

VIRIDITY AND *SAIZHAN*

Mostin the Metagnostic walked slowly through the hallway, the sound of his passage muted by a thick, crimson carpet which possessed a texture akin to fine velvet. He was not alone: his *arcane sight* revealed several *unseen servants* as they went about their chores, and a spined devil – one of a dozen compacted by the mansion's former mistress years before – flapped silently past. Its contract with Mostin had been renewed for a further three decades, and it was cautious to avoid irritating the Alienist.

He entered a study, the curious furnishings of which – upon his explicit instruction – had remained unaltered since the Alienist had taken possession of the place. Closing the door behind him, he walked to a ornate cabinet, opened its door, and removed a crystal decanter. Carefully, he poured himself a large goblet of *kschiff*. Taking a single sip – and briefly savouring its potency – Mostin sank into a large leather chair and introspected for an hour.

Thoughts of Shomei, the *simulacra* and Vhorzhe preoccupied him.

Finally, he stirred himself, removed a small stone from his robe, and issued a *sending* to his apprentice, Orolde: *No change, I assume?*

None.

Mostin sighed. After so long, he would have expected at least some kind of revelation to be forthcoming. Some kind of reaction. A threat. An assault. Anything.

Set a fire. I am coming.

Mostin stood, exited the study by another door, and passed through several reception chambers into an echoing corridor carved in intricate relief. Traversing its length, he reached a small wooden portal bound with polished brass. The door opened smoothly, and Mostin entered a huge library by way of an opening concealed behind heavy purple drapes. Purposefully, he retrieved an ancient tome from a pile of books stacked neatly upon a small desk, muttered, and *teleported* into the parlour of a rustic manse

several hundred miles to the south.

In the hills of Scir Cellod on the borders of Wyre, twenty yards outside of the limit circumscribed by the Claviger – an entity of deific power which curbed the excesses of Wyrish arcanists through an Enforcer of terrible power – Mostin had erected his *comfortable retreat*. His choice of locale – a wooded dell, through which an icy stream chattered noisily – had been inspired primarily by its proximity to the intangible border, although it also offered a certain secluded charm which was not entirely lost on the Wizard.

Mostin wordlessly handed his cloak to Orolde – a maimed sprite who served the Alienist with eccentric devotion – sighed, and descended into his cellar. The area was replete with potent wards, the continual renewal of which occupied a not inconsiderable portion of Mostin's time and resources. A dim green light – testament to a *dimensional lock* – suffused the place.

"Greetings gentlemen. I trust you are all well?"

From thaumatugic diagrams etched in precious metals upon the floor of the summoning room, three devils gazed impassively upon the Wizard: Titivilus, Murmuur and Furcas – Infernal magnates of high bearing, wielding wide dominion. None answered him. Malice flowed from them all.

"Are any of you feeling talkative?" The Alienist asked.

None replied. A great irony, Mostin thought to himself: both Furcus and Titivilus were renowned for their loquacity.

"Let me know when you are," Mostin said smoothly.

Silence penetrated the summoning room.

Mostin repaired to his study, and issued a number of *sendings*.

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The Sidhe leaned upon a balcony of Irknaan's Fortress in self-reflection. She considered her fortune with emotional detachment and cold, sharp precision. She could not rationalize her change: in previous transmigrations she had been bawdy; licentious almost without limit. Now, she was frigid, and possessed of an eerie clarity which was so inherently *magickal* that reality itself had shifted, and become a dream in which she was the calm protagonist. Everything had become fey.

Ahead, to the horizon, there stretched a bubble of Otherworld: pure, uncontaminated, as fresh as when the first flower had bloomed, and the first sprite had sprung into being. Beyond, for uncounted miles, lay a Shadow which was slowly receding. But behind, hidden by the towering mass of the castle, in the space once occupied by Jetheeg's range, potent magic had attached the bubble of Afqithan to Faerie proper. Many of the realm's inhabitants were either stirring again, or – in the case of those whom the taint had overwhelmed – fleeing to safer, darker places. Others, entirely new to the former demiplane, had migrated in small numbers to what was – for them – an undiscovered corner of the world. It was a phenomenon that had occurred before: such intrusions were not uncommon in the scheme of things, and Faerie continually spawned bastard demiplanes, or silently absorbed them. Troops of fauns, sprites and pucks of various persuasions – but with shared curiosity – found places beneath the great banyans. Afqithan was a mezzanine between two worlds, and the Sidhe's stronghold – although it had proven not unassailable – was a powerful bastion which straddled realities.

She had styled herself *Queen of Afqithan* like many before her had, and, no doubt, many after her would. She entertained great heroes, and ancient spirits, and minor gods of various kinds. She brooded on the deaths of past lovers, but wondered how she could have actually *felt* what she had once felt. At other times, musical invention obsessed her, and she would spend an hour composing a symphony, or a day contemplating a single cadence. Time froze, and raced past at breakneck speed.

Her subjects were, for the most part, accepting of her rule. To many, she had appeared in person, simply announcing "I am the Queen, now." Those who had found this a difficult prospect – and there had been a few – she had roundly bested, either in combat, or magic, or in some artistic contest. Some had become enamoured of her, others had been duped by her promises and intimations. But most had simply acquiesced to her claim: it was obvious that no other could rival her, and what would Afqithan be without a tyrant? In the event, she transpired to be less than despotic, and made no particular

demand from her subjects at all, other than to be called *your majesty*.

She stood, and adjusted her harness: a soft leather coat with heavy studs, and a belt which bore a delicately curved blade. She wore a travel-stained cloak and boots – vestiges of her former self – and bore a light diadem cut from a gemstone. Her sudden self-awareness erupted as a cascade of chords seeking to escape from her mind and into her harp. She grimaced, and began to play. It was bitter, brutal, and poignant; full of anger and loathing, tinged with a wry self-mockery which embraced the absurd. The irresistible fate of the fey: a timeless childhood, or a perpetual decline; the knowledge that *what was* is always better than *what is to come*.

Her music became dark and ominous. Below the throne room, in a deep chamber etched with powerful runes, a *gate* to Azzagrat slumbered. It had been sealed at both ends: by Graz'zt himself, as he sabotaged a hundred portals into the Argent Palace from planes where he perceived a possible threat; and by Mostin the Metagnostic in the aftermath of the Great Confrontation. Its very presence troubled her: she seldom enjoyed a peace of mind. Most of the Castle's inhabitants – sprites of low stature – were oblivious to its existence, although a few were not: gnomes and goblins who had eavesdropped on their former masters' conversations; or quickling spies, lulled into obedience by the new Queen's glamour.

The tune ceased. She turned, and entered the cavernous throne-room from the balcony. Great crystal lamps illuminated the hall, and hundreds of feys danced, sang and capered about. Gifts and curses were freely exchanged. Her mood lightened somewhat: association with her own kind, she observed, was reassuring and gave her a sense of identity. And, as always, she was the focus of all attention. She ascended a dais of carved onyx, and relaxed into a small siege cast from precious metal and adorned with opals.

As she sat upon her throne, a feeling of deep satiation and langour overcame her.

It's good to be Queen, she thought.

She greeted the *sending* from the wizard with an expression of mild annoyance.

Not now, she thought. *You are interrupting a pavanne*.

I need you to pull the wool over my Dukes' eyes. Are you up to it?

Her interest was piqued, much to her annoyance, but her manner remained insouciant.

Let me think on it, she thought.

I think I may eliminate Murmuur in front of the other two. They might be more apt to talk.

Don't be a fool. I'll come in the morning.

Pay close heed to time. A year might pass before you realize it.

Enough! I will come. Now go.

The Queen sat briefly, but found further enjoyment of the revel impossible. She stood in irritation, cursed, and exited abruptly.

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The *Sela* was clad in the armour once worn by Lord Rede of Dramore, a martial paragon from a previous era, when war had been the business of the Temple. At his waist, he bore a six-flanged mace, forged by the same celestial smiths who had hammered Enitharmon's sword from a shard of thought. He was, at once, a perfect, unified consciousness, an awareness of everything that was, or is, or could be; but frail, mortal, imperfect. There was no 'he;' no observer, and nothing observed. There was a moving stillness. The potentiality of infinite bifurcation. An Adversary taunting him with a Green Void.

He sighed.

He knew little of the arts of war. Even when he had served the Temple, rather than *been* it, his role had been mainly oracular. The peculiar blending of the conventional and the Absolute – which Tramst

embodied – did not seem to preclude gaps in his knowledge of mundane things. Strategy in war – amongst other things, such as royal tax protocols and the latest fashion in headwear – was one of those gaps.

For his captains he had picked Brey and Sercion – toward whom, since his ascension, he had payed particular notice. Neither were ready for the task that he had appointed them: their training was far from complete, and each still expected and presumed more than either would admit, even to themselves. Expectation and presumption were qualities which the *Sela* had striven to eliminate from those who had accepted him as their teacher. Nonetheless, Tramst was satisfied that their role was what it must be: he observed all action with calm understanding. Fatalism and free will were, to him, an empty duality, the refutation of which was amply testified by his very existence – at least for those who saw the truth.

The *Sela* observed ideas and emotions move through his mind: an unending torrent of desire, fear, concern, humour, regret and hope. He placed the tortuous ramblings of conventional thought to one side – whilst still honouring them – and embraced his ground of being; and saw once again, that they were no different. Insight and compassion welled up within him. But, even there, his Adversary was with him: tempting him in that moment to mould reality, to shuck off his mortality, and with a passing thought reorder things as he knew they should be. Any limitation which the *Sela* possessed was self-imposed.

Consciously, he hung his mace upon a weapon stand and began to cast off his armour. Tramst struck a light, the dull glow of an oil-lamp suffused his tent, and he turned to observe a slender young man with olive skin sitting on his pallet. He had a tangled mass of hair, a face which rested with an impudent expression, and held a tray of candied chestnuts in his hand. He offered one to the *Sela* with a boyish grin.

"Want one?" He asked. "They're from Bedesh. They're good."

The *Sela* sat next to the youth, took one of the sweets, and chewed thoughtfully.

"Another?"

"No, thank-you," the *Sela* smiled. "One is enough. I'm glad you came: I miss you."

The youth shrugged. "One has to make one's own way. I don't regret anything, you know."

"I know," the *Sela* laughed, "and I know that you aren't here for the reason that I wish you were. You are merely curious. You wanted to *see*, rather than *See*."

The youth nodded, and popped another chestnut into his mouth.

"You are feeling insecure?" Tramst asked.

"Somewhat," the youth smiled.

"Your place in the scheme of things is assured. Do not be concerned. Although why I flatter your ego so is beyond me: it hardly needs inflating."

"I seem to have caught you in a happy mood," the youth grinned. "Which is all to the good. I was wondering if you might tell me..?"

"Ahh," the *Sela* said drily. "Your name. Unfortunately, that information is still confidential. It can be bought, but I fear that the price might be too high for you."

"I guessed as much, although I had to ask."

"Of course you did, dear boy."

The youth stood, and bowed rakishly. "I will take my leave, then. I look forward to events with great anticipation."

"As do I," Tramst smiled. "Remember that I love you."

"I will try my hardest to forget," the youth sighed. He vanished.

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When the *Ahma* entered the tent an hour later, the taint was still so profound that it threatened to overwhelm him. His head reeled. Fear and concern possessed him.

"What happened here?" Eadric asked.

"I wavered for a moment," Tramst smiled. "There can be no truth without doubt."

Eadric scowled.

"You have my permission to go. Return within a fortnight."

The *Ahma* cocked his head. "I don't..."

Then he received the *sending* from Mostin.

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Bluff, Diplomacy, Intimidate and Sense Motive. Mostin still hadn't developed an epic spell to penetrate a *mind blank*. These skills enjoy a brief renaissance.

Execution and Parley.

"We should try again," Eadric groaned. He was exhausted: interrogating devils was tedious, unrewarding work. He stared hard at Ortwin – now Ortwine – and shifted uncomfortably. His adjustment to his (*former?*) friend's recent femininity continued to be difficult, and had proceeded in an intermittent fashion as revelations spasmodically shaped his perception. Her hauteur seemed genuine, even when directed towards him. Although prior manifestations of Ortwin had seldom been prone to

honestly emote, and had never revealed the true extent of his feelings on *any* matter, to the *Ahma*'s recollection. Coupled with the scant contact that he and the Sidhe had had with one another, Eadric knew that he did not know this creature. At all.

She seemed asexual, which was the most bizarre and implausible change from Eadric's view. Overt sexuality was not, apparently, Ortwin/e's defining characteristic. The essence was something else. An expression of some other truth, which Eadric could not grasp.

And her wit, Eadric quailed internally. *A little caustic, perhaps*, as Nwm had drily remarked. It was a snare; a wire with vicious hooks, which dripped contempt. So precise. So erudite. She seemed to know everything. She was *tapped in* to something much bigger, with which in every successive incarnation, Ortwine had become more identified. *What would she become next?* He wondered. What was more Fae than a Sidhe-Queen? He shuddered.

Ortwin had craved a kingdom, and Ortwine – now in possession of one – enjoyed her spoils with an easy display of ancient majesty. A quality which might take half-a-century for a mortal ruler to develop, seemed to be her natural demeanour. It was impossible to determine whether it was an affectation, or not.

Every time she died, she returned with increasing potency. Nwm brought her back. He would always bring her back. And if Nwm died, who would bring the Druid back? Teppu? Nehael? Mesikämmi? If any of them died, would they come back stronger? It was a truth, an aspect of the Viridity. *Absorb and transform. Deify the mundane. Death into life.* The perfect expression of the Green, which arose – or such was Nwm's contention – in inevitable response to other influences. For *Saizhan*, it presented neither a conflict nor a congruence.

“Are the trolls of mysticism mustering for another attack on your enfeebled preconceptions, *Ahma*?” Ortwine read his mood accurately. “Should we banish them with fly-swats?”

“I like you better as a goat,” Eadric replied.

“Then we must be grateful that you are not consulted in the matter,” Ortwine smiled. “Time is precious to me, *Ahma*. I would prefer that dreary obligations are resolved quickly. We should simply kill one.”

Eadric nodded.

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Eadric leaned on *Lukarn*, his gauntleted fists gripping the crosspiece, resting his whole weight upon the point of the blade. He stretched up onto his toes.

Next to him, Ortwine sat on a low wooden stool. She looked only mildly interested.

"Which paradigm will prove the ascendant, I wonder?" The *Ahma* mused.

Titivilus said nothing.

Eadric raised an eyebrow. "Your silence is unnerving. It seems to run counter to the natural order of things."

"Which one?" Ortwine asked. "I confess that Titivilus is my favourite – his manner is smooth, and I appreciate the efforts he makes towards presenting an agreeable social face. Furcus is haughty, but I respect his mind. Murmuur is somewhat dull, and lacks any feature which deserves to be preserved; but he is a soldier, and the least conniving and manipulative. Is he the most *good*, do you think?"

Silence.

"I could cut you down," Eadric sighed. He turned to Murmuur and Furcas. "Each of you in turn. It would bring the wards down, but still, none of you would survive long enough to react before your deaths. Nor could you intervene in each other's demise."

Eadric stared at Murmuur: of the Dukes he alone, the *Ahma* knew, could be read. The glibness possessed by Furcas and Titivilus was impenetrable.

The possibility of an emotion passed across the devil's eyes. Murmuur immediately knew that his thought had been perceived. And he knew that Eadric was not lying.

"And it would be a just punishment," Eadric continued. "I have the right to administer it."

Murmuur sneered.

Ortwine sat, apparently nonplussed. "What happens to the estate of an Infernal Duke, while he is in captivity? Are his possessions redistributed amongst other devils in his absence, or held in fief by his master until his return? How much fear do you each feel, now? Does the prospect of annihilation fill you with dread, or do you anticipate a blessed release from your miserable lot? Perhaps an iota of your essence will remain, tormented in some yet deeper Hell by fiends to whom you appear the merest of shadows. Perhaps Oronthon will welcome the memory and remnant of your spirits back into his bosom. Or will the ancient, formless evil of the Abyss swallow you in unbeing? These are questions which intrigue me, and I have never before had the opportunity to voice them to any who might know."

Murmuur's spittle fizzled against the invisible barrier.

"You doubt my sincerity?" Eadric asked.

The *Ahma* turned, and with two swift strokes felled Furcas, advisor to the Archfiend Dispater, and respected for aeons as one of Hell's most effective intellectual weapons. As the Duke crumpled, Ortwine leapt forward with blinding speed and seized him by the neck. She quickly drew a dagger of purified silver, and thrust deep into the devil's waiting throat. Ichor spilled over her. She tossed the corpse to the ground in a perfunctory manner.

"We are at war," Eadric grimaced, ignoring Murmuur and turning to the Nuncio of Dis. "This is no longer a parlour game, Titivilus. Archetypes are slain in our times, and new ones born. And I am not benign, Titivilus. I am wrathful. I am the *Ahma*. Do you understand?"

"Given the circumstances, a certain degree of cooperation might prove sensible," Titivilus conceded. "But I require guarantee of my release after I have testified, and assurances that you will not subsequently harass me."

Eadric furrowed his brow and stared hard at Titivilus. But his consciousness was turned towards

Murmuur, alert to signs which could be read.

"If I were to allow anything other than self-interest to inform my behaviour when my existence is threatened, I would be a traitor to my principles," Titivilus smiled. "In the final analysis, survival is the preferable route, and the court of Pazuzu is quite welcoming, I hear. Do not be alarmed – I have fallen out of favour before; a millennium or two passes, and I wheedle my way back in again. My eccentricities are forgiven in the face of my scheming brilliance."

"*Forgiven?*" Eadric asked.

"*Overlooked* might be a better word for you," Titivilus smiled. "Although, from my perspective, they amount to the same thing. I must also insist that you slay Murmuur before I co-operate. I can allow no witnesses to our exchange."

Eadric shook his head. "I will retain Murmuur as a safeguard against your duplicity. If you prove faithless, I will release him to inform your masters of your conduct, and to seek whatever revenge he deems appropriate."

"You have grown cruel, Eadric," Titivilus smirked. "There is hope for you yet."

"Your attempts at badinage bore me, devil," the *Ahma* sighed.

"The fiend has a point," Ortwin said. "Or half-a-point."

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"This is intolerable," Waide snapped. "You would abide beyond the Claviger's purview, but seek aid therein when it is convenient for you? Any one of us could establish ourselves outside of Wyre, but by choosing not to, we demonstrate our solidarity. But you persist in your conjurations *on the very borders*."

"I reside in Shomei's former home..." Mostin began.

"Infrequently," Waide objected.

"For once, I concur with Waide," Daunton sighed. "Your contribution is greatly missed. Commit yourself to a shared enterprise, Mostin. Information is beginning to flow freely between us, for the first time in ten generations."

"My present undertaking makes this an unlikely prospect," Mostin glared. "The Enforcer would terminate me."

"Your right to call an Assembly will not be universally recognized," Daunton observed. "Many will not come, if only to irritate you." He looked pointedly at Waide.

"Then I will speak to the Wyrish Wizards as an *outsider*," Mostin said sourly. "An embassy, if you will. *You* will issue the call, Daunton."

"Do not indulge him," Waide hissed. "Such an act would force me – and many others – to ignore you. You would cause a rift, Daunton."

"Waide," Mostin almost screeched, "if you were anywhere else, anywhere within a billion other cosmoi, then I would blast you for your pig-ignorance and show you what *transmutation* really means."

"But you cannot," Daunton smiled. "Isn't that, in itself, worth something to you?"

"Yes," Mostin said, gesturing irritably, "but it is not worth *everything* to me. You must be reflexive, or what you have built will atrophy and die. I will make a concession, however, to demonstrate my commitment to the Wyrish experiment."

"I doubt there is anything which would impress," Waide said.

"I will make Shomei's library freely available," Mostin replied. "On a reference-only basis, of course. No tomes will be removed from the property. And I believe there is a clause regarding theft between

wizards in the Injunction."

"You are outrageous!" Waide said indignantly. "Your right to that inheritance is contested, in any case."

"The library is mine, and I will vigorously defend it against any claim to the contrary," Mostin said with narrowed eyes. "So it's settled then? The bribe is sufficiently large?"

"From my perspective, more than adequate," Daunton sighed pragmatically. "And I doubt any Wizard would decline your request in light of such an offer."

"Waide?" Mostin asked drily. "I hope you don't intend to abandon your magical peers on such a momentous occasion?"

"No," Waide replied, "any more than you would seek to exclude Rimilin from such a gathering. I believe he also maintains a temporary residence in Morne."

"Quite," Mostin said through gritted teeth.

"Do I detect the stench of another rivalry, Mostin?" Waide asked sarcastically.

At that moment, Mostin considered whether to *disintegrate* Waide, although it would have meant his own, inevitable demise at the hands of the Enforcer. Turning red, he mastered himself with difficulty.

"Perhaps you are not the heir apparent, after all," Waide added.

Mostin twitched, and smiled madly. "We can accomplish great things together Waide..."

"*NO!*" Waide spat. "What you mean to say is 'I, Mostin the Metagnostic can accomplish great things with your aid.' You would attempt to corral every Wizard in Wyre into some ritual for *your* edification, not for the elevation of magic or understanding. I will not be your lackey in a cabal which serves your own, deranged agenda. Don't think that I don't understand your motive in this. You wish to bind Graz'zt."

"Amongst other things. And if we don't do it first, he will be invoked by the Cult of Cheshne."

"I will not be drawn into a religious conflict."

"The distinction you seek to make is irrelevant," Mostin retorted.

"It is the *Law of the Injunction*."

"Within Wyre, yes. I do not suggest that we act within Wyre."

"You would be a magical dictator, who acts without restraint beyond a sanctuary, and would cower in it when threatened? This is not acceptable to me."

Mostin paused. Waide had a good point, although he didn't see the bigger picture. He breathed slowly.

