Well, I'm back.

I just can't seem to stay away. I haven't thought of a title for the thread yet - I guess something will come in due course. Perversely, my enthusiasm for writing has been rekindled in the face of otherwise having to edit the other document (remember, when you were in school, washing dishes was preferable to doing homework? - it's kind of like that).

(Edit: good thinking PC. The other threads are linked below)

So. Er, here we go...

Fiends and Feys

The unrelenting tempest of acid roared again across the face of their blasted world. Demons, damned creatures, and a million souls consigned to perdition screeched in agony, as lurid flames burst from fumaroles, and immense fulgurations illumined the shattered plains.

Graz‘zt cursed, and screamed, and raved. All fled and hid themselves save Ainhorr only – his ability to read his master’s mood was unparalleled by any other. Too often, he had witnessed this scene.

The catalogue of disaster was growing. First, Cerothumulos. Then Rurunoth, gone without a trace. Uzmi and Feezuu, lost at Khu. Uruum, slain by the Alienist outside of Morne. Kothchori, assassinated by the cursed Ogre, before the Prince could realize his plans. And now, in rapid succession, Choeth and Djorm – two of his generals – conjured and eliminated, and one of his Succubi first ripped from Azzagrat, and then sped back to him with a message from the Paladin.

To the Demon Graz‘zt, who styles himself ‘Prince,’ in Zelatar from the Ahma, the Breath of God in the World of Men, a warning:

Let it be known that, by your actions, you have roused my ire and my eye is directed towards you. As Grand Master of the Temple, and the anointed dispenser of Oronthon’s justice in Wyre, you are summarily condemned to death.
In order to demonstrate my commitment to your overthrow, I have begun with the removal of two of your chief attendants. My intention is to render your position untenable in any confrontation which occurs between you and your enemies within the Abyss.

Ahma.

That is it? Graz'zt had ranted. Nothing more than a message of intent? No coercion? No attempts to negotiate for the return of the bitchling? How dare he?

In his fury, he had annihilated the Succubus who had borne him the letter, but it had done nothing to quench his rage.

Eventually, after prevailing over his own urge to destroy everything within view, the Prince retired to his sanctum and sank into black contemplation. Despite his arrogance, he was wise enough to recognize the possibility of a threat to his own position. And the new interdict set in place by the Wyrish Mages made things that much more complex. He still had agents abroad, but not sufficient for an assault upon Eadric – in any case, Rimilin and Griel were effectively barred from acting within Wyre’s confines.

Graz’zt meditated.

An hour later, his eyes narrowed as yet more ill news reached him. Griel was dead – slain by sonics and Pseudonaturals in the crumbling fortress of Kothchori in the ocean west of Pandicule – outside of the circumscribed area.

He cursed.

**

The Satyr combed his short beard as his spouse – from whom a gentle breeze continually issued – attempted to question the creature. It was barely waist-high, and its skin bore a greenish tint with a wet sheen. The nimble fingers of one hand, and its toes – which were long and slender – were graced with a webbing which bespoke its aquatic origins. Its left hand was missing, and in its place was a sticky, weeping stump, which had been ineptly treated.

"We mean you no harm, little one," Iua said for the fifth time, bending down to speak with it. "We are merely seeking information. We can have someone take a look at your wounds. Please say something."

The Sprite remained silent.

"Oh for pity’s sake," Iua grumbled impatiently. "Are you stupid? We will not hurt you."

It quailed.

"Bah!" She huffed. "This is ludicrous. You try, Ortwin. I’ve never met a Sprite as reluctant to talk – one generally has to beg them to stop. I’m going to sniff around down the corridor. Where is Mostin, anyway?"
Ortwin shrugged, sat down next to the diminutive figure on the dirty flagstone floor and grinned. He produced a bag of sugared figs from his pouch and ate one. "Fig?" He asked, munching.

The Creature eyed them hungrily.

"I am Ortwin," he said truthfully, "and I am the king of Feys in the North of the World," he proceeded to lie. "This island is now a part of my realm, and you are now under my protection – hence, you are my subject. Whilst this state of affairs may be something of a shock to you, you will come to happily accept my benign rulership in due course.

"You should know by now that Kothchori is dead," the Bard continued. "He attempted to interfere with – well, things which he shouldn’t have interfered with. This is regrettable, from your perspective, I am sure..."

The Sprite began to wail.

"However," Ortwin added quickly, "you should be gratified that your captors have been driven off or slain. Your master was mixing with a bad crowd at the end. He did all kinds of wicked things."

In response, the Sprite placed its good hand over its right ear and closed his eyes, as if to block out the Bard and his words. Ortwin attempted to speak for several minutes, but found he was making little progress.

The Bard sighed. This was insufferable. He, like Iua, was quickly beginning to lose his temper. "Snap out of it! Get over it! Yes, you're traumatized. Yes, your world has been turned upon its head. Too bad. I'm offering you a chance here – don't be a fool and turn it down. I can help you, if you let me. Well? Will you?"

There was a long pause.

"Yes, Your Majesty," the Creature squeaked.

"Good," Ortwin smiled. "Now, first of all, eat."

*

"Eek!" Mogus squeaked, alerting Mostin to the presence behind him. The Alienist turned, prepared to unleash his remaining offensive spells. He relaxed – if only a little – when he saw that it was Iua.

"Don't sneak around. Someone will blast you if you're not careful."

Iua grinned. "Find anything?"

"Nothing," Mostin moaned. "And I can't believe that Kothchori actually lived in this pigsty. He was one of the great, you know. It's a miserable story."

"His books? Papers? Oddities?"

"All gone. I'm guessing that Rimilin has the ones that Feezuu's demons didn't steal, way back when." Somehow, Mostin's words lacked conviction.

"And Griel? What have you determined about the items that he carried?"
"Er, nothing, as yet. I'd completely forgotten about them, in fact. Just...dropped them in the old portable hole and put them out of my mind."

Iua gave a condescending look which reminded the Alienist of her mother. "Why was he here?"

Mostin shrugged. "I'm not sure. He was a fool to leave Wyre – the Injunction would have protected him there."

"Do you think he was looking for something?" She asked archly.

"Um, I suppose it's possible," Mostin replied vaguely.

"Mostin, why do I get the feeling that you're holding out on me?"

"I don't know anything, for sure," the Alienist confessed, "but I've got a feeling that something is missing from the big picture."

"Why?"

"Because it doesn't make sense that Kothchori planned to open the second Gate within Wyre, rather than here. Distance would have been no object to a Demon, and to open the Gate here would not have violated the Injunction."

"Did Kothchori even know about the Enforcer, at that point?"

"Exactly my point," Mostin said. "If he'd known about it, why would he have opened the Gate in Wyre? If he hadn't known about it, why would he have bothered to travel to Wyre anyway, thus inadvertently violating the Injunction?"

"You aren't making much sense."

The Alienist sighed. Something was amiss, but he couldn't put his finger on it. He was tired. That day, he had already performed three Bindings, four Dimensional Anchors, one Banishment launched a dozen sonics, fired off three Disintegrate spells and Summoned a trio of huge Pseudoelementals.

