, the spell contains a flaw in its formula which I

cannot perceive; or, three, he was released by someone."

Shomei raised an eyebrow. "I see your dilemma. Magic of this magnitude is enduring, and I find it hard to accept the first solution. Fillein was a perfectionist beyond compare, rendering the second answer even less likely. I would opt for the third possibility, or a fourth which you have not considered."

"Which would be?"

"I do not *have* a fourth solution, Mostin. I am merely pointing out that it would be premature to discount the possibility of its existence. I think that he was probably released."

"By whom?"

"Who can tell now, Mostin? It was three hundred years ago. A rival mage?"

"Fillein – or Jovol – was – or is – without peer. He had – or has – no rival. Was he in possession of the *web of motes* at that time? If so, surely he would have anticipated the possibility in any case."

"Then one of the cabal? Or Fillein himself, maybe, for whatever unknown reasons motivated him. This is idle speculation. We cannot *know*. They are all dead and gone."

"Hlioth remains," Mostin pointed out.

"Hlioth is deranged, but not stupid. Why would she release the Prince of Azzagrat? And if so, why did he not eliminate her afterwards?"

Nwm interrupted unexpectedly. Neither of the Wizards had been aware that he had been paying attention. "If she released Graz'zt, then I commend her actions. Such creatures have no place in this world, bound or not. Rurunoth was bad enough, but a Demon Prince?"

"Then she is most inconsistent," Mostin pointed out. "She participated in the binding of the Enforcer."

"To prevent further *summonings* in Wyre," Nwm smiled. "Didn't that clause in Jovol's Injunction ever

strike you as odd, Mostin? Why do you think it was singled out, above and beyond the ban upon mages assaulting other mages?"

"Because of the circumstances prior to it," the Alienist replied. "There were too many *bindings*, too many *gates* opening. The possibility of too many more."

"Too many for what?" Nwm asked.

"For the established order to sustain," Mostin admitted. "But if you are somehow intimating that your Goddess insisted upon including a clause in the Injunction which would prevent further offense to her..."

"You are trapped in discursive thought – Uedii is a consciousness of what is Natural, not some other being ‘out there.’ Jovol was a Dreamer, who negotiated with Celestials, protected both Eadric and Tramst, acted in the interests of maintaining a peace, and directed the *binding* of an atavism from a previous reality. He was nothing, if not eclectic. I think you underestimate the scope of his vision."

"Hmph!" Mostin muttered. "Anyway. If we attempt to *bind* the Prince anytime soon, it will not be here. I have already given thought to it."

Shomei sighed, as Mostin proceeded to explain about permanent *dimensional locks*, pocket demiplanes and spells which foiled all perception.

*All of Kyrtil's Burh was consecrated by Tahl, and the chapel *hallowed*. Soneillon dispelled the effect in the chapel before dominating Eadric and the guardians. I use the ToH version of Movanic Devas (more martial, less magical), so *hallow* was not available to the celestials in order to restore the chapel.

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Church and Steeple - Part 2

Nhura uttered a string of black profanities when she received the news from Koilimilou that Crosod had fled back to Shadow, and was, by now, probably dead. The hunting party descended into the woods of Hethio, two leagues from the ancient dolmens at Groba. A madness fell upon the birds and animals as they fled from the umbral sidhe and the creatures which accompanied them: griffons, the chthonic *thing*, and the Lamia Jetheeg – another sorceress of no mean ability. Koilimilou was incapable of subsequently *screaming* the Wyrms, which only made his death seem that much more likely. Threxu's demise was all but certain.

Frustrated, and aware of the fact that it might prematurely attract undue attention, Nhura nonetheless instructed Koilimilou to *scry* Eadric of Deorham. Although the Lillend was aware of the general location of the *Ahma's* stronghold, a lock upon him and a subsequent *clairvoyance* would pin him down. The Cambion's efforts drew a blank.

Nhura cursed, and ordered Koilimilou to call and bind as many demons as she was capable of. A bitter argument ensued, but Koilimilou finally relented. Previously, she and the Lillend might have been well-matched; but now Nhura wore Irknaan's mantle, and was unassailable by any magic which the Cambion possessed. As dusk fell, under the Lillend's watchful eye – lest she order the creatures to turn upon her Queen – Koilimilou struck a series of bargains with profanities against which the soil of Wyre heaved in revulsion. Throughout, Nhura was poised to invoke *destruction* upon the Cambion if she spoke even a phrase out of turn.

Soneillon watched from behind a tree-trunk some fifty yards distant, hiding, *invisible*, and in the shape of a diminutive woodland spirit.

She had not anticipated Nhura's determination, nor the resources at the Lillend's command – albeit vicariously. Neither had the Succubus considered the lengths to which Nhura would go in order to assert her claims to Afqithan – in her retinue were knights loyal to Samodoquol and Menicau, and they needed to be suitably impressed.

The Queen of Throile passed into the unconscious world again, and returned her attention to Eadric. The mental landscape of dreamers in Hethio was fraught with hideous nightmares, the significance of which none understood.

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In the topmost chamber of the Steeple, the *Ahma* sat closeted with Titivilus, probing the Infernal Duke on a variety of subjects, but retaining a healthy sense of scepticism with regard to any answers that he received. When they returned to the matter of Soneillon, Eadric stayed true to his words with Titivilus at their first meeting: he preserved a total honesty in communication. He was struck with the realization that whether the Devil adhered to the same premise was, in the final analysis, irrelevant.

"You would advise me to use her," Eadric said. "To slake my lust, draw upon her power, discard her when her utility has expired, and move on."

"That is what *I* would do, *Ahma*. I am not you, however. I lack your moral baggage."

"You lack compassion."

"If you prefer," Titivilus sighed. "Although I thought we had already agreed as to its redundancy as an effective tool."

"That is because you also lack the ability to understand it," Eadric smiled.

"As your understanding of *compassion* is obviously far more developed than mine," Titivilus laughed, "then perhaps you should also extend it to Graz'zt. And every other Demon and Devil between Azzagrat and Nessus. Set yourself up as a shining beacon of Love, *Ahma*, and watch as, no doubt, repentant fiends flock to your warm smile and welcoming arms. I will remain at the back of the line and observe as Astaroth and Moloch, like pubescent girls, shyly jostle for their places and anxiously think 'will he choose me next?' I think not."

"Your mockery does you no credit, Titivilus, and merely reveals the fear that you experience in the face of that which you no longer comprehend but secretly long to become reacquainted with. I am not crippled by my doubt, but draw strength it. You resent me, because I am mortal but still you are forced to acknowledge my spiritual authority. I see the limits of your perspective – the 'Adversarial' paradigm – and recognize the *partial* truth which it contains. But you fail to transcend the dichotomy of total self-determination and absolute surrender to the Will of Oronthon: they are identical. Accompany me later to Morne, and I will introduce you to the *Sela*. I guarantee your safety – I would happily defend your right to speak with him."

"No, thank-you," Titivilus replied calmly. "Although I'm sure I appreciate the offer. Maybe another time – in an aeon or two."

"The door to the Fane will remain open."

"And I will remain outside," the Devil finished. "Now, *Ahma*, before I grow weary of your proselytizing, and my mood becomes less accommodating, let us turn to 'mediation.' You are ready for me to act as a go-between in communicating with Soneillon?"

"I require the benefit of your perspective in order to better inform mine. You are adept at dealing with fiends, and penetrating their motives."

"That much is true," Titivilus smiled archly. "Am I to act as a chaperone to you also, lest you feel an uncontrollable urge to bed this demoness?"

"You have a singular sense of humour."

"And your track history speaks for itself. Nonetheless, my raillery may be pertinent – Soneillon is said to possess a peculiar way of eliciting sympathy."

"So I have discovered," Eadric said wryly.

"Now?"

"Now," the Paladin nodded.

Titivilus issued a *sending*. Three seconds later, Soneillon manifested. Dreamstuff swirled briefly around her – nightmares and visions of horror, which rapidly faded to nothing in the waking world. As before, her form – that of a Trempan peasant-girl – evoked a complex reaction in Eadric, despite a knowledge that it was entirely superficial.

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"Charmed, I'm sure," Titivilus bowed with mock politeness.

"Is there any particular reason why I should not extinguish this gnat?" The Succubus asked the Paladin.

"If I thought it would carry any weight," Eadric replied, "then I would say 'because he is divinely mandated.' As I know that you recognize no such authority, I will simply say 'because I ask you not to.' I have requested the services of Titivilus as an arbiter. He is, in a manner of speaking, my guardian angel – albeit a fallen one."

"I may have misjudged Oronthon's sense of the absurd. This monster is hardly a disinterested party, Eadric. Still, he risks much by being here alone – I wonder how he is being recompensed. Where are Murmuur and Furcus, Devil? Three together might pose a challenge to me, but one alone is an easy target."

"Alas, they lack my boldness and appetite for adventure," Titivilus replied, "and my legal expertise," he added.

Soneillon tilted her head inquisitively. "You wish for a formal compact then, Eadric?"

Eadric shook his head. "I wish for a third opinion – however partial. I am also highly dubious of the extent to which you would regard any compact as binding. You seem oblivious to most other established fiendish conventions."

Soneillon moved closer, and her eyes bored into Eadric. "You are perceptive. I wonder if Nehael recognized your potential for transcendence when she was first attracted to you, or she saw you merely as a redeemer and was romantically fixated? She was always somewhat idealistic."

Eadric squinted. "What do you know of her?"

"I knew *all* of the succubi in Graz'zt's harem, Eadric. And the mariliths, the lamias, and every other shade of fiendish slut that he could lay his hands on. Each bitch is more wicked and depraved than the last, although, no doubt, each has her charms. When one spends a million years as his chief concubine, there isn't much that one doesn't discover."

"And you, Queen Soneillon?" Titivilus asked with an amused expression. "How wicked and depraved are you? I would almost say the wickeder, the better, from the *Ahma*'s perspective. He has a powerful urge to heal, you know. It continues to lead him into all kinds of trouble."

"I will tolerate your presence, but will brook neither innuendo nor veiled insults, Devil. This creature is a viper, Eadric – do not let his apparent openness and easy mannerisms deceive you. His only goal is your damnation, and if he can use me as a vehicle to achieve it then all the better for him."

Titivilus was about to speak, but Eadric held up his hand to stay him. "My circumstances are unusual," the Paladin said to Soneillon. "And it would seem that established mores do not apply to me. Somehow, I have been appointed a role in determining what is right from what is wrong, although I fail yet to fully understand my place in the new order. Damnation itself may be an outmoded concept – *Saizhan* is beyond such categories."

"You will be your own judge, Eadric. You know this. Who could be harsher?"

Eadric swallowed. He felt distinctly uncomfortable. Despite her subtleties, Soneillon seemed to possess an uncanny knack for presenting stark truths in uncompromising terms.

"I do not understand what motivates you," Eadric said.

"That is part of my appeal," she replied. "I am disappointed that you severed the connection between us: had the spell I wrought not been negated, you could have met me in Dream. What do you fear?"

"His lust confuses him," Titivilus said, "and he is unused to acting for the simple purpose of sensory gratification. Evil and pleasure are intimately connected in the *Ahma*'s mind: Temple conditioning is hard to shake off, even when one is the Breath of God."

"The Devil's words have some merit," Eadric nodded. "I would also add, however, that Dream is something which I have little understanding of. In Afqithan, the Duke offered to act as a mediator between myself and the Loquai and their allies – I assume that he included you in the equation. I refused him for the same reason that I was dubious of encountering you in Dream – it was not a familiar environment. I prefer reality to be more tangible – there are enough variables to deal with already."

"That is a specious argument," Soneillon smiled, "but, as I have said, I am no philosopher and prefer not to be drawn into ontological debate. It would be a terrible thing if my intellect succeeded in denying the possibility of my own existence."

Eadric laughed despite himself, before staring at her with a mixture of wonder and suspicion: was her humour genuinely self-deprecating, or merely an affectation assumed for his benefit?

"We should address the question of Graz'zt," the lightness in the Demoness's tone had vanished. "Are you now ready to hear the worst?"

"I don't understand."

"Nehael, Eadric. Do you wish to know what has become of her?"

Be careful, Ahma, she lies almost as well as I.

"No doubt you will take a perverse pleasure in relaying this information," Eadric sighed.

I do not take my pleasure thus, sweet Eadric. "Nehael is currently held in a cell of adamant, deep below

Zelatar, in immensely powerful magical bonds, and subjected to pain that you cannot begin to comprehend – Graz'zt is particularly skilled and inventive in these matters. She is guarded by the Nalfeshnee Trakkao – who administers punishment on the Prince's behalf." Soneillon's expression was one that, if offered by any other, the Paladin would have interpreted as genuine empathy and sorrow.

This whore is outrageous!

"Proceed," Eadric said coldly, scowling at Titivilus. He was beginning to feel sick.

"Violation of the body is only the beginning, Eadric. There is a limit to the trauma that even Demonic flesh – once fashioned of Empyrean stuff – can sustain before it loses all ability to renew itself. And Nehael is fragile – she has already relinquished much of the strength that was native to her. Little of her as you remember her remains, and her physical form has been stripped away: she consists now largely of *essence*. As to the integrity of her personality, who can tell? He may have broken her altogether. Prolonged pain of that magnitude often leads to madness and evil – such is the way of things."

"I fail to see what benefit relaying this information conveys to anyone."

"You should be prepared for the worst, Eadric," Soneillon answered. "She may be unrecognizable – not merely her form, but *who* she is. I would not keep this information from you, and later hear that you were deceived or misled by me."

Titivilus raised an eyebrow.

Outside, the storm raged.

Eadric looked at Soneillon. "I would request a brief moment to confer with my counsellor."

The Demoness nodded, and casually lay down upon one of the narrow pallets, lazily stretching her arms above her head.

**

Within the sanctuary, Nwm sat motionless, his perception reaching outwards through the weather system that he himself had conjured, and rapidly engaging in a series of penetrating mental glances towards his environment.

Eadric was masked from his faculties, but the creatures who were near him were not. Titivilus appeared to the Druid's inner vision as a familiar set of dissonances which, when combined, left no doubt in Nwm's mind as to the identity of the Devil. The other outsider – which defied conventional classification – seemed to be a shadow of the real, a fantasy which eluded direct scrutiny, but whose presence could be inferred by its effects on the Green in its vicinity. Soneillon, Nwm mused.

He furrowed his brow in concern. Eadric was playing with high stakes. Attempting to force some epiphany, no doubt, or construct a radical synthesis which would inform his direction.

The Druid found himself reflecting upon Jovol, the Injunction – both in letter and in spirit – and his own words to Mostin earlier that evening. A niggling doubt began to grow in his mind, quickly becoming an irritation with Eadric's actions, and a realization that his own role in events had been too passive. The time for calculated inaction was passing.

Too many realities were in conflict, and the new one, offered by Tramst, did little to assuage Nwm's concerns. *Saizhan* was too cerebral for his liking, despite its claims of relevance and immediacy. It was as though the devotional heart of Oronthonianism – however distorted and misaligned – had been ripped out and replaced with a philosophy which elevated the dialectical process itself to deific significance. Not that the majority of Oronthon worshippers would even notice, Nwm thought. Most would continue with the rites that they had observed for several hundred years, oblivious to the fact that their incarnate deity – or, rather, one aspect of him, his 'gnostic intellect' (whatever that was) – had utterly refuted half a millennium of dogma.

Nehael had spoken to him long before of a 'Middle Way' which avoided the extremes which had characterized Oronthonian thought and practice – of *all* thought and practice. Yet Nehael had rejected the Celestial Order a second time, when none other than Rintrah himself had offered to escort her back to Heaven. Uedii had calmly accepted her in the face of reason and expectation – an outsider to

Nature's order, admitted to her inmost secrets.

Saizhan. The Middle Way. The Dialectic. What had Eadric said that Titivilus named it? – Ahh, the 'Path of Lightning.' A suitably Left-handed spin on things. And Shomei had been moved on some level – but Shomei was Shomei, and carried her own fears and ghosts with her.

Somehow, Nehael was central – although, somewhere in the details, this had been conveniently forgotten. She had been the first to seek the reconciliation and transcendence of opposing Truths. She possessed a profound wisdom which the Druid missed.

Nwm sighed. If he understood the Green – and he was by no means certain of his own ability in that regard – then it would act accordingly through him. Would the tension between Oronthonianism and Uedii worship persist, although on a more rarefied level? *Saizhan* seemed to be a practice reserved for the educated classes. What relevance did it possess for a farmer, or for a trapper? What did they care for the much-vaunted 'dialectic of negation?'

Retreat from the world into a life of contemplation was a luxury that few could afford, and was bought with the sweat and toil of Uediiian peasants, however indirectly. The Church might be in the process of disestablishment, and its taxes lifted – as the *Ahma* had promised – but its principal funds still derived from the contributions of wealthy aristocrats. And *their* money was stolen from the farmers.

I suppose I should speak with Tramst, at some point, he thought. *Although I fail to see what he could tell me that I don't already know. Still, I should give him a chance. I might be pleasantly surprised.*

The Druid returned his attention to the Steeple, where the Green warped uneasily around the interlopers.

I am sick of this. I am sick of them, being here, interfering.

He glanced at Mostin, who was fussing – attempting to arrange his padded mat to his satisfaction. Shomei was on the verge of sleep.

Nwm stroked his beard, and wondered how things would unfold.

**

You are enamoured.

Somewhat. But it will pass.

You haven't used Palamabron's Eye to interrogate her.

She subscribes to a different Truth. What use would it be?

[Laughter]. *It is your truth which matters to you, Ahma, not hers.*

You are incorrect.

Perhaps your lust blinds you.

No, it doesn't, although it would be easier for you if it did. You are afraid of her.

[Irritated]. *As should you be. She can annihilate you with a moment's thought.*

That is not what I meant. You are afraid of what she represents.

[Condescendingly]. *And what may that be, Ahma?*

An escape from the prison that you have created for yourself.

Your moralizing is becoming tedious, Ahma. Has she then escaped Oronthon as well? Has she placed herself beyond the infinite – your view of the infinite. Is she outside of his purview? That sword cuts both ways, Ahma. What is not Oronthon?

I will not be drawn into monistic thought.