"If assurances were made – inviolable contracts which protected the interests of every wizard involved – would you be philosophically opposed to participating in a ritual which could be demonstrated to..."

"With you at the helm? Never."

"You are ignorant, Waide."

"I suggest arbitration," Daunton said slyly. "We could appeal to the Claviger."

"This is beyond the Claviger's purview," Waide and Mostin said in chorus.

"Exactly," Daunton smiled. "The Claviger has no interest in the outcome of this dispute. Hence, it would be the ideal arbiter."

"You suggest asking for *advice* from the Claviger?" Waide laughed.

"In a manner of speaking," Daunton nodded. "But its judgment would have to be binding."

"But it could not use the Enforcer in pursuance of such an arrangement."

"I am suggesting that you *abide* by its decision," Daunton replied. "Nothing else. Or have we all forgotten the ability to act with civility unless threatened with annihilation?"

"It has been a long time since I have *not* been threatened with annihilation," Mostin said sourly. "But I'm unsure if we could present a case in intelligible terms. Most of my conflict with Waide stems from the fact that he is loathsome."

"Our mutual hatred transcends any rational compromise," Waide nodded. "However, I will not be branded as the one who refused the advice of the Claviger. I will agree to its decision."

"As will I," Mostin quickly backtracked.

"It may demand certain concessions," Daunton said carefully. "Are you sure that you are prepared to accept that possibility?"

"Naturally," Mostin answered. *Concessions?* He thought. "But I would like to address the Assembly first, to see if some other route cannot be found."

"Good luck," Waide said snidely.

"Where, and when?" Daunton asked.

"In three days, at my manse outside of Morne," Mostin replied smoothly. "In my library."

Waide bristled silently.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 05-15-05

A shorter update. I'm trying to keep things to 1000 words or so.

Mostly backstory.

ORTWINE

Some millennia before – at a time when most of Wyre sat beneath hundreds of feet of ice – a sidhe-cambion named Suoninguhol had ruled the demiplane of Afqithan.

His succession had been swift and brutal, and accompanied by all manner of atrocious acts – as was common in the history of the place. The previous tyrant – the Loquai sorceress Mileze – escaped to Azzagrat where, in Graz'zt's court, she plotted revenge. Mileze had enjoyed several powerful Abyssal sponsors – a fact which, in itself, testified to her ability – but was, at that time, sworn to Zelatar.

When Graz'zt inevitably moved demons into Afqithan – the Prince was notoriously possessive of worlds he had annexed – most observers were shocked by the fact that Suoninguhol resisted all attempts to displace him from his fortress. Over the course of a year, Graz'zt attempted in various ways to wrest the castle – which contained a strategically vital *gate* to Azzagrat* – from Suoninguhol's grasp. Balors and mariliths were thrown against the stronghold, teams of kelvezu were dispatched to eliminate Suoninguhol, and powerful magics were invoked: the Prince even went so far as to manifest a body within Afqithan in an effort to directly assail the barrier which the cambion had erected. Nothing was effective. To make matters worse, Mileze was ambushed and slain by Suoninguhol's sister, Koilimilou, forcing Graz'zt to identify a new instrument of his will.

Frustrated, Graz'zt retreated his spirit to the Argent Palace, and contrived a spell which would peel Suoninguhol's fortress away from Afqithan and fling it into some nameless Abyssal plane wracked by negative energy. Despite his prognostications to the contrary, Graz'zt's spell failed, sending the Prince into a violent rage.

When he finally emerged from his tirade, Graz'zt swallowed his immense pride and negotiated a settlement with Suoninguhol – content to wait and extract his revenge at a more opportune time. He occupied himself with attempting to learn the identity the cambion's sponsor (the Prince had no doubt that Suoninguhol possessed one), and to groom his own chosen candidate – a Loquai named Irknaan –

in the duties expected of a loyal subject of Azzagrat.

Time passed. Graz'zt became distracted in wars with Orcus, Soneillon and Fraz Urb'luu. Suoninguhol entrenched himself yet further, tightening his grip on Afqithan and compacting hundreds of fiends from a variety of interested demonic parties. His ascendancy seemed assured until, abruptly and without warning, Suoninguhol vanished. News quickly found its way to Zelatar, prompting Graz'zt to again invest the demiplane and, this time, successfully install Irknaan as king. Koilimilou was captured, but Irknaan chose to humiliate rather than eliminate her.

The *gate* was reopened and, for a while, Graz'zt was content. Afqithan's status was monitored by the Prince's demons, and Irknaan paid a hefty tribute for which he gained recognition in Azzagrat. Graz'zt's minions became favoured compactees of Loquai sorcerers; Loquai mercenaries found themselves fighting in wars from Yutuf to Throile. Suoninguhol's abode became known as Irknaan's Fortress, and the new king was left to explore and expand the nineteen sub-levels below it.

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When Irknaan's Fortress passed into Ortwine's possession, the Sidhe inherited something of a mixed fortune.

The castle was established upon a precipitous bastion of rock, unscalable from three sides, and reached by a narrow path cut into the sheer wall of the fourth; although assault from the ground was as an afterthought to its real defense. Its highest towers, which soared many hundreds of feet into the purple skies, were linked with bridges less than a foot wide: each hung like a strand of silk which glistened in the dusk. All of the fortress – except for a reception chamber to which a previous queen had pactbonded a dozen of the largest jariliths – was *dimensionally locked* against unwanted intrusion, but demons could still be conjured and bound within. Its interior could not be *scried*. The outcrop itself was reinforced by a spell of tremendous power, wrought long before by a goddess named Shuae.

The art of the Loquai suffused the place, with moving murals and columns of shadow, fashioned by magic over long centuries. The air whispered as one walked through the lofty and insubstantial upper halls, but the deep chambers seemed to have walls of impossible density: here all sound was muted, and light subdued. Carven reliefs, which displayed scenes of glorious hunts – or grotesque tortures –

writhed as their stories unfolded to the observer. Broad stairs led to a wide platform upon which were roosted the four remaining tenebrous griffons, and the evil specimen once owned by Duke Ytryn – a chimaeric monster of unique form and singular foul disposition. Ortwine had tried, without success, to subdue the beast; it remained tethered by a two-hundred pound chain of adamant to a plinth of unbreakable marble.

At its deepest point, in a cleft which had been hewn into the bedrock by some unknown force, lay the now-sealed *gate* to Azzagrat; above it lay the summoning rooms, with a jackal-headed arcanadaemon confined in a circle of *binding* by Mileze long before. There was a cavern in which eerie shades moved across still waters; a repository of tomes written in dead and forgotten languages; a forge, where Ainhorr had maintained a team of Azer smiths; quickling warrens, and chambers filled with torture devices. An armory of Faerie weapons, in a vault which was guarded by a *symbol of insanity* placed by Mostin, now housed the ten-foot vorpall sword *Heedless*.

Gnome thralls moved silently and efficiently throughout the castle, and a handful of quicklings – enchanted to obey Ortwine's desires – were still retained by the Queen. Gaggles of minor sprites hovered and chattered continually, and bearded feys with cudgels and pipes sang and caroused with nymphs and sylphs in the many small courtyards. Walled gardens, once home to bloodthorns and viper trees, now also contained more benign shrubbery – although Ortwine had allowed a few demonic saplings to remain, mainly as a curiosity.

The Queen knew that Irknaan's Fortress sat upon a crossroad of realities, and for her, the World of Men was never more than a step away. Yet if one rode beyond the limit of burgeoning Faerie, the umbral taint of Afqithan still clung.** Invoked at the climax of the *incident*, as Mostin had wryly dubbed it, the planar rift was growing at an exceptional rate: it would take a mere two millennia for Afqithan to be entirely subsumed by Faerie. Understanding the cartography of the place had been Ortwine's first task to herself: mentally cataloging every *gate* and portal (there were many); identifying areas where other worlds were closest; understanding each nuance in Afqithan's planar symmetry. Knowing which paths led to sylvan glades, and which led to haunted copses.

Her hegemony stretched into Faerie, across wide tracts of forest and heath-covered moorlands, within which were hidden deep, wooded ravines. Beyond them lay mountains, a wide river, and the courts of noble sidhe in realms which stretched through space and time. In Afqithan itself – where the remnants

of the Loquai numbered a few hundred – her rule was uncontested. Menicau, three times a turncoat, still dwelt in her citadel, but even she presented no threat, and had bowed her head in deference. A dozen other families retained estates with Ortwine's permission. But the Queen herself kept no Loquai, demon or cambion in her train.

Ortwine surveyed the land south of her walls. Trees which had sprung over the heaped corpses of fiends; the great contusions in the ground – caused when Azazel smote Irzho from the sky, and the balor had fallen like a black comet – now covered with green creepers. The chasm, caused by Soneillon's final realization of nonexistence, become a deep pool to which mist clung, with an air only of deep sorrow. Nwm's hand, at work.

The Sidhe-Queen pulled a pair of leather gloves over her hands, shifted her scimitar, and tied her hair back. Her perception changed momentarily as she walked between worlds: from Afqithan, to an area of grassy knolls in Methelhar, near the borders of Nizkur Forest. She retrieved a small, ornate box from her belt pouch, performed a complex manual operation, and whispered nine syllables of power.

A *shadow avenue* opened to Deorham. There, she would meet with Nwm, who would bear her to Sisperi: the Goddess Lai had requested an audience with her, and Ortwine had grudgingly agreed.

*The *gate* to Azzagrat is of ancient origin. It is constructed, not natural: the result of an immensely potent spell. It cannot be freely *disjoined*, and the ward protecting it would require a large and powerful cabal to penetrate. It can be *sealed* – presumably the intention is to allow it to function as a door which can be locked from either side.

**The initial bubble of Faerie invoked by Teppu was four virtual miles in diameter, with Irknaan's Fortress at the dead centre.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 01-29-06, 12:51 AM

Recollection

Soneillon.

The name echoed in his mind, and caused his stomach to turn.

The *Ahma* stood alone upon the porch of Mostin's manse in the cold pre-dawn, mist rising from his mouth and nostrils. A waning moon, riding high in the West, illuminated the grassy hills of Scir Celod on the borders of Wyre with a silver-blue sheen, and cast long, violet shadows.

Eadric brooded: he had dreamed of her again. Her shadow clung to him like an insubstantial mist, gnawing at the corners of his awareness. For the hundredth time, he reenacted the events in Afqithan in his mind, searching for clues which may have eluded him, attempting to gain new perspectives.

“Her vestige remains in Dream,” Teppu had assured him in the aftermath of the Confrontation. “She will fade, if you allow it. If you permit her echo to intrude upon your consciousness, it will lend her memory substance. A semblance of *ens* will crystallize. Remember – *Nothing Becomes*. And you are the *Ahma*: your thought will become manifest before most others. Let her go. Let her remain cradled in the bosom of the Ancient.”

Eadric's throat and chest tightened with the memory of what had gone before. A single, tiny, corner of reality, subject to the strain of so many competing Infinities. Graz'zt's main force crumpling under the assault of Soneillon and her horde of augmented monsters. The Horror, unleashed by Mostin, and its frenzy of destruction in the West, abruptly ended by a swift stroke of Kostchtchie's hammer. The untimely evaporation of the *Quiescence of the Spheres*, and the onslaught of devils which had followed, sweeping everything before them. *Gates* opening, and rifts appearing, space buckling as demons fled to Azzagrat at their master's behest: Graz'zt working desperate magic in his sanctum as the greater threat of Orcus overrode all other concerns.

Eadric had sought relentlessly for Ainhorr within Irknaan's Fortress, and as Chaya had invoked gruesome necromancies, Shomei had hurled compacted devils at their foes and burned the lesser

demons away with a celestial fire which had caused him to gape in wonder. The *Ahma* had hewn his way through Nalfeshnee bodyguards to reach the Balor. But even in his moment of triumph, as he had struck Ainhorr down, an ecstatic scream of extinction had echoed in his mind, rushing in a wave across the battlefield. Soneillon had fallen.

His mind had darkened as a spell of terrific force settled upon them. Impotent, Eadric had watched as the *Akesoli* had descended upon Shomei, and, in a trice, flayed her body – stripping her essence away and binding it in a subtle net of Amaimon's devising. Infernal justice – for her numerous misdemeanours – swiftly served upon she who had broken compacts, and flouted the iron law of Dis. The *Ahma*, burned and bloody, with armour rent and shield shattered, his strength all but spent, had nonetheless brandished *Lukarn* defiantly. But the devil Nahuzihis had raised a clawed hand.

“Stay,” the word had issued like a foul breeze. “You have no authority here.”

Despite his wards, their power had washed over him, and *Lukarn* had fallen limp at his side. The devils vanished, and as the glamour lifted, he had turned to face Chaya. She stood naked and scarred, her black gem smoking with the spirits of the fiends it had consumed. Her mistress vanquished, her hatred for him had suddenly become palpable.

Still, she was no match for him. She had withdrawn.

Briefly, the *Ahma* had stood alone in the wreck of the throne room, the mangled corpses of demons – and Shomei's diabolic servitors – all about him. He had made his way uncertainly to a balcony, and gazed upon the blasted landscape below. Narzugon cavalry thundered through the glades, slaying at will, their stained pennants bearing flies and mantises. Legions of bearded devils bearing hooked glaives followed. Ahead of them, unassailable, the standard of Hell had moved with ruthless purpose.

And then, suddenly and without warning, the declamation issued by Nwm, within whose titanic mental voice were overlaid the soft tones of Nehael – *Nehael* – and Teppu, and Hlioth, and Mesikämmi, and Lai and her handmaidens. The voice which penetrated into every corner of Afqithan, stirring sprites in their tumps; buckawns and quicklings in dark places; and the genii of trees, pools, rocks and glades from their languor. Within the awareness of every woodland spirit in Afqithan, was conjured a vision of what could be. The Druid had forged an empathic continuum, embracing everything which contained a

vestige of Green, allowing energy to flow freely like water. Consciousness had unified and Goddess manifested.

If you be Fae, lend us now your strength.

It was both a command and a plea. The ancient inhabitants of the demiplane had answered. Teppu had gathered their power into himself, and a viridescent nova had purged Afqithan of interlopers, sealing every rip and fracture in the fabric of space.

As uncounted varieties of fiend and monster were expelled, so too were Eadric and Mostin: forced violently and abruptly away from Afqithan and into the sphere of Man. A nightmare was suddenly replaced with a cold, sick, wakefulness.

Alone, in the neatly tended fields of Hethio in Wyre, anger and frustration had utterly consumed the *Ahma*. He had screamed, and cursed Graz'zt, and Rhyxali, and the Adversary, and Soneillon.

“You are bewildered,” the voice, soft and familiar, had spoken to him from the very soil.

The blood had hammered in his temples. “Show yourself,” he had said, trembling.

A sapling had broken through the earth nearby, and quickly gained height and girth: it grew into a young ash, with black buds cracking with fresh, delicate leaves. She had stepped out of the tree, and stood before him. There had been a lightness and ease about her that he did not remember; and a confidence rooted in some other power which he could not know. No vestige of angel or demon remained, and an aura of deep jade surrounded her. Her eroticism – free and guiltless and profound – had somehow shamed him with its purity.

Madness had threatened to seize him.

“You teeter uncertainly,” she had said softly.

He had nodded, and hung his head.

Gently, she had embraced him, caressing hair caked with venom, blood and ichor. As he wept, she had sung quietly.

But the voice – the voice of the other demoness – had stayed in his mind. Soft, seductive syllables which repeated in a circle without end.

Exult in your memory, Eadric. Because Nothing will ever again compare to me.

*

Eadric turned to see Orolde patiently standing close by, mindful to avoid intrusion upon his reverie. The sprite, aware of the other's sudden perception of him, offered Eadric a goblet of mulled firewine. The *Ahma* nodded briefly and quickly drained it. In the East, the sky was brightening.

“Is Mostin abroad yet?” Eadric inquired.

“Yes,” Orolde replied. “But he is in his study. He finds the mornings most conducive to work. I will inform him, if you wish to speak?”

“It can wait.” *They* can wait. Titivilus and Murmuur were still bound with magic below, as the painful process of extracting information from the – now former – Nuncio of Dis continued.

“Can you feel it, Orolde?” Eadric asked the Sprite.

“What would that be, *Ahma*?”

“This... *Viridity*.”

“Ah. Yes.” Orolde nodded.

“What is it like?”

“For me? I suppose it is like jumping into a lake, and then suddenly remembering that I can breathe underwater.”

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 02-01-06, 03:53 PM

She is magnificent, Nwm observed as the goddess rode down the babau. *Drengh* was a bloody blur, flashing red about her head. The Druid was in a state of perfect, dynamic meditation: they had honed their rapport to the point of a wordless, instinctive knowledge of intent, where Nwm had become the agent of her thought.

Their quarry were diminishing in numbers: their leaders, and the most war-hardened among them, had been redeployed to another arena – a distant, violent conflict between two old enemies. Those that remained were diminished, and lacking the discipline enforced by the direct agents of Graz'zt's will, they had disintegrated into a violent rabble of clans, ruled by the most ruthless and cunning amongst them. They became easy prey for the bands of godlings and ancestors who rode forth to engage them.

Of the Nireem, Ninit had proven the most difficult to relate to. She seemed oblivious to the needs of Mulhuk, and countenanced no argument which conflicted with her desire. She was utterly impervious to reason. Her passion was only to ride, and to hunt.

Immediately, Nwm had adored her.

He had allowed himself to become subsumed in her, and relinquished himself utterly. An act of devotion inevitable, he wryly observed, when any aspect of *Goddess* presented itself to him. But the communion which Ninit provided for Nwm led to a reciprocity which The Rider had not anticipated. She needed him in order to slay more effectively, and now she guarded and protected him. Ninit had grown accustomed to a lack of worship – her cult had been extinct for centuries. Nwm's adoration – when directed towards her – had stirred certain deific *needs* which had been suppressed for too long. Ninit craved worship, once again. And the details of Nwm's broader henotheism were irrelevant to the goddess.

Nwm's mind reached out, connecting with the soil of Sisperi, and energy coursed through him. A

profound agony – familiar and reassuring – fired every nerve in his body. His skin cracked like the bark of an ancient tree and began to bleed, green fire coursed over him, and a necromantic impulse of terrible potency exploded outwards from him in all directions. Demons dropped like flies.

In his thoughts, Ninit smiled savagely.

As the few remaining monsters winked out, Nwm *healed* himself of his self-inflicted trauma and mustered his strength again.

You are weary, Ninit's voice echoed in his mind. *Return to Mulhuk.*

Nwm bowed. He might have continued, but one did not gainsay The Rider. He would return to Mulhuk, and then make his way to Wyre and his appointed meeting with Ortwine.

*

When not hunting, Nwm would spend long hours instructing Lai and her handmaidens in the arts he had mastered. His favoured location was a courtyard graced with crystal trees, where a warm sun always shone in the afternoon; demonstration was his preferred method. And the knowledge with which Nehael had imbued him, he eagerly disseminated. His role was paradoxical: both mentor and worshipper; teacher and priest.

At other times, he and Lai would leave Mulhuk, and walk beneath the trees in the region of Sisperi which had been called Soan, where the Werud – a confederation of tribes who had venerated the Nireem – had once dwelt. The desolation was absolute, as all sapience had been extinguished by the tide of demons which had ravaged the world.

One cold morning, not far from where Eadric had slain the babau Uort,* Druid and Goddess had come across the remains of a settlement, its inhabitants driven off or butchered a century before. The stench of death and decay still clung to the place; a pall of Abyssal misery, which might take millennia to clear. Nwm sat upon a moss-covered outcrop – all that remained of an ancient granary.

“What of Saes?” He had sighed. “Little can proceed without her.”

“I have tried. She will not respond. The gate to Ruk is closed. She is mad. Bloated on Death.**”

“You must persist. She may, in time, be persuaded,”

Lai laughed drily. “You do not know her as I do. Another way must be found. But something else has occurred to you.”

“There may be alternatives,” Nwm said carefully. “There are tribes in the North of my world. Some may be willing to undertake the journey here. To begin afresh. But I will not deceive them: demons lurk around every corner, and I suspect Sisperi will never be rid of *them* entirely. How would they even understand an entreaty made by you or Rhul? And they would bring their own gods with them, Lai. It might serve only to speed your demise.”

“A chance I am willing to take.”

Nwm shrugged. “Others can come, and when they die, Saes will claim them. Trees can be *awakened*, and when they die, Saes will claim them too. Saes is the key – all other solutions are merely temporary.”

“If another could be persuaded to go and speak with her. Eadric perhaps?”

Nwm shook his head. “It is unlikely. He has discharged his vow, and other matters concern him. And Saes might entrap him: Graz'zt would trade a whole world for the *Ahma*. I lack the necessary tact – or guile. No, I think Ortwine might be the answer.”

Lai's lip curled, and the sky darkened momentarily. “I will return to Afqithan, if I must. But I mistrust her.”

“And she, you. But her mendacity may be your ally.” He smiled grimly, and became serious. “She is no pawn, Lai. If she condescends to aid you, it will be on her terms.”

“I will send her a *dream*. It will be neutral territory.”

“It might be preferable if I speak to her,” Nwm suggested. “We have a bond that endures across four lifetimes, and she knows I will not deceive her.”

“If you deem it best,” the Goddess reluctantly agreed.

**

“I would like to extend my gratitude to the Assembly for allowing me to speak,” the Alienist began. “My particular thanks to Daunton, for acting as my sponsor in this matter.”

They had convened at Mostin's – formerly Shomei's – estate outside of Morne: thirty-one mages gathered in an audience hall around a great, oval table, carved from ebony and inlaid with scenes from Irrenite myth. Some sat. Some stood, or leaned on staves. Most were human. Rimilin of the Skin was there: he sat alone, shunned by all others.

