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For the record, I use the terms *yugoloth* and *daemon* interchangeably, depending on my whim.

More Than You Can Chew: Part 1

"I think that *three* of these wyrms might arouse a little too much suspicion," Nwm groaned, looking up into Mostin's enormous, sunken, draconic eyes. "It might also cause an unpleasant escalation – has it occurred to you that the Devils currently in Afqithan will probably be blamed?"

"Well of course it has," Mostin sighed. Flames cascaded over his crest irritably. "If you'd spent your time productively, studying the *web of motes*..."

"It is a non-issue," Shomei said to Nwm. "It will cause confusion, certainly, but events are hardly likely to 'escalate' any more than they have already: how can they? Besides, even if news reaches Graz'zt, what can he do?"

"He will not come himself?" Eadric asked.

"No future that I have observed involves Graz'zt leaving Azzagrat," Mostin said.

Eadric clenched his jaw. "But the plan..."

"The plan to lure him forth is unworkable," Mostin hissed. "My apologies – that was more condescending than I intended. These vocal cords are not equipped for comments that don't sound sarcastic. Graz'zt will remain closeted in Zelatar, irrespective of our actions. We shouldn't be surprised:

if his venturing forth entailed even a one in ten thousand chance of his demise, then he would not do it. It would be foolhardy, from his perspective. He has not retained an aeons-long regime by acting precipitously."

Eadric scowled, and his eyes bored into Soneillon. "You knew this."

"I would have guessed it," she smiled.

"But you allowed us to entertain the possibility, nonetheless?"

"You are the *Ahma*," she said simply. "It is reasonable to assume that you possess a degree of insight that I do not. Our perspectives are complimentary, Eadric, not antagonistic."

"Then..."

"I have acted already," Shomei sighed. "Mostin and I deemed it appropriate to increase his paranoia. I sent two glooms to assassinate him yesterday."

Eadric gaped. He didn't know what a gloom was, but they sounded impressive.

"They were unsuccessful," Shomei added quickly. "But he has *locked* Zelatar in reaction. He is currently busying himself with purges."

Soneillon looked bored, and yawned.

Mostin nodded. "I get the hint. One moment please." He turned to the Druid. "Nwm, if the hellfire wyrm is an unappealing form, you might want to try *this*.*"

The Alienist rapidly shifted into a monstrous, winged, four-armed brute of truly terrifying aspect. Its hyena-like head was surrounded by a mane of spikes which dripped venom, but its most unsettling feature was its torso. In place of a chest and abdomen there gaped a vast, toothed maw and pincers which twitched rhythmically.

"What would I do?" Nwm asked.

Mostin wiggled his pincers. "You cut their heads off."

"That doesn't seem terribly efficient," Nwm said drily. "Let's just go with the dragon."

*

Nothing could have prepared Nwm for the mind-shaking insanity which was Throile at war. As the rift between the worlds closed behind them, the full spectacle impacted on his consciousness like a tidal wave. This was likely as far as he would ever be from Wyre: by Mostin's reckoning, three hundred realities – most of them filled with demons – lay between him and the Green.

The sky was a purplish haze – at least, purple was the colour which it most closely approximated to his draconic eyes. The citadel of Soneillon below him was a colossal structure, built like a five-sided ziggurat but boasting a thousand towers which sprang from vast piers of black stone in concentric rings around its circumference. Its topmost pinnacle soared a mile above the treetops of a plush, verdant jungle which stretched as far as his eye could see.

The forest stretches to infinity, he thought. *In all directions*. It was a meaningless observation. His mind could not grasp the magnitude of it. An infinite jungle. It breathed malice and death.

Beyond the citadel, encircling it to a distance of a league – until the trees marched upon it – was a swathe of bedrock, filled with immense shafts from which fear and an agony of violence erupted like gruesome and intangible tephra. Perhaps the pits were filled with the damned – undergoing whatever punishment they had condemned themselves to – or maybe it was some phenomenon peculiar to Throile, where a cursed earth spewed its evil into the tainted airs, in a supernatural cycle where evil itself was propagated, and diffused, and finally reabsorbed. For four fifths of its area, the blasted rock beyond the walls of the fortress was utterly devoid of motion: neither demon nor monster walked there. But in one area alone, in a sight that made the Druid's heart pound in his scale-armoured chest, the ground and skies seethed with chaos.

Drawn up like two enormous wedges, the apices of which barely touched each other, the Abyssal armies of Soneillon and Graz'zt – the latter under the command of the marilith Janiq – faced each other in an orgy of pain, destruction and death. At their interface – the connecting point between the two spearheads – was the gap within the Paling which the succubus Adyell had *disjoined*. The aperture was only eighty feet wide, and demons seethed through from outside of the invisible magical wall. Sporadically, blossoming rapidly inside of the barrier, cadres of bar-Igura manifested as first one, and then hundreds, found purchase within the warded interior where they could *teleport* with impunity. Groups of succubi and palrethees descended upon them, or flew to intercept the units of yugoloth mercenaries who had overwhelmed the initial defense of the opening in the perimeter. Nycadaemons and yagnodaemons pushed through relentlessly, despite the frenzied resistance offered by packs of jariliths and goristros.

The mental static was terrific: thousands of demons screaming telepathic commands, which spilled over into Nwm's thoughts as unconscious urges to commit cruelty and violence. He gaped as demons *summoned* more demons, fell prey to compulsions and switched sides, invoked patches of *darkness*, or dispelled them.

Further outside of the Paling, clamouring for the opportunity to press forwards, countless dretch and hordes of rutterkins, uridezu rat-demons, and jovocs surged in restless waves. Under the supervision of hezrous, they crawled and clambered over each other, eager to claw, and bite, and rend. Quasits flitted in black swarms above them.

Emptying her bracelet of power, Shomei had rendered herself, Mostin and Nwm *invisible* and had *mind blanked* the Druid and the *Ahma*. All had been *hasted*. None of the spellcasters, however, were fully prepared to engage in an offensive, and the Infernalist inwardly lamented the fact that their wards might be woefully inadequate.

In the airs next to them, Soneillon relaxed into the form in which they had first encountered her in Afqithan – a shape of unbeing, around which an aura of annihilation began to glower menacingly. She folded her wings – now appearing as gaps in the fabric of reality – about herself, before invoking the nullity which was her essential nature and which had, for a brief time, been suppressed. Utter blackness encased her.

Soneillon, Eadric spoke into her mind.

Her thoughts regarded him ironically.

You need to instruct your troops not to assail me.

Naturally, Eadric. The Void vanished, only to reappear an instant later, a thousand feet below them, and in the thick of the press.

"A *prismatic wall* would do the trick," Mostin sighed. "Unfortunately..."

"Nor I," Shomei nodded.

"Before we can plug the hole we need..." Mostin began.

"To take out the ultroloths," Shomei finished. "I know, I know. We need to find them first."

"How many are there?" Eadric asked, sighing.

"Five," Mostin replied. "And two arcanadaemons."

Eadric closed his eyes briefly and concentrated. A *holy aura* kindled around himself and his unlikely companions – three hellfire wyrms. *Daylight* suffused him.

Shomei raised an eyebrow. "That's a useful trick."

"Mostin, can you *teleport* me to a position just inside of the opening?"

The Alienist was about to say something else, but thought better of it and clamped his jaws shut. He watched as a hundred bar-lgura began manifesting below them. "Yes," he replied.

"Good," Eadric said, drawing Lukarn.

"Hmm," Mostin replied.

"And Mostin. Nwm."

"Mmm?" They answered in unison.

"Don't take too long in getting there. I have a feeling that I may be unduly targeted."

"You think?" Nwm replied drily.

"And Shomei."

She looked at him.

"Choose your time wisely. This may not be it."

She swallowed. *He knows. The bastard knows.*

Mostin cocked his head.

**

For a brief period of time – which seemed like an altogether unpleasant eternity – the *Ahma* was alone. His appearance on the battlefield was a surreal event, which had even demons – who routinely dealt with the bizarre and the insane – baffled. The cursed ground at his feet smoked in revulsion at his presence as he manifested within a knot of bar-Igura. They reacted rapidly and pounced on him. Eadric's shield and armour turned their buffets, and the demons which struck him recoiled, blinded by celestial light. He swung Lukarn in a great arc, slaying all of those within his arm's reach. *Scorching rays* struck him but fizzled impotently, and he shrugged off a *dispel magic* which targeted him.

Darkness would not adhere to him.

A shadow covered him, and a flurry of claws and blows hammered down on him from above as a nycaloth lashed at him viciously, but the *holy aura* flashed brilliantly, blinding the daemon. Two others – the source of the magic which had struck him – descended rapidly towards him.

This isn't so bad, he thought to himself. But now the leaping demons around him seethed forwards again, clutching at him with powerful hands and attempting to bear him to the ground. He hewed at them, felling three of them, and thrusting one away, blinded. Others pummelled him, and he swung again, cutting a swathe through them about himself. In his mind, Lukarn sang, exulting in its potency. Almost as an afterthought, Eadric slashed upwards, striking the nycadaemon above him three times. He sidestepped as it crashed to the ground, thrashed its huge wings briefly, and expired. Another slammed into him, almost bowling him over, and thrusting him backwards five paces into the waiting clutches of the third: Eadric felt venom-tipped claws finding gaps in his armour, puncturing flesh and pinning him. Eight enormous, muscle-bound arms were groping at him in an attempt to overpower him. From his left, a *disintegrate* struck him but failed to overcome his protections.

Above, Mostin grunted to Shomei. *There's one.*

Deftly – and impossibly – Eadric twisted Lukarn in his wrist and began to slice at the creatures restraining him.** With four, powerful strikes, he slew one of them. The remaining daemon clung on desperately, screaming telepathically for assistance. Two of its enormous hands pinned Eadric's arm while two more pried his weapon from his grip.

The nycadaemon, unaccustomed to bearing a sword of Lukarn's power and temperament, gave a look of astonishment as it began to hack at itself with the captured weapon.

Before the next onslaught could reach him, Eadric spoke a single, quiet, *holy word*. The Abyssal rock beneath him shuddered in agony, and around sixty bar-igura within a broad circle about him burned away into vapour. The nycadaemon – and three others who had come to its call – were stricken instantly.

Eadric stepped forwards, and retrieved Lukarn from the paralyzed monster's grasp.

Great Goddess, Nwm thought as he plummeted towards the battlefield. *He is made for this. This is his purpose. He is like a machine.* He finally understood just how much Soneillon needed the *Ahma*.

The Druid discharged a cone of Infernal fire over the demons below him, simultaneously becoming visible. Behind him, Mostin and Shomei thundered over the field, burning bar-lgura footsoldiers with gouts of fire in the vicinity of where one of the ultroloths was suspected to be.

Below them, the hordes quaked.

The situation was uncannily familiar to Mostin, and he experienced a profound *déjà vu* as he winged away. His eyes widened, as the vision of a future half-remembered flashed across his mind.

Ainhorr, he thought to Shomei. *Ainhorr will come.*

She groaned. *Are you sure?*

Yes. No. Yes. I'm sure.

She swallowed. The *vorpal* sword was a vague recollection of death for her. But only one of several.

*

A succubus – a scout named Semhel who exercised no great power and held no particular responsibilities – appeared before Janiq. The marilith remained in the rearguard of her force, flanked by glabrezu bodyguards.

Semhel prostrated herself. "There is a mortal here – or a celestial. I cannot tell which."

Janiq, of quick mind, and wise to at least some of the many schemes in which her dark master was embroiled, narrowed her eyes and hissed. Adyell had confirmed that the *Ahma* had visited Throile on at least two occasions – in fact, the doubts held by the succubus regarding Soneillon's actions had, in large part, been responsible for her defection. She barked an order at her aide – the arcanaloth Xehez.

"Issue a *sending* immediately to Azzagrat. Eadric of Deorham is here."

Knowing that when Janiq said 'immediately,' she meant *immediately*, Xehez used a *limited wish* to expedite the message.

In his sanctum, three words resonated in Graz'zt's mind:

Deorham in Throile.

The Prince's reply was equally succinct:

Detain him. I will send aid.

Janiq – along with her retinue – *teleported* to a position which offered a better vantage of the battle, and watched, incredulous, as three hellfire wyrms – emanating *holy auras* – appeared above the vanguard of her army.

She screamed telepathic orders to her aerial heavy cavalry – the nycadaemon mercenaries – immediately instructing the entire force to withdraw from the goristros and to intercept the dragons.

Her orders to the ultroloths – whose loyalty she still doubted – were couched in the promise of reward. *Capture the mortal, and Graz'zt will lavish gifts upon all of us. Bring the wyrms down.*

She dispatched Semhel with instructions to her reserve force of bar-Igura – who waited several thousand miles away – to join the fray, and smiled. Drawing six *unholy* swords from scabbards across her body, the Marilith prepared for battle.

*

Mostin gyred in the sky, his aura blinding the succubi around him. In his belly, he felt the fire rising again as dozens of nycadaemons began to take off, or to manifest in the air around him.

At that point, he was struck by two simultaneous targeted *greater dispel magics*, and two quickened *unholy blights*.

Oops, he thought as most of his wards vanished and he was forced back into his natural state. He vomited but retained his composure, cast a quickened *dimension door* and appeared among a screeching mob of bar-Igura, sixty feet ahead of Eadric, *in the aperture in the Paling*.

Shomei screeched. *Are you insane?* She herself was struck by a *greater dispelling* but, to her relief, retained her draconic shape. A *horrid wilting* failed to affect her. But her *mind blank* was gone, and to the demons and daemons present who possessed *true seeing*, her real form became apparent.

Mortal! The voice of an Ultroloth echoed in the minds of the lesser daemons.

Gleefully, eight Nycadaemons tore into her. Many more flapped nearby, eager for the chance to engage an obstacle which now seemed as though it could be overcome. Still, they could barely penetrate her armour.

Shomei *shapechanged*. Her scales thickened and brightened, swiftly acquiring a flawless, mirror-like sheen. Her size doubled to titanic proportions. As her wings powered her backwards in the air, and daemons lashed at her, she breathed upon those in front of her head.

Fourteen paralyzed nycaloths dropped like stones to the ground, flattening dozens of bar-Igura below them.

*

A wave of malice washed over Eadric, attempting to *dominate* him, and his head turned to face the source of the compulsion.

It was a faceless creature, whose empty visage swam with tiny pin-points of light, and whose dark cloak seemed to blow with unnatural slowness in the gale issuing from above. It stood seventy feet away, flanked by nycaloths and behind a great, armour-clad yagnodaemon which bore a huge sword.

He began to run towards it, over the ashes of the bar-igura and past the stupefied forms of nycadaemons. Power coursed through him as he invoked as much strength as he could muster. *Hasted* time simultaneously slowed to a crawl, and sped to a blur. Nycadaemons clutched at him as he moved, and the yagnoloth interposed itself fully between Eadric and his quarry. The armoured fiend's sword bit deep into him, but he forced his way forwards, his shield slamming into the bodyguard's legs and bowling it over. He *smote* the ultrodaemon, and blackness poured from it. It emitted a thin, high-pitched scream.***

As the yagnoloth clambered to its feet, the *Ahma* turned and *smote* it. It struck Eadric again, with enormous force, blinding itself in the backlash from the *holy aura*. Two nycaloths moved in, and ripped at him in a frenzy, drawing blood with envenomed claws.

Gambling, the ultroloth spoke a *power word*. The capture of the *Ahma* was a prize for which much should be risked. Eadric's celestial defense failed, and for a fraction of a second the daemon exulted. But still Eadric did not succumb. He struck, and the daemon perished. He stepped sideways, and the sightless yagnoloth lashed out again, smashing through his armour. Eadric *smote* it again. And again. Eadric struck again, but wearily, and as it crumpled next to him, he knew that his strength was waning swiftly.

A huge claw snatched him from the battlefield, and carried him aloft.

"Thank-you," he said to Nwm.

"Hmm," the Druid replied.

But, struck by a *dispelling*, the *shapechange* on Nwm fizzled and vanished, and both he and Eadric plummeted back to the ground.

*I have retained *shapechange* on the Druid spell-list.

** This was a potentially dangerous situation – one of the nycadaemons Bull Rushed Eadric and the other began a grapple as an AoO – Eadric had already used his AoO for the round when countering the bar-Igura's attempted grapple (and Cleaving from it. Sigh.) Lukarn, however is a sunblade – i.e. it's treated as a light weapon, and could therefore be used in a grapple.

I use Pants's 'loths, btw. Nice work, Pants.

***This incident is worthy of note. Eadric's player – Marc – has this annoying habit of pulling off stunts like this. One would think that sticking a yagnoloth (a 10th level *Fighter* yagnoloth, to boot) directly in the path of a size M creature would ensure the ultroloth some space to either use a few more spell-likes, or to *teleport* away if things got sticky for it.

But, no. Eadric invoked the Strength domain and Righteous Might, charged, overran the yagnoloth, Power Attacked at +20, *smote* the ultroloth and scored a critical hit, reducing the daemon to around 30 hp. :rolleyes:

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More Than You Can Chew - Part 2

The bar-Igura pounced on him and attacked.

Mostin considered his options. Quickly. Although his very nature – infused with the essence of transcendental insanity – rendered him a degree of protection from their teeth and claws, he knew that they would still swiftly overpower him.* He cowered, avoiding their blows as best he could, mumbled, and gestured.

The battle froze around him, as he invoked a *time stop*. He muttered a brief incantation, and flew upwards amid the eerie silence, glancing around. Some distance away, the Void which was Soneillon was the focus of hundreds of demons, poised eagerly to join the mob which was already around her. Near her, the withered husks of those who had basked too long in her aura of nullity lay strewn around in heaps. In the airs above her, two succubi floated. From one, a streak of powerful negative energy issued, captured at the moment of discharge. The second was in the process of evoking a spell – although it was impossible to tell which one. Two of her three remaining loyal handmaids, no doubt. Mostin wondered where the third was.

Closer, Nwm and Eadric were captured in a dynamic pose – the Druid, in draconic form, had snatched Eadric from next to the steaming remains of one of the ultroloths. Nycadaemons were attempting to claw the hellfire wyrm. In the sky above him, Shomei – now transformed into a gigantic silver wyrm – hung motionless in the air, with daemons all about her.

Mostin sighed, and took rapid mental note of the positions of various entities within eyesight. In the stillness, he located two more ultroloths – one inside of the Paling and one beyond it – and, eighty yards outside of the aperture, an exceedingly vicious looking marilith surrounded by twenty hulking glabrezu. She was flanked by attendants – including an arcanaloth and a grossly obese shator.

Knowing that his reservoir was low, the Alienist grunted. He had little time to act, yet he *must* act. *Because Ainhorr is coming*, he reminded himself.

He swallowed, vacillated for a fraction of a second, emptied himself, and opened a *gate* – his last – next to the marilith Janiq, speaking a terrible name in syllables which caused his mouth to twist and his stomach to heave.

Tendrils of something, issuing from somewhere – and some when – crept through the dimensional interface to *Uzzhin*, to *outside*.

It had Vhorzhe's face – and many others besides. Malice seeped from it like a cloying fog. It smiled sweetly at him. Mostin screamed, and giggled hysterically.

[Symbol] = *Payment*

Mostin panicked. How would he bargain with it? What did it want? What currency did it recognize? No time to answer these questions. No time.

"Mirror," Mostin said, instantly regretting it.

[Symbol] = *More*.

Gods, it's greedy. That's the most valuable thing I have.

[Symbol] = *Faces*.

Mostin cackled. "What kind of faces?"

[Symbol] = *Faces like you*.

Mostin was beginning to hyperventilate. What did it mean? How would he provide it with faces? Would he have to bring a line of people for it to devour, so it could assume their likeness? Did it mean something else? No time. No time. Sh*t.

"Mirror," Mostin said again. "No faces."

It communicated nothing more. The Horror slid back silently through the *gate* to the Far Realm.

*Sh*t. Sh*t. Sh*t. What a waste.* A string of expletives and profanities left Mostin's lips. Still, he had to do something. Anything.

He flew upwards and quickly invoked a *prismatic sphere*. Hovering outside of it, he readied another spell. Time resumed its normal flow.

Mostin pulled a ring from his finger, and blew gently through it.

*

Shomei was beginning to regret her decision to *shapechange* into the form of a silver wyrm.

She simply presented *too much body* for the nycadaemons to attack. There were at least twenty of them in the air about her now: raking, slashing, finding gaps in her foot-thick armour. Many were blinded, but they pressed on regardless. Bright blood was dripping from her scales. Poison was creeping through her veins.

She *shapechanged* again, this time into a pit fiend – offering a smaller target to her attackers, whilst preventing the venom from taking hold. Diabolic protections would render her virtual immunity to their claws. And her taloned hand now bore her rod.

As she flew towards the ground through a gauntlet of daemonic attacks, the Infernalist scanned the aperture and tried to locate Mostin, but he had vanished from his previous location. She spied an ultroloth – the one who had struck her with a potent *dispelling* – and brought her will, focussed and augmented through her rod, to bear upon it.

I AM SHOMEI. YOU ARE MY SERVANT. SLAY THE SERVANTS OF GRAZ'ZT: HE IS YOUR ENEMY.

She smashed into its mind with her own, and the yugoloth's immense, ancient ego crumpled under the force of her compulsion.