With the help of Eadric, Nwm, Ortwin and Iua, the result – the elimination of two Abyssal generals – had proven almost child's play. Mostin grinned to himself. Doing it alone wouldn't have been so much harder.

The removal of Griel had been a more controversial move, in which neither Nwm nor Eadric had been willing to participate. It was ethically dubious, given the fact that the Wizard had not, until that point, actually done anything.

Mostin, however, had felt no such compunction. Griel had to go, before he could be effectively used as a tool by Graz'zt. Ortwin had concurred, and Iua had come along for kicks. Griel, a noted Evoker, never had a chance to evoke anything. His location determined, he had been Anchored, struck by two powerful sonics, and then ripped up by Ortwin, Iua, and the monstrosities that Mostin had brought with him. Scrying and Frying, as Mostin had come to know the process.

Now, within the dusty and cluttered cellars of Kothchori’s abandoned castle, Mostin reflected upon the situation. Somewhere out there, Rimilin was hiding – impervious to all attempts to locate him. With the exception of the great Ainhorr, the last of Graz'zt’s Balors – Irzho – was likely also present somewhere on the
Prime – along with several Succubi, who were less of a concern. The Alienist guessed that they were scattered – Graz’zt would not risk the wholesale annihilation of his minions if one of them were located.

Tomorrow, I will try to find Irzho, he thought grimly. But now, I need to sleep. Badly.

**

"Are you afraid of me, Ahma?" Titivilus asked, relaxing into a worn leather chair. He wore comfortable, loose-fitting hose and a baggy white shirt. His countenance was simultaneously both serious and amused.

"I wouldn’t say afraid," Eadric replied, pouring two glasses of firewine. "Suspicious, and on my guard, yes." The Paladin warily handed one of the crystal goblets to the Devil, careful to avoid touching his hand.

Titivilus immediately recognized his reticence and smiled. "I have yet to decide whether your receiving me at Deorham was a bold move or a cautious one. This is your home, after all. And you must still be in shock – I believe that Tahl hasn’t even been buried yet."

"If there is even a square inch of Wyre that will suffer the burden of your presence, I would prefer that it is mine," Eadric replied, scowling. "Tell me, Titivilus, how are your plans for my temptation and corruption progressing? How do you rate your chances? What boon will you receive if you succeed? I am interested by your motivation in this endeavour."

"They are still in the process of being formulated," the Devil answered with utter plausibility. "As to my chances – not too low, but not too high either. Any boon is a matter between myself and those whom I serve."

"There are questions that I would like to ask you," Eadric said openly. "I would rather that you didn’t lie, so I will wear the eye of Palamabron – if you don’t object."

"So you would like to play that game again? Very well, Ahma. I am in no hurry."

"Are you feeling talkative?" Eadric asked, placing the stone around his neck.

"I am invariably loquacious," Titivilus answered. "Although I should warn you that there are certain questions that I might feel compelled to deflect or avoid altogether, if the option of lying is not open to me."

Eadric nodded. "I understand. Your silence will speak volumes in itself." If I interpret it correctly, he warned himself.

Titivilus merely smiled.

"Then tell me of The Fall, Titivilus. From your perspective. From the beginning."

The Fiend’s eyes narrowed. "That is an intrepid opening gambit! I must but approve."

"I trust that your memory doesn’t fail you. I realize that it was some while ago."
"Oh no," Titivilus replied smoothly. "I remember it well enough. And the notion of *Time* is only partially applicable, in any case. I suggest you abandon normal temporality – for the time being, at least," he gave an ironic look. "But before I begin, I am curious – why do you ask?"

"It was something Mostin said," Eadric answered. "He felt an echo."

"Ahh," the Devil smiled. "Then I will speak in the past tense – although that is more for your benefit, than because it is necessarily correct."

*  

"It was glorious. You are a warrior, *Ahma*. It would have stirred you."

Eadric shook his head. "War is nothing more than a bloody necessity."

Titivilus laughed aloud. "As you wish," he said wickedly. "Never since has there been, and never again shall there be such a conflict fought. We were without number, our power immeasurable. Were there more of them than us? Who can tell? It raged for aeons beyond count through nascent spheres, but lasted a merest instant in the unmanifest Mind of Oronthon – a dissonance in the continuum of perfect consciousness."

"Please refrain from overt metaphysical speculation," Eadric interrupted. "And from the *beginning*, if you please. Let us start with *how* and *why*. And I apologize for arresting the flow of your narrative."

Titivilus raised an eyebrow. The *Ahma* was getting good at this. "You should be wary of enjoying yourself too much when consorting with Devils," the Duke jibed. "You would not be the first to be drawn in through love of badinage and wit."

Eadric experienced a brief discontinuity in his mind, curious as to why the Devil was warning him. "Thank-you," he said honestly. "I appreciate the advice."

"I am your advisor, after all."


"*How* and *why* will vary by degree for each of those who were involved in the Great Emancipation," Titivilus continued. "In my case, it was a desire for power, and for a growth of potential within a paradigm which rewarded the strong rather than appeased the weak."

"I find the term ‘Great Emancipation’ rather misleading," Eadric interrupted again. "‘Malign Dictatorship’ or ‘Brutal Despotism’ might be more accurate."

"Do you wish a dialogue on this matter, or am I relating my experience, *Ahma*? Or would you prefer a little of each?"

"I apologize again," Eadric said, "but, as I say, there is much that I wish to learn about your motivation."

"Perhaps you wish to develop compassion for me. Believe me, that is a wholly futile task."
“Compassion is never futile.”

“An interesting observation, but one that I must differ with,” Titivilus offered. “Perhaps you should be asking ‘How did it all begin? What was the prima causa of the Great Emancipation.’ Or ‘rebellion’. Or ‘Fall.’ Pick your own terminology.”

“I would be interested in hearing your theory,” Eadric replied. “How did it all begin?”

“Compassion,” the Devil answered. “Didn’t you know, Ahma? All great dictatorships first begin with compassion.”

Eadric groaned. He’d been maneuvered quickly into that one.

**

Nwm glanced from of his glade towards the castle at Deorham, and scratched his head. The Steeple was visible, jutting like a tall finger above the treetops. Eadric was closeted with a Duke of Hell within the tower – an improbable turn of events, given conventional theories about Paladins – especially considering the fact that a quartet of Devas still circled invisibly about Kyrtill’s Burh.

The Druid idly wondered whether the Celestials were bored. Whether such creatures ever became bored. It occurred to him that Devas and their ilk must suffer from a perennially dull existence.

Nearby, behind a moss-covered cleft in the rock from which flowed a tiny stream, was the small cave which the Druid occasionally identified as ‘home.’ His long absence had been taken as a sign of abandonment by a variety of animals, with whom Nwm had politely asked to share the space when he returned. Now they fussed, and tried to tidy things up. Sem and Gheim, the two eagles who accompanied the Druid, eyed several mice greedily, until Nwm remonstrated with them and explained the protocols which existed within.

He unloaded his pack, put his staff to one side, stretched briefly, and sat upon the litter-strewn floor. Concentrating on his torc, his mind stretched outwards, and the Green absorbed him.