Even Waide remained silent, aware that an untimely display of sarcasm might earn the ire of many of those present. Mostin – it was rumoured – was about to make some grand philanthropic gesture, and most were concerned that the Alienist was sufficiently eccentric to change his mind for no other reason than mild annoyance. Nothing should jeopardize this improbable event.

Mostin's lidless eyes scanned those present as he fondled Mogus, the obscene, fist-sized pseudonatural which lived in a nondimensional space within his tunic. In sympathy, the orbs on his *robe of eyes* rotated in a disturbing fashion, fixing first one, and then another of those present.

“Mulissu and Shomei are gone,” Mostin continued. “Two great lights have left us – to whichever fates they have chosen for themselves. We are diminished. I am left with the burden of being the greatest living Wizard in Wyre, although perhaps not on this plane - something I will come to in due course. Many of you consider me both aloof and deranged, and I will deny neither. I am, however, indisputably, a genius.”

Waide sighed.

Mostin ignored him. “Jovol's legacy remains with us, and if we dwell within the borders of Wyre, we must abide by it. For those of us with the resources – and I count myself fortunate in this regard – the option of continuing our conjurations is open, if we have another base from which to operate. I have erected my *portable manse* outside of Wyre's borders in order to facilitate this. This has proven controversial amongst some of you gathered here, as it might be claimed that it circumvents the spirit – if not the letter – of the Second Injunction. I am not alone in this regard, however.”

Mostin stared pointedly at the Hag Jalael, Rimilin, and Wigdryt – a smoke mephit.

“This is a testing time for us,” Mostin continued, “but we must not waver in our faith in Jovol's wisdom. His vision was more complete than we can appreciate, and he had access to methods which are now lost to us.”

A murmur rippled through the gathered mages. Rumour of the *web of motes* had been heard by all, although only a few knew of its true significance.

“I am about to make several assertions which may, on the surface, appear contradictory or paradoxical. Let me posit a scenario,” Mostin sighed. “As one who has experienced the power of the *web of motes* first-hand, this is not as improbable as it might sound. Jovol *knew* of the explosion of religious power which Tramst – the so-called *Sela* – exemplifies. He *knew* of an impending conflict with the Cult of Cheshne. Furthermore, he chose death – *in violation of his own Injunction* – as a course preferable to allowing a second conjuration of Graz'zt. He knew that a renaissance in Uediian power would act as the best balance on all other concerns. The entity who was Fillein, then Jovol, has self-incarnated again, in the guise of a fey named Teppu.”

The revelation left all of those present – except for Rimilin – dumbstruck. The brief silence was quickly replaced by thirty chattering voices.

Mostin held up his hand, and a gong sounded.

“Please allow me to continue,” he smirked despite himself. An uneasy silence returned to the room.

“There will be time for questions after I have spoken, but there are a number of other issues I would like to address first.

“Most importantly, *Teppu is not Jovol*, at least in any meaningful sense, any more than Jovol was Fillein. I am unsure of the extent to which even his memories are retained. Teppu's agenda is not Jovol's agenda. He is driven by a different set of desires and philosophies, although there is, somehow – perhaps hyperconsciously – a commonality of purpose. This higher purpose is related somehow to Dream, and was partially illuminated by the oblique references that Jovol made to his understanding of the dialectical process.

“If we deal with Teppu – and I suspect we must – we should not expect to enjoy any kind of special rapport. Teppu is *Green*. His concern is a complex of energies involving feys, nature spirits, the goddess Uedii, and the natural world – something which he refers to as the *Viridity*: a burgeoning node of elemental power centered around these principles. The Viridity may be arising as some kind of mediating effect to resolve the polarization of Oronthonian belief and the Cult of Nihilism from Shûth.

“Its effect in Afqithan *superseded the designs of Oronthon's Adversary*. Accordingly, I have designated it a Greater Infinity. Its relationship with Oronthon himself is unclear, as is the relationship between the two foci – the *Sela* on one hand, and Nehael on the other. When I inspected the *web of motes* the sympathetic energy between the two was astounding, which leads me to suspect that a higher order of Intelligence is at work – perhaps the same order which drives Teppu, perhaps not. In any event, the final turn of the wheel in Afqithan revealed the Adversary as nothing more than a cog in some transcendental purpose. He had no inkling of the Viridity, and knowledge of it was – or is still – shrouded from him.”

Waide could no longer contain himself. “Nehael is the succubus who started all this mess in the first place, am I correct?”

“Not exactly,” Mostin said smugly. “Nehael is no longer what she was. In fact, she may have never been what she formerly was – the Viridity is concerned primarily with the Now, the Moment. As such, what is past, and what is yet to come are in large measure irrelevant. According to that paradigm, all history is vacuous – and mutable.”

“This is mystical babble,” Jalael interjected. “I had expected more from you, Mostin.”

“Indulge me!” Mostin snapped. “And Waide, kindly allow me to speak without further interruption. I am trying to contextualize my actions, not justify current trends in religious thought.”

Daunton coughed. “Perhaps you might be a little more succinct, Mostin.”

“Oh very well,” the Alienist grumbled. He inhaled deeply, and thought for a moment.

“Let me speak of *artifacts*,” Mostin clearly enunciated the last word, and was not disappointed by the effect that it had on all of those present. “You have, doubtless, heard rumours regarding the *web of motes*. Its whereabouts is currently undetermined: its last known guardian was the demon Surab, who possessed Mulissu's daughter, Iua, and was responsible for the death of the Savant. The *web of motes* itself is unlocatable by any means available to me. Surab is *mind blanked* by some device. It is of paramount importance that we retrieve this object. There is hope: I have made a *metagnostic inquiry* of a Pseudonatural entity named *Ghom* which dwells beyond the middle region. I believe that Surab is unaware of the true nature of the *web of motes*. I also believe that Iua is still alive – her form, which is young and nubile, may be pleasing to the demon. Surab may be unwilling – or unable – to reenter Azzagrat, and has retreated to the unnamed regions between Hell and the Abyss.

“Also, the chthonic demoness Soneillon spoke of something named *Pharamne's Urn* – an object of which she claimed ownership, but which had been appropriated by Prince Graz'zt at some point in the past. This item is of Aeonic potency: one in full possession of its powers – something which the Prince of Azzagrat *is not* – can *create universes*. Naturally, Graz'zt guards it jealously. Queen Soneillon could unlock it to a greater degree although, I suspect, she could not manifest its ultimate power: she was unusual for a demon in her command of ritual magic, something which is antithetical to the Abyssal mindset. She was also unique in many other ways.” An ironic smile crossed the Alienist's face.

Mostin paused to take a sip of tea, and was mildly surprised – and gratified – to find his audience utterly enrapt.

“We are delicately poised,” Mostin continued. “Currently, as I am sure even the most politically ignorant of you are aware, the *Sela*, Oronthon's proxy, is on the field of battle, south of Wyre's borders.

Whilst Prince Tagur attempts to rally support for the campaign in secular circles, the Temple – *and I trust we all recall that particular monolith* – has effectively reformed, albeit with a more thoughtful perspective and without the stigma attached to the name *Temple*. I'll say the name again, for those of you who didn't hear me: *Temple*. It is the same band of lance-waving zealots as it was three years ago, and we must trust that Tramst has inculcated some measure of insight and tolerance in those involved.

“*This war is magical*. The initial skirmishes – which have proven inconclusive – have demonstrated that the *Sela* is fallible in this arena. His purview is enlightenment – whatever that means to an Oronthonian – and not conflict. We must decide – collectively – a policy in this matter. We are, of course, bound by the Injunction, *although we can act beyond Wyre's borders*. But of the three main sects within the Cult of Cheshne, only one is technically subject to the law of the Claviger, and this has yet to be tested in practice.

“A friend once described such a conflict as *arcanoreligious* and I scoffed at the term. I am, however, beginning to think he – now she – was correct. It is fraught with legalistic complexity, which the Injunction must adapt to – although I have no doubt that the Claviger itself can anticipate many of the vagaries. If I am a theurge, and I conjure a demon within Wyre's borders using arcane power, am I subject to the same set of laws as I would be if I used a divinely granted boon to do the same? And we should not doubt that the devotees of Cheshne are both willing and able to do these things. Their vision is apocalyptic, in the extreme.

“This rather circuitous speech – and I apologize, Daunton, if I was less *succinct* than you had hoped, brings me to the main thrust of my argument today: there are mages and hierophants within the Order of Cheshne who wield considerable power. Possibly more than me, even. Their exact names, numbers and dispositions are hidden from us, but there are undoubtedly transvalent casters amongst them. We know only *Anumid*, who is their mouthpiece, and with whom Daunton was granted a brief audience.

“Their veneration of Cheshne is absolute. They regard demons – even demonic nobility – in an entirely different light to those of us exposed to Oronthonian dogma. *Ugras* – fierce protectors – of ancient methods and teachings. This is their Truth, and who are we to gainsay it?

“We cannot hide from this. We must adopt a position – even if it is one of noninvolvement: something, incidentally, which I most emphatically discourage. I am not asking you to submit to my whim in this

matter, but I do request that my counsel is acknowledged, if nothing else. Waide distrusts and despises me – and the feeling is entirely mutual. But we have agreed to go to the Claviger for direction in our antipathy for one another, because both of us realize that our personal feelings for one another cannot be allowed to interfere with the larger picture.

“My appeal today is complex. First, I ask for help in recovering the *web of motes*. It is a tool which we can use to great effect – *let me finish, Waide*. Furthermore – as unlikely as this might seem – I owe it to Mulissu to see her daughter returned safely: I am rather fond of Iua.

“Second – and I will preempt cries of 'foul' before they are issued – I believe, for a variety of reasons, that it is within our mutual interest to confine the Demon Prince Graz'zt. He is one of the chief *Ugras* and we run the risk of him being conjured by our enemies and sent against us. The prize, if we can accomplish this, is *Pharamne's Urn* – if we can get to it before anyone else. I am in the possession of a transvalent spell bequeathed to me by Jovol which I believe can accomplish this infallibly *if I have the unqualified support of the Assembly in this matter*. The spell – which is outmoded, and I suspect against which Graz'zt has developed defenses – can be modified. Even a demon of Graz'zt's stature cannot withstand our combined power.

“Third, we must develop a coherent strategy to counter the threat from the Cult of Cheshne. We cannot be sidelined in this matter; neither can we allow ourselves to be overcome piecemeal, one-by-one. We must unite to address this danger. This runs counter to a thousand years of tradition, I know, but change is upon us. We live in a new world. We must adapt, or we *will* be broken. I have considered various possibilities as to how this can be accomplished, and I am willing to discuss them at length when the debate begins.”

Mostin took another sip of tea – which had gone cold – before continuing. He swallowed reflexively, as if in great doubt, ~~and closed his eyes~~.

“Word has probably already spread that I am willing to make Shomei's library available to the arcane community. This is so. But, in case any of you have doubts as to my earnestness in regard to the matters of which I have spoken – and my sense of urgency – I would like to go further. I have a well-deserved reputation for miserliness, I know, and this may come as something of a shock. So consider this as a display of enlightened self-interest.

“I would like to turn over Shomei's entire estate *in perpetuity* to the Wizards of Wyre, as the starting point of a collective endeavour. I will donate my own library to the enterprise, and urge you all to do the same. I propose a repository of learning, and a testing ground for intellects as yet undiscovered. An *Academy*, if you will. We should embrace the Injunction, and display it above our gates as our Law, but also recognize it as our guiding principle. And I should like to nominate Daunton to be elected as our first President.”

Thirty-one jaws, including that of Rimilin of the Skin, dropped.

When Waide had recovered his composure, he smiled bitterly. He knew that Mostin had finally won, and left his indelible mark on history.

* This story may have to wait for some time.

** Saes, the Nireem goddess concerned with death, had allied herself with Graz'zt when the demon invested the plane, seeing an opportunity to augment her own power when the inevitable tide of slaughter followed. She gathered the spirits of all dead things to herself, swelling her strength, and guarded her prizes jealously. When Graz'zt withdrew his main force to defend Azzagrat, Saes sealed the entrance to Ruk, the underworld. Nwm's efforts to use remains he had discovered to *reincarnate* some of those who had died in the conflict, in order to repopulate Sisperi, were foiled: Saes refused to relinquish their souls.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 05-09-06

THE PROSPECT OF EMBASSIES

In the aftermath of the Confrontation in Afqithan, Nwm the Preceptor assumed the form of a great raven and took to the skies. He surveyed the scene below: had it been any ordinary battle, a glut of flesh would have been his for the taking. But amongst the heaped corpses of demons and monsters, all carrion was foul. Ichor, not blood, stained the glades beneath the towering trees.

Purposefully, he winged his way to where I lay dead upon the field: foes whom I had felled were scattered around. His pinions cracked once, and his talons came to rest upon a heap of varrangoin. I beheld him through lifeless eyes as he approached: my spirit lingered, unwilling to abandon my body.

"A third time will I restore you," he cawed. "And a fourth and a fifth, if need be. We are in need of every ally which we can find. The seed must sprout. The shoot must be tended."

Gently, he lifted me upwards, and screeched, invoking ancient goddesses who had slumbered for millennia, and whose names he alone knew. With a violent passion, life returned to me again.

"How was death?" He asked.

"Cold," I replied. I smiled, and exulted in my new form, relishing its power and subtlety. I cast my sight about, perceiving the interwoven lattice of life and magic which suffused the place. "This is your doing?" I asked.

"In part," he answered, winging his way toward Irknaan's Fortress. "What now?"

"I will remain here," I answered. "Afqithan is mine, now."

He cocked his head. "That is a bold claim. How will you enforce it?"

"With ruthless charm," I replied.

Nwm stood beneath the sagging boughs of a great deodar, a tree not native to Trempe, but rather one of a dozen imported generations earlier, by an aristocrat with a taste for the exotic; some forebear of Eadric of Deorham, whose name the Druid could not recollect. The late afternoon sun shone warm through the deep green of its canopy. He watched her approach, studying her carefully.

Her poise and grace were effortless, and her natural footfall, silent. She wore the same, tattered cloak and stained jerkin that she always had, but bore a buckler of sidhe metal strapped to her arm, won in Afqithan from one of the thousands who had perished there. Her face – breathtaking in its beauty – displayed only the slightest hint of contempt.

"Will this take long?" She asked as she drew near.

"It may," Nwm replied. "Lai has a favour to ask you."

Ortwine's eyes narrowed. "And what does your deific protégé require of me?"

"To embark upon a series of negotiations, with a goddess named Saes." Nwm replied. He attempted to sound casual. "It is better if I say nothing else. I am merely the courier."

"Somehow, I doubt that," Ortwine replied. "Perhaps you think I might be less apt to view an old friend with suspicion?"

"There is no joy left in you, Ortwine."

"Let's just get this over with," Ortwine sighed.

**

As Nwm and Ortwine travelled to Sisperi, and Mostin addressed the largest gathering of mages for a

century, Eadric sat confined with the devils Titivilus and Murmuur in the summoning room. It was the third day of the interrogation.

Mostin had been irked by the fact that Ortwine and the *Ahma* had caused Titivilus to crumple so quickly: the Alienist had expected a more protracted negotiation. He had attempted for months to wheedle information from the confined Dukes, but had had neither the time nor the resources to develop a spell which would reliably subdue them: if an unprepared magick were to have failed, and a Duke were to break free, things would have become very messy, very quickly. One free would have become three free, and three of them together would have overwhelmed him. But the Wizard was relieved that he could – for a while, at least – avoid the two remaining Devils. He was implicated in the assassination of an Infernal magnate, and would enjoy the enmity of Dis until the end of his days.

The *Ahma* and Titivilus had spoken of the Adversary's role in Afqithan, of the deployment of Devils under Azazel, of Murmuur's Tower – now abandoned on the demiplane and, apparently, inert. Titivilus had speculated at length regarding the Infernal decision made to support Azzagrat – a subtle balancing act, to prevent Orcus gaining supremacy in his war with Graz'zt in the Abyss itself.

Many of Graz'zt's champions had perished, nonetheless, either in the Confrontation or shortly thereafter. Ainhorr, Cemdrei, Uort and a slew of others were no more. Melihaen had abandoned her master and fled to Throile, throwing in her lot with Adyell and the battered remnants of Soneillon's horde. Others had joined with Rhyxali, or Kostchtchie, or slunk away to Yutuf or Terkunuteng to lick their wounds, as their individual whim or interest dictated.

In Zelatar itself, Ilistet had rallied Graz'zt's army and led a savage counterattack against the undead host of Orcus. The war ebbed and flowed, but a stagnant impasse – which suited Hell's designs – seemed inevitable. The Prince of Azzagrat was fighting a defensive war which might last for millennia. His power had been curbed, and his ambition thwarted. Nehael was no longer captive. The *Ahma* had won, though the victory was bitter and empty.

Throughout the exchange with Titivilus, Murmuur had remained silent. Eadric regarded him with a mixed feeling, which included a grudging admiration. Here was a soldier, pure and simple. Loyal, steadfast, unwavering in his devotion to his beliefs, and utterly, irredeemably *evil*.

The *Ahma* sat, and laid *Lukarn* unsheathed across his knees.

"We have a few loose ends to tie up," Eadric sighed. "You may use surmise, but I will be alert to any attempted falsehood. If you try to mislead or prevaricate, I will annihilate you. Am I clear?"

"Yes," Titivilus grinned.

Eadric raised an eyebrow. The Devil already seemed cooperative. Did he think that Mostin's absence would make the *Ahma* more pliable, or was the prospect of his freedom causing him to be less opaque than normal? He grunted, and shifted his position.

"Tell me of Shomei. From your skewed perspective."

"Her soul is in a self-induced state of perdition. By rejecting *Saizhan* she made a conscious decision to consign herself to Hell. You have no authority in acts of individual volition."

"I have as much authority as I choose to assume," Eadric grimaced, "but I agree that it would be pointless to try to rectify the situation." He remembered his own conversation with Shomei too well, as well as the words and actions of the *Akesoli*.

"If you say so, *Ahma*."

"Is she in Dis?" Eadric asked, irritated.

"In Cania. Astaroth purchased her from the *Akesoli*. Perhaps neither Dispater nor Belial could meet their price: that is surmise, for the record."

"For what purpose?"

"She is a valuable prize," Titivilus smirked. "And the Grand Duke has an eye for the spirits of powerful mages."

"As currency?"

"To gloat over. Perhaps he will offer her unlife, for her immortal service. Pacts can extend beyond death, *Ahma*. Before you *smite* me, I should tell you that that is also surmise."

Eadric suppressed a shiver.

The Infernal Duke smiled. "The inducements offered by a Devil such as Astaroth are hard to resist," he persisted.

"And the *web of motes*, Titivilus?" Eadric asked, ignoring the goad. "Where might that be?"

"Frankly, I'm disappointed that Mostin has not contrived a spell to locate it. Find Surab, and you'll find the *web*. I do not know its location."

Eadric thought for a moment.

Titivilus spoke. "There is other information that I would like to impart to you. It is freely given."

"Or rather, the price is invisible," Eadric said stonily.

"Quite. Do you wish to hear it or no?" Titivilus gloated.

"I suppose I must."

"My mandate as your tempter was revoked some time ago. Before my embassy to Azzagrat, in fact."

"Why?" Eadric was suspicious.

"I do not know."

"*Surmise!*" Eadric snapped.

.

"To make way for one whom my superiors felt more suited, I assume. Or perhaps it was an

abandonment of the task altogether."

"You failed, then?"

"I thought I was doing rather well. No matter. Are we finished, now? Will you kindly release me?"

"I regret not. I fear that I have mislead you."

The *Ahma* prayed briefly, buoying himself with Oronthon's power. *Unholy auras* flickered in response within the thaumaturgic diagrams as the devils anticipated Eadric's intention. *Lukarn* gained a silver sheen, and then the *Ahma* spoke a *holy word*. The devils' confining circles were shattered under the assault. Titivilus screamed silently, transfixed, as light overwhelmed him, but Murmuur withstood the barrage.

Incoherently, Titivilus struck Eadric with a quickened *feeblemind* and attempted to dispel the *dimensional lock* placed by Mostin on the chamber, but failed. Murmuur lashed out with a rapid *meteor swarm* and leapt at Eadric, smiting him with as much vile power as he could muster.

Titivilus, paralyzed, fell quickly to a series of brutal strokes from *Lukarn*.

Eadric stared at Murmuur, who remained defiant. Unexpectedly, compassion welled up within the *Ahma*. He had no choice but to act upon it.

"Yield!" Eadric's voice thundered in the confines of the summoning room. "Submit to my mercy. You are no match for me."

More blows were exchanged, and each hewed through the armour of the other. Murmuur staggered uncertainly.

"Yield!" Eadric demanded.

"I cannot," Murmuur smiled sadly. "We are forever lost, *Ahma*. Do you not yet understand?"

Lukarn fell three times, and the duke dropped to the floor.

Eadric closed his eyes as his mind contained the magnitude of his deed. The line had finally been drawn. There would be no more negotiation.

**

Lai sat cross-legged before a fire pit, in which a ruddy flame flickered. Runes lay cast about her, and her handmaidens fussed nearby, pouring nectar into bowls of exquisitely carved wood. She regarded Ortwine carefully, anxious to avoid a conflict.

Nwm, who stood nearby, was clad only in a simple green robe tied about his waist with a length of rough hemp. He scratched the dirt at his feet with slender staff cut from a young hornbeam, and avoided Ortwine's glare. His beard and hair seemed inordinately long to the *sidhe*, as though their cultivation might somehow hold the key to the mysteries into which the Druid had been initiated. A faint aura of Green surrounded Nwm – the *dwimmerhame* which protected him from hostile magicks. His hands and forearms were scarred from the massive backlash energies he routinely employed.

"You are welcome here as an honoured guest," Lai said smoothly, "and what is ours, is yours. Please sit."