*

Eadric and Nwm tumbled sixty feet, headlong into a snarling pack of leaping demons. They immediately pounced upon the duo who, shaken by the fall, could do nothing but ward off their attacks and clumsily stagger to their feet. *Holy auras* flashed again, but the assault was determined. Nwm – unarmoured, unarmed and less skilled in combat – was quickly rent and bruised.

Fearing for the Druid's life, Eadric stayed his attack and clutched Nwm's shoulder. Light and heat poured into him, revitalizing him.

Nwm swore. He needed breathing space. In a circle around them, bar-lgura flew skywards as he *reversed gravity*.

"Watch my back," he snapped at Eadric. "And heal yourself. You're going to need it. And *don't move* unless you want to fall upwards."

But even as he spoke, behind them a powerful wind had started to blow, sucking demons from the aperture in the Paling. Outside, a great rift – over two hundred feet wide – had opened in space, generating a cyclone around it.

Mostin – now retreated into his *prismatic sphere* – had invoked a *reality maelstrom*. Hundreds of bar-lgura were being pulled through it, screaming, to be deposited in another dimension – although, which one, even Mostin didn't know. The Alienist – hidden within a scintillating globe of power – was not witness to the spectacle, but he would have been deeply satisfied to know that one of the ultrodaemons had also been dragged away.

The tempest was centered on Janiq, but the marilith weathered the spell and, together with three glabrezu, *teleported* to a position fifty feet from Eadric. Her succubi attendants, the shator, seventeen glabrezu and the arcanadaemon Xehez had all been drawn into the maelstrom.**

Janiq was livid. Most of her bodyguard had vanished. Demons were bobbing in the air nearby, *teleporting* to the ground, and falling upwards again. Those that attempted to pounce upon the two

mortals were likewise rocketing skywards.

Two of the ultroloths – now close by – were targeting Nwm and Eadric with powerful spells. The Druid barely survived an invoked *destruction*. Demons all around him tumbled to the ground as the *reverse gravity* – together with his *mind blank* and Eadric's *holy aura* fell to a *greater dispel magic*. He cursed, knowing that time was running out.***

Glancing at Eadric, Nwm held his *orb of storms* in his hand.

"This is going to hurt," he said to himself.

In an instant, the orb shattered, fuelling a spell. His consciousness reached out to the Green, three hundred worlds away, and seemed to draw on every storm that had ever echoed within her confines. Nwm's voice began as a low roar, which rapidly crescendoed into an ultasonic scream. His skull shook and his mind twisted as he sought to thrust the energy away from Eadric and himself, and direct it towards his enemies. The Druid's body reeled under the backlash. His skin, lacerated by channeling the power, peeled away in strips.

As Nwm turned his head, they seemed to burn away in front of him and around him, the sonic reducing them to atoms. Janiq, the glabrezu, the daemons and dozens of bar-Igura were vaporized under the force of the sound. The ground shook, and the Paling oscillated along its twenty-mile circumference in sympathetic vibration. For a millisecond, it was as though the entire battle had ceased.

The Druid barely retained lucidity, and he grinned inanely. He wondered where Mostin was, hoping that the Alienist had witnessed it.

But none of it mattered. The *reality maelstrom* quickly dissipated, eliminated by more abjurations. Thousands more demons – the reserve force called by Janiq – were beginning to manifest. Inside of the aperture, the vast, armoured form of Ainhorr – flanked by a dozen enormous nalfeshnees – had arrived through a *gate*.

Shomei, still in the form of a pit fiend and harangued by nycadaemons, flew towards Eadric and Nwm and threw the remaining *dominated* ultroloth desperately at Ainhorr. Outside of the magical barrier, she

spied the *prismatic sphere*, and hoped that it was Mostin, and that he was sufficiently protected. She opened a *gate* next to the Druid and the *Ahma*.

"Flee," she yelled at Eadric. "We cannot win this. This battle is lost."

Soneillon, he thought. And then, *Mostin*.

As Nwm pulled him through the portal, Eadric turned his head back, gazing across the demon-infested wasteland. Time seemed to freeze. His eyes did not rest on Ainhorr, but looked past the Balor, and through the other *gate*, to what stood beyond.

Graz'zt.

**

Shomei resumed her normal form in the courtyard at Kyrtil's Burh. The late evening sun was pale, and little warmth remained in the day.

Nwm and Eadric, exhausted, looked at her.

"Mostin..." Eadric began.

"If he has his wits about him, he will have opened a *gate* or *plane shifted*. If he doesn't arrive here soon, we should assume the latter. I will attempt to *scry* him presently. He had invoked a *prismatic sphere*."

Nwm relaxed.

"Do not be complacent," Shomei snapped. "If Adyell could *disjoin* a section of the Paling, then she could do the same to Mostin's defense."

"She wasn't present at the battle?"

"I didn't see her," the Infernalist sighed. "Perhaps she was avoiding Soneillon," she added wryly.

Eadric groaned. "How is it that, after millennia of stalemate between Graz'zt and Soneillon, as soon as I become involved, a decisive victory is scored? By the wrong side."

Shomei laughed. "Do you think that this is the first time that her citadel has fallen in that war?"

"I don't know."

"No. Nor do I. But holding any kind of Abyssal real estate is tricky, to say the least. Soneillon will retreat, if she has any sense at all – and I suspect that she does. Graz'zt will need to garrison Throile. Ainhorr will be faced with the decision of appointing a deputy – he, himself must return to Afqithan. The loss of Janiq will be a grievous blow, in any case."

"There are other mariliths."

"True – but there was only one Janiq," Shomei smiled. "She knew Throile and its subtleties better than any other of Graz'zt's generals. And when the Eye of Cheshne reaches its nadir at Khu – less than two hours away – Soneillon will wax to her full power again.**** She is a demon queen, Eadric. Never forget it."

Unlikely, he thought. He exhaled slowly. "I saw him, you know. Through the other *gate*."

Shomei nodded.

*

Two minutes later, Nwm noticed a sensor in the air nearby. Mostin's head appeared, seeming to float six feet above the ground in a disconcerting manner.

"Where are you?" The Druid asked.

"I don't know, but it's damn cold here," the Alienist replied.

Mostin had, in fact, *plane shifted*. And appeared upon the side of an unnamed mountain, overlooking the plateau of Tun Hartha, at an elevation of twelve thousand feet.

**

"You called the pseudonatural?" Shomei was agog. "Where was it? Why didn't I see it?"

"I was *time stopped*," Mostin replied. "And it declined my offer."

"Which was?"

"The Looking-glass of Urm-Nahat. Although, in retrospect, I should have offered it something else."

"Did it understand what the Mirror was?" Shomei asked.

"I don't know. I think so. But it wanted *faces*. I don't know what it meant. When I've rested, I will go to Uzzhin..."

"Mostin," Shomei groaned. "That will be the third time. Don't you think that's tempting fate just a little?"

"I don't subscribe to the theory of Fate," Mostin said drily. "Any more than you do." The jibe was precise and calculated. Mostin didn't know what the exchange between the Infernalist and the *Ahma* – before they had commenced battle – had signified, but he guessed that they shared some kind of prescience.

"Did the *web of motes* reveal nothing regarding this?" Nwm asked.

"Not to my recollection," Mostin answered.

"And what will happen now, in Throile?"

"I do not know," Mostin said irritably. "Events in Throile were not first on my list of priorities when I examined the nodality. Ainhorr will return to Afqithan, certainly. And Kostchtchie will move to aid him when Nhura returns and Rhyxali unleashes her legions. Other future memories will doubtless reveal themselves to me at apposite moments. *Nothing is certain* – it remains only a matrix of possibilities."

Shomei remained conspicuously silent.

"You and I need to talk," Mostin said.

"There is nothing else to say," she replied. She was weary.

"Humour me," Mostin said acidly.

*I have ruled that the transcended Alienist (like the Monk) has DR 10/magic, and that bar-Igura have DR 5/good (with chaotic-aligned and evil-aligned natural attacks). This was good for Mostin. It seemed reasonable to me that their initial attack would be to deliver lethal damage – demons like rending stuff, after all – but upon realizing the inefficacy of this tack, they would switch to grappling. And if they grappled him, he had *no* chance. Dan realized this too.

**Man, this spell is broken.

***Being a kind-hearted DM (ahem), I left the room and had a beer at this juncture. This gave Dave

(Nwm's player) and Dan (Mostin's player) time to thrash out an epic spell quickly. Dan's fingerprints are all over it because a) it's a sonic and; b) Dave isn't as good at squeezing the epic system for all it's worth. I don't mind, though – it's reasonable to assume that Nwm *is* good at squeezing the system. Dan was still pissed at me about the Horror, despite the fact that he knew they didn't follow the normal 'rules' for *gated* entities – we were playing 3.5 *gate* by now, and it was 1000xp that Mostin would never see again.

****This cryptic reference is, in fact, correct. Soneillon's power is not strictly dependent upon any astronomical cycle or any geographical area but, like any other spellcaster, she may only cast a certain number of spells per day. Soneillon's 'day' is reckoned by demonologists to begin with the anticulmination of the star which we would call *Antares* or *Cor Scorpionis* at Khu. In Shûth, this star is linked with the Goddess Cheshne and the process of annihilation. Other demons and devils (and celestials) have cycles for which the rising, culmination, setting or anticulmination of various astronomical bodies can be used as indicators.

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**

Dream and Demon - Part 1

It had been determined that Rhul – ever a patron of messengers and travellers – would undertake the journey. He was hardy, quick-witted, and wise in the ways of many worlds. The decision to send him had been unanimous.

His people were the Nireem, and, besides Rhul, only three of their chiefs remained: Lai, the goddess of magic; Ninit, who watched over horses; and a god of the forge called Jaliere. A tribal pantheon, they were aided by ancestral spirits and nature genii tied to significant locations. Predictably, the goddess of death, Saes, had aligned herself with Graz'zt: in a world in which the apocalypse had already come and gone, her power alone was waxing. The Nireem no longer counted her amongst their number.

Their people and worshippers – a clan known as the Werud, who had been finally eliminated by Graz'zt's armies some decades before – were the last tribe to walk upon the doomed earth. Once the inheritors of a proud legacy, they had been condemned at the end to cower in holes as the creatures – black-skinned monsters with great hooks upon their skulls – had sought them out and butchered them.

Ninit had ridden out and hunted down their enemies, and the hooves of her horse – the stallion called Drût – had kindled the grasslands to fire as she passed over them. She was an ancient goddess, who had joined the others a thousand years before: assimilated by the Werud from a conquered culture whose name Ninit no longer cared to remember. She was fickle and untamed – an atavism who bowed to neither law nor code. Before the world had turned dark, she had caused others amongst the Nireem great consternation by her actions. But now, since the death of Hodh, she was their greatest champion. And unlike the other godlings who gathered within their stone hall deep within the mountain called *Mulhuk*, Graz'zt feared her.

Lai the Implacable had foreseen the demise of her brother, and many others who had perished beneath the relentless press of demons. The end was upon them, and there seemed to be no escaping it. So Lai had dreamed a dream, and passing by roads which only she could take, she had made her way through a region of great turbulence, until she had found herself beside a still pool surrounded by many birch trees. A spirit of unfamiliar type had been waiting for her.

"Have you come to pronounce a final doom?" Lai had asked wryly.

The spirit had smiled easily. "You are not without allies."

"And are you one of them?"

"There are other worlds, Lai. Sisperi is one small corner in an infinity of infinities."

"That may be so," Lai had said through narrowed eyes. "But it is *my* corner."

"May I show you something?"

"That, I suspect, is why I am here," Lai had replied laconically.

The Spirit had gestured briefly, and a vision had appeared before the Goddess. A thick forest of strange trees which bore poisoned fruit, around which vines and creepers wrapped themselves, and through which creatures of evil demeanour stalked and slew, reveling in pain and death. A terrible haze of heat lay over the place.

"Is this a prophecy?" Lai had asked uneasily. "If so, I think I would prefer to remain ignorant of the future."

"It is the abode of one of your allies," the Spirit said mysteriously.

"I choose my friends carefully," the Goddess had smiled. "Who would live in such a place?"

"A demoness," the Spirit had replied. "But an enemy of the one who currently assails you."

"Can she be trusted?" Lai had asked.

"No," the Spirit had admitted.

"I draw little comfort from the possibility of such an alliance."

"If you wish to survive long enough to see your world free again," the Spirit had said stonily, "then you must look beyond what is comfortable and familiar. The place that you are looking at is called *Throile*. It is a battleground, and one of several keys to defeating your enemy. Do you wish to see more?"

"I concede that I am intrigued."

Another scene had appeared before Lai – again, a forest. It was an eerie place, full of deep shadows. A ruddy gloam hung over it.

"This is *Afqithan*," the Spirit had said, in answer to her unvoiced question. "It has become a fulcrum around which many interests turn."

"It is scarcely less depressing than the last vista which you showed me."

"Nonetheless, it is pivotal. Its natives are a race of evil spirits over whom Graz'zt exercises control. He has powerful vassals here. Would you like to see another?"

Lai had laughed. "No doubt it, too, is a dismal realm filled with haunted trees."

The Spirit had smiled and nodded. Another forest *had* appeared – darker and yet more sinister than those previously seen.

The Goddess had sighed. "I spoke in jest."

"This place has no name," the Spirit had said darkly. "Whatever moves there does so in silence, and in secret. Those who enter it seldom return unmarred. When its mistress acts, she does so with deadly precision and ruthless conviction. She is preparing to act now – against Graz'zt."

"And what intelligence dwells here? A demoness, or an evil shade?"

"A demoness, Lai. A very powerful demoness – a peer of the one who caused the death of your people. She is now beginning to exert her Will."

"You disturb me, Spirit. What can we do in the face of monsters such as these?"

"Let me show you one more," the Spirit had suggested.

"Your revelations are disturbing. But I suppose one cannot hide one's head in the sand."

"No, indeed," the Spirit had grinned. He gestured again, and another vision manifested: a fortress of stone with a tall tower, perched upon a sheer-sided outcrop of rock. Lai had never seen anything like it before. Atop the tower, a blue-and-silver pennant fluttered in the wind.

"Another ally?"

The Spirit had nodded.

"It looks less foreboding than the previous. Does a god dwell here, or a demon?"

"Neither," the Spirit had answered. "A mortal. Of sorts. His name is Eadric."

"And he wars with Graz'zt also?"

"Oh, yes. His obsession is rather single-minded."

"And his world is threatened?" Lai had asked.

"His world has been stolen from him."

"It seems peaceful enough," Lai had observed.

"It is a long story," the Spirit had replied. "He is embroiled in the politics of the previous realms that I have shown you. The details are complicated."

"And he can be trusted?"

"Yes."

"Then – assuming I can trust *you* – I suppose we should begin there. Rhul might undertake the journey – although his absence will weaken us considerably. He will convince..."

"Do not make the mistake of assuming that this mortal can be either coerced or persuaded against his better judgment," the Spirit had warned. "He should be treated as an equal – even your brother would have been hard pressed to match him in battle."

Lai had raised an eyebrow. "A mortal?"

"Sisperi is small, Lai."

A look of anguish had crossed her face. "Even if we prevail – what hope is there for the Nireem? Our people are dead. We are diminished. We will fade, and disappear."

"Perhaps," the Spirit had nodded. "But if you survive, then look to another mortal: not Eadric, but one of his allies. His name is Nwm. Remember it."

Nwm, Lai had thought.

**

"I seem to recall your cautioning me against entering these woods," Mostin said to Shomei. The two Wizards walked among the looming, twisted trees on Shomei's thousand-acre estate outside of Morne. "Have you dismissed the spirits that dwell in them?"

"Certainly not," the Infernalist replied. "As far as I know, the Second Injunction is not retroactive. I still maintain a staff of spined devils as well."

"How old are you, Shomei?" Mostin asked.

"That is an odd question. Does it matter?"

"I am merely curious," Mostin replied. "Are you older than me?"

"No," Shomei answered.

"Are we of a comparable age?"

"I am twenty-five, Mostin," she sighed. "Are you about to dispense some paternal advice?"

The Alienist gaped. "*Twenty-five?* I knew that you were a prodigy, but...Amon..."

"I was eleven."

"Titivilus?"

"Fifteen. I compacted him when I was seventeen. I have three children, all cambions – none were sired by Titivilus, incidentally. Devils are notoriously fertile, so I count myself fortunate in that regard. I left the bastards outside of the Abbey just south of here, before you ask. I have no idea what happened to them subsequently."

"I am forty-two," Mostin groaned.

"I know. Evidently you have only sixty percent of my talent," Shomei said drily.

"Why do you think that you are going to die, Shomei?"

She smiled thinly. It hadn't taken him long to figure it out. "I *know* that I am going to die, Mostin. That doesn't concern me. It is the fact that, apparently, I will show no desire to return when Nwm attempts to *reincarnate* me that has me worried."

"That is paradoxical," Mostin scratched his head. "Given the fact that – presently, at least – you do not seem particularly enthused by the prospect of remaining dead."

"Tramst..." She began.

"Pah!" Mostin interjected. "He is merely a demigod, Shomei."

"He is also an intrinsic part of my paradigm, Mostin – I would prefer not to embarrass you in a philosophical debate on this point."

The Alienist was about to offer a retort, but thought better of it, and closed his mouth.

"I assume that the exact moment of your death is not known to you?" He asked instead.

"That is correct," Shomei nodded. "The *web of motes* was suitably vague as to the details."

"At least Nwm is safe," Mostin pointed out. "Or he would not be able to attempt to *reincarnate* you."

"That is some small comfort," she nodded. "I am rather fond of Nwm. The revelation has not been conducive to my good humour, however – as you can probably appreciate. Given the fact that I am inclined towards depression and nihilism in any case, news of my impending, final death has been rather a strain on my psyche."

Mostin didn't know what to say. Every argument – *defy fate, Shomei* or *assert your Will, choose to remain* or *do not let this become a self-fulfilling prophecy* or even *change your paradigm, Shomei* seemed trite and contrived. She was his intellectual peer – and a superior rhetorician. She would strike down any case that he could make in seconds.

"Ngaahh!" He threw up his hands in frustration at the logical impasse in his mind. "Listen to me, Shomei: you do not exist in a vacuum. Frankly, I don't give a f*ck whether you give into this or not. *I* will not. My ego is more important than anything else, and *I* will not let this happen. It is not *my* paradigm."

"Thus we come to the Dialectic," Shomei said wily.

"F*ck the Dialectic," Mostin said. "*Saizhan* is a viewpoint, like any other."

She sighed.

"And f*ck Tramst and his mystical posturing. I'm tempted to blast him for his interference."

"I think the Claviger might have something to say about that."

"Mmm. Good point." Mostin suddenly grinned and his eyes bulged. He knew he was right. "Anyway. It doesn't matter. My infinity is bigger than yours."

She shook her head in amazement at his words. And wondered whether he *was* right.

**

Ortwin reclined into a leather chair within the study of Mostin's *comfortable retreat*, and swigged upon a decanter of expensive firewine, eliciting a look of mild distaste from the Alienist. Orolde, as always, doted on the Satyr.

"Well?" Eadric asked. "Are you going to share your findings, or just get drunk?"

"I had planned to do both – although the latter concerns me more at present. Has Nhura contacted you yet?"

Eadric shook his head.

"Ytryn is on board – at least as far as I can determine. Am I right, Koi?"

Koilimilou maintained her demeanour of serene malice, and gave no intimation that every time Ortwin used the diminutive, it was stored within her memory as a shallow cut she would inflict upon the Satyr when the opportunity arose.

"I think that Koilimilou would prefer if you used her full name," Eadric said wily. "Perhaps she dislikes your over familiarity?"

Ortwin shrugged. "There are two kelvezu within Ytryn's court – their names were never revealed to me. But there is also a marilith – Sethee. She pulls the strings."

"The name is unfamiliar," Mostin grunted. "She may have been recently co-opted by Graz'zt. And the hag?"

"Chavrilie is dead," Koilimilou said calmly. "She was assassinated shortly after Ainhorr annexed Afqithan. Her absence caused me no lament."

"Naturally, Sethee was intrigued by me," Ortwin said glibly, "despite her attempts to appear unmoved. It is also telling that she ceded to Ytryn's decision that the protocol of parley be enforced – the Loquai are very traditional when it comes to observing diplomatic niceties."

"With the sidhe, at least," Koilimilou said bitterly, glaring at Mostin. She would never forget that the Alienist had violated a similar truce and slain Shupthul and a dozen knights, humiliating her in the process.

"In any case," Ortwin continued quickly, "I promised to Ytryn – in front of the demons – that I would relay my satisfaction to Nhura, whom I described as 'anxious to return to Afqithan, and make amends for any past indiscretions.'"

"You *what*?" Eadric asked incredulously. "Nhura is currently less than popular, to say the least."

"We needed to get out of there, Ed. And the only way of convincing Sethee to let us go was to promise that a bigger fish was within reach if she did so. Appealing to Sethee's own ambition was the obvious course – Nhura has a high price on her head."

"That is reasonable," Mostin nodded, "although I don't doubt that if Graz'zt turned his mind to it, then he could liquidate Nhura even on Faerie."

Koilimilou sneered. "He wouldn't dare send demons there in numbers. There are far older and far more potent creatures than sidhe who would not tolerate such an intrusion. He would be squashed like a fly for his presumption!"

The Cambion's sudden passion made Ortwin smile inwardly. He had become accustomed to her moods – the way that her languor would abruptly change into aggression, or her impassive gaze could fill with venom or desire in an instant. The fusion of fey and demon made for a heady wine...

"Where is Iua, Ortwin?" Eadric interrupted his reverie.