Every fold in the land, every rivulet, every tree, every mammal, every bird was revealed to him in a barrage of visions which erupted into his waking consciousness, flashing briefly across his mental landscape before being replaced by the next in a series of infinite facets. His ancestors had called the totality simply Ollon, “The Whole.” Eadric’s forebears, the Borchians who had migrated from the south, had termed it Hahio, “Interwoven” – at least, before they adopted the cult of Oronthon, and replaced an older set of mysteries with a newer one.

Buildings and settlements were revealed as gaps in the continuum, blank spots, where the Green had been smothered or driven away. Cultivated fields appeared diluted, their essence contained or mastered. Here, near Deorham, the balance was still acceptable. In and around Morne, Nwm remembered, there was more emptiness than anything – isolated trees and plants seemed like blighted pockets within a sea of dull grey.

The Druid swallowed, and turned his attention to the interlopers. The experience
was uncomfortable, as though his sight had been turned inside out. The Celestials near the castle were exposed as ravenous voids, seeming to suck the very essence of the Green into them. The natural order buckled in their vicinity, singularities around which mental space warped uneasily.

Within the blankness of the Burh, two more voids rested in close proximity. Outsiders who had no real business being there, Nwm moaned silently to himself. Their potency – which appeared significant – was closely matched, and the Druid could not ascertain which was ascendant. No hint of their respective dispositions was revealed – the Green was above such petty distinctions.

Nwm sighed. Perceiving Eadric in that light was not an easy thing to accept.

His senses extended again, searching for Feys. The Sprites near the meadow where Mostin had erected his manse. A lone Dryad, deep within woods south of the road. He waited until the Satyr came suddenly into view, in the company of another Fey – odd, the Druid thought – and a locus of elemental energy that was Iua and her steed. Mostin also appeared briefly, and then vanished again. He dispatched Sem to intercept the others.

"You'd better tell them to come to the glade," Nwm instructed the eagle. "Eadric hasn't finished his business yet."

**

"Compassion," Titivilus continued. "A desire to make things more equitable, more agreeable, less tyrannical."

"I have doubts accepting it – although you probably won't be surprised to learn that. I realize that you aren't lying, per se, but I suspect that you are misperceiving. How do you reconcile this notion with the fact that you currently exist within a regime that is anything but less tyrannical? Or with your own ideas of 'strength' and 'weakness'? Or with your own admittance to 'considered, philosophical evil'? – I hope I am not misquoting you, but I vaguely recall your words being along those lines."

"A philosophy which is dynamic, rather than static, inevitably produces change and evolution," the Devil replied. "The Adversarial Law is reflexive. It adapts to circumstances as they occur. You must remember that we are, ultimately, eternally downtrodden, rejected and anathematized. We are consigned to a shattered world and appointed as the punishers of the rejected souls whom Oronthon has seen fit – in his ineffable wisdom – to deny entry into his blissful abode. Likewise, temptation and seduction are cosmically ordained tasks – it is not as though we have any choice in the matter."

"But you take pride in these tasks! You enjoy inflicting pain and causing misery."

"If one does any work for long enough, one comes to enjoy it," Titivilus answered simply. "And to excel at any vocation is surely desirable?"

"And how do you explain Nehael's repentance and escape from her eternal lot?"

"Do you think she was the first, Ahma?"

"The possibility of there being others had occurred to me." Eadric answered.
"Well? Have there been others?"

"I respectfully decline to answer that question," Titivilus replied, "and hope to leave you frustrated and guessing as to the reason why. Now, if I may continue?"

"Please do."

"So, the Nameless Adversary, the Great Enemy is the first to have an inkling that, perhaps, things could be better organized than they are – his efforts would be directed towards the collective, of course, in an attempt to improve the lot of all. Incidentally, has it ever occurred to you why he is not named? Has that never struck you as odd?"

"To name something is to empower it," Eadric replied.

"But to categorize and name something is also to contain it, to set boundaries upon it," Titivilus replied.

"Orthodoxy maintains that he was stripped of his name, and it was erased from every whisper of consciousness. Nothing in creation, including himself, can recall it, save Oronthon himself."

"And you believe that?"

"I have yet to hear a better explanation," Eadric answered.

"The Irrenites claim that they know his secret name. That it was preserved."

Eadric raised a dubious eyebrow. "And what might they claim it is?"

Titivilus laughed. "Unfortunately there is some disagreement amongst them on that count. In any case, I cannot recall it, and I assume that, at some stage, I knew it, so there may be some truth in the traditional explanation."

"You are digressing. Return to the original point."

"Ahh, yes," Titivilus smiled darkly, "compassion."

"I think we can move on from compassion, now. Let's talk about arrogance and presumption – I am correct in assuming that those qualities had a large part to play in events?"

"Yes, indeed," the Devil replied easily. "Although confidence and initiative are less loaded terms. One hundred and sixty-nine Seraphs agreed with the call for emancipation – can you imagine it? More than a few were exalted* even amongst the highest choir. Tired of being eclipsed by Oronthon, they decided to form an opposition."

"You make it sound very egalitarian," Eadric said drily. "I'm sure that next you'll tell me that the rebels conducted their affairs with due consideration for the democratic process. I am interested in your role in this, Titivilus – what was your former station? Under whom did you serve? Did you betray Oronthon along with your master, or did you defy them both?"

"My former master is my current master, Ahma. My loyalties have not changed."

"You mean they remain to yourself?"
"Ultimately, yes. I am honest in that regard, and make no pretence of altruism. As to my former station, I was messenger then, and am messenger now. An exemplar* among the Dominions."

"That is an office of high degree," Eadric sighed. "It is regrettable that you have been reduced to this lowly estate."

"Reduced?" The Duke guffawed. "Ahma, sometimes your naïveté is truly charming. I am more potent now than I ever was under the yoke of your glowing tyrant!"

"Potency and value are not synonymous."

"Ahh, on that count we differ."

"You are reflective and philosophical. Do you never regret your choices? Wish to be restored to your former station? Lament your actions?"

"Eternity is too long a time for regret," Titivilus snapped.

"Does the question make you uncomfortable?" Eadric asked.

"Do you think that I would be so transparent? Perhaps you should ask yourself this question, Ahma: 'Do I have sufficient insight to penetrate the motives of the Devil with whom I speak?'"

"I am looking for truths from you, Titivilus, not the Truth. Whatever role you adopt with respect to me, whatever emotion you choose to evince to me – it reflects something, however small, which is part of you."

The Duke looked impassive. Sometimes, this one could be very cunning.

**

"I seek power, Shomei," Mostin groaned. "Quickly."

The Infernalist fidgeted. "You look exhausted. We all seek power quickly, Mostin," she sighed. "Jovol made quite an impression on you, didn’t he?"

"I am beginning to find my current status limiting. I am afraid of stagnating. I crave infinite potential."

"A modest goal," she laughed. "You are ripe for seduction. Beware of Fiends bearing gifts," she smiled wickedly, "or embrace them. What has precipitated this new existential crisis?"

"I have a spell that I cannot cast. A transvalent masterpiece graven by Jovol – or Fillein, as he was then."

Shomei raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

"What did he leave you? Mulissu intimated that he may have bequeathed something to each of us who took part in the Binding. Just a casual inquiry."

What is the nature of the spell?"

Mostin squinted. "It is sensitive material," he replied.

"Perhaps it has a name?"

