POST 1: LADY DESPINAS VIRTUE

I originally posted this on the old messageboards - not realizing that they were going to be frozen quite as abruptly as they were. It's still messy, and hasn't been organized properly.

The first post was posed as a question on the general forum some time back in November and, unexpectedly, aroused a lot of interest. There was a follow-up post and, finally, a third post to explain the ongoing situation. I've also added the fourth (as yet, unposted) post at the end.

The saga still continues, although I am way behind in writing up my notes on it and there is a LOT to reproduce. I will post as often as possible to the story thread if interest is sustained: my main gauge on whether to continue will be the number in the "viewed" column - I realise that written feedback in story hour tends to be a little thin.

The style is rather odd - a story in places, game stats thrown in, some meta-stuff in other places. I suppose this reflects the hybrid nature of the original posts. Over time, I'm assuming that a more coherent style will emerge, although I kind of like the conversational approach: I'm not a novelist and have no pretensions in that direction. If it seems a bit dry in places then I guess that's just the academic in me.

[FIRST POST IN GENERAL DISCUSSION- SOMETIME IN NOVEMBER 2001]

I have an interesting moral dilemma currently occurring in my game, both from an in-character and a meta- perspective.

One of the PCs, a 14th level Paladin, the prized possession of its player for 10 years or so (he was converted from 2E), is currently attempting to CONVERT a succubus, and demonstrate to her the error of her ways.

The demoness, sent as an envoy from a certain fiend whom the Paladin had previously offended, was charged with the mission of corrupting the character.

Now, the Paladin is your typical high-chivalry pageants-and-tourneys type, embodying the ideals of courtly life. He is fair-minded, just, merciful, chaste and so forth.

The Demoness, warded by an amulet of undetectable alignment, has insinuated herself into the retinue of a certain Duchess, posing as the daughter of a minor noble with a fine pedigree, with various letters of recommendation. She has been posing as a guileless, naive and hugely compassionate handmaiden who is strikingly beautiful. The Paladin was instantly smitten -in a chaste way, of course-
and has been carrying her token while he jousts.

Having sought her out (and she proved very elusive), the Paladin has been recently courting her, and spending much time with her (reciting poetry, singing ballads etc.- he has a very fair perform skill). To his delight, he has found the lady to be highly intelligent, well-versed in metaphysics and deeply spiritual. They have spent many hours engaged in wide-ranging philosophical debate and found that they only differed in their opinions on a few minor points (heheheh...)

However, in the last session, following leads that our hero might be being duped, the deception was revealed. The Paladin drew his weapon and prepared to smite the evil thing.

The demoness sat demurely and began to weep, begging for his mercy and saying yes she had been sent here to corrupt him and yes that was her original intention but that he’d begun to CHANGE her, and if only he’d give her a chance that she’d prove that she’d overcome her evil ways.

The Paladin, to his credit, didn’t buy any of that and thought it was a crock. He raised his sword again, preparing to send her back to the Abyss, expecting her to retaliate. Still, she sat, motionless, and lowered her head.

Suddenly, the Player was overcome with doubt. What if she IS redeemable? Are demons forever damned? Is there an ounce of potential for her to be anything other than Chaotic Evil - after all demons DEFINE what evil is. And now, another dilemma besets him: if he kills her, here, in cold blood with this doubt in his mind has she WON? Does the very act of slaying her WHILE HE HAS DOUBTS mean that he has contravened his alignment, and is corrupted?

Opinions, please.

[FOLLOW-UP POST]

Sorry to keep you all waiting: loads of RL stuff to deal with, and the session was delayed. Furthermore, a bucket load more ethical questions are now confounding the Paladin: I think the player is starting to hate me…

I realise that this might be more appropriate to the storyboards forum, but I’m willing to risk the wrath of the moderators. Nothing has been finally resolved, but here is the gist of what happened last time.

We were scheduled to play on Saturday night, and the Paladin player (Marc) arrived an hour early to try and resolve it before the other two players showed up.

The Paladin stayed his blow (for which the Demoness was obviously grateful), although he kept his blade poised to strike if necessary. He proceeded to explain that, naturally, he doubted her intentions and was very aware that this might be some kind of ploy which she was executing on him, and that he found himself in a very difficult no-win situation. He complimented her for the subtleties of her deceit in this matter - which elicited another outburst of tears from the maiden, as she explained that she was GENUINE in her desire to find a better way of being.