"She has returned to Fumaril for a while," Ortwin replied. "Which is fine. She was getting boring, in any case."

Eadric raised an eyebrow, but let it pass. "We can talk about this tomorrow. I am in no mood to deal with you when you're drunk. I'm going back to the Burgh."

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**

Dream and Demon - Part 2

The *Ahma* dreamed.

A peculiar lucidity informed him that it was a significant dream. One to which attention should be shown. Either an insight of some kind was about to be revealed, or Soneillon was manipulating his unconscious.

In his dreamscape, Eadric sat upon a rock and smiled wily, wondering which it was.

He watched as a slender fey – a sprite perhaps four feet tall, and approximately male – approached and sat on a similar rock which had appeared nearby. Eadric spoke first.

"If I asked you who you were, you would, no doubt, give me an oblique paradox in return. Have I met you before?"

"Not precisely, no," the Sprite answered opaquely.

"Do you serve Oronthon?" Eadric asked.

"I serve the Dialectic," the Sprite replied.

"Is there a difference?"

"In my mind, yes," the Sprite answered, "although perhaps not in yours."

"I do not trust you."

"That may be wise," the Sprite nodded. "But you once dreamed of who I was. You trusted him."

"You were Jovol, before..." Eadric realized in a flash.

"You are correct. I have, however, adopted the form of a fey for my current manifestation: the significance of this may be revealed in due course. But you should not confuse Jovol's character with my own – our perceptions are quite different."

"And the Claviger?"

"That particular strand of doubt is now resolved. It no longer interests me."

"It reassures me that you are still active..." Eadric began.

"It shouldn't. I serve the Dialectic, not Oronthon."

"Why are you speaking to me now?" Eadric asked.

"Because complexity must increase," the Sprite answered.

"Suddenly, I dislike your agenda," Eadric scowled.

"That is because you cannot hope to comprehend it."

"Are you benign?" The question was incisive in its naïveté.

"Presently, yes. But I am a fey, and you will find your ethical standards somewhat inadequate to the task of describing me."

"What is your name?" Eadric asked.

"I haven't decided yet."

Eadric woke up and groaned.

After he had brooded for an hour, Eadric returned to sleep. He dreamed again.

*

He sat upon a lichen-covered stone bench within a shady arbour. A flower garden lay before him, and the blooming rhododendrons within it alerted Eadric to the fact that it was late spring, or early summer. Somewhere in the distance – although from which direction he could not tell – cheers and laughter could be heard: swords struck shields, and hooves galloped to and fro. A tourney, or a joust, most likely. The sound of a lyre drifted over the other noises: the tune was unknown, and, although played in a major key, bore a subtle melancholic undertone.

Eadric watched as a girl in a white dress approached, turned, and sat next to him. Her presence was comforting. Her smell, familiar and intoxicating. She smiled.

"I was unsure of what your reaction would be," Eadric said, "after we fled from Throile."

"Guilt and regret are futile emotions," Soneillon said easily. "Assuming you feel either in any measure. Do you, Eadric?"

Eadric sighed. "You utterly confound me," he said.

"How did the prospect of my demise make you feel?" She asked. "You must have considered the

possibility."

He groaned. "Why do you ask such questions? And why did you evoke this particular scenario? I suppose it is somehow for my benefit – I doubt that such gardens grow in the Abyss, or that tournaments are routinely held there."

"There are an immeasurable number of delights for those who know where to look," Soneillon replied. "Can you say with certainty that nothing like this could be found there?"

"For a brief while in some place, maybe. Before entropy caused another random scene to appear, and then it too was swallowed by baseness and depravity."

"You cling to transience in the hope that it will be eternal," she shrugged. "I admit to the inevitability of change, and embrace it. Which of us is more authentic?"

He shook his head. "Your rhetoric does not move me."

"That is because you are secure in the knowledge that *you are right*, irrespective of any ideas offered to the contrary. If you were truly interested in *results*, rather than abstract ethical concerns, then you would embrace me and what I have to offer you. I could show you the secret path, Eadric. I believe you have integrity enough to withstand the void. To overcome unbeing..."

A look of horror crossed his face as the magnitude of what she was suggesting sank into his consciousness. "I am sure that if I were to fall in the process of defeating Graz'zt, then few things would make you happier."

"Unlike Titivilus, I have no desire to see you fall, Eadric," Soneillon replied with surprising earnestness. "Nor would I push you. But if you were to seize your potential with both hands – if you were to *jump* – then I would say that you had done the right thing."

"No doubt you would find me more tractable in such circumstances."

"Far less so, in fact. You have no concept of the power and dominion that you could wield."

"Power holds no attraction for me."

"That is because you have never truly exercised it," Soneillon whispered.

"If it came at the price of eternal madness and self-loathing, then I think that I would do better without it."

Soneillon reached out to touch his face, and he recoiled. She sighed. "If I evinced these qualities, then I would admit that your argument is valid. The offer remains open, Eadric, if at any stage you should change your mind – not that I expect you to."

"You are very, very dangerous."

"You are afraid."

"Of an eternity shackled to you in a pit of despair?" Eadric laughed. "I think that is a reasonable fear."

"There are no shackles. I offer only self-determination, and an end to anguish."

"No doubt," he said wily, "you think that I would come willingly to you after this 'liberation.'"

"I think you would," Soneillon half-smiled. "And I know nothing of 'eternity' – which is your construction, not mine. A millennium, maybe. Or an epoch. Or an aeon."

"Put the possibility from your mind, Soneillon."

"As you wish, *Ahma*." The religious epithet was not lost on Eadric, although he was unsure of why she chose to use it now. *But it would be a good aeon.*

He smiled and shook his head. She just couldn't resist.

Soneillon stretched, and her manner became more practical. "Shall we stroll? The sun is warm, and we

can watch the joust while we iron out the details of how to proceed. We have much to discuss."

He nodded. "At least I can tolerate this scene – you could have chosen a far darker one."

"This is your dreamscape, Eadric, not mine. I am an interloper – although I think perhaps I should maintain this dream's cohesion, to appease your misplaced sense of continuity."

*

They sat in a small booth. Eadric winced as he watched a knight fall to the ground, expertly unhorsed by a cavalier who wore armour enamelled with intricate motifs in gold and green. Every detail was so precise that it was impossible to label the experience as anything other than completely real.

A pixie appeared and poured him a large glass of iced tea. Eadric raised an eyebrow.

"Forgive the inconsistency," Soneillon apologized. "I stole the fey from Ortwin's dream. He won't miss it."

Eadric said nothing of the sprite who had visited him previously.

"Abyssal politics are complex, Eadric," the Demoness sighed. "And the more power one possesses, the more complex they become – with a few notable exceptions, such as *Carasch*, of whom I believe Nufrut already informed you."

As the knight in gold and green trotted in a slow circuit, Soneillon languidly raised a silk scarf.

"Graz'zt," she continued, "being very powerful, is enmeshed in a web of interlocking interests of enormous subtlety. In order to hold Throile, he needs to divert resources from other areas – such as his war with Orcus – or risk losing it back to me in short order."

The knight rode up and lowered his lance, and Soneillon pinned the scarf to it. She tossed a garland of black lotuses towards him.

"Thus, conquering Throile is one thing, but holding it is entirely another. There is no defense that he can erect which I cannot overcome – unless he comes there personally. Even then, given sufficient time and preparation, I can probably circumvent it. Moreover, the Paling is my construction: it responds to my commands – not his. And there are interconnected wrinkles within the fabric of the plane which his servants cannot penetrate."

"Wrinkles?" Eadric asked.

"Nondimensional spaces. Demiplanes. Pockets of time and space which abut Throile itself."

"And Adyell? How close was she in your confidence? How many of your secrets does she know?"

"Less than she would like to think. Nonetheless, I have underestimated her ability. The *disjunctions* that she used to bring down the defense were something of a surprise – I thought I had siphoned her power more effectively.* She must have hidden a little from me."

"Where is she now?"

"In Azzagrat," the Demoness replied. "No doubt she is petitioning Graz'zt for suzerainty of Throile, and using every wile within her means to persuade him."

Soneillon clapped politely as her chosen knight unhorsed another rival.

"Your forces have been overwhelmed, Soneillon. I wonder if you are really this unperturbed, or whether this demonstration of calm indifference is for my benefit?"

"Scattered is not overwhelmed," she replied smoothly, "although it's true that my goristroi and my jariliths have been all but eliminated, and that is a sore loss. Or maybe not: I am no longer fighting a defensive action."

"Mostin had hoped that you would deploy them in Afqithan – if he carries off his *dimensional lock*, then they would have proven useful. He fears Kostchtchie's giants."

"Mostin exhibits an unusual degree of prescience," Soneillon smiled, turning to Eadric. "It is enough to cause me to wonder where he gets his information. I have myself only recently heard news that Kostchtchie is mobilizing for certain."

"Mostin is..."

"You are a terrible liar, Eadric, so I will not press the point: I suspect that it would make you uncomfortable. As to Afqithan, I will still commit what I can when Nhura has gathered her rabble together. I feel somewhat responsible – after all, it was I who made her queen in the first place."

Eadric refocused. The Demoness's manner was so natural, so effortless, that it was easy to forget who she was. *Responsible? Hardly*, he thought. "And Throile?"

"Throile can wait," she answered. "It will be there when the current crisis has passed. And Graz'zt expects some kind of counter-offensive there. Helitihai will lead a group of insurgents – which should occupy whoever Graz'zt or Ainhorr appoints as despot. But I will reserve a sizable force for Afqithan."

Eadric sighed. "What of Rhyxali, Soneillon? She remains only a name to me."

Soneillon laughed. "I think that is the way that she prefers it. She is very furtive."

"I still don't understand what her interest in this is."

"Nor am I entirely sure," Soneillon admitted. "I suspect that it goes beyond reclaiming Afqithan – maybe even beyond taking Azzagrat for herself. I am not privy to her wider schemes."

"Is her manner as disarming as yours?"

"I'm sure it could be, if she so chose."

He groaned. "Fiends are so indirect. I often feel that it would be better if I could simply deal with them *as they are*. You spoke of authenticity before – but I have yet to see you display that quality. You play games, and hide behind masques and personae in order to achieve your ends."

"I *am* authentic in that regard – that is my nature. And although I understand your grievance, you need to comprehend that, even amongst the Fallen, I am a rarity. I have tasted oblivion Eadric, and it is sweet."

"Still you dissemble."

Her wings unfurled. Suddenly, the malignity in Soneillon seemed palpable. It was so profound that Eadric shook. His head span. Even in Throile, she had never evinced it to him, hiding it behind a veneer of lightness and courtesy. Here was an abomination, with a billion lifetimes of wickedness and hatred to its name.

"Is this what you want?" She asked.

The dreamscape around them melted into a scene of agony and madness. His limbs atrophied, and his mind screamed as her claws sank into him, sapping his strength. She straddled him, and consumed him.

Reeling, Eadric strove to regain consciousness, and a hundred false awakenings dragged him yet further into a mire of despair. Her release was so sudden – and so violent – that he feared he would be annihilated. Her Will – which seemed irresistible – drew him with her.

Like one who has dived too far, he gasped as he broke the surface of the nightmare, only to find himself within the booth again, watching the tourney. Soneillon sat next to him. She seemed unfazed, and poured another glass of iced tea.

"Dreams within dreams," she smiled. "Shall I show you more?"

He turned his face away from her.

She vanished and reappeared in an instant, kneeling on his left side with her face inches from his. Her eyes bored into him.

"It is merely another facet, Eadric. A persona. It is part of me, but I am more complex than that.

Nothing becomes – you know this. Jump, Eadric. I will catch you."

**

The raven watched as the heavy torc dropped from its talons and turned three times in the air, before landing in the still water below with a *plop*.

Gone. The torc was gone. A feeling of liberation mixed with sadness and loss washed over the bird. In order to do what he had to do, the raven needed to sever his connection with the thing he wanted to be closest to. The irony was not lost on him. Centuries before, worshippers in the nascent cult of Uedii had tossed gold into lakes in supplication, or to appease the dangerous moods of their Goddess. The raven wondered whether they had felt the same wrench that he did now. But if the sacrifice did not diminish the devotee, then how could it be genuine?

In due course, perhaps the nereid who dwelt in the lake would find the torc. Nwm hoped that, if so, she would put its magic to good use.

A spell, he thought to himself. *I must make a spell, to reestablish the connection. Some day.*

As he winged away northwards, towards the mountains and the encroaching winter snow, Nwm exulted in the feeling of wind on his wings. Perhaps he would stay as a bird for a week or two. The perspective might be good for him.

Over Iald – not too far from Hullu's former abode – he spotted a group of crows and ravens circling above the treetops.

A wolf kill, he knew.

Nwm descended to feed.

*

"He's just *gone*?" Eadric groaned. "Why didn't he speak to me about it?"

"Probably because he thought you would talk him out of it," Ortwin said. He handed a letter to the *Ahma*. Eadric grunted, and read it:

I'm going on retreat for three months or so. Don't disturb me, please. I'll see you when the thaw begins.

Nwm.

"This is inconvenient," Eadric remarked.

"It's a damned pain in the arse, that's what it is," Mostin grumbled bitterly. "I need Nwm for the *quiescence of the spheres*. Now I'll need to tweak it, and Koilimilou will have to participate. We've just lost a third of our firepower."

But as he sat later in reflection, Eadric felt numb and listless. His dreams – if they could be called dreams – of the previous night lay heavily upon him. He had spoken to no-one of them. The only person whose perspective he really valued had decided to disappear for a season. And Iua had gone – was she coming back? What was Ortwin *doing*? Attempting to seduce Koilimilou?

His stomach turned. A pall of corruption seemed to be settling over them – not entirely unexpected, given their allies, but no less unwelcome. He wondered if Nwm was getting out for precisely that reason.

**

Mulissu exited the extradimensional space – a variation of Mostin's permanent *magnificent mansion*

where she spent much time – and stepped into the courtyard of the small palace in her pocket demiplane.

She was expecting a visit from a djinn called Rauot, a messenger from Magathei who brought Mulissu a stipend every six months: her fifty-pound alimony of gold from the estranged Ulao. Typically – and ironically – Mulissu would fritter the money when she made her occasional secret visits to the marketplaces of Magathei itself.

She flew past screens and archways into a comfortable reception chamber – an open and well-lit conservatory. A variety of exotic foliage bloomed in clay tubs and crept up slender pillars which supported the enamelled ceiling. As she floated – absorbed in aery thought – she became alerted to another presence in the chamber. Suddenly, the world felt dead.

She froze.

"Please sit," a voice said from behind her.

Without word or gesture, in a moment's thought, Mulissu exited the time stream. The Elementalist, although no coward, was no fool either. And more time was always better than less.

She turned to observe a demon sitting comfortably in one of her large wicker chairs. *Beautiful* was a woefully inadequate description of him: his skin was a deep, bluish-black; his musculature, perfect. He possessed features which were somehow both bestial and refined, as though infinite barbarity and utter sophistication had been distilled into a single face. The force of his presence was staggering, and even within the stasis of the spell, his stillness seemed impossible or unreal: here was an entity of utter dynamism. Mulissu – no expert in demonology – was immediately aware of his identity. The fact that Graz'zt had made no effort to disguise himself was also significant, although Mulissu wryly observed that there were any number of possible reasons for his apparent lack of subterfuge.

Mulissu attempted to make a *passage of lightning***: her destination was Morne in Wyre. The translation failed, and she realized that Graz'zt had already placed some kind of ward which prevented the use of the spell. And, no doubt, *teleport*, *gate* and any number of other transportation spells.

She could not flee, nor could she realistically assault her uninvited guest. She stood small chance of penetrating his defenses with anything other than an electrical evocation – which might tickle him at best.

She invoked a *limited wish* in order to issue a *sending* to Mostin. It failed.

Calling upon the power in the sapphire which hung around her neck, Mulissu tried to erect a *prismatic sphere* around herself. Somehow, the force of her amulet was subdued, and the defensive spell did not manifest.

In fact, nothing which was not a transvalent spell would work, it seemed.

She fled away at breakneck speed. The restricted area could not be big – even for Graz'zt, such an act would surely require a monumental effort. She would retreat back into the *magnificent mansion*.

As she approached the portal to the extradimensional space, a breeze stirred from a bound elemental, alerting Mulissu to the fact that time had resumed its normal flow. To the Elementalist's utter confusion, a *gate* was already open within her courtyard. The scene through the new portal was of *another* courtyard, in which Mostin stood, beckoning to her.

Guessing correctly that the Alienist had had some presentiment regarding her straits, Mulissu sped through the *gate* into the bailey of Kyrtil's Burh.

*

Mostin had been walking from the Steeple to the library in the main building of the keep when the prolepsis had overwhelmed him: the sum total of events within Mulissu's demiplane revealed to him in an instant, together with several dozen possible outcomes. He had also known that he only had around six seconds to act – an uncomfortably brief period.

He had invoked a *time stop*, *plane shifted* and passed through into the courtyard of Mulissu's palace with a quickened *dimension door*. He had swallowed as he saw her, suspended in the air next to a fountain, the flow of which was frozen in time and space. Behind her, half-manifested from a

teleportation, Graz'zt was an insubstantial haze. Mostin knew that the demon had dismissed whatever ward he had set upon the place in order to intercept the fleeing Elementalist. He knew that Mulissu was incapable of invoking another transportation spell. And he also knew that she must *not* enter her own extradimensional retreat: it was not safe. He had quickly interposed a *wall of force* between Mulissu and Graz'zt, blocking the demon's line of effect – opened a *gate* and retreated back to Wyre.

*

Mulissu appeared next to Mostin.

"You have the *web of motes*, am I correct?" Mostin asked. He knew that she did, but he still sought a verbal confirmation.

Mulissu nodded dumbly. She turned and looked back through the *gate*. Graz'zt *disintegrated* the *wall of force* and walked calmly towards the portal.

"Dammit Mostin, shut that thing down. Stop screwing around." Like the Alienist, Mulissu knew that the Demon could not pass through – the *gate* was not for him, and the Interdict forbade his entry. It was, nonetheless, a disquieting scene.

Mostin ignored her. He was taking the chance to study his enemy – knowing that such an opportunity was unlikely to arise again. The membrane which separated the two realities seemed uncomfortably thin.

"Mostin!" Mulissu screamed.

He closed the *gate* abruptly.

*

Eadric was confused. "You said that he would *not* leave Azzagrat."

"Technically, he didn't," Mostin replied, smiling. "He corporeated a body from the Astral Plane. He was

projecting."

"Does that make any difference?" Ortwin asked.

"In practical terms, no," Mostin admitted. "Except that this is a tactic which he will start to employ against us routinely, and we are in trouble. Even if we kill him, it won't kill him – if you know what I mean."

"Why didn't he simply eliminate Mulissu?"

"The most likely explanation is that he wished to interrogate her – I foresaw that she might be taken to Azzagrat and subjected to scrutiny within his sanctum."

Mulissu looked horrified. "This is your fault, Mostin. Gods, I should blast you for involving me in this. My work. My books. I must retrieve my scrolls..."

"You most certainly will not," Mostin snapped. "Forget your pocket paradise, Mulissu – it will never be safe again. Nor will the extradimensional space. And be thankful that he underestimated your power – you're lucky that he didn't anticipate that you might have a transvalent temporal escape plan."

"And *your* retreat, Mostin?" Eadric asked. "Is it safe?"

"No," Mostin replied sadly. "I suppose not."

"Was it ever?" Eadric grumbled. "What has changed, which makes it vulnerable now?"

"He is bending his mind upon us now, Eadric. In earnest. He glimpses possibilities which disturb him. He is laying intricate plans. I suspect that things will start to get very messy. Very soon. Mulissu, we could use you – will you..."

"Where is Iua?" She hissed.

"Fumaril," Ortwin said.

"Scry her, and take me there now, Mostin."

The Alienist nodded.

"And Mostin, after you have done that, I never want to see you again. Are we clear on that?"

"Yes, Mulissu. Quite clear." Mostin exhaled sharply, unsure of whether she really meant it this time.

* In game terms, Soneillon ensures that her chief servants (who are sorceresses) never advance beyond a certain level (17th) by drawing on their xp reserves to fuel her own epic spells.

**A kind of *plane shift* – *teleport* combo.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 04-26-2004

Mésalliance

BREY: *Sela*, what does it mean, to 'Fall?'

TRAMST: To Fall is to reject that which you have experienced to be true, in favour of that which you know, in your heart, to be false.

BREY: And what is truth?

TRAMST: That, unfortunately, is subjective.

BREY: Is it therefore possible for two people who share similar experiences, to have different destinies in this regard? By virtue of their different perspectives, may one Fall, and another not?

TRAMST: That is more common than one may at first think.

BREY: And when two irrefutable truths come into conflict? How does one then decide?

TRAMST: That, Brey, is why we practice *Saizhan*.

BREY: Hence *Saizhan* always reveals the correct truth.

TRAMST: No, Brey. *Saizhan* always *determines* the correct truth. The distinction is crucial.

BREY: Should one always choose the harder truth?

TRAMST: Often this transpires to be the case, but to adopt it as a premise leads to the Adversarial paradigm, which *Saizhan* teaches us is incomplete. Evidently, this is so, or the Adversary himself would not have Fallen.

BREY: I understand.

TRAMST: No, Brey, you do not. Which is why I am the master, and you are the student.

**

The Sprite materialized within the deepest reaches of the Forest of Nizkur, picked an acorn from the

ground, and examined it briefly.

