POST 1: THE RAPE OF MORNE

So: I've decided to start a new thread, as the old one is getting a bit cumbersome.

It goes without saying that a huge amount has passed since I last posted, so there is a lot to catch up with. Please note that posts will probably be more infrequent than previously, so as to avoid burnout in actually recounting stuff. Its been nice to actually have time to plan, and play.

As I mentioned previously, there is a kind of natural lacuna in the story after those events at Khu involving Feezuu, Ainhorr and the Celestial descent. If you can suspend your disbelief, and attribute events that happened after that to the third book - this one - then I think that it flows together more naturally.

Of course, I didn't know what to call it then, because the events which characterize it hadn't occurred. They have now - at least to a point.

Lots of bad things happen, and loyalties are shaken and upset. The first post, relatively light in content, is not at all typical of the sessions that we have since played.

And the point is made that whatever story arcs I devise, my players (and occasionally die rolls) tend to force things into better ones.

Mostin Gets Philosophical, and Ortwin Goes a-Courtin'

It was the morning after Mostin’s party, and the Alienist joined Eadric and Nwm in the hall at Kyrtil’s Burgh. He pointedly avoided the invisible Devas, who looked even more stern and judgmental than usual.

"Before you start," the Alienist held his palms up towards Eadric, "I had no idea that Shomei would be bringing an infernal guest. I would have discouraged her from attending if I had."

"Who was it?" Eadric asked. "And what ‘legitimate business’ was he referring to?"

"Duke Titivilus, and temptation," Mostin replied. "Specifically, of me."

"And you accepted?" Eadric inquired. "If so, I think our friendship is at an end, Mostin."
"I did not." the Alienist snapped. "Although, I must admit, I was tempted. But I know from experience that such arrangements tend to come at a higher price than is immediately apparent."

"What did he offer?" Nwm inquired. "Something suitably seductive, I hope?"

"Yes," said Mostin, cryptically.

"And Shomei?" Eadric asked. "What was her part in this? I assume that your association with her is at an end?"

"Certainly not," Mostin replied indignantly. "Shomei is a good friend, and by hearing Titivilus out, I may have helped her extricate herself from a tight spot."

Eadric looked confused.

"She has almost discharged her compact with him, Eadric. He has furnished her with certain…perquisites…and she has been instrumental in facilitating his sojourns on the Prime. By agreeing to act as mediator between Titivilus and myself – a facilitator in the Temptation process, if you will – Shomei is close to ending their misalliance."

The Paladin was aghast. "And you don’t resent her for that? I am constantly confused by your motives, Mostin."

"Initially, I was offended," Mostin confessed, "but Shomei explained her circumstances after Titivilus departed. She feels that it is hazardous to be involved with two Devils at once."

"Two?"

"Her loyalties are currently split between Belial and Dispater. She has overreached herself. She is attempting to sever her connection with Dis and Titivilus as diplomatically as possible."

Eadric groaned. "This woman sounds like a barrel of trouble, Mostin. She will drag you on the path to perdition if you are not cautious."

"No," the Alienist said. "She will not. You do not understand her. I’m sorry to pull rank on you Eadric, but there are some things that you will simply never comprehend, because your faith dictates that reality is a certain way, and no other. Her reality is not yours. Her guidelines are not yours. Nonetheless, she is highly principled. A left-hand path adept, if you will. Do not make the mistake of judging her by your morality."

"I cannot understand this," Eadric said.

"I know," Mostin smiled sympathetically. "For what it’s worth, I think that compacting with Devils is unwise, but for different reasons than you. Shomei regards them as tools – I would argue that there are more efficient and less hazardous ones."


"Only in the hands of the weak," Mostin replied. "That’s not to say that I haven’t had my fair share of power fantasies, because I have. But they are aberrant."
Incomplete. It is an extension of the same ethos which informs the Great Injunction: the quest for power is ultimately futile, and is a misapplication of personal resources and energy."

"Knowledge, then?" The Paladin asked.

"Partly. But beyond gnosis, there are states so profound that there are no words to describe them. Why do gods, devils, demons - or whatever -meddle in human affairs?"

"I’m sure you’re going to tell me," Eadric said drily.

"They are afraid of us. They seek to limit and control us, Eadric. We threaten them, because we possess something which they do not: infinite potential."

"To become like them?"

Mostin shook his head. "To utterly transcend them."

"And magic is your vehicle in this process?"

"Magick. Yes."

"And what is this 'final state' which you aspire towards, Mostin? What is 'Metagnosis'?" Eadric was intrigued. He had never heard Mostin speak as openly and as coherently about his own philosophy before.

"You misunderstand," Mostin replied. "There is no 'final state.' There is only becoming. Infinite becoming."

"That is a somehow disquieting prospect," Eadric said.

"Yes," Mostin concurred. "It should be."

"I’m just glad that I don’t agree with a word that you’ve just said," Eadric smiled. Mostin shrugged.

"But what did the Devil offer?" Nwm asked. "I am curious."

"A Demiplane called 'Cha’at.' Not very large – around sixty miles across, or a hundred thousand cubic miles. But very nice: perfect elemental balance, one access point only, benign flora and fauna. It is comprised of an island surrounded by warm, shallow seas. There are olive groves, wild vines and sandstone hills – at present. All morphics are, in fact, alterable. And its temporal morphic is alterable, also."

"Immortality?" Nwm was incredulous. "Frankly, I’m surprised you didn’t take it. I’d have been sorely tempted."

"And his price?" Eadric asked.

"My loyalty. I am even more suspicious of open-ended deals with Devils than I am of those which contain ten pages of impenetrable small-print."

"You spoke of Shomei’s involvement with him being 'almost at an end.' What else is there to come?"
"She must facilitate a final translation for him," Mostin explained. "He will attempt another Temptation."

"Of you?" Nwm asked.

"No," Mostin replied. "The rules of the Accord are very strict. He may only attempt to seduce a single mortal once."

"'Accord?'" Eadric asked. "That is the second time I have heard that word in the past day. What Accord?"

Mostin screwed up his face. "Do you not know? Has Zhuel not told you?"

"Zhuel is not empowered to tell him," Nehael said, entering the chamber unexpectedly, "and despite his holiness has an incomplete understanding of the truth. Temptation is the lawfully deputed province of Devils, Eadric. It is an enterprise blessed by Oronthon himself."

"That is rather a Heretical viewpoint," the Paladin said, "although not entirely a surprise to me, given the number of other revelations that I have had to accept. I need ‘official’ verification, of course."

Nehael raised an eyebrow. She had expected more resistance to the idea. His passivity to Oronthon’s Will seemed complete. She would inform Rintrah.

"It goes beyond a tacit understanding, Eadric. There are formal rules, which Devils never break – although they constantly attempt to reinterpret them. They play by the book. Demons are less observant of the rules, and while the Bright God tolerates their machinations, he does not sanction them. The difference is vitally important." She smiled.

Eadric grimaced. "I assume that this Duke’s final Temptation will be directed towards me?"

"That would be my guess, also," Mostin nodded.

"When should I expect it?" The Paladin asked.

"When it is hardest to decline," Nehael replied.

**

Ortwin reclined against the bole of a tree in the afternoon sun after a particularly passionate bout of cavorting with Hlioth, the Green Witch. She had organized the weather to their mutual satisfaction, replacing dreary grey clouds with a warm, balmy sunshine. Despite his physical satiation, Ortwin was frustrated.

"I’m bored," the Bard said. "With life," he added quickly afterwards, so as to not offend her. "Ennui. Dissatisfaction. That kind of thing. Little seems to grab my attention these days."

"Of course you’re bored," she said unhelpfully. "You’re a Fey. Ennui and melancholy are the perpetual bane of Feys."
"I mean I was bored before," he said. "I have no sense of purpose or direction. No inspiration. No goals to pursue. No great plan towards which I work. I feel listless."

"You are a selfish cynic. What do you expect?"

"Hmph," Ortwin sighed. She was being less than sympathetic. "You seem content enough to have no ambition. What’s your secret?"

"Simple," Hlioth replied. "I just have no ambition. It’s not something that I cultivate, or try to maintain. It’s just the way I am. There is nothing missing from me."

"And there is from me?" Ortwin asked, somewhat offended.

"Your words, not mine," she countered. "Is there no cause to which you can attach yourself? No movement for you to champion? Have you considered religion?"

"Certainly not," the Bard replied.

"Politics? The military?"

"Gods, no. The thought is abhorrent."

"Then I am afraid that your existence is doomed to be shallow and unfulfilled, unless you can come to realize that ambition itself is futile. If you can accept this, then you will begin to appreciate a simple, uncomplicated life."

"You sound disturbingly like Nwm," Ortwin said.

"Nwm is wise," Hlioth laughed easily.

"He regards you as – eccentric," Ortwin replied. "Neither a witch nor a druidess."

She shrugged. "I have no great desire to fit in."

"How old are you, Hlioth?" Ortwin asked.

"Why? How old are you?" She replied.

"Forty-four," he replied, "or at least I was forty-four before my, uh..."

"Transmigration?" She suggested.

"Yes, quite," said the Bard.

"Then I am older than you," Hlioth said vaguely.

"There is a rumour that you are immortal," Ortwin said. "Is it true?"

"How should I know? I’m not dead yet. You, however should certainly have a long life – providing that you are careful, of course."

"What do you mean?" The Bard asked suspiciously.

"Put it this way, dear: have you ever heard of a Fey dying of old age?"
"No, I suppose not," he conceded. "Then what kills them?"

"Melancholy. Ennui. The lack of will to go on." And Hlioth looked profoundly sad.

"Great," Ortwin said sarcastically. "Thanks for the optimistic words."

"Oh, snap out of it Ortwin! Stop being so self-indulgent. You have a perspective that no other Fey I know has – in that you are not entirely a Fey at all. Play to your strengths. Be less self-centered." She sighed. "What excites you most?"

"Women. Sword-play. Witty banter. That’s the problem. I’m eminently shallow."

"Are you satisfied with your fencing style?" Hlioth asked.

"I had been, until my encounter with Iua," Ortwin replied. "She is a genius. I am merely exceptional."

"But you are less..." Hlioth considered..."overspecialized. Do you resent the fact that she is a woman?"

"No," the Bard replied honestly. "I resent her because she is far better than me at something which I have always felt I am very good at."

"Do you find her attractive?" Hlioth asked unexpectedly.

Ortwin peered quizzically at her. What was she up to? "I am suspicious of your motivation in asking that question," he said.

"That is because you don’t understand me, Ortwin of Jiuhu. I do not care for rivalry. I am Hlioth – and I am utterly free."

"In that case, yes. I find her attractive."

"Have you made advances towards her?" The Green Witch probed.

"Not exactly," Ortwin said. "I have had lustful thoughts, and, unfortunately, she perceived them. Look, Hlioth, I don’t know where this line of inquiry is going. Would you please enlighten me?"

"Think about it Ortwin: she is your ideal match. She is a beautiful woman. She is bold, restless, and confident. She is your equal, if not your superior, in wit and badinage. She is a performer whose abilities compare favourably to your own. She is also perhaps one of the greatest living practitioners of the Thalassine rapier style and, like you, needs a focus. Unlike you, however, she is not cynical and has not forgotten her idealism. Her mother is an Evoker of singular power, her father is a Djinn prince..."

"A prince?" Ortwin asked. "Since when?"

"Several hundred years at least, I’d guess," Hlioth said drily. "Did you never think to inquire about Ulao?"

"She is reluctant to discuss her parentage. I didn’t want to press her. Is he rich?"

"Fabulously, I’d imagine," Hlioth sighed, "if such things are important to you."
"Money is never a bad thing," the Bard remarked.

"Hmm," Hlioth grunted. "The opposite is true in my experience. Has she evinced any romantic interest?"

"Not in me," Ortwin said, smiling. "Which is, in my humble view, a sign of madness or aberration in itself."

"An interest in anyone else?"

"Not to my knowledge," Ortwin said. "Perhaps she is very discreet."

"Or perhaps she is waiting for you to show a sign of your interest. Why else would she be still here? Why do you think that she crossed swords with you, if it were not to test your suitability as a potential mate?"

"Do you have to make it sound quite so functional? I have delicate sensibilities, and am easily upset. In any case, she seemed quite comfortable humiliating me in our duel – I suspect that that was her main motivation."

"Goddess, you are a cynic, Ortwin!" Hlioth said. "Maybe she needed to assert herself and her independence. It must have been difficult for her to confront you. She may be somewhat in awe of you. I think that you underestimate your reputation."

"I never underestimate my reputation." Ortwin grinned. "But the point is well-made. However, my hirsuteness and hooves may be an obstacle to any romantic entanglement now. Besides, she can be a spoiled brat. I think she has been indulged too much, and is too used to getting her own way."

Hlioth shrugged. "Think on it. In any case, I am returning to Nizkur later today, but fear not! We still have time for dalliance. I’ve ordered a lightning storm. I thought it might be stimulating."

Ortwin gazed upwards. The clear blue sky had vanished during their conversation, to be replaced again with an impenetrable grey veil. A huge thunderhead was forming above them.

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Ortwin never thought about anything for too long.

"I want a rematch," the Bard said to Iua. She was performing improbable acts of balance, in the meadow next to Mostin’s manse.

Nwm, standing nearby with Eadric, grimaced. He knew what was coming next.

"If he is willing," the Bard continued, "Nwm will..."

"Yes, yes," the Druid said. "Patch up the holes. I know. You must be insane, Ortwin."

"Not entirely. There are new rules. No magic is to be employed. No spells, potions, buffs. No thought-reading devices. No magic armour or protection devices. And no magic weapons. A test of skill, pure and simple. Scimitar against
rapier. Conventional armour is permissible to both parties, of course. Do you accept?"

"I find armour rather cumbersome," Iua replied. "Had you intended to wear field plate as an added precaution?"

Eadric guffawed.

Ortwin looked somewhat affronted. "I think a leather vest and buckler will suffice. Well? I hope you aren’t entirely dependent upon your Vampiric rapier, Iua. Because we both know, nobody is really that fast, are they?"

She bit her lip. "No," she confessed, "but you will still lose. Allow me an hour to prepare. I need to locate a suitable weapon."

"As do I," Ortwin said. "And there aren’t many Elves in these parts.*"

"What’s this about, Ortwin?" Nwm asked the Bard, after she had left to enter the house. "You know that she is better than you."

"Yes," Ortwin admitted. "But I need to know how much better she really is. How old would you say Iua is, Nwm?"


"What do you think of her?"

"She is remarkable, in every regard," Nwm replied. "Why?"

"I am considering courting her," Ortwin said.

"Courting?" Eadric asked, astounded. "That term seems somehow incongruous when it comes from your lips, Ortwin."

"Chivalry is a farce which any idiot can hide behind," the Bard said acidly, "but that is not what I am referring to. I simply intend to be thoughtful and reserved."

Eadric scratched his head. The whole world had suddenly gone mad. "Is this some springtime thing, Ortwin? Do Satyrs suffer from an imbalance in the humours when the blossom is on the trees?"

Nwm laughed heartily at the Bard, who looked mildly offended. "Besides," the Druid said, recovering, "I thought you had some arrangement with Hlioth."

Ortwin scowled.

"Hey," Nwm said defensively, "If you mess with the weather on my turf, don’t expect it to go unnoticed. I check that kind of thing out."

"You spied on us?"

"No, indeed. I was merely aware of your presence." The Druid tapped his torc. "Actually, it was Hlioth who suggested that I could do worse than pursue Iua."

"Hlioth is a crazy old witch," Nwm said. "Be careful of her."
"She is sensitive and caring, although a little strange, I'll admit," Ortwin said.

"In that she suggested that the best way to pursue Iua would be to try and lop her head off in a duel?" Eadric asked ironically.

"No. That was my idea, actually." Ortwin replied.


"Don't be so sarcastic, Ed. It doesn't become you. This is about the independence of the spirit – something which I really don't expect you to understand."

"Peace," Nwm said quickly, holding up his hand. "Time is moving on, and we have to find Ortwin a weapon. Eadric, do you have a scimitar in the armory at the Burgh?"

"Several. Tatterbrand knows where to look."

"And get me a buckler and a leather jerkin," Ortwin said.

Nwm nodded, stepped into a tree, and vanished.

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Tatterbrand rode hard from Kyrtill's Burgh to bring the scimitar to Ortwin, despite the fact that Nwm had offered to return with it. The squire was traditional that way.

"Anyone care to wager?" Mostin asked. "My money is on Iua."

Eadric coughed, and Nwm looked at the ground.

"Thanks for the support," Ortwin snipped.

Iua appeared bearing a small buckler and a rapier of fine quality, forged from good Thalassine steel.

"Where did you get that?" The Bard asked disconsolately.

"Er, it's mine," Mostin said apologetically. "I lent it to her. Don't worry – it isn't dweomered."

"Hmph," Ortwin grunted. "Shall we start at, say, twenty feet apart?"

Iua looked pointedly at Ortwin's hooves. "If you are trying to maximize your tactical advantage, you have just miscalculated," she said sarcastically. "Perhaps you would like to reconsider?"

"Twenty feet," Ortwin said through gritted teeth. Gods, she could be annoying. He drew the scimitar, and briefly inspected it. Good choice, Tatterbrand, he thought. It was of superior workmanship and, like other weapons kept in Eadric's armoury, well-honed and well-oiled.

Iua saluted him in a most condescending manner.
"I will give the sign for the fight to commence," Mostin announced grandly. "You will not fail to recognize it. If anyone would care to wager, now is your last chance."

"Oh very well," Nwm said. "Fifty crowns says that Ortwin lasts at least twenty-five seconds."

"Done!" Mostin said, delighted.

Ortwin squinted at the Druid, who looked back apologetically. Mostin gestured briefly and an enormous boom echoed across the meadow, causing the ground to tremble and chest cavities to vibrate.

Iua moved like a liquid. In a heartbeat, she dashed forwards two paces, launched herself into the air, curled into a ball, span the remaining distance and landed squarely in front of the Bard.

His mouth opened in disbelief as her rapier instantly found a gap in the leather vest that he wore, and cold steel bit into him. As he reeled, Ortwin expected her momentum to carry her onwards, but somehow she had arrested it. Her weapon was everywhere. Again.

"Remarkable," Mostin said in wonder. "And to consider that she is unaugmented. Do you think she might be the best living practitioner?"

"It’s hard to say," Tatterbrand replied. "The rapier is not my forté, and there are many different styles. Although for sheer speed, I’ve yet to see her match. But rapier and buckler is actually considered a rather old-fashioned technique these days in Fumaril."

Mostin looked quizzical.

"You know. Main gauche, rapier and cloak, rapier and scabbard. It’s all the rage."

"Oh," Mostin said.

"Look at Ortwin, though," Tatterbrand pointed. "He’s actually very good."

The Bard had adopted a considered pose, with a thoughtful expression upon his face. He wondered whether he could wear Iua down: in terms of physical stamina, and the sheer ability to withstand the blows, he suspected that he outranked her. He was also beginning to realize that having a hairy hide had certain benefits: her last blow, although penetrating both his guard and his armour, had failed to break his skin.

Abruptly, his scimitar lashed out furiously, causing the girl to move to block it. She misread it, the Bard dove and twisted, and the blade bit into the girl’s arm in a single, well-placed strike. He grinned.

"It’s also worth considering that Ortwin is a far better bullsh*tter than she is," Tatterbrand remarked. "She will now adopt a different tactic. Observe."

Iua assumed the impenetrable screening position which had vexed Ortwin during their first exchange, causing the Bard to grimace in recognition. He held his scimitar tightly as he anticipated her next maneuver.

Tap—oh no you don’t—tap—no—tap—no. Hah! Ortwin was amazed to see that
he still held onto his weapon. Iua pouted and then looked more determined.

Deciding that a different strategy might be in order, and aware that her screen was near invulnerable to attack, Ortwin suddenly turned, erupted into a burst of speed, and galloped away from Iua, his hooves taking him out to a distance of eighty feet. He threw down his buckler and gripped his scimitar in both hands.

As Ortwin turned, his weapon held in front of him, the pose made Mostin feel distinctly uncomfortable, reminding him of a certain Duke of Hell.**

"Sound tactics, Ortwin," Nwm called from the sidelines. "Hang onto your sword."

"Yes, run away Ortwin," Iua goaded him as she walked calmly towards him. "Trot off into the woods." She smiled wickedly, and then gestured provocatively for him to charge her.

Ortwin charged, covering over sixty feet of open ground with remarkable speed, his scimitar flailing wildly above his head. He thundered into Iua but despite his blow, she held her ground.

_Tap_-not this time, I've got two hands on it – _tap_ – _slide_ – _twist_ – _flick_. Dammit. The scimitar dropped to the ground, and Iua stabbed him twice in the thigh for good measure. Ortwin winced.

"Alright, that's it," he snarled. "I've had enough of this."

Iua expected a headbutt, and was surprised to find Ortwin groping at her rapier. She stabbed him in the arm.

"Ow!" He said as his hands closed around the hilt of her sword.

"That's cheap," Mostin said to Eadric.

"But effective," Eadric observed, as Ortwin wrested the slender blade from her grasp and poked at her with it.

"Do you give up?" Ortwin asked, gripping the rapier in both hands.

"Are you nuts?" Iua replied. "I could beat you blindfolded. Besides, look at you."

Ortwin noticed that he was bleeding from half a dozen different wounds. He suddenly felt very weak.

Iua crouched, drew a slender poignard, and grinned. "You were better off with your scimitar," she said. "I'll tell you what, I'll let you retrieve it, and I'll use this. Won't make a scrap of difference to the final outcome, but you might save some face."

"Don't be so damned patronizing," Ortwin complained. "A little modesty would sit well on you."

Iua goggled at the irony of the comment. "Coming from anyone but you, Ortwin, I might heed that remark."

The Bard gave his best charming smile. "I concede the bout. Again. Mostin, pay up. Eadric, thank-you for the loan of the sword. Is there any firewine nearby?"
Iua walked up to the Bard. "What, exactly, is this about Ortwin?"

"I thought I might court you, with your consent."

"You have an odd way of suggesting it," she countered.

"I recognize that your fragile ego needs to be nurtured and supported," the Bard remarked drily.

"I have no objection," she said in a matter-of-fact way. "But of course, you will need my father's permission. He is rather traditional in that regard. Besides, what happened to the Green Witch?"

Ortwin groaned.

Later that same evening, when everyone else had retired, Eadric sat by the fire with his hounds in the hall at Kyrtill’s Burgh.

When Rintrah appeared, and told him what had to be done, his stomach sank.

"Do you doubt?" The Planetar asked him.

"Yes," Eadric replied. "My ability, not Oronthon’s judgement."

"That is acceptable," Rintrah replied.

"And I fear the machinations of fiends," the Paladin said.

The Celestial laughed openly and warmly. "I’m afraid that will never change," he smiled.

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It was a wet, grey morning in late spring when Eadric ordered that the horns be sounded, and he rode with his captains and paladins across the bridge at Hartha Keep to parley with Brey. He did not bear the message that he had originally intended.

He took thirty men with him, including Nwm, Tramst, the Penitents who had sworn loyalty to him in the aftermath of the battle at Deorham, Thanes Streek and Togull, and the Uediian Ryth of Har Kumil. Jorde, formally of the Temple, bore Eadric’s banner – a three headed silver phoenix on an azure field.*** Tatterbrand rode close behind the Paladin.

The bridge – Aaki’s Bridge, as it was named – was ancient. A vestige of Old Borchia, the state which predated Wyre, it was a weathered, moss-covered affair which had improbably stood the test of both time and the numerous inundations of the river. A long causeway led up to it from both the eastern and western sides, elevating the road above an uninviting bog, before the track narrowed and traversed the dilapidated cantilevers of the span itself.

At exactly the midpoint, alerted by the horns which had rung from Hartha Keep, a contingent of Templars waited patiently for Eadric to arrive with his knights. The
river, still swollen by the thaw and the spring rains, coursed rapidly below, only a few feet beneath the peak of its arches. It carried driftwood with it, and foamed and gurgled around the stone pilons.

Eadric evinced some surprise at the group waiting for him, the more so when they sounded their horns indicating that they were an embassy. He had expected a more belligerent reception, and wondered whether new orders had issued from Morne regarding the means by which Brey should deal with him. As they closed, Nwm spoke with him.

"Brey is there. Should I leave? I think he holds little love for me."

"He probably wonders why he is still alive," Eadric said ironically. "Please refrain from killing everybody except him – this is an embassy, after all."

"You don't understand why I did what I did, do you Ed?" Nwm asked.

"I am beginning to," the Paladin replied unexpectedly. "I understand that you did what you thought was necessary."

"But was it?"

"It is easy to make judgements with hindsight," Eadric replied. "Would you do it again, if events repeated themselves?"

"That question is meaningless," Nwm answered.

"Precisely," the Paladin agreed.

"I could win this war alone," Nwm pointed out. "Break the Temple. Obliterate it. I have only recently come to understand that."

"And gain what?"

"Nothing that would endure after me," Nwm said sadly. "How are you going to deal with this idiot, anyway?"

"Not how he - or even you - expects," Eadric replied.

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"That’s quite far enough, Heretic," Brey shouted at a distance of around thirty yards. "You can bring Tahl the Corrupted with you, but the other pagans and blasphemers can stay where they are."

Several of the Penitents were almost overcome with zeal, and prepared to spur their destriers into a charge. Eadric restrained them, before riding on alone with Tahl.

Nwm carefully considered the sky, and felt reassured that he had already primed it, just in case he needed to blast anyone.

"Greetings, Lord Brey," Eadric said politely, and without rancour. "I trust you are well?"

"What is the purpose of this parley?" The Templar asked haughtily.
"I’ve come to see if you’re amenable to negotiations," Eadric replied. "I’m surprised that you’re even talking to me. Has the policy in Morne towards Trempa changed?"

"The Temple staunchly defends Orthodoxy in all of Wyre," Brey answered.

"Yes, quite," Eadric sighed.

"Unless you are prepared to atone for your sins, and accompany me to Morne for judgement, I doubt that there is little common ground here. Is that your purpose?"

"No." Eadric said. "But there are words that I would have you convey to your superiors in the Curia. First, I hereby assume the titles of Grand Master of the Temple and Inquisitor General, as both posts are currently vacant. Second, I demand that all Temple troops and resources be surrendered to me until the new Prelate is invested and ascends the throne. Third, I will enter Morne in one month. Please make the necessary preparations."

Brey laughed uproariously. "This is no embassy, it’s a farce." He turned his horse and began to ride away.

"This is your final opportunity, Brey," Eadric called after him sadly. "I doubt death will spare you a third time."

The Templar ignored him.

"So be it," Tahl said grimly.

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*In the Wyre game, the scimitar replaces the longsword as the quintessential Elven weapon.

**Dan pointed out the picture of Titivilus in the 1e Monster Manual II.

***This device was adopted by Eadric after his return from the wilderness and his meeting with Rintrah. Symbolically, the phoenix of course represents rebirth, but it is also the ‘higher octave’ of the Eagle – the traditional symbol of Oronthon. One head looks left towards Law, one right towards Good, and the third straight ahead, representing the synthesis of the two principles through the dialectic of insight.

POST 2:

Posted by: Sepuichrave II at ENWorld on 19th September 2002, 08:44 PM

Okay, time for another update. I had hoped to continue on a 1 post = 1 session basis, but that seems too ambitious.
First, some answers. I'm trying to be conscientious:

MasterOfHeaven wrote wrt Oronthon:

Quote:
Still, he's definitely not LG.

Maybe in your campaign he wouldn't be. Alignment debates are largely futile, as the individual DM decides the defining characteristics of each Alignment to suit his or her own campaign style.

Glad you removed the assertion about OT Yahweh, though. That was kind of inflammatory.

Warrior Poet asked:

Quote:
Are you a scholar of Blake?

I am a fan of Blake. I love his work, but I am certainly not a scholar.

linnorm asked:

Quote:
You said that the updates will be less frequent, any idea what the frequency will be?

Probably no more than 1/week.

BiggusGeekus asked:

Quote:
It would seem at some point that Mostin's and Eadric's cosmologies would bump heads. Yet they co-exist? Or is one wrong, in the sense that one can be "wrong" in these matters?

Absolutely no absolutism!

tleilaxu pointed out that

Quote:
Mulissu has 1 level of cleric.

Early in her career, she was an acolyte of Jeshi - a local elemental goddess worshipped in Fumaril.

rackabello asked:

Quote:
I'd like to ask a question or two about the setting: Gnomish artisans made a brief appearance, and elves have been mentioned -- what of the other humanoid races? Are there dwarves, halflings, and half-orcs in your campaign?
Do you use the Sorceror class in your game? All of the arcanists who've so far appeared in the story seem to be wizards.

No halflings or half-orcs. Or orcs, for that matter. There is no 'integrated society' of humanoids - mostly, I use feys and folkloric monsters (goblins, giants, dragons etc.) - excepting extraplanars. They seldom appear in the story. The Wyre Game is very 'humanocentric.'

Sorcerers exist, but they are marginal to society. Hedge-witches, purveyors of charms, that kind of thing.

grodog asked:

Quote:
That's a good question, come to think of it, Sep: what's your writing process, from game/inspiration through to posting. Do you take extensive notes, ad lib the dialogue, etc.?

I've tried everything - taking notes, recording sessions on audiotape, picking the players' brains afterwards etc. I try to keep the ad lib to a minimum, but I can always recall the tenor and context of comments, even if I don't remember words verbatim.

I think that's everything. I'll probably trim this thread brutally in the near future.

Sooo...

---------------------------------------

Soraine mused.
"I thought that you had decided upon a 'softly, softly' approach," she said to Eadric. "This hardly seems consistent with it."

"That had been the initial plan," Eadric agreed, "but Rintrah commanded a more direct tact."

"In which case," Soraine replied, "I should relinquish control to you formally – if you think you can handle the nobility of Trempa."

"Fewer of them have doubts now, and the ones that do are less distrusting and intractable. Although it will prove difficult. I have already required Ryth to bring his skirmishers south to join the main force."

"It will leave the northern flank vulnerable to assault from Thahan. I am reluctant to..."

"I will ask Nwm to deal with it," Eadric said simply. "Besides – we cannot have him present and active in the main force. It would be too controversial, and would give an unwelcome slant to what is essentially an internal Temple affair."

Soraine was staggered. "You need him with you. Even if you displace the Temple troops across the river – which is by no means certain – if the royal army is
deployed against you, he is your best assurance against defeat. And any attempt that you make to woo Tagur’s sympathies now is likely to be met with hostility: you may have lost a potential ally, there."

"It can’t be helped," Eadric shrugged. "I have been instructed to march on Morne as soon as is feasible. The Bishop of Kaurban is interceding on our behalf with the Duke – Tahl has spoken with him. He has always been sympathetic to our cause."

But Soraine shook her head. "The Bishop has been neutered by this whole affair. He has little temporal power left. I can’t believe that you told Brey of your intentions – a surprise assault would have been much more effective. Now they have time to prepare."

Eadric raised an eyebrow.

"Alright, forget I said that," the Duchess smiled. "But I find this whole enterprise to be very worrying. Even if you get as far as Morne, you still have to get into Morne."

"I am hoping for popular support," Eadric admitted ruefully. "If I only had the opportunity to speak with people..."

"I fear the common man will view you as simply another potential oppressor."

"I was thinking of speaking more to the Temple troops, actually," Eadric explained. "I may be able to turn large numbers of them towards our cause. Brey is misliked. Mellon, Rede, Irian and Hembur are all dead. Rumours are abroad of the encounter with Eniin at Deorham, and the Templars who have rallied to me are well-respected..."

"I suspect that the view amongst many is that you have seduced them. There is also the matter of Rede’s assassination – Nwm is implicated, and thus, you."

"That is another reason why he may not accompany me in this," Eadric sighed. "Tahl is investing me as Grand Master of the Temple tomorrow morning."

"That may be a hollow title," the Duchess remarked drily. "I don’t imagine it will carry too much weight – he could anoint you as Oronthon incarnate, for all that it’s worth. A name is worth little without the resources to back it."

Eadric shrugged. "I have been restrained for long enough. It is time to assert my spiritual authority. It will not be easy – I still have doubts about my abilities."

"That, at least, is reassuring," Soraine laughed. "I will summon the nobility. It’s time that we met in conference again – and all should be present for the ceremony. When did you plan to lead the assault?"

"In four or five days," Eadric answered. "I will attempt to speak to Tagur again in the interim."

Soraine raised an eyebrow. "Good luck," she said.

*

As a clear dawn broke the next morning, before the assembled aristocracy of
Trempa, Eadric took oaths and was blessed by Tahl. He assumed the titular command both the Temple and the Inquisition, and chose the unassuming title of ’First Magistrate’ for the unprecedented dual leadership. He also reclaimed the title of ’Protector of the Nineteen Tenets,’ which had been stripped from him at his trial.

In a second ceremony, which followed shortly afterwards, Soraine conferred the estates of Hernath and Droming upon the Paladin, appointed him the chief of her comitati – those knights, thanes and bannermen sworn to her service – and raised him to the rank of Earl. He was ceded absolute command of Trempa’s forces. This was a formality as far as Eadric was concerned, although Soraine’s legitimacy was unquestioned in the eyes of those present – unlike Tahl’s.