She spoke in apparent candor, saying that the intrigues and manipulations and seductions and corruptions that she had perpetrated in the past - thousands and
thousands of them across aeons of time - left her feeling jaded and sullied and worthless and self-loathing. Her perversion and evil came not from her ORIGINAL NATURE - which was bright, and celestial, "like a star burning in the firmament," as she poetically rendered it - but from the corrupting influence of those demons who far outranked her and whose evil was immeasurably deeper.

The Abyss itself, she protested, was a place of such infinite evil that, what hope did one of her minor stature have of redemption if she were forced to return to the place? Only by being sent to the mortal plane, and thus to a place from which all good had not been expunged, had she realized again the possibility of another existence. She wanted only to live out an earthly existence in quiet penance, and then die. She had no desire to return to her formal celestial abodes, as she had "forfeited that right, eternally, countless aeons ago when I made an error of judgement in the cosmic war. I was new-formed, and guileless - remember this was BEFORE evil was. There was no taint on me, or on most of the others, but subtle, provocative words were spoken quietly in our ears, and we succumbed. We were naïve." Grazz't, her master in the hosts, was one of those closest to the source of the corruption and threw his lot wholeheartedly with the rebels. "What choice did I have?"

Note that this account is, from the Paladin's perspective, more-or-less cosmologically accurate, although he hadn't heard an account first-hand from one of the Fallen Ones before. Rather sneakily, I must admit, I was pandering to Marc's general sympathies towards the Miltonian Lucifer in Paradise lost. Quickly, the Paladin gestured in the air and cast the spell "discern lies."

Obviously, I rolled the D20 in secret.

The Paladin quizzed her for a while, received answers that were bafflingly plausible, and evinced no perturbations in the demoness's aura, and then shouted out to his squire, who was waiting in the antechamber. He instructed him to fetch his friends, who were nearby in the quadrangle - he needed their advice.

We had a beer recess and waited for the other players to arrive.

It's worth mentioning at this point that the other two characters - a CG/N Half-Elven Fighter 5 / Thief 5 / Bard 6 and a NG Human Druid 13 also belong to players who've been around for a while. Ortwin, the Bard, has seen various incarnations from 1e onwards. Neither of them are spring chickens and they're both pretty aware of my general sneakiness as a DM. Note that both characters also have radically differing cosmological perspectives to the Paladin, which makes for interesting gaming...

The Bard and the Druid arrived presently, the Paladin apprised them of the situation (causing the Bard to laugh almost uncontrollably), and earnestly sought their advice.

They debated various possibilities, and the Paladin became anxious. Technically, although a holy warrior, as one not ordained, he ought to seek the advice of the nearest clergyman (the Priest who services the Duchess' chapel, a lowly 3rd level traditionalist), but felt that he was unqualified to answer in the matter. This caused a momentary paradox, as the Paladin realized that failing to do this was a breach of correct forms. Nonetheless, he opted to see his own confessor instead, none other than the Archbishop of Morne, High Priest of Oronthon in the capitol, 70 miles distant. The Druid cynically asked him, "And what if you don't like his solution?"
The Paladin answered, "We'll deal with that if and when it arises."
This caused a problem - what to do with the demoness? Obviously, assurances
from her to her good behavior were not sufficient, but they could hardly take her
with them: she couldn't physically enter the Fane anyway, as it was hallowed
ground. Ortwin, the Bard, offered to remain with her, whilst the Druid and Paladin
wind-walked to the temple to succor advice from the priest.

In their absence, the Bard and the succubus talked genially about various
subjects, including the importance of the independence of the spirit. He was
wary, but found her nonetheless beguiling.

Arriving in the capitol an hour later, outside of the orangery of the Archbishop's
palace, the Paladin and his friend were greeted by a minor functionary who eyed
the Druid suspiciously. Unfortunately, the Archbishop was indisposed, having just
gone on a meditation retreat.

"How long will it be?" the Paladin asked.
"We are not sure," the official answered. "He is communing with Oronthon.
Apparently with some urgency. I am not sure why. He seemed concerned, as if
some great event challenged the very structure of the church."
The Paladin groaned.

[THIRD POST]

Okay, after many requests...

The reason that I've put off elaborating any further is because the plot has got
immensely convoluted with all kinds of Machiavellian intrigues being perpetrated
(mainly by demons), which has left the Paladin rather flummoxed. The Druid has
been making snide remarks about the inevitability of this kind of thing when a
religion becomes dogmatic, institutionalized and divorced from its "roots" (i.e.
Nature, from his perspective), and the Bard has, as usual, been viewing the
entire proceeding with unconcealed humour. Further, another player has joined
the group - a wizard(diviner)/alienist who is played with a frighteningly
convincing display of insanity by a friend of mine called Danny.