You are avoiding the issue.

The issue is no longer a concern of mine. It is a road which leads nowhere. Now can we please consider the matter in hand – that of Soneillon. What is your opinion of her?

You are projecting your view of Nehael onto the Queen of Throile, Ahma. You have been seduced by her eloquence, wit and her – not inconsiderable – physical charm. You are confusing the two succubi in your mind. Both fly in the face of convention, and both have seized – or created – their own truth.

Are her words regarding Nehael's current state plausible?

Utterly plausible. This does not mean that they are entirely true, however.

Do you believe that she is deceiving me?

If I told you either 'yes' or 'no,' then you would – quite rightly – question my motivation for doing so. I will therefore say 'I do not know,' although you might also suspect that I am withholding an answer for some unknown reason. In fact, I do not know.

[Wily] How hard it must be, to be Titivilus. Are there occasions when you speak the plain truth, and no-one believes you?

If I speak the plain truth, then it is invariably in an effort to deceive, so the point is moot.

Would you advise a formal compact, in order to insure me against any ill will that she might bear towards me?

As you pointed out yourself, she may not regard such an agreement as binding.

Does she have a history of compacting that you are aware of?

I believe she prefers informal arrangements, such as with Irknaan.

That is not reassuring.

[Wickedly]*Of course, she may be attempting to avoid a compact precisely in order to give her greater latitude in her dealings with you later on.*

Your mind is truly tortuous.

Why thank-you, Ahma.

*

"Have you reached a decision, Eadric? Will you trust me?"

"I will *never* trust you Soneillon, because I will never understand you. You are both too alien and too human for comfort. I will, however, temporarily suspend my doubt – and possibly my better judgement. If you betray me – to death or perdition – then I will hold no ill-will towards you. The fault will be mine alone."

She smiled, and offered her hand. "Come with me. I will show you what we have to work with."

Eadric stepped backwards suspiciously. "Nhura is still loose. I must deal with her first – assuming that you still refuse to intervene and discourage her. I need time to prepare."

"This will take only a short while. I will return you in an hour or two."

The Paladin shot a glance towards Titivilus. The Devil's face was totally impassive.

Eadric groaned and, tentatively, reached out to touch her. She dissolved, and seemed to flow both into him and around him.

The nightmares of demons – which raged all around – were impotent against the Void which cradled

him, and bore him to Throile.

originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 10-07-2003

Mostly Nwm

Nwm fretted. It was nearly midnight, the two fiends had departed from his field of consciousness, and Eadric had not returned to the chapel. The fact that the Paladin was *mind blanked* did not help matters – it was impossible to discern whether he was in the vicinity or not.

When Gheim returned through the open window, the Eagle confirmed that the *Ahma* was no longer in the Steeple by dropping Lukarn at Nwm's feet.

"The room is empty, although his armour is still within. Do not make me fly in search of him, Nwm – or at least calm the wind somewhat, if you do."

Nwm scowled. He feared manipulation and betrayal by either the Infernal Duke, the Succubus, or both. The possibility that the two fiends might be in cahoots with one another also troubled him.

Iua glanced at the Druid. Other than Nwm, she was the only one of the group still awake.

"Should I wake Mostin?"

Nwm shook his head. "What use would it serve? Eadric is unlocatable. We just have to wait. Stay here – I'll be back presently."

He opened the chapel door and strode into the storm.

**

Nwm's contention that Nhura could not mount an effective assault upon Kyrtil's Burh until the next day was based on incomplete information, and a gross underestimate of the power at the Lillend's command. Likewise, Mostin's belief that the *screen* invoked by Shomei, together with the *dimensional lock* would prove a sufficient protection for the few hours they needed, was equally flawed.

Nhura was resourceful, merciless, and never one to cede the initiative in any conflict in which she was engaged. Five teams of demons conjured by Koilimilou – each consisting of a glabrezu and a succubus – had been dispatched, and one pair finally returned with useful news for the Lillend.

At Koilimilou's command, the fiends had systematically scoured the countryside in Western Trempa, looking for Deorham and Kyrtil's Burh, which – after questioning local farmers in an outlying stead near Hernath – was revealed to a succubus to be only twelve miles distant.

Elated with the news, the demoness slew several families in a fit of glee, before returning to her dark mistress and her even darker queen.

The castle, it appeared, was hidden by a powerful illusion, and at the centre of a highly localized weather system. The nearby village of Deorham, however, was plainly visible. The glabrezu had penetrated the *screen* about the keep with its vision, but subsequently retreated upon finding a quartet of devas – appearing from nowhere – which had hewn at him with their flaming swords.

When the glabrezu returned, eighteen seconds later, it was in the company of four others of its kind, five succubi, three *summoned* vrock, and the creature Hazihe – the chthonic babau originally enlisted by Irknaan, and now serving Nhura.

The rewards promised to the fiends by Nhura were lavish, and included a diamond circlet of immense value, an Azer blade of fabled power, a *cloak of displacement*, and a *robe of stars*.

The demons were well motivated.

**

As Nwm began to walk the short distance across the courtyard to the base of the Steeple, one of the devas – his name was Saphrez, although the Druid neither knew nor cared – manifested before him. Nwm was bathed in light from the *holy aura* which surrounded the deva.

"There are demons abroad," the Celestial announced. "Where is the *Ahma*?"

Nwm cursed, and shook his head.

"I suggest that you retreat within."

The Druid dashed back through the doors, and yelled, jarring Shomei, Ortwin and Mostin from sleep.

"Demons. We must act *now*."

Blurily, Mostin invoked a *wall of force*.

In the courtyard, confusion reigned. The demons were materializing, but only the glabrezu – possessed of an extraordinary perceptive faculty – could readily pierce the *screen* which protected the area. Through force of will, the babau Hazihe summoned sufficient insight to mentally overcome the illusion. Neither the succubi nor the vrocks were capable of clear perception, however. Despite a knowledge that they were standing within the castle walls, all they saw was a rocky knoll.

The deva Tarquam, somewhat disoriented by the sudden appearance of numbers of demons – some of whom appeared very confused – nonetheless reacted quickly. He spoke a *holy word*, instantly sending two succubi and a glabrezu back to their Abyssal home.

Seconds later, Hazihe – a yawning void which pulsed with unlight – leaped upon him, ripping effortlessly through celestial flesh with claws and maw, and, in the blink of an eye, permanently

extinguished the deva's shining essence.

Nazaihemaht and Rôrex, the two other devas in the courtyard, both pronounced further *holy words* in succession, banishing yet more of the fiends screaming back to the lower planes. Hazihe, two of the glabrezu, and one of the succubi were unaffected.

From within the confines of the chapel, Mostin grimaced as he heard two *power words* echo within the courtyard above the noise of the storm. There was a brief pause as the demons dispatched the devas, and then the glabrezu ripped the doors of the chapel off of their hinges.

One tried pushing forwards, but encountered the *wall of force*.

The other attempted to *teleport* into the sanctum behind where the party stood, but could not penetrate the *dimensional lock*.

Ortwin smiled, and stuck his finger up.

"I think that gesture may be a little premature," Nwm remarked drily.

**

The Void embraced him. It was warm, soft, yielding, welcoming. It showed its power through its capacity for absorption – which had no limit – and a profound silence, free of all worry and distraction. Eadric felt as though he teetered upon the edge of oblivion, and was vaguely surprised that the threat of annihilation did not seem so terrible. Beyond, fear and madness – the thought-forms and unconscious ravings of fiends – seemed a universe away. He wanted Nothing. He needed Nothing.

She is deadly. This truth is too easy. [Thought fails. Bliss. Emptiness.]

He corporeated again within an opulent chamber, draped with crimson and fuligin. It was replete with fantastic art of a most abstract and disturbing nature – although what it portrayed, he could not tell.

Dimension seemed warped and unnatural, as though curves existed where none should, and angles played at the corners of his mind only to disappear when observed directly. His perceptions buckled with layered dissonances. Nearby, a small silver bell hung from a delicate chain.

Soneillon had assumed a guise that her servants and thralls were familiar with, and Eadric swallowed. No longer a young girl, but a demoness of indeterminate age. Still beautiful, but cold, aloof, serene, worshipful; at ease with the terrible power which she commanded. She was as tall as he was, and wore only a diadem studded with black jewels.

The Succubus smiled disarmingly, and, for the Paladin's benefit, modestly shrouded her form with her sable wings.

"Welcome to Throile," she said coyly. "I have been somewhat neglectful, and there are matters that I must attend to – do not be alarmed, I will return very shortly. Strike the bell if there is anything which you require – Helitihai will meet any need that you might have."

Although the word *any* was not pronounced with undue emphasis, it still carried a meaning beyond the obvious.

Eadric sighed. "I would ask two things. First, that you do not present an expurgated view of this place in order to protect my feelings – my actions must be made in full consciousness, and the more that is hidden from me, the less I will feel inclined to trust my judgement. I am in the Abyss, and I do not expect to encounter scenes which I find agreeable. Second, I do not wish to linger here too long – I am a willing ambassador, but I have other responsibilities that I must meet before I can commit to any course of action in Throile. I would feel uncomfortable if my stay lasted beyond an hour – an hour *in Wyre*, to be clear."

"Your concerns are duly noted, and I will observe your wishes. If you would prefer, you may accompany me now. But you should be warned: there are things here which you would regard as obscene, debased and insane. You are likely to be offended."

"I've come this far," Eadric pointed out. "I will reserve judgement."

"It will still shake you to your core."

Eadric found that she was right. The suffering there knew no limits, and the pleasure derived by those who inflicted it was transient, grotesque and depraved. It was, after all, the Abyss.

He earnestly hoped that he would never become inured to it.

**

The demons had vanished from view, although they still appeared as nearby blots within Nwm's mind.

"Is he *mad*?" Ortwin groaned. "He didn't take his weapon with him? Where is he?"

Nwm shrugged. "Presumably with either Titivilus, or Soneillon. Or perhaps both."

"I hope the former, for his sake," Shomei sighed. "This is tedious. I am utterly depleted, and so is Mostin. And this *dimensional lock* may now prove more a prison than protection. How many are out there, Nwm?"

"Four. One is very unpleasant. There are no celestials within range – they're either destroyed or fled."

"I suspect that we are in no shape to deal with the chthonic," Shomei swallowed. "This is very bad news."

"We are safe unless they can *disintegrate* the *wall of force*," Mostin replied. "Don't panic quite yet. We have twenty minutes or so before it collapses. I have time to prepare a *banishment* and a another spell or two.*"

"Can you issue a *sending* to Ed?" Ortwin asked.

The Alienist shook his head glumly. "By the time I've prepared it and cast it, the *wall of force* will be down. And even if I renewed the barrier and Eadric manages to return, he will be out there, and us in

here. He cannot come into the chapel any more than the demons can."

"I still have a few tricks left," Nwm said wearily. His expression changed to one of horror as he shot a glance towards the open doorway of the chapel.

The demons had returned, and had brought Eadric's small staff of retainers with them. Dwarfed by the looming presence of the glabrezu, the servants – valets and maids, stablehands and gardener – cowered in terror.

The huge demons proceeded to dismember and eat the cook. The succubus danced nearby.

"Bring out the *Ahma*," the Void called Hazihe demanded.

Nwm groaned. "This is intolerable. Why must it always be the innocents? Mostin, bring the *wall* down on my signal."

"You are joking, of course?"

Nwm began to cast a ward upon himself.

"Nwm?"

"Now, Mostin."

"Nwm, I..."

"Just for once, trust me Mostin."

The Alienist sighed, and reluctantly complied. The *wall of force* dissipated.

Nwm grimaced and struck his blackthorn staff once upon the flagstone inside the door. The slabs which formed the chapel floor began to crack. "*She is tired of your interference*," he announced to the demons, although it would have been spoken with equal vehemence to Soneillon, the Loquai, the

devas, and perhaps even to the *Sela* himself.

Green fire blazed over the Druid, threatening to consume him. His skin blistered and cracked, his cloak ignited. His mouth, ears and eyes dripped a liquid that might have been blood, or sap, or both. A colossal discharge of viridescence emanated from him. His staff sank into the floor, burning in a brilliant flash of green, and the *orb of storms* which had topped it fell off and rolled away.

For the briefest moment, Ortwin fancied that he saw the silhouette of a woman in Nwm's place: a shape of great girth and dignity; fecund, bearing a thousand swollen breasts.

The demons were transfixed with expressions of bewilderment – impaled through limb and torso on vast, thorny boughs which erupted from the paved courtyard, penetrating their hides and instantly slaying them. The corpse of the babau, Hazihe, flickered disconcertingly on the edge of consciousness: destroyed, nullified – whatever became of things that had already survived annihilation.

Nwm collapsed.

"I should like to sleep now," he said.

Mostin gaped. "I had no idea..."

Iua smiled wryly. "Thankfully, we are not *all* wanton braggarts."

The Bard scowled, and then rapidly dismissed his vision as the imaginings of tired eyes and a still sluggish mind. Besides, nobody else seemed to have noticed.

*

Nhura waited.

The Demons did not return. The Lillend attempted to reach them with magical sight. Nothing. They were gone.

She cursed, and glanced at Koilimilou. The Cambion was slumped exhausted, in deep trance. Nhura resisted the urge to slay her out of spite – Koilimilou was too useful – and glanced at Jetheeg.

The Lamia was, as her custom dictated, *polymorphed* into the form of a crone – approximately human in shape – but of great height, and possessing an unusually bestial and vicious aspect. Jetheeg was accustomed to riding a griffon, and if forced into physical combat – something which she was generally cautious to avoid – her hag-like form served her well.

"The demons have failed," Jetheeg remarked drily.

"Koilimilou will conjure more tomorrow," Nhura scowled.

"She will run out of potential compactees at this rate. Her patroness will be most displeased with her in any case – losing five glabrezu is an act of reprehensible carelessness."

"If Rhyxali cannot provide them then we will try another," Nhura countered. "Soneillon has..."

"Soneillon." Jetheeg scoffed. "Do not place too much trust in Throile, or its Queen. You are precariously perched, majesty," the word *majesty* carried the slightest hint of condescension.

"She may provide more of Hazihe's ilk. She knows many names. I still suspect that she will pay a high price for the *Ahma*."

"If she ever deigns to answer your *sendings*," Jetheeg sneered.

"We will prevail," Nhura hissed. "Watch your tongue, Jetheeg – I am not above removing it. We know the exact location of the castle. You will issue more *sendings* tomorrow – Irzho is still here, somewhere in this world. He can be solicited – I suspect that he, like us, is now somewhat indifferent to Graz'zt's rule. And give the Cambion an hour to conjure more demons in the morning. When we assault the place, we will be prepared. Others will be glad to compact – there are sweet rewards for those who

succeed."

Jetheeg nodded – the promise was directed towards her as much as any other.

But, as later that night, Nhura rested – coiled around a tree of evil temper within the woods of Hethio – she herself received a succession of *sendings* from her glabrezu lover and cohort, Narab. He had been charged – together with Tebdeluz** – with maintaining a close guard upon Lehurze, whose capacity for treachery, Nhura suspected, was exceeded only by her usefulness as a tool. Lehurze had been appointed the task of reopening a dialogue with the Devils who maintained a presence in Afqithan. In fact, the suavity of the succubus did not match the oratory finesse of Titivilus and Furcas – two of Hell's foremost rhetoricians – and she quickly found herself beating a hasty diplomatic retreat.

None of this mattered, because Narab's *sendings* conveyed a dire message to the Lillend. Mere hours had passed in the demiplane since the departure of the *Ahma* and his party:

Ainhorr holds Afqithan. Three legions plus daemon mercenaries. Devils remain – assaults upon tower ineffective. Loquai capitulated quickly. Lehurze location unknown. Tebdeluz eliminated. Annexation took five minutes.

No, not sweet Tebdeluz! Nhura swore profusely. Disposition and location of enemy? Generals? Ainhorr returned to favour? What of Soneillon? Graz'zt?

Bar-Igura; some chasme. No dretches – highly mobile. Nycaloths. Seven mariliths; auxiliaries and specialists include goristros, kelvezu, retrievers, many succubi. Ainhorr armoured and rearmed. Soneillon location unknown. Graz'zt presumed Azzagrat.

Nhura groaned. She had half-anticipated some form of inquiry from Zelatar when the periodic *gate* opened – hence her own intentional absence. But this was unexpected. Lehurze may have sold her out. As could any one of a dozen others, for that matter. And three legions – close to twenty thousand demons – was hardly a token presence.

What to do now?, she wondered.

**

"You expect me to do *what*?" Eadric asked, incredulous.

"Do you think that you could deal with him – hand-to-hand – if his magic were neutralized?"

"No. Not alone."

"But with – for example – Ortwin and Iua?"

"Probably," Eadric conceded. "But I think that they would both require extensive inducements to participate. Ortwin would be the first to admit that he favours the appearance of valour over valour itself; and generally prefers money to morals."

"When Zelatar is looted, Eadric – as it certainly will be, after the fall of one of Graz'zt's stature – then Ortwin, I suspect, will be there to take the choicest pickings. Have you any idea of the extent of the Prince's wealth? Scavengers from a thousand different realities will descend upon Azzagrat like flies. News travels quickly."

"Then it would rapidly become the least desirable place in the cosmos to be," Eadric sighed.

"I doubt that Ortwin will see it that way."

"You speak as though the outcome is a foregone conclusion."

"Graz'zt can be eliminated. You must be the bait."

"He will not rise to it."

"You must force his hand. *You* are capable of doing this, Eadric: rousing his ire to such a degree, that he loses all perspective in his lust for vengeance."

"I had considered Afqithan to be a possible locale for an encounter."

"As had I," Soneillon agreed. "And his mind is already turned there. He is attempting to unravel the events that transpired there."

Eadric gave an inquisitive look.

"Ainhorr has just annexed the demiplane."

Eadric groaned and his eyes bulged. He considered briefly. "Why? I mean, why you, now? What do you stand to gain? I don't believe that all of your action springs from vindictiveness and the desire for revenge. You are too considered. Too methodical."

The Demoness laughed. "The *Ahma* sees with clear eyes. Because there is something of mine that I would dearly like returned to me. He stole it. I want it back."