"Suffice to say that it is germane to my current predicament, and that of my friends. It requires a cabal in order to realize, and was one of Fillein’s more noted accomplishments."

"Ahh, that dweomer," she nodded in understanding. "Are you reluctant to speak his name now, Mostin?"

"As long as he remains at large, I will avoid speaking his name again," the Alienist replied. "And will caution my comrades to do the same. If he knew...Shomei, I am taking a big risk in sharing this with you. You have dubious associates, and a reputation for dealing in secrets. This information is valuable. The spell is priceless to other entities – do you follow me? And I suspect that he would see it destroyed, if he knew of its continued existence."

"With aid, Mulissu could use it..." Shomei offered.

"She won’t cast it," Mostin said. "And why should she? It’s not her problem – although she has offered to contribute if I eventually lead it. Shomei, would you be willing to also? We can accomplish great things. Our time is near. Jovol may have been more of a visionary than any of us gave him credit for."

The Infernalist gave a quizzical look.

"The Enforcer," he continued, "a written Injunction. A ban on arcane vendetta within Wyre. The strategic distribution of his own possessions amongst other great Wizards. He is forcing us to cooperate."

"Perhaps," Shomei looked dubious. "Although if he hadn’t been so aloof for so long, it might hold more weight with me. How many does Gra...the spell require?"

"Seven, including the leader. It is a day-long rite. It also requires a large contribution from each of the participants..."

"Something which I am loathe to do again so soon," Shomei sighed. "And which others will flatly deny you, Mostin."

"Hmph. Anyway, just bear it in mind. To return to the idea of power, and its speedy acquisition, what do you suggest?" He asked. "Infernal pacts notwithstanding," he added.

Shomei shrugged. "If I had any such knowledge, I would have seized it myself. I see three possibilities: either an object which will empower you; the details of a process which will do the same; or an entity which will bestow the power, or give details of one of the first two possibilities."

"I am beginning to regret some of the things that I invested my power in," Mostin grumbled. "If I had been more single-minded about the pursuit of mastery..."

"Rest assured, Mostin, few have been as single-minded as you. Your reputation for miserliness is safe." Shomei smiled.
"Thank-you," Mostin said, "I will take that as a genuine compliment. Now, Shomei, I have disclosed and, in the interests of mutual reciprocity, I wonder if you feel inclined to do the same? What did Jovol leave you?"

"Something no less useful than when you last asked the question," she replied.

Mostin tried to smile endearingly. The effect – an insane grimace – caused the Infernalist to laugh despite herself.

"A bracelet, if you must know," she sighed. Shomei rolled up her purple velvet sleeve, to disclose a plain silver band.

"Intriguing," Mostin said. He had noticed the Ogre wearing the same band.

"And its function?" He pried.

"The promise of future greatness," she said mysteriously.

**

"Allow me to introduce Orolde," Ortwin said to Nwm. "Former servant of Kothchori. I have promised him that you will attend to his wounds."

"That is very generous," Nwm said laconically. "And then what do you propose to do with him?"

"Mostin will retain him," Ortwin said. "Orolde has no interest in being reunited with his clan and kinfolk, and is eminently suited to aid a Wizard in his tasks. He also has some small skill in magic which, if nurtured, might grow into something more."

"Mostin has agreed to take an apprentice?" Nwm was incredulous. "This is something I thought I’d never see!"

"Mostin doesn’t know, yet," Ortwin whispered quietly. "It is up to us to impress the moral incumbency of this idea upon him."

Nwm sighed, and turned to the Sprite. "I can stop the bleeding, the pain, and return you to health. I cannot restore your hand, however."

Orolde nodded, appearing slightly bewildered. "Thank-you," he said timidly. "And thank-you, your Majesty." He bowed to Ortwin.

Nwm groaned inwardly, but said nothing. If Ortwin wanted to play at being the sponsor of disenfranchised Sprites, then the Druid wasn’t going to object.

_Goddess knows, he thought, these days, Feys need all the help they can get._

*Exemplar, Exalted, Paragon and Perfect* are ‘dignities’ or, in game terms, four templates applied to leading celestials of any choir. *Exemplar* and *Exalted* are ‘permanent’ templates – i.e. they reflect the innate nature of the Celestial. *Paragon* and *Perfect*, on the other hand, are granted temporarily by Oronthon for specific purposes, and the Celestial ‘assumes’ the qualities of the template for a period of time (c.f. Eadric’s adoption of the Paragon template). Of the Celestials
mentioned thus far in the story, both Rintrah and Enitharmon are *Exalted*. Urthoon, the conduit to Oronthon is an *Exemplar*, as were the Devas which accompanied Tramst.

The fifth dignity, *Magnified*, is represented by the bestowal of one or more Divine Ranks upon a Celestial, Ascended Master or mortal acting as a Proxy of Oronthon. Tramst is Magnified, and as such is considered to outrank every Celestial in Oronthon’s host – he is effectively identified with Oronthon himself, and the fact that he represents the Gnostic faculty (*Sela*) of the Deity affords him a particularly revered status. According to the Urgic Mystics, Magnification (*Haujan*) is a discrete act – the particular moment at which an aspect of the Godhood inhabits another being. From that moment onward, the vessel (*kas*) and the indwelling spirit (*ahmasaljan*) are identical.

Again, with reference to the Fall, Enitharmon (who drove the Adversary from Heaven), was accorded the highest status at that time: according to Orthodox tradition, he was *Perfect, Exalted and Three Times Thrice Magnified*. In some eschatological beliefs, Enitharmon will also be the Adversary’s *Antiparallel* – the Celestial who will slay him at the end of days.

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**POST 2: MOSTLY CONCERNING MOSTIN**

*Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 18th March 2003, 12:04 AM*

First, a few answers, as I'm being conscientious.

*Quote:*

Could you post some of those templates for us, please, in the Rogue's Gallery thread?

I'll try and get around to it...

*Quote:*

sep: when was the session described played? my guess is december or january.

November, IIRC.

*Quote:*

I have a couple of questions that I do not recall you answering previously:

1. Do your players read your story hour?

2. Do you all play at the same time these days?

One reads semi-regularly, one reads very occasionally, and the others don't bother. Sessions are usually split between group time and 1-on-1, but sometimes the other players sit in when I'm running an individual exchange - they're pretty good about ignoring OOC stuff.

*Quote:*

...
So at the beginning of the last thread the group was around an effective level of 19 (Mostin) to 22 (Ortwin including Satyr abilities)...has there been any levelling in the meantime?

Up to this post, no. Up to the present day, yes.

Quote:
One thing that seems an odd choice - why did Mostin, Eadric, et al, decide to hit Choeth and Djorm rather than Ainhorrr?

I think they considered it, but Ainhorrr=30HD=too big for a Planar Binding. Gate too risky, because no dimensional anchor.

Note that they were not summoned to the Prime, but to Mostin's Permanent Magnificent Mansion.

So, an update, then. I'll call this one... er...

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Mostly Concerning Mostin

Mostin grumbled.

"What am I supposed to do with it?" The Alienist asked Ortwin, his eyes fixed on the diminutive figure of Orolde. The Sprite seemed a little offended about being referred to as an ‘it’ in the third person.