Pressing the seed with its thumb into the soft earth, the Sprite waved his hand casually.

A sapling shot forth, and began to grow rapidly. The Sprite watched in satisfaction as a trunk fattened, boughs twisted, and leaflets unfurled from twigs. Bark became pitted, cracked and thick. Mistletoe and ivy appeared around the bole, and moss burgeoned inside of damp recesses. Within twenty seconds, the tree matured. It could have been there for five hundred years. The leaves turned a deep gold, and began to fall, as if in an effort to catch up with the surrounding forest.

The Sprite's legs bent, and he sprang upwards, leaping eighty feet into the air and alighting softly below the crown of the tree. He sat and waited.

Presently, he heard laughter. A nymph capered by, pursued by two lusty wood-gnomes with ruddy noses. Plucking an oak-apple from a nearby branch, the Sprite hurled it with considerable force, striking the nymph soundly on her rump.

She stopped abruptly and glared upwards. "How dare you interrupt my frolicking?" The nymph looked suspiciously at the tree – she didn't remember it being there, the last time she had passed through this part of the forest.

"Hlioth, it is I," the Sprite called down. "I'm back. Come, we need to talk!"

Hlioth, the Green Witch, squealed in delight and abandoned her would-be suitors with looks of disappointment on their faces. She appeared immediately on the branch next to the Sprite and embraced him.

"Back so soon, Fillein? I was expecting a longer absence."

"I am no longer Fillein," the Sprite sighed. "Nor was I last time, if you recall. I barely even remember who Fillein was."

Hlioth shrugged. "No matter. What is your name now?"

"I haven't decided yet."

Hlioth clapped. "Splendid. I will choose one for you."

"Very well," the Sprite seemed amused.

"Will you be a fey now?" Hlioth asked archly.

"Yes, Hlioth."

"What is your genus? I don't recognize it."

"I am unique," the Sprite replied.

"Then your name is *Huhip*."

"That is somewhat too aspirated for my tastes."

"Then *Gudge*," Hlioth replied.

"It sounds like an affliction of the bowels," the Sprite observed.

"May I choose or not?" Hlioth grumbled.

"Only if you choose correctly," the Sprite laughed.

"Then your name is *Teppu*."

"That will do nicely," Teppu nodded.

Hlioth smiled. "I must say, I think you have made an excellent choice with regard to your form – although I admit I may be a little biased. Are you still a wizard?"

"No," Teppu replied. "I have chosen an instinctive, blended form,* in order to avoid the Injunction. Besides, I find wizardry dull."

Hlioth laughed. "I came to a similar conclusion some time ago. Can you show me?"

Teppu smiled, and quickly clapped his hands three times. A supernova of magic exploded outwards from him. It seemed as though, suddenly, sapience was everywhere.

Hlioth laughed and cried in happiness. "That is beautiful. How many did you *awaken*?"

"Oh, I don't know. Hundreds. Thousands, maybe."

"You are *Green*, Teppu."

"I am Green," he nodded.

"Do you still dream?"

"Of course I still dream, Hlioth."

A look of concern crossed her face briefly. "And the *web of motes*? Will you seek its return?"

"Why, Hlioth? Who cares about the future?"

She kissed him fondly on the forehead. The trees around him regarded him with warmth.

**

Eadric stood on the roof of the Steeple, wrapped in a thick fur, and stared blankly northwards towards the gathering clouds of winter. The cloak was superfluous – he no longer felt the cold – and he

wondered whether wearing it would remain an affectation on days when the wind blew from Tomur, down from the mountains.

He brooded upon Nhura. *When would she be ready?* For every day which passed in Faerie, a week dragged by in the World of Men: the delay was becoming unbearable, sapping his focus and resolve. He remembered the long period of uncertainty before he had marched on Morne, and this seemed a thousand times worse – a bleakness and desperation which he had never before experienced surrounded this venture. And constantly, he forced his thoughts away from dwelling upon his dream: the black ecstasy which Soneillon had forced upon him, and a foretaste of *what could be* if he so chose it. She had dominated him utterly, and to a large extent he felt the blame was his: he had all but insisted that she reveal her most malign and brutal face to him. So she had *demonstrated*. But he had dreamed it, and he didn't know how real it had really been.

Five more nights had passed since then, and, although his sleep was troubled, the *Ahma* had received no visitation – either from Soneillon or the Sprite. Now he was *mind blanked* – Mostin said that, henceforth, they must always be *mind blanked*, to prevent covert observation from afar by Graz'zt. The Alienist had also warned that it might not be an effective defense, but it was the best that he could do.

Mostin had closeted himself within his study, and begun to work half-heartedly on yet another spell in the absence of news from Faerie: Eadric had seen little of him, and the interaction between them had been tense and uncomfortable.

The Alienist was preoccupied with his own troubles and his strained friendship with Mulissu – he had issued a number of *sendings* to the Elementalist, none of which received a reply. His insistence that she was safer near him – where she could be warded – had fallen of deaf ears. And Mostin was vexed by another dilemma: he could not enter the extradimensional portion of his retreat and *summon* anything there for fear of direct assault from Graz'zt; nor could he conjure anything outside of it, without violating the Injunction. The loophole outside of the Claviger's domain had been effectively closed to him, because the Celestial Interdict did not apply there either. In the times when his head was not full of esoteric formulae, Mostin ruminated upon the Horror, and whether to make another translation to the Far Realm or not. Or complained about his house-guests: both Ortwin and Koilimilou were lodged with the Alienist. Eadric received the distinct impression that the Satyr was avoiding him.

Nonetheless, at precisely eight o'clock every evening, Mostin would arrive and renew the ward upon Eadric. And for that, the *Ahma* was thankful. He groaned. He desperately wanted to confide in Nwm.

He descended from the tower and into the courtyard where a trio of supplicants waited – pilgrims from Trempa who sought his blessing. One suffered from a blight which had caused her skin to crack with sores and pustules, and a rheum had settled upon her eyes. Eadric performed a brief, perfunctory rite, did his best to smile, entered the keep, and bolted the door behind him. Within, it seemed cold and unwelcoming.

He furrowed his brow, strode into the Great Hall – which seemed particularly damp – and picked up a wooden mallet. He began striking a large, iron bell, and did not desist until all eleven of his servants stood before him.**

He turned to his clerk. "Bocere, bring me the ledgers."

Bocere, who managed the finances of three estates – Deorham, Hernath and Droming – on a day-to-day basis, and seldom left his small office, looked sceptical. "Are you sure, *Ahma*? It will take several weeks to go over them. It has been a long time, after all..."

Eadric grunted. "Then bring me a summary. The rest of you – except Hawi – open every shutter and every window, light every fire. Remove dust, dirt and debris – including from the library. This place is beginning to depress me."

He tossed a purse to the stablehand. Hawi caught it, opened it and gawked – it contained more gold than he would earn in five years.

"Go into Deorham," Eadric instructed, "and find some more help. Start at the *Twelve Elms*. Do not return until you have secured the services of another maid, two lackeys, two linkboys and a minstrel – *not* a juggler. Offer them twice what they ask for, and give them a month's advance."

The boy nodded enthusiastically.

"Try to find a *good* minstrel, Hawi," Eadric sighed. Although he didn't hold much hope, the village of

Deorham was on the route from Morne to Trempa, and Hawi might get lucky. "You have two days. You may stay at the inn. Eat well, but do not consume too much ale – every penny should be accounted for."

"Why, *Ahma*, I..."

Eadric raised his hand. "You will also post a notice that I am seeking permanent retainers *of quality*. Including a castellan."

The announcement was greeted by a stunned silence.

"I realize this may be upsetting," Eadric said, although he felt unusually unsympathetic, "but it may be that presently I will leave for some time. In the event that I do not return – which is entirely possible – I would like my affairs set in order. Be assured that I will appoint someone of gentle birth and fair mind to guard your interests in the meanwhile." He knew that, as soon the news of his intentions became known, the younger brothers and second sons of dozens of nobles would clamour for the position. Gossip spread like wildfire amongst Trempa's aristocracy.

He turned again to Bocere. "How much of the endowment to the Temple remains to be paid?***"

Bocere coughed. "One hundred and thirty-thousand crowns."

"I will sign over the deeds to Hernath."

"*Ahma...*"

Eadric raised an eyebrow.

"Yes, *Ahma*."

**

Ninit charged.

The red haze was upon her again, and she swung the spear *Rengh* around her head like a flail, whilst guiding Drût effortlessly with her knees. Her copper hair blazed in the wan sunlight, and her bloodstained form rippled with power and restless purpose. The stallion's hooves – bright with white fire – flashed to momentary incandescence as it reared and hammered down upon the creatures which assailed her. As usual, she was alone: seeking alone, stalking alone, slaying alone. And in her madness, none of those who considered her an ally could approach her in any event: her anger was elemental, and best avoided by those who purposed to live.

The demons recoiled.

The goddess pressed forwards, and slew. And slew. And slew. And when she had slain them all, and their grizzled, muscled forms lay in stinking, steaming heaps around her, the frenzy finally passed.

She spat, and cursed them. The ground shuddered, ripped open briefly, and swallowed their already festering remains.

Ninit whispered to Drût, and they rode north across the plains to find more. The hairy ones which jumped were easy prey – although not as easy as the fat, squat ones which drooled. The toad-like ones, and the ones with four arms were trickier – although they seemed comparatively rare. The ones with the hooks on their heads were sly and vicious, and she hated them most of all: they always seemed to slip away at the last minute. But however many she killed, there always seemed to be more. She squinted.

Somewhat later, from the corner of her eye, she spied a bird winging towards her at great speed: a kestrel or falcon, although at a distance of more than a mile it was hard for the goddess to be sure. She wheeled Drût about, and waited for it to reach her: she saw that it was a peregrine. Which meant that it was Lai.

Ninit groaned, and swore. The goddess of magic assumed her natural shape nearby.

"What do *you* want?" Ninit grunted.

"Rhul has departed for the place called Wyre."

"What do I care?"

"He seeks allies, Ninit."

Ninit shrugged.

"Where are you riding?" Lai asked.

"North," Ninit said through narrowed eyes.

"May I join you?"

"If you must," Ninit sighed. "But stay out of my way, Lai."

"If you were to return to Mulhuk..." Lai began.

"And shut up," Ninit said.

**

Titivilus waited.

He was becoming impatient – he had been kept for five days in an antechamber of black steel high in the north face of the Iron Tower. A single aperture, three feet square, offered a restricted view of the endless city of Dis two miles below – in the rare moments when the infernal haze and acrid fog lifted sufficiently to permit it. Thousands of erinyes constantly patrolled the airs outside – their vectors changing on every pass which they made.

When his summons finally came, a mixture of relief and foreboding replaced a feeling of paranoia and anxiety, and he followed a silent, scarred pit fiend through a tortuous maze of interconnecting chambers and corridors into a reception room of unfathomable height.

A conclave of powerful devils, arrayed in awful forms, awaited him. They sat grimly on carved iron sieges around an iron table etched with scenes which portrayed the Great Revolt.

Titivilus bowed suavely, whilst taking in their number, political allegiances, and relative dispositions in an instant. The fact that Neabaz, the Herald of Baalzebul, was present caused the convoluted mind of Titivilus to twist in a hundred new ways.

"Sit," Dispater smiled.

Titivilus sat.

"Our objectives have changed," Dispater said calmly.

Titivilus nodded. His mind raced. *What objectives? By 'our' does he mean 'our' or 'my?' Or maybe 'his?'*

"The Chief Protagonist of our Cause has ordered that the *status quo* must be maintained," Dispater said opaquely.

"Sire?" Titivilus asked. Evidently, he meant 'his.'

"The force currently under Murmuur's command will move to support Graz'zt in Afqithan," Dispater explained. "Shomei's petition to Bathym was quashed."

Titivilus resisted the urge to allow a look of amazement to cross his face.

"You will bring seals to Azzagrat, and then return to Afqithan," Dispater continued. "Take a group as suits your needs. When you do return to the demiplane, you will find that your precedence has been diminished. I advise that you do not attempt to undermine or subvert those who have been appointed to

the task: you will find them less lenient than I."

"Who has been given this responsibility, Sire?" Titivilus inquired.

"Azazel," Dispater smiled. "He will have three *Akesoli* with him."

The Nuncio's eyes flickered.

Dispater gave an inquisitive look. "Never before have I seen you evince genuine surprise, Titivilus."

"Nor I, Sire," Titivilus agreed.

"That is all."

The Nuncio of Dis stood, bowed, and made to depart. But as he reached the doors to the chamber, his master spoke again.

"And Titivilus?"

He turned around.

"Your mandate for the temptation of Eadric of Deorham is hereby revoked."

He bowed again, but showed no sign of his irritation. Inwardly he was livid.

"May I inquire why?" He asked.

"No," Dispater smiled.

Titivilus departed in a calm fury.

**

A light dusting of snow – the first of that winter – lay upon the ground when Soneillon visited Eadric again: he sat alone in his library, reading by the light of an oil-lamp. It was late in the evening, and her appearance was foreshadowed by a feeling of darker anxiety which played across the *Ahma's* already troubled thoughts. Her façade was, as always, entirely convincing: the demoness tilted her head, and began scanning the spines of books upon the shelves. She walked slowly, her footfall quieter than a cat.

He scowled. "Is there some purpose to your presence here, or are you merely making a social visit?"

"Does everything have to have a purpose?" She asked in response.

"Yes," he answered.

"In that case," Soneillon smiled, "I am merely making a social visit. You have an impressive library. How many tomes do you possess?"

Eadric sighed. "Are you attempting to engage me in small-talk, Soneillon?"

"I thought you might appreciate some company, as your friends are otherwise occupied." She walked towards him, and sat lightly upon the arm of his chair.

"And the Queen of Throile has no better way to spend her time?"

"Than seducing the Breath of God?" Soneillon laughed. "I think not. Some of the more interesting volumes in your collection are charred. Why?"

"Certain members of the Inquisition were over-zealous in their hunt for heretical books and manuscripts."

"Ahh. Before the notion of heresy was itself deemed heretical. What were you reading, before I interrupted you?"

He silently handed her the book. Its cover, of heavy leather, was cracked and worn; the vellum pages, soft and well-thumbed:

Estates and Minor Houses of Trempa

"How dreary," Soneillon sighed. "Do you occupy yourself with mundane affairs such as these, to avoid brooding on your experience of me?"

"In part. It is not a memory which I enjoy to recall." He stood up.

She held out a soft hand. Her talons were conspicuously absent. "Come, Eadric. Dream with me. I will show you something sweeter. Gentle. Tender."

"You are foul," he said bitterly.

She raised an eyebrow. "I think perhaps you need lessons in the art of courtship."

"When will you desist from this charade?" He hissed. "How can I speak more plainly? You are repellant. You disgust me. Everything that you are is antithetical to all that I value and hold true. You are an ally of circumstance: there *is* no commonality in our purpose, save by unhappy chance. You are base, vile, obscene. You are nothing but a manifestation of corruption."

"No," she said softly. "I am Soneillon. And you cannot see past a dogma which is outmoded in the philosophy which you purport to espouse. You do *Saizhan* a disservice."

"That word has no place in your vocabulary. You degrade it by speaking it."

She laughed. "You are a sanctimonious fool. Your moralism merely reveals your ignorance of the Truth. Tell me, Eadric, what does it really mean – *Demogorgon*? What use is *Saizhan* if it cannot reconcile Oronthon with *that* truth?"

Reality seemed to momentarily darken as she invoked the name of the Ancient – its power, when spoken by her, was profound.

"Get out," he said through gritted teeth.

"You close your eyes and ears, Eadric. You shrink in fear from the Real as much as you crave it."

He cursed her. Power coursed through him, as he spoke a *holy word*.

She smiled, and pressed a finger to his lips.

Groping, Eadric drew Lukarn from where it hung in its scabbard on the back of the chair. Reality and memory collapsed to a single point in time, and he recalled another demoness standing in a similar position. Paradox and *déjà vu* almost overwhelmed him.

"Your desire for me has unbalanced you," Soneillon scoffed. "You are wracked with guilt and confusion."

"I will strike you down if you persist in this."

"I am your *kios*, Eadric: your enlightenment lies in me." She did not relent. "I am *that which you are not*. The Void shines, and you will not accept it: for do I not bring you closer to your God, *Ahma*?"

He *smote* her three times with all of his strength. Lukarn bit deep into her neck and shoulders, opening wounds which smoked and caused space to contort. Agony gripped her visage as the blade burned through her. Ichor poured from her, evaporating into nothingness as it struck the wooden floor of the library. She seemed to stagger uncertainly.

She did not beg, or cajole or threaten. She did not flee, and spoke no spell, although Eadric knew that she could have extinguished him with a thought. Instead, she assumed her most malevolent aspect – winged, naked, dark and terrible. Taint issued from her in potent waves.

"Remain ignorant then, Eadric. Finish me. I'll make it easy for you," her smile was that of a creature which exulted in evil and destruction.

He wavered.

"You are a coward," she screamed, spitting black blood. "Slay me or bed me, Eadric: you will need to choose sooner or later, in any case. Do so now. Do I consume your every waking thought, or no? Do I remind you of her, *Ahma*, or did she maybe presage me? *Which do you think it is?* Can you even recollect her face?" Her words were cruel and barbed.

Barely, he thought. He felt nauseous: grief and remorse briefly threatened to overcome him. He swallowed, breathed, lowered his sword, and held out his hand to her.

"Come," he said shakily. "You cannot mend those wounds."

"Compassion is wasted on me, *Ahma*." Her manner was ironic.

"I know. It is for my benefit, not yours."

"You have quite a temper, Eadric. Perhaps you should meditate more often."

The Demoness drew close, and he placed his hands on her neck. She hissed in pain and pleasure as his fingers probed the trauma.

"Do you never cease?" He sighed.

"I am what I am."

He gingerly released a little of his power, uncertain of the effect that it might have, before flooding her with light and warmth. She seemed infinitely passive.

"The scars will remain," Eadric said.

"I will bear them as a token of your high esteem," she said drily.

"We have a very unhealthy relationship, Soneillon."

"Do we? I can't say that I've noticed. May I stay?"

He nodded.

*The basic, mechanical premise for Fillein-Jovol-Teppu was one of a self-incarnating entity with only one restriction: the ECL of its new incarnation could be no higher than the ECL of its previous incarnation at death. All other variables are chosen by the incarnating entity as befits its new role and purpose.

**At this point in time, Eadric employed only eleven servants in Kyrtil's Burh: two cooks, three maids, a stablehand, a butler, a mason/carpenter, a gatekeeper, a clerk, and a valet. Although there was no shortage of potential employees seeking work at the Burh, Eadric was conscious of the fact that – between Inquisitorial burnings and demonic incursions – working for the *Ahma* entailed a certain risk.

***Eadric had made a commitment to pay a 200,000 gp donation to the Temple coffers in order to cover the debts incurred after the war.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 05-02-2004

Innocence

Shomei reclined into an enormous leather chair, and tilted her head inquisitively. She sipped slowly from a large silver goblet, imbibing a volatile liquid of unknown potency. The Infernalist seemed unusually calm and languorous.

"Your dwelling is...beautiful," Eadric said with surprise and genuine feeling. He was sat upon the edge of a similar chair, absorbing his surroundings. The room was exquisite – if somewhat bizarre – in its décor and furnishings. Purples and midnight blues predominated, and *things* hung upon walls or rested upon shelves. Crystal lamps emanated a soft, diffuse light, and a faint hint of incense hung within the air.

"Thank-you," she smiled.

A spined devil flew past quietly, and glowered at Eadric.

Shomei gestured, and it flapped away, closing a door silently as it exited.

"Would you care for a drink?" She offered, refilling the goblet from a huge crystal decanter.

"What is it?" He asked.

"It is called *kschiff*," she replied. "Do not consume too much – it will stupefy you. A little will relax you, however."

"How much is too much?" Eadric had the impression that Shomei was fast approaching that point.

"I will tell you when to stop."

The goblet floated gently towards him, and he caught it uncertainly. Its contents smelled faintly of orange blossoms, and the taste was astringent. But curiously agreeable.

"Thank-you for receiving me at such short notice," Eadric said. "I know that the time of a wizard is precious."

"That is particularly true in my case," she half-smiled.

He swallowed. "Shomei, I..."

She held up a hand. "We will not speak of it."

He sank back into the chair.

"You are here to talk about Soneillon," Shomei said.

He nodded, wondering whether she had foreseen it, guessed it, or determined it through some other means.

"Am I being asked in the capacity of friend, spiritual advisor, or advocate for the antinomian perspective?" She asked.

"I'm not sure," Eadric furrowed his brow. "Although the idea of you as a spiritual advisor is disturbing. You are something of an authority on fiends, however, and I thought your perspective might be useful."

"Have you considered speaking to the *Sela*?"

Eadric smiled. "I consider speaking to the *Sela* approximately once every three seconds."

"That is probably a good thing," Shomei ventured. "It would indicate that you are in touch with the source of your Truth. Your internal dialogue has not been compromised. May I ask a number of difficult questions?"

"Er, yes," he said dubiously.

"If Nehael's release is achieved, how do you think Soneillon will react to a rival?"

He shifted uncomfortably.

"Perhaps it would be better for you if somehow Soneillon were conveniently destroyed prior to liberating Nehael?"

"Shomei, that is most unfair."

"These are practical considerations, Eadric." She gestured, and the goblet floated back towards him again. He hadn't noticed that, at some point, she had refilled it. "May I ask you another question?"