Ortwine scowled, and lounged casually, resting on her left arm. Nwm coughed, and knelt next to the goddess.

"Let's get straight to the point," Ortwine smiled coldly. "Nwm tells me that you wish me to act as your messenger. You wish me to enter the abode of the Goddess of Death – I have not forgotten who Saes *is*, Nwm – in order to strike some kind of bargain."

"Yes," Lai nodded. "To secure the release of the spirits which she has hoarded."

"This is no small task."

"Indeed," Lai admitted.

"If I were to agree, it would require sizeable recompense. What do you think that such an endeavour – if successful – is worth, Nwm?"

"I am gratified that you retain your mercenary tendencies," Nwm said drily.

"Do you have a price in mind?" Lai inquired.

"Divinity is acceptable to me."

Nwm guffawed. His expression changed to one of incredulity, when he saw that Ortwine was serious.

"You are a *sidhe*-queen, Ortwine! What more can you require?"

"Homage is pleasant, Nwm, but I think you'd agree that worship would be preferable."

"It is not within the power of the Nireem to grant you what you seek..." Lai began.

"Then you'd better find a way, goddess, because until you do, there will be no deal."

**

Eadric felt edgy. He looked from the highest window of the Steeple, casting his gaze south and east in the direction of the *Sela*'s forces – although they were two hundred leagues beyond the limit of his vision. Below, lights and campfires were kindling amid a sea of tents – not warriors and soldiers, but pilgrims who had made their way to Deorham in the hope of catching a glimpse of the *Ahma*, and to walk in holy places. He turned to Mostin, who sat preoccupied in thought. They had touched briefly upon the topic of the Cult of Cheshne, towards whom both now earnestly bent their will.

"What are they *doing*? Why do they not act?"

"The Hierophants are devising and casting spells," Mostin grimaced. "Very potent spells. This takes time."

"And then?"

"They unleash the storm."

"Could you perhaps be a little more specific?" Eadric inquired.

"Opening a *gate* is child's play to these mages, Eadric. They compact demonic nobility. *Bhítis* and *Ugras*."

"How long do we have? Who will they send?"

"I don't know. If it were me, I'd start with a few balors. Just to get things warmed up – pardon the pun. When that happens, you'll know that the big spells are ready – they won't begin before they're prepared. I think we have a month or two, at least."

"Can we counter it?"

"If we pool our resources. A grand alliance, so to speak."

"And the Injunction?" Eadric looked sceptical.

"Only applies within Wyre's borders." Mostin's eyes suddenly narrowed. "Which is why the Assembly – which is demonstrating as much inertia as I expected – needs to come up with some solid offensive strategies. Fast. I would like to speak with your *Sela*. Can you arrange it?"

"Er...yes," the *Ahma* looked surprised. "I had intended to leave for the South in two days. Can you wait?"

"No," Mostin shook his head vigorously. "How about now?"

"There is *áuda* tonight and tomorrow – blessings which I am duty-bound to bestow, when I can. And I'd like to speak to the thaumaturge, Sineig – Canec informed me earlier that he has made the journey here from Gibilrazen on foot."

"The Irrenite? He is rather controversial, I hear." Mostin seemed amused.

"And becoming increasingly popular. He has quite the following."

"People like sex," Mostin shrugged. "If you include it in your praxis, it's bound to generate a lot of interest. And if you make intercourse with demons a central tenet, you will attract a certain kind of devotee."

"He is treading a dangerous path," Eadric sighed.

"But one not without precedent," Mostin replied drily.

"My religion has been transformed beyond all recognition," Eadric groaned. "And I am responsible for much of it. Most cannot grasp the teachings which Sineig presents. Many of those who follow his example will be broken."

"But a few will shine," Mostin insisted. "They *choose*, Eadric."

"Choice is overrated," Eadric sighed.

"It is preferable to spiritual despotism."

"Is that an ethical stance I detect, Mostin?"

"Only insofar as it applies to me. Now, can we leave?" Mostin nagged. "I'll have you back within an hour."

Eadric nodded.

**

"I require celestial sponsorship," Mostin sniffed, looking at Tramst. "My pseudonatural servitors are not suited for routine defense, and require a great deal of effort to summon and control. I have alienated many fiendish allies, and lack a versatile pool of potential compactees. I also suspect that Dispater may have placed a sizeable contract on my head, or will shortly. Can you help?"

Eadric gaped. The *Sela* seemed amused.

"How do you propose that I might do that?"

Mostin sighed. "Obviously, to sanction my *gating* of celestials and to waive any normal fees that I would otherwise incur for *planar bindings*. I don't see what the problem is. We're on the same side, here. I would stipulate only that celestials who serve me refrain from displaying their wings, or change them to something less offensive – those of bats or insects are acceptable."

"It is not within my remit to make compacts."

"That's absurd," Mostin waved a hand. "You're Oronthon as well as Tramst, aren't you? Just expand your remit."

Eadric groaned. "*Sela*..."

Tramst held up a hand. "I know." He turned to Mostin. "I appreciate any agency that you might provide, Mostin, despite your motivation. But you need to adopt a more conventional approach in this. I cannot *ease* your path to power, can I? How would that be of benefit to you? Perhaps you should speak to a celestial?"

"It is precisely in order to avoid their blinkered perspective that I am talking to you," Mostin groaned.
"I do not require *moral instruction*."

The *Ahma* coughed politely.

"Oh shut up, Eadric. So the answer is 'no,' then? Must I look to another source because the *Sela* is unwilling to help me help him?"

Eadric turned beet red, and opened his mouth to deliver an angry admonishment. Once again, the *Sela* raised his hand, staying his words.

We teach according to the wisdom of those who hear.

"I do not deal with the conventional, Mostin," the *Sela* was imperturbable. "But allow me to speak for Enitharmon: if you demonstrate your commitment, I have no doubt that it will be regarded favourably by those high in the celestial host. I believe that Jovol and Rintrah enjoyed good relations."

"Commitment?" Mostin asked suspiciously.

"You would need to refrain from routinely invoking fiends."

"And their pseudonatural analogues?"

"The host would not recognize such a distinction," Tramst smiled.

"And other pseudonaturals?"

"They would make no distinction there, either. As such, these entities would be acceptable."

"I will abide by these terms for the nonce," Mostin said grudgingly, "although giving up the daemons will be a wrench."

"They are not *terms*, Mostin, and I am in no means acting as guarantor. But if you are seeking to curry

celestial support, it is traditional that one show willing in certain areas. You might also aid the *Ahma* in his coming task."

Eadric cocked his head. "I have a task? That will be a refreshing change to determining my own fate. What is it?"

"On Nehael's initiative there will be a nonpartisan embassy which represents all Wyrish interests, spiritual and secular. You must parley with Anumid: we must attempt to resolve this peaceably, even if is doomed to fail. Both Prince Tagur and Daunton have agreed to the effort."

The *Ahma* swallowed reflexively. "And is my role to be religious or mundane?"

"Both. You are the *Ahma* and the Earl of Deorham."

"One high in the Order – a former Templar – would be of aid to me. Sercion or Brey."

"I can spare neither," the *Sela* said simply. "Nor would I, if I could. They are too unformed for such a task."

"There are no others," Eadric grimaced.

"Amongst the living."

Eadric was dumbstruck. *Must I break every rule?*

You are the Ahma. You do what needs to be done. If you cling to outdated dogma, then what hope do we have?

Must I slay you, as well?

Time will tell. The *Sela* smiled.

"And you also expect me to embark on this futile mission?" Mostin asked.

"Your presence would demonstrate a degree of cohesion; a unity of purpose."

"Which we do not possess," Mostin snapped.

"Yet," Tramst replied. "I remain optimistic, however. I think it is fair to suggest that all desire it, but none are quite sure about how to realize it."

**

The tomb and reliquary of Saint Tahl the Incorruptible were situated in a small chapel adjoining the Great Temple of Morne, and were reached from the main transept through a wrought iron gate which always remained open: the faithful, who sought Tahl's intercession, could at any time offer prayer to him.

When Eadric arrived, only a single petitioner kneeled in quiet contemplation. By her ascetic appearance – she wore little more than rags, and her hair and nails were long and filthy – the *Ahma* judged her to be an Urgic pilgrim from eastern Trempa or Ardan. Or rather, she would have been one, before such distinctions had become irrelevant. The air of the chapel was thick with incense, and slender candles burned steadily upon a small altar.

She gaped as Eadric lit a taper and kneeled next to her. "*Ahma*, I..." she began to whisper.

"I'm sorry for disturbing you," Eadric bowed. "What is your name?"

"Beka, *Ahma*."

"I would have you be a witness, Beka. If the later interpretation of events becomes fraught with untruths and idle speculation, you will remember what happened here. You are charged with preserving an accurate account. Will you accept this responsibility?"

"*Ahma*, I..."

"If you wish to leave, you may. I would prefer that you stayed, however. Will you indulge me?"

The pilgrim nodded dumbly.

Eadric stood, and removed his gauntlets. Reaching out, he ran his hand over the face of the marble effigy of Tahl: a figure lying in quiet repose, hands clasped upon the quillons of a greatsword, upon the lid of a sarcophagus. He mustered as much strength as he could.

Eadric hefted the lid, pushed it sideways, and lowered it carefully, so that it rested against the side of the tomb. Inside were a scourge, a sword, and a wooden casket, almost pristine. Eadric prised it open, gagging at the stench which rose up to greet him.

Beka turned her head away, aghast, and held her breath.

"In these days, even the dead will have no rest," he intoned.

There was a momentary flash, and Tahl's decayed form changed abruptly. His eyes opened.

"*Ahma*?"

"My apologies for interrupting your bliss, Tahl. There is much to be done, and I need your help."

"Of course," Tahl smiled. "Where is my armour?"

"Sercion wears it," Eadric laughed. Tears streamed down his face.

"Is the *Sela* here?"

"No. That meeting will have to wait."

"I am the first?"

"You will not be the last." Eadric nodded.

"Who is next?"

"Rede," the *Ahma* looked pained.

"He has become wrathful. A spirit of vengeance."

"So much the better," Eadric smiled grimly.

**

She was waiting quietly for the Alienist when he returned to his manse. When he saw her, blood hammered in his temples, and he briefly contemplated whether or not to flee. His *arcane sight* revealed no detail about her, impenetrable as she was to divination. Nonetheless, he knew her. Power radiated from her. The Claviger had magnified her.

"Am I to be arraigned?" He asked. "Eliminated?"

"You will make some tea," Gihaahia said with a wicked smile. "And then we will discuss the finer points of the Injunction."

"Do you take milk?" Mostin breathed a sigh of relief.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 05-23-06 at 2:25 am.



Untitled Update

Iua paced back and forth. Violent impulses crowded within her mind, and the recollection of fell deeds felt sweet in her mouth. But huge gaps remained in her memory.

She touched the pommel of her rapier lightly, feeling reassured by its presence. Through her gloved hand, a frisson of power from the weapon made her head spin, as though she had consumed too much *kschiff*.

Egress from the chamber was impossible. As opulent as it might be, she was a prisoner there. The door to the place – if it was a door – showed no sign of lock or handle, and was constructed of some kind of adamant. She had attempted to *plane shift* without success, and even in a *gaseous form* she had been unable to pass through the embrasure – a spell prevented passage, and Iua lacked the means to counter it. Looking out, all she saw was a smoking slope which extended below her as far as she could see. At irregular intervals, the ground was wracked by convulsions and liquid fire erupted.

I am Iua. I am in some Hell or other. I have had an enchantment laid on me: my memory has been selectively erased. I am not dead. I don't think I am.

She knew that there were significant people and places in her life – Mulissu, Ortwin, Ulao, Fumaril, Magathei, Trempa – but she could not clearly remember any events connected with them. When she tried to construct any memory associated with them, it would elude her, and remain tantalizingly beyond her grasp.

She sat upon the bed and waited. She opened her bag – which contained a number of apparently potent items – and laid the contents before her again, as if they might hold the key to her past. A sapphire, rings, amulets, a tiny boat, a lump of dark stone, a sphere, a flat panel of curious design. She gazed at them for a long while, but became frustrated. She replaced them in her bag.

Time passed.

A sound – a low *click* – finally reached her ears. Iua leapt silently to the side of the portal, drawing her blade. As the door slid open, she dashed forth, intent on escape and slaying any in her way.

None stood there, but as her foot passed over the threshold to the chamber, her memory was suddenly restored to her in full.

She screamed.

**

It was the first time that the *Ahma* and Nehael had met since their brief exchange during the aftermath of Afqithan. Eadric had not so much purposefully shunned her, he told himself as he walked to meet her, as been occupied with other, more pressing duties. As had she.

That must be why I feel like vomiting, he sighed.

She was sitting in a wicker chair in the same spot which Cynric had favoured; the place where Feezuu had blasted the Prelate into oblivion. The same place where Graz'zt himself had stood and spoken the dreadful syllables which had resulted in the greatest carnage in Morne's long history. Her presence seemed like a potent salve applied to an open wound.

She smiled when she saw him, causing his head to spin yet further. He sat shakily next to her, and noticed that she smelled like summer rain. He thought briefly.

"Do you retain a sense of irony?" He asked.

She raised an eyebrow.

"That's a good sign," he breathed tensely. "I'm sorry for avoiding you. Too much has passed. I didn't know where to begin. We are not what we were. Other clichés to that effect. I'm now being facetious to cover my discomfort."

Relax.

He relaxed a little.

"I would learn everything that has passed for you," Nehael said softly. "The totality of your experience. It will help me understand better."

"That may take some time."

"You need not speak. You need not even articulate thoughts and memories that are too uncomfortable for you. First, I would share myself with you in the same manner. It is the only way to heal the trauma. A perfect communion."

"Nehael, I..."

"Do not reject me now, *Ahma*."

He clenched his jaw, and nodded. "How?"

"Consider *Saizhan*, and what it teaches. Can you adopt a Sophist perspective for a moment? Allow that truth to assert itself?"

"How will that help?"

"It will contextualize your perceptions. Place them within a framework which is familiar."

Eadric groaned. "Others seem to alternate between religious truths far easier than I. My transitions are more fraught. But I will do as you ask."

"Are you ready?"

"*Now?*"

"Exactly," she smiled. "*NOW.*"

A soft hand reached out, and gently touched his face. His eyelids became heavy.

"Do not close your eyes!" Nehael laughed.

Reality shattered into a billion fragments, and was replaced by Itself.

*

Eadric was possessed of a piercing clarity, in which the world astounded him with its vibrancy and beauty. He looked at Nehael. She was perfect. The oranges hanging nearby – yet to come to full ripeness – were perfect. He listened to the conversation of Temple guards by the gates of the compound, smelled the incense which burned upon the high altar, felt the breeze upon his face on the roof of the Great Fane. He tasted the salt on his lips which blew on the wind from the marshes to the south of Morne. He beheld an ant climbing a rose-bush in a garden in the Bevel. All was perfect.

Beyond all – or beneath all – was a vibration which was inaudible, invisible, and without form. Infinite, yet apprehended in its entirety.

Viridity, he knew. His breath was quick and shallow.

Nehael smiled. "Know me."

The *Ahma* turned his consciousness – which had become all-encompassing – towards her.

In the space of a fleeting moment, he realized everything about her. Every thought, every memory,

every feeling she had ever experienced within her life since her rebirth through the Tree, and a myriad of other lives in cycles within cycles. But stretching back uncounted aeons to the beginning of time itself were another set of memories: impressions which were like dreams, and belonged to one who was no more. Past the Fall, until the Nehael who never was existed only as an unmanifest thought within the Mind of Oronthon. A gnostic ecstasy swept over him.

Abruptly, it ended as she withdrew her power from him. He quaked at the separation from the source. As his ego emerged from the reverie and his persona recrystallized, his breathing slowed again. He focused his mind.

"*Saizho*," he bowed.

He looked at her as her mind absorbed his own experience in its fullness. A single tear ran down her cheek: he watched, and as it fell and struck the floor of the orangery, a thousand tiny flowers erupted from the flagstones.

"You loved her," she smiled.

"Very much," he nodded.

"I am sorry for your loss."

He sighed. "She was my *kius*. The shadow which brought the Good into sharp relief."

"And now?"

"I see the light with clear eyes. Much doubt has passed."

"But the dreams persist, *Ahma*. Her vestige has not abandoned you, and clings yet to your memories. She exists in you most of all."

**

Mostin fidgeted nervously, waiting for the tea to steep. He glanced sidelong at the Enforcer, who was examining a collection of infernal curios upon one of the shelves in his study. She had assumed a black-clad humanoid shape, approximately female, with impossibly red hair. She turned to face him, and her eyes bored into him. Mostin quickly looked away, jerked his hand spasmodically, and promptly spilled the sugar.

"Sh*t," he muttered.

"I relish the rare moments in which I am permitted to manifest a body," Gihaahia said, smiling.

Gods, don't smile. It's too unnerving.

"And a discrete consciousness," the Enforcer added, almost as an afterthought. She sat. "Two sugars, please."

Mostin poured the tea shakily. Most of it found its way into the cup.

"You purport to champion the philosophical tenets which underpin the Injunction," Gihaahia took the cup from the Alienist's uncertain grasp. "Yet you evince a grudging literalism in your approach. As though it were a matter of convenience – or inconvenience – for you. I refer specifically, of course, to the fact that you have chosen to erect your abode *here* – less than a bowshot from the bounds of Wyre as defined in the nineteenth article. Some might view such a decision as purposely defiant and inflammatory."

"I think..."

"Shut up, Mostin. I haven't finished, yet. You are forgiven for this quasi-infraction. The Claviger loves all of her children, even the wayward ones."

Her? Children? Uedii's teats. She's deranged.

"You remain embroiled in political maneuvering – *shut your mouth, Mostin. I'm still talking.* Before you accuse me of arbitrariness, I have already determined to visit Daunton with the same warning. He's as bad as you are. Your *Académie* will sink before it has a chance to establish itself if you persist in this attitude. You are inciting other mages to violence. You are conspiring to conjure a demon prince – *yes, I know you don't plan to bind him in Wyre.* You are a rabble-rouser, and a danger to the body magickal. And as for Astaroth..."

Mostin gaped. Only hours before, a fleeting thought had passed through his mind regarding the Lord of Caina. The Alienist had mused – for all of two seconds – upon the possibility of *binding* the archdevil and forcing him to relinquish Shomei to him.

She has made her choice, Mostin.

Mostin scowled.

"I am sadistic and vindictive, Mostin," Gihaahia's eyes narrowed to burning slits. "And nothing would give me greater pleasure than to rend your body and hurl it into the Phlegethon. The Claviger is more reasonable, however – which is fortunate for you. You will desist forthwith from all political activity when you are within Wyre's confines. This includes plotting to assault the Cult of Cheshne; associating in councils of war with the *Ahma*, the *Sela* or any other representative of Oronthon; offering advice to any of Wyre's temporal leaders; or conspiring with other mages to summon demons. If you choose to engage in any of these activities, *let it be outside of Wyre.* If you violate these terms, you will be exiled for a period of one hundred years upon pain of obliteration if you re-enter the proscribed area. Am I clear?"

Mostin nodded dumbly.

"You would be well advised to reflect upon the spirit of the Injunction when making choices regarding these matters. Conjuring Graz'zt ten yards from Wyre's borders will be regarded as insolent, at the very least. Continuing your plots and machinations in a *magnificent mansion* which abuts Shomei's estate would be considered scandalous. Whilst neither would draw direct retribution, they would predispose the Claviger to a less lenient position if you were arraigned in the future. You may now speak. Be swift. Do you have any questions?"

"Many. Does the Injunction apply to arcanists from Shûth?"

"Of course."

"If I am assailed by a hierophant within Wyre, may I defend myself with impunity?"

"*Defend*, yes," Gihaahia sighed.

"If I open a permanent portal from Shomei's earthly demesne to her astral retreat and convene a council whose agenda is at odds with the Injunction, will it be held against me in the future?"

The threat of the Enforcer's titanic mental grip loomed over Mostin. He knew that she could squash his psyche with a passing thought.

"These are practical considerations," Mostin wailed. "Our existence is threatened."

"Adhere to the Injunction, Mostin. In letter and spirit. The Claviger looks after her own. You will not be abandoned."

"What do you mean?" Mostin asked.

"Precisely that," Gihaahia smiled her evil smile.

"I need to..." Mostin began.

But the Enforcer had vanished, without warning. The Alienist cursed, and hurled the teapot against a bookcase in a fury. What was happening? What was this talk of *gender* and *maternity* in relation to the Claviger? It was grossly inappropriate.

Still, somehow, he felt oddly reassured.

He issued a *sending* to Daunton: *We need to talk. Where are you?*

The reply was laden with fear and apprehension: *Later, Mostin. I have an unexpected guest.*

Mostin frowned. His hands were still shaking. He stood, walked to a small cabinet, retrieved an antique bottle, and poured himself a generous draught of vintage firewine. The liquor burned his throat and made him sneeze.

He fondled the *stone of sendings* briefly, swallowed, and then sent a message to Rimilin.

**

"Will she not compromise?" Lai asked, her voice evincing as much irritation as Nwm had ever before heard.

"Perhaps," the Druid replied. "She may have stated an unreasonably high bargaining position to begin with, with the intention of accepting other terms. But I think that she is genuine. Although it's impossible to tell."

"One of us could relinquish our power," Rhul suggested. "Although she would be bound to Mulhuk, much as we are."

"Would you make such a concession?" Jaliere asked. Smoke bellowed from his nostrils.

"To ensure our survival? Certainly."

"I suspect that Ortwine would find such a proposal unacceptable," Nwm smiled drily. "She wishes to take her divinity with her. Back to Afqithan.*"

"I find this entire conversation absurd," Jaliere grunted. "There must be another way."