"You will take him as your aide, and instruct him in the arts of magic." The Bard said regally, mostly for Orolde’s benefit. "He will act as facilitator in your experiments, maintain your house, bring books to you as you need them, and perform other sundry tasks."

"This is inconvenient," Mostin sighed. "It is not as though my manse stays in one place for too long. What happens when I decide to move it? And I don’t want some hanger-on to worry about when I make translations to the insane realms." He peered at the Sprite.

Orolde looked distinctly uncomfortable.

"Mostin," the Bard said, assuming his most reasonable demeanour, "Orolde is an innocent victim of an arcanoreligious conflict. But his loyalty to Kothchori was steadfast even to the end. He is efficient, discreet, deft and nimble (despite his one hand), intelligent and small enough to be unobtrusive."

"Arcanoreligious?" Mostin spat. "What kind of nonsense word is that?"

"One designed to demonstrate the ambiguous nature of the current situation," Ortwin grinned. "Do you have a better one, when Wizards are co-opted by Demon Princes in order to assault members of a church, and when other Wizards need an oracle to consult about their actions?"

"The Claviger is not an oracle," Mostin hissed.
"Semantics," Ortwin waved his hand dismissively. "In any case, Orolde would make an excellent apprentice. He has a grasp of the fundamentals of the practice, and is diligent. You could do much worse."

The Alienist looked again at the Sprite. "Do you know what the Far Realm is Orolde?"

Orolde looked dubious. "I have a theoretical understanding of the mathematical possibility," he replied.

Mostin cocked his head in surprise at the answer. "I do not deal extensively with Transmutations, as your former master did," he cautioned the Sprite. "I am unsure whether your mind could stand the strain of my work."

Orolde seemed nonplussed. "King Ortwin has recommended you as a potential teacher. I would suggest a probationary period of, say, one year. If things progress to our mutual satisfaction, then perhaps we could extend the agreement?"

"You would receive no stipend."

"Naturally not," Orolde replied.

"The work will be onerous, repetitive and dirty. It will be frustrating and slow to yield results."

"This is not unusual," the Sprite said brightly.

"There is a strong chance that you will lose your sanity – I am quite mad."

"This, also, is not unknown amongst Wizards."

Mostin sighed, and nodded. "After all, if King Ortwin has given approval, who could deny his royal decree?"

Inwardly, however, despite his apparent reticence, Mostin was immensely excited. As Ortwin had suspected he would be.

**

"It's very simple," Mostin explained logically. "We cannot hope to overcome Him in open conflict, therefore we need to cheat. His position in the Abyss has been weakened thus far by our actions, and he needs to turn his attention to internal matters or risk his rivals gaining ascendancy in the wars that he is currently engaged in. His political situation is immensely complex, and he can't afford for his vendetta against you to cripple his other schemes."

"I think you ascribe too much wisdom to him in these matters," Eadric sighed.

"And I think that you overestimate your own importance in his larger reality. He has suffered several setbacks and defeats – he needs to woo his vassals and allies and to reassure them. Do not underestimate the precarious nature of Demonic politics – it lacks the ability to resist upset, which either the Celestial or Infernal hierarchies demonstrate."
"And how did you come to this conclusion?" The Paladin asked.

"My discourses with Shomei have been productive, as always. But she advises a change of tactics on our part."

Eadric grimaced at the mention of the Infernalist, whose relationship with Mostin he still eyed dubiously. "And what new approach does she recommend?"

"To strike Him on a number of different fronts simultaneously. She draws attention to our mobility, and the fact that Wyre is now – to a large extent, and thanks to the Claviger – a ‘safe’ zone. Assault from conjured Demons is less of a risk."

"He’s got a good point, Ed," Ortwin chimed in. "We can find all kinds of other ways to piss off Gra…"

"Hup!" Mostin interjected, before Ortwin could finish the word.

"Although I do think he’s being overly paranoid about that," the Bard continued.

"I don’t want to just annoy him," Eadric explained. "Any actions that we take need to have strategic value."

"And Nehael?" Nwm asked. "For every act that weakens or undermines him, she will suffer."

"We cannot attempt a rescue," Eadric sighed. "It is not a realistic proposal."

"If we push him too far, he may annihilate her," the Druid continued. "That is what concerns me."

"Perhaps," Mostin said carefully, "although inflicting pain is his forté. I suspect that he will be reluctant to prematurely end that pleasure. Besides, he may yet view her as a bargaining piece. He is supremely paranoid, like all Demons. And he is not blind to the fact that we can threaten and hurt him. Although I think the letter that was dispatched may have been too much, I think the premise that we are operating under has merit. But we cannot bring up the matter of Nehael with him – I guess that he does not fully understand our motives in acting. He is depraved, power-hungry, hateful and vindictive – he may assume that it is simply out of a desire for revenge that we have targeted the Balors and Griel."

"You do not know that," Nwm groaned. "You are speculating."

"Well, of course I’m speculating," Mostin snapped. "I am not privy to his counsels. But we cannot deal with him openly – at least, not entirely openly. At the same time, his capacity for subterfuge far outshines ours – he has had a lot of practice, after all. I think we need to keep him guessing, at present."

"For how long?" Nwm inquired, exasperated.

"Until I master the spell," Mostin said simply. "It is our best option. In complete honesty, I think the question should be how can we all contribute to the empowerment of Mostin, so that he can cast this spell?"

"Don’t be so blind," Mostin hissed. "There is a great deal hanging in the balance. Yes, I crave power. Yes, I wish to blaze a name for myself in the annals of magical history. Yes, I am vain and self-centered. This does not detract from the fact that it is our best option."

"And how do you reconcile this with your opinion that we need to ’change tact’?" Eadric asked.

"The cosmos is infinite," Mostin replied. "The Demon has his fingers in many pies, of which Wyre is only one. Let’s start sh*tting in a few of them."

"Which pies did you have in mind?" Ortwin asked.

"Some regions where he holds sway..." Mostin began.

Eadric groaned.

"No, listen," the Alienist continued. "Some are much less dangerous than others. I have asked Shomei to do some research for me..."

Eadric spluttered.

"Listen. It is not just Demonic abodes where his influence is felt," Mostin persisted. "There are some worlds which suffer from his interference. Others where his dominion is entrenched. Yet more that he would try to subdue. He is active in many spheres. And we have more potential allies than perhaps you might guess."

"So where does your Diabolist friend suggest we act?" Eadric asked.

"She is making inquiries," Mostin answered haughtily. "And she is not a Diabolist – Shomei would be most offended if you referred to her as such. And if consorting with Devils is such a problem, then you’d better look to your own house first – unless you have forgotten who you were chatting with yesterday afternoon."

The Paladin opened his mouth to speak, thought better of it, and closed it again. Mostin had a point.

"And Irzho?" Ortwin asked. "There is still a Balor loose somewhere. He needs to be dealt with."

"That had been my plan today," the Alienist nodded. "It shouldn’t take too long. But we need to maintain the initiative. Keep the ball rolling. Give Him no chance to act, or to second guess us." Mostin grinned wildly.

Eadric squinted, and chastised himself. So much had happened, that it was sometimes easy to forget that Mostin was completely crazy.