In Nhura's throne room, in the palace built by Irknaan in Afqithan, Ainhorr gloated over the loot brought to him by the bar-Igura which leapt madly through the halls. Most of the Loquai who dwelt in the fortress had translated to Shadow or Faerie and eluded capture, but grizzly examples were made of their servants and those unfortunate enough to have been caught unawares.

Demons and *sendings* had raced back and forth. Menicau, Samodoquol and a dozen other nobles had immediately sued for peace. Within an hour, tributes had been lavished upon the Balor by fawning aristocrats. Ainhorr's contempt for them was offset by his immense greed, and a recognition that the Loquai – ultimately pragmatic in their outlook – would prove no threat.

The Demon set his pristine slaadi-forged blade across his knees, and relaxed into an immense throne of steel – erected in place of Irknaan's delicate chair of tenebrous coral. He intended to enjoy his tenure as despot of Afqithan.

He gazed through the deep-set windows across the lawns – strewn with the bodies of demons, Loquai, and fey and goblin slaves – and through the trees. Fifty nycadaemons now soared menacingly around the diabolic tower. Its inhabitants – three Dukes of Hell and their retinue – were reportedly contained. As much as it was *possible* to contain three Infernal magnates.

Which was to say, Ainhorr sneered to himself, not at all.

*At this point, Mostin had two fifth-level, one sixth level and one seventh-level open slots left. All of his prepared high-level spells, except for a *plane shift* and a *discern location* had already been cast.

**Narab and Tebdeluz: *big glabrezu* – advanced to 24 HD – and bound to Nhura by Irknaan himself as part of their nuptial agreement. Narab was given the *stone of sendings* – lost by Shomei – to continually apprise Nhura of Lehurze's actions, as well as the maneuvering of the various Loquai nobles in her absence.

Note:

Nwm's spell (*She is tired of your interference*) was a spontaneous variation of another that his player, Dave had been working on. I had ruled that DC0 Epic Spells could be invented and cast "on the fly." In this case I also allowed the *staff of the woodlands* to be used as a (fabulously expensive) material component – I permitted the normal XP cost to create the item (3600 XP) to be used in lieu of part of the XP mitigating factors (i.e. –36 DC). It had wholly appropriate symbolism for the mood that Nwm was in, and the spell's visual effects reflected that.

So Nwm was the first PC to cast an Epic Spell in the game – to the immense surprise of the other players, who had no idea that Nwm was capable (or even that he was 21st level, IIRC).

The demonic attack *was* kind of mean of me, I'll admit (although the players had great fun playing the devas for a round or two), but it *was* within Nhura's capabilities to organize the ambush, so I could hardly let it pass. The PCs were still all completely spent from their encounter with Crosod, Eadric was missing, and to throw the chthonic babau (CR 20 or so) and a bunch of glabrezu at them at this point was a little bit ruthless.

On a related note, this opened a whole new can of worms – that of allowing magical items to serve as material components for Epic Spells. I actually quite like the idea: its not as though such things can be freely purchased in the campaign, and I think it actually balances quite well – one form of XP sink (the item) is converted into another (the Epic Spell). The purpose and symbolism needs to be consistent on some level – so it wouldn't be possible to use, say, *Daern's instant fortress* to fuel a fire evocation.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 10-27-03

The Parley - Part 1

The meeting took place in early autumn at dusk, three days after the full moon, in a glade deep within the woods of Hethio. Mid-way – Nwm remarked ironically to himself – between Groba, where the Uediian rebellion had begun, and the eaves where Hullu's last encampment of *Bagaudas* had been set. With the Tunthi tribesman's abdication of leadership, the focussed organization of the Uediian uprising had rapidly degenerated into a motley rabble of outlaws and bandits, who now prowled the farmlands of Wyre's richest province in gangs of twenty or more.

But not near here. All shunned this spot. Fear had descended upon the woods.

The Umbral Lillend, Nhura, was coiled in a posture which suggested both calm and confidence. To her

left, mounted upon a griffon of singular size and evil disposition, Jetheeg – in her hag-form – sat impatiently, a look of cynicism and contempt upon her hideous face. Around them were arrayed Loquai knights of varying stature and reputation, who appeared as numinous shades from whom darkness flowed. To the right of Nhura, standing impassively below the Lillend's standard – a hanging sable pennant upon which the device was utterly obscured – was Koilimilou the sidhe-cambion. All the company were surrounded by compacted demons – a score of jariliths which prowled and circled ceaselessly.

*Sh*t*, Ortwin thought to himself. *This better be for real, or we're all dead meat.* Despite Eadric's assurances to the contrary, the Satyr felt less than confident in the motives of the recently styled – and now exiled – Queen of Afqithan or her entourage.

Ortwin glanced over his shoulder. Behind him, Mostin, Shomei and Nwm stood silently; *telepathically bonded* and buoyed by potent wards and augmentations, and ready to unleash a devastating magical attack if things went awry. Iua raised her eyebrows in a gesture which combined reassurance with a sense of deeply appreciative irony.

Ortwin grinned, and trotted forwards.

"Beautiful ladies," he bowed, causing Jetheeg to scowl yet further. "Elevated Triptych of incomparable grace and poise. I am King Ortwin – welcome to my realm."

Jetheeg snarled.

The Satyr smiled appreciatively before continuing. "I believe that, in our haste to create a favourable impression with one another, we may have overstepped the normal bounds of propriety and – inadvertently – caused each other mutual inconvenience."

"Must we endure this fool's prattling?" Jetheeg snapped, at no-one in particular. "Get to the point, Satyr. Bring out the box, bow and armour. And the other treasures which you have looted. And then we'll speak."

"My apologies," Ortwin bowed again. "In a previous parley we may have acted somewhat

precipitously, and this time I wanted to be sure to observe the formal niceties." The Satyr gave Koilimilou a sideways glance. "Believe me, I share your impatience."

He strode forward five paces, and unslung a heavy sack from his back. As he hurled it to the ground, it opened. Armour, a slender sword, a buckler, a compound bow, and several other enchanted objects of enormous power spilled forth. The *box of shades* fell upon the moss, and the Cambion inhaled sharply.

Nhura gestured, and two of her knights approached Ortwin with a black canvas held between them. It sagged with the weight of gear won from the Satyr and the Infernalist.

Nhura smiled. "I regret that, at this time, it is impossible for me to return your *stone of sendings*. It remains in Afqithan in the hands of one of my servants."

Inwardly, Shomei groaned. For her, it was a particularly useful item.

Ortwin licked his lips, and prepared to engage in more small-talk, but from behind him he heard Nwm – who appeared wilder and more unkempt than ever before – grunt disapprovingly.

"They are here."

**

Eadric's return, some days before, had been a solemn event. The *Ahma* had seemed weighed down with concern, and his eyes had conveyed a sense of pain and horror. He had witnessed near infinite brutality and suffering. The brief ecstasies enjoyed by demons – at the expense of naked souls, whose eternal lot was perdition within Soneillon's Abyssal demesne – coupled with Throile's madness-inducing warp of dimension and time, had left a knot of sickness and loathing in his gut.

Upon his arrival at Deorham, at the climax of a furious storm of Nwm's devising, his heart had sunk yet further. The courtyard of Kyrtil's Burh had been spattered with celestial and demonic ichor; human entrails lay strewn about, and the doors to the chapel were smashed against the base of the Steeple.

Outside of the entranceway to the sanctum, a great blackthorn reared, its sudden growth demonstrated by the shattered cobblestones nearby. Several of its branches were like huge, barbed lances, upon which the stricken forms of demons hung motionless, pierced and raised skywards as if in dreadful sacrifice to the storm and the Goddess.

Eadric had barely glanced at the tree as he walked into the chapel. Inside, his servants sat quietly in a small group whilst Iua had stood guard over them. Mostin and Shomei had been close in whispered conversation, and Nwm had appeared catatonic and wrapped in a heavy cloak.

Ortwin had grinned, and tossed him his weapon. "Glad you could make it. Better late than never, I suppose."

"I have struck a deal with Soneillon," Eadric had said.

Shomei had looked up with an expression which combined awe with profound concern.

"Welcome to the Path Sinister," she had sighed. "May your progress be as traumatic and as bewildering as mine."

"There are no paths, nor were there ever any. I act from instinct now."

"You are an adept already," she had smiled.

*

It had happened as the *Ahma* had predicted. The next morning, a *summoned* succubus had arrived in order to impart a message from Nhura: a parley in five days, if all were willing. An exchange of captured goods was to take place. Eadric had explained that it was part of the agreement reached with the Queen of Throile.

Nwm had groaned loudly. "She has maneuvered everyone into this situation. Irknaan and Crosod are conveniently eliminated – no doubt Soneillon doubted their tractability. Has it occurred to you that she

may herself have had a hand in betraying Nhura to Graz'zt?"

Eadric had nodded.

Shomei had shrugged. "Such is the nature of demonic alliances – they shift from hour to hour. It requires considerable will and insight for a leader to maintain any kind of cohesion. We should not even begin to think that we understand her true purpose, however. It will remain hidden for some time yet."

Eadric had mentioned that the demoness wanted something 'returned to her.'

Mostin had tutted and shaken his head. "I don't suppose that she mentioned – in passing – what this 'thing' was?"

"No."

"I thought not," the Alienist had sighed. "You are perceptive, Eadric – that much I reluctantly concede. But surely you cannot actually *trust* this creature?"

"I trust her to do that which is in her own best interest," Eadric had answered. "I think it is up to us to try to determine exactly what that is. I don't pretend that it will be easy. We have little other choice. Afqithan is an obvious locale for a confrontation – and neither you nor Shomei will be bound by the Injunction there. You may conjure hideous entities to your heart's content."

"I fully intend to," Mostin had replied casually. "But why five days? Why not today?"

"I need time for reflection," Eadric had said simply.

Four days later, he had returned to Throile again, to the dismay of Nwm. He would meet them at the appointed time and place.

"Is he ensorcelled?" The Druid had asked Mostin.

"Not to my knowledge," the Alienist had answered. "But I make no claim to omniscience."

**

Within the glade, Ortwin took several hasty steps back again as the Void began to manifest. Fear spilled from it – dream-phantoms which lingered in the waking world, before evaporating in the ruddy sunset.

Eadric's form materialized. Next to him, almost as though she were a ward in his care – or his lover, the Satyr wryly observed – was a slender girl clad in a traditional folk dress.

So that is her, Ortwin thought. *Intriguing. Less compelling than I had imagined.*

As if in response, her eyes brushed over him for the briefest moment. The Satyr immediately felt desire of a magnitude he had never before experienced. His stomach twisted into a knot, and his head span.* He was thankful that he was *mind blanked* and he knew instantly that, without protective magic, had she laid even the simplest enchantment upon him, he would have been utterly incapable of resisting.

Under the watchful eyes of Nhura, Jetheeg and Koilimilou – suspicious that the Alienist might attempt a *time stop* and attack – Shomei erected a *screen* and Mostin *fabricated* a large, circular table and thirteen chairs from an oak tree, together with a wooden awning supported by slender pillars.

"Not bad," Shomei remarked nonchalantly, and immediately sat down. Eadric watched her – despite her bravado, he knew that she was tense and nervous. Demons – and their allies – were less predictable than her usual diabolic associates.

Soneillon stepped away from the *Ahma* and smiled.

"Thank-you all for coming," the Queen of Throile said softly. "As you either know, or have guessed, I am Soneillon. At this moment, we share a common purpose which outweighs any other petty concerns which we might have. How we have arrived here is now irrelevant, and we should put these thoughts behind us. This is a parley and a truce. No weapon will be drawn, and no offensive magic will be

invoked on pain of annihilation."

Mostin looked sceptical. "You are powerful, but hardly omnipotent, Soneillon. The same conditions apply to you: I will blast you if I suspect counterfeit or magical manipulation, and if the last act I commit is to have you dragged screaming to *Uzzhin* then I will die happy – I suspect that your dubious ontological status will prove to be of no importance in that paradigm. You should be aware that you cannot effectively be both an arbiter and an interested party in this matter."

"Graz'zt is your enemy, Mostin, not I."

"That remains to be seen," the Alienist countered. "But as none of us trust each other, I am inclined to proceed with utmost caution. I should like to ask several questions before we go any further."

"Are all Wyrish Wizards so arrogant and disrespectful?" Jetheeg asked incredulously. "And openly insulting a Demon Queen is an act of questionable wisdom."

"Truth – even if presented in a most bombastic way – may be my ally at present. I would be misrepresenting myself if I allowed Soneillon to dictate the terms of this arrangement."

Ortwin's eyes bulged. Eadric smiled. Nhura said nothing, but her eyes narrowed as she studied the Alienist. *Very powerful. Very dangerous*, she thought.

Soneillon seemed unfazed, and opened her palm, indicating that Mostin should proceed.

"What is this *thing* that you desire to repossess from the Prince of Azzagrat, and what is Rhyxali's role in this? What becomes of his sanctum if he is eliminated: can another demon – magnate or no – benefit from its power, or is it attuned only to him? How many succubi within your retinue are sorceresses, and what is their relative power? And what is your defense in Throile against assault from Azzagrat? I assume that, on that count, there is some kind of ongoing spell or magical protection in effect – or the Prince would have overwhelmed you long ago. Finally, I would be grateful if you enlightened me with regard to Pazuzu's involvement – if any – and, out of intellectual curiosity, any information regarding the entity *Carasch* would be much appreciated."

Eadric glanced over the Loquai. Despite their practiced hauteur, he detected discomfort among several of them when the name of Rhyxali was mentioned. Nhura's emotion, if she experienced any, was unreadable.

[Shomei]: ?

[Mostin]: *There are hidden fingers in this pie. I am merely informing her that I have considered the possibilities of who they might be.*

Soneillon gave a wry smile and leaned forwards towards Mostin. "Your speculation is insightful. Have you heard of *Pharamne's Urn*?"

Mostin wracked his brains. "I confess that I have not."

"This is the item that I wish returned to me," the Succubus said simply.

"Evidently, it is not yours by right, else it would be called *Soneillon's Urn*. What is its function, and who is – or was – Pharamne?"

"An Aeon**," Soneillon answered.

Mostin looked dumbfounded and stared at the *Ahma*.

Eadric groaned. "Please, Mostin, explanations surrounding these matters may take all night. Since I last mentioned this item, I have made inquiries and Soneillon has been forthcoming – I will explain later. Rhyxali's involvement will also become clear in due course."

"Then she is implicated?"

"She is the heretofore secret co-sponsor of the Loquai. Koilimilou is her chief representative."

The Cambion tilted her head, and stared venomously at Eadric. The air seethed with unmanifest arcane power. Nearby, the jariliths began to bay and snarl.

"Stay your temper, Koi," Nhura said drily. "It would appear that Queen Soneillon has thoroughly instructed the *Ahma* – for reasons I'm sure she will divulge presently."

"Rhyxali will lend aid in any effort to retake Afqithan," Soneillon explained.

"I would have been informed," Koilimilou hissed.

"You are a thrall, nothing more," Soneillon said lightly. "Do not overestimate your importance."

**

The two kelvezu, Cociz and Dramalaz – erstwhile servants of Prince Socothbenoth, but lately retained by Graz'zt – took due pleasure and satisfaction in the task appointed to them in Afqithan. As Ainhorr's chief inquisitors, they left, in a matter of hours, a trail of mangled and mutilated forms which stretched across the breadth of the demiplane. Their retinue – which consisted of a variety of lesser demons – soon found that the fear evoked by the rumour of their arrival manifested itself in generous bribes from a number of Loquai nobility.

The information which was relayed back to Ainhorr, and thence to Graz'zt, was of a conflicting nature. A Duke from Faerie – Rhalid – had been in Afqithan with a hunting party. Rhalid or one of his cohorts had, in fact, been the despised Eadric of Deorham. Soneillon was implicated. Irknaan had been involved, but was slain because of an internal feud. Lehurze. The Infernal nobles Murmuur, Titivilus and Furcus were somehow enmeshed in the affair, as were a number of Afqithan's significant figures who were now, apparently, on the Prime – Nhura, Koilimilou, Jetheeg, Crosod and Threxu.

Graz'zt immediately smelled a plot, retired to his sanctum, and deployed a potent divination.

Upon emerging from his reverie, the Prince of Azzagrat acted swiftly. The periodic portal in Afqithan – upon which Irknaan's palace had been built – had closed, but Graz'zt opened a series of further *gates*. He reinforced Ainhorr's contingent with thirty nalfeshnees and around a hundred glabrezu. He issued orders to the marilith Janiq – one of his most experienced, competent and trusted generals in the field –

to vigorously renew her assault within Throile, and bolstered her armies there. For the sake of completeness, the ongoing war against Orcus – which had raged inconclusively for millennia across a dozen planes, and absorbed most of the Prince's resources – was stepped up a notch.

The succubus, Nehael – by Graz'zt's arts now stripped of her flesh, rendered insane, and subjected to continual torment – was confined alone within a prison world mere yards across, and warded against location by any form of magic or supernatural power. The only *gate* to the prison was sealed and similarly hidden, and the key – a silver cylinder some twelve inches long, and carved with indecipherable glyphs – was secreted in a location known only to the Prince himself.

Graz'zt turned his mind to the three Infernal Dukes present in Afqithan, and pondered upon Murmuur's tower and how best to overcome it. The connection between Titivilus and the *Ahma* was known to him, but Murmuur was a Duke of the Order of the Fly, not a vassal of Dispater. His involvement was a concern, and bespoke the machinations of subtler devils, and tacit agreements between Dis and Malbolge. And Murmuur's tower was close to impregnable: Graz'zt recalled its deployment upon the Blessed Plain – along with the other contrivances of the Adversary and Belial – in the early stages of the Great Revolt.

For an instant, a feeling of enormous poignancy welled up from within him: a profound melancholy, which consumed him utterly. Ideals and ancient oaths broken, and bright visions of bliss and freedom brought guttering to cold ash.

When it had passed, his brow furrowed in dark reflection. It was becoming hard to recall, and the memories seemed like dreams: divorced and incomplete, as though another, and not he, had taken part in those awful events.

**

"What of the succubus who followed me through the *reality maelstrom*," Mostin asked. "She is your cohort?"

Soneillon smiled. "Sometimes."