He nodded. He felt that he was beginning to relax.

"Have you entertained the possibility that Soneillon may be fertile? Succubi can enter the equivalent of oestrus at will, and the gestation is extremely fast – days, if I recall correctly. She may use this to exert leverage over you. How would you react if this transpired to be the case?"

His mind span.

"Let me posit another scenario," Shomei said, reaching out as the goblet returned to her.

Eadric found that he was watching her lips move. Her voice seemed to drift slowly through his head.

"What if Nehael perishes? I am assuming that she is presently alive, of course – the *web of motes* indicated as much. Can you retain your integrity of purpose under those circumstances? If Soneillon were to – for example – offer you a way out, would you accept it?"

He groaned.

"Because you *could* endure the Void, Eadric. I have no doubt on that count. I have seen the tendril of possibility."

"It will not happen," he said.

"Nor will Shomei the Infernal ever embrace *Saizhan*," Shomei smiled ironically.

The goblet seemed to appear from nowhere, hovering in front of Eadric's face. He grasped it, and set it down.

There was a brief silence.

"Why is the darkness so compelling, Shomei?" He asked.

She smiled. "Because it is dark, of course."

"Do you think Ortwin was correct – when he suggested that my desire to overcome duality through any means is the source of my fascination? That it might prove my undoing?"

"The *hierosgamos*? Maybe. But I think there was no such moral judgment implicit in Ortwin's words, merely that you inferred one. Are you inclined to symbolic microcosmic speculation?"

"I might be, if I knew what it was," the goblet had appeared in front of him again. He sighed, and drank. He found his eyes resting on the curve of Shomei's neck, and tore them away.

She raised an eyebrow. "Perhaps I should have warned you that *kschiff* also possesses aphrodisiac qualities. Don't worry – I have no intention of seducing you. Your life is complicated enough already." She sighed. "I think you are teetering on the edge of oblivion, Eadric – this is a place rife with temptation, but it also possesses infinite spiritual possibility. Everything will become a paradox, and you will be forced to redefine who you are on a continual basis."

"Now you begin to sound like an advocate for the short, steep path," he said grimly.

"I think your role is ultimately Adversarial, Eadric."

"The *Sela* once said something similar to me, regarding my place in the downfall of Orthodoxy."

"Perhaps you should have listened to him," she remarked wryly. "To avoid falling, all you must do is remain grounded in *Saizhan*. Everything else is superfluous."

A longer silence followed.

"In the past I have misjudged you, Shomei," Eadric sighed. "I'm sorry."

She shrugged, and looked away.

"You are very defensive."

"Yes," she replied.

"I feel I've missed the opportunity of a good friendship."

She swallowed, unwilling to meet his gaze.

"Bliss is not so bad, Shomei. If the weight of becoming is so heavy..."

She raised a hand, her eyes filling with tears. "There is no possibility that I have not considered, *Ahma*."

He held her hand gently. It seemed tiny.

She wept.

*

After Eadric had returned to Deorham through the portal which Mostin had opened, Shomei sat alone in reflection.

Somewhat before midnight, she renewed her *mind blank*, protected herself with other, sundry wards, grasped her rod, and opened a *gate* to Phlegethos. Soon thereafter she met with Bathym for their third – and Shomei hoped last – series of negotiations.

She was furious to discover that the Duke of Hell had reneged on their agreement utterly, and would no longer be committing a single devil to the 'situation' in Afqithan. Nor would he explain why.

It made no sense. The reason for Shomei's initial involvement in Afqithan had been because certain powerful devils had expressed a desire that Graz'zt be removed from the cosmic scheme of things. She wondered what had changed.

She returned to Wyre.

Mostin was awakened at two in the morning – from his usual bizarre dreams – by an incessant banging on his door.

*

The Alienist appeared in his *robe of eyes*. Shomei glared at him, and wondered whether he wore it to bed like a night-gown, to avoid being surprised by things which might otherwise surprise him.

"I've been f*cked over," the Infernalist spat, barging in.

"I see the *kschiff* has worn off," Mostin remarked.

"Bathym has backed out."

Orolde arrived from his room in order to answer the door. Mostin sighed.

The two Wizards repaired to Mostin's study, and the Alienist instructed that the Sprite bring them cakes and hot buttered firewine. He kindled a fire, and spent several moments adjusting the illumination such that it was *just so*.

Shomei fidgeted. She glanced around. Mostin's workplace was uncharacteristically cluttered and disorganized.

"What are you working on?" She asked suspiciously.

"A pseudonatural summons," he grumbled. "When I have the time and inclination – which seems seldom at present. What is happening, Shomei?"

"Bathym was on the verge of committing five legions of his devils. Belial had already sanctioned it."

Mostin gaped. "Five *legions*? Shomei, how do you do it?"

"Well, I don't – evidently. Support has been withdrawn. Presumably the interest has changed."

"Have you considered petitioning Belial directly?"

"I suspect that he is responsible for the about-face."

"Do you have any indication why?" Mostin inquired.

She shrugged. "Who knows, Mostin? Perhaps because of Rhyxali? Soneillon? Graz'zt? Tramst? Kostchtchie? Eadric? Me? Nehael? A perceived pseudonatural threat? A celestial conspiracy? The motives of a devil of Belial's stature are too convoluted to even begin to penetrate."

"I had not considered a sizable force of devils crucial to success," Mostin said. "The *web of motes* offered a number of other scenarios."

"Maybe not," Shomei conceded. "But thirty thousand barbazû would have guaranteed it, and acted as a balance on Rhyxali at the very least."

"I think that your perspective in this is flawed, Shomei – you are assuming that we can somehow retain sufficient control of this situation to actually *direct* the course of events. I have come to the conclusion that, at best, we can invoke a storm and let it blow as it will."

"Mostin..."

"It is realistic," he said. "We are dealing with entities of enormous power, any one of which can turn on us in an instant. We should be thinking in terms of self-preservation. *You* should be, at the very least."

"I am not getting into this argument again," she groaned.

"What other options remain open to you?"

"The glooms. Other Dukes. Possibly Murmuur: he is influential, commands a large force, and is – importantly – *present*. Time is running out to make such arrangements, however. And I have no relationship with Malbolge, other than vicariously through Belial – and he hardly seems reliable in this at present. Besides, I mistrust the involvement of Titivilus."

"You are still trying to control the situation," Mostin sighed. "Our first goal is the obliteration of Ainhorr's force in Afqithan – there is no need to be methodical about it. We can worry about Azzagrat afterwards."

"What exactly are you saying, Mostin?"

"I can *dimensionally lock* an area two miles across, Shomei. Outside of the *quiescence* – where demons will be forced to manifest – I can invoke a total of seventeen – *seventeen* – *reality maelstroms* if necessary. Afqithan is not my world, Shomei. There are no holds barred there. If I rip the spatial fabric of the demiplane to shreds, I don't care. If I can call the Horror, and *bind* it – as long as I can get away before the spell ends, I don't care. Shomei, even if I *gate* in Carasch and invoke an apocalypse *I don't care*. Are we on the same page here, Shomei?"

She looked at him. "Thank-you, Mostin. For a while, I was beginning to lose my perspective. I think you may have restored it to me."

"We are as gods, Shomei. Never forget it."

"You truly are at your best when you're at your craziest," she smiled.

**

She stood, and looked again at the tree for a long while.

It had an oddly compelling quality, which drew one's eyes to it and evoked a desire to run hands over soft, smooth bark. Its height and girth suggested that it was old, but it possessed a quality which seemed...*youthful*. Strange for a tree.

Around its base, bright flowers sprang between rocks and trailed into a pool fed by a small spring. The water moved, but she couldn't determine where it went, after it left the pool. *Curious*, she thought. She looked at the tree again.

Sometimes, she felt that it was watching her.

She gazed around, and wondered what else there was *out there*. Away from the tree. More than once, she had determined to leave – to walk away from the tree. To explore. But she never did.

Why leave the tree, after all? Whatever else there was, it couldn't be better than the tree.

She lay down against its warm bole, and it seemed to embrace her. She watched thoughts and memories pass through her mind, and wondered who had experienced them.

Bathe, she thought.

She vaguely recalled the fact that she liked to bathe. It seemed like a good idea – although she was unsure whether it had risen unbidden in her mind, or the tree had prompted the desire. She rose, walked the short distance over to the pool, and slid into the water. It was the perfect depth, and the perfect temperature. She immersed her head briefly – as that seemed the right thing to do – before leaning back and relaxing against a rock, which seemed to fit her head and neck very comfortably.

She suddenly noticed a small figure – maybe two thirds her own height – sitting on a branch of the tree, with its legs dangling freely. It wore grey hose and a leaf-green waistcoat.

"Hello," she said.

"Hello," the other replied. "Are you happy?"

"Yes," she said.

"Good," the other smiled.

"Where did you come from?" She asked. "I haven't seen you before."

"I came from the tree."

"Ahh," she nodded. She hauled herself easily from the water, and walked back towards the tree. She noticed that now she was covered in tiny flecks of silver – she rubbed them gently, but they seemed somehow part of her skin.

"They will not come off," the other said.

"What are they?" She asked.

The other smiled sadly. "The memory of a great injustice."

She cocked her head inquisitively.

"It would take too long to explain," the other said. "Nor does it matter – the injustice never really happened now. Your transition is passed at last, and you have been finally surrendered: from one Truth to another. This place is two things: a prison hallowed by an angel, and a womb which has always been here. If sometimes the Truth that you chose seems cold and indifferent, then it is Her nature. Maybe She forgot you for a while. Don't blame Her: She doesn't love you any less."

"You think too much," she laughed. "What will happen now?"

"Something nobody expects," the other replied.

"And what is that?" She asked.

"A Viridity," the other said, his eyes blazing.

**

Nwm felt the snow and pine cones beneath his feet as he ran. The air was frigid, his breathing deep but measured. The smell of resin permeated everything, and his eyes streamed in the cold. His pulse was audible to him, above the noise of his passage, thumping through his skull.

His focus was perfect: he was meditating. No symbolism moved through his mind. No recollection of memory, nor thought for the future. No expectation of revelation, nor seeking for something other than *moment* in its fullness. There was reflection, but it was dynamic and engaged – not introspective and divorced. Each moment was precious – but Nwm did not cherish it. He merely experienced it.

He ran until he finally dropped from exhaustion, and collapsed gasping. Still, he meditated. Whilst he slept naked in the snow, he meditated, and when he woke again with the pale winter sun, he meditated.

He came to a rock under an icy waterfall, and sat. Water cascaded over him as he gazed over a frozen pond for nine days. He neither ate, nor drank; nor did he crave warmth nor comfort. He needed nothing.

He meditated. He began to run again, and meditated.

After a week, he rested, and allowed himself to engage in discursive thought. After an hour, he got bored.

He meditated again.

In the *tuerns* of the Linna, Tunthi shamans said that some primaeval spirit had awakened, and come from the forests which nestled in the deep vales, south of the Heaped Thunders.

**

Several rumours – substantiated by more or less reliable evidence and witnesses – were current among the inhabitants of western Trempa and southern Tomur, and spreading rapidly through the rest of Wyre.

First, a group of twenty pilgrims to Kyrtil's Burh had, purportedly, undergone a terrifying ordeal wherein demonic or diabolic forces had manifested to them *within the castle*. The significance of this event was interpreted according to the various inclinations of those for whom it held an interest: a test of faith; a sign of the *Ahma*'s eccentricity, madness or evil; a cryptic revelation couched in terms which lesser mortals must strive to understand; or religious hysteria induced by too much privation and self-mortification – or perhaps the consumption of ergotized rye bread.

Second, Eadric, Earl of Deorham sought a steward for his castle and estates. This aroused much interest among various landless nobles, former church grandees who had surrendered estates at the end of the infeudation, as well as numerous unusual characters of mystical bent.

Third, in the face of the expectations of those who considered chastity a necessary prerequisite for the successful cultivation of *saizhan* – and there were many – the *Ahma* had taken a lover. She was seldom seen but was, by all accounts, beautiful and magnetic. Her lineage and credentials were unknown, and it was suspected that she was a peasant-girl. Or a foreigner. Or a celestial companion. Or a demoness. It depended on who you asked.

The *drip-drip* of pilgrims and mendicants to Kyrtil's Burh rapidly became a steady stream, and then a rushing torrent. It expanded to include potential retainers, philosophers eager to engage the *Ahma* in conversation and debate, Urgic and Irrenite ex-heretics who no longer felt the need to practice in secret, atoning Templars, and the merely curious. They lodged in Deorham – which had never seen so many new faces – and occupied barns, fields and rooms in farmsteads for miles about. The Innkeeper of the *Twelve Elms* quickly became very rich.

Eadric closed the gates to the Burh, and returned to his impossibly circular, self-referential *kiaus*:

What is Soneillon, if both Saizhan and extinction are not unattainable?

But even as he sat in contemplation, she would come to him and any insight that he thought he might have gleaned would be dispelled. She would purposely arouse him, or drive him to distraction by her presence. Her heat never abated. There was no indication of artifice in her desire, only the need for continual and infinitely varied sensation: taboo did not exist, or existed only to be broken, and when they coupled violently on the shattered altar of the chapel, Eadric didn't know whether they had profaned it, or sanctified it.

Constructed reality was overturned so swiftly, so thoroughly, that it seemed as though the cosmos disintegrated into its component atoms and they, in turn, evaporated into a Nothingness from which they were never unidentical.

This was the 'Path of Lightning' to which, he knew, Titivilus had referred – hard as a diamond, sharp as a razor, upon which only the mad could walk. But the Nuncio of Dis knew it by name only, and any formulation that Titivilus had posited regarding its nature was shallow and vacuous. The Abyss loomed on both sides of Eadric, and if he missed a single step, it would claim him.

On the night of the full moon before the winter solstice, Mostin arrived with Ortwin, Shomei, and Koilimilou at Kyrtil's Burh. Eadric ushered them into the great hall, and Ortwin raised an eyebrow: the place was as he had never before seen it.

A fire roared in the hearth, and wolf-hounds lounged before it. Lanterns hung from chains and torches burned in sconces: light was everywhere. Servants moved about busily. The smell of roasted game, wine and fresh bread filled the air. The sound of a lute carried over the hubbub.

Music? Ortwin was incredulous. *At Kyrtil's Burh?* Played poorly, to be sure, but music nonetheless.

The tune faltered as the Satyr, sidhe-cambion, Mostin – with his lidless eyes – and Shomei the Infernal entered the hall. Silence and uncertainty descended upon those present.

Eadric clapped his hands. "Go about your business," he smiled. "These people may appear odd, but

there is no need for concern."

They went about their business, and soon the volume resumed its previous levels.*

The Satyr turned to Eadric. "So the rumours are true. You really have gone nuts. Where's the Queen of Darkness? Lurking in the crypt? Or embroidering a quilt in the drawing room?"

"I believe she Dreams. Why are you here?"

"You mean this is *normal*?" Ortwin gestured around. "I thought that you'd put it on for our benefit. Who's that boy over there?" The Satyr pointed to a handsome nobleman in a fashionable doublet.

"His name is Canec. He is my steward."

"A Uediian?"

"He is Caur's maternal uncle. He marched on Morne with us. Do you not remember?"

"I have a poor memory for aristocrats," Ortwin said drily, pouring himself a cup of wine. "Is everything alright, Ed? You're not schizo are you?"

"Yes. No. In that order."

"Is it true? Are you screwing her?"

Eadric groaned. "You have a foul mouth, Ortwin."

"Man, you're in *big* trouble," the Satyr grinned. "Let's get drunk."

"Will you always be a hedonist, Ortwin?"

"I hope so. But there again, I can. I have a supreme advantage over you."

"And what might that be?" Eadric sighed.

"I'm a fey, Ed. Sh*t doesn't stick to me."

Eadric smiled and shook his head. "Why *are* you here?" He asked.

"Mostin said something important is about to happen. A 'convergence of tendrils,' apparently. He had some flashback of a possible future that he'd seen. A kind of mini-nodality."

"Should I be nervous?" Eadric asked.

"Probably," Ortwin replied.

Within fifteen minutes, Soneillon returned: she had located the balor Irzho in an abandoned temple in the mountains of Bedesh, together with several succubi and the demonist Rimilin of the Skin. They were willing to aid the cause against Ainhorr in Afqithan, provided that a price could be agreed.

Before the information had sunk in, the gate-ward entered, with news that a traveller stood outside who would not be turned away.

"What is his name?" Eadric asked.

"He says he is called Rhul. He...er...forgive me, *Ahma*. He claims to be a god."

Moments later, the hag Jetheeg and two Loquai knights arrived. Nhura was finally ready.

* This is one of the minor social advantages of possessing a +39 Diplomacy score.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 07-11-2004

**

AFQITHAN: PROLOGUE (Part 1)

[Soneillon]: If you should happen to slay Ainhorr today, you should grieve for him.

[Eadric]: (Contempt.)

[Soneillon]: Arrogance! You, at least, should lament his passing. A great warrior. Ever loyal to the master he loves and despises.

[Eadric]: Loves? Love is never that ugly.

[Soneillon]: Love is often that ugly, Eadric.

[Eadric]: And if you should perish today? How should I then react?

[Soneillon]: Exult in your memory, Eadric. Because nothing will ever again compare to me.

[Eadric]: For that, at least, I will be thankful.

[Soneillon]: You will be diminished.

*

[Eadric]: What does Hell have to do with this?

[Shomei]: I don't know.

[Eadric]: I fear its agenda.

[Shomei]: That is wise. Many forget the single, overarching truth.

[Eadric] (Warily): And what might that be?

[Shomei]: Hell is merely a vehicle for expressing the Will of the Nameless Fiend. Despite all appearances, it acts with one purpose.

[Eadric]: I had not forgotten.

[Shomei]: Do you believe the Will of Oronthon and the Will of the Adversary to be one and the same, *Ahma*?

[Eadric]: They are not unidentical.

[Shomei]: Do you believe that you are a focus through which the Will of the Adversary is expressed?

[Eadric]: Perhaps.

[Shomei]: Do you *trust* the Will of the Adversary?

[Eadric]: No.

[Shomei]: How do you resolve this paradox?

[Eadric]: I meditate to realize *Saizhan*.

[Shomei] (Exasperated): Must you always proselytize?

[Eadric] (Laughing): Do I? Good.

*

[Eadric]: Will you exercise restraint?

[Mostin]: I doubt it.

[Eadric]: *Can* you exercise restraint? Is it within your nature?

[Mostin]: I don't know. I've never tried, and have no plans to.

[Eadric]: Your lack of moral responsibility concerns me.

[Mostin]: A surfeit of it would concern me more. I abide by certain...axioms...Eadric, which you cannot hope to comprehend. You can rest assured that within your own framework, I am completely mad.

[Eadric]: And within yours?

[Mostin]: I am utterly pedestrian. There are things far madder than I.

*

[Eadric]: What of Iua?

[Ortwin]: She can look after herself.

[Eadric]: You have betrayed her.

[Ortwin]: Not so! Our arrangement made provision for outside interests.

[Eadric]: I am referring to *how* you went about this. Flaunting a lover in front of her is not discreet. You could have been more sensitive.

[Ortwin]: I have not lied to her. Are you suggesting that I should have?

[Eadric]: She is eighteen years old.

[Ortwin]: Life is full of hard lessons, Ed.

[Eadric]: That is facile. You have a duty towards her.

[Ortwin]: What can I say? I'm selfish.

[Eadric]: Koilimilou is a sidhe and a cambion, Ortwin. She venerates Rhyxali. She is without remorse or compassion. What can she offer you?

[Ortwin]: Inventiveness, and insatiability. Relief from the boredom of existence.

[Eadric]: Once you had principles, as much as you pretended not to.

[Ortwin]: Once, I was mortal. My perspective has changed.

[Eadric]: Your essential nature has changed.

[Ortwin]: No more than yours. And Eadric of Deorham is the one f*cking the Demon Queen of Throile.

[Eadric]: I remain conflicted in my actions, Ortwin. I am neither complacent nor fixated on sensation. I do what I must.

[Ortwin]: Oh, bullsh*t Ed. Grow up. You're just doing what we all have to do. It's biological. It's just been a long time coming for you, and you've decided to take an unconventional route. Guilt is an outdated emotion.

[Eadric]: Why are you even here, Ortwin?

[Ortwin]: I feel it in my blood, Eadric. I can smell it. Every tree whispers it to me.

[Eadric]: ?

[Ortwin]: Good things, Ed. Good things. Something stirs.

**

Why the Nameless Adversary acts in the way he does is a cosmic imponderable. His reasonings are so complex, his plots so byzantine, his vision so broad in its imagining, that no real hope exists in penetrating his motives.

The Irrenites – who had been generally sympathetic to the Adversarial paradigm – maintained the position that if the Oronthon beyond Oronthon was utterly ineffable, then the Adversary was the distillation of pure rationality. Every move that he made – to augment one incomprehensible factor, or to reduce another – was calculated with the utmost precision and played out within the framework of eternal potentiality. He nurtured tendrils of possibility which might not yield fruit for a billion years.

The nodality in Afqithan – although complex and multi-faceted – was itself only a minor aspect of a larger process of change: or so it could be interpreted, if one was inclined towards such speculation. The mind of God – which, from an Urgic perspective, included every iota of consciousness in existence at any time and every possible combination thereof – was engaged in a reorganization of its own, internal structure. This manifested in the World of Men in a number of ways: a resurgence in the cult of Cheshne, as concepts of Nothingness were articulated within the physical plane; long periods during which the *Sela* was engaged in intense meditation; and finally, the beginnings of a schism regarding the interpretation of the best way to implement and realize *Saizhan* itself.