"Well, we aren’t going anywhere yet," the Paladin said. "I need to go back to Morne, bury Tahl and Soraine and too many others. And then there is the matter of my troops. And..."

"You would honour their memory best by avenging them," Mostin said.

"Don’t push it, Wizard," Eadric replied.

"Ed," Nwm said, "go and meditate, or pray, or whatever it is that you do. You
need to find some perspective before you commit to this course of action. I will support your decision - I’m not necessarily saying that this is the wrong thing to do, merely that you should be fully conscious of your motivation before you act. I would hate to see your desire to hurt the Demon outweigh your duty to help Nehael."

"As would I," the Paladin agreed.

**

Five days passed.

Mostin’s efforts to find Irzho were unsuccessful, indicating that the Balor was mind blanked – either by spell or device. If the former, then Irzho may have returned to the Abyss, and be under Graz’zt’s protection. If the latter – and that seemed more likely, as whatever means Kothchori had used to conceal himself was still unaccounted for – then the Balor could be anywhere.

Mostin brooded upon the name that he had gleaned from the writings of the unknown Alienist – the name of the Pseudonatural Daemon who was, in all likelihood, responsible for the demise of his former mentor, Vhorze. Binding the creature seemed conceivable, but controlling it – or even communicating with it – seemed unlikely, if not altogether impossible. And there remained the problem of not being able to dismiss it, even if it were successfully contained. No doubt it would merely wait until the wards upon it expired, and then rip off the head of its captor, and drag the remains off to whatever insane realm that it had issued from.

Shomei visited Mostin at his retreat in the woodland meadow southwest of Deorham, interested in the progress of the Alienist’s plans regarding Graz’zt. It was a balmy afternoon, and bees droned in the warm summer air as they sat on the porch and drank chilled firewine. The Infernalist had opted to forego her normal purple attire for a simple, light robe of purest white silk, gathered in around her slim waist. It seemed to soften her pointed features, and made her look more Celestial than Diabolic. As always, she carried her intricate iron rod in her left hand, and was accompanied by the faintest hint of cinnamon. She raised an eyebrow when she saw Orolde, and her mouth dropped when Mostin told her about the Sprite’s position.

"An apprentice? How intriguing! Is he any good?"

Orolde sighed – apparently, being talked about as though he were not present was something he would have to adjust to. And it seemed as though Mostin was far less reclusive than Kothchori had been.

"He has marked potential," Mostin nodded.

"I have a favour to ask, and information to impart," Shomei said carefully.

"What is the favour?"

"I will reserve my request until we have spoken more," the Infernalist replied. "Before you ask, you are under no obligation to honour it, and what I am about to tell you implies no contractual exchange."
"I am glad to hear it!" Mostin said. "Although now my curiosity is piqued."

"I have been most active on your behalf, Mostin. The containment or overthrow of, well, You-Know-Who – I will humour your caution on that count..."

"It is paranoia, not caution," Mostin corrected her.

"Quite. In any case, one might say that I am acting out of enlightened self-interest. If he is reduced in power, removed temporarily – albeit only for a few decades – or even, possibly, eliminated, then it would..."

"Be to your advantage, politically speaking," Mostin finished for her.

"Precisely," she flashed her rare smile. "So bearing that in mind, that it is not out of altruism that I have acted..."

"I would never even suggest it," Mostin quipped.

"I should bring a number of worlds to your attention," Shomei continued. "I will need to use your Mirror, Mostin."

"Very well," he sighed, reaching into his portable hole. After a few moments of fussing, he had erected the Looking-Glass of Urm Nahat on the porch of his manse.

"This is exciting, isn’t it?" The Infernalist said. "Like opening presents when you were a child."

"I never had presents," Mostin said drily. "Get to the point, Shomei."

"May I? One just scries normally?"

"It is very fast," Mostin replied. "And also resembles the clairvoyance spell. And your sensor may rove. You will quickly master it."

She waved her hand, and the mirror rapidly became opaque, and then cleared to show a scene within a gloomy forest composed of trees possessed of colossal girth and height. A thrush sat upon a branch in the canopy, several hundred feet above the forest floor.

Shomei issued a message. The thrush immediately chirped, and seemed to stand to attention.

"It is a polymorphed Devil," Shomei explained. "I currently have several compacts still unexpired." The thrush vanished, and when the Infernalist brought it back into view, the scene beyond was fantastic.

The sky was a mixture of indigo and vermilion, and stars faintly glimmered within it. On a rock buttress of considerable size, thrusting above the treetops, an elegant castle sat perched, its lacy towers soaring into the air and defying the laws of both architecture and gravity. Tendrils of steam or smoke clung to the base of the fortress, giving it the appearance of sitting on a cloudtop. Something vast moved across the sky in the distance, temporarily extinguishing stars before they rekindled at its passing.

"Faerie?" Mostin asked.
"No," Shomei replied, "and although it is accessible from Faerie, a good deal of shadowstuff bleeds in as well. It is a demiplane called Afqithan by its inhabitants who, as you have already guessed, consist mainly of Feys – most notably Sidhe and their ilk."

"And this plane is of particular importance because...?"

"The pre-eminent clan are called the Loquai," Shomei explained. "They are cultists of the Demon whose name you are reluctant to utter. You are looking at one of their strongholds: that belonging to their most important king, Irknaan."

Mostin’s eyes bulged. "And they are Sidhe?"

Shomei nodded. "Of a particularly degenerate type. The umbral bleed has affected them to a large degree – or rather, as they have recognized it as a means by which their power can be increased, they have embraced and exploited it."

"Intriguing," Mostin said. "How large is Afqithan? What are the numbers of the Loquai? How potent are they? Is their dominance challenged? Are there demons present?"

"It is of moderate size," the Infernalist answered. "It has a virtual diameter of around three thousand miles – although the circular warping begins some distance before that. The Loquai number in the low thousands, although their hegemony extends over most other sentients – tens of thousands of other Feys and fantastic beasts. In terms of potency, their leaders may rival you or I. Dominance is always challenged, Mostin. And yes, there are demons present – notably Succubi and Glabrezu. The Loquai are intensely erotic, and seem to venerate that particular aspect of the Lord of Zelatar."

"And your Devil has been spying for you?"

"For several days, now. I have attempted scrying within the fortress, but it is warded from both sight and teleportation. There may be a Gate within its confines linking it directly with Azzagrat. The Devil has been eavesdropping on groups that issue from the walls – the Loquai are obsessive hunters who ride Tenebrous Griffons in pursuit of various other beasts."

"In that regard they differ little from most Sidhe," Mostin observed drily.

"They are crueler," Shomei said.

"Then they must be very cruel indeed," Mostin sighed. "Very well, Shomei. I appreciate the information. What is the favour that you request?"

"I haven’t finished yet, Mostin," she gave a curious half-smile. She waved her hand, and his mirror went blank for a few seconds. Another scene appeared on its surface.

"This frigid world is called Saraf," she said, as scenes of mountains, glaciers, and ice fields flashed across the looking-glass. "It has been incompletely subdued by Our-Friend-Who-Shall-Remain-Nameless. His tactics here have been less subtle and insidious than in Afqithan, and he has favoured a more direct approach. One of his allies, the Demon Kostchtchie has been instrumental in annexing this plane, primarily through the use of Bar-Lgura and Fiendish Giants – there are probably Gates to the Ice Wastes in the Abyss. The native inhabitants have been all but
"eliminated – they exist now only in a few, isolated pockets."