"*There is not*," Lai sighed emphatically. "We cannot assault Saes. We cannot coerce her. This fey – who

is unknown to her – may be able to achieve what we are incapable of."

"I don't see how." The God of the Forge was becoming agitated, and his beard began to kindle.

"Please remain calm," Lai's tone changed as she tried to placate Jaliere. "Ortwine is a greater liar than any I have met. She is conniving and duplicitous to an extreme degree. Moreover, if she is *motivated* sufficiently – if the prize is great enough – she will find a way."

"What of the *Ahma*?" Jaliere asked.

"His debt is paid to you," Nwm shook his head. "Three times over. And he is preoccupied with other matters – which I am neglecting in order to be here."

"But you had intended to accompany Ortwine?"

"Yes," Nwm nodded.

Lai looked shocked. "Why have you said nothing of this to me?"

Nwm shrugged. "I cannot let Ortwine do this alone. I thought you understood that."

"But this is..."

"Madness? Suicide?" Nwm suddenly became angry. "Then perhaps you should ask yourselves whether it is reasonable to ask this of her at all! Decide which this is Lai, because it was my impression that there was a possibility of success."

"Watch your tone, mortal," Jaliere threatened.

"Peace!" Lai raised her hand.

"All of this is moot," Rhul observed, "if we cannot find a way to grant Ortwine what she demands."

"*Ngaarh!*" Jaliere slammed a gauntleted fist upon the stone table. He barked at two spectral warriors – ancestral spirits who guarded the doors to the hallway.

"Bring in the Fey. This discussion is pointless without her presence."

**

The island – which rose from the ocean west of Pandicule like a jagged tooth – had been chosen by the mage Kothchori for its isolation and its peculiar aesthetic. Mostin wondered whether, at some time in the distant past, some wind-sorcerer had raised it from the sea bed in order to serve as a base – although the Alienist had no evidence to support such a theory. It was too eccentric, he observed, to be altogether natural.

Rimilin had claimed it as his own and – with a characteristic panache which Mostin grudgingly acknowledged – replaced the crumbling remains of Kothchori's abode with a three-hundred foot tall tower of red iron which pierced the sky like a great, bloody spearhead. The Alienist turned to Orolde.

"He has a certain style," Mostin admitted. "Don't you think?"

"I preferred it as it was," Orolde replied sadly. "Kothchori felt no need for such phallic ostentation."

"An interesting observation," Mostin nodded. "Which may have some merit. The Ritual of Bonding requires certain sacrifices which most would be unable to endure. Come, Orolde! We shall see whether Rimilin observes those niceties of conduct which transcend even the forced peace of the Claviger. It would be wise to omit any references to genitalia, however. Even after so long, that may still be a sensitive subject."

The duo ascended a hundred or so stone steps to arrive at the base of the tower, and stood before an intricate portal of black adamant, inlaid with precious metals and carved with dire warnings. It ground open to reveal a narrow staircase, lit by lurid green smokeless flambeaux. Mostin sighed, and strode in. Orolde scuttled in nervously behind. There was a brief sensation of dimension at once both stretching

and contracting, and Mostin found himself in an echoing hall of great height. He glanced behind quickly to observe Orolde, who still followed him.

The chamber was circular, and was illuminated by a firepit which sat in its dead centre, as well as by seven immense bronze sconces which jutted out of its walls at regular intervals in its periphery. It tapered to an apex perhaps thirty fathoms above, and around the walls a staircase wound, reaching balconies and doors beyond which, presumably, other chambers lay.

"Welcome," a foul voice issued from above the Alienist. Rimilin stood upon a wide mezzanine which extended for three quarters of the chamber's circumference.

Mostin cleared his throat. "Thank-you. Should I come up, or will you come down?" His voice was louder than he had anticipated, as though some enchantment magnified the sound in the tower's interior.

"Ascend if you dare," Rimilin's voice taunted him. "I promise to be good."

Mostin scowled, and slowly climbed the staircase.

"Ahh, the hero of the hour," Rimilin said acidly as Mostin gained the balcony. The walls were lined with bookcases crammed with thousands of ancient tomes. "Your coup with the Assembly will merit discussion ten generations hence – if it survives at all."

Mostin stared hard at him. His hairless head and naked torso glistened with an oily black secretion, and he smelled rank.

"I have come to take counsel," Mostin said simply. "Aside from Daunton and Jalaël, you are the only mage who openly advocates a proactive stance in our dealings with Shûth."

"The inertia of Wyre's wizards will be their undoing," Rimilin spat. "They all deserve to perish."

"It is incumbent upon us that we convince them to act in concert," Mostin sighed.

Rimilin snorted, and sat in a siege of wrought Abyssal bronze. He motioned to Mostin to do the same.

Orolde fumbled nervously and produced a ledger and a quill pen – from which the feathers had been judiciously removed.

"Why did you insist to bring your scribe with you?" Rimilin's brow furrowed. "Did you think that it would cause me to moderate my tone?"

"Not at all," Mostin sat stiffly. He wasn't even sure himself why he had commanded Orolde to attend him. Perhaps he needed the unqualified moral support. Perhaps he felt that it was high time that the Sprite was exposed to the inner counsels of Wyre's most accomplished mages: Orolde's aptitude for magic was beginning to assert itself, and soon he would be faced with the choice of whether or not to remain with the Alienist. Mostin grimaced. Such was the way of things.

"Has the Enforcer paid you a visit, yet?" Mostin inquired.

Rimilin's eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"There are those among us, myself and Daunton included, who tread close to the legal boundaries – both physically and metaphorically – of the Injunction. Gihaahia was kind enough to point out the fact that sometimes my actions are questionable."

"I have received no such warning. Perhaps you are more controversial than I," Rimilin smiled.

Perhaps physical proximity to Wyre is more important than I suspected, Mostin thought.

"I have recently succoured the *Sela* for celestial aid," Mostin tapped his fingers on the arm of his chair.

"You? An Enochian?" Rimilin's voice oozed with contempt. "You have been reduced to a lowly estate, Mostin!"

"I am exploring every option!" Mostin hissed. "And I preclude nothing at this stage. I need reliable allies, not fickle compactees. Devils are out of the question."

"I heard of Furcas," Rimilin smiled. "That may prove a costly mistake."

"I take it then that word has not yet reached you of Titivilus and Murmuur? They are also destroyed."

"*Three Infernal Dukes?*" Rimilin was visibly impressed. "That must be some kind of record."

"It was Eadric, not I, who slew them."

"I doubt that Dispater – or the Fly-Lords – will differentiate your complicity."

"Indeed," Mostin acknowledged.

"You might petition Belial for aid," Rimilin suggested. "If you care to walk Shomei's path."

"I do not. And I do not have the resources to pursue pseudonatural servitors at this stage. I am in danger of further exhausting my reservoir if I do. My options are limited. And in the field of rapidly polarizing allegiances, I must side *against Cheshne*. That is the biggest threat to me, and to Wyre."

"You risk a great deal in telling me this," Rimilin was suspicious. "Why?"

"Because, despite your depravity, you are no nihilist, and you understand *necessity*."

"You seek to act as the catalyst for a Cascade," Rimilin realized. "You think that you can force the hand of the celestial host, if Enitharmon perceives a large enough threat? Those days are over, Mostin. The demise of the Temple ended that paradigm, and both the *Ahma* and the *Sela* sealed that door when they chose mysticism over Orthodoxy."

"For themselves, maybe. Personally, I will use whatever tools I need to. Think on that."

**

Ortwine strode slowly into the council chamber in Mulhuk. Rhul gazed at her in wonder as she

approached: her beauty was undeniable, though cold, and her very presence seemed more profound than any there – who bore the title of *god* or *goddess* – could claim.

"Have you found a way?" She asked calmly.

"No," Lai admitted.

The Sidhe turned, and began to walk away.

"Ortwine, please," Rhul implored. "We are at a loss. If we could grant this freely, we would. We are but little gods," his voice was ironic. "You know this. You ask the impossible."

She turned to face them, and thought for a long moment.

"Very well," she finally said. "The payment can wait. As it depends upon my success in any event, here are the terms that I propose: Upon release of the spirits of the dead – assuming that such a deed can be accomplished – you will admit me nominally to your ranks. When Lai and Nwm *reincarnate* the disembodied *en masse*, my worship will be actively encouraged by your agents. As your power begins to wax again, as surely it will; you will, after all, have a monopoly on religion," sarcasm dripped from Ortwine's tongue, "then I will claim my divinity along with an equal – which is to say twenty percent – share of the veneration from Sisperi's burgeoning population. Which brings me to my portfolio."

Nwm gaped. Ortwine had some truly outrageous ideas.

"I choose lies and trickery. I have observed that you lack a suitable exemplar in these areas. *But* – and here is where you make a concession to me now, before we begin – Jaliere must first perform a task for me."

"Must he indeed?" Jaliere thundered.

Ortwine drew *Githla*, and handed it to the God of the Forge. "This blade was forged by the Azer Jodrumu, before he went mad."

Jaliere brandished it, feeling its balance and judging its temper with his mind's eye. "This is a fine weapon. Jodrumu – whoever he was – was a gifted smith."

"Just so," Ortwine agreed.

"You wish it reforged by Jaliere?" Lai asked.

"Not exactly," Ortwine smiled slowly. "I wish it married with another blade. If such a task is within his abilities."

Jaliere guffawed. "If not I, then who? Which is this other weapon?"

But Nwm already knew. Just as he knew that Ortwine alone was most likely to succeed in deceiving Saes, because the Sidhe had played him – and the Nireem – already.

The Druid grimaced. "The sword is named *Heedless*. And I strongly advise against this course of action, Ortwine."

"Your concern is duly noted," Ortwine nodded. "And ignored. If I am to be a goddess, Nwm, I must have a blade worthy of me."

* The Chiefs of the Nireem (except Ninit) retain a divine rank of 1 only when within Mulhuk, the minor heaven which abuts Sisperi. Outside of its confines, they are treated as DR0 quasi-deities.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II at 12:25 pm on 06-25-06

Tahl was first, and Rede was second.

When the *Ahma* brought the former Master of the Temple back, he found that Tahl's assessment had been correct: a righteous wrath had been Oronthon's gift to Rede of Dramore, whose realization of the truth had come too late.

Eadric had descended together with Tahl into the catacombs, and they had smashed sarcophagi open. Saint Tahl prayed as the *Ahma*, who alone of Oronthon's mortal servants possessed the power,* had called them back, breathing life into them: Tuan Muat, an Inquisitor of singular determination; Kustus of Mord; Wurz, the founder of the Mission; Moda the Exorcist; Tarpion the Rash; Anaqiss Twice-Apostate, who had briefly supported both the Irrenites and the Sophics before recanting his heresies; Haubi of Thahan. Former grandees and luminaries in the Magistratum, some of whom had been dead for two centuries or more. All had perished violently: in war, or at the hands of demons or assassins, or through acts of betrayal by those who sought to supplant them. Unquiet spirits who – gifted with new life and vigour – pledged themselves both to Eadric and to the teachings of *Saizhan*, body and soul.

Tahl called steeds to serve them: a brood of ancient celestial griffons of prodigious size, whose names were buried in forgotten temple tomes.** Eadric took Hauthuts, hot-tempered and proud, whose feathered mane bore a silver sheen. He knew that before the Fall, Murmuur's steed had been kin to them, and mused how many had descended with their masters into damnation: their adherence to virtue seemed already precarious. Within a week, there were twenty of them. They consumed horses more quickly than Eadric could have imagined possible.

The date of the embassy drew near, and Eadric considered his possibilities. After agonizing over the choices, he opted to retain Rede and Tarpion, deploying the others – including Kustus, who possessed great strategic insight – to order the *Sela*'s position south of Wyre. Tuan Muat, Wurz, Moda and Anaqiss were powerful spellcasters whose presence was sorely needed in the Temple camp; Tahl, he would not spare.

Nehael's initiative would be formally ratified by the Small Council in the august presence of King Tiuhan, a political move organized by Prince Tagur: Tiuhan approached his fourteenth birthday, and his majority. But Mostin and Daunton would join the party later, beyond Wyre's borders. Mostin had indicated that there were *diplomatic considerations* that should not be overlooked which prevented his official involvement.

Ugh. Politics, Eadric thought.

"Will you seize power, if a time comes where it seems necessary?" Tahl inquired archly of him. "There are rules you have yet to break."

The *Ahma* sighed. "Probably, knowing my luck."

"Do you think if they get us all in one place, they will try to overwhelm us with one, swift stroke?"

"Maybe," Eadric nodded. "But I think they'll fail if they do. They are not yet prepared. And we aren't so helpless. Now uncertainty vexes them, and it may be we can force their hand. Time is no longer on their side."

Tahl nodded. There were nine hundred sarcophagi in the Temple catacombs.

**

The fortress, which perched upon an island of matter, drifted in a haphazard fashion through a grey, featureless astral planescape.

Sho stood in the courtyard and gazed up at the expanses above her. She felt no desire. No fear. No joy. But neither did she feel *nothing*: oblivion was a state denied to her. She experienced only a perpetual, mild discomfort, as her incomplete psyche attempted to balance two irreconcilable commands:

Preserve what you are. Become other than what you are.

Her creator's gift to her – other than a semblance of life – had been a perpetual existential malaise. She sighed – because that is what she understood was appropriate – and entered the keep: a round bastion pierced with narrow windows, from which issued the bluish-green light of a *dimensional lock*. She made her way by a narrow staircase into a chamber in the bedrock, where the Alienist was closeted.

Potent wards protected the place. Mostin paced back and forth, irritated. Within a thaumaturgic diagram, a solar – Taruz – stood in glorious, radiant, blissful meditation. Captured by a *superior planar binding* – a spell developed by Shomei – the celestial had refused point-blank to deal with Mostin until it was released. Events were not transpiring as the Alienist had hoped.

Mostin glanced sidelong at Sho, but refused to meet her gaze. He would not look at her directly – something which Sho knew should make her feel upset. She decided to pout, but the expression was lost on Mostin.

Orolde – who sat on a low stool – smiled at her, and raised his stump. He hopped down, and scurried over.

"The celestial is being less than accommodating," the Sprite whispered. "Where is Mei?"

"She still reads," Sho answered. Orolde was kind to her. She felt that she should like him.

She coughed, in an effort to attract Mostin's attention.

The Alienist scowled.

"I should like to explore," Sho asserted. "May I leave the keep?"

Mostin raised an eyebrow. "I think you might find the landscape hereabouts rather dull – although I would advise caution nonetheless. But I am not your master. Do what you will. Perhaps Orolde will accompany you."

The Alienist watched as they departed. His clumsy efforts to nudge the simulacra towards self-realization had, thus far, had negligible results; they had demonstrated nothing which could be described as genuine individuation. It would take time, and magic of a magnitude he could barely begin to comprehend, to effect that change. And there was never enough time.

He dwelt briefly on the possibilities offered by Shomei's infinity of pseudoanalogues, before dismissing them from his mind.

After invoking powerful protections, Mostin turned to Taruz. "Don't try any funny business. Don't try to intimidate me – it won't work. And spare me your moralizing."

He waved his hand, and a little of the powdered silver which formed the protective circle around the celestial blew away. Taruz stepped forth.

"I know you have a *very* good reason for this, Mostin," the Solar's eyes bored into him.

**

The Arcanaloith, Tholhaluk, gazed into the *scrying* mirror, observing Iua's endless progress through the maze within his basalt fortress with an expression of malicious curiosity. At whiles, she would stop to regain her bearings; or, alternatively collapse for an hour in uncontrolled bursts of tears as memories cascaded through her mind. She was perched precariously on the edge of sanity. The Daemon smiled – it was important that she not be pushed *too* far if she were to be effectively harnessed, and not utterly broken.

Surab, who had moved into her rapier, prompted her as necessary. Always in proximity to Iua, he could reinhabit her at need – should her actions become too suspicious or threatening. He played masterfully on her wild, impulsive nature; the instinctual chaos which was her elemental self. She had taken to the corruption which he lavished on her, greedily absorbing the taint whilst simultaneously rejecting it in disgust. Angst raged through her: she was empowered and violated; stripped of her will, yet granted boons which no mortal could hope for. She found it increasingly difficult to separate her own identity from the evil which drove a dark desire to maim, rape and kill.

Sensing her own damnation, she wept spasmodically in despair, all the while exulting.

Within the shifting walls of the maze – from which, it was becoming apparent to Iua, there was no real exit – Tholhaluk had placed a number of conundrums. Perverse scenarios wrought of shadowstuff, in which Iua was forced to act as the protagonist in a play whose choices always dealt misery, pain and

death – but, for her, granted an ecstatic release which left her calm and sated. But only for a little while.

Eadric – the *Ahma* – might have fared better, she mused as she watched fiendish trolls idly butcher children and gorge on their flesh. Her spirits soared as her body heaved in revulsion.

But I am not Eadric. What hope do I have? They are breaking me.

She laughed maniacally. She knew that the pain would finally end, when she could recall her own mother's murder with delicious satisfaction.

*

Even after abandoning Graz'zt – a decision which Tholhaluk wryly observed he might later come to regret – the daemon remained on favorable terms with a number of Azzagrat's proxies. The initial assault upon Zelatar by death knights, blood fiends and Abyssal ghouls had seemed, at first, overwhelming. Tholhaluk had panicked; bursting free from the sealed palace with a powerful *disjunction* which had ripped a hole through defenses erected by Graz'zt; for which, the Arcanaloth knew, he had gained the everlasting enmity of the Dark Prince. However, Tholhaluk believed – correctly – that he was low on the list of Graz'zt's priorities as far as potential targets for revenge were concerned. He would have a few centuries, at least, before his former sponsor's eye was turned towards him: if Azzagrat endured at all through the current crisis.

Yaugot – the fearsome king of Terkenutung – still paid for the services of thugs provided by Tholhaluk, and the daemon had seized upon the vacuum of opportunity left by the withdrawal of Graz'zt's troops from that world. Mazikreen – one of the few succubi to have successfully disentangled herself from the webs of Queen Alrunes to forge a kingdom of her own – had graced him with a visit in his citadel soon after Orcus had invested Azzagrat. Suudjut – a balor who rivalled Ainhorr in his power – had also made overtures to Tholhaluk; apparently eager for trade in souls but, in fact, the daemon knew, anxious to procure the sword *Heedless*, which was reported to be still in Afqithan. Tholhaluk, who had lost a veritable host of mercenaries in the Confrontation, was understandably reluctant to pursue any enterprise there. And now the heart of Afqithan was in Faerie: woe betide any fiend who roused the Sidhe-Lords from their languor.

Tholhaluk was, as always, treading carefully. But Iua was an opportunity. He would work with Surab for as long as it took for one of them to destroy the other. With grim appreciation, Tholhaluk knew that he wouldn't be the corpse at the end of it.

**

"What would you require of me, in order to secure unqualified celestial aid?" Mostin asked bluntly. "If, for example, I needed a handful of cherubs to aid me in casting a spell?"

The solar's eyes went blank for a moment.

The bastard is communing with his superiors, Mostin knew. Don't they ever think for themselves?

"A genuine recantation of your prior crimes," Taruz smiled beatifically. "That you wholeheartedly embrace Oronthon, and demonstrate – through your deeds and words – a dedication to His cause. If you achieved such a state of grace, however, I suspect that the likelihood of you *wanting* to cast such a spell would be zero."

Mostin groaned. "Who are you speaking with? Enitharmon? You're certainly towing the Orthodox line, aren't you?"

"Your dealings with fiends have not endeared you to the celestial host."

Mostin held his tongue, as mentioning the name *Soneillon* would have merely elicited rhetoric from Taruz regarding the mission of the *Ahma* which the Alienist was in no mood to hear.

"The fact that I am in a position to defend Wyre – and the faithful – from an inevitable demonic assault, and that you show reluctance in aiding me in my efforts might be construed as rather short-sighted, don't you agree?"

"Your lack of faith in the vision of the *Sela* merely demonstrates your unworthiness in this area," Taruz

observed.

"It was the *Sela* who suggested that I contact the host!" Mostin was becoming increasingly frustrated.

"That is known," Taruz nodded. "As is your participation in the coming mission to the Cheshnite sect. Hence, I am demonstrating a greater tolerance of your *binding* me than I might otherwise."

Oh, for Shomei's rod, Mostin lamented, and cursed the *Akesoli*. He thought deeply for a long while.

"I need allies, Taruz. Powerful, effective allies who can be trusted, and who will not bleed me dry in the coming months. Allies whose agendas are not entirely at odds with my own. But my spirit is mine, and you may not lay claim to it: I have transcended, and I am beyond your grasp. I will not recant my sins, for in my judgment – the only judgment to which I am beholden – I have committed none. I propose a *mutually beneficial arrangement*. Is that so hard to wrap your feathery head around?"

"The thought of looking to the obvious has come late to you."

"Don't be so damned smug!"

"There will be no cascade," Taruz said firmly, "unless Enitharmon so decrees it. Nor will the celestial host aid or in any way condone your efforts to bind Graz'zt – or any other fiend for that matter. You will not subject celestials to *bindings*: it is inappropriate."

"*Inappropriate*? And why no cascade? You were willing enough at Khu."

"Why does Oronthon choose to incarnate himself? Why does he not reorder creation so that it is more to his liking?"

"Trust me," Mostin scowled. "You do *not* want to have this conversation with me. Go on."

"If you open a *gate* to call archons or devas you will find them well-disposed towards you. Payment will be waived and reciprocal service will be considered rendered if they are deployed in a manner consonant with the will of the *Ahma* and the *Sela*. I should also point out that your options are running

out."

"Thank-you for your keen observation. I accept the terms – with one caveat. Under no circumstances are celestials called by me to trespass within the borders of Wyre as defined under article nineteen-point-zero of the Injunction. The Enforcer would have my head on a stick for such an infringement."