"And presently?" Mostin asked irritably.

"Her name is Lehurze," Nhura answered. "Narab indicated that she disappeared prior to Ainhorr's attack. She is very slippery. If we meet again, I will likely kill her out of caution. I suspect that she covets Afqithan; Irknaan intended for her to supplant me."

"And where is she?" Mostin asked, exasperated.

Soneillon stared hard at the Alienist: she had no doubt that he could locate Lehurze if he so desired.

"She has returned to Azzagrat."

Nhura cursed. "I knew that the whore was a turncoat, but..."

"Graz'zt does not know that she is there," Soneillon interrupted, "although, doubtless, he knows that she is somehow involved in events to date. He probably also guesses that she has Maihodrot's *cubic gate*. Before you ask, Mostin, Maihodrot was the demon responsible for overseeing Afqithan. Graz'zt executed him for dereliction."

"That was long overdue," Nhura remarked acidly. "He was an incompetent fool."

"What of the devils?" Shomei asked. "What is their rôle in this?"

"I suspect that they are waiting to see how events unfold before acting." The Succubus answered.

"Ainhorr has more than sufficient strength to force their retreat."

"Not so," Soneillon countered. "He can partially contain them, nothing more. They have erected a tower which is all but impenetrable. It is also a planar nexus, and leads to a number of worlds – including several Hells, no doubt."

"But Graz'zt himself could overcome it?" Mostin asked.

"Yes, given sufficient preparation. As could I. Or you maybe, Mostin; or Shomei. Or the understated Nwm. I know what you did to Hazihe, Druid. It was most impressive."

"I would have done the same to you," Nwm said coolly. "My current concern is to see you – *all* of you – return to whatever grim, depressing realities that you issued from. Or at least out of mine, in any case. I am hoping that this parley might expedite the process."

"You arrogant bastard," Jetheeg snapped. "As I recall it was first *you* who trespassed in Afqithan. And now you cry foul at our presence here? Mortals are perpetual hypocrites."

Eadric held up his hand. "The point is well-made. I think, however, we should move on before it becomes a point of contention. What has passed, has passed. The root question, which everyone is carefully avoiding, is this: *can Graz'zt be lured to Afqithan and eliminated?* Do we have the wherewithal? More importantly, I have yet to be convinced of the authenticity of you, Nhura, and your company: when allegiances change as quickly as yours, you must understand that it is impossible for me to hold even a modicum of trust. I speak the plain truth. What is preventing you from betraying us to Graz'zt?"

The Umbral Lillend laughed. "Nothing at all, *Ahma*. But Graz'zt is somewhat unforgiving of those that deceive him. And Soneillon would, doubtless, punish me for any transgression against her. And Ainhorr sits on my throne, which irks me more than a little."

Shomei shook her head. "I think that if Eadric of Deorham were delivered into Graz'zt's hands, then he would forgive more than a little. Perhaps even the Queen of Throile has considered as much. We can, however, assume that this course of action did not appeal to her: she has had the opportunity, and did not act upon it. Here is your answer, Nhura: if you betray us, be sure that we are *all* dead. Because if either Mostin or I survive, we will find you, and kill you. But first, the glooms will stalk you, and the horrors will tear your mind apart. I am more vindictive than others here."

*It's worth bearing in mind that Soneillon's stratospheric Charisma – 50, when buffed – is close to impossible to portray meaningfully in game terms. Given the fact that she is primarily a sexual being (or nonbeing), Ortwin's response – given his predilections – was natural.

**Aeons are (or were) understood to be cosmic celestial entities; emanations (or possibly avatars) of Oronthon. They are charged with tasks of great magnitude: establishing physical and metaphysical laws; the creation and maintenance of matter, space, energy and time. Orthodox Oronthonianism denies their existence, and long ago branded speculation regarding Aeons as heretical. Both Irrenite and Urgic belief, however, have a place for Aeons within their respective schemas: they are amoral or trans-moral but finite; removed by several degrees from the standard celestial hierarchy, and unconcerned by relative terms such as good and evil. Irrenite belief links them with the Inevitables, who otherwise occupy a very inconsistent place within the Orthodox world-view.

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The Parley - Part 2. And Afterwards.

The jariliths prowled ceaselessly around them.

Nwm observed Soneillon with curiosity as she spoke. The demoness seemed utterly calm and imperturbable, as though she possessed every answer to every question that might cross a troubled mind. Somehow, in her own way, she seemed to have resolved all paradox. He understood Eadric's fascination with her – if it was fascination – but simultaneously wondered whether it was a façade, and hoped that the *Ahma* held the same doubts.

The Queen of Throile spoke at length about Graz'zt: his subtlety, guile and prescience; his dominion, and the worlds that it extended to; his insatiable ambition; his allies, great and small; and his personal power, which, if he were given the opportunity to augment through sorcery before any meeting with

them, might prove beyond even their collective ability to counter.

Kostchtchie, his most formidable ally, was discussed: to what extent would he remain steadfast? Who amongst the Prince's servants – demons, daemons, demodands, lamias and half-fiends of every hue – would be loyal in the event of a serious threat to his hegemony? How far was his control already compromised: three of his balors had been eliminated and two – including Rurunoth – were missing. Only Ainhorr remained.

"Ainhorr is now armoured," Nhura said, "and, according to Narab, wields a slaadi blade."

"The weapon is called...*Heedless*," Soneillon said, after searching briefly for an accurate translation of its name. "It is a ten-foot *vorp* sword. He won it from the death slaad champion Rshgu in the Vestibule of Lamentation: he was not idle after you broke his blade, Eadric, and sought eagerly for a replacement. *Heedless* is, as its name suggests, a notoriously fickle weapon, even by slaadi standards.* It is immensely powerful, and may actually present more of a threat than the Balor himself. Ainhorr may or may not be capable of controlling it – it has only been in his ownership briefly. Graz'zt must have lent him aid in his efforts to secure it, prior to the assault upon Afqithan – Rshgu would have crushed him under normal circumstances."

"Charming," Ortwin smiled. Privately, his stomach turned over. Ainhorr remained something of a bugaboo for him. "You seem remarkably well-informed regarding these matters."

"Yes," Soneillon agreed.

"You are also less than altogether forthcoming," Mostin added, "but this is not entirely unexpected. Earlier, I posited a question regarding the Prince's sanctum. He is an arch-fiend, and much of his power stems from it – would it benefit you, if you were in possession of it? Could you actualize its potential?"

"I have no interest in replacing Graz'zt as the ruler of Azzagrat, if that is what you are asking – albeit obliquely. And no, it is *his*. Neither Ainhorr, nor even Kostchtchie could ascend and claim it. It would quickly wither upon his demise."

"And Azzagrat itself? Does his Will maintain the cohesion of the realm?"

"Azzagrat would eventually return to Void, from which it was carved. But only after a billion life-ages of the universe. In this regard it is no different from any other Abyssal domain."

"Your brand of nihilism is unique," Shomei said. "Perhaps you could expand further upon this theory?"

"Philosophy does not interest me," Soneillon replied dismissively.

"Adyell, Helitihai, Orychne and Chaya," Mostin pressed on. "These are your chief servants. Given your propensity for powerful spells, Soneillon, I assume that they are well-used to acting with you in magical concert? And by drawing energy from them into yourself, or diffusing it, you prevent them ever becoming a challenge to you."

[Soneillon]: *Your mind is exquisitely tortuous, Alienist. I would greatly enjoy penetrating its mysteries.*
[Image] [Image]

Nwm coughed and Shomei raised an eyebrow as the *telepathic bond* relayed the information to them. Eadric smiled sympathetically. Mostin seemed to be somewhat flushed and embarrassed.

"I am intrigued by where your questions are leading," Soneillon remarked, apparently nonplussed.

[Shomei]: *!? Mostin, you cannot be serious...*

[Mostin]: *With you, and Nwm, and Mulissu, and Jetheeg, and Koilimilou, and the succubi it would be possible. I would need to fine tune the spell. We should not discount the possibility.*

Mostin breathed deeply. "Heretofore, you may have considered two options: to negate the Prince's spellcasting and to overcome him through force of arms, or to subject him to a titanic magical barrage in Afqithan and hope that his defenses can be overcome. Both involve considerable risk. There are two other choices, which you are not aware of: given a cabal of sufficient ability, it is within my means to conjure the Prince and contain him; or I can *gate* a pseudonatural entity which I have come to know affectionately as *The Horror* and attempt to deploy it against Graz'zt." The Alienist winced as he said the demon's name.

Soneillon looked dubious. "I doubt your ability to devise such a spell."

"It is mine already. I inherited it from Fillein."

Nhura hissed. "*That* spell? It would seem unreliable, at best."

"The dweomer is perfect," Mostin countered. "I believe that the Prince was intentionally released the last time he was bound."

"Then there is no need to leave this place until that is accomplished," Koilimilou said. "He can be bound here, and..."

"No," Nwm said.

"The Druid refers to the Injunction," Nhura explained. "Outside of the proscribed area, however..."

"No," Nwm said, "I do not. I will neither participate in nor condone the imprisonment of a Demon Prince within the Green. If you proceed regardless, I will release him."

Mostin sighed and nodded. They had already discussed this at length. "We would need to find another location."

"In this case I would *not* recommend Afqithan," Nhura said coldly. "Not out of any concern that he would be bound in my vicinity, but because his release might be too easily accomplished by his own agents: there are many cultists loyal to him."

"I will seek for a suitable locale," Shomei grimaced. "An obscure demi-plane would be the best option. Alternatively, I could create one – although I currently lack the wherewithal to do so. And I suspect that the debt incurred in casting the binding spell would be large."

"Colossal," Mostin corrected her. "I also currently lack the means."

"Then why are we even having this discussion?" Jetheeg snarled. "You spend too much time in idle speculation. We should assault Ainhorr before his grip tightens – enough of the Loquai have escaped to Shadow or Faerie or obscure regions of the Abyss. They can be rallied and deployed *en masse*. If Rhyxali really purposes to lend aid, it will be easy enough to retake Afqithan. Graz'zt cannot denude his forces elsewhere to *that* great an extent. And if this mortal here," Jetheeg waved curtly towards Eadric, "is really such a prize, and Graz'zt comes in person to add his weight to the fray, then all the better."

Eadric shook his head. "He must be lured, if we follow that route. If he comes expecting war – armed to the teeth, surrounded by bodyguards and warded by spells that we cannot hope to penetrate – then it will go badly for us."

"Challenge him to single combat," Ortwin said drily.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I'm not suggesting that you actually go through with it," Ortwin said, as if instructing a child. "But he probably *knows* that you'd like to, and therefore it wouldn't come as a total surprise to him if you did, in fact, issue the challenge. It is a plausible deception."

"It is absurd," Eadric replied.

"If he refuses, then brand him as craven before his peers. Kostchtchie, Pazuzu, Fraz Urb'Luu, Orcus, Rhyxali. The gentle Lady Soneillon." Ortwin gave a mock bow. "Issue multiple *sendings* to a variety of Abyssal dignitaries declaring your intentions."

"You are insane."

"I will act as your herald to Graz'zt. I can make him believe it. Outside of the Infernal host, few liars approach me in guile or believability."

"That is quite a boast, Satyr," Jetheeg hissed. "And even if it were true, so what? Deceiving a mortal, or even a demon of low rank is one thing. But Graz'zt? I think not."

"I am capable," Ortwin replied nonchalantly. "Graz'zt is no different to any other demon, except that he is less gullible than most. In order to make him believe, one simply needs to be a better liar. If a *mind blank* is not adequate to the task, then Nwm will devise a spell to make my lies undetectable by Graz'zt's magic..."

"Will he?" The Druid raised an eyebrow.

"But not yet," Ortwin added quickly. "We need to rile him beyond all rational behaviour first. And I agree that it would be better if he were not accompanied by a dozen mariliths. His reaction needs to be so utterly violent and deranged that he immediately translates to Afqithan in order to kill Eadric. Overwhelming his forces there and eliminating Ainhorr might be a good start in our achieving this state of transcendental ire in the Prince – although I would recommend that we keep our identities hidden again for the meantime."

"He will obliterate you before you can even deliver the message," Nhura scoffed, "and if not, then certainly in response to such a challenge."

"Perhaps," Ortwin said, "in which case Nwm will *reincarnate* me. Although I suspect that he will not assail me. I will, after all, be in disguise."

"And what would you be disguised as?" Nwm asked, sighing.

"Not *what*, but *who*. As Titivilus, dear Nwm. As Titivilus."

"You would dare impersonate an Infernal magnate?" Jetheeg asked, incredulous.

"Yes," Ortwin replied. "Diplomatic immunity would be useful in negotiating with Graz'zt."

"That is unwise," Shomei said quietly. "It would attract displeasure in unwanted quarters. And the Nuncio of Dis himself might be your least concern."

"I will weather it," Ortwin grinned. "The opportunity of executing one of the greatest counterfeits in

history is difficult to resist. It will be my *magnum opus*."

Eadric exhaled sharply. "We have a variety of options, it would seem. Having multiple redundancies in our plans is no bad thing, however. Nhura – how long before you could assemble the remaining Loquai?"

"They are dispersed. Some weeks, in your time. Several days in mine."

"And the creature you have mentioned, Mostin. Is it *reliable*?"

"I don't know," the Alienist replied. "If Shomei and Nwm were to help me, I believe I could coerce it. A fourth caster would guarantee success and a reasonable degree of safety." Mostin stared meaningfully at Koilimilou.

"Now just wait a minute..." Nwm began.

"It will involve an immense backlash," Mostin continued.

"Would you *gate* it?" Koilimilou asked.

Mostin shook his head. "I think with four of us, I would use a *planar binding*. Holding it long enough to subject it to a compulsion would be no problem."

[Nwm]: *I am uneasy about involving this cambion in magical concert.*

[Mostin]: *As am I. She has raw power, however, and is now our ally. Fillein/Jovol was right: cooperative casting is where we should focus ourselves, Nwm. The potential is immense.*

"Nhura will translate to Faerie," Soneillon said, "and rally the Loquai. I will send word to those that have fled to Shadow, or to Rhyxali's demesne. I will also speak again to Rhyxali herself, and contact Lehurze in Azzagrat." *Eadric, return with me to Throile. There is much that I would share with you.*

Eadric swallowed. "We should meet again in three weeks. We have some breathing time, at least.

Nhura, issue a *sending* and we will translate to your location."

"We have yet to find a suitable staging ground," Nhura remarked. "Faerie and Shadow both entail certain risks."

"I will leave it to your discretion," Eadric replied.

"Is that *trust* I hear, *Ahma*?"

"It is pragmatism."

[Soneillon]: *Come with me, Eadric...*

Eadric closed his eyes, and refocused. "I will go to Morne," he said.

Mostin nodded, but felt uncomfortable. The connection between Graz'zt and Rhyxali was the subject of scholarly debate amongst those with more than a passing interest in demonology. Was their resemblance to one another merely superficial, or were they cut from the same block? Did they share a common essence? Was she, somehow, his *anima*?

His stomach knotted. He desperately needed to consult the *web of motes*.

**

The Triune met for the second time on the autumn equinox, at Mostin's manse, in the woods southwest of Deorham. Orolde – somewhat awed by the presence of the three powerful mages – nonetheless ensured an agreeable environment in which they could discuss whatever weighty matters they needed to discuss. Unlike Mostin, the apprentice had made peaceable contact with the nearby sprites, and several pixies – whom Mostin eyed suspiciously – acted as temporary cooks and waiters.

After a sumptuous repast, the Infernalist, Elementalist and Alienist sat upon the porch in silent telepathic communion.

[Mulissu]: *Here is the spell [Formula] I have avoided any unnecessary squandering of your valuable reservoir, Mostin.*

[Mostin]: (Analyzes) *If Nwm can be co-opted, collectively we could do this: [New Formula]*

[Mulissu]: (Eyes widen) *That is most impressive.*

[Mostin]: (Smiles) *That is only the beginning. We could then do this [Formula] and then this [Formula].*

[Mulissu]: (Dumbstruck).

[Shomei]: (Wrily) *Effectively, the Green dissipates the backlash. Nwm has set certain conditions upon his involvement, however.*

[Mulissu]: *Whatever they are, we should accept them. No-one has ever gone this far before. Whatever secrets Jovol could unlock from the web of motes will be trivial in comparison to the insights that we could gain. What does the Druid require?*

[Mostin]: *That, collectively, we petition the Claviger for an amendment to the Injunction. And assurances from each of us that while the augmented condition persists, we will only use its benefits for the purpose of divination.*

[Mulissu]: (Ruefully) *The latter, I will happily guarantee. But I am not sure that the Claviger can be so easily persuaded. What is Nwm's request?*

[Shomei]: *A tightening of the rules regarding summoning.*

[Mulissu]: *In response to the actions of the Loquai?*

[Mostin]: *Partly. And Soneillon. And the devas at Kyrtil's Burh, amongst others.*

[Shomei]: *No extraplanar entity should be permitted to enter Wyre. Period. Or the Claviger will dispatch the Enforcer to eliminate them.*

[Mulissu]: *I have no objection to approaching the Claviger on this point. I am dubious about its reaction, however.*

[Shomei]: *Is a quorum more likely to gain a favourable response?*

[Mulissu]: *I would say no. The Claviger is the Claviger. It abides by its own rules. Its motives are unguessable, and its intelligence quite alien.*

[Mostin]: *I believe that it would compromise the Claviger's paradigm – which is geared towards the actions of Wizards. What if the Sela were to gate a solar to Morne? Would Gihaahia intercept it? It would be a conflict of interests, and would, in fact, throw the entire Injunction into question: its key tenet is still 'no intervention in non-arcane politics.' Moreover, an incident between the Enforcer and a cascade of celestials would be better avoided.*

[Mulissu]: *You forget that Rintrah was complicit in the idea of a Second Injunction. Jovol's relationship to the Celestial Host and Tramst was – or is, assuming that Jovol's essence persists – ambiguous, to say the least.*

[Mostin]: *It is beyond the Claviger's purview. However sympathetic I am to Nwm's position, I think he is on his own.*

[Mulissu]: *I am surprised that Nwm doesn't object to the presence of the Claviger itself.*

[Mostin]: (Humourously) *He does. I think he regards it as the lesser of two evils, however. Untrammelled summoning is worse for him. It is amusing to speculate upon an organizing principle in this regard. Jovol, Rintrah, Nwm – all are working within the same framework, but to attain different ends.*

[Shomei+Mulissu]: !