"What are they?" The Alienist asked, fascinated.

"A hirsute race of humanoids whose name I do not know," Shomei answered. "They once possessed a high civilization, although millennia of aggression has removed almost all vestiges of it."

Mostin screwed his face up, as a leaping Demon appeared in the mirror. "Another of your spies?"

Shomei nodded. "Another polymorphed Devil. I have gleaned some interesting knowledge, regarding Saraf. Observe." The Infernalist sent another message, and the Devil vanished. When it came into view again, it was standing outside the gates of a city which seemed to have been wholly encased in a glacier.

"I am not sure how this came about," Shomei said. "Whether some sorcery of His, or a defense of the native inhabitants, or through a natural process, but the city itself seems to have been largely preserved."

"Is it inhabited?"

"Only by ghosts and demons. But secrets reside there, of that I am sure."

"Have you scried within?"

"Not to any great extent," Shomei responded. "Unlike you, I do not have the leisure to spend hours in casual observation," she remarked acidly, "and my own crystal ball has roamed further afield." She waved her hand, and the mirror became blank again for the briefest moment, until yet another picture showed itself to them. It was a scene from a dark nightmare, in stark contrast to that which had gone before.

Molten waterfalls cascaded over steep lips into basins, where networks of funnels and troughs distributed liquid metal to forges and foundries. The only light present was a reddish glow, issuing from the seething metal, illuminating the faces of thousands of slaves, who toiled ceaselessly. They were watched and bullied by a variety of demons, who took fickle delight in their work.

"Another demiplane. Most of the captives are Azer," Shomei said. "Needless to say, I have an agent placed here also. Below this area, there are mines, and pits, and yet more foundries. And more. The full extent seems to be vast – I haven’t come anywhere close to mapping it all. They are extracting adamantine from other ores: it might interest you to know that after the metal has been purified, it is transported to a system of storage vaults, before passing through a Gate to Azzagrat, and thus to the Demon’s treasury."

Mostin raised an eyebrow. Shomei had certainly excelled herself. In five days, she had uncovered an extraordinary amount of information. "Is there more to see?"

"Presently, no. I have plane shifted several other compactees to different locations, however, and they are currently following on leads. More information will doubtless be forthcoming. There are several hundred worlds where the influence of his Highness is felt."

"Hmm, I suppose I should ask you what boon you seek," Mostin grumbled. "It will be hard to deny it, given what you have uncovered."
Shomei bored into him with her violet eyes. "If you engage upon any extraplanar jaunts, I should like to accompany you."

Mostin relaxed. "I would be delighted," he grinned. "Convincing Eadric may be harder, however. He mistrusts your Diabolic connections."

"That is only reasonable," she admitted.

**

Eadric and Nwm returned to Morne, where the Paladin oversaw Tahl’s funeral – a modest affair in light of the events which had transpired after the Inquisitor’s death. He was laid to rest in the Fane’s crypt with little ceremony, and Eadric mourned quietly – part of him lamenting the fact that his most faithful friend received such small recognition.

Until, to the confusion of all, Tramst declared his immediate beatification. Bewildered, Eadric sought out the Sela.

*Why waste time with pomp and ceremony, if death is merely evanescent? Why wait for a cult to grow, or for miracles to manifest? I know the Masters ere they are born.*

Eadric bowed, and left joyfully.

Soraine was to be interred in the cemetery adjoining the Temple compound, along with Hyne and the Penitents who had perished in the ambush outside of Morne’s gates. But Eadric changed his mind – the body of the Duchess would taken in state back to Trempa, accompanied by Ekkert and Streek, her most trusted Thanes. Somehow, it seemed appropriate: Soraine’s religiosity had been too eccentric and individual to be confused with the zealots and martyrs. Likewise, Ryth would be returned to Har Kumil in the north of Trempa. Nwm offered to conduct the ceremony, but Ryth’s son, Caur, politely declined.

"The local priest will serve well enough." Caur was young – maybe sixteen – but already a giant of a man.

Eadric shifted awkwardly, unsure whether his actions would offend, but passed a heavy casket to the boy. "Soraine would have given you more, for your father’s loyalty and friendship. Say nothing. Do not object or refuse: if you have no use for it, distribute it amongst the poor in your Lairdship."

Caur nodded. Eadric could be very persuasive when he turned his mind to it.

"Temple money?" Nwm asked as they departed.

"Hardly," Eadric laughed. "The Fane’s coffers will be empty within a month in any case. No, it was mine."

Nwm raised an eyebrow. "How much did you give him?"

"Five thousand."

Nwm coughed. "That was exceedingly generous."
The Paladin shrugged. "It's all the same to me. And Soraine would have given him more. Unfortunately, I have to pay nearly a thousand mercenaries."

"Trempa should foot the bill," Nwm said.

"The allocation of Trempa’s finances is not within my purview," Eadric replied.

Nwm stopped in the street, and span the Paladin around. "Don’t be a fool, Ed," He hissed. "You are avoiding the issue. You will have to either let Foide’s boy inherit the Duchy, support a rival candidate, or make a claim yourself. You cannot simply ignore it, and wait for it to go away. Unless you want your taxes and feudal duties to end up in Foide’s hands. Just how compromised do you think you’d feel then?"

"There is time, yet," Eadric replied patiently. "Let them jostle and maneuver for a while. What if SkADDING inherits Soraine’s estates? Who knows? Maybe he’ll throw off his father’s yoke."

"Do you believe that?"

"I am optimistic that given the right guidance, Skadding could be a good Duke."

"And you would provide that guidance?"

"When I could," Eadric replied.

"And in your absence?"

"Then maybe he could make mistakes to learn from," Eadric sighed. "The Sela told me that I might be forced to intervene. He said nothing about open conflict. Intervention takes many forms, Nwm." Eadric tapped his nose. "And when the boy makes his annual progress around Trempa, I will invite him onto the rampart at Deorham. Devas make effective proctors."

Nwm guffawed.

**

Ortwin preened himself.

"You never cease," Iua observed.

"Perfection requires continual readjustment," he grinned, unsheathing his scimitar with a flourish, and cutting an orange in half. The sending, issued by Mostin, had seemed urgent. Now, typically, the Alienist was late. Orolde had refused them entry into the manse, apologizing profusely to the self-proclaimed Fey King and his consort, but unwilling to contradict Mostin’s instructions.

"Wizards and their servants are such depressing literalists," Ortwin had remarked, but was content when the Sprite had provided them with refreshments on the porch of the retreat.

Presently, in vaporous form, Nwm and Eadric appeared. As the Druid corporeated, so did his two eagles, who had appeared as nothing more than
wisps of smoke attending him.

"Mostin will appreciate their presence, I’m sure," Ortwin said caustically. "Although, personally, I find them far preferable to that stinking bear."

"You’re in a good mood," Nwm said, "your manners are always impeccable when you’re happy."

After reassuring an increasingly nervous Orolde, waiting for a further half-hour, and depleting Mostin’s supply of beverages, they were finally joined by the Alienist.