Because Cheshne – who, if the cosmos possessed an objective truth, might be identical with Demogorgon, and might not – had stirred. Or maybe she shifted slightly in her sleep. In any event, a torrent of contradictory truths were suddenly unleashed upon an already strained Dialectic, forcing an explosion of insights to occur. Cheshne was real again, and always had been.

The liaison between the *Ahma* and Soneillon – it was suspected – was merely a physical symptom of the articulation of Nothingness within the Ideal realm. Eadric did not know it, but his relationship with the demoness was to have profound and far-reaching consequences for Oronthonian mysticism. Not with respect to the *definition* of *Saizhan* – after all, how can a state devoid of all qualities be rendered in sensible terms? But as far as praxis was concerned – the *method* by which one came to the final realization which *Saizhan* claimed to be – the *Ahma* was blazing a path which would appeal to a particular minority: those of antinomian bent within the broad and complex set of perspectives which comprised Oronthonian religion.

Many who had been Irrenites – before such labels became superfluous – immediately understood what Eadric of Deorham was attempting to do. They applauded his revolutionary vision, his rejection of conventional mores, and his apparent transcendence of notions such as good and evil – although the matter was far from resolved within the *Ahma*'s own mind. Several adepts – including the thaumaturges Sineig and Wrohs* – went as far as to compact succubi in their exploration of *Saizhan*. Not so much in emulation of the *Ahma*, but in recognition that rapid deconstruction of conventional reality required radical tools, and demons were about as radical as it got.

The subschool which arose, *Skôhslclair* – the gate of demons – would produce works of extraordinary

genius and subtlety. Its validity as an authentic vehicle for *Saizhan* was doubted by few, but its suitability as a universal tool – which many of its proponents advocated – was regarded with dubiety by more conservative elements. It was too controversial. Too hazardous. Too *Adversarial* for the tastes of many. It was beyond even the most questionable of Goetic practices. It should be reserved only for those whom the *Sela* deemed ready.

Of course, the *Sela* himself declined to make such judgments.

It was in foreknowledge and anticipation of these events – and others beside – that the schemes of Hell were set into motion. To the amazement of the nobles Furcas and Murmuur, Azazel – and the Infernal Standard – arrived in Afqithan, together with three other devils of unusually wicked temperament. Sachir, Zaare and Nahuzihis were *Akesoli*, serving the arch-fiend Amaimon, and dispensing pain upon powerful and intractable thralls both mortal and diabolic. There was no question of challenging Azazel's authority in the demiplane by either of the entrenched Dukes. He needed neither seals nor letters of precedence to validate his assumption of command: he was *Azazel*. That was enough.

The presence of the *Akesoli* caused fearful speculation amongst Murmuur and his various captains and lieutenants – decorated narzugons high in the Order of the Fly. Murmuur was a straightforward soldier, and although subtle in the way that all Infernal aristocrats are subtle, he lacked the calculated finesse of intellectuals such as Furcas and Titivilus. He was not privy to the machinations of his liege in Malbolge, nor of his liege's liege in Maladomini. It was evident that the *Akesoli*'s presence must have been authorized at the *highest* level: sanctioned by the Adversary himself, the Quatriumvirate, and possibly the silent council of the thirteen great Antagonists.**

Murmuur was, however, relieved that Azazel had been appointed the task of commanding the effort. Azazel was – like himself – a warrior, with little interest in devious schemes. Although a harsh taskmaster, Hell's standard-bearer recognized accomplishment upon the battlefield above all else, and Murmuur excelled in battle and deeds of martial prowess. The Duke mused drily whether Azazel's arrival had been a strategic decision designed to make Murmuur himself more tractable, or whether it in some way reflected the involvement of the *Ahma*: although Agalierept might have been a more obvious choice, he would possess less *gravitas* as far as mortals were concerned.***

Murmuur waited impatiently, eager to simultaneously align the nine *gates* within his tower to

Malbolge, in order to permit his troops through: thirty legions, plus their auxiliaries. There were bearded devils, malebranche, horned devils and erinyes. And his knights, who numbered several thousand, would lead the narzugon charge – if and when it came.

If it came. Murmuur realized that he still had no idea what was really happening. But unlike Furcus or Titivilus, his political ignorance was a source of comfort rather than distress.

He grunted. Spined devils flapped silently around him, strapping his breastplate and vambraces – constructed of an unknown, greenish metal – over a fine mesh of infernal steel.

**

The galley – a vast, ponderous quadrieme from Shûth – lumbered at dusk into the bustling port of Jashat, and moored close to the weathered marble of an ancient wharf, fast by a sleek Thalassine jabeque. Her timbers groaned as she eclipsed the smaller ship, blotting out the sunset and irritating the dozen or so sailors who smoked and relaxed upon the jabeque's deck after a hard week's work. The quayside – stretching below a vast plaza crammed with temples to a hundred gods – was a riot of colour and activity.

The Gentleman from Thond – whose own preference for colour in his clothing was understated at best, and muted at worst – stood in the cool evening air upon wide steps, below a timeworn shrine to the god Pe'ahj. Six retainers attended him. He squinted through the scented clouds exuded by temple censers in an effort to suppress the effect upon his humours. His humours exhibited a particularly delicate balance. He was nervous, and agitated.

He watched impatiently as pulleys span and counterweights soared upon two great derricks near the stern, and the galley lowered a gangway half as wide as the road to Fumaril. She began to unload dozens of crates, chests and boxes from her hold, lugged by huge slaves who bore intricate brands upon their arms and shoulders: the Gentleman from Thond wondered they were a giant-breed from some distant corner of Shûth. Before them, a company of guards – of similar type, but clad in dull breastplates and wearing cloaks of sombre red – marched silently down the walkway and arrayed

themselves in a wide semicircle, blocking half the quayside and causing merchants and vendors to curse and grumble. Long, sharp glaives pointed outwards like a thicket, oblivious to the laws and customs of Jashat.

A second gangplank – less massive than the first – was hauled into place and dropped by a hundred muscled arms.

The Gentleman from Thond licked his lips apprehensively. A slow procession of magi began to issue from the galley. Some were cowed and hooded, others bare-headed, yet more bore hair arranged in long, intricate braids – all according to their station and function, at which the Gentleman could only guess. In the rear, a number of veiled palanquins – attended by servants or neophytes – swayed rhythmically, in time with the steady footsteps of their muscled bearers.

He swallowed, and strode forwards. Several of the guards – each a cubit taller than himself – immediately brought their weapons to bear on him. He smiled uncertainly, and coughed. Before he had the chance to speak, he heard another voice issue from behind them.

The wall of steel parted, to reveal a slender man with a terse manner dressed in a loose, silk robe of greenish-black.

"I have made the necessary arrangements, but..." the Gentleman from Thond began.

"Good," the other interrupted. "I am Anumid. You will address me – and me only. Here is a list of our requirements."

Anumid handed a long scroll to the Gentleman, who raised his eyes in surprise.

"The temple precinct has been cleared," the Gentleman from Thond said. "Vagrants were..."

"The details are irrelevant," Anumid interrupted again. "The site will be reconsecrated, in any case."

"I have had to call in many favours and line many purses, to make this happen, Anumid. I have had numerous unforeseen expenses."

"You will be recompensed," Anumid smiled. "Do you wish to continue in the capacity of our agent?"

"Yes, but..."

"Will fifty thousand be sufficient to begin with?"

"Yes." The Gentleman from Thond bowed perfunctorily.

As the train made its winding progress through the city of Jashat, they passed by two Wizards of middling power: a local enchantress named Luthlul, and her recent acquaintance Menniz, a conjurer who originally hailed from Lang Herath in Wyre.**** Luthlul gave Menniz a meaningful look.

"This is an unexpected development," Menniz said uncomfortably, scratching his neck. "Do you think they're genuine?"

Luthlul invoked her *arcane sight* and gaped.

"I assume from your expression that the answer is an unqualified *yes*," Menniz said laconically.

"The four in the palanquins are off the scale," Luthlul whispered. "I'm not getting anything from half a dozen others – they're probably *mind blanked*."

"Why aren't they using a more conventional mode of transport? Is it a ritual thing?"

"Probably," Luthlul nodded. "What should we do?"

"We can't *do* anything, Luthlul. But I'll issue a *sending* to Daunton in a while: he should probably know. Frankly, if they're staying here, I'm inclined to return to Wyre. At least it's safer there."

"From less than half of them," Luthlul grimaced. "I wonder if any more are coming."

"I doubt it. I'm surprised that there are that many in the whole of Shûth. What have they been doing for the past eight hundred years?"

"Preserving the tradition, apparently."

After Daunton received the *sending* in Gibirazen, news quickly became current among those mages he knew – and subsequently, through his friend Prince Tagur, passed into both temporal and spiritual circles.

When it reached the ears of the *Sela*, Tramst evinced neither surprise nor concern.

Within a day more rumours were circulating, and Daunton determined to visit Jashat himself – none of his divinations were proving effective in the matter.

Three miles outside of the city, the temple of Cheshne – abandoned and overgrown for a millennium – had risen again from its crumbling ruins. By their arts the magi – and now none doubted their authenticity – had restored the compound overnight.

Towers soared skywards to giddy heights, icons and statues of tormented spirits – the *ugras* or 'fierce protectors' of the faith – adorned walls and bastions: they bore an uncanny resemblance to figures which, in the faith of Oronthon, were understood to be fallen celestials. In the beliefs of Shûth, however, their rôle was subtler and more complex. And far older. Embodiments of fear, lust or violence which must be both placated and overcome in order for reconciliation with Nothingness to be achieved.

Mostin – who had been inwardly concerned about the missing tendril in his convergence – received a *sending* from Daunton while he sat at the table in the Great Hall at Kyrtil's Burh. His face remained impassive.

Queen Soneillon, who rested across from him in contemplative pose, looked into his eyes.

**

Iua's defiance of her mother's wishes was rooted in her need to refamiliarize herself with Fumaril – from which she had been absent for a year – almost as much as her obstinacy when it came to obeying Mulissu's commands. Despite her mother's insistence that Iua remain inconspicuous and protected by the wards of faith, the Duelist's own curiosity and wanderlust – traits for which Mulissu herself had once been renowned – found her in any number of dubious locales. She took to the streets with a mind to finding anything which might distract her from brooding upon her brief, eccentric and ultimately empty relationship with Ortwin.

Mulissu herself was cloistered within one of several small temples to Jeshi – into whose cult, in her youth, she had been initiated.***** Whilst the Savant had maintained a relatively low profile amongst wizardly circles in Wyre and beyond, her reputation amongst the clergy of Jeshi – who shared many of the same aerial contacts as the Elementalist – was somewhat different. Her progress had been watched: lauded by some, criticized by others, and, by more than a few, recognized as a potential source of revivification for the cult's flagging fortunes.

Mulissu, who abhorred politics almost as much as organized religion, avoided all attempts to convince her to renew her vows to Jeshi. But the *hallowed* ground of the temple was – from her perspective – too useful a defense to ignore, so she grudgingly acquiesced to the demands of the High Priestess to attend revels held in Jeshi's name. In return, the Elementalist was granted several perquisites: the use of the roof-space above the Chamber of Chimes, a feigned ignorance of any magic that she might work, and assurances that she would be otherwise left alone.

Mulissu's unique spirituality – cerebral in the extreme – had developed to regard devotional practices as bizarre and inexplicable. There was no reconnection with a deeper source, no feeling of unity or succour, no camaraderie, and no appreciation of a symbolism which might – to an initiate – possess profound revelatory significance: to Mulissu, it appeared as an alphabet inaccurately scrawled by a toddler.

But in Fumaril – which lay beyond the purview of the Claviger – Mulissu could *summon*. She haggled *ad nauseum* with powerful djinns in an effort to replenish her diminished supply of spells, and co-opted the services of a novice called Naimha to act in the capacity of a broker. Naimha scoured every marketplace and every hidden shop which dealt in oddities in an attempt to procure magical

paraphernalia – mostly without success. Mulissu opened lines of communication with Tozinak, whom she liked; with Jalael, whom she distrusted; and with Waide, whom she found intolerable. She also began to cultivate the friendship of Ehieu, a sorcerer from Pandicule whose flightiness made Mulissu seem positively stable. Ehieu roamed the seas south of Fumaril and – when not alternately vexing or aiding sailors – made infrequent visits to the Temple.

She pointedly – and somewhat petulantly – snubbed Shomei, who by virtue of close association with Mostin, was considered an undesirable acquaintance. Shomei was, to some degree at least, responsible for the Elementalist's decline in fortunes.

She sighed. She should have known better than to deal with Alienists and Infernalists, even if they were among the handful of people whose intellects she actually respected.

When Mulissu therefore received a *sending* from Daunton – who had been apprised of her presence on the Prime – her heart sunk:

Cult of Cheshne resurfaced in Jashat. Powerful necromancers and blood-magi. Suspect at least six first-order wizards and four transvalent hierophants. Will advise further. Daunton.

Mulissu groaned, and wondered if it was related to the nonsense that Mostin had involved himself in. She would keep all of her possessions on hand, in case a speedy exit from Fumaril proved necessary.

Jashat, after all, was only forty miles away.

She brooded briefly, and wondered whether relaying the information to Iua would be wise. Her daughter was brilliant, but her judgment frequently poor.

Iua herself did not return until the early hours of the next morning. She was flushed from a number of encounters – some involving crossed blades, others not – and moderately inebriated.

Mulissu sighed. Parenting was not her strong suit. She chided Iua inexpertly and gestured, vaguely conscious that this might be the correct way to address a child.

Iua ignored her, and her eyes widened: she seemed to be looking at something *behind* Mulissu. The Elementalist's hackles rose, and she wheeled about, prepared to unleash a powerful necromancy.

I see nothing

The thought passed through Mulissu's mind a fraction of a second before she experienced an acute, stabbing agony, rapidly followed by a succession of further intense pains. Her eyes glazed over, and she glanced down to notice that around a foot of cold, slender steel was protruding from her stomach, and that blood was flowing freely from her. She felt Iua's blade withdraw from her, and as she collapsed and died, she idly wondered why her own daughter had slain her.

Thus passed Mulissu: counted among the greatest of evokers in Wyre's history, although she was not herself a native of that place. And this time, Mostin the Metagnostic experienced no feeling of foreboding prior to the danger in which the Savant found herself, no presentiment of her demise. Not even the faintest inkling of prescience remained to him now, and some time would pass before news of her death reached him. Mulissu, whom he had loved in his own, strange fashion.

Her spirit fled, and was dispersed upon the winds.

Iua screamed silently from within the prison which her body had become, and watched, helpless, as her hands began to rifle her mother's still-warm corpse for items beyond worth. She grabbed rings from Mulissu's fingers, ripped an amulet from her breast, and pulled the *sapphire of mutable coruscations* from its collar around her throat. She smiled wickedly as she delved into a *glove of storing* and felt the *web of motes*, and something else. She pulled forth a small lump of obsidian, shaped like a horse.

How fortuitous, the thought manifested with savage irony within Iua's mind, although it was not her own.

Iua, and her possessor – a demon named Surab – *plane shifted* to the Abyss upon a fantastic steed.

*Although Orthodoxy had boasted few magically potent priests in its heyday – and many had been slain during the war with Trempa – the heretical Irrenite fringe sheltered a number of competent thaumaturges.

**Hell's hierarchy is, of course, immensely complex, and various devils exercise varying degrees of power in different areas. Governance is executed through Asmodeus, Astaroth, Baalzebul and Belial – amongst whom precedence is hotly contested. The Thirteen Great Antagonists are fallen seraphs who have no place in the day-to-day administration of Hell, and concern themselves entirely with the war against Heaven. Many scholars of diabolic politics insist that the arrangement is purposely tense and ambiguous – a dynamism in the hierarchy enforced by the Adversary to prevent stagnation.

***Agalierept is the commander of Hell's second legion and Grand General of Hell. Among Hell's foremost soldiers, his cruelty and vindictiveness are legendary. The armoured cornugons who serve him are likewise renowned for their ruthless brutality.

****After the Claviger's Injunction in Wyre, many wizards of more independent mind moved outside of the magically proscribed area. Of them, most found their way south to the Thalassine.

*****Mulissu's initial vocation – that of a priestess – had been quickly rejected. Jeshi is a Thalassine goddess of the winds, with a widespread but uninfluential following. The names *Jeshi* and *Jashat* are etymologically connected.

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AFQITHAN: PROLOGUE (Part 2)

At least five infinities clashed in Afqithan. When forces collide in the metaphysical realm, it is only natural that this is reflected in our own.

- Orolde.

Rhul's case had been delivered with such eloquence and such poignancy that all those who listened to him, excepting perhaps Jetheeg – the lamia *cum* hag who possessed neither a moral conscience nor artistic sensibilities – had been moved.

He had spoken of Sisperi: its clans, and history and traditions; its wide grasslands and virgin forests; its towns and villages; the customs and the temperament of its peoples. He had evoked scenes of soaring mountains riven with deep canyons, and sun shining on a rolling surf, and mists rising over cold, still lakes. His speech had possessed a natural rhythm which made all constructed meter seem crass and childish; his tone was mellifluous and enchanting.

And then he had spoken of death, and ruin, and the end of the world. Of the blight which consumed all things and turned them to filth and desolation. Of the razing of civilization, and the final extinction of sapience. Rhul's words had become a soft-spoken lament; there was no compromise in his description of the horror which had occurred, even until the bitter end. He had spoken of Mulhuk, and of Saes, and Lai, and the death of Hodh and other godlings besides. He had spoken of Ninit, and her wild, unquenchable fury.

Ortwin had sat silently, his head in his hands. Mostin had stared blankly. Bile and anger had arisen in Eadric's throat.

And then Rhul had begged for aid. Eadric had felt as though his soul had been cut in half.

*

After he had left – and Rhul's message and entreaty had taken more than two hours to deliver – Eadric resumed his seat uncomfortably. He poured himself a large goblet of wine, and sat back in his chair. The fire in the hearth had dwindled to a dull glow, and moonlight illuminated the Great Hall through the windows high in its south wall. The servants – disturbed by the company which the *Ahma* chose to keep – had long since retired.

"You cannot waver now," Mostin groaned. "We are so close. How many other worlds could tell a

similar tale?"

"The Wizard is right," Jetheeg scoffed. "Do not let your weakness and susceptibility to a well-spun story dictate your course of action in this. You have taken vows, and made assurances, *Ahma*. Would you add oathbreaking to your tally of crimes against your deity? The list gets longer every day, I hear." The innuendo was hardly subtle.

Eadric sighed. "How many has Nhura gathered?"

"A thousand Loquai knights – virtually all of those who were exiled. Some few sidhe. Compactees. More than a few slaadi may involve themselves."

"Slaadi?" Shomei gaped. "Is Nhura insane?" She furrowed her brow, and glanced at Mostin – who shrugged and scowled. Neither had foreseen the possibility.

"They are not waiting with her in Faerie or Shadow," Jetheeg snapped. "But several Anarchs have become aware of the situation. They have a vested interest, after all."

Realization crossed Mostin's face. "*Heedless*," he said.

Jetheeg nodded curtly.

Eadric swallowed. "Mostin, you've said many times that this will be no conventional war. That I need to think far beyond anything with which I am familiar. Do you have *any* idea how long this will take to resolve? Are we talking in terms of days? Weeks?"

Mostin laughed. "Eadric, if the situation in Afqithan is not decided within fifteen minutes, I will be surprised."

The *Ahma* nodded grimly. "Then I would ask you to issue a *sending* to Rhul: if I'm not in Sisperi in two days, it means I'm dead, and I'm not coming."

"You mean to go otherwise, then?"

"Yes."

Mostin turned to Soneillon, who had thus far only observed. "You have been conspicuously silent. I am surprised that you have had nothing to contribute. What of your own force? And what of Rhyxali, Soneillon? What *is* she sending?"

"Demons, dear Mostin. She is sending demons."

"How *many*?" He asked irritably.

"Rhyxali is not predisposed to act often," Soneillon smiled, "but when she does, she acts decisively. She is sending nearly all of them, Mostin."

Mostin's jaw dropped.

Koilimilou smiled.

"I smell a rat," Ortwin remarked.

**

Mostin dreamed of devils.

Powerful devils. Terrible devils. One bore a chain with many barbed hooks which dripped a black venom; another had claws like scythes which clicked together as it flexed its fingers; a third wore a great hood, but Mostin knew that it was faceless beneath its cowl. The fourth devil was still an angel – a Virtue, of sorts. It was tall and beautiful, and wore a breastplate which had been forged before the beginning of time. Strength and power and wisdom were in its hand – but so were lust and greed and evil. It stood beneath a vast banner which depicted a meteor streaking through oblivion.

When he awoke, the details eluded him, and he was left with a vague feeling of dread. Dream had claimed his last precognition, and Mostin, who was no Dreamer, could not recall it.

**

Magic coursed again through Mostin's veins as he flew. Afqithan was wild, dark and potent.

This place, he thought. *Out of a quintillion possible worlds, why had they chosen this one? What forces had conspired to make this time and place what it was?* Mostin was no fatalist, but nor was he quite so arrogant to think that he had entirely mastered the cosmos.