"That is understood."

"I also reserve the right to summon any fiend, in the knowledge that our agreement will expire at the moment that I do. I expect no retribution if this occurs."

"I can make no such promise."

"I'll take my chances," Mostin said drily.

**

The sword *Heedless* was brought to Jaliere – the smith of the gods – with great pomp and ceremony, as befitted Ortwine's whimsy. Nwm had opened a doorway between two great trees – a banyan in Afqithan and a fir in Sisperi – through which a procession of gnomes bearing the weapon appeared with great solemnity. They were followed by dancing nymphs and flights of portunes – the tiniest of sprites, each no bigger than a thumbnail. Satyrs blew copper horns. Sundry minor feys capered and applauded.

Ortwine signalled for quiet, and an excited hush fell upon the assembled throng. As *Heedless* was rendered to Jaliere's apprentices, one satyr could restrain himself no longer, and began blowing a raucous note on his horn. Ortwine quickly *silenced* the offender, and smiled benignly. Her expression changed to a scowl as the doors to the smithy were closed and locked tight; Jaliere would admit his secrets to none.

As the feys cavorted through the roads and courtyards of Mulhuk, Nwm turned to Ortwine.

"How did you make the sword quiescent?"

"I *charmed* it, of course. I have utterly seduced it. It adores me."

"It may come to resent its bondage."

"I predict an uneasy relationship," Ortwine agreed. "Nonetheless, at present, *Heedless* and I are newlyweds. We should bask in the first flush of romance."

"I suspect that it may harbor less good feeling towards you after its shape has been contorted and bound to another blade."

"Love is pain, Nwm."

"How long will you be remaining?" Nwm asked. "Jaliere may take a month to complete his work."

"How long does the *gate* remain open?"

"The portal is permanent," Nwm replied calmly.

"*What?*" Ortwine screamed. A fury crossed her face.

"It is not the first."

"*How dare you!*" She was still screaming. Evidently, Ortwine valued her isolation more than Nwm had anticipated.

"Not just to Afqithan, but to other areas in Faerie, to Nizkur, to places which you are not worthy to behold. I forge connections, Ortwine. It is *my* fee to you and the Nireem. Call it a finder's fee."

"Contact me in a month, or whenever the thing is ready," Ortwine hissed.

"Trust my foresight!" Nwm snapped. "I do what I must; that includes squeezing my friends for their debts: if you think you can unravel yourself from your past deeds, you may not find it so easy."

"I will have it *dispelled*."

"Afqithan is in Faerie now, and you do not *own* Faerie," Nwm sighed. "Your direct hegemony is limited, whatever title you choose to assume. Do not thwart me, Ortwine, but accept that my vision is sound. Return with me to Wyre. Events transpire in which we should be part."

"Wyre bores me."

"Annihilation threatens."

"So what? You tell me this when I have no weapon?"

"I'm sure Eadric has a spare."

Ortwine glowered.

**

Anumid, the mouthpiece of Cheshne, knelt in supplication before his eleven masters – hierophants, necromancers and blood magi. Some were living, some were dead. Some were human – or had once been. All were immortal. His voice sounded as a dirge, as he recounted the disposition of the Wyrish embassy.

"The *Ahma*, and three of those whom he has *resurrected* – Tahl the Incorruptible, Rede and Tarpion; also Nwm the Preceptor, Mesikammi the Shamaness and the witch Hlioth; Prince Tagur of Einir, and twelve of the finest knights in Wyre; Ortwine the Sidhe, usurper of the throne of Afqithan; Daunton and Mostin, champions of Wyre's fledgeling collegiate system of wizardry."

"Ahh, the heralds of the new order," Sibud spoke. His inflection was two thousand years old, but well-known to those there: Sibud was a primal vampire of ancient pedigree, the sire of many masters.

"Daunton insists upon a *dimensional lock*. Mostin has enough magical support to invoke his *quiescence of the spheres*, and will likely do so."

"So be it," Yeshe the Binder nodded. "Let them spend their strength thus. I will go: I should like to meet the *Ahma*."

"And I," Naatha purred.

"As would I," Sibud smiled. "Set the meeting for midnight."

"At Galda?" Anumid inquired.

"If Mostin requires that it be outside of Wyre's borders, we should indulge him," the lich Choach rasped. "I will also attend."

"Anumid will accompany us, and Visuit," Yeshe decreed. "Let the remainder of the company, to the number of two dozen, be chosen as each of we four see fit."

*Long ago I house-ruled *raise dead* to be a 7th-level spell and (true) *resurrection* to be 9th-level. In the Temple's history, *raise dead* has only been cast a handful of times. Before Eadric, no *resurrection* had ever been made. Prior to the advent of *Saizhan*, there was a necromantic taboo associated with both

spells.

******The griffons are advanced (10 HD) celestial monsters of legend with the haste and spell-turning special abilities. I rule that when templated creatures are called with *planar ally* spells, each +1CR of a template counts as 2HD for purposes of determining whether a creature is subject to it.

N.B.: Contundor got smushed by Nalfeshnees in Afqithan, something which I neglected to mention previously.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 12-24-06

The Letter

They are not nameless, Eadric thought, although the fact provided no measure of comfort to him.

He had requested that Tahl divine the information; a direct communion with the Source would reveal their purpose and number. There were ancient names amongst them, to which rumours in only the earliest of temple chronicles alluded. Tahl issued a *sending* to Mostin.

Unsurprisingly, the Alienist knew of their identities, and the myths associated with them. Orolde *teleported* to see Eadric in Morne; the *Ahma* was in temporary residence in the Temple compound, and it was uncharacteristically quiet: many of the devoted had taken up arms again, and accompanied the *Sela* to Wyre's Southern march.

Orolde appeared bearing a scroll: he was nervous, his head twitching and his eyes flickering restlessly, as though every shadow might prove a lurking place for the Enforcer or one of her agents. The sprite was sure that he was trespassing in an area of dubious legality regarding the Injunction, and Eadric smiled benignly, in a vain effort to assuage Orolde's paranoia. The fey quickly handed the letter over, *teleported* back to Mostin's manse, and breathed a sigh of relief when he realized that all of his faculties remained to him.

Eadric immediately broke the seal, and read the letter. Mostin had adopted an elegant script: evidently,

the Alienist had been experimenting with a new calligraphic style.

To the Ahma in Morne, greetings:

The names with which you have furnished me are a source of some concern. I have arranged them in what I deem the most likely order of precedence, although I should make it clear that my information is likely outmoded: note, then, a certain amount of conjecture follows.

Temenun is a demonic spirit of primeval strain, native to the jungles of Utter Shuth. His form is feline. He was master of a wide dominion before the Sleeping Gods withdrew from the World of Men; a reign of sacrifice and terror, the memory of which still endures in the occult lore of nomadic wise-women. Wyre was still beneath two hundred feet of ice when Temenun was deposed and – purportedly – slain. I suspect Temenun may, in fact, have been subject to some form of imprisonment – only to have been recently freed (the same may be true of others amongst the Cheshnite sect). Temenun's prophetic ability is said to be unrivalled.

Yeshe the Binder is at least five thousand years old; she is mentioned in cryptograms from the era of Shuth's First Empire, preserved in Siir Traag. Twenty-one centuries ago, Yeshe conjured Pazuzu at Khu and unleashed the demon upon the desert kingdom of Durjan, destroying it. Fifty years later, she razed the port of Triptah through the depredations of a demon named Narake – possibly a Chthonic. In times past, she built massive edifices – sites of profane power – the wrecks of which still litter the ancient erg. Her bloodline – or those who boast descent from her – still exercise power in Shuth. It is of note that both Kothchori and Feezuu were scions of her house, or at least made claim to be. The source of her immortality is unknown, but she lacks the pretensions typical of divinity, and has no cult.

Idyam exists now in mostly unmanifest form; his consciousness was transferred to his remains, which were preserved in the Temple of Tejobih – a somnolent Power who absented himself even before the rest of Shuth's gods entered hibernation. Idyam was held to have ascended to godhood, although his contempt for those who supplicated him was well-known. Idyam is no deity, I suggest, but a demilich. This may prove the worse for us.

Sibud is a vampire – a progenitor from outside the World of Man; an abomination, birthed in some

other cycle of being – he arrived in Shuth two millennia ago. His countless spawn have infested the deep desert for centuries, and have visited ruin upon many tribes. Sibud's mastery of the necromantic arts was once unsurpassed, and his bloodlust insatiable: his downfall is recorded in a document known as the Kash-haya (Shomei possessed a copy; if you wish to inspect her library, I can arrange it). His command of ritual magic was legendary; for a while, Urm-Nahat was his apprentice. Together they devised a spell known as the storm of blood, which slew the armies of a rival warlord, Kumaari. It is highly likely that Sibud can still convoke a respectable assembly of spellcasters; we can hope that he has not yet fully returned to his former power. If he can manifest his storm of blood, then we may be in trouble: I would advise against deploying any temple troops en masse until we find out – a fragment recounts that 'sixty thousand warriors of renown perished' when it was last invoked.

Jahi is a demigoddess, who appears as a marasmic child. Little is known of her, save her sparktheft – she is credited with stealing the divinity from a number of minor godlings in order to swell her own potency; some accounts refer to her as Jeshi's half-sister, who, unlike her sibling, 'suckled at Cheshne's teat'. The lack of other information is worrying; I advise utmost caution in any dealings with this entity. Although such advice is hardly necessary.

Naatha is a succubus of bestial mien, kin to Chaya and Chepez (but not Nathi). Ironically, she is likely to be one of our most direct antagonists. Naatha was once an Ugra – a fierce protector – but she disliked any form of contractual obligation, preferring to bind rather than be bound. What else I can write on the subject of succubi which is not already known to you?

Dhatri was once human – she appears now in the form of a bloated mass of undead flesh. She is gluttonous, and rumoured to savour the corpses of those she has slain. Her title translates as 'nurse' or 'midwife' – it is safe to assume that her nurturing urge is not directed toward the living. She has mastery over ghouls, ghasts, and other necrophages. She is venerated by several death-cults in Analah in southern Shuth.

Prahar is a great warrior, an Ur-Priest, and a undead psychotic. He ruled in Danhaan before his elevation by Orcus to the stewardship of another world – a lush plane known as Veddekeh. After several centuries as the incumbent despot – a dark age overwhelmed Veddekeh, if accounts are correct – Prahar rebelled against Orcus and shrugged off his yoke. This part is important:

Prahar bound Orcus with a spell, and forced the Prince to meet his demands.

This is no small accomplishment. Knowledge of this event is obscure – Orcus made a great effort to eliminate any witnesses and records after his quick release. I believe Orcus made an immediate, absolute concession to Prahar's demands – whatever they were. Veddekeh became unreachable thereafter, and it's reasonable to assume the events are connected.

Rishih is a Theurge and a Thaumaturge. He specializes in compacting middle-ranking demonic nobility – powerful mariliths and balors, and lords such as Ahazu and Munkir have submitted to him in the past.

Guho Is an aberrant, festering heap of corruption – even by my liberal standards. She is a worm that walks. This is such a grubby method of transcendence. She was a Blood-Mage of high credentials before seizing her immortality – I'm sure she's considerably more dangerous after a thousand years.

Choach – favoured by the dark gods – embraced unlife some eight centuries ago. He might be considered the 'junior member' of the sect's leadership, although doubtless none amongst Wyre's wizards – excepting possibly myself – can rival his power. Choach was renowned for his unbridled sadism, his perverse sense of humour, and, like Feezuu – according to the literature upon the subject – a preference for acid evocations.

These are the eleven leaders, according to Tahl's information. All equal or exceed me in their command of magic. Teppu may be more powerful than any of them, or he may not – the sprite's potency is hard to gauge, and focussed in a narrow area. His exact agenda is not known in any case, so he cannot be considered a reliable ally.

If my calculations are correct, a spell synergy by these eleven alone – not including the cabals and priesthood – could achieve a result in the region of the three-thousandth order. I appreciate that this number means little to you, but it might help if I tell you that the wave of hate – from which Morne will likely never recover – was approximately a two-hundredth order effect.

I will expect you in two days.

Mostin.

*

The four of them – Eadric, Ortwine, Mostin and Nwm – finally met at the Alienist's retreat. Orolde had absented himself. Sho languished on the porch in a manner which made Eadric feel uncomfortable: some of her mannerisms were uncannily similar to her maker's.

Mostin immediately grabbed Nwm's arm, and drew him aside. The Alienist whispered in an agitated manner.

"So what exactly do you *know* about Hlioth. Is she safe? What's her agenda? Did she say anything about releasing Graz'zt after Fillein bound him?"

Nwm groaned. "I know as much about her as you do, Mostin. She does what she does. At present, she is an ally. I don't know if that relationship will persist. And no, she made no comment regarding Graz'zt – although I am sympathetic to her action. It must have been a hard choice, but Fillein's behaviour was arrogant in the extreme."

"What have they been *doing*? Her and Teppu and Nehael? And you? What have *you* been doing?"

"It would take too long to explain," Nwm sighed.

"Then *summarize*," Mostin hissed.

"I making *gates*," Nwm smiled. "Teppu mysterious. Mesikammi rousing earth spirits. Hlioth weaving powerful magic in Nizkur. Nehael facilitates. Understand?"

Mostin twitched. "What magic?"

"I'm not entirely sure," Nwm confessed. "I suspect nothing too controversial. Hlioth is bound – at least in part – by the Injunction."

"Actually, Nizkur is beyond the Wyrish border – as far as the Claviger is concerned, at any rate. Besides, everything that Hlioth does is controversial. Tell me of the *gates*."

"I have opened a number of *tree portals*," Nwm nodded. "Connecting Afqithan, Sisperi, Nizkur, Groba, the receding Tunthi realm of spirit, the Shrine of Three Storrs in Ialde, Deorham, and several discrete regions of Faerie. They pass through the primordial Tree-*ludja*."

"You *have* been busy," Mostin remarked drily. He raised his eyebrows. "From *Deorham* to Sisperi? You don't seem afraid of stepping on your friends' toes. Aren't you concerned about unwanted traffic?"

"Any traffic is good. That is the purpose. To enable the movement of energy within the matrix of the Interwoven Green."

"Your concepts are curiously archaic." Mostin observed. "I predict that your *gates* will become bottlenecks. Petty lords will try to control them."

"These are *feys* and nature spirits we're talking about," Nwm sighed. "Not demons – or men for that matter. You can't ascribe such emotions as *desire to rule* to most of them."

"To most of them, maybe not. But to enough of them to cause a problem, I say *yes*. Ten thousand gold says that you have an incident within a month. Where something, maybe a *wicked greedy fey* – such things exist, you know – tries to take strategic control of one of your *gates*. It's a resource. Trust me."

"I have no money, Mostin. Alas, I cannot meet your wager."

"I'll take a *reincarnation* on credit."

Nwm laughed. "Really? I would think you already have some unspeakable contingency."

"That was my big plan," Mostin nodded. He sighed. "Unfortunately, it never seems to get any closer. I

also had the notion to spellwarp myself. And bind Graz'zt. And locate the *web of motes*. And to evolve the consciousnesses of the *simulacra*. Frankly, there is too much to do, and too little time. I'm bogged down."

"If you were to look to a more natural solution to the *simulacra*, I might help..."

"Shomei directed me to her pseudoanalogues."

"For what? You think you can attempt some kind of *synthesis*? Why? Do you really want two pseudo-Shomeis running loose? Besides, you would need the most powerful cabal ever assembled in Wyre. You do not command that kind of respect – consider your efforts to gather even a half-dozen mages to aid you: they aren't interested in your desire to capture the Demon, and ascribe your idea to megalomania. Although I hardly blame them. Can you even honestly say that it's relevant to the current situation?"

Mostin stared hard at Nwm. "I don't know," he admitted. "It's mostly so that I can gloat. What do you suggest with regard to the *simulacra*?"

"A natural solution, naturally. Or Dream-vestiges. Shomei has echoes in other places. "

"I am no Dreamer," Mostin sniffed dismissively.

"Nor am I," Nwm smiled. "You would have to *learn*. Is that so abhorrent to you? Ask Teppu. He might advise you."

"And he might not," Mostin scowled.

Nwm sighed. "Whatever they become, the *simulacra* will *not be Shomei*, Mostin."

"I know that," Mostin snapped. "This is no adolescent fixation, Nwm. I am merely trying to find a solution within the terms Shomei asserted."

"Did she specify a pseudonatural synthesis?"

"Not exactly," Mostin said. "Or at least, I don't think so."

"What precisely *did* she say?"

"Begin with the premise that all creatures have multiple pseudonatural analogues."

Nwm laughed loudly, causing Ortwine – who stood nearby in conversation with Eadric – to glare at him.

Mostin seemed mildly offended. "I fail to see what is funny."

"What other premise would Mostin the Metagnostic bring to bear upon any problem?"

"You may have a point," the Alienist shrugged. "But she said that it would be my *magnum opus*. I can't see what other direction it could take."

"Just reify them with a *wish*, and let them develop in whichever direction *they* choose to go, Mostin. Surely she would have wanted that? To have you *determine* their course of unfolding would surely be antithetical to everything she believed. Besides, Shomei never exhibited any particular aptitude in the prescient arts – what makes you think that she possessed any special insight into the subsequent evolution of her *simulacra*?"

"The *web of motes*, you dummy. She saw it in the *web of motes*."

"You are overanalyzing an off-hand comment made by someone you cared about and affording it too much significance," Nwm sighed.

"Shomei *never* made off-hand comments."

"And you are idealizing her in your memory," Nwm continued relentlessly. "She was no less fallible than you or I. Goddess, Mostin. How old was she? Twenty-five? How much wisdom and experience can one of her age really have acquired?"

"More than most," Mostin snapped, his nostrils flaring. "And more than I, certainly. I was still chasing sylphs when I was twenty-five, and Vhorzhe had only recently apprenticed me. Shomei was summoning glooms and compacting with Belial. We are talking orders of magnitude here, Nwm."

"Fine. Have it your way. But you can't break Hell open, Mostin. If you meet her again, she will likely be your enemy: I assume Eadric spoke to you of Titivilus's veiled threats? That Astaroth could offer her some kind of deal?"

"Titivilus was full of sh*t," Mostin snorted. "And if Ed hadn't killed him, I think I probably would have by now. I've had it with fiends. They're too much work to keep in line. I've gone Enochian – for a while, at least."

"Celestials are no better," Nwm grumbled.

"Agreed," Mostin smiled. "But they're cheaper. The Host cut me a special deal, based on my connections."

*

"Aid me in this," Ortwine pleaded. "I need you."

"There are other matters, far more pressing." Eadric was unyielding.

She seized him by his pauldrons, pushed him backwards, and stared him in the face. Eadric noticed that she was as tall as he was.

"I'm coming out of this a *goddess*, Eadric. I can bring a *lot* of weight to bear on a situation if that happens. In the idiom of my former self: when I get my newly divine ass on the battlefield and I've got a *vorpal* sword in my hand, who's gonna try it on, eh? Right – *no-one*."

"Gods are plentiful, these days." Eadric smiled.

"True. And they're not all on your side," Ortwine retorted. "*I* will be. If you help me. You know it makes sense." She flashed a smile.

"I think not," the *Ahma* sighed. "Your apotheosis is not my first concern. Did you just use a *suggestion* on me?"

"Certainly not. The defense of Wyre and the Temple is a complex strategy, Eadric," Ortwine changed tack. "Consider your moves carefully. At least hear me out."

"Go on," he grumbled. "Try to be quick."

"I have to convince an insane death-goddess to relinquish a million or so souls so that life can begin again in Sisperi. As lunatic an enterprise as this might sound, I think I have a good chance of doing it. If I can get to her. That's where you come in."

"I have no desire to fight my way through some pagan underworld at present."

"Gaining entrance will be the tricky part. The entrance – Saivo – is a double-bottomed lake. It's... upside-down on the other side...for want of a better description."

"I assume it's guarded?"

"Naturally."

"A dragon? A huge dog?"

"No," Ortwine said brightly. "Neither of those. Demons left by Graz'zt, in fact. If you recall, Saes was allied with him for some time. His minions have...gone native...if you catch my meaning."

"I'm not sure that I do."

"Saes has changed them."

"How do you mean, *changed*?"

"Augmented. Infused."

"With what?"

"Well, with *death* of course. That is her portfolio, after all."

"Which means what, exactly?"

"The details are hazy," Ortwine admitted. "After we pass the vestibule, we enter Ruk proper. If the reports are correct."

"If." The *Ahma* said acidly. "Whose reports are these, Ortwine?"

"You know. Rumours. Speculation."

Eadric looked exasperated. "Is there any concrete information?"

"No."

"Why do you think that is, Ortwine? Perhaps because nobody has ever returned from this underworld alive?"

"That is the consensus amongst the Nireem. I plan to be the first, however."

"Let's assume that you get to Saes," Eadric sighed, "but your powers of persuasion fail to move her: I would deem this likely, if she is insane. What then? Do you plan to kill her?"

"I would prefer not to. Admittedly, she is a minor goddess in the grand scheme of things, but her role in the natural balance of Sisperi must be respected. Eadric we are talking about *returning life to a world*

raped by Graz'zt. However selfish my interest is, yours should not be. Remember your vow to Rhul..."

"Aye," the *Ahma* glowered. "I remember it, and it is discharged. Uort is slain; the babau purged from Soan. I cannot leave Wyre at present."

"Rhul and Lai won't ask you. I am less reticent, however. In a month or so, when my weapon is complete. A queen begs you, Eadric. Forty-eight hours: that's all I ask of you."

"You are optimistic."

"I am motivated."

"If anything happens in my absence; if I get stuck there: by Oronthon I will make you pay, Ortwine."

Ortwine bowed her head. "I will take your oath as testament to your seriousness."