But before the day was out, in a development which left Eadric feeling extremely uncomfortable, all such titles were forgotten. The Paladin did not determine the source – although he (wrongly) suspected one of the Penitents to have started it – but a new appellation was given to him: Ahma*. It spread quickly amongst the zealots, and was picked up by the more secular aristocrats and even the Uediians. Eadric attempted to have the name forbidden, but it was too late. To him, it verged on blasphemy. He spoke to Tahl, and the Inquisitor shrugged as if it were an inevitability. He related his concerns to Nehael.

"Actually, I began it," the demoness smiled.

"But why? It is a profanity."

"Applied to anyone else, perhaps. But you are an emissary. A vehicle. Your ego is of no concern. You are simply the agent of Oronthon’s will: nothing more, nothing less. Soraine said that you needed to exert your spiritual authority. You cannot do that in half measure, Ahma."

"Do not call me that," he snapped.

She slapped him. He winced. "See?" She said. "Don’t worry – you’re still a man."

**

"This is a development I could have done without," Eadric said to Nwm regarding his new name.

"Your modesty is becoming, Ed," Nwm said, "but this is a religious war. You’re bound to get some weird title or other foisted upon you, if you play the role of Oronthon’s chosen representative. Don’t worry about it."

"But I don’t feel I deserve it. It makes me uncomfortable."

"Good," Nwm said unsympathetically. "The moment that you feel happy about it, is the moment that you become crazy."

"I hope that you will continue to offer a critical perspective regarding all of this, Nwm. It’s good to look from the outside in. Let me know if things are going too far. I can’t believe that Nehael started it."

"She has an expanded perspective," Nwm grinned. "Trust her. And you may count on my brutal objectivity."
"She talks of surrender. Of forgetting my ego. Of agency." Eadric sighed.

"What do you expect?" Nwm laughed. "She is a mystic. She is also, of course, correct. Relax, Ed. Let go of your concerns. Let it – whatever it is - *flow* through you. Forget your own judgements and preconceptions. Zhuel can be your guide in this. It is actually ridiculously simple."

Eadric sighed. "I've recalled Ryth's longbowmen. I need you to sort out the Temple troops in northern Trempa. Can you deal with it?"

"Yes, but..."

"I cannot have you with me, Nwm. It compromises my position too much."

"I understand that," the Druid said. "It's hard, though."

"I will take Nehael, if she is willing – assuming that's alright with you."

"She is a free agent," Nwm laughed. "I have no authority over her. It is a good choice: she is an able counsellor."

"It seems appropriate that she should be present in whatever transpires," Eadric explained. "After all, this whole mess started with her. Did you know that she is in contact with Rintrah?"

"She mentioned as much to me," the Druid admitted. "I trust her implicitly, but her motives are quite unfathomable. She seems equally comfortable dealing with the Goddess, and most of the Uedians are willing to defer to her authority in matters religious. I think she works to preserve openness and communication – in all of its forms – more than anything else. She spoke to me of a 'Middle Way.'"

"With regard to what?" The Paladin asked.

"Everything?" Nwm suggested. "Who knows? She is eight billion years old, and has a lot of experience to draw upon. She foresees ends which we cannot. Are you still, you know...?" The Druid waved his hands vaguely.

"I don't know," Eadric mused. "I haven't really thought about that for quite some time. And at the moment, it seems like a bit of an unnecessary distraction. Before you head north, I need you to take me to Gibilrazen – I'm going to try talking with Prince Tagur again."

"Tact or honesty?" Nwm asked.

"The latter, unfortunately," Eadric said.

"Be careful. I doubt he'll appreciate any threats."

"No more equivocating. It's time to act decisively."

"There you are," Nwm jibed. "Being the Breath of God is easy. You don't mind if we drop in on a friend of mine on the way, do you?"

Eadric looked puzzled.

"Yes, *Ahma*, even I have friends," Nwm said sarcastically. "Hullu. I need to keep
 abreast of his progress. And you should meet him – he may be a potential ally."

**

"You can use this," Iua said to Mostin, giving him a plain silver ring. "It used to belong to him."

The Alienist grunted. "Very well. Normally, of course, I would demand a fee..."

"Oh just hurry up and do it, Mostin," Ortwin interrupted. "I thought we'd got beyond all of the ‘fees for this’ and ‘fees for that’ business."

"We have," Mostin agreed, "but it doesn’t hurt to remind people once in a while of my generosity and magnanimity."

The Alienist clasped the ring in his hand, and stood before the looking-glass of Urm-Nahat, invoking its powerful magic yet again. The mist upon its surface – eerie and supernatural – gradually gave way to clouds which appeared more natural in origin. Wisps broke in them, to reveal a sky of such bright, perfect azure that Mostin had to squint. There was no sun, but the air seemed to glow with an inner light.

Ortwin gasped in wonder. The scene before him was utterly fabulous: a vast island of rock, suspended in mid air, supporting a city constructed entirely of white marble. Towers and pinnacles stretched high into the sky, and domed roofs glistened with silver and gold. Gardens and orchards of fruit trees grew in profusion: each, apparently, meticulously nurtured and tended. Water ran freely through pristine aqueducts, and accumulated in pools and open cisterns.

"What is this place?" Ortwin marvelled. He felt that he had been missing something for both of his lives.

"It is called Magathei," Iua replied. "It is Ulao’s capitol. Around ten thousand Djinn live there – but it is not the largest of their cities on the Plane of Air by some way."

"I have visited Kalkinassus," Mostin bragged. "This is a backwater compared to that place. I first met Mulissu there."

"And attempted to seduce her?" Iua asked archly.

"Mostin!" Ortwin said with mock gravity. "I didn't know that you were capable. And she rejected your advances? Inconceivable!"

"Yes. Quite." Mostin agreed, perfectly seriously. "I will accompany you, if that is acceptable – a day or two here will make for a pleasant outing. And there are a variety of interesting inhabitants. It may be worth my while."

"What can the Djinn offer you?" Ortwin asked.

"Not just Djinn," Iua explained. "Elementals, Mephits, Sylphs, Aerial Servants, Stalkers, Vortices, Arrowhawks and Wind-Walkers. Wizards and sorcerers from who-knows-where. Not to mention Auran analogues of every creature that you can conceive of – and more. And creatures from other Elemental Planes. It is a very cosmopolitan city."
"I always thought the Djinn were rather parochial," Ortwin mused. "That is good news: I assume your father's progressiveness extends to his daughter's potential suitors?"

"Hmm," Iua sighed sceptically. "In any case, do not attempt flight with your boots whilst there – you will be ridiculed. A gift of some kind would be appropriate – overt displays of generosity are well received. Be tolerant of unusual customs. And you should be aware of my name."

Iua pronounced a long string of sibilants and aspirated syllables.

"Iua is easier," Ortwin remarked.

"Ulao will simply call me one-eight-six. He has many children."

"But you are the only non-Djinn?"

"Gods, no," Iua replied. "I've got elemental, half-elemental, half-celestial, half-fiendish and every other conceivable kind of bastard sibling. Ulao is quite undiscriminating in his lust."

Ortwin nodded. At least they had that in common.

"Wait," Mostin remembered. "I must get my hat."

**

"Damn, Nwm, how many does he have here," Eadric was astounded.

"More than when I last visited," Nwm said, equally surprised. "And that was only a fortnight ago."

Within seconds of their materialization from a vaporous state, the Paladin and the Druid were surrounded by dozens of men and women of all ages, mostly – Eadric noted – of the same racial group to which Nwm belonged.** They bore spears, bows and swords. Several were wearing chainmail shirts of Thalassine construction, others were clad in studded armour or hauberks looted from Temple troops and men-at-arms.

Nwm quickly held up a hand. "Peace. I am Nwm, the Preceptor. This is Eadric of Deorham. I seek Hullu." The Druid quickly realized that he recognized only one or two faces from his previous visit.

Their reaction made Nwm nervous. Some were suspicious, whilst others were confused – their awe of the Druid offset by what they considered to be the enemy in their midst: Eadric. Whatever the Paladin's own leanings he was, in the final analysis, a Templar from their viewpoint. And many of them lacked the broader political perspective which may have made them more understanding. Trempa was two hundred miles away, and the troubles there had had little direct bearing on the situation of those present.

A woman in her early thirties, with a face worn with concern stepped forwards. She wore a byrnie of blackened mail, and in her hand she carried a powerful horn
bow. She was girt with a bastard sword with aristocratic motifs on its scabbard – no doubt plundered from an unsuspecting Temple knight.

"I am Tarva," she said assertively. "Hullu is not present. He has mentioned you, Nwm. How may I help?" Her manner was cold.

"I wished to discuss strategy and progress with him," Nwm said easily.

"That will not be possible," Tarva replied. "He is briefing a mission. Is there anything else?"

Nwm was mildly irked by her attitude, but hid it. "Then I should like to speak with you, Tarva," he said.

"Not while the Templar is present," she said, turning away.

*This has to be resolved immediately*, Nwm thought. "That was not a request, Tarva," he said icily.

She turned back to face him. "By what authority do you command me – or any of us here – Nwm?" She said bitterly. "I have yet to see you suffer at the hands of the Temple. I have yet to see your support for us, beyond striking the enemy when and where your whim dictates. You cannot be depended upon."

"No, I will not be depended upon," Nwm snapped. "Do you think I should raze Morne for you, Tarva? Obliterate the Temple? Replace it with a grove of trees? I have more to consider than your immediate needs. My responsibility is to future generations. *Do you not think that I have considered all of this?*" His tone was one of exasperation.

"Then why did you begin all of this?" She gestured around at the stockade, the smithy, the dozens who were flocking to hear the exchange.

"To empower you," he smiled ruefully. "A little too effectively, it would seem. This is Eadric of Deorham, as I said. Have you heard of him?"

Tarva nodded. "The Heretic Templar with the Demon concubine."

Eadric coughed.

"He may be our best hope for a solution to this situation." Nwm explained "He plans to disestablish the Church, and remove taxation. *All* taxation – not just of Uediians."

"A reformer?" Tarva said sarcastically. "Big deal! Five hundred years of oppression aren't going to be removed by a few tax breaks. Uediians farm the most marginal land. They form the majority of indentured workers. There are five times as many Uediian tenant farmers as there are Oronthonian, but they only comprise a third of the population. Work it out!"

"I agree," Eadric said unexpectedly. "I will take an oath, here and now, that every Uediian household in Wyre will be compensated. I will empty the Temple coffers to achieve this."

Hmm, he thought. I hadn't planned to make that commitment.

"Promises are easily made," Tarva growled.
"I do not lie," Eadric said.

"I do not trust you," Tarva groaned. "I am tempted to have you captured and bound. You would fetch a fine ransom."

"You would fail," Eadric said in a matter-of-fact way, shaking his head. "There is no man in Wyre who can withstand me in arms."

"I could," Hullu grinned, walking into the middle of the group. "Although, obviously, I'd prefer to avoid the demonstration. Greetings, Nwm – it's good to see you again. I regret that the ale is still not ready, although we have mead, now. I am honoured, Eadric. Nwm seems to trust you - which is a rare thing in this dirty world – and therefore I am inclined to too."

Eadric glanced down, and his stomach turned. He had all but forgotten the sword, but there it was, hanging from the hip of the Tunthi tribesman.

"Don’t worry," Hullu said, following his eyes. "She is firmly under control. I had thought about renaming her ‘Merriment’ or ‘Exuberance’ – after all, Melancholy is such a depressing name."

She? Nwm thought.

**

"You have achieved a great deal here, Hullu," Eadric said. "And in a very short period of time."

The Tribesman nodded. "Resistance is relatively easy to organize amongst the hopelessly disenfranchised," he pointed out drily. "But I am regarded as a kind of cingetomaru in their speech– a war leader, only. My customs mean that I suspect I will never be fully accepted."

"But you are mastering the old tongue quickly," Nwm said. "Your inflexion is close to perfect."

"I have a knack for languages," Hullu smiled. He grunted. "Don’t be discouraged by Tarva, Nwm. She is a radical – even amongst these people. Most still regard you favourably."

"I admit that I am surprised that you have bestowed so much power on one so controversial."

"I’d rather have her close to me, than undermining me," Hullu explained. "Besides, she has remarkable energy and natural leadership skills – it is better to channel that ability than repress it. And she possesses political savvy."

Eadric nodded. This man was intriguing. Much more than a simple warrior. "How much strength can you field?" He asked.

"From this camp, three hundred who are at least reasonably competent," he said. "But there are other cells establishing themselves – I admit that we reached capacity here more quickly than I had anticipated."
"And altogether?" Nwm asked.

"Close to a thousand, perhaps," Hullu replied carefully. "Even I am not sure of exact numbers. You have sown the wind, Nwm. It didn’t take much."

The Druid shifted uneasily, and wondered whether he should assume a more active role before things ran away from him. "How do you feed them, Hullu?"

"I finally acquiesced to Tarva’s desire to raid Oronthonian farmsteads," he admitted, but added quickly, "but only the largest and wealthiest ones. And not to the point of destituting the owners. I am merely skimming some of the fat off."

"That tendency may get out of hand," Eadric pointed out. "If you set a precedent for it, it will become stretched by need and spurious logic."

"They are more disciplined than you give them credit for," Hullu replied. "But the forest alone cannot support them – unless they spend all day hunting, of course. And boar are getting scarce in these parts." He grimaced. "We’ve messed up the balance of nature already, Nwm. It is an inevitable compromise, but it doesn’t mean that I hate it any less."

The Druid nodded sympathetically. "Then you should move, before things get worse. Although your defenses here..."

Hullu laughed. "I can erect a stockade in two days, Nwm. That is no concern. It is the beer that worries me. I have already considered it: I will leave a skeleton garrison here, a store of provisions, and move the bulk of the bagaudas to a new site. It should also give the forest time to recover here."

"Where will you go?" Eadric asked.

"Eastwards. Maybe four or five days. The land beyond the forest is richer there, although more populous."

"Towards Morne?"

"Towards Morne," Hullu replied.

*Without getting too heavily into Oronthonian theology, the name can be roughly translated as "Breath of God." It also has metaphysical associations which are similar to Sophia or Logos or Shabda in RL religion. The first syllable is pronounced as in German ‘acht,’ ‘machen’ etc.

**These people are the descendants of the Crixi, one of the first racial groups to inhabit Wyre, before Old Borchia was founded. Although great individual variety exists, and bloodlines are much confused with later migrating groups, typical Uedians possess sufficient different features to distinguish them from Oronthonians in Wyre. Descendants of later migrants are taller, have fairer complexions and tend to be rather more slender. Nwm and Eadric conform quite closely to their respective racial stereotypes.
PO
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ST
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3:

Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 25th September 2002, 06:56 PM

Quote:

Hey, I missed the whole b-day thing. When was it Sep?

It was Sunday - but don't worry, I'm having another party tonight I'm stringing this one out for as long as possible...

This update is the second half of the previous post - as I said, I wanted to do a 1 update = 1 session thing, but it's just too much. When taken with the last post, you'll probably realise just how much happened during that session - it was a very intense, 6-hour affair.

So, without further ado...

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By the time that Nwm and Eadric reached Gibilrazen – a mere two hours after leaving Hullu - events had already moved quickly.

They were not to the Paladin’s liking. Knights and soldiers were mustering both inside and outside of the gates.

Eadric remained airborne and vaporous above the Prince’s palace, whilst the Druid descended into the courtyards in the form of a crow in order to glean what information he could. When he returned, an hour later, he related his findings to the Paladin.

"News of your claim of the Temple leadership is already current amongst the aristocracy," Nwm explained. "There are several Wizards present – one is called Dauntun. He has been engaged by Tagur to act as a messenger between here and Morne. I suspect that he is acting in the same ‘auxiliary capacity’ as Mostin is. Apparently, he is a Diviner of high credentials."

"Where is Tagur?" Eadric asked.

"He is already en route to Morne," the Druid replied. "But even at his best speed, he can hardly come there in less than a week."

"I'm an idiot," Eadric groaned. "I should have suspected that the nobility had access to Divination magic – what's good for the goose, and all that. Aristocrats – especially the more secular ones like Tagur – certainly aren't going to balk at using Wizards in the same way that the Temple itself might. Every nobleman in Wyre is probably apprised of the situation by now."

"What next?" Nwm asked.

"We locate Tagur," Eadric replied. "When did he leave?"
"Yesterday morning," Nwm answered. "He shouldn’t be too hard to find."

So the duo sped eastwards again, although this time they stayed above the road, their eyes alert for signs of the Prince’s passage. Another hour passed, before they finally caught up with him. Only twenty knights rode with Tagur – all were lightly armed and riding coursers of great stamina in order to make the best time possible to Morne. The Prince’s device – a Golden Boar – floated in the wind above the troupe.

Eadric descended to the road ahead of them, rematerialized, and stood squarely in their path as they thundered towards him. He held up his hands in a gesture designed to make them arrest their gallop.

Tagur barked an order, and horses were spurred to greater speed. Swords sprang from scabbards, and lances were levelled: it was likely that at this distance that they hadn’t, in fact, recognized the Paladin. And they were taking no chances.

Oh, sh*t, Eadric thought. Still, he didn’t move. He made another gesture in the air with his hands, communicating with his ethereal guardian.

Abruptly, fifty yards ahead of him on the road, Zhuel manifested. The knights immediately became disordered: some veered away, some reigned in their horses, others - including Tagur – continued onwards.

The Archon sounded his trumpet. A single note of piercing clarity rang out.

Horses collapsed and men fell from their steeds – many struck with paralyzing awe. Tagur dropped to the ground, his bay courser overwhelmed by the sound. He landed unceremoniously in a puddle of mud.

Eadric walked forwards slowly, his armour bright in the afternoon sun. He spoke in a clear voice.

"I apologize for the demonstration, Prince Tagur. I hope neither you nor your men are too badly bruised. I need you to hear me out."

Nwm, perched nearby in the form of a hawk, shifted on his branch. Apparently, Ed wasn’t pulling any punches this time.

Tagur staggered to his feet. Over half of his men and around two thirds of the horses were immobilized, and of those six riders who remained in control of their faculties and their steeds, none were pressing forwards towards where Zhuel hovered in front of the Paladin. Several had expressions of either disbelief or religious terror upon their faces – it was difficult to determine which. Tagur himself, however, evinced no such awe.

"Deorham!" he thundered. "I am not impressed by your attempts to intimidate me. I don’t give a damn whether you invoke the entire celestial host in this matter. You are not marching into Morne without a fight."

Eadric remembered Tagur’s secular perspective, and wondered how best to proceed. The Prince was not an atheist – he simply did not recognize the overwhelming imperative of Oronthon’s will. It was not relevant to his political viewpoint.

"What can I say, your Highness? I wish to minimize or avoid unnecessary bloodshed in this matter. I would have you return to Gibilrazen and demobilize
your troops."

"How dare you?" Tagur asked, walking forwards. "You have no authority over me in this. You will not dictate to me how I should best determine the defense of Wyre. There is more at stake here than an internecine squabble in the Temple. Listen well: I will not allow thousands of armed men to enter Morne unopposed. Your religious agenda does not move me. That is not negotiable."

"I don't want to kill you, Prince Tagur," Eadric sighed. "And I don't want to see innocents needlessly suffer."

"Then back off," the Prince retorted. "Return to Trempa. Do not prosecute this aggression. Sue for peace – perhaps the King will be lenient."

Eadric read Tagur's expression, and although he did not say as much, the Prince was offering to intercede; to speak on Trempa's behalf on the royal council. Eadric felt that he had not misread Tagur's attitude towards him in their initial encounter: the Prince actually liked him. The Paladin almost wept.

"I cannot," Eadric groaned. "This is not my choice."

"It is absolutely your choice," Tagur said grimly. "Deorham, I am going to mount my horse again. Then I am going to Morne. I will advise the king to call a general muster unless you indicate to me now that you will not pursue this folly."

The Paladin inwardly heaved. Another concession from the Prince, because implicit in his statement, Tagur had just said: I trust your word, Deorham.

The hawk, who had been sitting on a nearby bough, and watching the exchange with interest, flew over and shifted into the shape of the Druid.

"I am Nwm, the Preceptor," he said.

"I know who you are," the Prince replied, walking away.

"Listen to me, Tagur. Change is coming. Upheaval. Maybe death and misery. But hope for something better. It is inevitable. You have to decide what your role in it will be, and why."

"I also know my role. I need no counsel from you."

"You knew your role. It is time to reappraise."

Prince Tagur returned to his mount, and attempted to revive her. Several of the other stricken knights and horses were now beginning to regain their senses. The bay staggered up, shaking, and Tagur calmed her. He retrieved his own banner, handed it to his herald, and climbed into the saddle.

"Unless you purpose to kill me now, or at least attempt to, I suggest you move aside."

Reluctantly, Eadric backed off of the greensward. As the riders made ready to move on, he spoke once again.

"Listen to me, Tagur. I am the Ahma. I am the Breath of Oronthon made manifest in the world. You must understand that, whatever logic dictates, you cannot withstand that. It is an irresistible force." His tone was imploring rather
than assertive, but carried more conviction than any present had ever heard before.

Prince Tagur swallowed, turned, spurred his mount, and rode on towards Morne.

_Dammit_, Eadric thought.

**

Magathei had utterly beguiled Ortwin. Its intricate, carved marble reliefs. Its archways, buttresses, courtyards, winding streets, alleyways and markets. Its orchards of apricots, dates, pomegranates, oranges, figs and almonds. The music of water everywhere, carried to gardens, gathering in still pools, or welling up from fountains in the bedrock.

The inn chosen by Mostin, the Bard, and his prospective (lover? mate? fiancée? concubine? wife?) – well, whatever Iua was – was in the most fashionable and expensive district of the city. A city which was, by its very nature, fashionable and expensive.

Ortwin goggled at the price quoted to him by a languorous djinn smoking a hookah. It translated to around two hundred crowns per night. The suite included a bedchamber, a lounge, a steam bath, a private terraced garden, and two mephit servants, named Thispin and Goil. Mostin had elected to take more modest chambers.

The Bard inquired regarding the hookah which the djinn seemed to be enjoying immensely, wondering whether it contained a substance similar to _kschiff_, used in the country of Shûth.

The genie laughed, and muttered an unintelligible string of syllables in Auran.

"What did he say?" He asked Iua.

"He regrets that the sublime airy vapours of which he is partaking would prove far too volatile for your gross physical body, and would likely result in some kind of seizure, followed by death."

Ortwin grunted, and retired to his chambers, where he began working on an ode for the glorification of Ulao. According to Iua, the only thing larger than her father's treasury was the size of his ego. Deciding that this might be the place to start, the Bard dispatched Thispin to procure a lyre of the finest quality.

"Cost is no consideration," he grandly (and stupidly) announced.

The Mephit clapped her hands gleefully, curtsied, and returned fifteen minutes later.

"On second thoughts," Ortwin said, "overt gaudiness is not entirely necessary. You may limit your transaction to five hundred gold pieces."

She sniffed, and disappeared again. Ortwin wasn’t sure whether he heard her mutter the word ‘cheapskate’ as she flew off. The Bard groaned. This was likely to be an expensive outing. He hoped that Mostin had some spare cash, and was feeling more generous than usual.
He shrugged, and grinned. It didn’t matter. He had no doubts that he would wow the locals. He was, after all, Ortwin.

* 

"Er, how much have you got, Mostin?" Ortwin asked. "Just curious, that’s all."

"Why?" The Alienist asked suspiciously. "How much have you got?"

"Around two thousand left," he confessed.

Mostin laughed.

"What?" Ortwin asked.

"You have yet to find a suitable gift for Ulao. It needs to be something unique."

"I am composing an ode in his honour," Ortwin reminded him.

"I suspect that he would prefer something more tangible."

"Is it true that magic can be openly purchased here?" Ortwin asked.

"Certainly," Mostin replied. "Although it is still hard to find, and the prices are rather inflated."

"Will you accompany me to find such a gift? I would appreciate your discerning eye."

"You mean you don’t want to be ripped off?"

"Yes," Ortwin said. "Precisely."

"Two thousand isn’t going to buy you much," Mostin sniped.

"No," Ortwin agreed. "But this will." He held his pick up.

Mostin shook his head. After all of the time, effort and trouble – not to mention the compensation paid to Troap – that the Bard had gone through to acquire the pick, he seemed remarkably keen to part with it.

"I thought that it was a style thing," Mostin said, pointing at the weapon.

"Honestly, Mostin. Fashion does change, you know. How much gold did you say that you had with you again?"

"I didn’t," the Alienist replied.

**

Three days after the ceremony in which Tahl had sworn Eadric in as First Magnate, and he had assumed control of Trempa’s forces, Ryth’s guerilla fighters arrived upon the Blackwater Meadow, exhausted after a forced march from the northern marches of the Duchy.
Six hundred battle-hardened, dirty and confident Uediians suddenly jostled for space along with Trempa’s aristocracy, men-at-arms, Ardanese mercenaries and levies from across the fief. After nearly three hard months in the field, Ryth’s men – consisting primarily of archers – naturally considered themselves somewhat superior to those who had been drilling in the pastures which abutted the Nund.

Eadric knew that he *must* move. Maintaining the cohesion of the forces thus far had been an act of supreme diplomacy on the part of himself, Tahl and Soraine: the more remarkable, because the Paladin had engendered a sense of camaraderie amongst the disparate troops which he would have considered impossible only twelve weeks before. But if they stayed where they were now, then the impetus would be lost, and the sectarian tendencies amongst those present would begin to reassert themselves again. After he had finalized the plans for provisioning the army – something which was already beginning to heavily afflict the economy of Trempa itself – he called a meeting of his captains and lieutenants.

Soraine, Tahl, Ekkert, Streek, Ryth, Togull and Banding of Gamall were present. Bremaa, the Countess of Thokastrond in the far East of Trempa, who, despite her age, still lusted for battle. Olann, the *de facto* leader of the Ardanese contingent, whose preeminence amongst the mercenaries was maintained more by his brawling ability than by his strategic competence. Jorde, his bannerbearer. And Nehael, whose mysterious presence still unnerved many of those there. Details for the effective deployment of troops were thrashed out into the early hours of the morning.

The main thrust would take place at Moath Gairdan – the span of the bridge was shorter than at Hartha Keep, and its girth would allow three knights to ride abreast upon it. Eadric himself would lead the main assault at this point – although it was still unclear whether Brey would attempt to hold the bridge, or allow passage and defend his bulwarks upon the far side of the river as necessitated by assault. Trenches and dikes protected over a dozen Temple enclaves, spread over an area of fifty square miles.

A smaller group would attempt to win Aaki’s bridge – although the length of the crossing, combined with its narrowness and the causeways which led up to it, made this a much more difficult prospect. They would be supported by many of Ryth’s archers, who would use small rafts and air-bladders to cross the Nund and harry Temple outriders south of the bridge, before attempting to secure its western end. It was a tactic which the Thane had used on several occasions in the north, but near Hartha Keep the river was both wider and deeper, swollen by tributaries which flowed down from the hills – the largest and the closest of which was the Blackwater itself. Most of the Uediians were capable swimmers, but Ryth was worried about wet bows and ammunition. Oilskins were not entirely reliable.

Togull, Laird of Rauth Sutting and a man advanced in years, was astonished by Eadric’s proposed course of action at the northern bridge.

"You plan to simply *cut your way across*?" he asked.

"Yes," the Paladin replied.

"You will be at the forefront?"

"Yes. I will not lead from the rear."
"Are you really that confident? That good? This is no tourney."

"I am aware of that," Eadric responded.

"But if you fell one, then another will appear, and another. The crossing will become jammed with corpses of men and horses in no time. Passage will be close to impossible, in either direction."

"We will bring ropes, to drag them off the bridge into the river."

"But the momentum..."

"Will be sustained," Eadric finished for him.

"And in the event that you should perish?"

"Then Tahl will lead," Eadric said. "And if he dies, then Jorde will lead. And so on, until we make the crossing."

Togull scratched his head. "You admit the possibility of death – how can this be, if you are the Ahma?"

"I am merely a conduit," the Paladin replied simply. "If I die, then Oronthon will choose another."

"Do you not fear death? The man who doesn’t is a fool."

"Then I am a fool," Eadric smiled.

"A holy fool, but a fool nonetheless," Togull sighed.

**

"Are they real?" Ortwin asked.

Mostin nodded. "At least, the vendor is not thinking about lying, and the dweomer checks out as being of the right variety."

The duo stood at a market stall, where a djinn of immense proportions touted his wares, flanked by two jann of dour aspect. Ortwin had been surprised to note that the elemental trader possessed feet, but decided it might be impolite to mention the fact – he had always assumed that genies were somehow nebulous below the waist. He had even pondered on the mechanics of Iua’s conception, given that false premise.

Having found a suitable broker for his magical pick – an item which he found, in the event, he was loathe to part with – the Bard had sold the weapon for a good deal of money. Its thundering electrical dweomer was, after all, an attractive selling point given their location. He had immediately invested in silk pantaloons and shirts, several velvet waistcoats of varying colours, sashes, earrings and bracelets of gold, and a new scabbard of inlaid cherrywood for his scimitar. His purse bulged with precious gems. He looked, and felt, extremely wealthy.

In his hands, he held a pair of Golden Lions – figurines of power. He was tempted to purchase them – despite the prohibitive cost – until he considered his situation.
The djinn grunted unappreciatively as Ortwin handed back the figurines and shook his head.

"I need something unique," he muttered to Mostin as they walked away. "And buying something from someone here is not going to fit the bill – I mean, think about it: even if Ulao is ignorant of many of those who pass through his city – which he may or may not be – it's likely that he is aware of things sold by members of his own people in his own city."

"Other extraplanar entities frequent Magathei," the Alienist reminded him. "It is merely a question of locating a vendor and a gift. It will take time, patience and diligent inquiry."

**

Eadric mounted Contundor. The dawn glow was muted by mists which clung to the ground in the wide Nund valley, muffling the sounds of armour and harness. The fog was a parting gift from Nwm, before he had flown northwards to displace the skirmishers who had crossed into northern Trempa from Thahan.

The core of those who would lead the assault with him were, to a man, religious fanatics who had no doubts about the divine nature of the Paladin’s mission. Their zeal was a tangible force, and no notion of failure was entertained by any of them. Horses – both celestial and mundane – champed restlessly, eager to be underway.

At six o’clock, Earic’s outriders returned with the news that both bridges were held: Brey, aware of the arrival of Ryth’s troops the previous day, had immediately taken precautions. Temple engineers had set emplacements of stakes across the western ends of both spans, and Ryth’s scouts had already shot dozens of men who had been undermining the pylons on the bridges, in the event that they would need to be collapsed. On the far bank, teams of draft horses stood ready to draw great chains which had been looped around the stone buttresses and supports.

Eadric quickly redeployed his troops, and called a hundred of Trempa’s most able knights to himself. He assumed a position on the eastern bank, halfway between the two bridges, and waited for Tahl to arrive: the Inquisitor was presently closeted in intense prayer.

The Paladin smiled grimly. He had hated to do it – to dissemble to his own captains regarding his plans – but it had been entirely necessary. He had no doubt that Temple spies were present in his ranks, and neither the time nor the inclination to weed them out: the fear and mistrust engendered would have been too high a price to pay. And the possibility of magical eavesdropping had also made him cautious. It was easier this way.

Tahl presented himself, and drew a scroll – one of those confiscated from the Penitents at Deorham – from his belt. He incanted briefly, and gestured.

Rapidly, a broad swathe of water began to drain away into the bedrock. A section of the river forty yards wide, stretching from bank to bank, vanished.

Trumpets brayed, and Eadric led the charge across the dry bed of the Nund. In
the van were Tahl, and Jorde with the standard, renegade Templars, Paladins and
Penitents. They screamed, and the cry was taken up by the host which rode hard
on their tails.

Ahma!

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**POST 4: THE SECOND DESCENT OF GRACE**

Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 2nd October 2002, 10:44 PM

This post is likely to be a tad controversial - viz. my rulings in the game, as
contingencies which have no rules precedent are addressed. I'll answer some
outstanding questions, then try and explain my reasoning for the current post,
and finally post the update itself.

**Q's**

So

Quote: Sep, is a Penitent an Ex-Paladin in your campaign?

The Penitents are those Templars who seized Eadric's castle at Deorham,
executed his retainers, and subsequently repented. They're fanatics, who are
consumed with the need to expunge their guilt.

Quote: so Sep...did Eadric's player catch you off guard or had you prepared for a water parting?

Completely off-guard. Marc had given it some thought, but hadn't shared the
information with me. :rolleyes:

Quote:

Did you have Tagur's response pre-concieved or were you reacting to the
arguments that Eadric brought forward?

A little of both. I know Tagur's character (I quite like Tagur, actually), so it was
relatively easy for me to gauge his response. The specifics were unknown,
however. I tend to play NPCs on the fly to a large extent - it makes for interesting
gaming, but means that the plot tends to go off in weird directions.

Quote:

Did it ever occur to Ortwin to just give Ulao his (very valuable and unique) pick?

It did. His main objections were a) Ulao is 12 feet tall, and what's he going to do
with a size S pick; and b) Some extra cash would be nice for Ortwin, also.

Quote:
I gotta ask is that actual in game discussions (do your players really talk like that in game?) or is that artistic liscense?