He pondered whether Graz'zt would project himself to Afqithan, or whether he would choose to exercise restraint – the latter seemed more likely, according to Mostin's understanding of Graz'zt's paranoia. A combination of the terms *silver cord* and *Heedless* had sprung to the Alienist's mind – Graz'zt would not be safe from a *vorpai* sword, even if he was otherwise warded or fortified. *Snip*, and it would all be over. Even if Graz'zt knew a spell which specifically protected his cord from dangerous slaadi blades – entirely possible given his age and dedication to sorcery – then it was one less *death impulse* or *desperate summons* that he would be casting. And Graz'zt had no doubt considered the unlikely possibility that one of his enemies acquire the sword. Or if Ainhorr lost control...

Gods, Mostin thought. *What happens if Ainhorr loses control of the sword? Who will he chop? What was the Sword's agenda?*

Kostchtchie was already in Afqithan: a 'visiting dignitary' who, in terms of power, was more-or-less matched with Ainhorr – certainly as long as *Heedless* remained in the Balor's possession. Kostchtchie's entourage was hardly diplomatic, however – armoured fiendish giant huscarls and sorcerers, white wyrms, a winter-wight and countless bar-lgura. Except for the wight, they were, at present, situated some six hundred miles from their current position, near the fortress of Irknaan. But many could also move instantly across any distance, so it barely mattered. The undead monster was harrowing large tracts of forest with no apparent rhyme or reason – the Alienist wondered whether it was even vaguely reliable as an ally of the Demon Lord.

According to Jetheeg, who had received news from Nhura, Graz'zt had opened a number of portals – most likely of a limited duration than of permanent nature – between the planes. Afqithan was now linked directly with Azzagrat in at least two other locations besides Irknaan's fortress, and also with the Ice Waste – presumably in the vicinity of Kostchtchie's force. The exact whereabouts of the new *gates* were uncertain: this was problematic.

The Alienist knew that most of Soneillon's faction would arrive the same way: through a portal opened by the demoness from one of Throile's "wrinkles," and assumed that Rhyxali's force would be similarly deployed. The little that Mostin *did* know about Rhyxali included the importance of the marilith Viractuth within the Shadow Princess's camp. Viractuth was a powerful sorceress who served in the capacity of general and confidante. She would be capable of a magical feat which could transport an army.

Mostin fervently hoped that his *quiescence of the spheres* would not be anticipated. He cursed, because Nwm would have been an invaluable ally. He made a brief, unfelt prayer to any benign deities who might be listening that Shomei should not die today – she was one of the few people with the wit to understand him. And he adjusted his hat – a huge affair, resembling a mortar-board, made from crimson silk, and boasting two-hundred cloth-of-gold tassles.

They had made the decision to split into two groups. The first contained Shomei, her conjured minions, Eadric and the succubus Chaya – one of Soneillon's 'handmaidens.' Chaya had a penchant for powerful necromantic spells. The second trio – Ortwin, Koilimilou, and the Alienist himself – was less of a concern for Mostin. As long as Rhyxali was on *their* side, then Koilimilou was not a tangible threat. If Rhyxali were to become their enemy, however – not entirely impossible, given the whims of powerful demonesses – then Koilimilou would be a dangerous adversary, with considerable tactical information useful to the Princess. Prompt elimination of the sidhe-cambion would be necessary.

Chaya, however, was a completely unknown factor. She was wild, bloodthirsty and crazy – *even for a demon*, Mostin ruefully considered. She had been instructed by Soneillon to guard the Queen of Throile's current favourite – namely, Eadric – and to make her reservoir available to Shomei on demand. Chaya was less than pleased. But she feared Soneillon.

A third group would consist of Soneillon herself (she *had* elected to become personally involved), the balor Irzho (who, by Soneillon's magic, would be augmented to terrifying power), and Rimilin (*won't it be delightful to see him again*, Mostin thought caustically). Rimilin's craft had reportedly increased to the extent that Mostin wondered if he might be on the verge of transvalency, or even if he had already achieved it. Rimilin had mastered Irzho. *How?* Mostin thought. Irzho had a *mind blanking* ring. How does one master a *mind blanked* balor? The price for their involvement? For Irzho, *Heedless* – what balor wouldn't like a huge, intelligent *anarchic vorpal* sword? For Rimilin, sinister pacts struck with Soneillon, and possibly Rhyxali. Mostin shuddered. The direct sponsorship of a wizard of Rimilin's prestige by a demoness of Rhyxali's power would place him on a par with Shomei in terms of fiendish clout. And Rimilin lacked Shomei's – admittedly idiosyncratic – principles.

The Alienist smiled. Despite his loathing of the Acolyte of the Skin, it was not without a certain degree of pride that he recognized that Rimilin was part of one of the most formidable generation of spellcasters that Wyre had yet produced. *Although, for a golden age of magic, it seems strangely dark and bleak.*

Mostin, Shomei, Ortwin and Eadric were all *telepathically bonded*, magically bolstered, and smothered with various wards. The Alienist lamented Nwm's absence again: more would have been better. Mostin was charged up with *reality maelstroms* as well as various sonics, conjurations and auxiliary spells. Shomei was loaded with necromancies, enchantments and conjurations.

Their greatest assets, however, were two spells: a protective *dweomer* devised by Shomei, and an abjuration invoked by Soneillon herself prior to their arrival in Afqithan – Mostin had later learned that Rimilin, Irzho, Nhura and several others had been similarly warded by the Queen of Throile. They were virtually invulnerable to magic, and unless struck by multiple *disjunctions*, or unless Graz'zt himself were to come and target them with his *superb dispelling*, all were safe from an unfortunate evaporation of magical protections at the hands of other spellcasters. Mostin knew that the succubus Adyell was capable of bringing down their wards, and hoped that Soneillon was correct in her assertion that her former handmaiden would not be present.

The Alienist circled nervously, and glanced downwards towards Shomei. He sighed. *She is glorious*, he had to admit to himself.

The Infernalist was flanked by four pit fiends, conjured via *planar bindings* and then subjected to the power of her Will, focused through her rod. And they were *Belial's* pit fiends – bound in deliberate defiance of the Lord of Hell's Fourth Circle. She was clad in her *robe of stars*, and while – as always – she bore her rod, a globe now hung from her belt: a sphere of transparent adamant from which Nufrut's head leered. The marilith had passed into Shomei's possession, as previously agreed with Mostin.

Eadric sat nearby upon Contundor, and both steed and rider appeared impassive. The celestial charger had acquired a pair of huge *feathery* wings, which caused Mostin to feel nauseous every time he saw them: Mostin was profoundly thankful that he and the *Ahma* were not in the same team. Next to Eadric, in dark antiparallel, the succubus Chaya waited with her mount – a foul-tempered cauchemar which champed restlessly. Mostin studied her briefly: the demoness was naked and scarred, almost bestial in appearance. She bore no weapon, and carried but a single item – a smoking black diamond the size of a fist which oozed necromantic power.

Somewhat removed, displaying his characteristic nonchalance, Ortwin laughed and twirled his scimitar confidently. Koilimilou, perched upon an ecalypse and surrounded by jariliths, ignored him. She seemed even more introspective than normal, and Mostin watched her nervously: was she privy to Rhyxali's plans (which were certain to be other than had been revealed)? Did she possess a measure of genuine affection for Ortwin? It seemed unlikely – neither demons nor sidhe were renowned for warmth in their relations. Could Ortwin be trusted, anyway?

Except for Eadric, we are a gruesome, conceited and selfish bunch. Perhaps he is the moral glue which binds the feys, sociopaths and fiends together.

The Alienist shrugged, and descended. His thoughts reached out to Shomei.

[Mostin]: My fingers itch! How much longer?

[Shomei]: Three minutes, by my reckoning.

[Mostin]: Aren't your bodyguards restless?

[Shomei]: Devils are notoriously patient.

[Mostin]: I am having reservations.

[Shomei]: Good. Apparently your psychosis has limits.

[Mostin]: I am dubious about the *quiescence of the spheres*. I like retaining the option of instantaneous

retreat.

[Shomei]: Mostin...

[Mostin]: Don't worry. I still intend to cast it.

[Shomei]: You'd damn well better, Mostin. Quite a lot hinges upon it. Still, you may have been better contriving the spell with yourself as a mobile locus, rather than designating a static one.

[Mostin]: And lose the opportunity to invoke *reality maelstroms*? Not bloody likely.

[Shomei]: I suspect that you won't get the chance in any case – you need to physically remove yourself two miles from your casting point.

[Mostin] (Grins): I've already thought of that. I will *summon* a pseudodjinn. We will *wind walk* together.

Shomei laughed. "You are ingenious." Then her manner suddenly became serious. "If I should die, Mostin..."

[Mostin]: Do *not* start this again.

[Shomei]: There are two *simulacra* at my mansion...

[Mostin]: !

[Shomei]: Together, they comprise most of what I am.

[Mostin]: They are lumps of ice, Shomei.

[Shomei]: You will need to find a way to reify them.

[Mostin]: That is not possible.

[Shomei]: Nonsense. It has merely never been accomplished before. It will be a task commensurate with your ability.

[Mostin]: They lack a Self, Shomei.

[Shomei]: I didn't say it would be easy. One is of me as I was – before Nwm *reincarnated* me. The other is of me as I am now. (Ironically) They are called *Sho* and *Mei*. You will tell them apart by their hair colour.

[Mostin]: This is distasteful!

[Shomei]: It will be your *magnum opus*, Mostin. The last challenge I set you. I would not leave the world bereft of my acquired knowledge.

[Mostin]: You are more than the sum of your learning. I wish you'd said something about this before.

[Shomei]: Do all creatures have multiple pseudonatural analogues, Mostin? If so, I would start with that premise.

[Mostin]: (Astonishment).

[Shomei]: I have left each with two contradictory impulses: *preserve thyself* and *transcend thyself*. Hopefully, the seeds of dialectical consciousness have already been sown. They will aid you in your research – both are familiar with my library. Everything I have is yours, Mostin.

[Mostin]: (Utter amazement). Shomei...

[Shomei]: Sho possesses the key to my astral retreat. I have not used it in some time, for fear of assault. If the current crisis is resolved favorably, it should be safe again. And try to establish a second Triune: three is a good number for productive magical inquiry. Consider Rimilin...

[Mostin]: You cannot be serious!

[Shomei]: You are the most powerful living wizard in Wyre, Mostin. You have a responsibility to act as a check on him.

[Mostin]: That is the Claviger's purpose.

[Shomei]: The Claviger acts within its own circumscribed limits.

[Mostin]: Mulissu...

[Shomei] (Sadly): Look no more to Mulissu for aid.

[SONEILLON]: NOW

Shomei smiled, unrolled a scroll, and opened a *teleportation circle* to a location previously *scried*.

Beneath a *screen*, in a small glade within sight of both the steep tor upon which Irknaan's palace stood, and of Murmuur's diabolic tower, Mostin – together with Shomei and Koilimilou – began to invoke the *quiescence of the spheres*.

A thought flickered through Mostin's mind: *Murmuur's tower is outside of the quiescence*. Had it moved? He couldn't recall its exact previous location.

Mere seconds before the spell was completed, tens of thousands of shadow demons began to manifest as Viractuth – Rhyxali's lieutenant – folded a huge area of a distant Abyssal layer, and brought it into vibrational congruence with Afqithan; a massive *gate* opened to a demiplane abutting Throile, spewing forth Soneillon's horde; and Nhura and her knights and sorcerers – along with compactees and sidhe mercenaries – simultaneously translated *en masse* from the Plane of Shadow.

The keen-eyed spined devils who circled Murmuur's tower relayed the information to Azazel – their commander-in-chief. Hell's standard-bearer issued an immediate telepathic command to Murmuur:
Open the gates.

Titivilus – whose presence never failed to irk Azazel – now stood nearby. Dispater's Nuncio betrayed no sign of emotion

Azazel scowled, and his knights and captains quailed before him. He entered a brief, silent reverie, and *communed* with his master. He did not doubt that all contingencies had been anticipated.

[Azazel]: What is your command?

[.....]: We will not intervene yet: a measure of uncertainty still exists. Wait. Hold your position until instructed otherwise.

[Azazel]: Yes, Majesty.

*Mostin had originally assumed that Rimilin was Irzho's slave, rather than vice-versa.

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**

AFQITHAN - Part One

"Mulissu is dead," Daunton the Diviner announced to the assembled wizards.*

His words were greeted by a variety of reactions: by Troap, a look of stunned disbelief; by Tozinak – in the form of a sylph – with tears and a dramatic posture; by Waide, a smug grimace which conveyed the

words 'I told you so – it was inevitable.' Jalael and Idro exhibited calm insouciance. A dozen other mages – and several of these were formidable in their own right – showed expressions which ranged from anguish, through curiosity, to total ignorance of the reclusive Savant's identity.

"Thank-you, Daunton," Waide said with nasal condescension. "Although..."

"There is more," Daunton interrupted, shooting the transmuter a look of barely concealed contempt. Waide surpassed him in terms of power, but Daunton enjoyed the respect of the entire magical community and the friendship of several influential personages – including Prince Tagur – outside of it. "An artifact bestowed upon her by Jovol has been stolen, along with other powerful items."

"She and Mostin were feuding, I hear," Waide ventured.

"Waide!" Daunton snapped. "There will be no rumourmongering and innuendo."

"It is hardly an idle thought," Waide persisted. "Mostin's assault upon Griel outside of the Claviger's domain is well known. Which *artifact* do you speak of?" Waide licked his lips.

"It is called the *web of motes*. It is potent."

"I have never heard of it," Waide sniffed.

"Nor I," Jalael agreed. "What is its purpose?"

Daunton sighed. "Divination," he said.

Waide laughed openly. "I think we can discern the purpose of your insistence upon this meeting, Daunton: you desire this item. And try telling me now that Mostin has no part in this."

"I make no such claim," the Diviner said dismissively. "But neither do I make the assertion that Mostin murdered Mulissu: he did not. Her own daughter, Iua, slew her. The priestesses of Jeshi confirm as much."

"Matricide?" Jael said drily. "This gets more interesting. Where is Iua now?"

"I do not know. I suspect she is *mind blanked*. I have tried to discern her whereabouts twice."

"An accomplice?" Troap asked.

"Or a device," Dauntton nodded. "Naturally, you suspect the former, Waide, and you suspect that it is Mostin."

"It is not his style," Tozinak sobbed. "He would have killed her with much more *panache*. Was Iua under a compulsion?"

"Perhaps. Graz'zt certainly bore Mulissu a grudge. He may have *dominated* Iua, although it would have been a potent compound spell to circumvent the temple wards – especially from Azzagrat. But the Prince had already personally assailed the Savant in her demiplane: hence her retreat to the Prime."

Waide's jaw dropped. "And she *survived*?"

Dauntton nodded. "She was well prepared. Furthermore, Mostin anticipated the attack and provided a safe exit for her."

Waide swallowed nervously. Once he and the Alienist had been peers. But now he realized – and the knowledge caused him to grit his teeth in envy and frustration – that Mostin had utterly surpassed him.

"Had she other enemies?" Troap asked.

"Not to my knowledge – she carefully avoided making them, as a rule."

"How kind of Mostin to lend her one of his," Waide said snidely.

"It was Mulissu who invoked the cascade at Khu," Troap said drily, "not Mostin. I think that is enough to warrant the enmity of any number of powerful fiends."

"It was no doubt in response to Mostin's nagging," Waide replied.

"Because Mulissu was *so* weak-willed and impressionable, and Mostin *so* likes the company of celestials," Troap retorted acidly. The Goblin turned to Daunton. "Do you think the emerging Cheshne faction may have had a hand? They are in geographical proximity."

"The possibility had occurred to me," Daunton nodded. "Although a motive is harder to fathom."

"Mulissu could have crystallized magical resistance in Wyrish and Thalassine spellcasters, if it became required," Jalael suggested. "It may have been a preemptive strike."

"The Cult of Cheshne has never exhibited an historical desire to dominate in that manner," Daunton sighed. "Besides, why wait to remove her until *after* their arrival? And I am reluctant to pin every unfortunate event which transpires upon them – we do not *know* their agenda."

"*Not good*," Waide grumbled. "We know that much, at least. The Claviger may prove to be an aegis which we did not anticipate. Although maybe Jovol did."

"Jovol was not omniscient," Jalael grunted. "And his legacy has already stymied magical activity. It may yet deny us the ability to muster an effective defense."

"You seem fixated on some impending conflict, Jalael," Daunton scowled. "If it occurs – and I doubt that – it will likely be religious in nature, and will not concern us."

"If the *ugras* are invoked, I doubt they will make the distinction," Jalael smiled. "But the question remains: why now?"

"Nothing becomes," Daunton said grimly. "We cannot know *why* or *where*. Which brings me to events in the demiplane of Afqithan. I trust that we are all aware of what passes there?"

Jalael groaned. Tozinak fidgeted nervously. The other wizards evinced either blank stares or, in the case of Waide – ever reluctant to reveal his ignorance in such matters – an expression which could be interpreted as either inquisitiveness, or quiet understanding.

Daunton sighed. "I will tell you what I know – which is all that Mulissu related to me. Her information was, I don't doubt, incomplete. And I think that even those who are embroiled in its troubles have only a partial perspective."

"Mostin," Tozinak sighed.

"And Shomei," Daunton nodded. "But one could probably have inferred as much by their conspicuous absence from this meeting."

"The great luminaries of our magical brotherhood," Waide said snidely. "Do they even know of what has happened?"

"I issued a *sending* to Shomei," Daunton replied, "and instructed her to inform Mostin." The Diviner then proceeded to relate the tale of the *Ahma*, Graz'zt, Soneillon, and Afqithan.

After Daunton had completed his account, Tozinak – overly moved by the story – punctuated the silence with a long sigh.

"And the *web of motes*?" The Illusionist asked. "What exactly does it *do*?"

"It illuminates connections," Daunton explained. "Between people, places, thoughts, dreams, futures, and truths. It is the most potent object I have ever heard of."

"If Mulissu wasn't wildly exaggerating its power," Waide quipped.

"Why Mulissu?" The Necromancer Creq inquired. "She wasn't even Wyrish. Why did Jovol choose her?"

"Perhaps he liked her," Daunton snapped. He relaxed before continuing. "She was not alone. Shomei received something, as did Mostin, and Hlioth, and you, Waide. And you, Tozinak. All of those who took part in *binding* the Enforcer."

"And you?" Waide asked archly.

"A minor curio," Daunton answered. "I was the junior member, if you recall. Which, incidentally, leads me to another point: Jovol dwelt in the Thrumohars for fifty years, but where was his sanctum? There must still be a cache somewhere; a repository of knowledge and power."

"I have pondered this question," Jalael admitted. "And what else, Daunton. Have you heard what I have? I am apt to converse with demons, but I wonder what your sources tell you?"

"Rimilin," he nodded.

**

Nwm's eyes flashed open. He had been sitting beneath a fir-tree, listening to the soft *pad, pad* of an arctic fox, when he heard its pattern change in response to a new stimulus. Something else was close by. He waited.

The Druid inhaled sharply as she approached. She was beautiful. And curiously familiar.

She sat down in the snow before him, unabashed by her own nakedness, and smiled. Her skin possessed a soft, silver sheen, and her eyes – no longer demonic – were green within green.

"This is an unexpected pleasure," Nwm said wryly. "I should warn you: if my conversation seems stilted or awkward, it's because I haven't spoken for several months."

"Your social ineptitude was never much of a concern," she laughed.

"Can I assume that Eadric was successful in his efforts?" Nwm asked.

"Not yet." She raised an eyebrow.

"I am unsure as to whether I should worship you or not."

"That is your choice. It makes no difference to me. What were you doing?"

"You know, Nehael, I don't really know. Waiting for you, I suppose. I don't imagine that there's a rational explanation for your presence here?"

"Certainly not."

"And what happens now?" Nwm asked.

Nehael laughed. "I asked that very question myself."

"And what answer did you receive?"

"A Viridity," she replied.

"That is suitably vague," Nwm sighed.

"Strange," Nehael said drily. "I had the same reaction. There is something that I would like to share with you, Nwm. A place."

"What sort of place?" Nwm asked suspiciously.

"A sanctuary. An island of Green. An unassailable bastion. A womb."

Nwm felt a frisson of excitement as she spoke, but his voice was sceptical. "In my experience, nowhere is unassailable."

"Prepare to change your mind," Nehael smiled. She held out her hand, and he took it. Stretching forwards, she lightly touched the bark of the tree.

"Step into the tree," she said.

They dissolved into an ocean of jade, emerald and celadon. Another Tree, which was the same tree – it was, in fact, all trees – appeared.

*

Nwm quaked. His mind screamed in fear, and soared in awe. His breath became rapid and shallow. He was dumbstruck, unwilling to believe, but knowing that it was there.

"Eadric's forebears would have referred to it as the Tree-*ludja*," Nehael said softly, touching the Tree.

"Yours would have called it *Derv*.**"

"What have you become?" Nwm asked her.

"You know what I am," Nehael smiled. "I am merely Nehael. But now the way is open. You first showed it to me. She remembers. That is why it is Tree, and not Lake or Storm."

Nwm swallowed. She alluded to things which made him feel distinctly uncomfortable. Gingerly, he reached out.

Tree, he knew.