It transpired that the Archbishop (on meditation retreat, if you recall) was to
remain closeted for some time before the Paladin could speak with him: two
weeks, in fact. I allowed the entire party (with the exception of the new
character) to level up during this period: they were, in fact, long overdue, but I
generally insist on an in-game period of down-time to be made available before I
allow this to happen, to represent consolidation of skills etc. This was the first
opportunity that they'd had for a while. During this period, the Paladin (who spent
a LOT of time in prayer), took it under advice from the other characters to make
absolutely no contact with the demoness: they would keep an eye on her. He
slept in the chapel, just to be on the safe side. At the point where the Paladin was
to return to the Temple to seek advice from his confessor, the party consists of

1) Eadric (ee-AD-rik). A 15th level human paladin with a lot of stress in his life.
He wears a flashy suit of magical full plate, has a big magical shield and has a big
magical sword called "Lukarn" - an intelligent, lawful good, keen sunblade with
the special purpose: slay chaotic evil creatures. Eadric likes tournaments, acting
in a chivalrous manner, and gallantly courting fair damsels. Often the vissicitudes
and grim realities of the world prove to be a disappointment to him, but he
marches on optimistically nonetheless. He's kind of a stereotype, but he's played
so well by Marc that it enhances rather than detracts from the experience.

2) Nwm (NOOM). A 14th level human Druid whose prized item is his self- made
"staff of the woodlands" capped with an "orb of storms" rescued from a blue dragon's possession. Nwm is apparently sardonic and skeptical, but secretly idealistic in a "peace, man" kind of way. A guy called Dave plays him as a cross between Timothy Leary and Oscar Wilde.

3) Ortwin. A Half-Elf Fighter/Rogue/Bard 5/5/7, with a mischievous sense of humour but a good heart - usually. Not someone to cross, he's been known to stray a few times from his announced CG alignment when vendetta is involved. Rob, his player, says that if he were a modern era character, then Iggy Pop would be his idol but he'd dress like David Bowie and sing like Freddy Mercury. Ortwin has an "Iron Horn of Valhalla," a "Cloak of Displacement" and "Dread Githla": a +4 Keen Scimitar with both the Throwing and Returning enchantments, which I have had cause to regret his ownership of more than once. He also has a scroll with a number of powerful spells on it which he's been afraid to use because of the possibility of them misfiring.

4) Mostin the Metagnostic: A wizard (diviner) 6/ Alienist 9. Mostin is played by Danny, who has some interesting insights into the nature of psychosis. Mostin is CRAZEE. Not in a charming, eccentric, lovable way, but in a deeply disturbing, pathological way. He has strange, obsessive compulsive behavioural traits, and makes bizarre rituals out of seemingly mundane activities. Danny returns to the group after an absence of nearly a year: his last character, a monk called Skaddius, was killed in a tussle with a Nalfeshnee demon and its cohorts, and declined to be resurrected. The in-game rationale was that such a step would be an impediment to the character's enlightenment, although in fact the player had too much RL stuff going on to commit to the game. Mostin is in possession of a "Portable Hole" full of all kinds of nick-nacks including the fabulous "Looking Glass of Urm-Nahat" - a Mirror of Mental Prowess, and by far the most powerful single magic item I've ever allowed in a game. I must be mellowing as I get older...

I will post again at some stage: please try to understand that to do this justice requires time, and that between other responsibilities, including a tabletop campaign and a PBEM game, as well as work and family, ongoing revelations about this game may get pushed onto the backburner.

Sooo...

During the short sabbatical and training period, at the invitation of the Duchess of Trempa, Mostin the Metagnostic arrived at the castle where the events to date had been occurring. Mostin's reputation as someone who can simply "find things out" is almost unparalleled. Various strange happenings, apparently without explanation, had caused some alarm amongst the castle's inhabitants, and various minor diviners had been consulted but to no effect. Nwm, usually helpful in these matters, had proven mysteriously silent. Eadric was in prayer and could not be disturbed - looking for inspiration, from the Duchess's point of view.

Trees withering. Food rotting on plates. Holy water boiling and candles flaring up in the chapel. That kind of thing.