Sometimes. Dan (Mostin's player) really talks like that - in fact his language is even more long-winded and pedantic than I've indicated. Dan reads too much Jack Vance.

**Three Instances of Grace**

I'm generally against the idea of "Limit Breaks," or "Wild Cards" which characters can play, but at the same time, there are a lot of things which happen in this game which the rules can't really begin to address.

An arrangement that I made with Lombard (Eadric's Player), was that he could invoke *Grace* at three key points during the course of the campaign - after the divine nature of his mission had been revealed to him.

Even though, technically, the Celestial Descent at Khu was precipitated by the acts of an NPC, Mulissu (actually my wife, Susan was playing her at the time so I guess she was a PC at that point), I ruled that it was such an extraordinary occurrence, that it counted against Eadric's "credit." He had two instances of Grace left.

The metagaming conundrum which knowing this caused was easily overcome: if Eadric was in a pivotal situation, and Lombard demonstrated *exceptional* roleplaying, only then would I allow Grace to intervene. If he invoked it. The other thing was that Lombard *did not know how it would manifest*. I, of course, did. It was therefore up to him to decide how best to act upon it, when it happened.

In the event, the Battle of the Crossings of the Nund proved to be the second descent of Grace: it manifested quite differently from the first, but it was in reaction to a very unexpected sequence of actions from Eadric, where he demonstrated the quality of *mercy*, but managed to contextualize it within the story and the whole, ongoing religious paradox thing.

Hats off, Marc.

For twenty rounds, the *Paragon* Template from the ELH was applied to Eadric. He became, briefly, the perfect human being, and the perfect paladin. I've added "Paragon Eadric" to the Rogues Gallery thread, just for the sake of completeness.

Btw, a *kanista* is a wedge-shaped formation of mounted Templars. This will also prove relevant in a later post.

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**Update**

As Eadric gained the western shore of the river with his knights, lightly armoured mounted auxiliaries scattered north and south along the riverbank. Unable to withstand the heavy cavalry, they instead fled to join with the main Templar companies who were positioned at the ends of the bridges. Mist limited visibility
to around a hundred yards, and the Paladin knew that he needed to act swiftly to take advantage of the surprise that it offered.

Half of the Ardanese mercenaries were immediately dispatched to the south under Olann's command. They were supported by several squads of armoured knights, together with their squires and retainers, led by Breama the Bitch and Laird Togull. Olann was detailed with disrupting the Temple emplacements, and drawing attention away from the amphibious assault launched by Ryth and his Uediians south of Aaki's bridge – Eadric hoped that even if news of this plan had reached Brey and his commanders, then it would be discounted in the light of news of their passage across the river.

The remainder of the mounted archers were to form a screen north and west of the main force of heavy horse, and hopefully intercept any Temple squadrons who were riding for the northern crossing. The zealots, along with the bulk of the armoured aristocracy, headed straight towards the north, their front increasing in aspect as they rode. It took them only two minutes to reach the outworks: lines of stakes, hastily set the previous night, barring passage. Companies of mixed pikemen and crossbowmen already stood in loose formation behind the barriers, and waves of quarrels slammed into the vanguard. Behind, half-visible, the Templar knights were ordering their lines.

*Dammit,* Eadric thought, reining in. *They deployed too fast. And Pikemen.*

He turned to speak to Tahl, but the Inquisitor had already pulled another scroll out and was incanting fiercely. He pushed his hand forward as power rushed through him, and the ground ahead rippled ferociously, flattening the defenses and knocking dozens of Temple men-at-arms to the ground. The unluckiest amongst them were drawn into cracks and fissures that had opened briefly in the ground, before slamming shut with a terrific *boom.*

Eadric motioned to Hyne, and yelled. "Sound the charge!"

A horn rang out, and they surged forwards. As they thundered towards the Temple lines, Eadric's eyes tried to penetrate the mist to discern the location of Brey's standard, but unsuccessfully. More horns sounded – this time from the enemy - and, terrified, the remaining infantry who intervened either fled or fell back to the ground, in an attempt to escape the inevitable. Although disordered and incompletely prepared, the Temple countercharge was devastating. Lances shivered as they struck shields and armour, and penetrated flesh.

The wedge of zealots, led by Eadric, punched a hole in the Temple front, but the enemy knights swelled around, their discipline and training all too apparent as they broke upon Trempa’s aristocracy and discomfited them. The melee which ensued was confused, brutal and merciless.

**

Ortwin tapped his fingers nervously.

"Well?" Mostin asked.

"Talk about lousy timing, Mostin." He had returned, briefly, with the Alienist into his extradimensional retreat. The scene on the Mirror of Urm-Nahat showed Eadric on the meadow, preparing to cross the Nund.
"If you’d rather not know..." Mostin began.

"Don’t be facetious," Ortwin said. "Where the hell is Nwm, anyway?"

"Eadric specifically asked him to stay out of it," Mostin replied.

"Do you think I should go?" The Bard asked.

"One Satyr can do little," Mostin replied.

"Unless that one Satyr is me," he countered. "But should I go?"


"Will you buff me?"

Mostin sighed. "Ortwin, you know how much grief violating the Injunction cost me last time. Do you have to put me in the position of choosing?"

"Please?" Ortwin gave his most imploring smile. "It’s not like you’re throwing lightning around."

"Oh, very well," Mostin groaned.

**

In his initial charge, Eadric had struck down Terquen – a knight of no mean ability whom he had immediately recognized from his days in the Temple. Terquen’s lance splintered on Eadric’s shield as the momentum of his mount carried on, and two other Templars targeted Eadric rather than those directly ahead of themselves – one lance glanced off of his shield, another off of his helm.

Bile rose in the Paladin’s throat – Terquen was a good man.

He dropped his lance and Lukarn sprang from its scabbard. Before he had prepared himself, a longsword struck him soundly but almost harmlessly from another Templar. He lashed out, grunting, but then abruptly twisted his blade in the air as he struck.

A young paladin, with an open-faced helmet, perhaps eighteen years old.

Dammit, Eadric thought, and buffeted him on the head with the flat of his blade. The force of the blow was still immense, and his opponent toppled off of his horse, insensible. In a series of rapid exchanges which lasted less than half a minute, four more knights succumbed to his skill: in each case, the Paladin struck them with the flat or the pommel of Lukarn. By the end of it, he, Tahl, and half a dozen others had passed clean through the Temple line. Eadric was almost entirely unscathed.

Tahl looked at him quizically. "Do you intend to subdue them all?" He half-yelled ironically. The clamour of the battle was terrific.

Eadric thought sadly of Terquen. "I will draw no more Templar blood," he replied.
"You will have blood on your hands no matter what," Tahl pointed out. "You are going to be the only person here who isn't striking to kill – recall that the Penitents and Trempans are following your orders to do so. Should I instruct them otherwise?"

"No," Eadric replied.

Tahl looked dubious. Was Eadric somehow attempting to relinquish responsibility for the deaths that would occur there? The Paladin read his mood.

"You do not need to doubt, Tahl. Before the day is out, I will have the death of hundreds weighing on my conscience."

"I do not understand. What do you hope to achieve, Ahma?"

"To stimulate insight," he replied.

Tahl immediately understood the paradox. Mercy and judgement. Compassion and retribution. Forgiveness and damnation. Oronthon and, vicariously, his emissary, was all of those things.

"Now may not be the best time to act as a teacher: you understand that this is likely to be misapprehended," the Inquisitor said. "That others might accuse you of shirking your responsibility, of shying away from the deeds that need to be done. One could attribute your acts to cowardice."

Eadric smiled. "Then the paradox is complete. Only a coward would shy away from the possibility of being branded a coward."

The Paladin snapped his visor shut, and rode back into the fray. He was present in the Now more than he had ever before been. Scenes, impressions and thoughts flowed through his mind like liquid, and he let them pass. He opened himself totally, and all thoughts of self were vanquished. Spontaneous, instinctive, unassailable, irresistible. He dismounted, cast off his helm, threw down his shield, and gripped Lukarn in both hands.

Grace had descended upon him.

*

In the southern encounter, Olann’s horsed archers discharged volley after volley into the Temple ranks: their recurved horn bows sang and the air was thick with darts. The phalanx of Trempan knights, together with supporting mounted men-at-arms waited for an opportunity to engage, but to no avail. The Temple foot soldiers – chainmail clad and secure behind a wall of shields and stakes – merely bided their time and sent a slow but steady stream of quarrels into the Ardanese outriders, gradually wearing them down.

Bugger, thought Breama. Somehow she had to draw out their cavalry, or Ryth would be discovered before he could effectively deploy his longbowmen, and they would make mincemeat of him. She sent messengers to Olann, and others to Streek – who waited on the eastern bank of the river with the heavy infantry – and immediately ordered her knights to follow her westwards, parallel to the line of Temple emplacements. She enjoined the Ardanese to ignore their losses and continue their assault, and ordered Streek to launch an assault upon the bridge itself from the opposite shore. As she and Togull redeployed, mounted Temple
auxiliaries appeared from out of the mist and harried their right flank. After a series of brief skirmishes, the Countess gained the western end of the Temple defenses.

She heard them long before she saw them: the rumour of many horses bearing down upon her from the southwest. Or was it the west?

"Sound the charge!" She ordered her herald.

"Which way?" Togull asked ironically.

"Er, that way," she said, pointing into the fog. "I think."

*

The messenger who brought news to Streek – a young esquire by the name of Tambur – rode at breakneck speed over the dry river bed. His haste, caused as much by fear of the waters around him suddenly collapsing in on him as by desire to deliver his message swiftly, soon brought him to the presence of the Laird.

"The bridge itself?" Streek complained.

"Immediately, my Lord," Tambur confirmed.

Streek grumbled and put his helmet on.

**

"There," Ortwin said, pointing at a cluster of high-ranking Templars in the reserve force.

"Are you quite insane?" Mostin asked. "You will be totally cut off."

Ortwin laughed. "You underestimate me, Mostin."

"I think perhaps you overestimate yourself," the Alienist countered. "Might I remind you of Iua?"

"That isn’t necessary," the Bard remarked drily. "I am unlikely to forget. Note, however, that I wasn’t hasted, and I wasn’t wearing this."

Ortwin pulled his cloak around himself, and immediately appeared to shift several feet to the right.

"I wonder if they’ll mistake you for a Devil," Mostin mused. "Your behaviour will be rather atypical of a Satyr."

Ortwin shrugged. "Where is this group in relation to Ed?" He asked.

The scene changed rapidly as the mirror scanned back through the mist around three hundred feet, and Eadric appeared on its face. Mostin raised an eyebrow.

Ortwin’s jaw dropped.
**

Eadric broke upon the Temple ranks, and began toppling knights from their horses at incredible speed. Lukarn slammed into torsos, battered helmets or crashed against shields and staggered their bearers. Wherever he struck, they fell. He seemed to anticipate every move, to possess such complete awareness of his environment that he avoided almost every blow directed at him. And even where lances or swords should have pierced or slashed him, they seemed to recoil, or to glance harmlessly off of him.

"What the f*ck?" Ortwin exclaimed.

Within the space of a minute, a swathe of armoured forms – buffeted and pummelled - lay groaning around Eadric in a circle. In his immediate vicinity, the battle had ceased entirely, as Templars sat unsurely on their steeds or backed away from him.

From the north, through the mist, the reserve force of Templars led by Brey appeared. If Eadric had still been Eadric, he would have inwardly groaned.

A column of violet fire engulfed him, but did nothing beyond warming his armour slightly. Lances were levelled at him, but the hands which held them shook. He spoke.

"I am the Emissary of the God whom you claim to understand," he called out in a clear voice. "An act of violence against me is an affront to him. You are instructed to lay down your weapons, and sound a general surrender. You will follow me into Morne."

Brey wavered, nodded, and hung his head. Fate – or Eadric – had, in fact, spared him for a third time.

Zhuel manifested, and if any doubts remained, they were layed to rest. Brey wept.

But the surrender came too late for Breama and Togull, who were both slain as the kanista of Temple knights overwhelmed their squadrons, for many of Olann’s archers, and for scores within the southern Temple emplacements when the rain from Ryth’s longbows finally fell upon them. Many had perished in both engagements.

Much bitterness resulted.

When Ortwin appeared, the inner fire had not yet left Eadric. The Paladin smiled benignly.

The Bard swallowed, and fought against the urge of prostrating himself before his oldest and closest friend.

POST 5:

Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 10th October 2002, 01:35 AM
Sooo

Life's been a trifle busy lately, so I haven't had as much time to write as I would have liked.

This is about five sessions behind in terms of updates - unfortunately, the gap is growing, not shrinking. Time. Time. Time. Always need more time.

Sigh.

---------------------------------------

Daunton the Diviner Teleported to Prince Tagur’s position after scrying the Prince, appearing at dusk in his campsite.

Several of Tagur’s hearthguards drew their swords.

"Your retainers are a little jumpy," the Wizard smiled. The humour immediately left his face. "Brey of Methelhar has just capitulated with Deorham."

Tagur sat silently for several moments. His mind raced.

"There is more," Daunton continued. "It would appear that the clandestine raids mounted in Hethio are more organized than we previously suspected. It is some kind of popular Uediian movement. It seems to be growing exponentially."

Tagur cocked his head. "Are they allied with the Trempans?"

"I think allied is probably too strong a word. But I suspect that some contact exists between them. Nwm the Preceptor is the most likely suspect. He is an associate of Deorham."

The Prince grimaced. He knew that much already. "And the Curia?"

"Are irrelevant," Daunton said.

"Do we have numbers?" Tagur asked.

"Assuming that most of the Templars follow Brey’s lead – and that seems likely – around twelve hundred knights, twice as many auxiliary cavalry and six or seven thousand infantry. That includes the Trepan aristocracy and militias, and around eight hundred Ardanese mercenaries."

"The Temple has been ineffective to date," The Prince said. "There is no reason to suspect otherwise from now on."

Daunton shook his head emphatically. "That is absolutely not the case. The reason that Templars were not deployed en masse was because of their vulnerability to magical assault from Nwm. That is no longer an issue. I would also remind you that a substantial number of Deorham’s footsoldiers are not levies and militiamen any more. They are Temple infantry. Finally, if Nwm chooses to actively participate in this, then there is nothing that you can do. He commands enormous power."
Tagur’s stomach tightened when he considered the rumours of the Druid’s assault upon the Temple camp, three months before. A thousand dead in five minutes, they said.

"Is there no way that any Wizard can be persuaded to intervene?"

Daunton shook his head.

"If you contacted one from outside of Wyre? An extraplanar? A Blood Magician from Shûth? It troubles me, but if forced into the arena of magical warfare..."

"Then, I regret, our association would be at an end," Daunton said sternly. "My securing magical help for you would be no different to binding a demon or throwing lightning myself. I will not risk violating the Injunction. I may impart only information. I will neither act as mediator, nor as a procurer of supernatural aid."

"You would rather see order overthrown and thousands needlessly die?"

"Yes," Daunton replied simply. Because the alternative was too terrible to contemplate.

"And Mostin’s acts?" Tagur asked.

"Were questionable, but sufficiently minor and ambiguous to warrant oversight: there is also the fact that many rumours concerning him issued from the Temple itself. Mages have little inclination to trust priests. Believe me, your Highness, when I tell you that you do not want Wizards actively participating in temporal wars."

"Or Druids," Tagur said laconically. "Daunton, I would ask that this news is relayed to the small council in full. Now is not the time for withholding information based on petty past disagreements. Inform the Lord Chamberlain that I will be in Morne in three days. I just hope that we can come to some kind of consensus before it’s too late. Sihu* will be pivotal – her troops are involved in Temple activities in the north of Trempa."

"Were involved," Daunton corrected him.

"She has also capitulated?" Tagur was aghast.

"No indeed," Daunton replied. "But the Templars there are likely to be of unsure loyalty given Brey’s reversal. Eisarn is their commander. Furthermore, they have been forced back into Thahan."

"A second assault? Already?"

"Nwm." Daunton replied.

The Prince groaned. It appeared that the Druid was already active, although his agenda was unclear. "And Iald?" He asked wearily.

"Iald is still invested by Temple troops – for the moment. News of the events on the borders of Trempa may have already reached them, however. I will maintain scrutiny on them. You may wish to consider allowing Deorham into Morne."
"And consign Wyre to even more Theocratic bullsh*t than it has already suffered? I think not."

"He advocates disestablishment," Daunton replied.

"For the moment," Tagur said bitterly. "But does his deity? And who’s to say that some other ‘revelation’ won’t descend upon him in the near future commanding him to seize the throne? Religion is so tiresome, Daunton. It stops people thinking clearly and behaving rationally."

The Wizard nodded sympathetically.

**


Tramst, again, and his own brother, Orm.

The Paladin ripped himself out of sleep, and stood up in his tent. His knees were weak. The canvas flapped in the night wind.

Strange, he thought, the door should be over there. Ah, he realized, I’m still dreaming.

Another face appeared: huge, gnarled, with tattoos on its cheeks. The fearsome aspect of a giant or an ogre, but somehow benign. Its ancient eyes spoke of enormous wisdom and power.

Who are you?, Eadric asked.

But he received no answer, and woke up abruptly.

He lay motionless on his pallet for a few moments, gradually accepting the fact that he was, in fact, conscious. He became aware of another presence in his tent.

Nehael sat nearby upon a stool, regarding him seriously.

"What time is it?" Eadric asked.

"An hour before dawn," the Demoness replied. "The camp is beginning to stir."

"How long have you been sitting there? Do you never sleep?"

"Around two hours. And no."

Eadric thought for a moment. "What is your relationship with Rintrah, Nehael?"

"We are on amicable enough terms,’ she replied.

"Have you been in regular contact with him?"
"I wouldn’t say regular," she said, standing, and drawing her cloak closer around her. Eadric was curious at the affectation – he knew that the Succubus was impervious to the cold.

"You aren’t being terribly forthcoming," he remarked wrily. "I thought you were acting as my counsellor."

"Perhaps you are asking the wrong questions," Nehael replied.

"Are you an agent of Oronthon?" Eadric queried.

"No," she answered flatly.

"Of Uedii?"

"No," she replied again. "Although if I had to choose a particular interpretation of religious truth, then I would favour Uedii for aesthetic reasons."

The Paladin grunted. Nehael was being characteristically vague about her own loyalties. He wondered if Nwm’s conversations with her had been any more revealing.

"I dreamed that Morne was sacked. The Fane and the Temple compound put to the torch. The murder and rape of innocents. Incredible cruelty."

"War brings atrocity," she replied impassively.

"I cannot be responsible for that," Eadric said. "I will not have it on my conscience."

Nehael said nothing.

"There were many faces – too many to count," he continued. "They flashed through my mind in rapid succession."

"Numerous people and strings of events have led to the current crisis," Nehael explained. "The drawing together of many disparate threads into a single, overarching Now. You have sensed a nodality. Another occurred at Khu: Graz’zt attempted to direct it, but Mulissu’s presence thwarted his purpose. If you had been killed there, then the Church of Oronthon in this reality would have been greatly diminished. The coming nodality is likely of much wider scope."

"The last face I saw was of a giant – or an ogre. He was aware of me, but did not answer my inquiry to his identity. His face was tattooed. He radiated enormous power, but also compassion."

"I do not know," Nehael said, "but I suspect that was Jovol. He is a Wizard who lives much of his life in the realm of Dream. It is likely that he is aware of the impending crisis. Dreamers are sensitive to such vibrations."

"But why would he make his presence known to me – if not his identity? He is barred from acting in the current crisis, anyway. The Injunction prevents him."

Nehael was conspicuously silent.

"Nehael?" Eadric asked nervously.
"Old certainties are failing, Ahma. You yourself are testament to that fact."

"Mostin insists that the Injunction is inviolable. That it is contrary to the whole ethos of magic for a Wizard to embroil himself or herself in politics."

"Mostin himself has already violated the Injunction," Nehael reminded him. "He acted out of concern for his friends. He decided that the risk of doing so was acceptable, given the stakes."

"Jovol, I suspect, is motivated by compassion," Eadric said. "At least that is some reassurance."

"Perhaps," the Demoness said sceptically. "But others will be aware of the confluence of events. Bending their wills, and mobilizing their servants into action. Uedii, the Green Reality. Oronthon – who may not have revealed all of his purposes to you. Demons, maybe."

"And Devils?"

"There are always Devils, Ahma. Somewhere in the background. Waiting."

"And others?"

"Whose purposes and motivations are unknown to us, and maybe even to themselves. Random elements." She answered.

**

Mesikämmi. Honey-Paw. A wisp of vapour hurtling through the sky.

_Hullu! Hullu! Hullu!_ She thought to herself as she flew south across Iald. _Where have you gone, my pretty boy? What troubles are you finding your way into now, I wonder?_

The land below, thick with forests, so different to the wild tundras of her homeland. Then settlements of stone buildings, bridges, keeps and towers, ploughed fields, rolling hills and a thousand streams, bringing waters down from the tall mountains beyond which lay the _Linna._

She sighed. It was warm here, in the sun. And how much warmer it would get, as she flew yet further south! Further afield than she had ever ventured before.

At least in this small, sad world, she thought ironically.

Mesikämmi considered the spirit who had appeared to her in her revelry. An unfamiliar creature, whom she did not trust. No doubt some entity involved with the strange God worshipped in Wyre, although whether opposed to him or allied with him she did not know.

Or care.

She had conjured one of its servants: a being bright with effulgent light, winged like a bird and radiating warmth and peace.

Not that that meant anything, she thought. But now she bore its token – a
talisman of unknown power and function, and travelled to heal a man she had never heard of in a land that she never knew existed.

Hullu, she thought again, and yearned for his sweet embrace. Not coerced this time, but freely given. As she raced over eastern Hethio, she scanned the ground below. He was here somewhere, she had scried him only hours before. But where? As she passed through a cloud, suddenly it was revealed.

She inhaled sharply. A sea of wagons and tents stretched before her, and plumes of smoke rose into the air. People crawling like ants on the ground below her – thousands it seemed. More than she had ever seen before.

Resisting the urge to descend, the Shamaness continued on southwards. Wyre fell behind her. She flew out over the Thalassine, and cities passed beneath her. She flew over Pandicule with its hundreds of rocky islands, over Bedesh, and across the Western Ocean.

There, below her, two hundred miles from anywhere: a surf-wracked island perhaps three miles long. It boasted a single stone building - a castle of unusual design.

Remember, she thought. The slippery spirit knows where his books are. That is enough.

Mesikämmi sighed, and wondered why such things were so important. But it would assure her Hullu of victory, and that was sufficient. And then, perhaps, he would return with her at last. This time, she would be coy, and restrained, and yielding.

"For there is nothing which I cannot teach you in the arts of love," the bright servant had informed her.

**

"A Fey?" Ulao roared. "One-Eight-Six said nothing to me about you being a Fey. And a Satyr to boot! A licentious, unprincipled erotomaniacal Satyr. It doesn’t surprise me that she was evasive about you when questioned: no doubt you have already plucked her frail maidenhood with your goatish lusts! I should have you flogged for your insolence."

Ortwin bowed theatrically. The enormous Djinn – whose girth suggested an overindulgence in whatever airy sustenance such creatures partook of – was clad wholly in crimson silk, and bore a tulwar almost as tall as Ortwin himself. He sat upon a throne of ivory in a hall of dizzying height, its domed roof supported by immense marble pillars of intricate design. Tendrils of purplish smoke, issuing from numerous braziers, clung to the columns before wafting out of great shafts hewn into the roof. Numerous creatures attended him: Djinn of lesser rank, Mephits, Elementals and Sylphs. To his right stood his chief advisor, whom Iua had already warned Ortwin of – a Marid named Shasheen – and nearby, standing in a tight group, a squad of dour Azer mercenaries from the Elemental Plane of Fire, prospective allies in the age-long hostility against the oppressive Efreet regime. Iua herself stood demurely to her father’s left – Ortwin noted that she played the role with considered ease. On a couch, a Sidhe of singular beauty reclined. His face remained impassive at Ulao’s disparaging comments regarding Feys in general.
Iua had informed the Bard that the politics of Ulao’s court – like the Inner Planes in general - were extremely complex and transient.

"Great Ulao," Ortwin said dramatically, "I bring you gifts as a token of my esteem."

From the back of the hallway, in a stately fashion, a train of Pixies flew forwards with serious looks upon their faces. They bore cushions of white velvet, upon which rested a number of fabulous items procured by Ortwin from a passing Sorcerer from an unknown world.

"First," Ortwin gloated, "the Fuliginous Grand Rill: a rose of such exquisite scent that those who experience its aroma are enraptured to the point of insensibility. It is unique, in that it requires no water or soil to sustain it, deriving its nutrition from the ecstasy evoked in those who inhale its fragrance. Be sure to smell it at least once per day, or it will perish from lack of due love and attention.

"Next," the Bard continued, "a bottled whirlwind. An amusing toy in which, I hope, the Great Ulao will discover some small pleasure. But a word of caution to the owner: the whirlwind is utterly fickle and unpredictable, and does not heed any command. If you loose the stopper, be sure to have an efficient method of escape: although such warnings are hardly necessary for one with sublime mastery of the airy realms." Ortwin thought that he ought to cover his back, nonetheless.

"Finally," he said, "obtained with great difficulty and sacrifice," although not be me, he thought, "a Pipe of Prescience: inhaling smoke through this pipe, and concentrating upon the desired subject will reveal intimations regarding future events. The hints are vague, of course, but divination is an inexact science at best." Ortwin bowed again with a flourish.

Ulao raised an eyebrow. Whoever this Ortwin fellow was, he seemed generous and had excellent taste. And the train of Feys who attended him looked suitably loyal.** His eye fell upon Mostin, who stood silently behind Ortwin, his lidless green eyes peering out from beneath his wide-brimmed hat.

"And this fellow," Ulao gestured at the Alienist, "is your attendant and advisor, I assume?"

"In a manner of speaking, your Magnificence," the Bard said smoothly. "He is a Wizard of excellent repute, called Mostin the Metagnostic. He seldom speaks, but has proven a faithful aide."

Mostin twitched reflexively, but said nothing. The situation, although amusing, would rapidly lose its charm if Ortwin persisted too far in that direction.

"Tell me, Ortwin," Ulao questioned, waving at the Pixies who fluttered around him, "do you have many such servants in your own realm? I am surprised! I had always been led to believe that sprites were intractable and unreliable. You must command great respect amongst your own kind."

Ortwin bowed graciously, and gave an expression of embarrassed modesty. False understatement was one of his specialties in the field of mendacity.

The Sidhe, hitherto silent, shifted lazily on his couch. When he spoke, his voice was like honey. "I regret that some Feys have acquired far too
much...Earthiness...due to prolonged exposure to mortal soils," he mused absently. "It does not surprise me that servitude comes easily to them – they are far removed from their roots."

Ortwin looked mildly offended, noting the expressions of indignance which crossed the face of several of the Pixies. His response was inspired.

"Such rudeness! I will, however, pardon your abuse. I am a magnanimous fellow – although great Ulao may take affront at such profanity. Reference to that basest of elements will not pass my lips. I would refrain from sullying Prince Ulao's consciousness with such vulgar thoughts: I only hope he can forgive you."

"Yes, quite," Ulao said, half-bemused. "Your concern for my sensibilities does you credit, Ortwin, although I am less easily offended than you might think." He clapped his hands, and a dozen Mephits darted off to bring large, comfortable cushions. Ulao gestured for Ortwin to sit.

Yes, he thought to himself. I'm in.

The Sidhe smiled coldly.

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*The Duchess of Tomur

**Mostin used a Planar Binding to bring sixteen Pixies onto the Plane of Air from the Prime to attend Ortwin. They were paid with a vial of Nolzur’s Marvellous Pigments and several potions, which had been transferred into tiny barrels for ease of transport.

POST 6: STUFF GOING ON

Posted by: Sepulchre II at ENWorld on 15th October 2002, 10:28 PM

Another update - kind of. Much of this actually consists of backstory, but if I don’t include it then subsequent events are likely to make no sense.

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Stuff Going On

The sprite, who had proven skittish and elusive, finally showed himself to the Shamaness after she had entered a trance and invoked some strange power. Orolde – paranoid beyond reason, and constantly looking over his shoulder for Demons – had felt a strange compulsion.

She was there, in his mind. Probing.
"Who are you?" He later asked nervously from behind the castle door. "And what do you want?"

Mesikämmi did not understand his words until she had spoken an appropriate string of powerful syllables.

"I am Mesikämmi. I am seeking a Wizard called Kothchori. I understand that he requires healing. Is he here?"

"Kothchori is beyond help," Orolde replied unsurely. "I tend to his needs as best I can. He is harmless now, and there is nothing of value left in this place. You are wasting your time. Please, leave us in peace."

"You do not understand. I am Mesikämmi. I have yet to find one who is beyond my help, dead or living. I wish to heal him."

So, reluctantly and suspiciously, Orolde opened the door.

A strange but delightful spirit, Mesikämmi thought as he revealed himself to her. Half the height of a man, with greenish skin and webbed feet like a duck. He had welts on his arms, and covered them self-consciously when the Shamaness saw them.

"Did Kothchori do this to you?" She asked.

"He is not in command of his faculties," Orolde replied defensively, "and becomes easily confused."

"Show me to your Master," she said.

Orolde took her through an untidy clutter of broken furniture, boxes and shattered glass devices, into a small room. An unkempt man with a ragged beard, dressed in filthy robes sat at a chair. His eyes had been burned from his head. He said nothing.

"Other than his blindness, what is his malady?" Mesikämmi asked.

"He is deranged," Orolde replied. "He has moments of lucidity, but soon slips into ranting again. Most often, he just sits. Occasionally, he beats me – usually when I try and feed him."

"Your loyalty is admirable, if inexplicable. Has he no friends who could have revived him?"

"None who cared enough," Orolde said bitterly. "Or who are willing to invest any of their own precious energy in him. And his works are gone – stolen, like everything else of value. He would awaken to find himself deprived of his most vital sense: his magic would be denied to him. It may be better for him in this way. The only thing worse than being crazy and confined to this forsaken island, is being sane. Believe me."

"I know where his books are," the slippery spirit had said to her. That is enough.

The Shamaness took a bear’s claw which hung around her neck, and pressed it firmly against each of Kothchori’s eyes in turn. She chanted in a language which contained many vowels, and paced around the Wizard. She sprinkled diamond dust over him, and spoke yet more words. The air around her was alive with
spirits.

Somehow, remarkably, his eyes began to grow back. The madness which possessed him evaporated. He looked at her.

"Who are you?" He asked. "Why have you come to me?"

Orolde, excited beyond words, skipped and clapped his hands.

"I am called Mesikämmi," the Shamaness replied. She took the talisman which the bright servant had given her, and showed it to Kothchori. "Do you know what this is?" She asked.

The Wizard seemed to shiver. "Yes," he replied.

"A spirit gave it to me, and said I was to deliver it to you. That you would know what it meant. He says I know where his books are. What is this talisman?"

"It is a seal," Kothchori replied. "A mark of identification."

"It belongs to a spirit?" Mesikämmi asked. "A powerful one?"

"Yes," he answered, "a very powerful spirit."

"What is his name?" Mesikämmi asked.

"His name is Graz'zt," Kothchori replied.

**

Over sixty Templars stood before Eadric. A third of them were composed of veterans: Penitents who had sworn themselves to him in the aftermath of Deorham, or those who had stayed in Trempa after Tahl had assumed control of the Temple there.

The others, including Brey, were new. All were captains and lieutenants in the ranks of the Magistratum. Many had observed the Second Descent of Grace at the Battle of the Crossings of the Nund, where doubt, and the realization that they were wrong had finally overcome them. Eadric spoke openly to them.

"The Curia must be dissolved, and ambiguities settled. This must be resolved quickly, and as peaceably as possible. A new Prelate must be allowed to ascend the throne. The temporal power of the Temple will be greatly diminished in the aftermath: this is a necessary thing."

"It is likely that much suffering will accompany this transition. Many do not trust me, others do not trust the Temple in any form, others do not trust Oronthon himself. The secular authorities will not allow unhindered access to Morne – despite my assurances that this is an internal matter. This is regrettable."

"I have experienced visions of Morne in chaos. The Temple destroyed. Murder in its cloisters. I have no desire to initiate such terror, but I cannot say that 'it will not come to pass' or that I can prevent it happening. I command you to instruct your troops that, whatever happens, even if we have to take Morne by force, that
the normal ‘spoils of war’ – perquisites such as rape, murder and looting, which soldiers generally enjoy – are utterly denied them. This applies as equally to the auxiliaries and mercenaries as it does to you yourselves. If it happens, I will myself execute the offenders, and their officers for dereliction. Take note: I hold you responsible for the actions of your subordinates. Absolute discipline will be maintained at all times."

"Morne is five days away, although I suspect we will meet resistance long before we reach it. I will brook no petty rivalries, either amongst knights of the Temple, or between Templars and any of Trempa’s aristocracy, or with any other group. You will not arrogantly assume that you are the elite in this matter, or that others should defer to your experience or piety. You will treat all with equal courtesy and respect, be it myself or a Uedian peasant. You will offer such leadership as you can, neither grudgingly nor haughtily, but freely and with an attitude of service, not command. If acts of pride and conceit come to my notice regarding Templar officers, they will be summarily disciplined. Reoffenders will be flogged, and stripped of their rank: they will act as exemplars in one way or another."