"I will consider the terms of service which I would require from you in return," Eadric gazed stonily at her.

Ortwine stepped back. "I am no man's vassal."

"You will do what is necessary, Ortwine. Like you said, you need me."

"I can shower you with gifts. Would you care for some gnomes?"

"I do not want your *slaves*."

"They adore me!"

"Service in kind, Ortwine."

*

"Mostin mentioned the enemy using *big spells*," Eadric looked at Nwm. "He seemed reluctant to expand on the topic – other than make mention of an invocation known as the *storm of blood*, which seems worrying enough. And numbers which seemed distressingly large, if somewhat unfathomable."

"He was probably sparing you the stress that would ensue."

"You think he has an idea of what might be involved?"

"I'm sure he does. Or has at least speculated. I have. The names that Tahl divined, Eadric – suffice to say that Mostin is more concerned than I have seen him before."

"And you are not?"

"The names themselves mean little to me," Nwm shrugged. "But the fact that it has Mostin worried has *me* worried. 'Eleven transvalent casters,' he keeps mumbling."

"And what do *you* think they can do?"

"If they can bring a large group of spellcasters to bear in invoking a single spell, I'd say pretty much anything. They could waste a few hundred square miles with a single dweomer."

"Is that likely?"

"I don't know," Nwm admitted. "I'm hoping that enough distrust exists amongst the leadership that they wouldn't be willing to pool their resources thus."

"I think their unity of purpose is apparent," Eadric sighed.

"And it's only 'apparent.' We, in fact, know nothing of their purpose."

"It is malign," Eadric grunted. "Let me rephrase. What would *you* do if you were assaulting Wyre."

"Why is their purpose to assault Wyre?"

"Perhaps some kind of divine edict?"

"Let me posit another theory," Nwm grimaced. "What has arisen in Shuth, and subsequently established itself in the Thalassine, has done so in direct response to the principle of Annihilation being invoked in the World of Men. By the *Ahma*. In other words, your *sin* caused this. Understand that I am framing this concept within terms familiar to you: I do not personally subscribe to the notion of *sin*."

"Are you serious?"

"Why have you not fallen? Because you are the *Ahma*. The rules are different for you. But what you do – how you *act* – this is reflected in the world around you."

"That's something of a stretch," Eadric was dubious.

"I would think that it was manifestly true, from a certain point of view: such truth is the cause of your veneration by thousands of people. I am not the first to take this perspective."

Eadric raised an eyebrow.

Nwm smiled, and assumed a voice of mock piety. "'The *Ahma* has invoked the apocalypse. He has fornicated with demons, and betrayed us.'"

"They're saying that?"

"Some of them," Nwm nodded.

"I am the Breath of God, not the body of the world. It sounds like misunderstood Irrenite dogma."

"Even your flaws are perfect, Eadric. You need not worry."

"What an odd thing to say."

"Perhaps *God can breathe darkness* would suit better."

"That is brutal, Nwm."

"Are you the chief agent of the Adversary, Eadric?"

"Perhaps," the *Ahma* slowly exhaled. "The thought had occurred to me."

**

At midnight, Eadric received a *sending* from Tahl. He looked nervously at Mostin.

"What now?" The Alienist sighed.

"I will be invested as Earl Marshal by King Tiuhan tomorrow. All of the Small Council have ratified it. It will consolidate the Temple battalions and secular armies under my leadership. I fought a war in pursuit of disestablishment, and what do they do?"

"Can you refuse?" Nwm asked.

"No," Eadric said simply. "Nor would I, if I could. At least I won't step on any toes this way – Tahl intimated that I might have to take command at some point otherwise. I imagine that he leaned on Tagur."

"It's just a formality, then?"

"Right." The *Ahma* seemed unconvinced.

"Believe it," Mostin scoffed. "Ten thousand knights will do you about as much good as ten thousand

monkeys with sticks at present."

"Every little helps," Nwm stroked his beard. "And don't knock the monkeys."

Eadric's face went blank as another *sending* reached him.

"What now?" Mostin sighed.

The *Ahma* was unsure whether to laugh.

"It was from Tahl: *Sela informs Mostin that Mulissu has reincarnated.*"

"Is she *Green*?" Mostin looked horrified at the prospect.

Eadric shrugged.

Mostin fussed, and drew his *robe of eyes* about himself. Lids opened, and orbs rotated in woven sockets in a disconcerting manner. Mogus emerged briefly from a *dimensional pocket*.

"You still have that thing, then," Ortwine's expression was one of mild distaste.

Mostin ignored her, and unrolled a scroll.

"Mostin?" Eadric asked nervously.

Potent syllables rolled from the Alienist's lips. A *gate* opened. Madness flowed from it.

"I am journeying to the middle region of *Uzzhin* and beyond," Mostin announced. "to confer with the entity *Ghom*. If any of you wish to accompany me, you may; it might entail certain risks, for the..."

"Sane?" Ortwine offered. "No, thank-you."

Mostin stepped through the *gate*, and reappeared a split second later.

"Were you gone long?" Ortwine inquired. "I see you have a new hat."

But the length and colour of Mostin's beard – which seemed strangely animated – and the appendage which issued from his *robe of eyes* in place of an arm, testified to the duration of his stay Outside.

"Longer than I expected," he nodded.

"What did you uncover?" Eadric asked with trepidation.

"Many things," the Alienist evinced a sage madness. "Including the location of the *web of motes* – and Iua. We have to go immediately. There is no choice, and no time for preparation. Do you understand?"

"Mostin..." Eadric began.

Mostin opened another *gate*. "Follow me," he said, stepping through.

"But I want my *vorpals* sword," Ortwine complained.

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 12-28-06

Given his oft-voiced concerns, Cheiromancer will appreciate the irony of two particular spells. The double-whammy of Mostin casting a *disjunction* and Eadric speaking a *holy word* would become a staple opening gambit in combat. Nwm preferred spontaneous epic [death] effects, or to *shapechange* into a dragon or phoenix.

*

Mostin's Moment in Time was devised by the Alienist during his tutelage under the entity Ghom, who dwells beyond the middle-region.

Its premise is simple – to look inside when one is Outside is to observe the bounded cosmos transfixed in time, as though one were under the effect of a time stop. Or it can be, which is all that matters for the type of magic that Mostin practices.

In any event, imagine, for a moment, that you are Outside. You turn your consciousness inside to observe the Moment, while you perceive time passing normally for you – or as normally as it does when one is Outside.

Your target – Surab-Iua – is warded by a mind blank, the web of motes is undetectable by any magic, and the only other name with which you have been furnished by your metagnostic inquiry – a daemon named Tholhaluk – is likewise impenetrable to your divination.

But you have your Moment. You use a limited wish to commune with pseudodeities of terrible knowledge, and invoke visions. You determine the location of Tholhaluk's stronghold, and discover that he has severed his link with the Demon Graz'zt. The fact that Tholhaluk's chief henchman is the arcanadaemon Xufu is also revealed to you. You learn of the garden of mind – a magical locus which is controlled by Tholhaluk.

You scry Xufu and are delighted to find that your spell penetrates his ward. Moreover, he is in an audience chamber, kneeling before an empty throne – whoever sits upon it is doubtless mind blanked, and hence cannot be perceived by you. Daemonic mercenaries throng about. You inspect their gazes, and the hidden messages which lie behind them: with your insight you infer the location of another presence in the room, also invisible to your spell.

With successive divinations, you determine the protections which ward the chamber, and the areas which abut it. A hundred feet below, you locate an abandoned cyst once home to a pack of barghests. It is outside of the dimensional lock.

You meditate, and gather your strength. Once you are inside again, you must act quickly. Your Moment will have passed.

- Orolde's Third Temporal Treatise.

**

That they were in some kind of Hell was immediately apparent.

The evil was palpable, seeping from the floors and walls of a hewn chamber. Distant screams from damned souls echoed disturbingly. The air seemed ruddy.

The *Ahma* invoked a *holy aura*, and *Lukarn* kindled. As he watched Mostin mumble spells, Eadric was aghast at the transformation that the Alienist had undergone.

"I understand your awe at my beauty," Mostin said earnestly. His visage resumed its more familiar cast, and his organ became a hand. "I will spare you the spiritual conflict that it must evoke in you."

"Indeed," Eadric agreed diplomatically.

Mostin scowled sharply, and pointed. "What is *she* doing here?"

Sho stood behind Nwm. She had followed him through the *gate*.

"I am here for my edification," Sho remarked calmly.

"You are a blank slate, begging to be possessed," Mostin was agitated. "There is no time for this nonsense. Return at once."

"Can you not...?"

Eadric warded her.

The Alienist scowled again. "Listen carefully. We are about to assault a jackal-daemon, an arcanaloth named *Tholhaluk*. He is a powerful sorcerer; currently we are below his throne-room, which is

dimensionally locked. We must kill or drive off the fiend as quickly as possible – he has yagnodaemon guards, but they should prove reasonably easy to overcome. Iua will be there: her weapon is inhabited by the demon Surab, and she is quite mad. Try not to kill her. Notice the direction in which I face: the daemon will be fifty feet, dead ahead, when we gain the chamber. When I *scried*, there was a gap between two yagnoloths..."

Ortwine sighed. It would be her – she was the fastest.

"How did you..." Nwm began.

"There is no time," Mostin opened a *passwall* directly above their heads. Then three more, each delving a shaft deeper and higher into the rock above them. The Alienist bestowed the power of flight upon them all.

They ascended the shaft swiftly, and Mostin removed their last obstacle – the three feet of magically reinforced adamantine which was the floor of Tholhaluk's sanctum – with a quickened *disintegrate*. A lurid, red-green light immediately illuminated the shaft, vying with Lukarn's brilliance.

Mostin, followed by Eadric, Nwm and Sho, shot upwards into the centre of a tall chamber wherein hundreds of fiends were gathered. The Alienist unleashed a *disjunction* immediately. Space buckled as Eadric spoke a *holy word*: a swathe of grossly misshapen daemons burned away in a wide circle, instantly turned to ash by his power. Nwm invoked a spell: great metallic barbs, like spiked lances, erupted from the floor, impaling dozens.

Fiends fled away from them in every direction.

Eadric glanced toward where Mostin's *disjunction* had fallen: the *Eye of Palamabron* revealed an unweaving cloth of impossible colours, which rapidly evaporated into nothingness.

Ortwine's *invisible* form flashed through the demagicked area at breakneck speed towards a group of daemons who were gathered on a low dais. The *Ahma* observed that the Sidhe bore the scimitar won from the succubus Cemdrei in Afqithan, and hoped it would prove equal to the task. Iua also stood there.

Her reactions were undiminished.

Even as Ortwine's scimitar found its mark, Iua had leapt the distance between them and was about her in a fury, stabbing with uncanny speed.

Ortwine glanced toward Iua and caught her eye for a split second, *hypnotizing* her.

"Tholhaluk presents far more of a threat to you than I," Ortwine spoke quite reasonably as she proceeded to tear into Tholhaluk with her scimitar, slashing wildly; the daemon smote her with a *destruction* but it seemed to slide off of her. She deftly avoided the blows of two yagnodaemons as they struck the floor with their *tol kendars*, sending sparks flying into the air.

Tholhaluk disappeared in an instant.

Surab abandoned Iua's rapier and likewise vanished. But Iua's assault on Ortwine was just as determined.

She froze, as Mostin *dominated* her. The Alienist gestured again, opening another *gate*.

"Why the *disjunction*?" Eadric inquired.

"I know he's got one," Mostin replied. "I had to get mine in first. Quick. Before they return."

**

I have the web of motes Mostin's head span. He sat in a comfortable chair in his study, fondling it with his pseudopod.

"Are you keeping it?" Eadric asked pointedly, trying not to look too closely at the Alienist's appendage. "Is Mulissu still its steward? What is the protocol?"

"Finders keepers," Mostin cackled. He sighed. "Oh, I don't know. I must first confer with Mulissu: she has returned as a fey. Teppu persuaded her. Although I suspect that she is less *Green* than Teppu would have liked: that, at least, should be some comfort."

Nwm guffawed. "Are you serious?"

"How delicious," Ortwine smiled. "One point to the *Viridity*, I say. You'd better get *resurrecting*, Eadric or you'll lose the race. Are you edified, Sho?"

The *simulacrum* stared at her, and then looked at Mostin. "Nwm informs me that you plan to combine me with a pseudonatural analogue of my maker. Is this correct?"

"Yes," Mostin nodded, glaring briefly at Nwm. "It is your destiny. Shomei predicted it."

"She may have," Nwm interrupted. "And she may not have. It's all a matter of interpretation."

"Don't start trying to seduce my students with your *green-ness*," Mostin barked. He turned again to Sho. "Nwm thinks I should reify you with a *wish*. Would you wish for such a mundane noogenesis? One should start on the highest available rung of the ladder of consciousness."

"I have no preference in this regard," Sho admitted.

"And therein lies the dilemma," Nwm sighed. "How can one best determine the mode of one's being when one is not empowered with an existential appreciation of the choice?"

"Do not let Nwm mislead you into thinking he is any saner than Mostin," Ortwine poured herself a glass of *kschiff*, sniffed it, and placed it on the table with a look of distaste. "Although I would still recommend against Mostin's preferred course of action: if you possessed an ethical locus, you would feel the same way."

Sho stood uncertainly, and looked at Eadric. "You are the *Ahma* – and are thus bound up in Shomei's world-view. What is your advice?"

"You lack the capacity for reflective thought," Eadric smiled sadly. "I'm not sure I have a position."

"I can *awaken* you," Nwm said. "What's more, I can do it *now*. It will contextualize your perception."

"You will be choosing an inferior state of being," Mostin was rapidly becoming agitated.

"When will this pseudosynthesis be possible?" She asked Mostin.

"It is some time distant," the Alienist admitted. "It has not been foremost in my thoughts."

"I am at a higher risk of annihilation as a *simulacrum*."

Mostin nodded dumbly. He knew what was coming next.

Sho spoke clearly. "I invoke both governing axioms, *preserve thyself* and *transcend thyself*, and choose Nwm's *awakening* as the best way to satisfy both. Is my logic flawed?"

"No," Mostin sighed. "But let me say this: what I have to offer, you will fear when your consciousness is so confined. A limitless ocean of possibility will appear beyond your ken, and you will be repelled by it. If you assume such a mundane state, try to recall the fact that at this moment you feel no abhorrence and no trepidation. Your natural aptitude will be for conjuration – much as your maker. I will teach you the secret method, if you are so inclined."

"And what of Mei?" Eadric asked.

"She can make her own choice," Nwm rose up. "Come. Don't be disturbed at the sight of my skin boiling away – I recover quickly."

*

When they returned, an hour later, Sho was silent. Mostin looked long at her.

"Is this the weight of being?" She asked.

"Yes," Mostin said enthusiastically. "You must strive to overcome it! Destroy yourself a hundred million times."

"And then?"

"The gods will fear you."

"This philosophy sits well with me."

"It should. I suspect you are rather predisposed to appreciate it. But you should contemplate your paradigm carefully."

"Unnecessary. I choose Goetia as my vehicle," Sho announced.

Nwm groaned. Eadric hung his head. Mostin sighed.

"You are choosing a lesser infinity," Mostin had a pained expression.

"I find your theories untenable," Sho replied.

The Alienist sat back, and pondered briefly. "Very well. My summoning room is at your disposal. Use the *mirror* as much as you need. Any spell in my collection is yours for the transcription. Please refrain from using my scrolls. Study the Injunction carefully, especially article nineteen."

"Thank-you," Sho nodded.

"Where will you start?" Mostin inquired.

"With Erinyes."

"Beware of Dispater! I would choose an unaffiliated duke, away from the main axes of power. Seere counts Erinyes in his train." Mostin silently unclasped the mantle which first Irknaan, and then Nhura, had worn before him, and handed it to Sho. "Consider this an indefinite loan."

Eadric raised an eyebrow. It was a fabulously extravagant gesture.*

"Mei is still considering her options," Nwm was exhausted. "But she is an impression from a later epoch of Shomei's consciousness, after her *reincarnation*. Her decision may surprise us."

**

The inauguration of the *Ahma* as Earl Marshal of Wyre was a subdued and informal affair, as Eadric had requested. It was silently ratified by the small council, each magnate witnessing in succession, and approved by the King.

Ortwine and Nwm were present in no specific capacity; Tahl, Rede and Tarpion – a saint and two vengeful spirits – also came in the *Ahma*'s train. Mostin had absented himself to avoid being politically compromised, and had instead travelled with Daunton to open a dialogue with Mulissu.

It came after the first major spells of the conflict had been cast; not the destructive magicks and compacted demons which Eadric had feared and anticipated, but a series of massive enchantments which had fired the uncertain masses of a dozen Thalassine cities into a bellicose fervour. Daunton's spies reported bizarre behaviour among the aristocrats of Jeshat, and a notable increase in anti-Wyrish rhetoric. The diviner ascribed the change to dozens of strategically-placed compulsions, which would prove difficult to locate – much less counteract.

After the ceremony, Eadric took counsel with Prince Tagur, Attar, and Sihü. Foide left on 'urgent business,' the nature of which, Tahl guessed, involved putting as great a distance between himself and the *Ahma* as was practical.

"Until the threat has been properly assessed, we will deploy troops in cadres of no more than one hundred," Eadric removed his gauntlets and sank into a carved siege. "Any more is inviting disaster. Twenty knights, plus infantry and outrider support. They will adopt a defensive strategy – there will be no heroic charges.

"Each cell will have a number of Templars attached to it. I have authorized the full use of the scrolls from the vaults below the Temple scriptorium: now I regret that so many were squandered during Trempa's secession. Certain more independently-minded mages have expressed an interest in joining the effort, as long as the conflict remains south of Hrim Eorth and the remit of the Claviger: their contribution should be welcomed.

"Orders will be simple: harass the enemy where possible; stay alive at all costs. Gallant dead knights are no use to me. Adopt a guerilla style of warfare. Strike and flee. Burn baggage trains. Poison enemy wells. Kill them in their sleep. Use whatever means necessary. Keep moving. This is about survival. Make them bleed for every inch they advance.

"As *Ahma*, I take the moral burden of the atrocities to be committed entirely upon myself. Make it clear that all who join us are absolved of all sin. This is a Holy War: their entry to paradise is assured. Are there any questions?"

*

"Where is she?" The Alienist complained. "And why did you choose this locale?"

Daunton and Mostin stood upon a jagged pylon of rock; the ocean crashed at its base.

"I am here, idiot." Mulissu was aerial, manifesting before them in a blue haze.

"I trust your transmigration was satisfactory?"

"What choice did I have? Teppu was unwavering in the weight of *guilt* which he applied to me."

"Are you sympathetic to his cause?"

"Oh, broadly, I suppose," Mulissu seemed distracted. "But I am still Mulissu and he is no longer Jovol."

"Hlioth traces the continuity."

"Hlioth is deranged. I bear no comparison with that crone."

"I have secured Iua," Mostin said.

"I know. You suddenly felt it necessary after many months – lest my ire descend upon you, I suppose?"

"Quite so. She is currently *dominated*."

"That is a wise precaution," Mulissu nodded. "I would suggest returning her to the Temple of Jeshi, but the Thalassine is rife with unrest. Magathei will be safer."

"To *Ula*o?" Mostin asked. "Is that wise?"

"Perhaps not. But I cannot guard her,"

"There is a demon. Surab..."

"Can you deal with it?" Mulissu asked.

"Regrettably, I cannot," Mostin looked apologetic. "I am under Empyrean contract, and must abstain from Goetic practices for the nonce."

"Must I do everything?" Mulissu scowled.

"I recommend a *finger of death*. He is warded against enchantments, and your evocations won't even tickle him."

"How long is this bizarre Enochian phase likely to last?"

"A few more weeks, at least," Mostin grinned.

"Don't get too comfortable, Mostin. Death has not lessened my anger towards you. And what have you *done* to yourself?"

"Evolved," Mostin nodded.

*This apparent act of generosity belies the fact that Mostin already had high SR and groovy spell absorption powers. His tenure in Uzzhin (which served as a useful way to advance the plot) had gained him the Pseudonatural (CA) and Spellwarped (MMIII) templates. They brought him up to ECL 30 or so, on par with Ortwine and Eadric.

Nwm was 28th-level, with a revised VOP and two powerful permanent epic wards on him: *dwimmerhame* (which grants SR 38) and *anathema ward* which prevents bodily contact with outsiders.

I should probably update the rogues' gallery at some point.

Sho's Awakening looks like this:

Instantaneous DC=0 epic spell. Seed: *animate* (DC 25), *life* (DC27), *fortify* (DC17); Mitigating: 11-min casting time (-10 DC), 50d6 backlash (-50 DC), burn 900 XP (-9 DC).

Originally posted by Sepulchrave II on 09-08-07

The Road to Galda

WYRE, to the furthest extent of its ancient bounds, stretched from the Ocean of Iarn in the east, to the rocky slopes of Harland in the west. Its northern frontiers were marked by the Thrumohar Mountains – the Heaped Thunders beyond which the frigid and inhospitable plateau of Tun Hartha stretched. In the south, it marched upon the cities which bustled around the warm and shallow waters of the Thalassine, where the winters were mild, and olive and almond trees grew in great profusion. For more than six hundred years, Wyre – in more determined fashion than its precursor, Borchiea – had dominated the political landscape of the subcontinent.

It was, for the most part, a fertile and well-watered land, strewn with numerous lakes in its inner regions, and hilly or mountainous at its margins. The forests which had once covered Wyre's landscape had, by the diligent effort of fifty generations of farmers, been first contained, and then forced into retreat; save for the vast tracts of Nizkur in the west, where feys and older spirits still held sway. Wyre enjoyed the seasons in roughly equal measure, although the snows of winter had a tendency to linger.