[Mostin]: *I said amusing. I am not suggesting some metacosmic conspiracy.*

[Shomei]: *In any case, we should approach the Claviger. It can do no harm. And I am curious to experience it.*

[Mostin]: *Agreed. Nwm himself also indicated that he would like to join us in the petition.*

[Mulissu]: (Sardonically) *Then if the Enforcer is unleashed against us, we may, at least last a few seconds longer.*

[Shomei]: *I doubt it. When I inspected the web of motes it was quite apparent that the Claviger possessed significant deific powers. It would likely magnify** the Enforcer before any encounter with an entity that might otherwise prove a viable threat.*

[Mostin]: *Are you then suggesting that the four of us acting in concert might present a 'viable threat' to the unaugmented Enforcer?*

[Shomei]: *Certainly. We are, after all, the most potent spellcasters in the world.*

[Mostin]: *That is worrying. I had simply assumed Gihaahia to be unassailable. If a cabal of powerful mages were to attack her...I am thinking of posterity, here.*

[Mulissu]: (Acidly) *The point is moot. The Claviger has great prescience, and is virtually omniscient with regard to all things magical. It knows we are having this conversation, and has already determined its course of action with regard to our petition. It may have reached its decision ten billion years ago. Things will unfold as they were meant to.*

[Mostin]: *I expected better from you, Mulissu. I am tired of fatalistic musings – is it a philosophical fashion that somehow escaped me?*

[Mulissu]: *Realities are changing faster than I can apprehend them, Mostin. One must find some kind of calm center. Angst becomes tedious after a while. Should I contact Nwm now?*

[Mostin]: (Nods).

*

Mulissu issued a *sending* and, shortly thereafter, Nwm stepped from a nearby elm-tree.

"I assume that my proposal received a favourable response?" The Druid asked wily.

"It is ingenious," Mulissu agreed. "I should caution you that, even collectively, we cannot assure a similar reaction from the Claviger. We cannot coerce it – only appeal to its guiding principles."

"If it agrees, how will its decision manifest?"

"I don't know," the Elementalist replied.

"When can we make the petition?"

"There is no time like the present."

"Should we forewarn it of our impending visit?" Nwm asked.

Shomei smiled. "Don't worry Nwm. It already knows."

Nwm raised an eyebrow.

*

In a small, dry cave in the hills of Mord, a child – with shoulder-length blonde hair and possessed of an ambiguous gender – suddenly materialized before an upright marble slab nine feet tall.

The great tablet, engraved with a thousand or more paragraphs of detailed arcane legalese, seemed to hum inaudibly and pulse invisibly. It had *presence* of an unusual kind, although the exact quality of its sentience was difficult to determine – its very inscrutability was the quality which marked it as far removed from the mundane.

The child watched patiently as, descending into the chamber down a narrow flight of rough-hewn steps, a trio of Wizards and a Uediian priest shuffled nervously.

Upon seeing the child waiting, Mostin was seized by an almost uncontrollable bout of panic, and attempted to push past Mulissu, and back up the staircase.

The Druid scowled at him, blocked his egress, and gestured for him to continue on into the cave, to which he only reluctantly complied. As the four assembled before the diminutive figure, Nwm watched the Alienist carefully. The last thing he needed was for Mostin to suffer one of his ‘episodes.’

"I am..." Nwm began.

"...Nwm," the child finished for him.

"Are you..."

"...the Claviger, or the Enforcer?" The child completed his sentence again. "We are joined now. It makes little difference. I am the mostly benign part."

Mostin relaxed somewhat.

"You know why we are here," Nwm, Mostin, Mulissu, Shomei and the child said in perfect synchrony.

"Yes," the child said.

Mostin swallowed. "Is the..."

"...Injunction immutable, or is it subject to change? Both. You should have read it more closely. It

contains a clause which ultimately gives the Claviger discretionary power in its interpretation. A law which is static and unyielding is of limited utility. The answer to your question, incidentally, is *no*. The Enforcer will not be deployed against ‘extraplanar’ targets – if you insist on using such naïve terminology – simply because they are present."

Mostin grinned smugly, his confidence returning. "I told you..."

"Your analysis is incomplete," the child interrupted. "Unfortunately, due to your meager perceptual faculty, you lack the ability to reach a comprehensive understanding."

Mostin scowled. "Perhaps you could..."

"...enlighten you? It would be a futile exercise to even attempt it. Could you instruct a rodent meaningfully in the higher magical arts?"

"It could be..."

"...awakened, yes. In which case it would no longer be a rodent *per se*. The metaphor is apt – if the Claviger were to change your faculty to be capable of understanding, you would no longer be Mostin the Metagnostic. Dismiss the possibility from your mind – the Claviger has no intention of deifying you. You may now ask one question regarding the *web of motes*."

Mostin shook his head, and gestured vaguely in the air. Obviously, vocalizing his question was an entirely superfluous act.

"Yes," the child answered unequivocally, and vanished.

Mulissu gave a quizzical look. Her hair crackled in mild irritation.

*Slaadi blades are almost invariably sapient.

** i.e. bestow one or more divine ranks.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 12-15-2003

An Untitled Update

Eadric stood next to Sercion upon the roof of the Temple in the warm autumn sun, and gazed out across Morne. Much of the damage caused to a thousand private residences in the wake of the *wave of hate* had been repaired, although, in places, clusters of blackened buildings remained. Industrious craftsmen still busied themselves with numerous minor projects, and from sunrise until dusk the *tap-tapping* of stone hammers, and the rasp of saws echoed across the city. The scaffolding which surrounded the Fane itself, however, was silent and abandoned – no mason or carpenter had worked there for two weeks.

The Temple coffers were empty. Many of Wyre's aristocrats – appalled at the fact that the new Primate had distributed huge quantities of gold to Uediian peasants – had ceased to pay the now-voluntary tax. Promissory notes issued some months before had been delayed by church bureaucrats to such an extent that most of the guilds in Morne now refused to deal with the Temple at all.

Eadric scowled. "What is the debt, Sercion?"

The Templar grimaced. "Around two hundred thousand crowns, *Ahma*. Or so I am told."

"I will honour it," Eadric sighed.

"Good," the *Sela* said, ascending onto the roof behind them.

Eadric bowed.

"For long term sponsorship, we need to look to Sihu and Tagur to set the example," Sercion said.

“Unfortunately, they are still paying for the war. Wars are expensive.”

“There needs to be a coherent financial strategy,” the *Sela* remarked wryly. “Alas, Oronthon chose one with no expertise in this area to be his representative – hence I depend upon a staff who are more competent in these matters than I.”

“The Temple estates are vast,” Eadric pointed out.

“But undergoing a sweeping monasticization,” Sercion added. “Negotiating their relationship with the secular order will be a huge challenge. Foide and Skilla are already grumbling about the tax differentials.”

“I confess that I am somewhat behind the times,” Eadric said.

“How is your relationship with Skadding?” Sercion asked.

Eadric looked confused.

“Will you be attending the investiture, *Ahma*?” The Templar continued.

“He will be sworn in as Duke of Trempa in ten days,” the *Sela* explained. He seemed rather amused.

Eadric sighed, and shrugged. This was news to him. The mundane affairs of Wyre – even those which concerned him directly – seemed a world away.

Tramst gestured for Eadric to follow him. “Come. We need to talk.”

*

The *Sela* – whose demeanour that particular morning, Eadric noted, seemed more mortal than divine – opened a small cabinet, retrieved a bottle of amygdala, and gestured for Eadric to sit in a wooden chair

with a worn leather cushion. The reception room – once sumptuously furnished during Cynric’s tenure as Archbishop – was now bright, airy and spartan. Eadric smiled. The *Sela* had, after all, achieved his perfection in the company of Urgic Mystics in Ardan, renowned for their austerity and modesty.

“How is Titivilus?” The *Sela* asked ironically, handing Eadric a carved wooden goblet filled with the almond liqueur.

“He is enigmatic and confusing,” Eadric replied.

“And Soneillon?”

“Doubly so. I have yet to comprehend her place in the scheme of things.”

“It will doubtless become clear in due course,” Tramst said opaquely.

“I should like to voice my concerns, and ask some questions, if I might,” Eadric ventured.

“Try to avoid metaphysics,” the *Sela* smiled.

“I will address them tangentially, if at all,” Eadric replied. “*Pharamne’s Urn...*” Eadric began.

The *Sela* groaned.

“I am not about to ask questions regarding the ‘truth’ in what was previously considered heretical doctrine, nor am I about to inquire regarding the properties of this *thing*. But if such an object were to exist – is there any reason that I should not allow it to fall into the hands of the Demoness. Actually, I do not seek an answer to that question either, *Sela*, I merely wish to impress upon you that it is something which currently preoccupies me.”

“As it should,” Tramst agreed.

“There is also the question of those I number my allies: A demon queen – or possibly two, if I include Rhyxali – and a variety of umbral fiendish feys and their cohorts. Not to mention Mostin and Shomei,

who have dubious connections, to say the least.”

“And Nwm?” The *Sela* inquired.

Eadric laughed. “Once, I considered my friendship with Nwm to be scandalous. Others felt that it compromised my faith. These days, we argue little – our philosophical differences are relatively minor compared to the others with whom I deal.”

“What is your relationship to me, Eadric?” Tramst asked unexpectedly.

“I do not understand...”

“I mean, do you regard me as your confessor? As your teacher? The absolute spiritual authority whom you follow? Your Archbishop? Or do you regard yourself as my equal in some ways?”

Eadric looked horrified. “You are the *Sela*. You are...”

Tramst held up his hand. “Yes, yes. The Infinite Perception of God. No value judgement is implied in the question, *Ahma*. What is your function? What is the purpose of the *Ahma*?”

“To pave the way for you.”

“Well, now I am here. You remain the *Ahma*, however. What is your purpose now?”

“I think I am still defining it,” Eadric answered carefully.

“I once asked you if vengeance and retribution were within your purview. Have you come to a conclusion yet?”

“To define my rôle purely in those terms makes me somewhat uncomfortable.”

“I said nothing about vengeance and retribution being *exclusive* qualities. They do not preclude mercy, for instance. But the question remains: is this now the primary purpose of the *Ahma*? Is this why he

wages war on Graz'zt?"

Eadric shook his head. "I would bring aid to Nehael. None other will come."

"For mercy or love then? Perhaps you resent the fact that Enitharmon has not ordered a host to descend into Azzagrat?"

"I do not resent it – who am I to dictate action to the Celestial Marshal?" Eadric sighed. "Although, sometimes, I regret it," he added ruefully.

"But if Oronthon were to appoint a powerful representative in order to expedite Nehael's release, and to bring justice to Graz'zt, you would deem it appropriate?"

"Yes, I would."

"Despite the fact that she turned her back upon Rintrah when he extended Oronthon's grace to her?"

"Perhaps because of it," Eadric answered. "She seeks a higher perspective."

"Maybe Rintrah was sent to tempt her," the *Sela* said, smiling. "To offer her an easy way out."

"That is a peculiar inversion of conventional truth."

"The fact that it can be inverted is the quality which defines it as conventional, Eadric. And perhaps Enitharmon *cannot* act, because he relates to that aspect of Oronthon which is conventional, bounded and finite. It is not within his remit."

"That is unfortunate for Nehael," Eadric said grimly.

"I don't see why. Oronthon has merely opted to use a more unconventional tool."

Eadric looked confused.

The *Sela* sighed. “You, *Ahma*, you. Whilst your humility is an endearing trait, sometimes it can be painfully difficult to make you understand your own importance. You are a liminal entity, Eadric. You relate to facets of reality which have no place within the beliefs of Orthodoxy, or the understanding of celestials. This is why the acceptance of self-determination is most important to you – perhaps Cynric himself foresaw this. After all, whatever you do, it is the Will of Oronthon.”

“But I can still Fall.”

“Oh yes,” Tramst nodded. “And harder, faster and with more brilliance than any have done for a long while. Do not make the mistake of thinking that you have transcended the paradox, or even that the paradox *can* be transcended.”

“You give most conflicting lessons, *Sela*.”

“Thank-you,” Tramst said.

“I have another question,” Eadric said, averting his eyes. “It is somewhat presumptuous. You may feel the need to chastise me for asking it.”

The *Sela* smiled. “This should be interesting.”

“It regards your nature – both finite and unbounded. I recognize that this is a necessary dialectic for the transmission of *saizhan*: you cannot be purely Man or purely God.”

“I had not perceived it in those terms. It is an interesting speculation. You are also trespassing dangerously near the province of metaphysics, now.”

“Sometimes, you appear as more mortal than divine to me. At others, you are the Godhead manifest. Is this merely a reflection of my understanding, or does it have a basis outside of my own experience?”

“Is there a difference?” Tramst asked.

The *Ahma* nodded. *Saizho. The capacity for the human mind to perceive is also something which I*

frequently meditate upon. I refer to Mostin's plans...

“You are concerned that his expanded awareness may be dangerous?”

“Yes,” Eadric replied. “Especially with regard to the *web of motes*. The idea that he can acquire as much prescience as that offers. And Shomei...”

“Do not concern yourself with Shomei. She has a healthier perspective than Mostin, although she will soon be confronted with an enormous burden.” *Do you wish to know what it is?*

Will the knowledge benefit her, or anyone else?

“It might,” the *Sela* replied. A look of sympathy briefly crossed his face. “Shomei will soon die.”

Eadric's jaw dropped. “But...”

“She will perceive her own demise when she inspects the *web of motes*, just as Jovol did.”

“It cannot be averted?”

“She can choose to make the manner of her passing meaningful.” Tramst explained.

“But Nwm can...”

“I have opened the door for her, Eadric. Death will be a less unpleasant experience for her, the second time around. She may be unwilling to give it up. Bliss is not easily surrendered.”

“Then she will have failed, according to her own philosophy,” Eadric sighed. “When the struggle ceases, what then for Shomei? It defines her being. It is the essence of *what she is*.”

The *Sela* smiled. “I think that, for Shomei, overcoming her desire to overcome may be the ultimate antinomian act.”

Eadric grimaced, and nodded.

“That is all, for the moment. Has this conversation helped you?”

“Oddly, yes,” Eadric replied.

“Good. And beware of Soneillon, Eadric.”

“Yes,” the *Ahma* replied.

He stood, bowed, and exited the reception room, and began to walk down the steps towards the cloister. But before he had descended even half-way, he was met by a familiar figure – hooded in purple, bearing an ornate rod, and about whom the faintest hint of cinnamon hung. He swallowed, and his mind span. For a fraction of a second, he wondered what she and Tramst would talk about. He wondered how often that – since their initial exchange – she had come here to see the *Sela*. It was hardly the kind of detail that she would be inclined to share.

“Hello, *Ahma*,” she said with a wry half-smile.

He nodded in acknowledgement, but did not meet her eyes.

Passing out of the cloister, beneath the scaffolding and across the courtyard, Eadric made his way to the stable, where three score Temple steeds – many of celestial descent – were quartered. The place was strangely serene and, aside from the horses and two grooms, entirely empty. Contundor’s stall, like the others, was open and ungated. The destrier bore no harness, and stood waiting patiently.

“I will not ask you to come with me...” Eadric began.

I will come.

“Thank-you,” he smiled.

**

Ortwin and Iua – together with the sidhe-cambion, Koilimilou – sped through the twilight skies of Afqithan. They were *mind blanked, invisible, polymorphed* and buoyed by several other augmentations. Ortwin was, for once, serious in his attitude and demeanour. There were demons everywhere: they could afford to take no risks.

Koilimilou said nothing during their progress. Her face remained impassive. Ortwin found her presence and demeanour utterly disconcerting.

They were bound for Chaltipeluse, the castle of Ytryn, a Loquai noble who preferred the style of ‘duke’ rather than ‘king’ – although it reflected nothing on the actual power at his command. His fortress, carved by indentured dao from the rock of a mountain-peak long ages before, would – in a more conventional conflict – have been altogether unassailable. In Afqithan, it was no less vulnerable than an unwallled village upon an open plain.

Ytryn was, as Irknaan had been, an aristocrat with two demonic sponsors – although Koilimilou didn’t doubt that he had been one of the first to support Ainhorr when the Balor had invaded the demiplane. *Loyalty* to either Graz’zt or Rhyxali was not so much an issue as the *opportunity* offered by service to one, or the other, or both. Ortwin, in order to demonstrate his glibness and power of persuasion, had volunteered to address Ytryn, and win him on board – or at least find a way to compromise him sufficiently to turn Ainhorr’s suspicious eye towards the Duke. If his position became untenable, he might be forced to rally to Nhura out of desperation.

It was a dirty plan, Ortwin thought, but then again they were hardly observing the niceties of Wyrish chivalry. *Not that anyone really observes them in Wyre, either*, the Satyr mused.

If all else failed, Koilimilou would – hopefully – ensorcel Ytryn with a *geas**. They would likely also need to eliminate the Duke’s consort, a hag named Chavrilie. And anyone else present when Ytryn was enchanted.

Ortwin felt his pouch nervously, to check that the two scrolls hastily scribed by Mostin and Shomei, a

plane shift and a *sending* – to be used only in emergencies – were still there. It had been a long time since he had read a spell from a scroll. He hoped they wouldn't backfire.

“Will there be demons there?” Ortwin asked. “Or has Ainhorr granted a modicum of autonomy to his new subjects?”

“There will be demons,” Koilimilou replied stonily.

“Is that speculation, or do you know for a fact?”

“The palace will be crawling with Ainhorr's agents. Some will be disguised. Others will be openly present in the capacity of ‘advisors.’ There may or may not be a garrison – which may be of a temporary, permanent or indefinite nature.”

“Then how can we even gain a private audience with Ytryn?” Ortwin groaned. “I dislike the idea of attempting to coerce him in the presence of a marilith and half a dozen glabrezu...”

“You work it out,” Koilimilou snapped. “You are the one who claims to be able to talk his way out of anything. And to think you had the presumption to assert your ability to dupe Graz'zt himself.”