"If any have an issue with these instructions, now is the time to make themselves heard. Likewise, if any doubt me, I will furnish them with a horse and they may ride where they will."

(Silence).

"Finally, you should note that amongst my closest confidants, I count a Demoness, a Wizard, a Pagan and a Fey. Whilst, initially, you may find these presences difficult to accept, in time you will become more open to them. And you will remain open to the inevitability of change, or you will break, and fail."

Eadric turned away.

"Ahma has spoken," Tahl said.

The Templars nodded and murmured.

**

Nwm returned to the meadows near the Nund Crossings to find that Eadric’s camp had shifted onto the western bank, and had assimilated a large Temple contingent. He sought the Paladin out, and relayed news of events on the northern borders of Trempa.

Using his torc to pinpoint the enclaves of Temple troops – also supported by cadres from Tomur and Thahan – the Druid had simply appeared before their leaders in vaporous form, and issued dire warnings if they did not withdraw back across the river and disband. A few, aware of Nwm’s reputation, fled there and then. Others, who did not heed his advice, were later subjected to entangling plants, insect plagues, inclement weather, and pilfering by summoned Feys. Their swords and armour turned into wooden replicas, irascible horses refused their commands, and odd gravitational effects and magical booby traps afflicted them. Summoned Earth Elementals wreaked havoc in the camps, smashing gear and snapping the weapons of those who tried to strike them. None noticed the sparrow who sat on a nearby branch, chirping happily to itself, watching these events with unconcealed glee.
After three days of harassment, Eisarn, the Temple commander, decided that it would be wise to retreat his eight hundred or so troops before the Druid’s apparent good humour left him and he began employing *Fire Storms* instead. Eadric had, in fact, specifically asked Nwm to ‘go easy’ on the enemy troops.

The inevitable meeting between Nwm and Brey was tense and difficult, despite Eadric’s best efforts to smooth things over between them. The Templar’s character – which demanded a rigid adherence to dogma - had not changed, although the focus of his zeal had shifted. After stiff words and obvious discomfort between the two, Eadric dismissed Brey and conferred in private with the Druid.

"He will never forgive me," Nwm sighed. "I can’t really blame him. I constantly remind him of his humiliation. I think the same can be said for most of his captains."

"Good," Eadric replied unsympathetically. "It will give them something to work on. I’d hate to think that this was easy for any of them."

"Tomorrow, the *Tagamuos* begins," Nwm said. "It is three days until the Solstice. I have yet to decide what to do – whether to go to Hethio and attend Hullu, or to stay here with Trempa’s Uediins. In either event, I will probably be called to lead the celebrations."

The Paladin groaned. "I’d completely forgotten about the Solstice. This is inconvenient timing. Is there any way that the festival could be, er, toned-down a little? Discipline is paramount at the moment."

"Good luck in trying," Nwm said unhelpfully.

"If you choose to go to Hethio, any information regarding Hullu’s progress would be appreciated," Eadric pointed out.

"Ed!" Nwm said with mock horror. "I hope you’re not suggesting that I go and spy on those of my own faith? I am a High Priest. Seriously, though, the same had occurred to me – but I’m not sure whether I should leave here."

Eadric looked quizzical.

"For the next three days, your camp will be filled with drunken Uediins fornicating and celebrating heathen rites, Eadric. This might prove somewhat inflammatory. My presence might stop things getting out of hand."

"Hmm." The Paladin answered.

"I think a short period of segregation might be appropriate," Nwm suggested.

"Normally, I’d disagree," Eadric said. "But perhaps an exception might be in order. The river may prove a useful barrier. Who will lead the celebrations here if you decide to go to Hethio?"

"Nehael is the obvious choice," Nwm answered.

Eadric looked distinctly uncomfortable.

Nwm smiled sympathetically.
The Dreamer drifted within a sea of colours which had no name in any mortal tongue. The Celestial, exalted even amongst his own kind, floated before him. Hundreds of motes of light hovered in front of the Dreamer, and he scrutinized them carefully.

"There is a sixty-two percent chance that the main arc becomes asymptotic in seventeen days," he said.

"That is why you must act," the Celestial replied, "or there will be multiple Gates."

"More than at Khu?" The Dreamer asked sarcastically.

"Khu was exceptional," the Celestial replied, smiling. "Enitharmon authorized a cascade. It was a necessary lesson for Graz'zt."

"Graz'zt does not frighten me," the Dreamer said. "His flux is dwindling – I suspect he has too many other concerns to deal with."

"Not so," the Celestial replied. "The reason that you discern a diminishment is that he has just facilitated the translation of four Succubi. He will force agency on this one here." He pointed to a dim mote, which appeared relatively innocuous.

"It is the Wizard Kothchori. There is a tight resonance with this one, and this one, and this one," the Dreamer said, pointing at several other motes.

"I will take your word for it," the Celestial said ruefully. "Such subtleties elude me. What is the power of this Kothchori?"

"I'm surprised that you don't know. He is a Transmuter of significant ability."

"Wizards tend to escape my notice," the Celestial confessed. "Unless they are Summoners."

"Or Dreamers," the Dreamer remarked wryly.

"Or Dreamers," the Celestial agreed.

"Is he aligned?"

"Not to my knowledge," the Dreamer answered. "I recall him being pragmatic rather than philosophical. He was one of Feezuu’s targets in her search for Mostin. He was originally from Shûth, if I recall."

"In which case he is outside my purview in any case. The Sleeping Gods take care of their own. Interference would be undiplomatic."

"As at Khu?" The Dreamer jibed.

"Must we always return to Khu?" The Celestial asked, exasperated. "It was a finely balanced nodality. Oronthon’s action was not unilateral."

"Still, it risked offending those whose power still resides there," The Dreamer
pointed out.

"They have slept long," the Celestial said.

"Sleep is no obstacle to action," the Dreamer observed. He pointed to other motes in succession. "This one is the Shamaness Mesikämmi, this one is the sword Melancholy. They are connected vicariously through Hullu, Nwm the Preceptor and Eadric before they touch Tramst."

"And this one here?"

"Is another Wizard, called Rimilin. He is despicable."

The Celestial nodded knowingly.

"This connotes resonance between Graz'zt, Rimilin and Mesikämmi. But I still cannot see the strand between Kothchori and Graz'zt."

"Perhaps not all tendrils are visible to you?" The Celestial suggested. "Oronthon sees such things."

"I am not omniscient," the Dreamer admitted. "But neither is he – no, please, Rintrah, let's not start that argument again."

"What will you do?" The Celestial asked.

"At the moment, nothing," the Dreamer replied. "I will not act preemptively, based upon this probability."

"A second cascade is not out of the question if fiends are invoked – but it would still require a catalyst. I doubt that Mulissu would act in that capacity again. Would you?"

"I will reserve judgement on that request," the Dreamer said. "Although my instinct is to say no. I have issues about opening Gates in order to solve problems caused by opening Gates, let alone because of some Binding. The possible escalatory nature of this is exactly what I am trying to avoid, not to compound."

"But you have already admitted the possibility of action." Rintrah said. "At what point?"

"If the main arc becomes asymptotic, not before." The Dreamer answered.

"After Morne is sacked?"

"My first duty, as far as possible, will always be to the Injunction. I will not violate it lightly. You must understand that."

"I do Jovol. And so does Oronthon."

**

Mostin, having left Ortwin to ingratiate himself with the dignitaries in Ulao’s court, returned once more to his lodging in the city of Magathei, passed through the mirror-portal to his extradimensional retreat, and pondered.
Since his exchanges with Shomei, the Alienist had spent much time reflecting upon the nature of compacts. Her success with Devils – which was undeniable – came at a price which Mostin found wholly unacceptable. This, compounded by the fact that she had overextended herself, had led to her current predicament. Nonetheless, as with all ideas with which the Alienist came into contact, he wondered which parts he could improve upon, and exploit.

He considered Vhorzhe, his former mentor. *What exactly had happened?*, he wondered. The Alienist suspected that it had been an Entity of the higher order which had dragged Vhorzhe – body and spirit – off to some unknown reality. One of those from beyond Beyond, as it were.

*They can be called, and bound*, he had told Shomei. But he was unsure whether he believed it himself.

And were there other things, beyond even them? A third order of Pseudonaturals? A fourth? The metaphor of a series of mathematical constructs, possessing an increasing number of dimensions, was hard to avoid.

*There were no limits. To anything.* Mostin knew this. Not as an article of faith, but revealed to him through his hypercognitive faculties. The Metagnostic Reality.

He fidgeted, paced, brooded, and sighed. He spent an hour consulting his books.

*Outside* – ‘Uzzhin,’ or the ‘Far Realm.’ How did one get there? Cryptic references led him to believe that *Plane Shift* was an ineffectual method of transportation. It was beyond the power of the spell.

Is a *Gate* possible? He wondered. Or is it too dangerous to attempt? Is it really a place at all, or simply a state of being – although that argument was unsustainable. After all, what were *any* of the Planes, if they were not ‘states of being’?

The atemporal nature of the place caused conundrums to appear in the Alienist’s mind. *If*, by some means, he could come there, he could spend an infinity there, and, upon returning to the Prime, would still arrive at exactly the same time that he departed.

And would the aggressive, insanity-provoking nature of the place affect him? He was, after all, an Alienist. He had transcended his physical form, and was privy to secrets which few had ever gained. Secrets which could not be apprehended by a mind limited by conventional rational thought. Would the place embrace him, or extinguish his consciousness?

He needed answers.

Nervously, he opened a *Gate*.

**

Aside from Iald and Thahan, where concentrations of troops still existed, the Temple forces were thinly spread and ineffective. The Temple compound in Morne was almost empty of warriors, and only a few hundred others were scattered across Wyre, attached to the various Episcopal sees. Brey’s defection – along with sixty percent of the Magistratum – was a sore blow.
In Morne, the Curia – or part of the Curia – convened. Daunton’s assertion to Prince Tagur that the body was ‘irrelevant’ was only partially true. The Bishops of Mord, Tomur, Thahan and Gibilrazen – who, together with Hethio had formed the core dedicated to Eadric’s impeachment almost a year before – could, despite a diminishment in military clout, still bring a considerable degree of diplomatic pressure to bear. As a group, they lacked the cohesion and direction that they enjoyed under the Prelacy – or even under Rede’s brief protectorship. The spiritual solidarity which so many people expected of the Curia, real or apparent, was also absent. As individuals, however – individuals who still commanded significant resources, and the threat of anathematization – they were not entirely toothless. They lobbied the King and the Royal Council for action. Again. Shiel, the Duke of Jiuhu, and Sihu of Tomur, who, together with Foide the Lord Chamberlain and the boy Tiuhan IV, received all four of the Bishops, were sympathetic.

But Eadric was not their immediate concern.

"Our diviners have informed us that the threat which needs to be countered lies in Hethio," Foide said in a cracked voice. "The Uediian uprising presents more of an immediate danger."

"Eadric is an instrument of the Adversary," Gibilrazen countered. "What could be more pressing than his defeat? He has taken the blasphemous title of ‘Breath of God,’ and has corrupted yet more of the devout. He is an insidious snake, and must be stamped on. The survival of Orthodoxy depends upon it."

Sihu, devout in the extreme, shifted uneasily. "No decision regarding how to deal with Eadric can be made without Tagur," she said. "His consent will be crucial to whatever course of action we decide. His men are already on the move."

The Bishop snorted. "My see is three weeks away. The Adversary is five days from here. Morne will be lost before the Prince can come here."

"If so, then not to Deorham," Shiel remarked drily. "The Uediian movement must be crushed immediately and totally, before it gains any more momentum. And, respectfully your Majesty," he turned to the boy, "screw Tagur. We cannot wait for his men, or his prevarications. The Prince himself should be in Morne before nightfall tomorrow – he has ridden hard from Gibilrazen. He can make his case then. I myself have already ordered a thousand of Jiuhu’s finest to rout the Uediians and execute any rebels who surrender. An example must be made."

"Troops which could have been better deployed along the road to Trempa!" The Bishop objected.

Shiel gave a peremptory gesture. "They still will be. Just a day or two later. Kaurban’s forces may still intercept and delay the Heretic – he is already in the field. And Sihu’s troops will soon be hastening to join him. Deorham is unlikely to attempt to invest Morne with an army at his back, is he? And he lacks siege engines – Morne is safe for now."

"From the Pagan, Nwm?"

"He may be with the Uediians. Which is why we must eradicate that threat. If he is there, we will deal with him also."

The Bishop of Gibilrazen laughed harshly. "You would send a thousand men to
deal with the Pagan? Do I need to remind you of the fiasco on the Nund? They will all be dead within an hour."

"No," Shiel replied. "A thousand men will be deployed to disband the Uediian rebellion. One man will deal with Nwm."

The Bishop looked blank.

"Rimilin has sworn to defend Wyre against the chaos. He has shown his true colours in this time of crisis – those of a loyal patriot."

"Are you insane?" The Bishop asked in disbelief. "Rimilin is an accursed demonist. And you would risk loosing this canker on Wyre with royal sanction? Your Majesty, I beg you to reconsider."

"Rimilin will not violate the Injunction," Sihu said shakily. "He will not be deployed in the field. He will merely contain the threat of Nwm, if the Pagan is present."

"That is a violation," the Bishop said, exasperated. "It is a political act. If he gets away with it, who is to say what else he will attempt?"

"Fear of retribution will dissuade him from any such attempt."

"And what have you promised Rimilin for the aid that he lends you?" The Bishop asked bitterly.

"Nothing," Shiel replied. "That is precisely the point. I believe that he acts out of genuine concern – so much, that he is willing to risk even his own reputation."

"Bah!" The Bishop of Gibilrazen didn't buy a word of it and, despite a universal suspicion directed at all things arcane, in this case he was right. Because Rimilin acted under direction from Prince Graz'zt, and with the promise of protection and great reward.

Of those four Succubi whom Graz'zt had dispatched onto the Prime, the first, Chr'ri, was directed to Mesikämmi - to incite her to seek Kothchori, to heal him, to bring him the seal, and then to receive aid in her quest to win back Hullu. Afterwards, the Demoness repaired to the Uediian camp to gauge the mood and to await the arrival of the Shamaness herself. The triangle between Mesikämmi, Hullu and the sword Melancholy had great potential to wreak havoc.

The second Demoness, sent to Rimilin, bore news of the imminent collapse of the Great Injunction. The fact that Rimilin himself would be instrumental in effecting it, encouraged rather than dissuaded the Acolyte. Invoking a new era of madness and death was certainly appealing, especially if there were no fears of repercussions. The name of the Succubus was Kalkja, and she bore a hatred for Oronthon exceptional even amongst demons. Henceforth, she would act as the Rimilin's concubine, and Graz'zt would shower favours upon him.

The third, Chomele, was ordered to approach Kothchori himself. She manifested shortly after Mesikämmi departed, bearing a page ripped from one of his own books. Reluctantly, he agreed to compact with her. The price of exchange – the return of his spells to him – was more than he could refuse. And to him, Wyre, and its Injunction, held no special meaning.

The fourth Succubus, Aelial, appeared before Shomei with the promise of rewards beyond anything she had theretofore imagined. Shomei raised her rod,
obliterated the messenger, and immediately contacted Belial for advice.

In the Abyss, Graz'zt, exhausted from the efforts of opening access to the Prime for his Demons, retired to his sanctum and brooded. War always brought ample opportunity for chaos, deceit, horror and death.

He smiled.

POST 7:

Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 21st October 2002, 04:04 AM

Quote:
Specifically Tramst went to see Eadric's brother Orm and the Urgic Mystics in Ardan, but then the next mention I found of him was during the Eadric's embassy with Brey on the Nund.

I think I might have missed some intervening tidbit.

Actually, my mistake. It was a typo - that should read Tahl, not Tramst. Apologies for any confusion. Too many "T"s - Tahl, Tramst, Tagur, Tiuhan, Tatterbrand, Togull, Tostig, Trempa, Tomur, Thahan, etc. I get confused.

Tramst is still in Ardan at the time of the last post. (Although not for long).

Quote:
Also, what happened to the bishop of Hethio? Last we saw of him he was pretending to be sick. He's no longer part of the core bishops of the curia, but it doesn't say whether he was found to be evil or not.

The rather pathetic story of Hethio will be revealed in due course 😢

POST 8: HERE AND THERE; AND THIS, THAT AND THE OTHER: PART 1

Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 23rd October 2002, 11:50 PM

Okay, so these two posts are all over the place, flitting about from scene to scene without any apparent cohesion. It was originally going to be one post, but the page freaked out and couldn't cope with the size.

It's pretty long, and still I've had to gloss over some events. Ah, well.

Quote:
I'd be interested to know if you have any game mechanics worked out for Jorvol's method of divination/lifestyle. Does he dwell on the Plane of Dreams (ala Manual of the Planes)
Yes, and mostly. Jovol uses a custom Epic Divination.

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**Here and There; and This, That and the Other: Part 1**

Hullu shifted his weight upon the branch, and waited. He was finding it hard to focus on the moment, to be fully aware of his surroundings. His mind was distracted by events that had come to his notice: the mustering of Morne's city defenses; the riding of a force from Jiuhu, intent on crushing his rebellion; and the arrival of two witches in his camp, seemingly in his time of greatest need.

He had ordered Tarva to watch them, distrusting his desire to trust them.

He patted Melancholy affectionately, glad to have her cold steel – or whatever metal from which she was constructed – to hand.

Along the road, from the northwest, the sound of horses galloping came to his ear. He motioned down to where the Druid, Bodb, rested behind a bush in the form of a boar. Hullu then gave a low whistle, alerting those others in nearby trees to action.

A score of riders, moving at great speed, suddenly came into view. Their standard – a Golden Boar – fluttered above them. An ironic device, Hullu smiled, as he looked towards the Druid.

As the horsemen passed beneath him, vines suddenly sprang up from the track, and lashed out from the undergrowth on both sides of the road, wrapping themselves around the legs of the mounts. Several tripped, depositing their riders hard upon the ground. They whinnied, and riders yelled.

Abruptly, dozens of yard-long shafts began tearing into the confused group. Men toppled from their steeds, others drew swords, a handful – including the bannerbearer – broke free and fled eastwards. Hullu's *Bagaudas* slew all of the remainder, except one, who broke off and ran north on foot through the trees.

The Tribesman cursed, leapt down a bone-jarring two fathoms onto the ground, and raced after him. He spotted him his quarry immediately, and began to close.

After a two-hundred yard pursuit, Hullu found that his prey – a slim man in his early forties, who wore an unassuming black robe of modest design – had turned, and was prepared to face him. He had drawn a rapier.

"Wait," the man said. "I am a simple mercenary – nothing more. I am only doing my job. Consider this, before you attack me."

Hullu drew Melancholy, and walked forwards. "I apologize," he grinned, "but you have chosen the wrong side. Such are the risks of a mercenary’s life." Hullu knew it well, as for years, he had been one himself. "Now you will suggest that perhaps you can join me, in order to save your own life."

"Yes," the man replied. "That is precisely what I had planned. I have no particular loyalty, other than to myself."

"Your honesty is admirable," Hullu grimaced, "but your sword is fine, and we
need such weapons as we can acquire. And, doubtless, your purse is also fat."

"My purse you can have," the man answered, flinging it onto the ground. "But my blade is my livelihood. I am loathe to part with it."

"Then I should take it from you," Hullu replied, and leapt forwards. His power and ferocity – combined with a natural speed and a precision honed by years of practice – landed the Tribesman a solid blow.

His opponent’s face whitened visibly as the blade struck him, as if something cold had just brushed against his soul. Hullu paused briefly, and wondered why Melancholy seemed so eager to slay this man.

A brief but rapid exchange followed, in which Hullu’s opponent demonstrated considerable skill and finesse with his blade.

"Your weapon is a monstrosity," the black-clad man observed. "But, nonetheless, I will take service with you. My fee is fifty crowns a week. I have tactical expertise which may benefit you. I am also a capable cook."

Hullu laughed despite himself. The man had mettle, there was no denying it. "Lower your blade, and I will consider it."

Half to his surprise, the man complied. Both stood still, until two dozen Bagaudas had arrived, arrows nocked in their bows. With an effort of will, Hullu forced his weapon back into its scabbard.

"Bind and blindfold this one," Hullu instructed. "He may prove useful. Did you find the Prince among the slain?"

"He must have been one of those few who escaped," Tarva replied. "It is unfortunate. Bobb has taken the form of an owl, and is pursuing them."

Tagur breathed a sigh of relief, blessed his understated taste in clothes together with his diplomatic guile, and quietly acquiesced as his hands were tied and a cloth secured over his eyes.

Had whatever intelligence inhabited the sword Melancholy possessed lips, it would have smiled quietly to itself as it considered possible routes to unfettered chaos. Allowing Hullu to gain the impression that he had the blade under control served its purposes for the present. When the real personality conflict arose, the sword would be a little more assertive.

Still, it had been difficult not to force him to kill the Prince.

**

Mostin swam in a sea that was not a sea, in a place that was not a place, for a time that was not a time.

An infinity of dimensions stretched before him, each overlapping and melding with the others, joining, merging, parting. Monstrous things that were neither plants nor animals drifted, or moved under their own strange methods, past his vision. In many cases, it was hard to determine whether they were on the same plane as the Alienist, or one of a multitude of coterminous ones. The pressure on
his consciousness was immense, threatening to force his mind into new modes of perception.

It was tempting to acquiesce.

Mostin stepped backwards through the Gate and reappeared in his study. Panting, he closed the portal, and walked to the Mirror of Urm-Nahat. Fresh in his mind was the image of a Pseudonatural behemoth of unknown type.

The Alienist attempted to scry it, but to no avail.

He sighed. It looked as though Gate worked, but nothing else would. How tiresome.

He pondered upon how to contact Them. Those from the far Beyond. Did they have names? If so, it may be possible to bring them.

He spent four hours skimming through books, trying to find something that might be of use to him. One name, that was all he needed.

His search was fruitless. Nothing which spoke of a name. Nothing that even mentioned Them, beyond vague rumours and warnings. He procrastinated for a while, and finally decided to pay Shomei a visit. Mostin’s library consisted of some twelve hundred books, many of which were rare and obscure. It was an impressive collection.

He knew for a fact that Shomei possessed over fifty thousand volumes.

*I*

"I must depart on an urgent errand," the Infernalist said hurriedly. "Feel free to peruse the library at your leisure, Mostin. Half of me hopes you find what you are looking for, the other half desperately prays that you don't. The Spined Devils will attend to your mundane needs."

"How long will you be absent?" Mostin asked. "And why do you trust me alone in your home?"

Shomei laughed. "Mostin, I know you would never be foolish enough to steal from me. Besides, everything of value is beyond your reach. Remember: do not enter the woods near the Mansion, as infernal spirits inhabit them. If you venture into the cellar, take care in the summoning room: there is a Hag in one of the pentacles. I will return as soon as maybe."

"Where are you going?" Mostin asked.

"Hell," Shomei smiled. She grasped her rod, invoked a ward, and opened a Gate. "You can come, if you wish. You are under my protection, and I will ensure that no harm befalls you." She passed through the portal. Mostin looked at the scene beyond, agog.

A hall so vast that its ceiling was on the edge of sight. A dull red glow. Devils. Rank upon rank upon rank of them, standing in silent vigil. Thousands of them.

He ducked out of sight of the Gate’s opening, closed his eyes and waited for it to
go away.

After several stiff drinks, he went to the library.

Twenty-nine hours later, exhausted, and wondering why no-one had ever seen fit to devise a spell which searched libraries, Mostin held a slender volume in his hand.

As he opened its soft, calfskin covers, his stomach twisted in recognition of the symbols amid the letters. A journal. Kept by an Alienist of unknown identity. How had it ended here? This was more than he could have hoped for.

Shaking, the Alienist began to read. So much of it seemed simplistic, almost naïve. But the final entries were of colossal importance.

11.45: The entity prefers to assume the guise of a denizen of one of the outer planes – an Ultrodaemon in this case. I can only assume that its essential nature resembles this creature, and this is a projection of such essence into the bounded cosmos. (Complex symbols and equations followed)

12.30: It does not speak, or attempt to communicate with me in any way. The circle is secure, which surprised me at first, but I must act quickly – I have no doubt that I cannot contain it for longer than a day.

20.00 Still unresponsive to my offers.

22.45 Still unresponsive. I have no doubt that it is a higher order entity.

09.30 Still no response. I will attempt to remove it with a Banishment in an hour or so.

There were no more entries, but a set of symbols indicated a name, syllables which would sound unnatural when spoken by a human voice. Mostin committed them to memory.

How maddening! Who had written the book? Was this the same entity that Vhorzhe had attempted to call? – It seemed likely. Had he gleaned the information from this tome? He had certainly not written it, as his style and script were unmistakable.

Was it the name of this creature which he had read? A Pseudonatural Ultroloth of the higher order? Would Vhorzhe have been that foolish?

Mostin considered his options.

**

Although resolved to oversee the climax of the Tagamuos rite with the Uedians who formed part of Eadric’s army, Nwm nonetheless visited Hullu’s camp two days beforehand.

It had grown into a vast sprawl of tents and wagons. There were thousands of men, women, children and animals. Nwm was staggered.
Five minutes after his arrival, having sought out Hullu, Nwm was even more shocked to observe Prince Tagur standing nearby, spit-roasting a boar. The Prince looked at him impassively, but the Druid saw his eyes flick from side to side, as if considering a possible route of escape.

"Well," Nwm said to Hullu, his eyes still upon Tagur, "things have certainly grown larger – and apparently more complex - than I had anticipated. But I somehow expected the revel to be underway by now."

"There will be no revel," Hullu said dourly.

Nwm raised an eyebrow.

"Several couriers have been intercepted – it appears that the Duke of Jiuhu is planning a surprise visit, timed to coincide with the main ceremony. He is sending a thousand or so of his friends to join us in the celebrations."

"An attack on the Solstice? That’s pretty underhanded."

"But a logical choice," Hullu replied wrily. "I suspect, however, that he deems us less organized than we in fact are."

Nwm nodded, still looking at Tagur. "What will you do?" He asked.

"I have only a handful of horses, and even fewer who can ride them," Hullu explained. "And his force is entirely mounted. I will, of course, use pikes and longbows – as many of them as I have, at least. What idiot wouldn’t? Are you hungry, Nwm? You have been looking at that boar since you arrived here."

"Yes," the Druid replied, vaguely.

"The cook is a mercenary who we captured in a raid earlier today," Hullu said easily. "I think his claims to culinary expertise were merely a way to avoid death."

"Doubtless," Nwm agreed. "Do you make a habit of picking up unknown mercenaries and inviting them into your ranks?"

Hullu laughed. "No, but the fellow certainly has a way with himself. But after I’d had him blindfolded and led here, it occurred to me that any attempts at secrecy have been a waste of time for some while. It’s just a habit that’s hard to shake."

"How so?"

"Nwm, there are twenty thousand men, women and children here. This movement is bound to be riddled with leaks. We are four days from Morne, and occupying some of the fattest farmland in Wyre. It’s not like we can be inconspicuous anymore."

"And what is your purpose now, Hullu?" Nwm asked carefully.

"Negotiation," Hullu replied in a low voice. Seeing the Druid’s expression, Hullu continued. "For autonomy and independence. The outlawing of indentureship."

Nwm swallowed nervously. "And if you fail to achieve it?" He asked.

Hullu pulled a chunk of bread off of a loaf, stuffed it into his mouth, and pointed
eastwards.

"Morne is that way," he said casually.

"I think you may be overestimating your reach," Nwm said. "You have yet to deal with Jiuhu’s troops."

Hullu shook his head. "I understand how it works. Think about it Nwm: this movement is already growing at a phenomenal rate. Once we’ve beaten a Wyrish aristocrat in a pitched battle, people will see *that it can be done*."

"And you think you can force Wyre’s nobility to the negotiating table after one defeat?"

"Probably not," Hullu concurred. "In which case Morne is doomed."

"And how in the name of the Goddess do you propose to take Morne?" Nwm asked. "Even Eadric is cautious on that count – he has yet to make siege engines. He will be relying heavily on magic if it comes to that point."

Hullu grinned. "To be honest, Nwm, I was hoping that you’d help us on that one. But, if not, others may lend a hand. A pair of hedge-witches – sisters, maybe - have thrown in their lot with us. They seem capable."

Nwm screwed up his face. This was a new development.

"And there is always *this*," Hullu tapped the hilt of Melancholy.

"In a siege? I don’t think that it’ll prove much use."

"You’d be surprised," Hullu replied.

**

During the festival celebrations at the Nund crossing, Eadric took counsel with his knights and captains. Ryth, the only avowed Uediian amongst Trempa’s aristocrats (although others had sympathies), felt obligated to attend in order to make sure his people were not underrepresented. The atmosphere was tense and difficult. Neither Tahl nor Brey were present, having been detailed with approaching Eisarn – the Temple commander in Thahan – in an attempt to win his support.

Nwm arrived late, after his visit to the Uediian encampment. The news that he brought caused several of the Templars to draw breath tightly. To them, the Druid represented the worst face of radical Paganism, and only their vows to Eadric prevented an assault there and then.

The Paladin sighed, and wondered whether he could hold his alliance together. Too many factions. Too many different needs. Too much bitterness. He prayed silently.

"In less than thirty-six hours, Hullu will face four hundred trained knights, plus their retainers and men-at-arms," Nwm said. "It will be the first time that he has been tested in pitched battle. He has a minimal number of horsemen, and will be forced to fight with infantry: most of whom are enthusiastic, but incompletely
disciplined. Nonetheless, he seems confident. After his victory – which he feels is assured – he will attempt to force negotiation with the Royal Council. If this fails, he believes that he can rally enough support to take Morne."

"Ahma," Sercion, a Warpriest, and leader of four Temple squadrons said, "if I might speak openly?"

Eadric nodded, with a resigned expression.

"I feel that this Hullu is no ally of ours. His goals are not our goals. The Uediians hate the Temple, that is well-known. How can you tolerate this man’s activities?"

"Because I would avoid a conflict which polarizes along purely religious lines," Eadric answered. "And because the Uediians have many valid complaints."

"There is more," Nwm said, grimly anticipating the response that it would evoke. "Aside from a number of Druids who have rallied to his movement, he has recently been joined by two witches – Sorceresses maybe. Neither seemed enthusiastic to meet with me, and I didn't want to press the point. Both registered as major foci of magical power when I communed with the Green in that locale."

Various groans were heard from around the table.

"Also," Nwm said, half-amused, "it would appear that Prince Tagur is being held captive in the camp."

Eadric looked flabbergasted, and the revelation elicited sounds of wonder from the others present.

"Hullu is unaware of the identity of his prisoner, whom he assumes is merely a mercenary soldier. I didn't have the heart to turn him in – and I thought that the information might prove useful. Tagur suspects – no, in fact I'm sure that he knows that I recognized him – and now he is unsure. I will keep him under surveillance. If he attempts to flee the camp, I would suggest that we intercept him before he either gets to Morne or is tracked and caught by Hullu’s men. In the meantime, I think that his experiences in the camp can do him no harm, and may even open his eyes to a fresh perspective."

"Ngaarh!" Sercion groaned. "I do not understand you or your purposes, Pagan. Why do you share this information with us? It is contrary to your interests."

"No," Nwm smiled. "It is contrary to how you would prefer to perceive my interests, to maintain your sense of simplicity in this affair. I recognize that there are some things that I cannot address alone, and I trust Eadric’s judgement in this."

"Because he is the Ahma," Sercion nodded.

"No, despite it," Nwm replied, exasperated. "Finally," he added, "I should mention the fact that I was scried on my journey here. I don't know by whom, or for what reason, but I broke the sensor. There are dozens of possibilities."

Eadric nodded. "You are not the first to complain of tacit observation. Several of the high-ranking Templars have mentioned as much. Asser is one possibility, Daunton is another, and there may be other Diviners retained by the Royal Council – either collectively, or individually. Now we may have two Sorceresses to
add to the equation."

"We would probably benefit from Mostin’s presence," Nwm suggested, to the horror of several of those present.

"I will ask Nehael to find him and bring him here," Eadric said. "We will adjourn, and meet again in two hours."

_This is not an Diabolic conspiracy_, Sercion repeated to himself several times.

**

"He is currently at the mansion of Shomei the Infernal," Nehael said to the reassembled council. "I Teleported into the grounds, but did not enter the building itself. I left hastily before a number of Devils descended on me, but managed to convey a message to him. He will be here presently. There is other information, but it can wait."

Sercion bit his tongue.

Lome, the erstwhile deputy steward of Deorham, and a knight who, although loyal to Trempa, had no particular religious agenda, produced a long scroll and unraveled it.

Eadric gestured for him to continue. He was eager to hear the report – much of it was news to him.

"This is the information that we’ve gathered so far regarding the disposition of already mobilized forces in Wyre. It’s long and tedious, but I’ll skip to the most salient points. Most of it was gathered by either Tahl or the Lady Nehael’s efforts, and is the most up-to-date reconnaissance that we have."

"Eisarn – who may or may not be an ally, depending on the success of Tahl and Brey’s embassy – has two hundred Templar knights and around six hundred crossbowmen in southern Thahan. Until this point, he had been cooperating closely with a large cadre of troops led by Durhm of Lossan, the chief Bannerman of Sihu of Tomur."