Wyre lacked the ancient pedigree of the civilizations far to the south, or the enthusiastic dynamism of its closer neighbours in the Thalassine, but possessed a middle-aged dignity which had not been entirely leached of youthful vigour. Its stability, like most feodalities, was tenuous at best, and Wyre was often beset by internal strife. In its worst guise this manifested as open warfare between its grasping nobles but, more frequently, the internecine squabbles of Wyre's aristocracy were resolved through the more elegant and precise medium of assassination. Millennia of history – mostly forgotten – underpinned Wyre's traditions, but without the decadent self-obsession of Shûth, or the ponderous grandeur of Bedesh. The Wyrish, whether of noble or common birth, were not a people preoccupied with tradition and ceremony; although, in matters of faith and philosophy, opinions tended to be more jealously guarded – and more passionately voiced – than elsewhere.

Whilst power ebbed and flowed between great noble houses, its reins held by first one, and then another branch of the same huge family, the Orthodox Church of Oronthon prospered. By the beginning of the seventh century since Wyre's foundation, the Temple – as it had become known in all of its guises – had firmly quashed any rivals to its supremacy, and sat, gross and distended, at the center of matters both spiritual and mundane. The plethora of heterodox philosophies which it had once tolerated had been reduced to the state of heretical cults by the Temple, and their adherents forced to Wyre's geographical periphery.

The Temple levied its own taxes, dispensed its own justice, maintained its own army, and prosecuted its own wars – albeit with the sanction of whichever monarch happened to sit upon the throne in Wyre’s capital, Morne. The boundaries of ecclesiastical and temporal law became so blurred that an exclusive class of barrister had evolved in order to negotiate this perilous field – where a charge of heresy was often the price for failing in the defense of one under the scrutiny of the Inquisition. Nonetheless, despite its cumbersome bureaucracy and dubious methods, the Temple retained an attraction for those whose motives were pure and selfless. And, provided they could endure the stagnation and inertia which Orthodoxy routinely presented to them, such individuals would find that, near the centre, was a kernel of truth, and a light which had not yet gone out.

At odds with the Temple, subject to higher taxes and frequent harassment – and occasional open persecution – an older faith persisted. It concerned itself with the cycles of growth and death and decay, with the rocks, the rivers and trees, and the numerous spirits which dwelled therein. It lacked a formal body of dogma, was not graced (or burdened) by an organized priesthood, and boasted no central locus of power. In fact, its practices were so diffuse and various that to call it one name would be to do an injustice to the diversity of perspectives which comprised it. Less ecumenically inclined members of the Temple simply dubbed the practice *pagan* or *heathen*, and identified the woodland demigods and spirits venerated by the older faith with outcast members of their own hierarchy of celestial beings. Those clergy in Morne who adopted a more tolerant stance – often at some risk to themselves – called the other faith *Uediian*, after an earth-goddess whose cult had flourished in southern and eastern Wyre prior to the Temple’s ascendancy. The term, although simplistic, was deemed politer and was even adopted by members of the faith themselves. It was a name which simply identified them as ‘those who do not worship Oronthon,’ although *downtrodden* might have been more apt. The interface between the two faiths, tense and dynamic, bred several interesting schools of inquiry, all of which were considered heretical by the prelacy.

In contrast to both religious movements, a third group existed. It had evolved from the undisciplined arcanism practiced before Wyre’s emergence. Its members concerned themselves with the pursuit of knowledge and understanding, and their methods and language were esoteric and complex. They shunned involvement in politics and regarded the desire for temporal power as aberrant and bizarre, seeking only to deepen their own understanding of obscure and hidden lore. They worked alone or, occasionally, in small cabals. They were mysterious, furtive and utterly obsessed with their own, elite

clique: the raw talent required to become apprenticed to one of them precluded all but one in ten thousand of Wyre's inhabitants. The Temple loathed and feared them, the Uediians distrusted them, and the temporal rulers of Wyre begged them for favours – often to be rejected on the grounds of some mysterious Injunction, the terms of which, when cited, made no sense to those who were not initiated. They dealt with feys, elementals, and all manner of more sinister entities, in a seemingly undiscerning manner. They were the Wizards.

Each of these three traditions had, in recent times, undergone a transformation.

The Temple, beset by internal strife, had disestablished; its hierarchy was dissolved, and its structure became cellular: the meditational practice known as *Saizhan* became emphasized above all else. Involvement in temporal matters was frowned upon, although not expressly forbidden. Simultaneously fragmenting and synthesizing, the Temple underwent an explosive renaissance in philosophy.

The ancient cults of Wyre which venerated Nature and Goddess were striving to coalesce into a single world-view which held that a *Viridity* – a "Greenification" of the world – was underway. Some viewed this phenomenon as a periodic awakening in the cycle of the Goddess herself.

The Wizards – finally frustrated by their own isolating paranoia – had relinquished the proctorship of matters arcane to the mysterious entity known as the Claviger, and, in an atmosphere of suspicious camaraderie, information had begun to flow more freely between them.

It was against this backdrop of revolution in philosophy and praxis that a fourth perspective – ancient and sinister – was revealed. It was foreign to Wyre, and the cause of its re-emergence after centuries of brooding silence, the source of much speculation. Its exoteric teachings were of nihilism and death, although its true purpose was impenetrable to all rational scrutiny; its appeal was visceral in the extreme.

*

Mesikammi flitted as an insubstantial mist through the night sky. A swift breeze bore her southwards with Hlioth to their appointed rendezvous with Mostin and Daunton. It was cloudless, and the young moon had already set; low in the east, the ruddy Eye of Cheshne – Soneillon's star – hung with her

daughters. As Mesikammi gazed at it, it seemed to pulse with a menace which caused the shamaness to shiver; she shifted her perception rapidly, and concentrated instead on the rolling hills of Scir Cellod. A light frost clung to the ground below.

Hlioth spied a light and gestured. Both descended to where the Alienist had, in an effort to make himself comfortable, magically erected a small pavillion and a *secure shelter* on a hilltop, and conjured a number of minor pseudoelementals to do his bidding. Daunton sat, cross-legged on the ground, staring into a *crystal ball*. Flambeaux burned in a wide circle about them.

"Perhaps you could make yourself even more conspicuous?" Hlioth snidely remarked as she corporeated. She assumed the form of an alluring woman of early middle-age, which may or may not have been authentic.

Mostin ignored her. They were warded against magical observation, and that was all that mattered to him.

Daunton barely raised his head. "The appointed area is nineteen miles West. We can *screen* this location if it makes you more comfortable, but I doubt that any scouts are trying to pinpoint us visually. We should also make a move soon: we need to be outside of the *quiescence* again an hour before the meeting begins. We will be entering on foot or on horseback."

"How quaint," Hlioth grumbled.

"Eadric says that it would be 'proper form' for a diplomatic party. For what it's worth, I've got no issue with it – I don't anticipate crossed swords just yet."

"You are optimistic," Hlioth said caustically.

Mostin handed her a scroll, with arcane glyphs smothered across it. "Here is the formula."

Hlioth glanced at it. "You require a transvalent contribution? And ten gallons of my psyche, apparently."

"I have modified the spell. It is more robust."

"It better be."

"What have you been doing, Hlioth?" Mostin inquired. "In Nizkur?"

"The Forest will be our last defense. It must be secure."

A chill went down Mostin's spine. Daunton glanced upwards. "If you have some prescience which you wish to share, Hlioth..."

"I am not the one with the *web of motes*," Hlioth gazed at Mostin.

"And I've not yet had the time and resources to inspect it," Mostin snapped. "Were others than I committed to Wyre's defense; if I were to benefit a modicum of *support* from the body magickal..."

"You lack the ability to rouse conviction in others, Mostin. When will you realize this?"

"As soon as any other takes responsibility," the Alienist retorted. "Something which, thus far, none have had the spine to do."

"Perhaps Mulissu is the prophet you are waiting for?"

"Perhaps *you* are," the Alienist replied drily. "Although being chased by fauns is more to your liking."

"Do not denigrate simplicity, Mostin."

"Nor should you overlook the collective. You have become too selfish, Hlioth."

Hlioth laughed. "You know nothing of me or my means. I see wider and deeper than you, Mostin."

"*Then share your insight*," Mostin hissed.

"Not yet; but soon, maybe."

"You are arrogant beyond belief!"

"I am a cog in a larger wheel, which is turning through more dimensions than you can readily apprehend."

Mostin raised an eyebrow. "Now that, I most sincerely doubt."

**

They moved at fantastic speed, phantoms of fear from which all that lived, fled.

Before they reached the limit of the *quiescence*, the stars seemed to wink out and, for a moment, utter darkness prevailed. The ground shook as in some terrible impact ahead of them. Space warped briefly. Gihaahia stood before them: her aspect was gigantic; winged and wrathful, and magnified to terrifying proportions. Flames kindled about her.

Choach invoked a shimmering ward which encapsulated them all, stretching the fabric of reality into a semipermeable interface of null-magic. It crackled darkly.

The Enforcer shattered it with a contemptuous glance. The lich reeled.

"You act beyond your purview," Yeshe was undaunted. "We are outside of Wyre and no transgression has occurred."

Silence your tongue. Speak not to me of my responsibility.

"Sister..." Naatha began.

And you, lest I deem your head unsuited to your body.

Naatha promptly closed her mouth.

From a huge, clawed hand, Gihaahia let a tablet drop with a *thud*. She sneered – evidently she preserved her sense of humour.

The Rules Have Changed. I suggest you read them before you proceed. Consider this a polite warning.

The Enforcer vanished.

Yeshe cursed. She didn't need to be told what the tablet was.

"She was three times thrice..." Choach began.

"I know it," Yeshe replied dismissively, waving a hand.*

"Need I remind you of..."

"*I know it!*" Yeshe screamed, her face contorting. Her calm – whether mood or façade – reasserted itself in an instant. "We have underestimated the Claviger. That could prove problematic."

"It is a strategy devised to allow the *Ahma* time to prepare," Sibud grimaced. "Jovol's prescience should not be underestimated. Who can tell how his negotiations with the Claviger proceeded? Jovol's Oronthonian sympathies were well attested to."

"As is your paranoia," Yeshe replied.

Sibud remained silent.

"My apologies, brother," Yeshe gave a curt bow. "Forgive my words – they were spoken in haste. Please continue."

"Thank-you," Sibud smiled. "If the Claviger..."

Yeshe pretended to listen, but her own head span. She waited for a suitable length of time as the Vampire spoke – *his power should not be underestimated* - before gesturing. The tablets rose from the ground and hung before her. She inspected them swiftly for any revisions: prudence had demanded her own familiarity with the Wyrish Injunction.

As her eyes scanned the engraved text, her face contorted in anger and disbelief.

"...*dispensation to the Enforcer to act unilaterally...*"

"...*extension of the Injunction's remit to include aspects of Shûthite theurgy within the ...*"

"...*the preservation of the Wyrish Collegium...*"

Yeshe closed her eyes, and brooded silently. Sibud might be right: maybe it was an Oronthonian conspiracy, after all. She issued a *sending* to Temenun.

The Tiger-Who-Waits was nonchalant.

She is still finite. Let her flap her wings.

**

It was twilight. The company rode south to Galda.

"One wonders what would have happened, had you slain Despina," Nwm remarked drily. He rode bareback – and expertly – upon a charger lent him by Prince Tagur. The horse had seemed absorbed in an ecstatic trance since its temporary adoption by the Druid.

Eadric shrugged. He felt uncomfortable.

"Perhaps reality would not have unravelled to quite such a degree," Nwm continued. "Sparing her was an ambiguous act, wouldn't you agree? Rooted as much in lust as in compassion."

Tarpion scowled. Nwm smiled back.

Eadric sighed. "My conscience is fraught enough as is, Nwm. Why add more to my misery? I've thought long on this – and Nehael's rejection of Oronthon. I know it well."

"She asked me to remind you," Nwm grinned.

Eadric squinted.

"She said other things, do you wish to hear them?"

"I'm not sure," the *Ahma* shifted in his saddle. "Will they depress me?"

"Perhaps they can wait."

Eadric shook his head ironically.

"I can quote her verbatim, if you wish?"

"Spit it out, Nwm," Eadric groaned.

"Enjoin the *Ahma* to recall that moment, and to reflect upon his motivation at that point – before his awareness had expanded to embrace a larger reality, when his concerns were more human and less divine. The seed of discord in his mind – the tension between his desire and his mercy – has been the source of his strength. The root of the Path of Lightning, which has unshackled him from morality. For a while, that path and the Middle Way were congruent, but no longer; if the antinomian view becomes dogmatic, he will fall as surely as the Adversary.

'The Viridity arises in response to the ontological paradox. It grounds the abstract in the present. Notions of *ens* and *non-ens* are abandoned in the face of the Now, and when the *Sela* apprehends the Viridity through *Saizhan*, he is pleased: the vibrancy of life crushes all philosophy.'"

Eadric reflected for a while, and scowled. "She has become no less opaque."

Nwm drew to a halt, and called out to Tagur, who led the company. "We will rest here for one hour. The *Ahma* and I will return shortly." The Druid began riding towards a lone cypress, a hundred yards from the roadside.

Eadric paused uncertainly for a long moment, and then spurred his mount to follow. "Where are we going?" He called to Nwm.

"To Afqithan," Nwm replied.

Eadric immediately reined his steed in, and shook his head. "I have no desire to return there."

Nwm wheeled about and stared hard at him.

"Oh, very well," Eadric grumbled.

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The pool was black as pitch, and utterly still. Tendrils of dark mist clung to its surface.

"Welcome to the source of your nightmares."

"I am past grieving, Nwm."

"You are disconnected from your humanity," Nwm opined.

"So you bring me to the grave of the demoness? This serves little purpose."

"Your reluctance to be here would suggest otherwise."

"I am wary of invoking her: her memory yet resides."

"She is merely a phantom which clings to the *real*."

"What is the purpose of this excursion, Nwm?" The *Ahma* was wary.

"Consider the Viridity, Eadric. Aside from the truth of it – and you have *experienced* that, so you cannot deny it – your words can sway thousands.

If you were to adopt a reconciliatory perspective, you could effect the synthesis and flowering of religious thought for generations to come. An end to ethnic strife in Wyre. The *Sela* must surely agree..."

"The *Sela* would express no opinion, I'm sure," Eadric smiled wily.

"*It must happen*," Nwm seemed adamant. "It is only a matter of *how* and *when*. You have a responsibility to posterity: you must exercise it wisely."

"The weight of history is not mine to bear."

"I do not shirk my duty thus," Nwm was acid. "I still strive to effect change for the better. My concerns are human."

"When you are not pursuing the elusive Goddess."

Nwm smiled. "My perspective is balanced. But if you wish to speak of the devouring feminine, Eadric, I'm all ears."

The *Ahma* pondered briefly.

"There is much common ground here, Ed. You know it. A mystic is a mystic, after all."

"*I do not determine doctrine*," Eadric groaned. "And I will not be drawn into a debate involving comparative mysticism. At least, not until I've eaten. And I will not make sweeping religious reforms."

"Why not? Who says you can't? Or shouldn't? You say that the *Sela* would have no opinion on the matter, and why should he? But you can. You are the *Ahma*. You are not the 'gnostic intellect of God.' If not you, then who?"

"Bah! Perhaps. But it is not my immediate concern. And even as we stand here, hours fly past in the World."

"There is something you should see. Please indulge me!"

"Be quick!"

Nwm shifted into the form of a raven with a thirty-foot wingspan, and made an odd clicking sound, indicating that Eadric should climb onto his back. He powered upwards through the canopy, into the violet and saffron gloaming of Afqithan's sky, and bore off in a direction away from Ortwine's Fortress.

"Look through the *Eye of Palamabron*," Nwm croaked.

Eadric did so, and gaped. Nearby, soaring above the treetops, was Murmuur's tower, abandoned. Coiled about its upper quarter was a linnorm of dreadful size, dark with shadowy power – some ancient vestige from the umbral fringe of Afqithan. Teppu had bound it, and set it about the place in guard, before hiding the tower itself from all but the most penetrating sight.

"Hlioth is of the opinion that Mostin, were he to use the *web of motes* in his inquiry, could determine the mode of operation of this device."

"I think that Mostin owning a planar nexus to the Hells is a *bad* idea," Eadric said. "Besides, why has it not been retrieved?"

"Devils do not step here. They have no place now."

"Nor do I."

"Ah, but you are here by *invitation*. My question is precisely this: *should* we tell Mostin?"

"I suspect we have to, now," Eadric said glumly. "Can you imagine how he'd react if he found out that we knew about it, and had said nothing?"

Nwm nodded his avian head. "There is one other thing..."

"How many other 'one other things' are there likely to be?"

"No more. I am wary of your reaction to this, however."

"Thank-you for the warning."

Nwm squawked. "Around now, Mulissu has seized control of the City of Fumaril."

Eadric was aghast. "You cannot be serious!"

"The Temple of Jeshi has endorsed her coup, and a dozen wind-sorcerers are backing her. She is erecting a barrier – similar to Soneillon's paling – around the city."

"The Injunction?"

"She is outside it."

"But the other Wyrish Wizards...this is a massive breach of etiquette."

"Who cares? She's Mulissu. No-one dare challenge her. Especially if they know that Mostin would jump to her aid."

"It seems most unlike her," Eadric mused.

"Teppu is persuasive. And Jovol was the only Wizard that Mulissu ever deferred to."

"And you support this course of action?"

"I'm not sure," Nwm admitted. "It risks a great deal – it is a response to the compulsions which were laid down by the Cheshnite cabals, and ups the ante more than I'm altogether comfortable with. But she will bring order to the city very quickly, either by persuasion or by *domination*."

"Does she intend for this to be a permanent arrangement?"

"She is styling herself *Tyrant of Fumaril*, so one would assume so."

"At least she makes no pretence as to her role. I wish I could say the same. Is this the *same* Mulissu? I mean, has her reincarnation changed her?"

"It always does," Nwm seemed matter-of-fact.

"But how much?"

"Enough that she has stepped into the political arena. But I think the integrity of her ego has remained intact." Nwm landed upon the ground, and resumed his human form.

"Unlike Jovol-Teppu?"

"Unlike Ortwin-Ortwine," Nwm smiled. "Teppu is...well, who knows, really?"

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Eadric drew alongside Prince Tagur. "Highness, if I might have a word?"

Tagur scowled. *Highness*? This man – if such he still was – retained an odd respect for conventional forms. Or perhaps he was simply the consummate diplomat. There was no particular need for the *Ahma* to address him at all – Tagur was under no illusion that his presence was anything other than ceremonial. There was nothing that Tagur could actually *do* to influence the course of events. He

sighed, and nodded.

"I should like to speak with you regarding the possibility of things...ah...coming to blows, shall we say."

"I'm sure I shall die very quickly," Tagur smiled.

"I suspect you will have as good a chance as I," Eadric said wryly, "considering I will be their principal target."

"Ah, yes," Tagur half-apologized. "There is that."

"Before we meet them, there will be a period of *preparation*."

Tagur raised an eyebrow.

"It is customary to fortify oneself as best as possible before this kind of parley – the kind that can degenerate quickly into a bloodbath. Especially if Mostin is present."

"Are you quite serious? Why is this madman even involved?"

"I wish I knew," Eadric groaned. "In any event, do not be concerned that you will be ineffective. You will be bolstered with numerous spells, and will prove quite handy. I suspect you'll find things more evenly-matched than you fear."

"You may spare my pride in this matter, *Ahma*."

"Trust me. A large part of me hopes that it does come to swords. When I get the opportunity to hit something in the head, the odds tend to favour me."

"Have you considered simply striking first?"

"Oh yes," Eadric nodded. "I consider it all the time."

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Ortwine rode on ahead, utterly self-absorbed.

I want my sword. My Heedless Githla. She realized that her desire for the weapon bordered on obsession, and shrugged.

Ripples in consciousness, to which Ortwine seemed to be becoming increasingly sensitive, spoke to the sidhe of the Green in motion: Nizkur was awakening, the ancient spirits of the land stirring. In the south, feys and elementals were agitating.

Despite herself, Ortwine felt the Viridity drawing her in. The lure was impossible to resist, as much because she felt it was stemming *from* her as calling *to* her. It made her uncomfortable.

What do I want? It was the perennial question for her. Her existence was so often a jaded malaise. An ennui which had persisted through four successive incarnations. A sword? A throne? Divinity? All was empty. Ortwine turned her head, and gazed over her shoulder.

Nwm, who rode behind her, stared impassively at her.

Ortwine's eyes narrowed. "Your religious machinations will not determine my purpose," she said acidly.

"I seek only to inform it," Nwm smiled.

Ortwine glowered. "Fine. But I want my sword, first."

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Mulissu floated above the balcony before an immense throng; they screamed in frenzied adulation. *Redemptrix*, they called her. *Goddess*. The euphoria was intoxicating.

Temporal power is dangerous, she observed silently. *Still, I will not have my city tampered with*. The savant raised a hand, and an excited hush fell.

"I am Mulissu, your new Tyrant," Mulissu announced. The proclamation was greeted with rapturous applause. The witch waited for it to subside.

"My apologies to any council members present for the inconvenience of your displacement; rest assured that you will remain unharmed, and your mundane duties will be mostly unaffected.

"You will find me largely benign, if somewhat aloof; my occasional fits of pique seldom result in malicious transmogrifications. Please refrain from engaging in civil uprisings, as such would be doomed to failure. Your day-to day activities are of no concern to me, and I have no interest in managing your affairs beyond providing you with protection. Continue to pay your taxes. Put your children to bed at the normal time. For the moment, you are *safe*."

*The numerological significance of the Enforcer's magnification was not lost on members of the Cheshnite delegation. Enitharmon was said to have been *three times thrice* magnified – i.e. to have been bestowed with nine divine ranks – for the purpose of expelling Oronthon's Adversary from heaven.