Mostin, of course, through the use of his divinations, quickly determined the truth: a demonic influence was at work in the Duchess's court. Ortwin and Nwm discovered Mostin's arrival too late: they tried to corner the character before he mades his discoveries known, but failed to do so in time. Stoking his repugnant, malformed hedgehog (a pseudonatural familiar), Mostin informed the Duchess of his findings, and elicited cries of consternation from her and the courtiers gathered there. All of this was unknown to Eadric, who was still praying fervently.
in the chapel.

"There is a DEMON in your midst," he announced dramatically, enjoying the effects of his revelation on the crowd. Before the hubbub had subsided and the Alienist could point out the culprit, Ortwin, paramount master of BS, thinking on his feet, quickly invoked a “shatter” spell, causing all of the chandeliers to explode, and eliciting panic in the court. Next, a thick green mist with red eyes seemed to escape from his mouth, groaning and with a stench of sulphur (a major image). The hall was in chaos, with maidservants screaming and old women fainting everywhere, retainers vainly drawing their swords. Ortwin collapsed to the ground, apparently insensible. In the frenzy, Nwm managed to whisk Mostin away and impress on him the complexity of the situation. Out of sheer perversity, Ortwin, lying prone with one eye open, caused the hideous manifestation to chase after the Duchess, and it flew around above her head for a few moments before it evaporated harmlessly.

The succubus, posing as a handmaiden, pretended to be as shocked as the other courtiers and fled through the nearest exit.

Having briefed Mostin, the alienist reluctantly agreed to dissemble, and informed the Duchess that the threat had removed itself "for the time being, at least," - he was covering his back - but that Ortwin must rest in the chapel until the effects of his "possession" wore off. Trilgar, the lowly castle minister and confessor, was dismissed despite his protestations, now that an "expert" was there. Mostin pointed out that even the rumour of his coming was enough to force the demon out and his reputation was thereby increased.

Taking counsel with the eerie and discomfiting Mostin in the chapel, Eadric, Nwm and Ortwin discussed their options. All three of the original characters knew Mostin by reputation, and so were quite glad of his input in matters. The crazed alienist began by immediately attempting to contact Eadric's deity, Oronthon, by means of a "Contact Other Plane" spell. "Best we go straight to the top," he explained, "and cut out the intermediaries." Eadric was uneasy about getting a mage to do this, as he knew that a priest's information was generally more reliable. Still, he couldn't wait for the Archbishop to come out of retreat. And that's when the REAL trouble began.

Mostin, with a Will Save of +16, wasn't afraid of going any crazier than he already was - not that that would have deterred him anyway. With an incandescent blue Ioun Stone buzzing around his head, he bravely embarked on his psychic journey. Now, for those of you familiar with the "Contact Other Plane" spell, there are certain situations where it can be "blocked" by other entities. Unfortunately for Eadric and his friends, this was one of those situations. And I LOVE spells which have vague descriptions like this, as it means that I can legitimately do what I like without feeling some guilt about "Breaking the Rules" - or other such nonsense..

Anyway, the attempted conduit to Oronthon's presence, mediated normally by a Planetar called Urthoon, was intercepted by the Balor Rurunoth who had been observing events with interest from the astral plane at the behest of his overlord, the demon prince Graz'zt. Rurunoth's impressive Bluff skill was sufficient to utterly confound the intuitively impaired Mostin. His spell trace was redirected to the awesome, inspiring and terrible presence of Graz'zt, posing as the Paladin's deity.

"Er...Is the Succubus posing as Lady Despina (the handmaiden's name, btw) genuine in her desire to redeem herself," Mostin asked plaintively.
"YES!" The voice boomed in the alienist's head. "Can her efforts be aided in some way by the Paladin Eadric?"
"YES!" The voice boomed again. "Must he acquire some object to accomplish this?"
"MAYBE." The voice boomed. "Is there another way, without acquiring an object?"
"NO!" The voice boomed again.

Mostin scratched his head and thought for a while. The answers weren't entirely consistent, but better than he'd hoped for.

"What is the name of this object?"
"VIRTUE." The voice boomed. Figuring that the answer to the third question kind of made sense now, Mostin pressed on.
"Whose Virtue?" He asked. "IRRELEVANT." The voice replied, and Mostin realized that he'd wasted a question.
"The virtue of the succubus posing as the Lady Despina?"
"CORRECT." The voice boomed, for the final time.

Emerging from his trance, Mostin proudly announced that he'd spoken to Oronthon - "a nice sort of fellow" (this made Eadric's hackles rise), and the answer was simple. They must find the Succubus's virtue, and restore it to her.
"And where would that be, exactly?" Nwm inquired archly.
"Er, he didn't say. Or I didn't get the chance to ask him. You should ask her - perhaps she'll know."