"Durhm is a wily opponent," Ryth said with surprising admiration. "My guerillas were hard pressed to contain his assaults."

"However," Lome continued, "it appears that Sihu has recalled him to rejoin her main force, which is currently approaching Lang Herath in Thahan. With Foide’s men, this will mean an army some six-thousand strong, on our northern flank. Command will likely fall to either Skadding, Foide’s son, or Durhm. Skadding has precedence, but Durhm is undoubtedly the more seasoned warrior."

"Shiel, as we have just heard, has deployed a thousand of his men to deal with the Uedilian uprising. There is no reason to assume, therefore, that he is not already in the process of mobilizing the others – another fifteen hundred or so. If Nwm’s report is correct, then the Duke has committed almost his entire cavalry to this operation – note that the remainder of his troops consist mostly of levies, and are poorly trained and equipped."

"And a third of them are Uediians," Ryth said. "Of uncertain loyalty," he added
"I can testify to the accuracy of Nwm’s information," Nehael interjected. "I have myself just observed the army moving south from Jiuhu."

"Skilla of Mord has undoubtedly received a Royal Summons," Lome eyed Ryth, suggesting that further interruption was unwelcome, "but as yet we have no news of troop movements. Hethio’s forces are in disarray with the removal of Temple leadership.* The Duke of Kaurban, however, is already within striking distance. His force is small – less than a thousand – but highly mobile. He is three days northwest of here."

"Finally," Lome continued, "Prince Tagur’s main force has already left Gibilrazen – ten thousand, trained, disciplined and highly motivated. It will be at least a fortnight before they reach Morne, probably more. Aside from these, no other magnate presents any kind of threat. At present."

"As to Morne itself, and the King," Lome added, almost as an afterthought, "the city guard number around twelve hundred – many of them are part-time militiamen, with little or no experience of organized war. A number of Thanes and Baronets who count the King as their feudal master, as well as Captains of the Royal Demesnes, are being recalled to Morne. Tiuhan’s estates are scattered across Wyre, however: we can probably count on no more than two or three thousand being available to him within the next three weeks."

Mostin entered and sat down silently. Mogus emerged from inside of his *Robe of Eyes*, eliciting expressions of fear and disgust amongst several of the knights closest to him. The Alienist stroked the deformed hedgehog affectionately.

"This leaves us in a quandary," Eadric sighed. "Will the Duke of Kaurban’s force attempt to harry us and slow our progress, or will it wait until it joins with Sihu’s men? I would prefer to march on Morne immediately, but I am suspicious of investing the city while leaving an unfought army less than a week away. Further, can any of these nobles be wooed and turned?"

Sercion grunted. "Not Kaurban. *Ahma*, if I may? Give me three hundred Templars, and half your Ardanese riders, and I will ensure that his men are removed as a potential problem."

"Olann?" Eadric asked the *de facto* leader of the mercenaries.

"I don’t see why not," the wiry Ardanese Captain replied. "Provided that due respect is afforded us."

"Precisely," Eadric replied. "Sercion, your request is granted on two conditions. Firstly, you cooperate with Thane Streek of Jorbu – I would have a third of your heavy cavalry comprised of Trempans. Second, that you do not attempt to undermine Olann’s command."

Sercion stuttered. "*Ahma*, I must..."

"Olann will lead the brigade, Sercion."

"As you wish, *Ahma*.

"And take care that pride does not subtly inform your choices, Sercion," Eadric warned.
The Templar nodded dumbly.

"Nehael," Eadric sighed, "there was something else that you wished to share?"

The Succubus nodded. "Rimilin of the Skin is riding with Shiel of Jiuhu's men," she said.

Mogus squeaked.

**

In Magathei, Ortwin relaxed amid the splendour of Ulao's court, and the affairs of Wyre seemed remote and long ago. His ode, which the Bard personally felt was long and tedious, was received with rapturous applause by the Prince's followers, and with a satisfied grin by Ulao himself. Ortwin had certainly done his homework in researching the Djinn's past, and the performance captured Ulao's triumphs and conquests – both of the romantic and military nature – admirably.

The Bard’s ability to ingratiate himself without seeming at all ingratiating, had held him in good stead, and his easy manner had endeared him to many of those who attended the Prince.

Except the Sidhe, Nunimmin.

Whether it was a perceived rivalry, or perhaps a realization on some level that they were too similar, their initial mutual dislike blossomed into a thinly-veiled hatred, and exchanges between the two were characterized by innuendos which, at times, bordered on direct insults.

Nunimmin – ancient, beautiful, cool and aloof – was a sophisticated aesthete, and a bard of exceptional talent. As a true native of Faerie, he regarded Ortwin and his ilk from the Prime Plane as being wholly inferior: wanderers in a world long overwhelmed by mortal griefs and concerns. His spite towards the Satyr was confounded yet further when his partner of several millennia – a half-elemental Nymph named Yoriel – evinced an interest in the 'rustic charm' that Ortwin brought to Ulao's court.

Ortwin was smitten despite himself, and found that he shook whenever in the Nymph’s presence. He tried his best to avoid Yoriel and focus on the matter in hand which, as far as he could remember, had something to do with courtship and marriage. Iua’s attitude of amusement at his discomfort helped little. At other times, she played the role of dutiful daughter so well that the Bard wondered what he had embroiled himself in.

Under the watchful eye of Orop, a large but simple Djinn who had been entrusted with chaperoning Iua, Ortwin and the duelist met in one of the numerous small orchards in Ulao's palace grounds.

"There will be a dowry, of course," Iua said.

"Oh?" The Bard replied with poorly feigned surprise.

"Don't play the innocent with me, Ortwin," Iua sighed. "You knew damn well there would be one."
"This may come as a revelation, Iua," Ortwin said, genuinely offended, "but I’m not doing this for the money. I actually quite like you."

"You quite like me. Well, that’s decent. We don’t want to get too carried away, do we?"

"Iua, I fall in love – or lust – on a regular basis. It’s no real gauge of my affection for someone, and doesn’t inform my decisions particularly helpfully. I was bad enough before, but since my...er..."

"Satyriasis?" She suggested.

"Yes," the Bard agreed. "Well, my hormonal urges are even more pronounced than before. It’s my basic nature."

"I know," she sighed. "Ortwin, understand that I was raised in the court of a Djinn who is considered a philanderer amongst even his own kind. I am half-Auran. I lack the moral baggage of mortals as much as you do."

"Hmm," Ortwin replied.

"Although I am less of an erotomaniac," she added.

"Hmm," Ortwin said again, somehow reassured. "How big a dowry are we talking, anyway?"

"Well, you must consider that I am his one-hundred and eighty-sixth child. I am favoured, however, and Ulao still holds a soft spot for Mulissu despite what he might say."

Ortwin nodded and gestured for her to continue.

"And," she continued in a low voice, so that Orop could not overhear, "he seems to think highly of you for some bizarre reason. He has the impression that you are some kind of bigwig."

"I am the best liar in the world," he admitted. "That is a title of some distinction. But how much?" He added, impatiently.

"Two hundred thousand gold pieces," she said.

Ortwin shook, and giggled inanely.

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POST 9: HERE AND THERE; AND THIS, THAT AND THE OTHER: PART 2

Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 23rd October 2002, 11:56 PM

At Eadric’s request, Mostin erected his looking-glass in order to best observe the events that transpired outside of a village called Hrim Eorth, three days southwest of Morne, on the morning of the Summer Solstice. The Alienist had scried the main antagonists in the impending conflict: Hullu, and Fustil - the Baron of Utlund, and Captain of Jiuhu’s forces.
The Tunthi tribesman had elected to intercept the cavalry on a meadow formed by a broad meander in the river Nenning, next to which the main road to Morne passed. It was on open ground that, on first inspection, conferred no particular tactical advantage to his Bagaudas, and invited a mounted charge.

"I wonder what he’s playing at," Eadric mused.

Mostin concentrated yet further, and scenes too rapid to understand flashed across the surface of the mirror. Another figure appeared.

A handsome man, with an oily sheen to his skin, riding a Phantom Steed. Mostin grimaced in anticipation of his sensor being detected, but fortunately the subject did not seem to notice – or perhaps to care. There again, he thought, we’re probably not the only people watching this.

"Rimilin," the Alienist said. "A worrying development, to say the least."

"Acting in an ‘auxiliary capacity,’ I assume," Nwm suggested.

"Yes," Mostin said dubiously. "Although to my knowledge, Rimilin’s divination skills are rather lackluster."

"What does he want?" Nwm asked. "I mean, what’s his angle?"

"Power," Mostin sighed. "There is no other reason for submitting oneself to symbiosis with a demon. It arrests and distorts the native ability of bonded wizards, forcing bizarre changes upon them."

"In Wyre, that seems rather short-sighted," Nwm said. "The Injunction being what it is."

Eadric shifted uneasily, and recalled the appearance of Jovol – if it had been Jovol – in his dream, and Nehael’s words afterwards. He had yet to share his suspicions regarding the Ogre-Mage with either Mostin or Nwm.

"Other lands," Mostin said. "Other worlds and planes. If dominion is your goal, why not start out somewhere quiet, where you can build your resources carefully?"

"I would hardly call Wyre ‘quiet’ at present," Eadric remarked wrily.

Rimilin smiled, and doffed his cap several times at empty spaces in the sky. Mostin laughed despite himself.

"He is acknowledging that he is being scrutinized – I suspect that Daunton is also observing with interest, and probably others. I wonder why he hasn’t warded himself. At least he’ll play by the book. Rimilin is not popular, and is unlikely to do anything which is questionable."

A flash of insight erupted into Eadric’s mind. Patterns shifted, coalesced, and bifurcated on new levels.

"He is about to violate the Injunction," the Paladin said.

"That is unlikely," Mostin answered.
Expressions of confusion crossed the faces of those present as they looked into the mirror. From inside of his coat, the Acolyte of the Skin produced an eagle chick, not yet even a fledgling. Its short wings were bound to its sides. With one deft movement, Rimilin twisted its neck and cast it to the ground.

"A sacrifice?" Nwm asked.

"Or a message," Eadric replied.

"Observe the legs of the horses nearby," Mostin said. "They are moving to attack."

Rimilin himself, however, slowed his steed and cast a spell. An image appeared in the air next to him, seeming to float above his outstretched hand. It was of a town consumed by fire and was replaced by the ghostly face of a rather familiar Wizard.

Mostin’s jaw dropped, as he gazed at an apparition of himself. "Which town was that?" He asked.

"It looked like Jiuhu to me," Eadric replied.

The mirror went blank.

"But the battle..." Nwm protested.

"Shut up," Mostin said. He refocused and, from a great height, Jiuhu – Ortwin’s home in his prior life – appeared upon the surface of the looking-glass. A dozen or more scattered patches, each fifty or sixty feet wide, were burning amid the closely built timber homes in the town’s old quarter. Flames leapt easily from one wooden building to the next, as crowds rushed through the streets and people jostled to escape the fire.

"Sh*t," the Alienist said. "That wasn’t me."

Immediately, Nwm acted. Sprouting wings from his back, he turned to Mostin. "Keep the portal open," he said, and stepped through.

He appeared briefly in the skies above the town: it was windy, and gusts were fuelling the eager flames below. Nwm invoked the power in the Orb of Storms atop his staff.

Dead calm, torrential rain, he commanded, before stepping back through the portal.

"That should do it," the Druid said, "although it’ll take a while for the weather to reorganize itself."

By the time that Mostin had reoriented the mirror, and was looking again to the battle near Hrim Eorth, the scene was one of utter carnage.

*

Hullu ordered his archers – comprised in equal parts of longbowmen and crossbowmen – to begin shooting as soon as the front of horsemen came within
range. Dozens of lightly armoured outriders on coursers fell, and horses toppled.

Behind, the ranks of plate-clad aristocrats thundered on.

*Not enough archers,* Hullu remarked wryly to himself.

The witches – whose names the Tunthi warrior still didn’t know – stood nearby. Hullu scratched his head dubiously, and wondered whether they possessed as much power as they claimed.

*Ah, well,* he sighed, *too late to worry about it now.* He hefted his shield, drew Melancholy from its black scabbard, and invoked the protection of his clan’s Totemic guardian.

One of the witches, who had been muttering quietly to herself for ten minutes or more, suddenly fell to the ground and began to screech and writhe, strings of bizarre syllables issuing from her mouth. The pikemen nearby looked shaken and disturbed, but Hullu’s heart leapt.

*FROMTHELINNASHEISFROMTHELINNA.*

*OHGODSANDPROTECTORSHOWCANITHANKYOU.*

*YOUCAMETOMEINMYHOUROFNEED.*

He almost wept with joy.

The river, slow and ponderous, asleep for millennia beyond count, awoke.

*

Rimilin, warded from the rain of arrows and bolts, gazed at the ranks of Uediian guerillas and farmers ahead of him, and wondered if Nwm was present. He considered his assurances to the Royal Council – not to deploy his magical armamentarium in a tactical capacity – and grinned wickedly as he remembered his agreement with Graz’zt. The Aristocrats were lowering their lances.

*Let’s smoke out the Druid,* he whistled merrily to himself, as he launched a *Fireball* at the front rank of pikemen, instantly immolating forty of them. *Oops, there goes the Injunction*.

Fustil, the commander of Jiuhu’s forces, looked at him in disbelief.

Rimilin’s smile vanished. Agony overwhelmed him as water evaporated from his body. *What the Hell? A Necromancer? Where?* All around him, knights and horses collapsed screaming. Fustil’s steed tumbled, flinging the unconscious Baron to the ground, where he was trampled by the hooves of a dozen others. Ahead, the Acolyte of the Skin detected a distortion in the air in front of the disordered Uediian front line.

Some trick of the Druid’s? He urged his mount to full speed, and it shot forward like a thunderbolt. Rimilin launched another *Fireball* at the distortion, which seemed to quiver under the force of the blast. A gust of frigid air wafted over him from behind, and glancing back, Rimilin saw that a huge curtain of ice – fifty yards long – had appeared between himself and the bulk of the cavalry. Knights swelled around the ends of the wall, but many of those in whose path it lay crashed into the barrier, or arrested their charge, resulting in chaos.
A wizard. It had to be a wizard, Rimilin thought desperately, but which one?. He cursed, banked his Phantom Steed away and flung another Fireball.

*

"I stand corrected," Mostin said to Eadric, as they observed the Acolyte launch another magical attack.

"What is going on there?" Nwm groaned. "Where did the Wall of Ice come from? And what is that?" He pointed to the distortion.

As if in response to his question, it shifted, and grew, and suddenly manifested. The Paladin coughed.

"Er, Ed," Nwm said, "That’s a Dragon. A big black one."

"Apparently," Mostin agreed.

*

At the appearance of the colossal winged reptile, a hundred feet or more from its snout to the tip of its tail, Rimilin veered his steed away and Teleported. He didn’t care if it was a Dragon, or a Shapechanged Wizard. Either way, he was out of his league, and was going.

Not before loosing another Fireball, however.

**

Mesikämmi leaned on her staff and smiled. Ah, the River here was ancient. He knew all kinds of tricks.

Nearby, the Succubus, Chr’ri, stood impassively. Anarchy and death – yes. Not entirely what she had anticipated, but anarchy and death nonetheless. That was good enough.

*Traditionally, Hethio, the richest province in Wyre (not counting Einir, technically a Principality), has always looked to the Temple for direction in times of crisis. Many of the Templars themselves are natives of Hethio – sons and brothers of its numerous minor nobility. With the realignment of so many Templars in favour of Eadric, the removal of a Bishop very active in temporal politics, and repeated harassment by Hullu’s Bagaudas, the ineffectual and aging Duke, Falaere, was unable to actualize his considerable resources. Furthermore, many of his bannermen were reluctant or unwilling to meet their own kin in battle.
End Note: Mesikämmi used a *Spirit Ally* spell to call a Greater Nature Spirit.

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**POST 10: ANSWERS TO SOME QUESTIONS**

Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 27th October 2002, 04:57 AM

Trying to keep to my promise to answer questions, here :rolleyes:

Quote:
One question I gotta ask, however....How do you run mass combat in your game?

In the past I’ve tried using various miniatures rules, but I found them too cumbersome. Presently, I must admit its largely a 'wing-it' kind of system - I react to the strategies of the PCs wrt troop deployment, but I'm no military theorist so ultimately I can only use common sense. The *individual* actions of players (notably Eadric - to date) are very hard to translate onto the larger scheme of things: I have a selection of 'encounters' which are possible within the larger framework of the battle, and try to extrapolate from there. Moving the story forwards is obviously the driving force, and during mass combat it becomes more of a collaborative effort.

I'm really lucky, in that my players can shift perspectives very easily - between the 'DM vs Player' paradigm and the 'We need to collaborate on what happens next' paradigm. I'm not afraid of granting them the responsibility, but they understand that I can override it and veto their decisions at any time.

Quote:
Now, to the question: When you are considering all strategical movements of the different armies, do you use a map and pin out their

That is exactly what I do: I have a map of Wyre which is around 3' x 4', with lots of different colour pins with labels attached. Marc (Eadric's player) and I sit and look at the map and brood.

No, really, we do. Sad, isn't it? My wife thinks we're crazy.

Quote:
Really, after so much had gone through, is our Ahma still in love with our Lady Nehael? Also, how did Nehael feel, especially after her atonement and Nwm's guidance, do their relationship just end like that?

I am just curious, the involved event were so complicated that I can't possibly imagine how they will feel. Please enlighten me.

I don't want to give too much away - suffice to say that that drama has yet to be concluded. BTW, welcome, Guardian Andy. Glad you like the story.

Quote:
Do you all meet together as a group when you play? Or do you handle characters...
that are off on their own separately?

Usually we meet together - bear in mind that the backstory has been pretty important recently, and that the actual time devoted to players' actions in the last few posts has been quite small. If, say, Ortwin is in the spotlight, the other players usually just sit back and wait - a lot of the chopping and changing between scenes is because my notes run in the order that the players are active.

For a very long periods of single-player focus, there is always the Playstation for the others.

Quote:
I'm curious now. Where do the 'loths fit into your cosmology, Sepulchrave?

This is complex, because this requires the kind of cosmological absolutism that I've been trying to avoid in the game.

According to Eadric, and Orthodoxy, there are various entities dwelling in the 'Unnamed Regions' between the Abyss and Hell. They are also considered to be 'Fallen,' in the same manner as demons and devils. Presumably, they didn't make it all the way to the Abyss, when the refugees rejected the Adversary's 'alternative society.'

On a connected note, one poster mentioned the idea of 'Paradigm' and wrote about the importance in the game of Mage: The Ascension. I've never played Mage, but I think I understand the similarity. I'll present five different cosmologies below - as held by the PCs, and one NPC (in this case Shomei). They are markedly different, but not necessarily mutually exclusive. They just represent different perspectives.

**Eadric’s Perspective** in brief:

1. The Highest Reality is the Heaven of Oronthon.
2. The World of Men is the testing ground which has the potential to purify the Human soul for entrance into Heaven.
3. The Hells are the Abode of Devils, the Abyss of Demons, who were expelled from Heaven for rebelling. 'Unnamed Regions' stretch between them, where other fell entities lurk.
4. There are an infinity of Limbos in which other intelligences dwell – some good, some bad. Ultimately, however, they are all irrelevant. Phantoms to beguile the unfaithful, the resting places of Pagans and the unbaptized.

**Nwm’s Perspective**

The *Hahio*, the 'Interwoven Green' is everything that matters. It is *Here* and *Now*. It is the world around you. You and it are the same. Everything else is a promise of something which is not *Here and Now*, – why dwell on that? Look at that tree. Look at the sky. **It is enough!**

Other realities? Maybe, but who cares? They are not *Here and Now*

*Uedii* is a convenient term, a device through which we relate to the Green. Is she real? Look at that tree – if you need to ask, **Then You are Not Looking!**
Mostin’s Perspective

All Reality is a function of the consciousness which perceives it. Consciousness directs, shapes and informs the appearance of physicality. Consciousness may be directed by Will.

Will is cultivated through the practice of Magick.

There are billions of realities, all equally valid, all subject to Magickal Will. Consciousness has no limit. It is always moving, becoming something other than it is.

Will directs becoming, beyond good or evil, being or nonbeing, ignorance or gnosis.

I am an unlimited, transcendent, effulgent star. The Gods quake before me. So are you. The difference between us? – I realize it!

Shomei’s Perspective

In large part, Shomei would agree with Mostin. Note that her particular slant is oriented towards the Oronthon-Adversary duality, however.

Shomei’s Becoming, to use Mostin’s terminology, is based in antinomianism – i.e. a rejection of Oronthon’s ‘Law,’ and the adoption of the Adversarial ‘Law’ – to challenge, overcome, to strive against impossible odds, to be forced to fight against and again and again. To fight against Oronthon, and against one’s own ‘moral’ nature: for Shomei, mores are a societal impediment to becoming, or to self-transcendence, and must be destroyed. This requires enormous self-discipline.

Only when morality is obliterated, can the true nature of the individual be realized. Free of all conditioning, it soars. Not moral, not immoral, not even amoral. More like ‘Trans-moral’ or ‘Meta-moral.’

Such an individual acts from instinct, and is always correct in his or her actions.

Note that, in her youth, Shomei was baptized into the Orthodox church. Her rejection of that experience may be responsible in large part for her philosophy.

Ortwin’s Perspective

(Shrugs). Gods? Magic? I suppose they can be useful. But isn’t it really just a lot more trouble than it’s worth?

Now, her – that woman there – well...

POST 11:

Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 27th October 2002, 04:01 PM
Quote:
And is it just me, or does Mostin's view borrow heavily from Aleister Crowley and Thelema?

Quote:
so shomei is a nietzsche freak aye?

Both Shomei and Mostin can be regarded as embracing philosophies which, in our terms, have a kind of Hermetic-Thelemic feel to them. Both wizards draw heavily on contemporary ideas about 'Left-Hand Path Magick' - Mostin's perspective is more consciousness-oriented, whereas Shomei's is more existential.

His attraction to the Far Realms is understandable in this context: they represent a reality in which consciousness is unfettered and has the potential for enormous expression: beyond even, say, Limbo. Even in Limbo, there potentiality is limited by ideas such as matter, space and time.

Shomei's ideas are Nietzschean to an extent - in that ideas of self-transcendence are understood in terms of 'self-overcoming.' The Fall (of the Devils) is more important as a mythopoeic device to Shomei than as an event which occurred at a discrete point in cosmic history. She is more concerned with the (to her) archetypal idea of 'Falling'or 'Rebellion' than the actual event itself: it is that, and the struggle of Devils, which moves her. That said, the fugue moods which Shomei experiences (she is prone to intense bouts of depression) stem from a kind of nihilistic angst. On some level, she recognizes that Devils messed up somewhere along the way.

Interestingly, Shomei has enormous respect for Nehael - someone whom she perceives as having shaken off all conditioning.

Quote:
Sep: I'm confused about the black dragon. As far as I can tell Mesikammi summoned the spirit of the river, which took the form of a black dragon? Why not a water elemental? Also, I'm not sure who was casting the different spells. Am i missing something or is this still a mystery?

The Nenning Spirit was casting the spells. I use the Greater Nature Spirit from OA, with the difference that such spirits have no 'visible' form besides an apparent distortion effect when present in normal reality. However, they can manifest (shapeshchange) in any form which they please - in this case a Black Dragon.

One of the hardest things has been to decide how Mesikammi (with a 'shamanic' reality) interacts with the realities presented by, say, Wyrish Magic and Oronthonian belief.
The next few posts are when the proverbial sh*t hits the fan - I'll try and update as often as possible, but my RL schedule is pretty mad at the moment.

This takes us up to 9th September, btw, so I'm slipping behind in the posts - we're probably 6 sessions further on. At the same time, I'm trying not to gloss events too drastically.

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**Morne: Part 1**

"You are in violation of our compact," Kothchori spat at the Succubus, Chomele. "You promised the return of all of my books after Jiuhu."

"And you undertook the obliteration of the town, not a few paltry fireworks," she smiled easily.

"That was not specified in the agreement – merely that I assault the place," he retaliated. "Your master is in breach. I demand their return immediately, or he will suffer at my hands."

Chomele laughed. "What will you do, Kothchori? You have a handful of spells at your disposal: will you Teleport to the Abyss and slay Graz’zt with a Fireball?"

"Return the books," the Mage demanded again.

"Or what?"

"I am not entirely toothless, Chomele."

Instantly, without word or gesture, Kothchori vanished.

Oh, sh*t, the Demoness thought. She immediately made an Ethereal Jaunt to where her contact, the Glabrezu Thurukos waited.

"You incompetent whore," he screamed.

The Demoness sneered. "Relay the news to his Highness. I have not lost the Wizard, merely misplaced him. I will need a larger incentive to woo him, however. And watch your mouth, Pig-face. I am favoured."

Thurukos smiled a wicked smile. "Not for long, pretty-pretty. There are a billion other sluts in the Abyss who are just the same as you."

"Perhaps," she agreed. "But I am not the messenger bearing bad news." And, with that, she rematerialized upon the Prime.

The Succubus waited for an hour, and made a second Ethereal Jaunt. Thurukos, who was waiting, smote her with a Power Word and grabbed her with an enormous pincer around the neck. It bit into her, and ichor dribbled down the Glabrezu’s claw.

"The Prince has divined Kothchori’s location. He is in Fumaril."

"Why?" She choked.
"He is looking for the Elementalist's daughter, you imbecile."

"Is she capable of reaching her mother?" The Succubus was aghast.

"Who knows? Anyway, she's not there, so it doesn't matter. Kothchori is here." (Mental image). "I don't need to tell you of the price of failure."

"No, indeed," she replied. She smiled to herself. The sprite, Orolde, would give her the leverage she needed. Kothchori seemed to care about his servant more than anyone else in the world.

Quite touching, really.

**

Eadric observed events at Hrim Eorth in the wake of the massacre which had occurred there. Hullu's *Bagaudas* moved amongst the fallen, looting their bodies, and dispatching those who still breathed with dagger thrusts to the throat.

The Dragon – or whatever it had been – had vanished, but not before wreaking havoc amongst the armoured nobility of Jiuhu and their mounted retainers. As if to press the point home, the witches – whom Mostin had located around halfway into the battle – had dragged a quartet of fire elementals into the fray, panicking the horses and decimating the front ranks of an already disordered charge. Under Hullu's direction, the rain of quarrels and arrows continued to descend upon his enemies. He had reordered his troops – resisting numerous requests from his underlings to surge forwards – and the brave and foolish few who had reached the Uedilian lines found the pikemen waiting for them.

Eadric sighed. Aristocrats could be such arrogant, ignorant bastards. Although he regretted the loss of life, he had little sympathy for the group of brightly-clad knights who had continued despite all odds. At least those who fled were still alive.

A year ago, he would have felt differently, but a lot had happened in that time. The tourneys at Trempa were a lifetime away.

"What will you do?" He asked Mostin.

"Do?" The Alienist questioned.

"You have just witnessed the violation of the Injunction," Eadric said. "Aren't you honour-bound to follow up on it?"

"Honour? No. Pragmatism and concern that this does not escalate further – I suppose so. Others who were observing will have seen the image evoked by Rimilin, however. I am implicated in the assault upon Jiuhu. If an assembly forms, they will probably have questions for me as well."

"And that concerns you?"

"Ultimately, no," Mostin replied. "Rimilin’s suggestion that I was the first to act in contempt is hardly plausible. Mud sticks, however, no matter who throws it. I will wait until someone contacts me – it might look rather suspicious if I immediately
embark upon a crusade to bring Rimilin to justice, whilst being under scrutiny myself. Especially this recently after Deorham. I'll just go about my business normally."

"How long before one of the other mages approaches you?" Nwm asked.

"Not too long, I'd imagine," Mostin smiled.

Fifteen minutes passed, and a sensor appeared nearby. Seconds later, Shomei appeared. Eadric immediately became uneasy.

"I thought you were in Hell," Mostin remarked wrily.

"News travels fast," she replied. "Did you do Jiuhu?"

"Certainly not," the Alienist said. "Ask the Paladin, here. Besides, I'd have used Sonics." Mostin raised an eyebrow. "This is the second time that you've called me on the Injunction, Shomei. What are you, the legal enforcer in Wyre?"

"Hardly," she laughed. "But think about it, Mostin. If things are about to go haywire – and I have information that would suggest that this is the case – perhaps now is a good time to assert oneself."

"Maybe," Mostin agreed dubiously. "What do you mean, haywire?"

"Ask him," she said, pointing at Eadric.

Mostin turned to look at Eadric quizzically.

"I've had the odd dream or two," Eadric admitted.

"Go on," Mostin said slowly.

"I believe that Jovol might intervene in the current crisis."

"Jovol has communicated to you through dreams? That is a rare honour. What did he say?"

"Well, nothing, actually," The Paladin replied. "He just appeared. Made his presence known. I believe that he is benign."

"Jovol's motivations are obscure at best," Mostin said.

"How powerful is he?" Eadric asked.

"No-one really knows," Mostin admitted. "Perhaps very. I've never met him. I think Hlioth used to know him, before she went crazy."

Nwm sighed.

"I think he may be an ally," Eadric carefully said. "Although I don't know for sure."

"Jovol is active," Shomei confirmed. "My sources inform me of as much."

Eadric's head reeled. Her sources? What sources? Devils, but which ones? This woman was beyond him. She had personal contact with entities whose names, for
him, embodied the ultimate evil in the Universe. Names which appeared in lists of the Fallen. But she bore no taint. It made no sense – she was an impossible paradox. Had she encountered even Him? The nameless Adversary? And she would facilitate the translation of a Duke of Hell who would, at some point, tempt him. Somehow, however, he could not see her as an enemy. Was that a device of the Enemy? Ngaarh! Don’t go there, you’ll go crazy.

"All things are necessary," Nehael said, stepping into the tent and sitting.

The knot of logical impasse within the Paladin’s mind instantly evaporated, and he experienced a feeling of relief.

He remembered Nwm’s words regarding Nehael: She spoke to me of a Middle Way.

**

"Is that it?" Ortwin asked. He had expected something somewhat more formal. "There is no ceremony? No celebration? No congratulations? No Gifts?"

"Why should there be?" Iua asked. "Ulao is the law here. He just says: ‘let it be so,’ and it is."

"So what now?" The Bard asked.

"I am no longer his responsibility. Also, note, from now on he owes me no guidance or aid. That is now your duty. You also, of course, owe him your fealty, if and when he requests it."

"Fealty?" Ortwin asked, horrified. "Now hang on. If this is some feudal bullsh*t thing, then he can forget it."

"The exchange is made," Iua said, shrugging. "I assumed that you knew the implications of marriage to an Elemental noble, however minor. If it’s any consolation, I think that its unlikely that he’ll call upon your services any time soon."

"Great," Ortwin said sarcastically.

"We should find a Janni, and make our way back to the Prime," Iua said, holding up a small bag and grinning.

"For the journey?" Ortwin asked.

Iua opened the bag, which was full of flawless corundum stones. "Our dowry," she said. "Of course, Djinn law requires that the bride alone determines how it is spent."

Ortwin looked at her askance.

"I’m joking, Ortwin," she smiled. "What do you want to do with it? We could buy a castle."

"Ed’s got one already," Ortwin said. "Assuming he’s not King of Wyre by now. No – let’s just squander it."
Eadric's decision to march immediately upon Morne was not undertaken lightly. He sent fast riders to bring instructions to Olann, Sercion and Streek – who had already been dispatched with a sizeable cavalry – to contain the army of the Duke of Kaurban as well as the combined troops of Tomur and Thahan, should they attempt to intercept Eadric’s main force. He reinforced them with another fifty Templars and three hundred mounted auxiliaries, but issued dire warnings against meeting the numerically superior forces of Foide and Sihu in open battle.

The news that Tahl brought, that Eisarn would support him, lifted his mood somewhat. But Eisarn’s units were four days away, and had no hope of joining with him before the Paladin moved out. They were also in Thahan – now, to all intents, hostile territory.

Hullu. Hullu was a concern. What would he do?

The Uediians had not pulled back after the battle at Hrim Eorth, but their Cingetomaru – their war leader – had ordered the entire camp to uproot and move northeast. He was also heading straight for Morne, and support for the movement would undoubtedly grow even more rapidly. His negotiating position would become very strong very quickly – already, indentured farmers whose families had, for years, served the Oronthonian nobility of northern Hethio, were deserting their masters and flocking to join the popular movement.

And – unknown to Eadric - Mesikämmi was not remiss in disseminating knowledge of the events that had transpired near the Nenning. But, despite her own desires, and following the advice offered by the Succubus Chr’ri, she maintained a discreet distance from Hullu himself.

"Maintaining a certain mystery is never a bad thing," Chr’ri had said with a wicked smile.

Nwm undertook the responsibility of speaking with Hullu again – partly to gauge the Tunthi warrior's position, and partly to attempt to determine the identity of the sorceresses who were aiding him

"I will accompany you," Eadric insisted.

"That is probably unwise, given the current climate," Nwm said. "Besides, I’m going to the mountains for a day or two before I meet with Hullu."

"Mountains?"