“Actually, I am more concerned that my innuendo will need to be so subtle, that Ytryn himself may not understand it.”

Koilimilou scowled. This satyr was a braggart.

Iua sighed. “The real problem is, as Mostin continually points out, that any demon in Afqithan – and I include Ainhorr himself in that statement – is only two *teleports* away. Ten seconds.”

“If we see any demons abruptly vanish, then so should we,” Ortwin replied.

“And if we don't see them at all?”

“Then we're screwed,” Ortwin admitted. He groaned. “How can we fight this war? I see only repeated

guerilla raids of *teleporting* demons, and umbral sidhe who vanish back to Shadow after brief forays. Is there *nothing* which can be likened to a conventional force?" The Satyr considered Mostin – the Alienist had, amongst other duties, agreed to reflect upon possible strategies for combating large numbers of demons.

"That *is* a conventional force," Koilimilou said irritably. "At least by Loquai standards. They favour campaigns of bloody, tit-for-tat attrition. Graz'zt knows this, and has deployed leaping demons as his main troops – they are *teleporters*. Dretch would be of no use at all to him, even in vast numbers. Hence, also, the kelvezu, although no-one knows how many – their services are exceedingly expensive. There again, Graz'zt is unfathomably rich. Strike and retreat. Intimidate. But *every* Loquai stronghold has areas which are *dimensionally locked* to prevent precisely this kind of assault. And many sit on *gates* to one plane or another. Some are known, some are jealously guarded secrets."

"And Ytryn's fortress?" Ortwin asked.

"Has a portal which leads to Faerie," Koilimilou answered. "But I do not know its location, or its appearance."

"But his inner chambers – wherever his Ducal seat is – will be in a place which is proof against extradimensional movement?"

"And *scrying*," Koilimilou replied.

"And his sanctum – where he practices magic?"

"Pah," the Cambion sneered. "Ytryn has no great ability. He is a warrior, nothing more. Chavril is a necromancer of some skill, however."

"And, aside from the Loquai and any demons, is there anything which we should expect?"

"Gargoyles and manticores. Displacer beasts."

"Of the umbral fiendish variety, no doubt?"

“Naturally,” Koilimilou replied humourlessly.

“Does this...quality...which Afqithan possesses have a source?” Ortwin had been about to say *taint*, but decided that it might be undiplomatic. “A wellspring? A locus? Is there a place where the umbral bleed is strongest?”

“You adequately demonstrate your cosmogonic ignorance with regard to Afqithan,” Koilimilou sneered.

“Shomei speculated that it may be a splinter of Faerie which was shattered during the Fall...”

A look of contempt crossed Koilimilou’s face.

“Pray enlighten me,” Ortwin said drily.

“Afqithan is Afqithan, just as Azzagrat is Azzagrat. Speculate all you like. The umbral flux ebbs and flows. Sometimes, Shadow is closer, at others it is further away.”

“But the pure *malignancy*,” Ortwin asked, deciding that diplomacy was wasted on the Cambion. “That is not a trait native to Shadow.”

Koilimilou smiled darkly. “That is the touch of the Lady Rhyxali.”

“But...”

“She was venerated here long before the name of *Graz’zt* was known. This place is sacred to her. And whatever temporary steward takes control, Afqithan is, and always has been, hers.”

“Ah,” Ortwin nodded dubiously, raising his eyebrows.

**

“There is too much to do,” Mostin grumbled. “And too little time.” Within the extradimensional space of his manse, his desk – normally immaculate in its organization – was strewn with books and papers. Several imps – temporarily compacted – acted as scribes: finding references, bringing books to Mostin, or taking notes as required. The Alienist’s mind held every title of each of the nine hundred volumes which Shomei had loaned him. He merely needed to decrypt them and scan them for relevant information – during the time that he wasn’t working on the second in the series of spells designed to interpret the *web of motes*. His head span.

Pharamne’s Urn. Carasch. The Horror. Rhyxali. Soneillon. Titivilus. Murmuur’s Tower. Graz’zt. The *Ahma*. Nehael. Throile. Afqithan. Azzagrat. Lehurze. Ainhorr. Nhura.

“Perhaps you should retreat to a slower time-stream,” Orolde suggested unhelpfully, eyeing one of the devils suspiciously. It leered back at him.

“Perhaps you could retrieve *Tersimion’s Last Diatribes against Arcanism* and insert it into your fundament,” Mostin replied with uncharacteristic vulgarity. “It would be a fitting resting place for that tome, in any case.”

“I will make some tea,” the Nixie sniffed.

“That is an excellent idea,” Mostin nodded. “Orolde, in case my attention lapses, do *not* allow any imps into the house proper. If I were censured for violating the Injunction at this time, it would be highly regrettable.”

Orolde nodded, and withdrew.

The Alienist issued a *sending* to Ortwin:

What progress? Ytryn ally? News of Titivilus? Soneillon? Do we have timeline? Need viable, secure base of operation.

Patience. No contact made yet. Still considering options. Dimensional Locks in Chaltipeluse may prove defensible.

Mostin sighed, and idly tapped upon the nigh-indestructible sphere of black crystal which sat in front of him.

Nufrut's head appeared. She scowled.

"Your knowledge of strategy and tactics in the sphere of Abyssal warfare is immense," Mostin said.

"Yes," the Marilith sighed.

"And your knowledge of Afqithan itself, not inconsiderable."

"That is correct. Get to the point, Mostin. You are being boring."

"I would remind you that *you* are the disembodied head, and I am the powerful wizard whose patience has recently been tried overmuch," Mostin said drily.

"The point is well made," Nufrut admitted.

"If you had eighteen thousand bar-lgura, a thousand or so chasme, several hundred nycadaemons, as many succubi and palrethees, a hundred goristros, and – how many kelvezu do you think Graz'zt has had the opportunity to enlist, by the way?"

"Now *that* is an interesting question, isn't it?" Nufrut smirked.

"In any case," Mostin continued, "is there a classical model or scenario for annexing or invading a demiplane such as Afqithan?"

"I'm sure there are several hundred, at least," Nufrut answered.

“But their organization – presuming they have any?”

“Do not make the error of assuming that because of their philosophical inclination towards freedom and satiation, that demons are an undisciplined rabble when gathered en masse,” Nufrut chided. “Who are the Generals? Captains?”

“Seven mariliths. And more recently arrived – according to Nhura – two dozen nalfeshnees and a hundred or so glabrezu.”

“*Seven?* Graz’zt is taking no chances, it would appear,” Nufrut’s condescending smile was beginning to irk Mostin. “You should give up now, Mostin. You have no hope at all.”

“Correct me if my analysis is wrong,” Mostin said, ignoring the Marilith’s enjoinment to despair.

“Goristros are, being largely immobile, confined to the capacity of point-defense and guarding important tactical positions; succubi and palrethees act as scouts, messengers and aerial light cavalry, so to speak...”

“That is correct,” Nufrut replied enthusiastically. “They are seldom deployed in units of more than six to twelve. Also, the capacity of some succubi to act as infiltrators should not be underestimated.”

“But the chasme are deployed in larger groups?”

“Squadrons of forty or fifty,” Nufrut replied. “They are extremely effective when massed. Their collective drone will be close to irresistible.”

Mostin’s stomach tightened. He hadn’t even begun to consider the implications of *that*. “And the heavy-hitters? The nycadaemon mercenaries?”

“Three or four companies are sufficient to use as shock troops,” Nufrut leered, “and expendable. But I wouldn’t anticipate a pitched battle, in any case.”

The Alienist’s mind was already developing a plan. And the more he thought about it, the more he liked it. He needed to address the root of the problem. “Let me pose another question, Nufrut: if I could *force*

a pitched confrontation. If the ability of these demons to *teleport* was temporarily suspended...”

“That is pointless speculation,” the Marilith sneered.

Mostin ignored her. Formulae were flooding through his psyche. He picked up Nufrut’s sphere, and handed it to the imps.

“Take a five-minute break,” he said to his compacted scribes. “Do *not* leave this extradimensional space.”

As the diminutive fiends gleefully tossed Nufrut’s head to one another, Mostin brushed all of his collected books and papers from his desk with a swift sweep of his arm. He retrieved a single, blank sheet of paper, and with a quill pen which made him feel particularly dangerous – boldly still bearing its feather – he wrote at the top:

Mostin’s Grand Astral Flux Inhibitor

He sighed, crossed it out, and pondered briefly, before writing:

Mostin’s Quiescence of the Spheres

Much better, he thought. Not that he really had time to begin this. But it couldn’t hurt to analyze a few formulae. Just to see if it was a plausible idea.

Within five minutes, he had decided that it *was* plausible, and all thoughts of *Pharamne’s Urn* and *Carasch* had left his mind. He now had seventeen days to develop *two* transvalent spells.

Orolde returned shortly thereafter with a large pot of tea, which Mostin liberally fortified with a variety of alchemical stimulants.

*Koilimilou would use a *limited wish* to achieve the desired effect. 1 action being better than 10 minutes.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 02-16-2004

**

Three Webs.

Eadric rode alone from Morne to Trempla upon Contundor, passing by his own keep at Deorham without pause late in the afternoon of the second day of the journey.

His decision not to take Tatterbrand, who had been quietly at work within the Temple apiary, was based in large measure upon the knowledge that his squire – upon learning of the *Ahma's* intentions – would have insisted upon accompanying his master to Afqithan. And Afqithan was a place beyond Tatterbrand's ability to comprehend and, likely, survive.

Mostin's message, *I can lock part of the demiplane. It will be possible for you to go as yourself, without duplicity, if you so desire*, was a simultaneous cause of both relief and concern for him, and he considered the implications as he rode.

Somewhat later, when Eadric made camp by the wayside, Mostin himself appeared and they discussed the likely unfolding of events. Soneillon was engaged in delicate negotiations with Rhyxali, and Ortwin made overtures to Duke Ytryn in Afqithan. They waited for Nhura to rally the remaining Loquai in Faerie and Shadow, and give the signal. Mostin seemed confident that the spell that he was devising and – with the aid of Nwm and Shomei – would invoke, was proof against even Graz'zt's attempts to dispel.

"Provided, of course, that he does not enlist a cabal of his own," Eadric said drily.

"Demons are not renowned for exhibiting a preference for cooperative magic," Mostin sniffed.

"Except Soneillon?" Eadric asked.

"She is unusual in that regard, but not unique," Mostin nodded. "You know her better than most. In your judgment, will she involve herself personally, or act through others?"

Eadric shrugged. "I've no idea. I'm surprised that you trust my ability to read her."

"I don't," Mostin agreed. "But I trust mine less in this regard. And I have not been to Throile. What did..."

"I'd really prefer not to talk about it, Mostin."

"Ahh," the Alienist nodded.

"And Throile itself is under renewed attack."

"Evidently, she keeps you well informed," Mostin raised an eyebrow. "When you were there, did she..."

"Mostin..." Eadric sighed.

"I'll not ask again. Apparently you feel a little reticent to speak of it."

"How perceptive of you, Mostin. And when will your spell be ready?"

"Soon enough," the Alienist answered. "I am somewhat pressed for time, however. And Shomei is nagging me to complete my part of the cycle which will allow us to interpret the *web of motes*. She is ready, and so is Nwm."

"Then don't let me keep you," Eadric said, arranging his blanket meaningfully.

"She is not idle, however," Mostin continued, ignoring the hint. "I believe she has approached several Infernal magnates regarding possible support in the Afqithan endeavour."

"On whose authority?" Eadric was aghast.

Mostin laughed. "I don't think that she requires any. Shomei is very well connected. And she is also making inquiries regarding the presence of Titivilus in the demiplane."

"This is becoming too complex." His mind boggled as he considered the connection between the *Sela* and the Infernalist. A microcosm of the Irrenite perception of Oronthon and the Adversary? The Left Hand of the Numinous. *Do not start thinking that way. It leads to madness.*

"What do you expect?" Mostin sighed. "The prize is enormous, after all."

"Afqithan? Hardly."

"Azzagrat is the prize, Eadric, with its untold wealth. And the fall of Graz'zt. Such events – or the promise of them – tend to attract attention. *Lots* of attention."

"Mmm. Yes. I suppose they do."

"Are you actually beginning to grasp the full ramifications of this, Eadric?" Mostin asked sarcastically.

"You realize that the spill-over will be immense, of course? It will be like dropping a boulder into a puddle."

"Azzagrat is a puddle?"

"Cosmically speaking, yes. And if we succeed, we create something that Abyssal nature abhors the most."

Eadric gave a quizzical look.

"A power vacuum," Mostin explained.

**

Had Rintrah been mortal, and subject to the vagaries of pride or honour, he might have rejoiced in the grace bestowed upon him, or experienced ecstasy at his newfound closeness with the Godhood. As it was, lacking in such faculties, or even a differentiated sense of self, the temporary Perfection of the celestial registered as nothing more than a recognition that he was a more efficient tool for carrying out his Shining Master's Will. His thoughts reached out to find an omnipresence which mystics might have regarded as comforting and all-embracing. Lacking an ego to begin with, the experience was less profound for the Messenger.

Wreathing himself in flame and darkness, Rintrah descended rapidly into the lowest pit of Hell. After a brief and unknowable exchange had occurred, the celestial struck out across the infinities which stretched toward the Abyss, perceived by his mind's eye as a spiral which led to Nothingness.

In Morne, the *Sela* sat in a state of *saizhan*, the interaction of entities of tremendous power appearing merely as facets of the dialectic revealed to consciousness. Whether his mind reflected reality, or reality responded to his intention was unknown. Causality, synchronicity and coincidence: all were meaningless terms.

The Messenger reached an interface. A bubble of separation. Sealed, inviolable; the labour of centuries of sorcery. Even before he touched it, Rintrah knew that he could not penetrate it.

Oronthon Magnified him. He passed effortlessly through.

Pain waited beyond. It was as if all the agony in the cosmos had been distilled into this single space, mere yards across: a perfect sphere, the walls of which were graven with glyphs and runes of torment. Their power passed over the celestial, and around him, and through him, but caused less than the

slightest discomfort. Rintrah's eyes, incandescent with potency now, glanced upwards to behold a semblance of a form: wracked, inchoate, stretched and twisted beyond recognition, its pattern diffuse at its margins. It seemed as if the slightest of breezes would cause it to evaporate. Its grasp on existence was tenuous.

Under the force of the Planetar's selfless Will, the quiddity of the sphere began to change, and reshaped itself according to his direction. Empty space assumed pleasing forms: a tree, a small pool with lilies, a tiny rock garden. The upper hemisphere gave off a soft, azure radiance, reminiscent of a cloudless day in late summer.

Rintrah rested briefly: the effort of creation was not insignificant. He glanced at the artificial sky, still etched with sigils of dreadful power which emanated madness and pain, before his wings lifted him gently aloft. As his hand trailed lightly over the runes, each one shattered, *disjoined* into its separate components. They fell like a silver dust upon the rockery, or to float upon the surface of the pool.

The formless *thing*, still suspended in the centre of the sphere, quivered palpably and then relaxed. For an instant, Rintrah was concerned that the sudden removal of the tension that it had experienced might cause it to dissociate. He swiftly grasped the essence and held it in his hands. Cohesion and perception returned to it. Responsive to the celestial's ministrations, it corporeated rapidly.

Rintrah laid her by the bole of the tree, *hallowed* the sphere, and vanished. Nehael slept for the first time in her immeasurably long existence.

The *Sela* shifted his position, and a single bead of sweat trickled from his temple. It had been a particularly difficult meditation.

**

Ortwin, Iua and Koilimilou waited in an antechamber of blacks and muted greys, the vague and

insubstantial walls of which were carved with exquisite yet gruesome scenes. They depicted torture, mutilation, and an erotic exultation in pain and depravity which upset even the Satyr's normally liberal sensibilities.

This may be the stupidest thing I have ever done, he thought to himself. *Ainhorr must know of our presence by now*. Inwardly, he fretted desperately. His outward appearance was one of practiced, imperturbable nonchalance.

Ytryn, one of the most powerful of Loquai nobles, had kept the trio waiting for an hour. What counsel was he taking? Whose orders was he following? Dammit, why hasn't anything *happened* yet?

The Cambion said nothing, her perfect face remained impassive, perhaps bearing the slightest hint of contempt.

Gods, I hope her name still carries some weight in these parts, Ortwin regarded Koilimilou. *I hope they buy this*. And then, *He knows I am here. He must. He knows what I am, who I am. He knows that I was there when we hit Feezuu. He knows it was me – and Iua – at Khu. Why has he not acted? I should be dead by now, or at least undergoing painful dismemberment*.

A pair of doors opened. Ortwin's stomach turned over, and bile rose in his throat. He smiled lazily.

"After you," he said easily to the Cambion.

Polymorphed and *mind-blanked*, Ortwin and Iua followed Koilimilou into the great hall. The Satyr had assumed the shape of a sidhe again. Iua's form – a death slaad – was designed to cause maximum confusion and concern amongst Ytryn's vassals and his demonic courtiers. Ortwin hoped that she could pull it off – Iua was a fine liar, but lacked his own finesse.

Koilimilou bowed her head.

Ortwin strode forward, aware of the many gazes upon him, bowed with considerable flair before Ytryn's throne, and spoke in a calm, confident voice. His Sylvan was full of archaic inflexion, as befitted a representative of the oldest of fae lineages.

"Greetings, your Grace. My thanks for receiving this embassy, and the hospitality of your court. Queen Nhura sends her regards from her exile in Faerie, and trusts that you remember your old acquaintance."

As Ortwin's head rose, his eyes took on the full scene before him. Ytryn reclined upon a low seat. To his left, coiled and menacing, a marilith was poised like a viper. Two kelvezu flanked the Duke, and at least thirty Loquai knights stood about in silent vigil. Umbral quicklings darted around the periphery of his vision, and a palrethee hovered in the air nearby.

*Sh*t*, the Satyr thought.

**

Eadric's decision to attend the investiture of Skadding, Foide's' son, as Duke of Trempa, had been made quickly. Despite his ambivalence towards the House of Thahan, and his distrust of the Lord Chamberlain and his tedious plots, Eadric actually felt a measure of confidence in Skadding. The boy was naïve and overly trusting – qualities which, in many ways, the Earl of Deorham regarded as positive and which his father had, apparently, failed to divest him of.