Eadric quizzed Mostin further. "I thought that you were supposed to be able to find out anything," he said. "Where is this virtue located?"
Mostin, bristling at his reputation being questioned, agreed to cast another spell in order to find out - he offered to contact "Oronthon" again but the Paladin declined, saying that he'd rather go through more conventional (and reliable) channels.
"How about a quick 'Vision,'" Ortwin suggested, slyly. "We know it's her virtue that we're looking for now - I assume that this magic is available to you?"
"Of course it is," Mostin retorted, "and my thoughts exactly. Although you should understand, Eadric, that it takes a certain toll, and will increase our account."
"Our ...account?" The Paladin inquired incredulously.
"Precisely. Firstly, I have lied to the Duchess in order to protect your girlfriend; second I have just mediated between you and your deity and third I am about to subject my mind to great strain on your behalf. I'd say that you already owe me a fair reward."

The fact that Mostin had told an outright lie - at the prompting of Nwm and Ortwin, of course, was news to Eadric, and his stomach dropped. It seemed whatever he did (or did not do) was quickly "soured" somehow. He bemoaned the situation - not for the last time. Someone had lied on his behalf, and truth was always the first victim when the seeds of corruption took root. The fact that Mostin had called the demon his girlfriend simply made him mad.

A long argument ensued about whether he should immediately come clean with the Duchess - a lie was a lie, after all, and should be exposed. Quite different from merely keeping a secret. After a debate which degenerated into bickering and name-calling (mainly between Nwm and Eadric), the Paladin eventually
agreed to let the lie slip in the interests of the greater good - i.e. the possible redemption of the Lady Despina, although he felt seriously compromised in the process.

The intangible Rurunoth watched events gleefully through a color portal and, wraithing himself in astral fire, took off like a thunderbolt toward the Abyss in order to relate events to his master. Simultaneously, in the chapel, the lights flared and the font began to overflow with blood.

Eadric immediately became defensive again. "Alright. That's it. We tell the Duchess. This is obviously an omen. Oronthon is displeased. How could I even contemplate letting this go any further?"

Despite their protestations, this time the Paladin was resolute. (Ortwin was in it up to his neck now, largely because it would expose him as the perpetrator of the 'evil green mist' - and he didn't want the Duchess asking questions such as 'and why did the manifestation appear to chase me?') Eadric stormed off towards the Duchess's chambers, prepared to wake her if necessary. Both Nwm and Ortwin knew that it was pointless to argue with him when he was in this mood.

"S***t, Nwm. DO something," the Bard begged the Druid. After a moment's thought, Nwm sighed and touched Ortwin on the shoulder, and both evaporated into mist. To get to the Duchess's chambers, some 200 yards away, would take the armoured Eadric around two minutes. Nwm and Ortwin "Wind Walked" there in six seconds.

[It's worth noting that at this point, I placed my watch on the table and began counting down in real time before the Paladin reached them. It started at 90 seconds - it takes 5 rounds to assume the mist form]

The Duchess was asleep in her huge four-poster bed, and Nwm asked "What now?"

"That's easy," Ortwin replied quickly, "just touch her and we'll take her for a spin - if she wakes up she'll just think she's having a dream."

"We can't do that," Nwm explained, "it doesn't work like that. She'll just stay put on the bed unless she's awake."

[SEVENTY SECONDS]

"Well let's wake her up, then," Ortwin shouted. He was getting nervous. That woke her up.

The Duchess came to and looked terrified at the two misty apparitions hovering above her bed.

"Fear not," Ortwin said in his most soothing voice, before she could scream. "We are gentle spirits, come to show you wondrous sights. Simply close your eyes and relax. Today has been a hard day for you. You have nothing to worry about."

[FIFTY SECONDS]

[Another OOC Note: Ortwin has a huge Bluff Skill, +24 including bonuses, or something like that]

Astonishingly, the Duchess complied. Ortwin rematerialised, all the while speaking in a slow, hypnotic voice reminiscent of a guided meditation.

[TWENTY SECONDS. Eadric's armoured boots were now audible, stomping up the stone stairs and along the hallway.]
The Bard vacillated for a few seconds, drew his hood up over his face, and cast a "silence" spell. The spoken spell jarred the Duchess from her reverie, but her screams at the hooded intruder in her room went unheard, as did the knocking at her door.