"I have a pair of eagles to catch," he said mysteriously, before vanishing into mist.

Hyne entered Eadric's tent shortly afterwards. "They are ready," his herald said.

Eadric sighed. "Very well. Sound the trumpets. We’re moving out."

Ten thousand soldiers – nobles, Templars, squires, retainers, mercenaries, auxiliaries, and levies – as well as numerous camp followers, began to crawl towards Morne.
Nwm arrived in the woods near Deorham, and was greeted by the immense form of the bear Tostig, who slobbered over him. The Druid touched him gently on the nose. Nwm incanted briefly, and when he spoke, the sounds which issued from his throat which guttural whines and growls.

"Tostig, free. Go. Eat berries and fish. Find mate."

The Bear grunted, and lumbered back into the woods. Nwm smiled. No change there, then, he thought ironically. The last of his erstwhile menagerie, Tostig had long since been left to his own devices. He would probably still loiter in the woods there – there were, after all, plenty of fish in the numerous streams which crossed Eadric’s land.

Lots of land, Nwm reminded himself. Eadric was now Earl of Deorham, and Soraine had bestowed the estates of Hernath and Droming on him. The Paladin was, in fact, very, very rich.

The Druid lamented the loss of warm evenings spent on the Steeple with Ortwin and Eadric in idle conversation. Before conflict, or Alienists, or Succubi.

Change. Always Change, he grinned, and flew north to the mountains. Regret was not in his nature.

He sped over Thahan, brooding under the threat of war; over the cold, dark waters of the lake of the same name, and passed over Dramore, ascending into the dizzying aeries of the high Thrumohars. Through his torc, the Druid’s mind reached out and he began to search.

Chomele found Kothchori amongst the sprawl of Fumaril with little difficulty, his exact location revealed to her by Thurukos. He was pestering passers-by for information regarding Mulissu’s daughter, only to receive blank and uncomprehending stares.

He was still filthy and ragged: most people mistook him for a beggar, or a madman, or both.

Chomele – hooded, and clothed in the garb of an expensive courtesan, approached him wearing a different face to the one he had previously encountered. It was only when she stood a few feet from him, that she revealed herself.

She threw a tiny severed hand to the ground at the Wizard’s feet.

"Orolde has another hand, and two feet," she smiled. "Plus two ears, two eyes, and a rather pathetic set of genitalia. You will do as commanded, Kothchori. Do I make myself clear?"

He nodded dumbly.
Three days passed, each more threatening and ominous than the last. Time seemed to drag interminably for Eadric. Moving troops was frustratingly slow and tedious – making camp, breaking camp, his speed limited to the plod of his heavy infantry, lest his army separated and the columns of men, horses and wagons became spread too thinly and vulnerable.

News of the movements of other units continually reached him through his scouts and through Mostin’s divinations.

To the north, Kaurban’s force retreated under the advance of Olann, but refused to meet the Ardanese captain in battle. Rather, it simply withdrew further into Thahan, and taunted the Templars and mercenaries to pursue it.

The combined army of Foide and Sihu had left Lang Herath and was moving upon a course which, unless Eadric entered Morne within two or three days, threatened to intercept him outside of the capitol. It was led by Durhm, as he had anticipated. Somewhere behind them, the Paladin knew that Eisarn followed.

Mostin’s efforts to find Rimilin had been unsuccessful, and the Alienist concluded that must be Mind Blanked. As he sat on his horse, Mostin thought. Logically, the Acolyte must have an item to provide this benefit – the spell was undoubtedly beyond his means. How had he acquired such a fabulous treasure? A patron seemed likely – probably a demon, given Rimilin’s inclinations, and probably Graz’zt, given the history of the current conflict. Rimilin would have likely compacted. He rode up the line of troops and spoke to Eadric.

"Demons," he announced.

Eadric sighed. It hardly came as a surprise.

Shomei visited Waide and Hlioth and Tozinak, in an attempt to form a quorum for action and tried without success to contact Jovol. She cursed the Ogre-Mage for his arrogance in the affair – what in hell’s name was he playing at? He was so damned superior. Both Waide and Tozinak were sympathetic to her solicitations, although each conceded that little could be done until Rimilin was, in fact, located. And the matter of Jiuhu also remained: who had perpetrated the attack?

Hlioth the Green Witch was, predictably, disinclined to help.

As Eadric set camp that night, in wide fertile fields barely a day from Morne, news reached him that his scouts and Hullu’s outriders had spotted each other south of the city. Durhm’s force was rapidly closing on his position from the northeast, and the gates to the city were closed and barred – most of the inhabitants of the outlying farms having already retreated within its walls. Morne’s defenses were in place, although it appeared that the Royal Council was not deploying troops beyond the city itself. They probably worried that there were too many variables.

Eadric laughed. He understood that all too clearly.

Just before midnight, Ortwin and Iua arrived in the camp, borne on a fierce wind evoked by the duelist. Eadric, seemingly more human again – to Ortwin’s relief – fretted continually about the situation. He was eased to find the Bard as
nonchalant as ever, and experienced the distractions offered by Ortwin’s (unexaggerated) stories of Magathei as a welcome break.

At one o’clock in the morning, Mostin and Nehael entered Eadric’s tent. The Alienist reached into his Portable Hole, and erected his mirror.

“I think you should probably see this,” the Mostin said. He waved a hand, and an image rapidly formed upon the surface of the looking-glass.


Morne.

“What happened?” Eadric asked, aghast.

“We are still trying to work that out,” Nehael replied. “Hullu is leading an assault within the walls, but we aren’t sure who is responsible for the fires – maybe those who are with him, maybe Rimilin, perhaps whoever assaulted Jiuhu. And the Temple – several of the outbuildings have collapsed, the Fane building shows signs of enormous weakening.”

“I suspect it was hit by an Earthquake,” Mostin suggested. "Maybe more than one."

“How did Hullu get in?” Eadric asked, groaning.

The scene on the mirror shifted again, around to the eastern side of the city. A long rent, seeming in the very fabric of space itself, penetrated the twenty-foot thick curtain wall.

"Passwalls," Mostin said. "Maybe twenty or thirty of them. He has access to very potent magic."

“And he is attempting to seize the city?"

"Unlikely," Nehael replied. "He has at most two hundred men with him – although undoubtedly they are the best of his Bagaudas. No, this is more of a guerilla raid. And a demonstration of his seriousness."

"Can you find Nwm?"

Mostin concentrated briefly, and the face of the Druid appeared in the mirror. He was sitting on an icy outcrop with two eagles. He seemed unperturbed by the precipice – a drop of nearly a thousand feet – which stretched below him. As the sensor appeared, he raised an eyebrow, and began to cast a spell.

Mostin stuck his head through the mirror.

"It’s only me," the Alienist said. "Do you really need to associate with such loathsome creatures?"

"What an ill-mannered human," one of the eagles remarked.

Mostin would have blinked if he’d had eyelids.

“They are Awakened,” Nwm grinned. “Take care not to insult them. I would like to introduce Sem and Gheim. Sem, Gheim, this is Mostin the Metagnostic. He is a
friend, but rather distrusting of avians."

"Unfortunate," Sem remarked drily.

"You keep dubious company, Nwm," Gheim added.

Mostin groaned. A pair of birds that talked. That was all he needed. "I assume that you haven't spoken to Hullu, yet?" He asked.

"He is safe for now. I had planned to catch up with him tomorrow."

"Change your plans," Mostin said. "He's in Morne, causing chaos."

**

The old fire that he'd felt in the Linna in his youth had returned to him. The speed, the danger, the exhilaration. A rage that bordered on ecstasy. Somehow, however, it seemed to persist. His desire to slay was immense, moving through his body like a tide.

He had felt the ground rumble, observed the rain of Fireballs that had erupted from the sky. He didn't know who, or how, or where it had come from – the two sorceresses who accompanied him were quiescent, and as distant and restrained as always. Bells clamoured across the city in response to the fires.

It didn't matter. He had cut a rift into the wall, thrusting Melancholy into the dressed granite, and dragging her slowly through the stone. The great blocks had parted easily, as if folded back upon themselves. His Bagaudas, under cover of night, had crept below the walls and followed him beyond.

The streets were already in uproar, with lights kindling, people banging on doors, families streaming out of houses, guards dashing impotently around and everyone cursing the sky.

"Kill," Hullu screamed insanely, and the guerillas fell upon those present indiscriminately.

POST 13: MORNE: PART 2

Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 7th November 2002, 09:57 PM

Needless to say, things get more complicated. Mostin finally takes an ethical stance - but it is not what the other characters expect. Nwm is confronted with a moral dilemma about whether to heal or not. Mesikammi pulls out all the stops, and the sh*t clogs the fan up a little more.

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Morne: Part 2
“Er, so what do we do, Ed?” Ortwin asked, looking into the mirror. The scenes that played across it were horrific and brutal. “We can’t just let that happen, can we?”

“No,” Eadric replied. “Buff up. We’re going through.”

Abruptly, Mostin waved his hand. The looking-glass of Urm-Nahat became a simple reflective surface. “You’ll need to find another way.”

“Mostin…” Eadric began.

“No.” He was adamant. “Bailing you out at Deorham, I used it. Getting Ortwin to the crossings on the Nund, I used it. Getting Nwm to mess with the weather at Jiuhu, I used it. Gods, I even used it just now to get Nwm from some mountain in who-knows-where. I have a suggestion, Eadric: would you like me to use the mirror to get your whole army into Morne?”

“Well, no,” Eadric replied.

“Why not?”

“Because it would be a violation…”

“…of the Injunction,” Mostin finished for him. “Correct. Is there any difference? Do you see how it starts, now? This has got nothing to do with me being caught and tried by the other Wizards: frankly, I don’t think they’d even bother at this stage. This is about why there is an Injunction in the first place. You know, I think I actually have an ethical position on this. I know it’s hard to believe. Hell, we might even have an Injunction so that the little guy – you know, ‘Uediian farmer X’ or ‘Oronthonian Lard Merchant Y’ can lead a happier, less stressful life.”

“It is,” Ortwin agreed.

Mostin looked puzzled.

“Hard to believe that you have an ethical position on something,” the Bard explained.

“We’re wasting time,” Eadric moaned. “How long to Wind Walk there, Nwm?”

“Ten minutes. But it doesn’t matter – I’ve not got one prepared.”

“Perhaps Tahl…”

“I’ll go to Hullu,” the Druid sighed, “it’s sort of my responsibility, anyway.” He sank into the ground.

“Find Tahl,” Eadric yelled at Tatterbrand. The squire ran off to comply.

The Paladin glowered at Mostin, who refocused. Nwm appeared upon the face of the mirror.

Before the Alienist could even open his mouth in disbelief, Ortwin had leapt through.

Find yourself another diviner.” The Alienist dropped the looking-glass into his Portable Hole.

“Mostin…”

“No,” he replied. “The line is drawn, Eadric. You have presumed on our friendship too much – all of you. I’m pissed off. No-one seems to respect my position in this. They think: ‘Oh, it’s just Mostin being cranky, he’ll come around.’” The Alienist was ranting as he stormed out of the tent.

Eadric looked at Nehael.

“He’s got a point,” the Succubus said.

Moments later Tahl, accompanied by Tatterbrand, entered. The Inquisitor looked groggy and bewildered.

“Can you Wind-Walk us to Morne?” Eadric asked.

Tahl shook his head. “No, Ahma. I didn’t expect it would be needed. Is it important?”

“Yes,” Eadric thundered.

“There is always Zhuel,” Tahl suggested.

Zhuel, the Paladin thought. Of course. He motioned in the air, and the celestial manifested.

“I need you to get me to Morne,” Eadric said desperately.

“You are the Ahma,” Zhuel replied. “Your word is law. However, I have one thing to ask: should you jeopardize your own life in this manner?”

Eadric’s mind reeled, as arguments cascaded through his brain. His duty to those who followed him. His duty to Wyre. His duty to posterity. His duty to Oronthon. His duty to his friends. His duty to protect the innocent.

Nehael slapped him, eliciting looks of horror from Tahl and Tatterbrand. “You’re thinking too much again,” she said.

“We go,” Eadric said.

“Best speed?” Nehael asked.

Eadric nodded.

She smiled and vanished. Moments later, Eadric, Tahl, Iua and Tatterbrand assumed nebulous forms. But before they sped westwards, Eadric spoke to Zhuel.

“Go straight to Nwm and Ortwin and Nehael,” the Paladin commanded.

“I am charged with guarding you,” Zhuel replied.

“You can guard me again in ten minutes,” Eadric said. “Go.”

Zhuel bowed, and disappeared.
In his rented chambers in Morne’s most prestigious district – the Bevel – near the outwalls of the gardens of the Royal Palace, Rimilin’s mind and body span with the immense power which coursed through him, before manifesting within the magical diagram which he had constructed.

The Balor’s name was Uruum* – of less stature than Ainhorr, but a potent Demon nonetheless. One of the five (previously, six) who served Graz’zt, Uruum possessed a particular talent for subtlety and guile – qualities which, while present in Balors, had a tendency to be overshadowed by the urge to maim and kill.

Rimilin quickly stepped forwards and broke the binding circle, in the event that the Demon misinterpret his intentions. Disturbingly, Uruum had adopted the guise of a small child – a girl with wide eyes and an endearing smile. The Acolyte straightaway reasoned that the Demon must have some kind of device to have achieved this transformation: Balors were not natural shape-shifters. The Succubus, Kalkja, who stood nearby, immediately abased herself before the child, conscious of the fact that she could be extinguished by a single thought.

Rimilin, possessed of an arrogant and haughty attitude, but at the same time pragmatic and aware of the Demon’s power, gave a deferential nod.

Uruum promptly stepped out of the thaumaturgic diagram and vanished.

One, the Acolyte of the Skin thought to himself.

Nwm arrived near the breached walls of the city, in a dimly-lit alleyway. The narrow street was littered with bodies – some still breathing – and blood soaked the cobblestones. Nearby, in the main thoroughfare, the inhabitants of the city were in the streets, dragging children and belongings behind them in an effort to escape the chaos. Fires burned – some started by spells, others by flasks of oil hurled by Hullu’s men. They illuminated the scene with a ruddy glow.

He cursed, as he knew the delay that it would entail, but he had no choice. He knelt down beside the nearest living form – an aging woman, who bled from a wound to the stomach - muttered briefly, and touched her upon the torso.

Instantly, the wound closed, and her breathing became more regular.

Nwm stood again, and moved quickly towards the next figure. As if from nowhere, Ortwin suddenly appeared.

“What the hell are you doing?” The Bard asked. “We need to find Hullu.”

Nwm scowled, and said nothing.

“Nwm...”
“Ortwin – let’s just worry about the present situation for the moment.”

Others would probably die because of it, but what else could the Druid do? These people were here and they needed help now. To act in any other way would have been a betrayal of his most closely held principles.

Ortwin considered pointing out the inconsistency of his position, and the fact he had killed a thousand people only three months before, and he was probably feeling guilt and remorse, and...

The Bard nodded, sighed, and waited.

Nehael appeared. “Eadric is on his way,” she said. “He’ll be a while, though – he’s Wind-Walking with Iua, Tahl and Tatterbrand. Mostin’s throwing a tantrum.”

Nwm nodded, and invoked the last of his healing magic upon a bloody child, close to death, before standing again.

His perceptions stretched out, and through his torc he apprehended Morne as a vast blot, a scar on the face of the Green continuum. Ugh. Large areas were devoid of trees and natural life. Quickly, he scanned for knots of magical and supernatural power.

Half a dozen powerful spellcasters – although no time to further refine the search. Outsiders: one (Nehael) – two – three (a big one) – four – five – six (very close – what the...)

Nwm turned abruptly, and then relaxed. Zhuel floated silently behind him.

Twenty-one major fires burning, dozens of smaller ones. Mostly in the nearby Temple district.

Easier to find than Hullu, the sword. Melancholy = steel + supernatural + extraplanar combination. There she is. Outsider and spellcaster also nearby.

“Around three hundred yards away,” the Druid said, pointing towards the northeast. “But they are moving out of the city wall. We need to intercept them.”

In the flash of an eye, both Nehael and Zhuel vanished. Nwm looked around desperately for a plant of sufficient size, but there was nothing close. He grunted, and assumed the form of an Air Elemental, before shooting off at incredible speed.

Ortwin sighed, urged his winged boots to action, and followed. He adjusted his collar as he flew, and hoped that his new shirt – of finest Djinn silk – wouldn’t get ruined.

**

Hullu – now feeling lucid and in control again – quickly ordered the withdrawal of his Bagaudas. The raid had been an overwhelming success, but he had no doubts that hundreds of watchmen and townsfolk would descend upon him in short order if he tarried too long.
He also felt sick to his stomach, disgusted by his own enjoyment of the brutality. He turned to the sorceresses as they approached a section of the city wall.

“I think that a further display is unnecessary,” Hullu said.

The younger witch – the one from the *Linna* – replied. In their association, Hullu had heard her speak fewer than a dozen times. But there was something about her which was both reassuringly and uncomfortably familiar.

“It’s too late,” she said. “The Earth-Spirit has already done my bidding. Soon, the Air-Spirit will make his presence known.”

Hullu swallowed. It seemed that they were responsible for the *Earthquake*, at least. “And the rain of fire?” He asked.

“Was not my doing,” she replied. “You need to get your men out of the city now. We have only a few minutes.”

“Call off your Allies, Witch. Enough is enough.”

But she shook her head. “Oaths have been taken. I cannot renege. When the winds blow, a firestorm will likely begin.”

Hullu cursed as he drew Melancholy from its scabbard, and opened another rift in the curtain wall of Morne.

“Get out,” he barked at the *Bagaudas* who accompanied him, ushering them through. “Go to ground.”

“You must flee, Hullu,” the Sorceress said desperately.

“My men go first,” he replied simply.

**

Shomei sank into a huge leather chair in one of the numerous parlours at her manse, outside of Morne and sighed. She threw the red velvet cloth back over her *Crystal Ball* and drank deeply from a glass of firewine.

Whoever had struck at Jiuhu, had done so again only fifteen minutes previously at Morne – although it appeared that this time, he or she (or they?) had been less restrained. And the *Earthquake* implied either an innovative Transmuter or a Divine caster of considerable power.

Waide was the only one to possess that kind of clout, and he was far too staid to be a suspect.

She brooded.

A knot suddenly tightened in the Infernalist’s stomach. Moments later, an intricate brass bell, suspended on a metal stand nearby, rang once. She almost heaved. *No, not now,* she thought. *It’s too damned complicated.*

Groaning, Shomei stood and swallowed. *The last time,* she reminded herself. She
grasped her rod and spoke a single syllable.

Instantly, a Chain Contingency sprang into effect, rendering her immune to fire and Hasting her. Her skin toughened to the hardness of stone. Swiftly, she invoked another ward: Mind Blank. She didn’t trust him, this time.

She breathed deeply and opened a Gate.

Titivilus, the nuncio of the Arch-Fiend Dispater, promptly stepped through accompanied by four Erinyes Devils. As usual, his guise was of a man of commanding mien, dressed in unadorned black, who possessed a scholarly air.

Shomei gave a cursory nod. “My Lord.”

“Shomei,” he smiled easily. “Our compact is fulfilled, but I would speak with you at length before we part ways.”

The Infernalist squinted. What was his game? She knew that he knew of her new patronage from Belial – although he had never been so crass as to remark upon it openly.

“I fear that we would have little to say to one another,” she replied. “And I am loathe to take up your valuable time. Perhaps we should simply part – on amicable terms, of course. I would not want to presume upon our association.” Although framed in the first person, Shomei’s remarks were directed at the Duke himself.

“Sit, Shomei,” Titivilus half-suggested and half-commanded.

The Infernalist remained standing, and forced calm upon herself. “I regret that I have much business to attend to, my Lord Duke. Feel free to use my home in my absence – I assume that your stay will be brief?”

The Duke smiled, and relaxed into a chair. He pulled a leather ottoman towards himself with a booted foot, raised his legs, and crossed them in an all-too-human gesture of comfort. He poured himself a glass of firewine.

“I’m in no hurry. We can talk later. When you have time.” Titivilus clicked his fingers and pointed. One of the Erinyes picked up the Crystal Ball and handed it to him. “In the meantime, I might amuse myself with your scrying device. See what Wyre’s marvellous Wizards are doing with themselves in these oh-so-troubled times.”

Shomei nodded, and vanished.

Sh*t sh*t sh*t sh*t sh*t, she thought, appearing seventy miles away in the meadow where Mostin’s retreat still stood. She walked up to the door, and rapped on it. Instantly, a Magic Mouth appeared.

“Begone!” It ordered.

Shomei banged on the door again, this time heavily with her rod.

No response.

Dammit, Mostin, where are you? Quickly, the Infernalist issued a Sending to the
Alienist:


Seconds later, Mostin’s disembodied head appeared nearby through a portal created by the Mirror of Urm-Nahat.

“Where are you?” Shomei asked.

“Near Morne,” the Alienist replied. “In a Secure Shelter. What are you doing?”

“Are you warded from Scrying?” Shomei asked.

“Not presently,” Mostin admitted.

“Do so now,” Shomei instructed. “Use a Mind Blank.”

“I don’t have one prepared,” Mostin grumbled.

Shomei looked astounded. “Mostin, for one so paranoid, you have much to learn. Do you have a spare valence?”

Mostin nodded. “Give me fifteen minutes.”

“Use a Nondetection in the meantime. Leave the portal open.”

Mostin sighed, and his head disappeared.

Twenty minutes later, the Alienist and Shomei sat in a comfortable but rustic cabin not too far from where Eadric’s army was encamped. A fire burned merrily in the hearth.

“Is this a secret bolt-hole?” The Infernalist asked.

“Hardly,” Mostin replied drily. “It was simply the most convenient thing to do on short notice. Although the idea of a dozen of these, rendered Permanent and scattered around the countryside does have a certain appeal.”

“I have just Gated Titivilus to the Prime, Mostin.”

“Ahh,” the Alienist replied.

“Our contract has expired. All debts are now discharged.”

“Well, that’s good,” Mostin said.

“Except that he is still at my manse,” Shomei answered. “And wants to speak with me: presumably to make me another offer, which it will be very difficult to refuse. He is currently entertaining himself by spying on various Mages. I assume he is here for the Temptation of your Paladin friend.”

“Eadric is not in my good books presently,” Mostin said haughtily. “I have just withdrawn my services from him. I feel exploited.”

“Is there anything to suggest that he is particularly vulnerable at present?”
“I don’t think so,” Mostin replied. “But why should you care?”

“I don’t,” Shomei admitted. “But I like you, Mostin, and I know that you do. And something else occurred to me: if Titivilus is here to tempt Eadric and I called him, have I, by default, just violated the Injunction? Eadric is a political figure, after all. Have I just intervened in temporal politics?”

“Well, technically, I suppose, but…”

“These vagaries of Law are beginning to irritate me, Mostin. We need to formalize the ‘do’s’ and ‘don’ts’ of Injunction protocol. We need a legal framework, written and attested.”

“An interesting notion,” Mostin agreed.

“And we need a group who have the will to carry through the letter of the Law.”

“I think that certain members of the magical community might take issue with that degree of control and centralization,” Mostin said. “Me, for one. Anyway, why exactly are you here, Shomei? You sounded desperate.”

“My compact has expired, Mostin. I am no longer beholden, but neither is Titivilus. I mistrust him.”

“But you are under Belial’s protection. He will not try anything.”

She looked dubious. “Perhaps. Although I am conscious of the possibility that I may not be entirely au fait with the politics of the moment in Hell’s various circles.”

Mostin smiled. “You mean that you distrust those paragons of fair play? I am shocked to think that your allies may be disreputable, Shomei.”

“This is no laughing matter, Mostin. If I get through the next twenty-four hours in one piece, then my life will become much simpler. One less Infernal dignitary to worry about.”

“Forgive me, if I sound unsympathetic Shomei, but this is really all your own doing. If you must insist on making arrangements with Devils…”

She held up her hands. “I am aware of the perils. But I am on the fast, dangerous path Mostin. The ‘Honey on the Razor’s Edge,’ and all that. When a patron outlives his usefulness, I must dispense with him or her. It is the way I am.”

Mostin sighed. “So what’s your point?”

“I need time and space to recuperate. Regain my strength. When I confront him again, I need to be fully warded.”

“Why not just let him be? Wait for a couple of days, and he’ll be gone.”

She shook her head. “We are at a crucial juncture - a defining moment in our relationship, Titivilus and I. I can’t just run away from him. Until this point, I have deferred to his authority. I will do nothing to initiate a struggle with him, but if he tries to coerce me…”
Mostin raised an eyebrow. “You cannot be serious, Shomei. He’d toast you in seconds.”

“I don’t need to actually assault him - merely let him understand that he can’t f*ck with me, like I’m some novice diabolist. That is the way it works, Mostin. If I can assert my ascendancy over him, I redefine my entire being in one, colossal paradigm shift. The risks are immense, but so are the potential rewards.”

“Well, if you think that I’m going to help you in this insane scheme, then I suggest that you reconsider. I’m not planning on pissing off any more Devils than I already have.”

She smiled. “I never asked for your help, Mostin. I’m just letting you know, in case the worst happens. Now, I need to sleep.”

He sighed and nodded.

**

Zhuel appeared directly above Hullu, Mesikämmi, the Succubus Chr’ri, and the twenty Bagaudas who remained within the walls of Morne. He sounded his trumpet and descended. The instrument that he bore suddenly became a greatsword.

The force of the blast stunned the Shamaness and two thirds of Hullu’s followers. The Tunthi warrior himself was unaffected. Melancholy, still in his hand, screamed for blood. His vision clouded, and the sword took over his mind.

Chr’ri immediately retreated onto the Ethereal Plane. She had not anticipated an Archon. Almost simultaneously, Nehael appeared in the air nearby.

Zhuel flew down to a height of twenty feet and spoke a word of power. Hullu was instantly transfixed, although he remained conscious of his surroundings. The celestial alighted upon the ground and folded his wings behind his back. Nehael promptly followed him. Zhuel observed Hullu’s sword with some concern, and moved forwards to divest the warrior of it.

Groaning, but quickly recovering from the effects of the Archon’s trumpet, Mesikämmi spoke a Word of Chaos, and Zhuel was instantly sent screaming in disbelief back to Oronthon’s heaven. Nehael was catapulted in a daze onto the Astral Plane.

The Shamaness smiled, dispelled the Hold upon Hullu, and invoked a Wind Walk.

“We need to be going now, my pretty boy,” she said to him. “Make haste.”

“Honey-Paw?” He asked.

She smiled, and they both dissolved into mist.

* 

By the time that Nwm and Ortwin arrived, Hullu, the two Sorceresses, Zhuel and
Nehael were nowhere to be seen. Ortwin scratched his head as the Druid resumed his human form.


“They have fled,” Nwm groaned. “We cannot pursue.”

“Sh*t,” Ortwin said. “What about Nehael and Zhuel?”

Nwm looked worried, and raised his palms. “They should be here. They’re not. Assuming they aren’t both dead, it’ll take me an hour at least to scry them.”

“We have to get hold of Mostin,” Ortwin said. “He can do it much faster – and more reliably.”

Nwm sighed. “We can’t. We have no way of getting to him.”

“Then we wait for Ed to arrive,” Ortwin snapped. He was getting irritated. A fresh breeze suddenly sprang up, and Nwm gave a quizzical look. Again, his mind stretched out through his torc.

What in the name of the Goddess was that? Immensely potent, ancient supernatural consciousness. Massive cyclonic wind formation above Morne: well beyond his own power to manifest. Morne – the fires – and Eadric was Wind-Walking into the middle of it. He would be ripped to shreds.

The Orb atop the Druid’s staff crackled, as he commanded the winds to cease. But it would take time – assuming that they would, in fact, obey him. He had his doubts. Wings sprouted from his back.

“What are you doing, Nwm?” Ortwin asked.

“I’m going to try and talk to it,” he replied.

“Talk to what?” Ortwin shouted. The winds were growing stronger.

The Druid pointed up at the sky, but Ortwin saw nothing.

**

The Succubus, Chr’ri, from her Ethereal vantage point, had observed the expulsion of Zhuel and Nehael from the Prime Plane.

The Shamaness certainly had a few tricks up her sleeve, she thought.

Suddenly, it dawned on her that here was an opportunity for great self-advancement.

Chr’ri turned to her contact, a dour Glabrezu called Otarr. She scowled at him, knowing that he had not recognized Nehael, but not wishing him to steal her own glory.

“Relay to his Highness that our secondary mission has been a success,” she said in a matter-of-fact way. “The bitch Nehael is stranded somewhere on another
Plane. I await further instructions.”

Otarr, unwilling to admit that he did not know of this ‘Secondary Mission,’ grunted and Plane Shifted back to the Abyss.

Chr’ri grinned. There would be a fat reward for that information.

**

Jovol screwed up his wizened and tattooed face as he attempted to interpret the web of possibilities. The deviation in the main arc remained minimal, and events seemed to be propelling it inexorably towards the asymptote – still twelve days away.

He inspected the Graz’zt mote, which had become more conspicuous in the past few days. Rintrah had been correct in his appraisal of the Demon Prince’s involvement. The agency of both Kothchori and Rimilin, although possessing no mutual vibration – save that offered by the succubi – appeared to possess catenaries which fed directly into the nodality itself. The wizard hypothetically advanced the web over the next few days, and watched the motes blur as probabilities parted and coalesced. As the asymptote began to manifest in the model, tendrils snapped and, as if from nowhere, bright points of light, burning like magnesium, flashed across his view: Gates opening to various other worlds.

Shomei had already opened two to Hell, Mostin one to the Far Realms. Rimilin had compacted with a Balor, and looked set to bring three more onto the Prime at Graz’zt’s instruction – assuming that events followed the most likely course of action. Mesikämmi worried him with her primeval spirits. And Kothchori was another concern – his flux was unstable and could swing either way.

The Dreamer sighed as he weighed his responsibilities in the balance, and a variety of possible scenarios flashed through his head. If and when the time came, he would need to act decisively and without reservation. But of the hundreds of permutations which he contemplated, when his own involvement was added to the mix, he foresaw his own death.

He smiled ironically. If he acted now, then this could probably be prevented with the minimum fuss. But he could not, in all conscience, act now because it was still an ‘if’ and not a ‘when.’ By the time that it became a ‘when,’ it would be too late – for himself, at least.

But the projection of events after his own death held exciting possibilities for the future, and that was a reassuring thought.

Besides, physical death was really nothing more than a minor inconvenience. He would carry on dreaming, and that’s what mattered.

The sea of motes vanished, and under the force of his will, dreamscapes around Jovol flashed by – half remembered visions and insights of entities long passed away. Immense turbulence surrounded him briefly, but he passed through, and latched onto an idle half-thought entertained by a beautiful woman who dozed beneath a pomegranate tree with a quill pen in her hand.

Effortlessly, the Ogre-Mage corporeated next to her.
Mulissu stirred, raised an eyebrow, and looked up. “Jovol, I assume?”

*Uruum was also the Balor summoned by Ainhorr at Khu, who caused Ortwin to implose.

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**POST 14: INTERMISSION**

*Posted by: Sepuichrave II at ENWorld on 11th November 2002, 04:24 PM*

**Quote:**
So, assuming you have time for questions, how do you keep track? A Word file? Excel? Pencil and a LOT of paper? Perfect memory? Droid?

Mind-maps. Diagrams w/ lots of arrows. I recommend them.

**Quote:**
Do your players ever get access to this info, or is this just for us? Do you work out these side stories for the game, or do you just come up with the the effect on events of off-screen actions and add the actual story and dialog later for the story hour?

In broad tems, yes, they get the info - eventually. I don't detail actual dialogue until I write it up, but I know what transpires and how.

**Quote:**
How much have you written down about your NPCs, including the demons and celestials? Is it much, or do you have most in your head?

Mind-maps again. Scrawled notes on bits of paper. I'm pretty disorganized in my files.

---

**Intermission**

It was Night-time. Clouds shot across the face of the Moon, moving at unnatural speed, and the sky above Morne was lit with an eerie glow from the fires burning within it.

Mesikämmi and Hullu flew southwest for only three or four minutes, covering as many miles, before the Shamaness commanded them to descend. No word was spoken between them in that time. As they resumed their solid states, the wind had begun to blow strongly. The warrior turned to the witch.
"My men..." he began.

"They will be fine, if they follow your advice and go to ground. We are not safe in the sky now, and we need to do the same. The storm will be very large, and even our own camp will be somewhat affected – as well those of our enemies."

"And Morne?" He asked.

"The eye wall is directly above Morne, the eye itself a little north of the city."

"Mesikämmi, what are you dong here?"

She smiled. "We are destined for great things, you and I. Bright spirits have told me as much."

"And the creature that you banished – the servant of the Wyrish God?"

The Shamaness shrugged. "I don't pretend to understand the subtleties of it all."

Hullu sighed. His life was currently more complex than he truly cared for. He looked at her openly.

"My sword concerns me, Honey-Paw. And I feel tossed around by forces which I do not comprehend."

Mesikämmi laughed loud. "That is the price of power, my boy."

**

Tornado force winds emanated from Nwm as he ascended, overpowering even the intense air currents which were forming above the city.

In the centre, where he flew, was a zone of absolute calm.