Besides, one must fulfill one's feudal obligations, after all.

After a brief detour to visit the Abbey of Osfrith – where he instructed the nuns to arrange the transport of the insane Urqual to the Fane in Morne – Eadric rode through the open gates of the castle at Trempa on the evening before the ceremony. The outer courtyards were crammed with tents and pavillions. Knights, courtiers, maids and entertainers ate, drank and mingled in the dusk. Heads turned quickly to regard him, and from somewhere his own *ladon* – his clarion call – rang out from a trumpet.

Passing swiftly beneath the Tower of Owls and into the inner bailey, his presence caused more chaos and hysteria than he was altogether comfortable with. Trempa's Oronthonians – the first to embrace the new order when it had swept across Wyre – prostrated themselves and hailed the *Ahma*, a virtual

demigod. The Uediians – who comprised most of Trempa's northern aristocracy – regarded him as a saviour from Temple taxes and the indentureship of pagan farmers. In that regard, he had held true to his word. Caur of Har Kumil shouted and greeted him warmly.

Foide regarded Eadric suspiciously behind a veneer of politeness and civility. The satisfaction that he had enjoyed for the past month – at his family's possession of two of Wyre's great fiefs – now turned to sourness in his mouth. Foide was reminded of one simple fact: with the blessing of King Tiuhan or no, this ceremony could only pass with the support – whether open or implicit – of Eadric of Deorham. He was above the law, whatever protestations he might make to the contrary. He was invulnerable: mortal weapons could not touch him, they said. Men would follow him happily to their death, assured of their place in paradise. And if he had wanted the duchy for himself, he could have taken it.

And he rides into Trempa, travel-stained and without an entourage, like some errant or hedge-knight.

Eadric dismounted, and knelt before Skadding, his new liege-lord. Somewhat abashed, the Duke-to-be ushered him to his feet.

"My sword is yours," Eadric bowed. "And my counsel and guidance, should you ever require it."

Foide of Lang Herath chewed his lip and brooded.

**

Mostin's lidless green eyes were glazed and his body motionless, as he floated – transfixed – within an infinite sea of light. A hundred billion motes surrounded him.

His intellect, swollen by magic to titanic proportions, reflected briefly upon the series of spells which had brought him to this place. Potent dweomers, which only a handful of Wizards in Wyre's long history would have been capable of mastering, seemed – from his new perspective – like paltry cantrips fit only for neophytes and dabblers.

Cradled in the palm of Mostin's hand was Graz'zt's mote: dark, erotic, brooding, and seething with

potency. The Alienist inspected first one facet, and then another. The fact that he could not determine the location of Graz'zt – in spatiotemporal terms, at least – was indicative of the fact that the Prince was *mind blanked*. But it made no difference: there was another mote, anchored by a taught radicle, in close proximity. What one could not read directly, one could infer obliquely with little effort in an expanded state such as this: Lord Kostchtchie stood before Prince Graz'zt within the great hall of the Iron Palace in Zelatar.

Mostin scowled, and rapidly plotted the trajectories of several hundred possible futures, scanning each for resonances with Eadric, Nhura, Soneillon, Rhyxali, Ainhorr, Titivilus, Nehael and himself.

Kostchtchie will move to support Ainhorr in Afqithan, he thought. *Fiendish giants*, he mused, *and some are powerful sorcerers*. His eye caught a new thread of probability. *What is that?*

[Inspection. Analysis.] *Blightfire*, he groaned inwardly. The Lord of the Ice Wastes had potent allies of his own.

Mostin returned his attention to Graz'zt's mote, and abstracted his perspective. He noted the tenuous rapport between himself and the Prince of Azzagrat – alluding to Graz'zt's own prescience.

But I see both more clearly and more deeply than you, he thought. *For the moment, at least. Your machinations are transparent to me*. Graz'zt could not grasp the entirety of the Afqithan nodality any more than Mostin could, but the fragments of which Mostin was aware – scattered and incoherent as they were – were more complete. He considered the immense *dimensional lock* that he had developed, projected the catenary of the pseudonatural Horror onto the lattice of interconnected points, and then superimposed Shomei's glooms on top of that. The nodality rapidly reorganized itself to show a number of different probable futures.

None showed Graz'zt in Afqithan.

He is afraid, Mostin knew. *And rightly so. He is not unassailable. He will not come.*

Mostin cursed. One plan at least – to lure the Lord of Azzagrat to Afqithan with the promise of Eadric's head – could not be realized. Mostin did not underestimate Graz'zt's shrewdness or cunning, but had

hoped that his temper would be sufficiently unstable to betray him.

The Alienist projected a scenario which involved the swift subdual of Afqithan, the removal of Ainhorr and Kostchtchie – and whatever wights the Ice Lord brought with him – and an immediate subsequent assault upon Azzagrat itself. It required Shomei to secure twelve legions of Bathym's barbed devils *and* the commitment of Rhyxali's main force of babaus in addition to her shadow demons. But there would be no second *dimensional lock* and no glooms – Shomei herself had vanished from the picture, slain by kelvezu before she could articulate her own power.

He examined a string of possible futures which involved the *binding* of the Horror, and its travel through a *gate* to Azzagrat in order to assassinate Graz'zt. Fourteen of the twenty-three outcomes resulted in Graz'zt escaping to his sanctum before the Horror could complete its mission. Five of the remaining futures involved the coercion of the Horror by Graz'zt and its subsequent redeployment against its summoner: *I'd better make sure it's adequately buffed, If we go that route*, Mostin thought. Two futures promised Graz'zt's demise, and two were ambiguous – depending on the reaction of the Arch-fiend's courtiers.

Mostin meditated upon the interaction between the motes of the Horror and Graz'zt, seeking tendrils of possibility to exploit. Graz'zt would need to be weakened – divested of a sizeable portion of his reservoir – before the Horror could be used efficiently. Of the hundreds of powerful spells within Graz'zt's repertoire, one – and the name *exquisite domination* sprang unbidden to Mostin's mind – was sufficiently potent to threaten even the Horror's virtual immunity to magic.* If Graz'zt could shoot off two spells – a *superb dispelling* variant followed by the compulsion – then the chances were good that the Prince could assert his will upon the pseudonatural. Graz'zt's reservoir was immense, and he could absorb an unholy amount of backlash before being troubled.

Mostin breathed deeply, and focused his mind. He remembered where he was – within the dome of Mulissu's mansion, floating within the *web of motes*. His thoughts reached out to the Infernalist.

[Mostin]: [Very complex semiotic pattern] (= *The Horror cannot accomplish an assassination in Azzagrat without prior softening of the target. And he can dispel your glooms effortlessly, and still deal with the pseudonatural. And this assumes he is not even within his sanctum.*)

[Shomei]: [Complex semiotic pattern] (*=That is inconsequential. If he were, then he could prevent the gate opening in any case. Come what may, I will send the glooms tomorrow.*)

[Mostin]: !

[Shomei]: (Emphatically) [Semiotic pattern] (*=It is time that he realized he is vulnerable in a tangible way.*)

[Mostin]: [Semiotic pattern] (*=He will quickly overcome them.*)

[Shomei]: [Semiotic pattern] (*=He will bleed first. And they will cut deep.*)

[Mostin]: [Semiotic pattern] (*=Have you seen something I have not? If so, please share it.*)

[Shomei]: [Complex semiotic pattern] (*=I am walking a narrow line, Mostin. Every action I take from now onwards must be calculated for maximum effect.*)

[Mostin]: [Complex semiotic pattern] (*=Please do not sink into a fugue, Shomei. I thought that you had finally made it through the nihilism.*)

Shomei smiled, and shook her head.

*The prime benefit conferred by Mostin's insanely buffed Intelligence was the bonus granted to Knowledge (Arcana) checks. Whilst difficult to rationalize in terms that we might understand, the answers to questions such as "what spells does Graz'zt have in his repertoire which might affect this possible course of action " would spring into Mostin's mind at appropriate times. I had already optimized around twenty ELH spell variants for Graz'zt – i.e. increased the XP burn and pumped up the backlash to bring them within his ability. I assumed that he had several hundred more – after all, he is

X billion years old, and it only seemed reasonable. It is unfortunate that it is impossible to play a character with an Int of 22, much less one with a (temporary) Intelligence of 150. What does it *mean* to be that Intelligent? It is impossible to even begin to conceptualize how thought processes can work on that level. Thankfully, this has been the only time that such cosmic heights have been reached. It is simply too much of a headache to DM.

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Untitled Update

[Mostin]: *Thus.* (Conjure the Horror. *Lock* area around Irknaan's palace – two mile radius. Simultaneous arrival of Rhyxali's force *here*. Highest probability of Kostchtchie's appearance *here*. Portals to Faerie *here* and *here* and *here* will allow Nhura access to Afqithan, although I estimate thirty minutes before she can order her forces. Soneillon variable too complicated to calculate because of events in Throile [diagram].)

[Shomei]: *Perhaps this.* (Chaltipeluse secured as beach-head: already warded against *teleportation*. Ytryn ally/eliminated. Ortwin has a high chance of success in this endeavour.)

[Mostin]: *But.* (A Feint *here* [Picture: the stronghold of Queen Menicau] will draw out Ainhorr's main force. Then possible to open *gates*, then *lock* and assault Irknaan's palace directly.)

[Shomei]: *Unlikely.* (None will assume that role. Too dangerous. Unless you can persuade a group of demons to sacrifice themselves for the greater good. [Irony])

[Mostin]: *We two and Nwm - look.* (*Shapechange* and multiple conjurations can achieve the same effect. If you and I each open two *gates*...)

[Shomei]: *My reservoir is close to empty, Mostin...*

[Mostin]: *Then this.* (We should take a short holiday – In fact, I would suggest Afqithan. Get used to your new form, feel the power course through you again, and wreak some random havoc. And take the airs, of course. Nwm will likely come along – he enjoys flying around and destroying things, however much he denies it. And if we cause enough of a ruckus on our first visit, it will cause an overreaction on the second one – which is precisely what we want. [Diagram])

[Shomei]: [Calculating probabilities]. *We must be something terrible, that will give Ainhorr pause for thought. Solars? Klurichirs?*

[Mostin]: *Hellfire Wyrms.* [Diagram]

[Shomei]: *Nice. Very nice, Mostin.*

[Mostin]: *Why, thank-you.*

[Shomei]: *But this.* (Multiple summonings with multiple empowerments and I can pull around twenty narzugons into the fray and still retain a high enough valence to contribute to the *quiescence of the spheres*).

[Mostin]: (Nods). *That might be preferable. I will gate a couple of pit fiends in, just to be sure we're taken seriously.*

[Shomei]: *Titivilus, Furbas and Murmuur will likely shoulder the blame.*

[Mostin]: *Such is life. I believe the augmentation just ended, by the way. My cognitive faculties have resumed their normal ant-like status.*

Shomei sighed, a look of profound relief crossing her face. "I'm weary, Mostin. It has been insightful, but I'm glad it's over: my ego was beginning to fray. We should translate in a couple of days. Flex our muscles with an attack on Samodoquol's fortress."

Mostin nodded. "There are three hundred chasme there, and around a dozen glabrezu enforcers as well as other demonic agents. They are commanded by the nalfeshnee Jamua – who is something of a

heavy-hitter. Samodoquol is fractious, and Ainhorr needs to keep him in line. But I suggest that we strike some smaller strongholds first – minor Loquai nobility who have capitulated with the current regime. It will send the message that the Balor's grip is less than ironclad, and won't give as much of an opportunity for Ainhorr to react. And when Nhura finally arrives, it may be that she can expect some support."

"Nhura in the capacity of redeemer and liberator?" Shomei asked ironically. "Now *that* is an amusing prospect."

"It's all relative," Mostin replied. "Still, attacking Samodoquol must be undertaken with the knowledge of the risk involved. Chasme are hardy."

Shomei shrugged. "Let the flies drone. We will burn them from the sky."

"Reinforcements will arrive within thirty seconds of our arrival."

"Then we will depart." Shomei said easily.

Mostin's eyes betrayed an excitement which made the Infernalist slightly nervous. "We could go tomorrow," he said.

"Two days, Mostin," she replied. "Tomorrow, I send the glooms to Azzagrat."

**

The anointment and investiture of Skadding as Duke of Trempa took place on a cold morning in late autumn on the Howe, a green hillock outside of the castle gates reserved for such grand occasions.

In the past, the Abbot of Trempa (or the Bishop of Thahan, had his other duties permitted it) would have performed the ceremony. As it was, the prior incumbents of each position had, in the wake of the *Sela's* assumption of the Prelacy, opted for a monastic life: both had been conservative in their view,

and the Bishop had been one of the *Ahma*'s foremost detractors. Neither position had been since filled, and Tramst was in no hurry to reestablish the episcopacy until the internal revision of the Temple had been completed. It had therefore been assumed that the ascension of Skadding to the Ducal seat would be a secular affair, and, given the disestablishment of the Temple and the general move away from Church infeudation, that seemed appropriate.

During the feast before the investiture, to Foide's horror and dismay, the thane Ekkert – after consuming large quantities of mead – had suggested that Eadric perform the ceremony. The idea had been greeted by rapturous applause by Trempa's assembled aristocracy, despite the fact that it was highly irregular for an Earl to anoint a Duke. Trempa's customs had always been eccentric, but such a notion verged on the insane.

Eadric had politely declined.

"You would be acting in a religious capacity," Ekkert had drawled. "I don't see what the problem is."

"I am not empowered to anoint Dukes," Eadric had said simply. "Besides, a third of Trempa's inhabitants are Uediian. I am not about to begin a new round of disenfranchisement."

"Then ask Nwm to participate," Caur had suggested cannily.

"Regrettably, his whereabouts are unknown to me," Eadric had replied uneasily. It was true – he had no notion of the Druid's location, and no means to contact him.

Foide, thinking that the *Ahma* had closed the subject, had breathed a quiet sigh of relief.

Later that night, however, as Eadric had strolled in the gardens in an attempt to aid his digestion (he seldom ate rich food, and boar did not agree with him), the soil between two rose bushes had begun to warp and ripple. Nwm had appeared, rising from the ground in the shape of a pillar of earth which had rapidly assumed a more recognizable, human form.

The druid had shaken his head, and dirt had fallen out of his tangled hair.

"I understand that I am to officiate at Skadding's investiture tomorrow," he had said in a matter-of-fact way.

"How did Caur contact you?" Eadric had asked, sighing.

"He didn't," Nwm had answered.

"Then how do you know?"

"At this present moment, I know pretty much everything," Nwm had replied. It was true – the Druid had been buoyed by the cycle of augmentations devised by Mostin, and in which he had taken part.

"Although, actually, a wizard of our mutual acquaintance informed me of the probability that you would be asked to anoint the new Duke, and that you would refuse on the grounds that it would alienate the Uediian faction."

"I assume that the interpretation of the *web of motes* is passing according to plan, then?"

Nwm had shrugged. "I'm leaving it to Mostin to work out."

"And what have you been doing?"

"Watching birds, mainly," Nwm had answered.

"And you have discovered...?"

"Nothing that I didn't already know," Nwm had admitted. "I'm telling you, Ed: omniscience isn't all it's cracked up to be."

Eadric guffawed.

"In any case, we'll both perform the ceremony tomorrow."

"I don't think so..." Eadric had begun.

"There is actually an eighty-eight percent chance that I will change your mind in that regard," Nwm had grinned, "so you may as well just throw in the towel now, and save yourself the argument."

Eadric had sighed. "Skadding will..."

"He'll agree too," Nwm had interrupted.

"But Foide..."

"Will come around. What choice does he have, Eadric? *Vox populi* and all that: he is nothing, if not politically astute. He won't want his son to begin his tenure in a climate of apathy and indifference. You'll be doing the boy a favour. Trust me, Ed. Press this point now, and save yourself some grief down the road. Now, I'm hungry. Is there any food left?"

So it was that Nwm the Preceptor placed the coronet – a twisted wreath of ivy, mistletoe and oak-leaves – upon the head of Skadding, and Eadric anointed him with holy water.

The company – over a hundred noble families – made a slow procession from the Howe to the Hall of the Seat, which had stood empty since Soraine's death at the hands of Rimilin five months before. Skadding assumed his place amidst much panoply, and began his large – and depressingly administrative – set of duties. He had a huge backlog to contend with. Aristocrats bickered about land ownership, hunting rights, debts, impending marriages and when the next tourney should be held. Commoners waited outside in droves to voice their complaints regarding the bread dole, the theft of pigs, taxes on beer, and the quantity of devalued coinage in circulation. Several sought recompense from soldiers for unwanted pregnancies in indiscreet daughters. Representatives from the Guild of Clockmakers preened themselves in anticipation of an audience. Entertainers seeking employment breathed fire, sang ditties or performed minor tricks of prestidigitation.

Eadric looked at Nwm. "And you wanted *me* to do this job?" He said in a low voice.

"On reflection, I think maybe you were right."

As the *Ahma* took his leave of the new Duke, he bowed, placed his hand upon the marble floor, incanted, and touched his eagle pendant in what most there assumed was a final blessing. A feeling of indescribable calm descended upon the Hall of the Seat. Nwm felt a frisson of power and suppressed a look of astonishment, and questioned Eadric as soon as they were outside again.

"Did you just do what I think you did?" The Druid asked.

"That is entirely possible," Eadric nodded.

"And since when could you just *do* that?"

"I don't know," Eadric shrugged. "I've never really tried before."

Nwm nodded. "Good," he said. "This may save me considerable effort and labour in the future."

With a passing thought, Eadric had *hallowed* the hall, and with his brief invocation had laid a *zone of truth* upon the place. No fiend – openly or in possession of another – could enter there, and, for a year at least, no lie could be spoken there without considerable effort.

Skadding was young and inexperienced, and already had enough to contend with without falling prey to the scheming mendacity of vassals, peers, ambassadors, and family. Or demons, for that matter.

**

Ortwin sang. Purportedly, a composition in Ytryn's honour, commissioned by Nhura as a gift to the Duke.