He looked out from the blackthorn in the courtyard of Kyrtil's Burh; from a huge banyan in Afqithan, around which demons clashed furiously; from a hornbeam with white bark and silver leaves, beneath which a goddess meditated; from a viper-tree amid a grove in Azzagrat, where acid rained and fire burned; from a lonely olive-tree on a deserted island in Pandicule; from a celestial oak which rose, impossibly perfect, upon the Blessed Plain.

Nwm withdrew his perception, and looked at Nehael.

"How?" He asked.

This Way, she showed him.***

"Is there more?"

"Oh, yes. There is much more."

"But to look into Hell? Oronthon's Heaven? These places are not..."

"Of the Green?" She offered. "I think you need to revise your understanding, Nwm. The Viridity is a transcendental principle: it does not care for conventional labels. *Green* just became a lot bigger."

"Who was the goddess beneath the tree?" He asked.

"Her name is Lai," Nehael smiled. "You will meet her in due course."

"What is her rôle?" He asked dubiously.

"She is a student. Of magic. Of nature. Her world is all but dead. You will like her – which is all to the good."

Nwm gave a quizzical look.

"A student needs a teacher," Nehael explained, "and a goddess needs a priest."

**

The *quiescence of the spheres* began exactly five seconds after the Eye of Cheshne – a large, reddish star linked with ill-fortune, miscarriage and death – anticulminated at the necropolis of Khu in the World of Men.

Thus, when Soneillon and her host arrived in Afqithan – together with the Balor Irzho and the demonist Rimilin of the Skin – a mortal would have breathed but once, before she waxed to her full power again.

Her first act – before even Ainhorr had issued the telepathic command for his minions to descend upon the hordes of interlopers – was to utter an incantation which caused a shimmering wave to issue from her. Soneillon poured forth the void, transforming it, and buoying those hundreds who were closest to her with an ecstasy of negation.

The palrethees, succubi and other monsters – the half-fiendish lamias, medusae, harpies and hags which swarmed in the sky around the Demoness – greedily drank of the essence which their mistress lavished on them. Irzho and Rimilin – already bloated with Soneillon's unlight – swelled yet further. Koilimilou inhaled sharply as power coursed through her and her Will was sharpened and intensified, before she abruptly disappeared to sight. And Eadric watched in trepidation as Chaya – the succubus appointed to him – threw back her head and exulted.

As the impulse washed through the *Ahma*, visions of unbeing passed through his tortured consciousness. A sweet, lingering taste, heavy with the promise of annihilation. He glanced at Shomei's devils, borne upon the invocation's wind and magnified. They terrified him. He terrified himself. And in his heart, he knew he was as potent as he had ever before been – save perhaps when he had fought at the Nund, where Grace had descended upon him. Now the darkest wards protected him. Blasphemy sustained him.

He drew his sword. At the limit of his vision, issuing in streams from Irknaan's citadel – unable to manifest closer, within the *quiescence of the spheres* – Ainhorr's demons were beginning to appear in ghastly flights and packs.

Fifteen minutes, Mostin had said. It would all be resolved within fifteen minutes. The mental clamour of the demons was already threatening to overwhelm him.

Mostin vanished. A *bound* pseudodjinn – a grotesque parody which made Eadric grateful that Iua was *not* there – bore the Alienist on a course which, for the sake of convenience, they had arbitrarily determined as 'west': in Afqithan, there were no cardinal directions. He sped towards a second materializing force – Kostchtchie, mounted upon his wyrm, together with his bar-Igura. Mostin purposed to eliminate the demon as quickly as possible. Ortwin and Koilimilou were with him. The three were *invisible* and *mind blanked*.

The Alienist scowled. The air was rapidly becoming thick with varrangoin above Kostchtchie, pouring through a *teleportation circle*: they were a group whose presence he had not foreseen. Nhura and Jetheeg, together with hundreds of Loquai aristocrats and sidhe mercenaries mounted upon umbral griffons, moved towards the Demon Lord. A vast, black cloud of shadow demons followed them. The Alienist, Satyr and Cambion swiftly overtook them all.

[Ortwin]: How long, before we intercept?

[Mostin]: Ninety seconds, give or take. We need to be patient. We must stay *wind walking* until we reach the boundary of the *quiescence*. I will be far more effective at the interface.

Momentarily, he doubted. He feared that by the time they reached the invocation's limit, most of Kostchtchie's force would already be *inside* the *dimensionally locked* area – many of the leaping demons were pressing forwards restlessly. More *teleportation circles* were opening outside of the *quiescence*. Abyssal giants – some riding white dragons – were arriving from wherever Kostchtchie's main force had been concentrated.

Mostin cursed. One of the sorcerers in the Demon Lord's train must possess an extremely potent device – there was no way that the spell could have been repeatedly cast in such short time. Doubtless, one of the varrangoin: they were not natural *teleporters*, and moving large numbers of them effectively would otherwise prove problematic.

As they sped onwards, the Alienist grinned: Kostchtchie himself was not moving inside the *quiescence*. Evidently, the Ice Lord was reluctant to surrender his ability to instantly retreat.

[Mostin]: We must achieve the perfect position before the *wind walk* is dismissed. We should strike the Demon with everything we've got.

[Koilimilou]: Watch for the dragons. Their noses will catch us, even if their eyes can't.

*The assembly of wizards, called by Dauntun in his manse in Gibilrazen consisted of Dauntun himself (diviner 10/loremaster 5), an accomplished facilitator whose impartiality was renowned; *Waide* (transmuter 17), generally conceded to be a supercilious pedant; *Tozinak* (illusionist 18), often hysterical, and in a semi-volitional state of morphic flux; the green hag *Jalael* (evoker 13/archmage 2), known to have devoured her lovers on several occasions; *Sarpin* (illusionist 5/shadow adept 7), a Shade, and Jalael's current concubine; the goblin *Troap* (enchanter 14); *Gholu* (generalist 8/loremaster 4), a pompous eunuch and hoarder of useless magical curios; *Muthollo* (abjurer 12), a Bedeshi newcomer regarded with suspicion by the other wizards; *Tullifer* (transmuter 7/master alchemist 5), who evidenced a vulgar interest in commerce; the sprite *Shuk* (illusionist 10); *Droom of Morne* (evoker 12), who stood in minor contempt of the Injunction, and had had his lips magically sealed for one year; *Creq* (necromancer 11), who helped to perpetrate the worst stereotypes regarding his magical lineage; *Idro* (generalist 12), intellectually stunted and now verging on senile; *Wigdryt* (transmuter 9/plane shifter4) – a smoke mephitis who had recently reappeared from a thirty-year retreat; and *Poylu* (enchantress 11), who dwelt in a well near the town of Banda in Ialde.

Ehieu (sorcerer 10/air savant 8), introduced to Dauntun by Mulissu, was also present – although he found the proceedings tedious at best.

**The Tree probably deserves some explanation. Before the rise of Oronthonianism, the migrant Borchian tribes (from whom Eadric and his kin are descended) venerated nature spirits of various kinds, manifestations of different aspects of the *Hahio* ("Interwoven [Green]"). These facets ("*ludjas*") were numerous and diverse, and never fully systematized: for example there was a *ludja* for Stream, for Valley, for Gorse-bush, for Snow etc. etc. etc. Larger *ludjas* also subsumed smaller ones – e.g. the Stone-*ludja* superseded the Pebble-*ludja*, the Boulder-*ludja* etc. The three principal *ludjas* were considered to be Stone, Water and Tree.

Derv is a Crixi word meaning "[prototypical or archetypal] Tree." There was considerable overlap and syncretism between early beliefs in the peoples who predated the foundation of Wyre, and certain concepts were held to be parallels of one another – *Derv* and the Tree-*ludja* possessed an obvious identity. For *Derv* to be an actual *tree* however was almost nonsensical from Nwm's perspective: it is like being shown the Platonic ideal of "Tree", manifested and fully real.

***Several new spells would be revealed to Nwm by Nehael.

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AFQITHAN - Part Two

"Show me more," Hlioth, the Green Witch demanded.

Teppu laughed, and stroked the ash-tree which they stood next to. It seemed to croon lovingly to him. "It will involve a certain loss of individuality," he smiled. "Are you jealous of your discrete existence? Your autonomy of perception and Will?"

"Certainly not," Hlioth answered. "If I hadn't determined all arguments regarding Will to be specious, then I would never have abandoned wizardry."

"You should blend all elements into a harmonious whole," Teppu said. "And your song will be different to mine. Give me your hand."

The Green Witch complied, and Teppu pressed it to the trunk of the tree. Within moments, a cascade of new impressions flooded into her mind. Multiple realities became apparent. Her breathing became rapid and shallow.

"How many layers are there visible?" She gasped.

"They cannot be measured in numbers," Teppu laughed.

"I can see Faerie."

"I am surprised that you can distinguish it so readily. Although it is less sleepy than many of the others."

"Perhaps I am predisposed to easily apprehend it. One other seems close – within reach. What is it?"

"It is the half-hidden world of the Tunthi. Were you to go to Tun Hartha, you would see it more clearly. It is closer there than here."

"It has recently stirred?" Hlioth asked.

"Twice. Great spirits were awakened. Echoes remain within the visible Green. It was roused from its torpor near Hrim Eorth, then again at Groba."

"I recall hearing of Hrim Eorth – the river became a dragon. But Groba?"

"Groba is more ancient than most know. Mesikämmi woke its *genius loci*."

"To what purpose?"

Teppu smiled. "To swallow a sword, and keep it safe."

Hlioth's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "You have been following her activities?"

"Amongst others," his eyes twinkled.

"*Which* others?"

"Nehael. Nwm."

"What does the demoness have to do with this?"

Teppu threw back his head, and laughed. "Nehael is no demoness, nor was she ever one. The past is not immutable."

Hlioth scowled. "What are you plotting, Teppu?"

"I do not plot," Teppu replied sincerely. "I merely act according to need. There is a splinter of reality

which must be realigned: purged of its umbral infestation. In order to accomplish this, I will need the concerted effort of several selfless individuals."

"I think perhaps you might explain a little more."

"I mean to eradicate the seeds of taint from the demiplane of Afqithan: it will be the first manifestation of the burgeoning Viridity. Faerie must reclaim its own."

Hlioth shrugged. "What is Afqithan, and why is it significant?"

Teppu sighed. "Your knowledge of current events is lamentably scant, Hlioth. This does not surprise me, but you cannot continue to view *Green* within the limited terms that you have previously described to yourself. Afqithan is a finite reality where demons, devils, tainted sidhe and various other monsters struggle to assert themselves: Oronthon's *Ahma* is embroiled in its troubles, as is the creature Soneillon – a demoness who has transcended her ontic state.

"I am dubious of your ability to manage such an act."

"It will be simple: trust me."

"And how do you propose to accomplish this?"

"Why," Teppu laughed, "with magic, of course."

"You *are* Jovol," Hlioth sighed. "*And* Fillein."

"Yes – and no," Teppu replied.

"I understand neither you nor your motives," Hlioth groaned.

"Nor do I," Teppu admitted.

**

Eadric and Shomei rode in the blazing trail carved by Irzho through the purple skies of Afqithan. Before them, Rimilin – whose grotesque, sexless form rippled black and oily – and Soneillon – into whom all light vanished – flew within the great fume of smoke and fire which emanated from the balor. Contundor was buffeted by the gale which issued from the pit fiends – *invisible* but the source of a palpable malice – who flanked them both. Demons, half-fiends and evil monsters of every conceivable hue surrounded them, jostling for space.

Ahead of the *Ahma*, Ainhorr's forces filled immensity, blackening the skies, their numbers still swelling as demons from across Afqithan heard the summons, and *teleported* to the unlocked areas beyond the *quiescence of the spheres*. From the towers of Irknaan's palace they gushed forth in a never-ending torrent, and below the flights of chasme, succubi and palrethees, the ground and treetops seethed with bar-Igura. Eadric scowled as the standards of the Mariliths in thrall to Ainhorr were being raised beyond the spell's limit. More demons flocked around them, and those Loquai who had thrown in their lot with Graz'zt.

[Eadric]: How so quickly?

[Shomei] (ruefully): I suspect that Ainhorr has my *stone of sendings*. He issues a command to a subordinate, they instantly relay the message to their subordinates, and within a few minutes nearly every demon in Afqithan will be here. Redeployment is seldom a problem for fiends.

[Eadric]: And Graz'zt?

[Shomei]: I don't doubt that he was the *first* to know.

[Eadric]: We should climb. How long will the *invisibility* last?

[Shomei]: We have time yet, but avoid any conflict for the moment. We need to retain the element of surprise for as long as possible. We must find Ainhorr.

[Eadric]: Within the palace.

[Shomei]: Doubtless. He will not commit himself personally yet. You will also notice that no Nalfeshnees have appeared – they remain close by their master. There were thirty, at last count.

[Eadric]: Thirty is too many, Shomei.

[Shomei]: It is not. Just watch out for the sword.

[Eadric] (pointing with his mind): What is that? You didn't mention a dragon. I thought Mostin got the dragons.

A grotesque shape, the wings of which beat slowly and rhythmically, was moving through the demons of Ainhorr's force towards them.

[Shomei]: That is Ilistet's Steed. Graz'zt's herald.

[Eadric]: His *herald*? Is he here himself?

[Shomei]: Not according to Mostin.

As if to punctuate the realization, a long, sonorous blast issued from Ilistet's horn, causing the ancient, twisted trees to shake, and the *Ahma*'s chest cavity to resonate.

Eadric, Chaya, Shomei and her quartet of devils peeled away from the main spearhead of demons, and began to climb rapidly. They were not alone: other fiends from both factions were attempting to assume positions which offered a higher vantage point.

Climb, he urged his mount.

Within one minute, they had reached nearly two thousand feet. Still, they needed to climb – flights of succubi and chasme, issuing from the tallest of the towers, had already reached that altitude. Eadric glanced downward and ahead of himself, and watched in fascination as Irzho ploughed into a mob of

invisible nycadaemons which slowly revealed themselves to his sight.

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[Mostin]: We must finish him as quickly as possible. His focus lies upon Nhura, at present, although no doubt the probability of *invisible*, *mind-blanked* assailants has occurred to him. I'm hoping that the *wind-walking* hasn't. We have a chance, here: it is the nature of demonic enthusiasm for a cause to crumple if the Lord or Prince who binds them – in this case Kostchtchie – is eliminated. It's all personality.

[Ortwin] (Drily): No doubt this is about *us* preventing *him* reaching *you*.

[Mostin]: In a nutshell, yes. The Djinn will remain nearby, *wind-walking*, in case you need to make a quick exit.

[Ortwin]: "*You*" need to make a quick exit? What's with the "*You*"? How will *you* escape?

[Mostin]: I will *teleport*. We will be outside of the *quiescence*.

[Ortwin]: So we're relying on some bitter, reluctant pseudoelemental?

[Mostin]: I have offered it suitable inducements. Do not be concerned.

[Ortwin]: Gods, Mostin. It's not just Kostchtchie. It's the dragon. And the other demons. And the other dragons. And that *thing*.

Mostin peered ahead. Close by the Demon Lord, shunned by demons but around whom fiendish giants grouped clumsily, a gaunt figure stood. It was clearly visible between the warriors' legs: the trio were closing rapidly, now.

[Mostin]: Sh*t. The winterwight. It's not supposed to be here.

[Ortwin]: Feeling nervous yet?

[Mostin]: You may have a point. Keep flying.

Varrangoin were all about them – although oblivious to their presence - when they materialized outside the *quiescence*. Hovering five hundred feet from the limit of the *locked* area, Mostin invoked a *reality maelstrom*. It was centered around Kostchtchie, the wight, and the *teleportation circles*. The dimensional tempest raged incoherently, stretching away from the *quiescence* in a sphere from which a section had been cut: along the interface between the two spells, a null-space suffused with paradoxical magical energy crackled. For a fraction of a second, Mostin became visible before hiding himself again with another spell.

[Ortwin] (Grinning): That's more like it.

[Mostin]: Brace yourself.

The magical response to the Alienist's assault was immediate and would have overwhelmed them all, had it not been for Soneillon's ward. *Horrid wiltings, fireballs, a meteor swarm* and numerous sonics blasted into them. The djinn was instantly vaporized, and Mostin's brief appearance had been sufficient to make him the target of three attempted *disintegrations* and numerous *enervations*. Rager varrangoin were all about him, attempting to rend his *invisible* form.

Centered on himself this time, as yet more spells struck them ineffectually, Mostin invoked a second *reality maelstrom*, content that their own wards would prevent their succumbing to it. This time, the Alienist remained *invisible*.

Ortwin swallowed as he stood poised on the verge of another reality. Mostin cackled, looking through the rent in space: a rift into Limbo.

[Mostin] (Madly): We're safe here.

[Ortwin]: Are you quite nuts?

Flying through the dimensional storm – and through hundreds of varrangoin being pulled helplessly to their fate – a huge white dragon powered its way purposefully towards them. It bore an ugly, squat, bandy-legged demon brandishing a great hammer.

Clinging to the flank of the dragon, of whose presence the wyrm seemed entirely oblivious, an arcanist varrangoin clung, drooling like a dog. It stretched out its hand, and delivered an empowered sonic *meteor swarm* to them.

Bad, Mostin thought, as several creatures nearby were disintegrated by the sound. The tassles on his hat swayed slightly. Two more dragons appeared behind the first: mounted upon each were giants wielding enormous axes.

Abruptly, the *reality maelstrom* vanished, struck by a *greater dispelling*. From the dragon's jaws a terrible cold washed over them, numbing them despite their wards.

Koilimilou, buoyant with Soneillon's power, retaliated with a soundless gaze. Black fire coursed over the wyrm, and it bellowed in agony for a second, before silently vanishing in a cloud of dark ash. The varrangoin sorcerer took to the air with its own wings, but Kostchtchie himself began to tumble towards the ground.

[Ortwin] (Gaping): What the...?

[Mostin]: Kostchtchie can't fly.

[Ortwin]: (Hysterical laughter).

But in response to its master's telepathic command, one of the other dragons wheeled about and its rider climbed from his harness, and carelessly launched himself into the air.

Mostin anticipated that Kostchtchie would attempt to *teleport* into the vacant saddle. He opened a *gate*.

Koilimilou – a sidhe-cambion seldom prone to uncontrollable outbursts – screamed. The pseudonatural

Horror – simultaneously both a daemon, and a writhing thing possessed of appendages with an unknown purpose – slid through the portal.

[Symbol] = *Faces*.

[Mostin] (Pointing mentally at Kostchtchie): *His* face (and then at the dragons), *their* faces.

With a gusto which surprised Mostin, the Horror launched itself from the *gate* towards their enemies.

There had to be a catch, Mostin knew. There was always a catch. It was never that easy.

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The demon Surab, together with his host – a half-mortal named Iua – rode upon an *obsidian steed* across a blasted Abyssal landscape. A great, flat, plain – riven by yawning chasms which led to the domains of a thousand different demonic magnates – stretched as far as the eye could see. Surab relaxed into his new form – young, athletic, deadlier with the blade than any of the succubi mercenaries who served Graz'zt. He might keep her for a while – she seemed quiescent enough.

Through her eyes, he scanned the terrain ahead of him, eagerly seeking a familiar portal to Azzagrat where, he knew, its Lord would shower him with favour for his success in eliminating the Savant. Although the plan had been swiftly devised, it had been flawless in its execution. Pure simplicity.

Surab congratulated himself upon his ingenuity.

After riding hard for around an hour, the Demon nudged his steed towards a pit filled with lurid green flames, entered it, and, within seconds, emerged from a *gate oven* in the midst of Zelatar.

The scene which greeted him was violent, chaotic, brutal and filled with seething hatred. In that regard, Azzagrat was entirely normal.

What marked the Triple Realm as changed, however, was the nature of many of the creatures present. A frenzied pack of Abyssal ghouls were feeding nearby, and a cadre of death knights – mounted upon cauchemars – thundered past with some dire purpose.

Because, acutely conscious of Graz'zt's denuded power and overextended forces, and perceiving the chink in his usually impenetrable armour, Prince Orcus – acting on the gentle promptings of Rhyxali – had determined to invest Azzagrat and test his rival's defenses with a lightning-quick assault.

Surab panicked. The Argent palace, under normal circumstances visible from all parts of Zelatar, had vanished: the demon guessed that Graz'zt had obscured it with a spell.

Commanding his steed to *plane shift*, Surab, his host and his mount vanished. Any forsaken realm between Hell and the Abyss was preferable to Azzagrat at that moment.

Upon his throne, Graz'zt himself reflected. The purpose of the embassy delivered by Titivilus now seemed clear to him: the Nameless Adversary had, no doubt, known of the impending situation, and chosen to maintain the existing balance of Abyssal politics by reinforcing the Prince's armies in Afqithan. It had to be Afqithan: a diabolic presence in the Abyss would have caused outrage among the other Princes. Afqithan, because of the concentration of Graz'zt's force there; because that was where the *Ahma* had determined to start the war; because to *hold* Afqithan was yet another opportunity to defy the will of Oronthon. Afqithan had become an unlikely trophy in the Great Game. New impulses were revealing themselves.

Graz'zt spat venom, and cursed. He knew he *would* have been overwhelmed in Afqithan. He *needed* the devils: in order to secure Azzagrat he was being forced to withdraw from dozens of worlds – including Yutuf, Tirche, Sisperi and Saraf – and redeploy tens of thousands of demons. And now he doubted that he held Throile: the sweet prize dearly bought with the life of one of his favourite generals. And bitterest of all, he realized that, despite all appearances to the contrary, he himself was *still* the pawn of the one who had sparked the Great Revolt.