His sight stretched out through his torc, and instantly apprehended the storm system. It was immense, and extended well beyond the range of his perceptions. Its total diameter must exceed fifty miles. Totally beyond anything that he, or any other spellcaster that he could imagine, was capable of.

Through his inner vision, he knew that he approached the locus of power from which the winds emanated, although it was invisible to his mundane sight. Glancing down, Morne stretched beneath him: flames were spreading rapidly in the Temple Quarter as the numerous fires fed off of the growing gusts.

Suddenly the entity manifested above him, and Nwm gasped. He had never seen or heard of anything like it: like some vast, iridescent eel or lizard, with scales of crimson and aquamarine. It seemed ancient, almost atavistic, and possessed a primal beauty and presence that almost overwhelmed Nwm with awe.

Nwm cast Tongues upon himself, and yelled up to it.

"You have no business here. Call off the storm and return whence you came."

A Lightning Bolt struck the Druid, and he cursed.
"Desist, or I will hurl you from the sky." He yelled again.

The creature cavorted wildly, seeming to delight in the destruction it was causing, and flew straight towards Nwm, seemingly unperturbed by the two hundred mile-an-hour winds which surrounded him. Two great claws slashed at the Druid, and its maw – full of backward pointing teeth – bit him. Pain shot through his body.

Nwm *Shapechanged* into a colossal red dragon, which dwarfed the creature.

It promptly vanished.

*Heh*, thought the Druid. His blindsight revealed nothing, however. The creature had disappeared. And his torc indicated the same thing – it was simply no longer there. Curious.

And the wind still blew.

**

East of Morne, and approaching rapidly, four *Wind-Walkers* – Eadric, Iua, Tatterbrand and Tahl – were beginning to experience discomfort in the growing winds.

"We should descend," Tahl yelled. "It’s getting too dangerous."

Eadric swore. They were still three miles from the city, and from where they were, the flames and smoke were visible – blowing in gouts from within the walls. He nodded, and they drifted down towards the ground. The Paladin was unsure whether Nwm had invoked the winds and, if so, whether he knew about their own approach.

As they landed, and resumed their solid forms, all saw that they were bleeding: physical effects of the strong winds upon their nebulous bodies.* Eadric squinted towards Morne, dropping his visor to prevent dust and debris from entering. He couldn’t believe what he saw.

"Dragon," Iua screamed, pointing.

"I see it," he shouted back. Holy Oronthon protect us! It is *enormous*.

He had never even heard tell of one that size before, and it was a Red. It was flying straight towards them. He had absolutely no doubt that they would all die. He groaned. Two Dragons in Wyre in two weeks – more than in the past two centuries.**

Nwm assumed the shape of a Roc before he came within spell range, and landed nearby. The ground shook.

"KRAAK. KRA-KRAAK..." he began to screech. Still under the effects of the *Tongues* spell, the others miraculously understood him.

"The winds *are* beginning to abate in the immediate vicinity of Morne," he explained. "I have seen to that. But the storm is immense – effectively, what I have done is increase the size of the eye to a six mile diameter. Beyond that, the
winds are intensifying. And I cannot make it rain as well within the central area – at least not until I have meditated and replenished my powers."

"I can," Iua shouted back at him. "Get me into the centre, and I can bring rain to douse the flames."

He nodded. "Then we should go as quickly as possible. Grab a claw, and I will fly us all in. Eadric, you should know something: Nehael and Zhuel are both missing – possibly destroyed. They are no longer within the range of my torc. I'm sorry."

And the Paladin’s world was turned upon its head.

**

Within thirty minutes Eadric, Nwm, Ortwin, Iua, Tahl, and Tatterbrand stood within a small market square in the Temple district. The wind had ceased around them, and rain fell in great sheets from the sky, slowly quenching the flames.

Steam and smoke rose into the air. Corpses littered the streets – some slain by Hullu’s guerillas, some burned, others flung and battered by the winds or struck by flying debris. Pieces of masonry, tiles and beams from roofs lay strewn around. People wept.

But this is not what I saw in my dream, Eadric thought. Is there more yet to come?

And then, Nehael!

Nearby, nervously, a squad of Templars were approaching.

The Paladin groaned. He turned to Tahl. "Can you contact Mostin?"

The Inquisitor nodded. "I can issue a Sending."

"Screw that," Iua interjected. "He has hardly been of use. Do you plan on begging him?"

"If necessary," Eadric snapped. He hoped that the Alienist’s mood had passed. The Paladin pointed at the approaching troops. "Nwm, can you...?"

The Druid sealed them off with a Wall of Thorns.

Tahl’s Sending consisted of two words:

Please Help.

**

Shomei was finding sleep difficult: around the Secure Shelter, beyond the zone of calm established by Nwm over Morne, the winds raged. She tossed uneasily in her bunk. Mostin sat in an uncomfortable wooden chair, idly stroking his hedgehog, and musing about pseudonatural entities of an altogether different
order of power.

The shutters and door rattled. Gusts of wind blew down the chimney and sent clouds of smoke and ash into the small cabin.

Pah! So much for 'Secure,' the Alienist grumbled to himself. This was ridiculous. Rustic was rapidly beginning to lose its charm.

*Please Help*, Tahl’s voice, in his mind.

He scowled, and grunted. What nonsense had they gotten themselves into now? Quickly he Scried the Inquisitor.

There they all were. Looking deflated, wet and bedraggled. Nwm pointed at the sensor, and Ortwin gave his best endearing smile, nodding optimistically.

Mostin sighed. They didn't seem to be in any danger. He thrust his head through the portal.

"What do you want?" He grumbled.

"We have a situation," Nwm explained.

"You always have a 'situation,'" Mostin chided.

"This is a bad one," The Druid said.

Mostin groaned, and made a beckoning gesture. "Come on," he said.

*

Ortwin stood with his back to the fire, and steam rose from his Cloak of Displacement. Within the small cabin, it rapidly became very humid: seven people, five of whom were very wet, crowded within. Tahl had left upon arriving through the mirror, walking the half mile through the storm to his tent – assuming any of it still remained – in order to use a scroll to quiet the weather in the vicinity.

Eadric glanced suspiciously at the Infernalist, who reclined in deep thought upon a nearby bunk. He was about to question her presence, but decided that it might be impolitic, given Mostin’s mood. There was a short but decidedly uncomfortable silence.

Mostin gestured. Clothes instantly dried, and vapour disappeared.

"Why aren't you in your manse?" Nwm asked the Alienist.

"Because I had no Teleports prepared, because I didn't want to leave the mirror unattended, and because I wanted some peace and quiet," Mostin snapped.

Nwm nodded. Evidently Mostin was still tetchy. Briefly, the Druid explained the situation.

"Can you Scry for them?" Eadric asked.
"I can try, I suppose," Mostin said wearily. Five minutes passed, but no clues to the whereabouts of either Zhuel or Nehael were forthcoming.

"So are they dead?" Eadric asked.

"Either that or, obviously, in a place which cannot be Scried," Mostin nodded.

"How can we know?"

"I’ll attempt a Discern Location, but it will have to wait until morning. If that yields no result, then we can assume the worst." He sighed. "You may as well just make yourselves comfortable until Tahl deals with the weather. I regret that I have nothing to offer anyone in the way of refreshments."

Shomei groaned. "Oh stop being so damned stiff, Mostin." She began a brief incantation, and Eadric suddenly became very nervous.

The Infernalist waved, and a Djinn appeared. Eadric relaxed.

"Make some tasty snacks, and some firewine, and some utensils," she instructed. The genie broke a splinter of wood from one of the logs near the fire, cast a Major Creation, and made all manner of rude wooden gourds, plates and cups, together with a huge pitcher. It clapped its hands, and suddenly the small desk sagged under the weight of exotic viands.

Iua scowled. It seemed rather demeaning to use the members of her own race as simple butlers.

Ortwin grinned. "Great," he said. Ed might be depressed, but the Bard wasn’t about to let it interfere with his appetite.

*

Outside of the cabin, the winds began to abate – evidently Tahl had retrieved the scroll, and forced the weather to subside. There were now two lacunae of still air within the storm’s two thousand square mile extent: one around Morne, the other in their immediate area.

By the time that those in the Secure Shelter had finished eating – albeit in a subdued atmosphere – the Inquisitor had safely returned.

"The camp was in chaos," he informed Eadric. "Many of the canvas tents have been ripped away. Anything that wasn’t tied down, or sufficiently heavy, is somewhere other than it was two hours ago. Numbers of horses have escaped. It may take some time to gather things together."

The Paladin nodded.

"The one reassuring thing Ahma," Tahl continued, "is that the forces of Kaurban and Sihu are doubtlessly caught within the storm as well. We might be able to use this to our advantage. How much longer is the main system likely to persist?"

"Fifteen hours," Nwm answered.

Eadric mused briefly. "Could we open a corridor of still air between here and the city?"
Nwm nodded. "I had just considered that."

"Return to the camp," the Paladin instructed Tahl blackly. "Send messages to Olann, Sercion, Streek and Eisarn: as soon as the storm lets up, they are to head straight for Morne at their best speed – they are not to tarry. Instruct Brey to be ready to move on my order."

The Inquisitor nodded, and departed.

"How long until dawn, Nwm?"

"Only two hours," the Druid sighed. "But I am exhausted. I need to rest before tomorrow."

There were several nods of agreement

Ortwin immediately transferred himself to the most comfortable bunk. "Here is as good a place as any," he smiled.

*

It was close to noon of the next day before those present had made themselves ready. Eadric donned his armour, prayed briefly, and exited the cabin to inspect the damage of the previous night.

Branches lay strewn around, snapped from trees during the windstorm as the Paladin walked down the gentle slope towards the camp. It was deceptively still, and he knew that only two miles away, beyond the zone of calm, the winds still pummeled the lands in the vicinity. He wondered about the effects on the harvest: this was some of Wyre’s richest farmland, and Morne’s bread-basket.

He spoke briefly with Brey, Tahl, Ryth and Soraine, who were overseeing the operation to reorder the camp and to retrieve and repair as much as possible from the previous night, and tried to occupy himself.

Eadric fretted, found himself unable to concentrate, and walked back to the small cabin. He waited impatiently for Mostin to finish scanning his books, but said nothing until the Alienist had cast his divination. The others stood by tensely.

Mostin sighed. "The news is a mixture of good and bad," he said. "Mostly bad. Nehael is alive. She might be better off dead, however. She is currently on the forty-seventh layer of the Abyss, beneath the palace of Graz’zt in Azzagrat."

Eadric’s jaw dropped. How?

Mostin considered for a moment. "I could attempt a Planar Binding to bring her here."

"Do it, Mostin. Anything."

But fifteen minutes later, when the Binding had failed, Eadric’s mood was black. Perhaps she was warded. Perhaps she was already magically bound. Perhaps she was in an area of Antimagic. Mostin was unsure.
The Paladin swallowed. "Thank-you Mostin. I appreciate it. And my sincere apologies, if you think that I have disrespected you for your friendship and the help you have rendered."

Mostin gave an embarrassed grumble.

"Was she abducted?" Nwm asked.

The Alienist shrugged. "Perhaps. Perhaps a Bebilith snatched her way. Perhaps she was Banished or Dismissed."

"When that happened before, you quickly retrieved her," Ortwin pointed out.

"Circumstances seldom repeat themselves exactly," Shomei said. She turned to Eadric. "I'm sorry. Really. She is a remarkable individual." The Infernalist groaned, inspecting her watch. "I should go. Wish me luck, Mostin."

She vanished.

"What's up with her?" Ortwin asked.

Mostin laughed. "If you really want to know, she is about to engage in a battle of wills with a Devil who has a reputation for cunning, twistedness and subtlety which makes even his own kind quail."

Eadric looked uneasy.

Mostin nodded. "Your tempter is here, Eadric. Shomei has her own agenda to pursue with him, however."

Eadric swallowed. He would ask Tahl to Commune later. Several questions needed to be answered. And the whereabouts of Zhuel were still a concern.

**

Twelve seconds after Nehael had been thrust onto the Astral Plane, the Glabrezu Otarr had Plane Shifted to the Abyss.

Six seconds later, he Teleported to the Iron Halls of Graz’zt. He was immediately granted an audience: the Prince had instructed the Mariliths who guarded entry to his sanctum that all news regarding Wyre – and especially Eadric – be relayed to him as quickly as possible.

Otarr communicated the news telepathically to the Great Demon, who writhed ecstatically at the news.

He Scried the Succubus within moments, summoned Ainhorr and his jailer – an intemperate Nalfeshnee named Trakkao, opened a Gate in her immediate vicinity and, accompanied by his majordomo and chief administrator of pain, stepped through.

Unfortunately for Nehael, Teleportation was not an option upon the Astral Plane.

Within one minute of being banished by Mesikämmi’s Word of Chaos, Nehael was captured, bound in the same Dimensional Shackles that had once held the
Marilith Uzmi, and led in mockery back to the forty-seventh level of the Abyss.

Graz’zt had her flung into a hole until he could decide what to do with her. He would find something particularly inventive and unpleasant, preferably lasting several aeons.

Prince Graz’zt seldom left the confines of his own palace, much less made extraplanar sorties. This had been a special case, however.

*Wind-Walkers in my campaign house rules suffer 5 points of damage per round with no saving throw for every increment in wind speed above strong: i.e. severe = 5/round; windstorm = 10/round; hurricane = 15/round and tornado = 20/round. In addition, those subjected to tornado force winds must make a Fortitude save (DC20) every round or be ripped apart by the winds and die. By the time that the party landed, the winds had already reached storm force.

**Although northern Dramore was terrorized by a Blue Dragon some years previously, which roosted in the High Thrumohars. Eadric, Nwm and Ortwin hunted it down and killed it.

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POST 15: MORNE – PART 3

I’m back from internet limbo - which is a blessing. Four days from EN world, and I was getting serious withdrawal.

So, without further ado...

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Morne - Part 3

Is the Archon Zhuel safe and unharmed?

Yes. He is with ME.

(Awe. Oronthon’s words – not Urthoon’s – resonate in the mind of Tahl, piercing his soul with their perfect clarity. Unexpected explication beyond a simple affirmation or denial.)

May I recall him to the world of men?

Yes.

Is the temptation of the Ahma imminent?
Temptation is ever present

(Words to generate insight, not to dissemble. Tahl feels with his whole being. New levels of truth are revealed. Layers of paradox are shed away.)

But the Duke Titivilus is here for the purpose of his temptation?

Yes.

(Grief at the Fall, aeons before. So intense that Tahl’s body shakes, unable to contain its full magnitude. Compassion, and the desire to forgive, extended even into the deepest pit of Hell.)

Can the Succubus Nehael be released from bondage?

*Not by ME. She has placed herself beyond MY protection by her actions.*

Will the Ahma triumph over his foes?

*Only if he can determine who they are.*

Will Morne suffer more?

Yes.

Will the Archiepiscopacy be reestablished?

Yes.

Soon?

*He comes.*

The Ahma has told me that it will be Tramst.

*I will be Tramst.*

(Awe.)

Lord, grace me with Your wisdom.*

*Not all truths are unequal. Remember that I love you, Tahl.*

Tahl wept, as the Longing of Separation descended upon him.**

**

Eadric sat in full harness upon Contundor and observed as his troops formed themselves into their companies. Around him, the wreck of the encampment still stood: rags of canvas hung limply from broken poles, and belongings that were less than essential lay strewn around. He had ordered that the army had broken camp as quickly as practicable: speed was of the essence.
The air was unnaturally still as a result of Nwm’s interference in the prevailing storm – which, according to the Druid, still had three hours left to blow. The Paladin’s mood was bleak, as he contemplated Tahl’s words, and he hardly paid attention to the Inquisitor, or to Brey, or to Soraine; all of whom sat upon horses nearby.

Not all truths are unequal.

Curious words, framed in a double negation that was almost Urgic in its construction: a *kius*, as the heretical mystics named it. Somehow, he felt that he could not connect with the phrase, and his stomach was still an empty pit, which turned every time he considered Nehael.

He watched idly as he observed Iua and Nwm approach, flying from the west towards him. The Auran steed upon which the Duelist rode moved gracefully through the air. The Druid, in aquiline form, was flanked by Sem and Gheim – apparently a mated pair, although Eadric was still unsure which was which, and what their respective sexes were.

Ortwin, disguised by a glamour, reined in next to the Paladin. “Have you ever seen a goat ride a horse before?”

Eadric scowled. He was not in the mood for levity. “Where is Mostin?”

“Contemplating Goetic mysteries,” Ortwin replied lightly. “Are you sure about this Ed? Is your judgment sound?”

“Who knows? I still doubt – although I regard that as a good sign. But I am tired, Ortwin. I long for this to be over.”

“And Nehael?”

“I can do nothing. I’m not yet ready for the confrontation that would entail. I don’t know if I ever will be: I am, in the final analysis, mortal.”

“I’m not,” the Bard grinned. “And I am no longer bored. I have decided to live for at least a million years: circumstances permitting, of course. Beware of becoming too heavy, Ed. It isn’t worth it.”

The Paladin raised an eyebrow. “Now is hardly the time for platitudes, Ortwin.”

Nwm landed nearby, and assumed human shape. “The corridor is open,” he said. “And you have twelve hours on the enemy, at least, before they can recover from the tempest. But it’s quite a gambit.”

Eadric nodded, and motioned to Hyne. The Herald’s trumpet rang out, and the call was taken up by a hundred more.

**

Tiuhan IV, the Boy King, met with the Small Council in the audience hall of the Royal Palace in Morne. Sihu, the Duchess of Tomur; the Lord Chamberlain, Foide of Lang Herath; Attar, the grizzled Warden of the North; Skilla of Mord, recently arrived in the Capitol; a dozen other knights and captains of renown; and the
Bishops of Gibilrazen and Thahan. Jholion, the Marquis of Methelhar, was noticeably absent – he and the small cadre of soldiers that he had with him were under close scrutiny. As Brey’s paternal uncle, Foide had recommended Jholion’s exclusion on the basis of dubious loyalty.

Water fell from a great hole that been ripped in the roof by the winds of the previous night: the rains had passed, but enough water remained in pools among the twisted tiles to provide a constant drip. Conversation was tense and agitated.

A raid by the Uediian rebels. Tagur missing. Rumours of the Heretic’s presence in the city, only hours before. A storm of immense proportions, either started by the Pagan, or suppressed by him – stories were conflicting. The Druid moving through the wounded, healing them. The Druid invoking pagan magic to assault a group of Templars. A rain of fire from high above Morne. Dragons, Rocs, Shapeshifters. An Earthquake, striking the Temple itself, but leaving the rest of the city untouched.

Some had reported seeing celestials. Others, demons.

The Bishop of Gibilrazen, as usual, had a skewed but not entirely misplaced opinion.

“You doomed yourselves by dealing with the demonist, Rimilin,” he half-mourned and half-gloatched. “I warned you of as much. Now Oronthon has abandoned us: the legions of heathens and blasphemers are moving upon Morne. The ground shakes, fire falls from the sky, demons and dragons assail us. Archons sound their trumpets to herald the end of the world. Who can now doubt that the Trempan Heretic is, in fact, the Adversary? Prayer is our only recourse.”

Sihu shook almost uncontrollably at his words, overcome with pious guilt.

Foide sighed in an exasperated fashion.

“Unless you have something positive to contribute, my Lord Bishop, I suggest that you refrain from further remarks. The Heretic is less than a day away, and according to Griel is already marching on the city. His sorcerers have subdued the storm to allow him access: otherwise, it rages around Morne in all directions – save above the city itself.”

“What of my Uncle?” The boy piped. “Has any news reached us yet?”

“No, your Majesty. I regret not. But his men are only a week away. If we can stave off the Heretic, they may bring succour to us. And with my own troops and those of the Duchess nearby, we stand a good chance.”

“Can your diviners not Scry Tagur?” Attar growled. “I was under the impression that was a relatively simple exercise.”

“They have tried,” Foide replied glumly. “Alas, to no avail. Nor has Daunton contacted me.”

The Lord Chamberlain lied well. But with his own son, Durhm, already in the field with six thousand men, it suited his purposes that the troops from Einir remain leaderless for the time being.

After much debate, the watches on the walls were doubled and redoubled, barrels of pitch were readied, mangonels and ballistae were armed, and squadrons of
troops were prepared within the walls.

Attar sighed. The primary defense of the city would fall to him, and he didn't like it one bit. Morne had five miles of walls – around twice as much as the Warden was comfortable with. The fact that the Heretic had no engines of war was of small consolation.

He had the Druid. *Oronthon help us all.*

**

Hullu cursed. Wind screamed around him.

“What do you mean, he is moving on Morne?” The Tribesman yelled. “That is impossible. This storm is impenetrable.”

“Nwm has quietened the weather about Morne.”

Hullu cursed again. “Can you do the same, Honey-Paw. Or bring a spirit to delay him? I *must* reach the city before him.” Melancholy was urging the warrior to action, and Mesikämmi recoiled in uncertainty.

“It is too late,” she said. “Your troops *cannot* meet his Templars in open battle, they will be crushed. And I *cannot* prevail against Nwm in a straight contest.”

“And what of the other sorceress?” Hullu snapped. “Where is she?”

Mesikämmi shrugged. “She is doubtless attending to other business: we are not joined at the hip.” She didn’t know. The Shamaness had still not told Hullu the truth about the Succubus – at least the truth as she perceived it, which was less than the full story in any case. “The storm will pass in a matter of hours. No assault will be forthcoming until later, or more likely tomorrow. What does this cause that you fight for mean to you, Hullu?”

Her question made his mind rock. The Sword goaded him, but his loyalty and responsibility to those who had sworn to follow him weighed on his mind. He felt the irony of his situation – that Nwm, who had set the course of events in motion, had rejected him.

“You spoke of ‘great things’ for us,” Hullu said. “There was a time when I thought that such desires were past me. Then they were reawakened. Why are you here, Mesikämmi? What do you want?”

“I want to help you to get whatever you want,” she replied openly. “To win you back again.”

Her naïveté was sometimes staggering, Hullu thought to himself. She could coerce, manipulate and plot with the best of them, and her sense of ethics was perverse in the extreme. He would never understand her – but then again she was a shamaness, a witch, a dream-speaker. The things which motivated her were beyond his ken.

“So. What do you want?” She asked.

Hullu thought long and hard.
Had the Succubus Chr’ri been present, Mesikämmi may have used a different tact – the Demoness, after all, had advised guile in dealing with Hullu.

But Chr’ri was with Chomele, Kalkja, Rimilin and Uruum. They had been joined by a second Balor, named Irzho. Graz’zt was less interested in the possibilities that Melancholy offered, and more concerned with the broader issues, as the nodality began to develop a new facet. That, and an overwhelming desire to hurt Eadric: deeply, profoundly, again and again and again.

Before he was killed, he must be utterly broken.

**

Prince Tagur struggled northwards through the forest. The winds, which had blown ferociously for twelve hours, showed no signs of abating. Trees had been stripped bare, boughs ripped off, and the less firmly rooted toppled over. Debris filled the air. His progress was painstakingly slow, and his head and body were bloody and bruised from a dozen impacts.

Abruptly, and without warning, the storm ceased – or rather the Prince entered a zone of calm air. He raised his eyebrows. How strange. Behind him, the trees still shook under the force of the tempest. Ahead, nothing moved. It was eerily quiet.

Tagur took a moment to inspect his wounds, and noting that nothing looked too serious, plodded on. Branches lay scattered around but, with a feeling of exhilaration, he began to walk briskly, then to trot, and finally to run pell-mell through the trees. He was alive. He was free. Whatever happened after this day, he would take a joy in it. He had been dour and preoccupied for too long. He thought of the administrative burden that his life had become, and then thought of his resourcefulness and cunning – qualities that had long remained dormant, only to be manifested when he had been backed into a corner.

He thought of Hullu, whom he decided that he quite liked. He thought of roasting boar and baking bread. He thought of Nwm, who had recognized him but had said nothing, and grinned to himself.

After an hour, the trees began to thin, and gradually gave way to commons used by pig farmers in the open woods. He stumbled across a track running to the northeast, and his heart leaped – he hastened along. Morne. Morne must be close.

Finally, the woods ended. He climbed a low bluff, and gazed northwards over twenty furlongs of rich farmland, at the whitewashed rampart of the city. Steam and smoke rose in columns from inside the walls – there had been fires, probably the previous night. But it was not the smoke which made Tagur swallow in concern.

Between himself and the curtain wall, was a vast cavalry. Tagur knew the blue and silver banners of the vanguard, although sagging in the windless air, hid a three-headed phoenix – Eadric’s device.

His joy evaporated, quickly replaced by the tactical perspective of his trained military mind.
He lay down, keeping his profile low, while he decided what to do. At least he would be safe where he was.

Except that, ten minutes later, he noticed that several eagles were descending towards him.

*Oh, bugger,* he thought.

* Tagur watched the eagle in the centre of the trio grow as it flew towards him, its wings stretching out until they were a full eight fathoms across.

He glanced back towards the woods, and sighed. It really wasn’t worth even thinking about it. All three birds landed nearby, and the downdraft from the largest was terrific.

“Nwm, I guess?” Tagur said with a resigned voice.

The bird squawked loudly. Unexpectedly, one of the other, much smaller eagles spoke.

“Good afternoon, your Highness. I am Sem. Nwm regrets that he cannot use speech at present,” it said. “He also appreciates the irony of the situation.”

Nwm squawked again.

“He trusts that you are well, and did not suffer too much at the hands of Hullu’s men. He is willing to fly you into the city, if you wish.”

Nwm made a curious croaking sound.

“He also says,” Sem added, “that Eadric would like to speak with you – should you so desire. Note that you are under no coercion.”

The Prince scratched his head. This was becoming an increasingly surreal day. “Alright. Whatever.”

Nwm screeched.

“You may hold onto his claws,” Sem instructed. “He will endeavour not to drop you.”

“Good,” Tagur replied.

* When Eadric received Prince Tagur, it was around six o’clock in the evening, on the ninth day after midsummer. The Templars – around six hundred of them – had been drawn up in two huge *kanistas* less than a mile from the southern and western walls of the city. Behind them, Trempan aristocrats were loosely arranged in a riot of colour with their mounted men-at-arms, and Temple auxiliaries ordered their lines. Both flanks were guarded by the lightly armoured
but ferocious (and notorious) Ardanese horsemen.

More troops were arriving from the northeast – Templars, armoured aristocrats and mercenaries - and the Ardanese roared and banged their swords upon their shields at the return of their leader, Olann. Sercion began to form his troops into a third *kanista*.

“The infantry are still half a day away,” Eadric said to the Prince, “in case you were wondering.” The Paladin dismounted and bowed in a cursory fashion.

“Isn’t it rather late in the day to be beginning an assault?” Tagur asked. “And what do you propose to do – knock down the walls with your lances? I assume you haven’t forgotten that they are twenty feet thick?”

“Nwm has agreed to facilitate entry, if it is necessary. I will attempt a final parley first. I wish merely to be allowed unhindered access to the Temple compound – as is my right as Grand Master.”

“The legitimacy of that title is questionable,” Tagur remarked drily.

“You could speak to them, Tagur. Allow this to pass without bloodshed.”

“I am not about to act as your message-boy,” the Prince replied, “whatever your present intentions are. Deorham, my concern is that if you enter the city, some other spiritual imperative will descend upon you. Oronthon will ask you to take control of Morne, or he will instruct you to arraign the Small Council.”

“That will not happen,” Eadric grimaced.

“Are you so sure?” Tagur retorted. “What if you had some new ’revelation?’ Deorham, for what its worth, I actually quite like you, and your crazy Druid friend. But that doesn’t really mean much in the current political climate. I have responsibilities to the citizens of Morne. If you enter the city, there will be bloodshed. Innocents will perish. There will be rape, murder, looting and burning. It is a war. It *always* happens, no matter who leads the troops, or whatever their stated values are.”

“Not this time,” Eadric was adamant.

Tagur sighed. “You are naïve and idealistic.”

“Ask them to open the gates, your Highness.”

“I will not.”

“Then at least bring my proposal to the Royal Council. Advise them as you will, but allow the others to vote on it. I beg you, Tagur.”

The Prince groaned and nodded. “I will vote against you, and counsel the others to do the same.”

“That is you prerogative,” Eadric replied. He turned to his squire. “Tatterbrand, fetch another horse. We will escort Tagur to Morne.”

**
“Where the hell have you been?” Foide snapped at Rimilin of the Skin. “And exactly what did you think you were doing at Hrim Eorth? You agreed to only target Nwm with your spells.”

The Acolyte stood before King Tiuhan, Foide, Sihu, Attar and half a dozen other nobles, as well as the Bishops of Gibilrazen and Mord. He was flanked by a young girl, perhaps twelve years old.

“I miscalculated,” Rimilin lied, looking contrite. “For which I offer the council my profound apologies. I will suffer the consequences of my actions when the Wyrish wizards indict me.”

“Why do you bring this urchin before us?” Sihu asked.

“Not an urchin, your Grace: a simple child from Morne. An innocent who is typical of those who would perish if the Heretic enters the city.”

“I hardly see the point of bringing her here,” Foide snapped. “Or have you simply taken her under your wing: does she have nowhere else to go?”

“I hope to appeal to the Heretic’s better sense,” Rimilin said slyly. “Once he was a great champion, whom few of us here would question. Since his seduction by the dark powers, however, he has fallen into vain and evil ways. But none of us are without the potential for redemption. Perhaps when he sees this child, and others like her – unsullied, and without guilt upon them - he may be struck with remorse.”

The Bishop of Gibilrazen could not believe his ears. “You, an accursed demonist, have the gall to say that? You are utterly despised, Rimilin. You are base, faithless and irredeemable. You have fused with some foul thing from the Pit.”

“I am loyal to Morne, and to my King,” the Acolyte bowed. “You and I may have differing perspectives, your Eminence, but we do not necessarily differ in our need for stability and security.”

“You are a canker, Wizard,” the Bishop retorted. “Whom even the other cankers in Wyre will not deal with. You are an accursed liar, although I don’t know what your scheme is. And that girl is likely some whore from the Abyss, or some innocent whom you will sacrifice. You will sell us all to the Adversary, who has assumed the guise of Eadric of Deorham.”

“Silence!” The Acolyte screamed, apparently losing control. “I could obliterate every one of you here, if I so chose. However,” he seemed to master himself again, “I do serve my King, and I am loyal to Morne. I will do as you bid, your majesty.”

Tiuhan, unused to being addressed directly rather than through an intermediary, stammered self-consciously.

“You will address the Council, Rimilin,” Foide said.

The girl looked at Tiuhan.

Tiuhan looked back.

“I-I think we should allow Rimilin to speak with the Heretic,” the Boy King said.
“Your Majesty…” Foide began.

“No!” King Tiuhan said, surprising even himself. “I have made my mind up. Rimilin will speak to the Heretic.”

Foide sighed. What harm could it do? And anything was preferable to this pious hysteria from Gibilrazen.

**

The embassy – which also served as an escort to Prince Tagur of Einir – consisted of Eadric, Tahl, Tatterbrand, Brey, Soraine of Trempa, Jorde, Hyne, seven of the eleven Penitents and Ryth of Har Kumil. Nwm flew overhead. Mostin, Ortwin and Iua observed events from afar in a secure shelter which the Alienist had erected. For a variety of reasons, none felt that they had anything to contribute to the negotiations, although they all maintained a keen interest.

Privately, Ortwin had determined to jump through the mirror again if required – in the full knowledge that Mostin would probably never speak to him again if he did.

Horns sounded, the South Gate of the city opened, and a squad of twenty knights rode out to meet the Ahma and his party. They bore the standard of the Gultheins – the golden boar – surmounted by the eighteen-pointed crown of the kings of Wyre. Eadric recognized the armour of their leader Attar, Warden of the North, and gave a small sigh of relief. Attar was known for both his equitableness and his pragmatism. In the middle of the group, the Paladin noted a young man on a grey palfrey and three children on ponies. He scowled. Most irregular. He readied himself in the event of something unforeseen.

Mostin, gazing through the mirror of Urm-Nahat, saw only three children and a riderless horse. He became fidgety. “I smell a rat,” the Alienist said to Ortwin.

“An invisible rider?” Ortwin suggested.

“Perhaps,” Mostin responded. He muttered a spell, and vanished.

Iua looked at Ortwin, who shrugged.

“I’m still here,” the Alienist said. He pushed his own invisible head through the mirror above the royal embassy, in the knowledge that if there was an invisible rider upon the horse, Mostin would see him or her with his magical sight.

A young man, whom he didn’t recognize. Not invisible, though. Must be warded from scrying.

Rimilin? Whoever it was, he was looking at another sensor nearby, which Mostin immediately perceived. He looked down again.

One of the children was looking straight at him. She can see me.

A force pressed upon his consciousness, coercing him. “Why not tickle Eadric?” It suggested. “Remember how he likes the tickly sensation of disintegrate?”
Mostin shook off the spell, pulled his head back through the mirror.

“Very fishy,” his mind raced as he said it. “It might be Rimilin, and he might have demonic allies with him. One of them just suggested that I disintegrate Eadric.”

“Demons disguised as children?” Iua asked. “That’s pretty cheap.”

Mostin shrugged, and began to buff.