Whatever else he does, Iua mused to herself as she listened, *lying aside*, *Ortwin does this best*. He was an arrogant, self-indulgent, narcissistic erotomaniac – to be sure – but he had an uncanny ability to tap

into the aesthetic sensibilities of his audience. His song was dark, brooding, and melancholic. It conveyed a lust for blood, it exalted pain, and suggested the promise of a grim satiation which would be all-fulfilling but transient; and then the birth of the next desire, which would, in turn, be pursued to its empty and bitter conclusion. Ennui. Psychosis and apathy. The fleeting release from the curse of immortality.

Iua didn't even understand the words: Ortwin sang in an archaic dialect of Sylvan.

The duelist watched Koilimilou carefully, but if the cambion was moved by the Bard's performance, she displayed no outward sign of it. But neither Iua, nor Koilimilou, nor the marilith Sethee were alerted to Ortwin's true message – directed at Ytryn alone, and concealed within the song.

[Make no response to this communication – I suspect you lack the subtlety possessed by yonder demoness, and she would quickly realize your intention.

Graz'zt's hegemony here will shortly end. His enemies already mobilize themselves. Nhura is returning, and her allies will crush Ainhorr. Rhyxali – your other patroness – is poised to retake her rightful property. Soneillon craves vengeance, and her designs will soon bear fruit.

Where will your loyalties lie, Duke Ytryn? To whom will you pledge your treacherous sword? Listen well, and you will survive the orgy of death and prosper in the aftermath. When the gates to the other worlds open, and the demons at Chaltipeluse are recalled to the battle before the walls of Irknaan's palace, you will slay those that remain here. You will mobilize your army, and join Queen Nhura in the fray.

In payment, Nhura will grant you Someranth: Menicau will likely not survive the upcoming conflict and if, by some strange chance she does, she will not survive long *after* it. If you fail, then Nhura's ire will turn towards you, and like those others who betray her, you will die painfully.

And Ytryn, in case you forget, I am an ambassador from Faerie and you will guarantee my safe passage and lend me such aid as custom dictates. Koilimilou and the slaad Qhrsjh are under my protection. Do not underestimate my influence or my reach. If I am assailed, then the Hunters will descend upon you, and drag you to a doom which even you cannot imagine.]

*...and of frost
and unrelenting pursuit
and jealous death.*

Ortwin finished his song. His innuendo had conveyed information which was – to his knowledge – at least partially accurate. Admittedly, he might have been a little liberal with his interpretation of the facts, and his promises might not have been sanctioned by Nhura. No matter. He had no doubt that Ytryn believed him – it was merely a question of how the Duke would react to what he had heard.*

**

There had been two of them. They had been fast: faster than he was. Their motion was precise, calculated and deadly. He had been taking his pleasure when they struck.

His feeling had been one of outrage, coupled with incredulity. How had they reached him here? There were precious few areas in Zelatar where it was possible to *teleport* or open a *gate*. Places which – by necessity – were not *dimensionally locked*, and he knew them all intimately. Most of them were known *only* to him.

He had been alerted by a blur of shadowy motion, and a feeling of pain which ripped through his shoulder, piercing demonic flesh and sinew and spilling his ichor upon the floor of his own harem. He had been stabbed nine times more before he had reacted.**

Fearing for his very existence, Graz'zt had emanated a shroud of death and destruction which had instantly annihilated his assailants, together with three succubi and the marilith Chuschi – his current favorite.

The glooms had evaporated, returning to whatever shady realm they had issued from. They had been *summoned* creatures, and possessed no final reality.

Immediately afterwards, Graz'zt had locked the whole of Zelatar, except for the *gate* room – where the guard was quadrupled. Brutal interrogations of scores of demons – mainly nalfeshnees in possession of *cubic gates* who presided over various conquered worlds – ensued. A wave of tortures, mutilations and assassinations flooded through the citadel and city as the Prince's paranoia asserted itself, and his demonic servitors found an opportunity to settle old scores.

Graz'zt retreated to his sanctum, rapidly healed his wounds, and gave thought to revenge.

*Ortwin – benefitting from a multiply empowered *eagle's splendour* comfortably made a DC 50 Bluff check – enough to 1) convey his innuendo successfully without alerting the others present; and 2) simultaneously lie sufficiently well to convince Ytryn that he was an important sidhe of powerful connections, and crossing him would result in the Duke's rapid demise. All was hidden within the context of a song which rivalled those composed by the most accomplished of faerie bards and minstrels.

**Graz'zt's DR – 20/Cold Iron and Epic and Good – actually saved his bacon. Still, the +10 *keen daggers* used by the glooms filled him full of holes.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 03-02-2004

Dragonplay

The tower was a slender, delicate structure, rising some thirty fathoms from a low hillock and twisting

deliciously before reaching its crest. It was carved in intricate relief and inlaid with precious metals which seemed to capture and then amplify the perpetual twilight, and stars glistened softly at its apex. Around it, arranged in elegant symmetry, five more towers – the hues of which were subtly different – rose in close proximity to half the height of the central spire, their shoulders attached by narrow buttresses of both aesthetic and functional design.

It was the home of Shondipere, a Loquai aristocrat and vassal of Queen Menicau. Shondipere was a noble of middling means, who nonetheless boasted an excellent pedigree. His title – if translated from the Sylvan – might have been 'baron' or 'thane': in fact, the Loquai admitted to greater variation within their order of precedence than most human cultures.

Only fifteen Loquai dwelt with Shondipere, and all were related. The remainder of his household consisted of a handful of umbral quicklings who acted as messengers and spies, two *charmed* fiendish trolls who served as door-wards, a dozen slow-witted gnome slaves, and the noble's pet monster – an abyssal basilisk named Turchin. Shondipere kept a stable of twenty griffons, although he seldom ventured beyond the confines of his castle, content to busy himself composing morbid verse, or indulging his dark and violent fantasies.

Shondipere had spent the last several hours – or was it days? he paid little heed to the passage of time – closeted alone in an airy rotunda pondering upon various aspects of the nature of pain. His reverie had been interrupted when two palrethees and a small troop of bar-Igura – agents of the balor Ainhorr – had arrived and required that he surrender his daughter as hostage, together with a large portion of his portable wealth. Shondipere had remained impassive, and conceded to their demands – he felt no particular attachment to his offspring, and was anxious to return to his contemplation. His primary concern regarding his daughter was that, were she to die, he would be without an heir – precipitating a need to find another mate and to sire further progeny.

Shondipere was therefore vexed when the quickling Khimpa darted into the rotunda and bowed her tiny head to the glass floor at his feet. Shondipere gestured irritably, a sign that the sprite should speak.

"Two devils require an audience, Lord," Khimpa squeaked rapidly, her malevolent face betraying a certain wicked glee at the discomfort that she knew the news would cause her master.

Shondipere observed the quickling's features, and made a mental note to have her punished for insubordination later. A brief spell with the trolls might encourage her to act with more civility, or at least hide her emotions better.

"What is their order?" Shondipere inquired coldly.

"A horned devil and an erinyes, Lord," Khimpa replied.

Shondipere scowled. What was a cornugon doing *here*? He had been informed of the presence of the three dukes in Afqithan, of course, but whatever their purpose was, it didn't concern him. It seemed likely the arrival of two devils at his own gates was connected – unless it was a ruse devised by Menicau, or maybe Ainhorr himself: to test Shondipere's loyalty, or perhaps out of sheer perversity.

"Order the household to assemble," he sighed. "I will receive them in the heptagon in ten minutes."

As they approached, Shondipere – cautious of being drawn into some diabolic intrigue which he had no desire to enmesh himself in – studied the devils carefully.

Something isn't right, was his last thought.

**

Eadric and Nwm – together with Contundor, Sem and Gheim – *wind walked* to Deorham. The Druid intended to dispose of the blackthorn tree which occupied the courtyard of Kyrtil's Burh, together with its grizzly fruit – the carcasses of the demons who had assailed the keep. More than a fortnight had passed since the attack, but Eadric's servants had been disinclined to deal with the spectacle, concerned that some taint might infect them, and generally shunning the northern and western parts of the bailey. And the *Ahma* was anxious for things to return to normal – for their usual brief while, at least.

In the event, Eadric changed his mind. The remains of the demons should probably go, he suggested wily, but the tree itself could stay. It would act as a reminder to himself – and any potential threats to

him – that he was not without allies, albeit strange ones which he often failed to understand.

In a businesslike manner, Nwm used his magic to clean up the mess he had made, removing the flags which had shattered upon the sudden growth of the tree, and replacing them with a small garden around the blackthorn's bole. Concerned that the tree might still appear rather dark and gloomy, he caused it to flower, and tiny clusters of white and pale yellow appeared on its spiky twigs. It was out of season, but a justifiable tinkering, given the circumstances. The spell which Nwm invoked to achieve the effect was, however, of less than pinpoint accuracy, and the ivy which clung to the Steeple and the keep burgeoned into a thick cover. Eadric sighed and entered the chapel.

Of the quartet of celestials called by Tahl, the single remaining deva, Saphrez, was deputed by Eadric to guard the sanctum. The celestial remained near the altar, *invisible*, and was enjoined to bestow whatever blessings it might upon those who came to pray there. The decision was both timely and unfortunate – it transpired that a group of pilgrims from Ialde were already boarded at *The Twelve Elms*, the only inn in the village of Deorham, some two miles distant. When Eadric – reluctant that his home become a shrine – conveyed his concerns to Nwm, he received an unsympathetic response.

"I'm surprised it took this long, actually," the Druid said laconically. "If it troubles you that much, just ask Mostin to move in. I'm sure he would discourage any pietists from undertaking the journey here."

Eadric grumbled. It occurred to him that his intent – to have the deva act as a support for his staff, and a source of healing for those locals who required it – would rapidly foster a situation which attracted zealots and fundamentalists. But he could hardly *deny* succour to those who came to Kyrtil's Burh seeking it.

"Keep the gates open," he wearily instructed his servants, "but allow visitors access to the well and the chapel only, and encourage them not to linger too long."

Later that day, after Nwm had retired to his glade, Eadric watched from a window within the Steeple as a party of twenty pilgrims with travel-stained clothes made a slow procession up the knoll, across the bridge, through the courtyard and into the chapel. Hopefully, he mused wryly, none of them were *cursed*, diseased or injured, Saphrez could remain inactive, and news of miraculous goings-on at Kyrtil's Burh would be delayed for a little while. But it was only a matter of time. And if any

petitioned him directly for spiritual aid, he was duty-bound to provide it. Whilst he did not resent it, he could feel no upwelling of generosity or compassion while he still had so much more to do: first and foremost, he remained a soldier.

As the *Ahma* leaned upon the sill, gazed down from the tower, and ruminated on his various responsibilities, a sudden breeze caused his hackles to rise and the faint scent of death and lotus reached his nostrils. A pair of slender arms encircled his waist, and a soft face pressed against his back. Wings began to fold around him, beckoning him inwards. He swallowed, and pulled himself away.

The void-that-was-a-demon-who-was-a-girl had returned, apparently seeking reassurance.

**

Mostin rapidly changed his form, shedding his diabolic body and assuming the shape of a dragon fifty feet long which barely fit into the lofty reception chamber. His scales kindled to a searing flame, and he breathed a gout of infernal fire over Shondipere, the four knights who flanked him, and a pair of unlucky quicklings who happened to be hovering in the wrong place. All were instantly immolated.

Chaos erupted all around. Gnome slaves and sprites fled for cover, and several of the remaining Loquai immediately *plane shifted* to Shadow. Others shakily targeted Mostin with spells or arrows, none of which affected him. He leapt upwards, smashing his head through the delicate glass dome, shattering the plinths either side of it, and took to the sky briefly before settling upon a slender buttress, which began to crack under his weight. Mostin flapped his wings inexpertly to compensate.

Inside of the heptagon, Shomei had taken the form of another wyrm. Hellfire erupted again briefly, before she joined Mostin above the castle, perching upon the topmost spire.

"We should give the gnomes a few minutes to escape, and then just flatten the place," she called down.

Mostin nodded enthusiastically. *Shapechange* was rapidly becoming his new favourite spell.

**

"Are they yours?" Titivilus asked Furcus, smiling.

"No indeed," Furcas replied, stroking his beard.

Titivilus sighed inwardly. It was a pointless question – the Count of Rhetoric was almost as good a liar as himself.

"Apparently, they are very large ones." Titivilus said. "And they have levelled four strongholds already. I cannot *scry* them – they are warded. I am returning to Dis. Duke Allocer should know."

"Is that wise?" Furcas asked. "They might be his."

"They may also be rogue," Titivilus countered, wondering whether Furcas dissembled and, if so, what his motive was.

"One, perhaps; but two? Unlikely. Murmuur would..."

"I think it best that we do not inform Murmuur," Titivilus interrupted. "If they are his, it is better that he doesn't know that we know."

"Murmuur's knights are mandated to intervene in affairs if necessary," Furcas scowled. "And he is here. Are you suggesting that we withhold information from our commander? That is a bold course to take."

"Not at all," Titivilus replied, careful to avoid any possible accusations of insubordination. "I'm merely saying that, if they *are* his, then it may be that we are not meant to know. I would regret upsetting any wider plan because of our over-diligence in information gathering."

"It may be related to your former protégée's petition."

"Perhaps," Titivilus nodded, not knowing what it was that Furcas referred to, but unwilling to make that fact known, "but *which* petition? Now that another has been made, it merely complicates things further." He *had* to return to the Iron City, to find out what was going on. He discreetly studied the face of Furcas for a response, but the Count evinced none.

"And she may have made several others, news of which has not yet reached us," Furcas pointed out, curious as to whether Titivilus lied about the second petition and, if not, to whom it might have been addressed. "On reflection, perhaps you *should* return to Dis. I will guard our interests here in the meanwhile."

The mind of Titivilus twisted, wondering whether that had been Furcas's intent from the outset. The Confuser decided to play along with it. "It might be prudent to mobilize some of your troops," he suggested, "in the event that an unknown rival Duke is involved. I could bring a communiqué to Sobel* to that effect, if you so wish."

"I would prefer to relay such a message myself, should the need arise," Furcas said drily. "I would be embarrassed if the information was somehow misapprehended."

"That is understandable," Titivilus agreed. "Perhaps you should appoint an aide whose mental faculties are more sharply honed."

Furcas smiled thinly.

"Do you then have *no* requests?"

"That depends. Are you planning to visit Malbolge as well?" Furcas inquired.

"Only if our Dread Master demands it," Titivilus replied, the merest hint of sarcasm in his voice. Malbolge was a tedious, brutal environment, which lacked any sophistication: a far cry from the subtleties and intrigues of Dis.

"It might be prudent to ensure that Murmuur's troops are adequately prepared.**"

"That is a wise precaution," Titivilus concurred.

"And give my respects to our Lord, should you see him," Furcas smiled.

"Naturally," Titivilus lied.

**

Soneillon appeared in her natural form. She seemed utterly drained, although, at first, Eadric was nonetheless cautious that it might be a ruse. It was as though, somehow, the Void had diminished in stature. *Ens* had polluted her, diluting her with matter and energy. It had the effect of making her seem more tangible and real than normal.

A faint tracery of scars – wounds which she had recently received, and the vestiges of which had not yet entirely vanished – covered her arms, neck, wings and torso. Blackness stained the skin beneath her ears and nostrils, where enormous backlash energies had caused her demonic body to rupture. Her hands and fingernails were caked with dried ichor: when she had spent her last spell, Eadric knew, and they had grappled her within the unlight which surrounded her, she had torn at them in a frenzy with her claws.

"The Paling*** has been breached," she smiled wryly. "Adyell *disjoined* a section of it before she defected. Janiq's bar-igura are pouring through. I am asking for your help."

Oronthon, he swore silently. *She really is vulnerable*. He sighed. "Very well. How long do we have?"

"Helitihai and Chaya patched the defenses with multiple *walls of force*, but they were being systematically *disintegrated* by daemon mercenaries as I left. It is impossible to say. Throile must not fall, Eadric."

He nodded. "We need Mostin. Can you issue a *sending*?"

"I am spent!" Soneillon snapped. "I have magic enough to return us to Throile, that is all."

"Or to issue a *sending*?"

The message sped to Afqithan:

The Ahma commands that you attend him in his stronghold. Events are spiralling out of control in Throile. Your assistance is required.

Mostin raised a draconic eyebrow. He turned to Shomei. "I have just received a *sending* from Soneillon – she is labouring under the impression that I am somehow Eadric's servant. No matter. It seems as though the second Throile thread is crystallizing."

Shomei groaned. "That's the one with the ultrodaemons."

"Unfortunately, yes."

*

The pious were gathered in the courtyard, speaking amongst themselves in hushed voices, when one of them noticed the *Ahma* walking towards them from the base of the Steeple. Excitedly, he pointed out Eadric to his companions.

Their sense of religious awe was replaced by a feeling of confusion as, beneath the blackthorn, Soneillon manifested. There was talk of a demoness associated with the *Ahma*, of course, but rumour spoke of her being *genteel* in appearance. This creature was wild, naked, bloodstained.

Effortlessly reading their thoughts, Soneillon smiled. Despite all that had transpired, the temptation to *charm* these hapless mortals was still almost too much to resist. Eadric stared stonily at her.

Above them, the sky darkened momentarily and a fissure in space ripped open. As two enormous

wyrms, wreathed in infernal fire thundered through a *gate*, beyond them a scene from a dream – or nightmare – was briefly revealed: a twilit sky, streaked with deep indigo, saffron and vermillion.

The pilgrims fled from Kyrtil's Burh, adequately instructed, Eadric considered, in the application of the dialectic.

*Sobel – the lieutenant appointed to Furcas by Dispater – is an advanced erinyes with considerable tactical savvy. Although Furcas holds wide estates and can muster 29 legions of devils (primarily barbazu), he takes little pleasure in martial pursuits. Sobel watches the Duke of Rhetoric and communicates his activities to Dis, but Furcas still values her advice and military expertise.

** i.e. find out exactly who, and what, and how many, and whether any hellfire wyrms had been deployed.

*** The enormous magical outer defense which surrounds Soneillon's citadel in Throile. It is impenetrable to normal physical movement, and inside it *teleportation* is severely restricted, although *gates* may open within its confines. Access to the citadel is controlled through three portals which open or close according to Soneillon's will.