“Hey, what about the Injunction?” Ortwin asked.

There was a pause as the Alienist finished casting a Haste spell. “Rimilin is fair game. He is in contempt himself. If it is the Acolyte, then I’ll blast him as soon as he makes a move.”

“Let’s just take him out now,” Ortwin suggested.

“If, Ortwin. If.”

“We should warn Ed, in any case.”

Mostin nodded, and refocused the Mirror, before thrusting his head through again. The Alienist’s disembodied voice sounded in the ears of Eadric and Tahl.

“The man on the horse in the middle may be Rimilin. The cute kiddies might be Succubi, or worse.”

Eadric sighed.

*

As the reception committee approached to around forty yards, Eadric motioned to Tahl, who concentrated through the Eye of Palamabron and invoked its True Seeing ability.


Eadric cursed, and reined in. “Flee! Disperse!” He yelled. “We are ambushed.” Quickly, he turned to Prince Tagur. “Ride for your life, and pray!”

Everything seemed to happen at once, and with blinding speed.

Rimilin, who had anticipated getting closer – at least to within Eadric’s ability to sense the Demons – nonetheless acted first. Fire leapt from his left eye in a narrow shaft, reducing Soraine, the elderly Duchess of Trempa, to a cinder. It was not the tack that he had planned, but plans change, the Acolyte mused to himself. An empowered Fireball followed in quick order.

As if on his cue, a lurid purple Fire Storm ravaged the area to the left of the Paladin, immolating horses and riders. One of the children, who had continued urging her pony forwards, stopped and gazed briefly at Tahl the Incorruptible.

The Deputy Inquisitor crumpled into a lifeless hulk.
Mostin, acting with magically enhanced speed, stepped through the mirror and disintegrated the Balor Uruum, disguised as a child. Its true form flashed briefly across the vision of those present, before its aeons-long existence was snuffed out.

The explosion upon its demise was terrific, and fire ripped across the field.

Reeling from the force and heat, Mostin invoked a quickened Polymorph Other upon Rimilin but failed to effect him.

Eadric spurred Contundor forwards, charged past the burning royal standard, the bewildered Attar and the few knights who remained alive, and smote one of the other children – the Balor Irzho – with every iota of strength that he possessed. It screamed: an unholy noise, issuing from the mouth of a young girl. Black ichor sprayed from it, and it reflexively wreathed itself in comforting flames.

As he rode past, the succubus Kalkja, disguised as a twelve-year-old girl, flung a small iron box at Eadric before Teleporting away to safety.

Rimilin was struck full force by a Thunderswarm which issued from Nwm’s talons. Although warded, the Acolyte still reeled from the blast.

Time to go, I think, and he vanished. A fraction of a second later, Irzho also disappeared, even as Iua and Ortwin were preparing to engage.

Eadric, burned and blistered, turned Contundor, and rode slowly back to look at the carnage. Few still stood. Soraine was dead, and Tahl, and Ryth, and Hyne. Brey, unremarkably, still lived – at any other time Eadric would have appreciated the irony of the apparently unkillable Templar. Tagur also still stood, although his wounds were severe.

Tatterbrand! No, not you as well! But he still breathed, if barely. Eadric layed his hands upon him, and warmth and light flooded into his squire. Attar, unhorsed and charred, hobbled forwards.

“I did not know...” he began.

“It doesn’t matter,” Eadric said grimly. “They will always find a way. You are blameless.”

The reality of it was dawning on him. Tahl was gone. He could barely bring himself to look upon the corpse.

And then, the final affront. Ortwin walked up to Eadric, holding the small casket that Kalkja had hurled at the Paladin. The Bard was shaking. “I’m sorry, Ed.”

Inside, on a velvet cushion, were a pair of lips, cut from a face, and still fresh with blood.

Eadric turned away and vomited.

When he raised his head again, he saw a single tall, elegant figure dressed in black walking slowly towards him.

“It is time,” Titivilus said, almost gently.
Four Devas, Jewels in the celestial host and paramount warriors of the Order of Powers, accompanied Tramst, future Primate of all Wyre, as he Wind-Walked from Ardan to Morne. They were alert to the possible presence of fiends: their Marshal, Enitharmon, had instructed them to exercise particular vigilance.

Tramst, who carried a mandate from Heaven, brought a new teaching. It was based on neither unity, nor difference. It did not deny Orthodoxy, nor Ardanese practice, nor the Transaxiomatic philosophy, nor Reconciliatory Sophism, nor even the Irrenite Heresy – the most controversial of the Oronthonian factions. Tramst had taken the premise of the Urgic Mysitics, and in three months had stripped it of its inconsistencies, refined it, and through a succession of revelations had determined the best way to communicate his apprehension.

His system was dubbed saizhan, ‘insight.’ It denied the ultimacy of any and all external phenomena associated with Oronthonianism, and advocated direct, unmediated contact with the Fundamental. It was supported by a dialectic of negation designed to stimulate awareness which replaced the scala mystica that contemplatives had previously employed for centuries.

Oronthon, aware that his own church, divided against itself, could not endure unless it was changed, had decided to overhaul it. His solution was radical.

His Breath, the Ahma, had been the agent to accomplish the initial breakdown of reason necessary for the foundation of the new practice. But he merely foreshadowed Tramst.

His Mind, his Sela,*** would be Tramst. In order to repair his house, Oronthon needed to oversee the builders himself. In order to allow unmediated contact with the Fundamental, the Fundamental would be present.

Previously, the Archbishops had borne a bright spark of divinity: they were Oronthon’s vicars on Earth.

But Tramst, Oronthon’s proxy, would be an incandescent beacon.

*It is customary for Clerics who Commune with Oronthon to leave their last question ‘vacant’: the Bright God may dispense wisdom as he sees fit.

**The Longing of Separation is the profound sadness experienced by the querent after the intimate connection of Communing ends. More generally, it occurs after any mystical union.

***Without getting too deeply into Oronthonian theology, the Sela is the “Gnostic Intellect” of God – that aspect of Oronthon which mystics and contemplatives relate to.

Note: The names of the celestials who accompanied Tramst were Urlion, Shoonel,
Ruma and Diol - Astral Devas of great prestige and influence. In general, Devas represent the “muscle” of Oronthon: Urlion and his peers were of particular reknown.

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**POST 16: FINAL UPDATE**

Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 8th December 2002, 04:01 PM

...before I start a new thread.

I had a lot of trouble composing this - I hope that the reasons for things are clear. If there is confusion, I'll try and answer things as best I can.

BTW, thanks for the support, as always 😊

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**Interlude with The Confuser**

“You appear like a crow over carrion, Devil. You are contemptible.” Eadric wearily drew Lukarn.

“I am your lawfully appointed tempter,” Titivilus replied easily. “and your time has arrived. You may ask me to depart, if your faith is so weak that it cannot stand a minor trial. Assailing me, however, would be disrespectful in the extreme, and more than a little foolish.”

The Paladin sighed. “Make your offer, then leave. The answer will be ‘no’, in any case.”

“It might take some while,” Titivilus explained. “And is likely to involve elements which you do not expect. I suggest we remove to a more suitable locale.”

Eadric laughed grimly. “I am about to enter Morne with an army – now is hardly a convenient time.”

The Duke of Hell bowed ironically. “Fortunately, there is a place where we may go where the inconvenience of time is not an issue. I can return you at the point where you left.”

“You lie.”

“Frequently,” Titivilus conceded. “But not at the moment. I have no intention of lying to you, Ahma. If you distrust me, bring Palamabron’s Eye with you – any counterfeit will be instantly revealed. It is, after all, infallible. And Ortwin the Satyr, I strongly recommend that you do not do what you are considering.”

The Bard was assuming a flanking position whilst Titivilus spoke.

“You may dismiss me, Ahma,” the Duke said, “and I will never trouble you again.
But you may regret the choice later: here is a chance to confront your own shadow, in terms which few have the luxury of doing. Look into the Darkness of your heart with me. If you are true to your faith then you have nothing to fear."

“Honey on the tongue does not disguise malice,” Eadric spat.

“I am a Devil. What do you expect? Temptation is my work, and I take pride in it.”

Eadric sighed, relaxed his grip, and nodded.


“No. I need to do this.”

“That’s the spirit,” Titivilus said. “Don’t forget the Eye, Ahma. Unless you are afraid of the truth, of course.”

The Paladin knelt over the stricken body of Tahl, kissed him on the forehead, and removed the huge stone from around his neck.

Titivilus clicked his fingers, and a Gate opened. The scene beyond was idyllic: a soft, sandy beach gently lapped by a clear sea beneath a cloudless sky.

“After you,” the Duke of Hell ushered him. “Don’t worry. You’ll be safe and unharmed. I will return you to the present time and place whenever you wish.” He did not lie.

So Eadric stepped through.

**

“This is Cha’at,” Titivilus said in response to the unvoiced question in Eadric’s mind. “It belongs to my liege – inasmuch as a plane can belong to anybody.”

“The Demiplane that you offered Mostin,” Eadric nodded. “If you think that...”

“I have no intention of offering this place to you, Ahma,” Titivilus smiled. “Unless you want it, of course,” he added. His eyes twinkled with cruel amusement.

“Get to the point,” Eadric snapped.

“I will – but circuitously. Firstly, we need to establish a common language – so as to minimize misunderstanding.”

“Your ability to twist words is legendary,” Eadric scowled. “And I don’t pretend to be your equal in sophistry or subtlety of language.”

“Ah, the Ahma is a man of simple faith. Complex linguistic matters are beyond his understanding.”

“If you have merely brought me here to mock me...”

“Do I wound your pride, Ahma? Are you self-conscious of your limited ability to
grasp difficult ideas?”

Eadric said nothing.

“If you feel too embarrassed to answer that question, then I understand. If you feel that allowing yourself to be that vulnerable to me is unwise because I am the Enemy – one of the fallen; despicable, irredeemable, befouled with Taint and corruption – then I also understand. Allow me then to ask another question, Ahma: at what point does it become permissible for a man to be anything less than absolutely open and honest?”

The Paladin groaned inwardly. This was not what he had expected. “Alright. You’ve made your point.”

“And you agree that it has merit?” Titivilus asked.

Eadric nodded sourly.

“Tell me, Ahma: had you ever considered that idea before – purely hypothetically, of course. The idea that ‘even when dealing with demons and devils, one must maintain absolute honesty.’ I’m not suggesting that it is the Truth, but that it is, from your perspective a truth, which deserves consideration.”

“I had never before considered it,” Eadric admitted.

“In which case, you have learned something new. From me. I have taught you.”

“What are you?” The Paladin asked.

“You ask ‘what is a Devil?’ To you? A Dark Mirror.”

**

“We have established, then, that the language we will use is one of total honesty,” Titivilus said. “Remember that you have an advantage over me – any falsehood that I speak will be revealed by the Eye of Palamabron. I must simply trust you, and assume that you don’t lie.”

Eadric sighed.


“They are an heretical sect. They were banned because they venerated the Adversary alongside Oronthon.”

“That is correct – although it is important to note that they do not worship the Adversary as a distinct individual. They regard him as an aspect of Oronthon or, to be more accurate, an emanation.”

“If this is an attempt to sell me on the merits of various heresies then you are pursuing the wrong tack.”

“I don’t need to sell you anything,” Titivilus said wryly. “I take it that you are aware that Tramst will be the next Archbishop of Morne?”
The Paladin nodded.

"And that he will be imbued with a measure of Oronthon’s power which has no precedent – that he will, in fact, be an avatar of sorts."

"Tahl intimated as much," Eadric replied carefully. "Although the exact details have not been revealed to me." His answer was accompanied by a cognitive dissonance of enormous proportions – was he actually having this conversation with one of the Fallen?

"Tramst will readmit the Irrenites into the Oronthonian fold," Titivilus said. "As well as every other denomination and schizmatic group."

Still, the Devil did not lie. Eadric was dumbstruck – and enormously excited. He was also very suspicious. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Revelation is not the sole province of Celestials."

"Celestials generally do not want something dubious in return."

"Touché," Titivilus conceded.

**

"What do you know of Jovol the Grey?" Titivilus asked.

"I am reluctant to answer that question."

"Because you feel that by so doing, you may jeopardize Jovol, whom you regard as a possible ally – although you are not sure how, or in what capacity. Then let me enlighten you somewhat as to Jovol’s nature: he is immensely powerful. More than any of the other Wyrish Wizards suspect – with the exception of Hlioth, who knew him from before."

"Before what?"

"Before he assumed his current incarnation," Titivilus answered. "Jovol is preoccupied with the Injunction, and a particular paradox which he finds himself in – namely, that he must both enforce it, and then subsequently violate it. He regards himself as something of a custodian, and is resigned to sacrificing himself in order to renew the integrity of the magical détente."

"To me, that would seem to indicate a nobility of purpose."

"Quite," Titivilus said sarcastically. "Except that he has been ineffectual to date in preventing Rimilin from acting – and this has been through choice, not through inability. His divinations have indicated hours, perhaps even days ahead of time, where and when the Acolyte of the Skin will strike. Why do you suppose he has not prevented it, Ahma?"

Apparently, Titivilus was still telling the truth. Eadric sighed. "I do not know Jovol’s motivations. And I do not see why you are wasting time with this trivia. Cut to the chase, Devil. I can reject you, and we can part ways."

"Time is of no consequence here, so there is no need to feel rushed," the Duke
reminded him. “And it is seldom that one has the opportunity to tempt the breath of God – indulge me and permit my moment of dramatic tension. Think, Ahma! Why is Jovol, who is concerned more than anything else about the Injunction, not acting to prevent its most flagrant violation?”

“I will not be drawn into idle speculation.”

“Then let me tell you,” Titivilus said impatiently. “Jovol predicts in terms of probabilities – of significant contact between individuals, and of interplanar movement. When a planar contact is revealed, Jovol can infer the likely manifestation. He knows that if he arrests the actions of Rimilin, then Graz’zt – whose information in this whole affair is less complete than you might suspect – will change his tack accordingly. Jovol is therefore waiting until both Rimilin and Kothchori are present at the same time, before he shows his hand.”

“Who is Kothchori?” Eadric groaned.

“Kothchori is the mage who assailed both Jiuhu and Morne with fire. Graz’zt has him under his thumb at present. He is also warded from detection – although not from Graz’zt and his minions.”

“And perhaps you could tell me why this is important?”

“Because within two hours of your return to the battlefield, Kothchori will open a Gate allowing Graz’zt onto the Prime Plane.”

Eadric’s jaw dropped. “And Jovol knows this?”

“He knows when the Gate will open, but not where,” Titivilus confirmed. “And as he cannot locate Kothchori, there isn’t much that he can do.”

“This makes no sense,” Eadric muttered. “If Jovol can determine where and when Rimilin acts, why can he not do the same for this Kothchori?”

Titivilus sighed in exasperation. “Jovol detects contacts – one individual to another. An example: Hullu, Mesikämmi and Rimilin come into close resonance, and are accompanied by a perturbation which indicates a planar transit – in this case, from an archaic spirit dimension which borders the Prime. Jovol can discern the location of Hullu and Mesikämmi, therefore he can infer the location of Rimilin. As both Graz’zt and Kothchori are invisible to Jovol’s attempts to scry them, he only knows when. He has no where.”

Eadric had no idea who Mesikämmi was, and thought it best not to ask. He was starting to get very confused. Titivilus, despite the fact he had not yet lied, was living up to his reputation.

“This still makes no sense,” the Paladin said. “How can Jovol know where Kothchori and Rimilin meet, if he cannot determine the location of either of them?”

“Because when they come into resonance, other individuals are also implicated. Jovol can discern their location, thereby inferring the presence of both Rimilin and Kothchori.”

“And who are these ‘other individuals?’” Eadric asked.

Titivilus shrugged, and pointed a long finger at the Paladin. “You, maybe? I don’t
Eadric groaned. "Still, I don’t understand why Jovol simply didn’t intervene and stop Rimilin when he knew where he would be – when he interacted with me, or Hullu or Mostin, or whatever."

“It is likely that the projected course of events would be even more unfavourable – from Jovol’s perspective, at least – if Rimilin were eliminated prematurely.”

“How can that be so?”

“Graz’zt is methodical and lays intricate webs – for a Demon, at least.” The contempt in Titivilus’ voice was not concealed. “However, he is not above fits of rage and spite which ultimately act against his own interests. Consider what his mood would be if Kothchori conjured him and he had lost both Rimilin and the Balor Uruum in one day. I think that it may prove fortunate for Wyre that you did not slay Rimilin today. Graz’zt is more than capable of destroying Morne and everything in it with a single invocation.”

“He would suffer immediate retaliation,” Eadric insisted. “Or the celestial host would never permit such an act.”

“Would they not?” Titivilus asked. “Are you confident that you understand the Mind of Oronthon that clearly? In any case, Rimilin is not dead, so the point is moot. Graz’zt retains a sense of perspective, and his actions are likely to be more systematic and less insane.”

“His ire is directed towards me more than any other,” Eadric said. “It is those closest to me that I feel most for.”

“They are Graz’zt’s targets for that reason,” Titivilus smiled wickedly. “Graz’zt would like to break you, and then turn you against Tramst – the incarnate manifestation of Oronthon’s power.”

“That will never happen.”

“Never is a long time.”

“Your efforts to make me doubt are wasted,” Eadric said. “Do not forget to whom you speak.”

“I would never do that, Ahma,” Titivilus gave a mock bow. “But I digress. It is likely Morne will still suffer terribly, and at Graz’zt’s hands. And Oronthon will permit it to happen. When one can foresee the ends that Oronthon can, who can tell what ‘The Greatest Good for the Greatest Number’ really means?”

Still, the Duke did not lie. But Eadric was unfazed: this was a paradox that he had long since accepted.

“Do you wish to know what it is that Graz’zt will do, Ahma?” Titivilus asked easily. “Knowledge might allow you to ameliorate great suffering, although you could not prevent it all.”

Eadric said nothing.

“Remember our agreement,” Titivilus said. “Complete honesty.”
“I would like to know Graz’zt’s plans,” Eadric admitted.

“As would I,” Titivilus replied.

**

“The Succubus, Nehael,” Titivilus said, smiling.

Eadric groaned inwardly.

“She is currently in a rather awkward predicament, wouldn’t you say?”

“No doubt you are about to make an offer to rescue or release her, in exchange for a service that I can offer you,” the Paladin said in a resigned voice.

“No,” the Devil replied. “It is within your own power to resolve that issue. You have the means to do it – although you may feel compromised by the methods involved. Remember, you are the Ahma, and you have powerful allies.”

Titivilus did not lie.

“Then what relevance does Nehael have to this conversation?” Eadric asked.

“When she first succoured you for aid, you were willing to put everything – your own soul included – on the line in order to aid her redemption.”

“Yes. And?”

“Is she redeemed, now?” Titivilus asked. “Before you answer that,” he added, “if you feel that you are being drawn into an untenable ethical position at any time, feel free to stop me – but I feel there have been inconsistencies in your attitude that perhaps you should address.”

“I am not here to receive philosophical instruction from you,” Eadric moaned. “And your circuitous offer is still no closer to being voiced. Allow me to ask you a question, Duke Titivilus, for every one that you pose me, and we will see how this proceeds.”

“Very well,” Titivilus answered surprisingly.

“Does that proposal concern you in any way?” The Paladin asked.

“Yes,” Titivilus said.

Eadric raised an eyebrow.

“So,” the Devil continued, “has Nehael been redeemed?”

“That question has no answer,” Eadric replied. “You might as well ask ‘what kind of apple is that orange?’ How was your exchange with Shomei? Did she put you in your place?”

“That is two questions,” Titivilus pointed out. “But I will let it pass. It went as one might have expected, and our relative ‘places’ are affirmed. But your last answer
is intriguing – is the Ahma suggesting that redemption is not a universal phenomenon, available to all who earnestly seek it?"

“I make no such claim,” Eadric answered, “and no amount of verbiage will lead me to it. And I found your answer rather lacking, so I will pose the question again more clearly: Did the Infernalist Shomei assert her ascendancy over you, Titivilus?”

“In a manner of speaking,” the Devil conceded, “although all such arrangements are subject to renegotiation. But I have just thought of another question – not designed to stimulate your pride, before you ask: In the vast celestial hierarchy, where do you see yourself in relation to seraphs, saints and ascended masters, Ahma?”

Eadric shifted uncomfortably. “I have never before considered that question, but your premise is false: all of those about whom you speak live the will of Oronthon. There is no striving for them. They do not need to claw their way anywhere, as they have already achieved bliss. If you were to earnestly seek redemption yourself, Titivilus, I would willingly act as intercessor on your behalf. Can I interest you in such a proposal?”

“It would certainly have merit, were it not for other factors,” Titivilus answered.

“Other factors?”

“Ahma, the face I present to you is cultured, intellectual, reasonable and scholarly. I am all of those things. But it behooves you to remember that I am also cruel, merciless, depraved, manipulative and utterly, utterly evil. You see me as an Irrenite might see me, and that is intentional on my part – I would achieve little in the way of communication, otherwise. Already, you have been lulled into complacency, and have forgotten to whom, to what you speak. I am no succubus nor a minor devil, but a Duke of Hell. My philosophical position is the result of aeons of thought and contemplation upon matters which you do not grasp. I am not blind, ignorant, savage evil – I am reasoned evil.”

“That is to be most feared,” Eadric said. “But I have not forgotten who you are, and my proposal still stands. Be finished with your offer. And speedily. I grow weary.”

“Oronthon will not intervene to release Nehael, because the Succubus has placed herself beyond the Bright God’s protection. She chose Uedii over Him, and rejected an offer from Rintrah to reenter heaven. Would you say that she has abjured Him a second time? One could interpret her actions in that light.”

The Paladin did his best to retain an impassive expression. “I was unaware that grace had been extended to her to that degree. Nor can I always fathom her actions. But I still fail to see what you are driving at, Devil.”

“If you act to save Nehael, which it is within your power to accomplish – by hook or by crook – you must sacrifice something. You could attempt a punitive raid or rescue mission – a possibility that offers many opportunities for sacrifice. Maybe your life or soul, or those of your friends. In any event, you would sacrifice your responsibility to Tramst and to Morne and to your soldiers – after all, should you really be going off on an Abyssal jaunt if the fate of Wyre hangs in the balance and Oronthon’s Proxy is about to appear upon the scene?

“Alternatively, perhaps you could strike a deal with Graz’zt in some way, thereby
sacrificing a certain portion of your principles. Or you could employ other agents to make a deal for you.”

“Devils, you mean,” Eadric said.

“As I have already said, no,” Titivilus replied. “That is not what I meant – although if you request such assistance, we can no doubt come to a mutually beneficial understanding. I was referring to your associates – you could merely depute the responsibility to them.”

“And what do I sacrifice if I do that?”

“Your control of the situation? Your involvement? Your autonomy? Again, maybe your friends? Mostin can be rather rash, after all. Would you trust him with such a project?”

“More than I’d trust you,” Eadric answered.

“Of course, you could simply sacrifice Nehael to the ‘Greater Good’ and, no doubt, as time passes, so will your guilt and remorse.”

“Pah! Make your offer and return me.”

Titivilus sighed. “My proposal to you is this: that, henceforth, you and I will speak on a regular basis, about such matters that are pressing upon your conscience. With my aid, you will establish a platform from which insight can spring.”

“Are you insane? You would act as my counsellor?”

“Why not? Have you not found this exchange informative?”

“Whether or not I have is hardly indicative of your value as a long-term advisor. And what, I wonder, do you offer me in exchange for this absurd request?”

Titivilus smiled. “You misunderstand. That is not my offer of temptation to you. It is the boon which you would enjoy for a growing life in Oronthon’s wisdom.”

Eadric guffawed. “And what, then, is the price I would pay for it?”

“You will endure my attempts to corrupt, pervert and sway you from your current purpose. The torment that your psyche endures will be immense, and the moral knots that you have heretofore wrestled with will seem trivial in comparison. The Ahma has the chance of being in a permanent dialogue with the darkest things that there are. One cannot live fully in the light by denying the darkness, but only by transcending it.”

“That is Left-Hand Path sophistry,” Eadric said scornfully.

“It is the dialectic.”

“And Urgic and Irrenite heresy.”

“They are no longer heresies, if you recall. It is the basis of saizhan, the practice through which Tramst will revive Oronthonianism.”

Eadric swallowed. Titivilus did not lie. But it was too radical.
“Not all truths are unequal,” Titivilus said.

Eadric’s stomach turned over.

“It is the Middle Way. The Diamond Way. The Path of Lightning.”

And the Paladin’s head reeled.

**

“Are you suggesting that every Oronthonian will have a personal devil with whom they can converse, in order to stimulate their awareness?”

“Certainly not,” Titivilus answered. “Saizhan is a mystical practice for contemplatives who have overcome dualistic thinking. It negates all predicates about the nature of Oronthon, and replaces them with direct experience of the Godhead: with sufficient discipline, the devotee simply enters a trance and taps into Oronthon’s Sela, his Gnostic intellect.”

Eadric looked confused.

“They will Commune at will with him,” Titivilus explained.

The Paladin’s eyes widened. “And for those of us who lack ‘sufficient discipline?’”

“That is the second purpose of Tramst. For those who cannot grasp the fundamentals of the practice, they may approach the Godhood directly, embodied in Tramst. By speaking with him, they effectively speak with Oronthon himself.”

“I still fail to see the diabolic component,” Eadric said.

“For a dialectic to exist, antinomies are required,” Titivilus answered. “For contemplatives, they exist on the level of mental constructs. For the devotees who seek him, Tramst himself will stimulate awareness with speech and action, using a device similar to the kius.* But you are unique. For the Ahma...”

“They would be embodied in you,” Eadric sighed.

“Precisely,” Titivilus smiled. “And I have been selected because I am the subtlest, most conniving, most underhanded manipulator that there is in the Hells, bar one only.”

“If this is so, if it is necessary, then I fail to see what the temptation is,” Eadric groaned.

“That is because I have not yet tempted you, Ahma. I have merely made you the counter-offer.”

Realization slowly began to dawn on the Paladin.

“You may simply walk away from this, and become Eadric of Deorham once again. Let it go. Return to your castle, and your vineyards, and your dogs, and an untroubled life. Or to be free to pursue Nehael as you will, renounce your servitude to the Temple, and make war on Graz’zt. Take the fight to him. But that is not what Tramst requires from you. That is the temptation.”
“No,” Eadric said. “You seek to be both my tempter and my counsellor. You cannot both threaten me and offer me a path to understand my God.”

“I can and do,” Titivilus answered.

“I will not believe it,” the Paladin said.

“Then I suggest you speak to Tramst,” the Duke answered. “He will arrive outside of Morne within fifteen minutes of your return.”

Eadric’s jaw dropped.

“Ahma, your religion is undergoing a paradigm shift. Old roles are being redefined. Different facets of the Truth are manifesting. When you speak to Tramst, he will not be an intermediary as Cynric or even Rintrah was. You will, to all intents, be addressing Oronthon directly.”

The Paladin nodded dumbly.

“He demands much of you. He will not relent, nor compromise. By subjecting you to the darkness, he intends to purify and exalt you. To be an exemplar, you must embody the principles which define a philosophy.”

“I doubt.” Eadric said, simply.

“That is both your strength and your vulnerability,” Titivilus said, opening a Gate back to the Prime, “which it is my happy duty to exploit to the maximum.” He smiled wickedly. Palpable Evil emanated from him, causing Eadric to shiver.

“Until the next time, then,” Titivilus said. “Unless you choose otherwise.” He vanished.

Eadric stepped through the Gate. The paradox had come full circle.

**

“Where did you go, and how long were you there?” Ortwin asked Eadric.

“To the Demiplane Cha’at. And it seemed like forever, although it was probably no more than half an hour.” Eadric looked over his shoulder – behind him were the massed lines of Templars, their auxiliaries, Trempan knights, squires and, on the flanks, Ardanese outriders. Nearby, stood Attar and Prince Tagur.

His head span. Too much to consider, and too short a time in which to consider it.

“What was his temptation?” Mostin pressed.

Eadric laughed. Paradox spiralled through his mind. He looked at the crumpled form of Tahl, and began to weep.

Ortwin clicked his fingers. “Snap out of it, Ed. You can go nuts later. There isn’t time now.”

“In fifteen minutes, God will arrive. In two hours, Graz’zt is going to do
something terrible, and Oronthon is going to do nothing about it. And I think that my guardian Angel is going to be replaced by a Devil.” Eadric explained.

“I think you need to speak to Shomei,” Mostin said.

*The *kius* is an Urgic riddle, framed as a question qualified by a double negation, e.g. *What is Oronthon, if compassion and revelation are not unidentical?*. Technically, *not all truths are unequal* is not a *kius*, although its structure resembles one. The *koan* is probably the closest RL parallel, although the structure of the *kius* is more formal.

**POST 17:**

Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 11th December 2002, 08:41 PM

Some answers. It will be a while before the new thread gets underway, so bear with me.

Many thanks for kind words 😊

Quote:

Precisely what drugs in what combination do you have to consume to think up this example of genius?

Naah, we're all too old and long in the tooth for that kind of stuff these days.

Quote:

What will be the name of the new thread?

The Rape of Morne II :rolleyes:

Quote:

Some questions (in case you weren't sure what they were),

1. Did Ed's player react the same way (head spinning boy)?
2. Were the other players present for this negotiation?
3. Was the language used in play similar to what was used here?
4. When are you planning to publish this?
1. Not as much.
2. Yes - I couldn't stop them.
3. Similar, although neither I nor Lombard are that articulate.
4. Eventually.

Quote:

does this mean that Ed just realized that there is no end to fighting the good fight? that there is no point of "winning" this war after which you can lay down your arms and return to simpler times?

That's pretty much it, in a nutshell.

Quote:

and what reasons did you hope to become clear, that you mentioned at the start of the last post?

That was more a reflection of my uncertainty in actually being able to convey the gist of the exchange.

Quote:

This must have been an incredibly hard session to run

Yep. We took it very slowly. I was still a complete head罅罅罅罅, though.

Quote:

What is Oronthon, if compassion and revelation are not unidentical?

---------------------------------------------------------------

What does this mean, then, if revelation equates (as it would seem to) to a confrontation with evil? Is the suffering and death that may come from such a confrontation a part of that compassion?

The point of the kius - and this is just one example of many - is to force the mind into new patterns of apprehension. The double negative is crucial - to say they are not unidentical is not the same as saying they are identical - at least, not in any absolute case, although their identity can be inferred, if you read the kius a certain way. Truth is never positively asserted through the kius because to do so violates the Urgic premise that the Truth is, ultimately, inexpressible.

The rational mind is not supposed to understand the kius.

Not all truths are unequal is the 'final word,' if you like, insofar as it is self-referential, and it is posited as the Truth, rather than posed as a question. By positing not all truths are unequal as the Truth, the statement actually brings its own validity into question.

Sunyasunyata (pron. shunya-shunyata) - or the 'Emptiness of Emptiness' is the closest parallel I can think of: the Buddhist idea that all phenomena are ultimately un-Real or Empty, including the doctrine of Emptiness itself.
Have you used/adapted many modules for use in the Wyre campaign? Obviously most of the action you have outlined in the Story Hour threads hasn't been dictated by module, but have you used any in the past?

Nope.

Quote:
How many philosophy degrees do you have round your table?

One, and it's not me.

Quote:
the greatest manipulator bar one? greater than mephistopheles even?

I've overhauled the Hells. I'm afraid Mephisto in all of his Faustian glory has gone bye-bye, in favour of more traditional devils from the Lemegeton of Solomon, the Grand Grimoire and the Pseudomonarchia Daemonum.

Quote:
More accurately perhaps, do the orthodox say Oronthon changes?...Hmm, I'm guessing orthodox Oronthonists contemplatives are dualistic. Or are they?

According to (traditional) Orthodoxy, Oronthon is perfect, eternal and unchanging. When the orthodox contemplative achieves a mystical state of consciousness, he or she subsequently interprets it as being in the presence of the deity - i.e. the mystic and the Godhood are in close communion, although they retain their separate identities. Oronthon is viewed largely as a transcendent, rather than immanent reality. Orthodoxy is, in that regard, dualistic.

The Irrenites view the 'conventional' Oronthon - as perceived by Orthodoxy - to be an emanation of the 'Absolute' Oronthon, in much the same way as the Adversary is. They revere the 'Absolute' Oronthon as ineffable, numinous and largely otiose. By uniting the dualities, the goal is union with the Godhood - which is reality/truth etc. All things are, ultimately, Oronthon - hence, the Irrenite Heresy leans towards monism, although it is framed in dualistic language.

The Urgic mystics are also dualists, although they emphasise a different duality - that of matter and spirit. By shedding the physical form, through Gnostic realization, the Urgic Mystic comes to realize the identity of himself and the Godhead. The 'divine spark' is reunited with Oronthon, from which it was never actually different in the first place, and all phenomenal truths are revealed to be incomplete.

Tramst used the premises commonly employed by the Urgic Mystics, and subjected them to a series of reductio ad absurdum arguments, using the negatory dialectic which the Urgics themselves had devised. His conclusion was that even the statement all truths are relative - a common Urgic maxim - was, in fact, relative itself. Philosophy was irrelevant. Speculation about the nature of the deity was irrelevant. Only direct experience of the deity mattered.