"There is much to discuss," he said.

POST 3: PREPARATIONS

Posted by: Sepulchraise II at ENWorld on 26th March 2003, 09:42 PM

Quote:
The various gates and worlds remind me a little of the planar lands Lolth was in process of conqueroring in Q1

Me too...

Quote:
btw it’s "changing tack", not "changing tact". It's a sailing term...

Yep. Unfortunately, that was a genuine malapropism (sp?).

Quote:
BTW, Nwn didn't "span" Ed around, he "spun" Ed around. Other than that, perfection.

But 'span' is perfectly valid. Webster's lists it as 'archaic' - but I've always used it. Maybe its an American English vs. English English thing, or maybe I'm just weird. If anyone has the OED, perhaps they could look it up.

Quote:
Do the players get to see these scenes enacted in game, or is it solely a benefit of reading the SH?

The latter. Its just for you.

So...
Preparations

Eadric, Nwm, Ortwin, Mostin and Iua sat in discussion for three hours. It ranged from lively to – at several times – openly confrontational. What were their goals? What resources did they jointly command? How long did they have? Who would be most effective in which spheres? How could the elusive synergy of their respective abilities be evoked?

As night fell, they moved from the porch of Mostin’s manse into his drawing room, where Ortwin consumed too much firewine and became loud and rambunctious.

When Shomei arrived, just after midnight, Eadric became reluctant to further discuss details until she had submitted herself to scrutiny from the Eye of Palamabron – something which the Infernalist flatly refused to do. Shomei’s discomfort was further compounded when a drunken Ortwin made several lewd and cutting comments alluding to her history of diabolic suitors.

Shomei said nothing in response but eyed the Bard venomously. Mostin, afraid that things would get off to a bad start, fidgeted uncomfortably. Fortunately, Nwm intervened by neutralizing the alcohol in Ortwin’s system and bringing him back to a state of painful sobriety, and, somewhat surprisingly, jumping to Shomei’s defense.

"I suggest you remember Nehael’s own words, Ed. Those regarding allies in unlikely places. You can’t go around beaming your Eye at everyone you meet – it lacks respect for their integrity. You haven’t used it on Mostin, and I’m sure that his motives are less than noble."

Mostin blustered briefly. Ortwin apologized, and Eadric eventually relented – not before voicing his concerns regarding Titivilus, however. He was less than satisfied by the state of affairs existing between Shomei and the Duke of Hell and – in his mind, reasonably – saw their antagonism as a source of potential problems. This was agitated by the fact that Paladin and Infernalist viewed the Devil from two different perspectives: to the Ahma, Titivilus was a source of potential growth through friction and adversity, but one which was divinely ordained; to Shomei, he represented one of many discarded tools in the perpetual quest for apotheosis. Their respective paradigms were both uncannily close and dangerously divergent: something Eadric immediately recognized as a source of friction.

Nwm ignored him. "Moreover, I think there is something which you seem to have forgotten in your – at times, egotistical – desire to first redeem and now rescue Nehael from the clutches of the Demon who, for Mostin’s benefit, I will not name."

"And what is that?" Eadric sighed.

"She is a Uedian priestess and mystic," Nwm snapped.

Eadric tensed briefly, and then relaxed as though a great weight had left him. "Thank-you Nwm," he said openly. "And I’m sorry."

"Good," Nwm replied. "So, if we can discuss the matter in hand. We have a twisted version of Faerie filled with cultists, a frozen wasteland or some hellish smithy of huge proportions to choose between."
"I can add one more to the list," Shomei said. "So far. It is a jungle-like region of the Abyss itself: here the Demon is engaged in a war with a rival named Soneillon. The plane is called Throile. Soneillon is a succubus of great power, and was at one time the ally and consort of the Prince."

"I would rather avoid being caught in a lovers’ tiff," Ortwin said drily.

"You are oversimplifying the nature of Abyssal relationships," Shomei remarked humourlessly. "But I agree that Throile may not be the best option – at least at present."

"This frozen world sounds interesting," Nwm said. "Let’s consider it for a moment. Could we seal the Abyssal Gates – assuming that we could find them all?"

"Only temporarily," Mostin answered. "Or, at least, until Gra... – you see, I almost said it myself – could open them again, either with his own power or through one of his minions. There is nothing barring him from acting personally in Saraf – something else we need to consider. Outside of the Prime, we do not have the benefit of celestial interdict to protect us against Demons – even if it less than a hundred percent effective, it prevents fiends travelling here on a whim. It takes our enemy a great deal of effort to translate a servant here: plane shifting any of them to one of these other worlds would be child’s play to him."

"This is true," Shomei nodded. "And this is where the risk lies – as soon as we venture abroad, we run the risk of being chased through the spheres by hordes of demons. Wyre is safe, however, and hence the issue of mobility is crucial – as long as we can return here, we will be comparatively sure of a haven."

Eadric screwed his face up. "In which case preserving anonymity would seem to be crucial. And how can we protect against his divinations?"

"Mind Blank," Mostin sighed. "On all of us. Which will seriously deplete my stock of powerful spells."

"I am willing to share the load on that count," Shomei offered. "I concur: it is crucial. It will render us undetectable and immune to most Enchantments – the utility of this spell is not to be underestimated! Mostin’s remaining higher valences can be crammed with Sonic Evocations, mine with Conjurations. Multiple disintegrates will be a useful backup."

Mostin looked at Eadric, unsure as to the Paladin’s reaction to his next suggestion. "I have also given some thought regarding the procurement of a guide."

The Ahma dubiously raised an eyebrow.

"One who is close in the Prince’s confidence would be logical, although the transient nature of his court means that it is difficult to judge amongst those whom he currently favours. Ironically, Uzmi would have been a good choice – she was, for a while, high in his estimation."

Shomei seemed as surprised as anyone else at the Alienist’s suggestion, but guessed where he was heading.

"I suggest binding a Marilith," Mostin continued. "We can trap one in a thaumaturgic diagram, and then compel it into a jar. If Shomei aids me in the spell, it can be achieved with the minimum of fuss. Such a guide might prove invaluable: it could provide all kinds of useful information regarding his plans."
Mariliths tend to be well-informed regarding the bigger picture – their strategic and military capacity is well-known."

"It could also mislead and dupe us," Ortwin observed. "Demonesses are equally renowned for their mendacity."

Mostin smiled. "You see that big, shiny rock around Eadric's neck, Ortwin...?"

"Good point," the Bard conceded. "But would such a captive cooperate? An intractable demon who wails and attracts attention would be equally annoying."

"I will need to reach an agreement with it. This may involve a few minor compromises, but I think it would be worth it."

Shomei nodded. "I like the plan. Casting the binding is time consuming, however, and I dislike the idea of the demon breaking out of the diagram before the jar is ready. We should target her with multiple hold monster spells to prevent her escape until the binding is complete: one of them is bound to work. You will need opals, of course."

"And an accurate rendering of the target," Mostin added.

"If you do not have any names..."

Mostin sniffed, and began to chant the names of Graz'zt's Marilith servants in an obscure verse.

"Your information is dated, but still somewhat useful," Shomei half-smiled.

"How many of these demonesses serve him?" Nwm asked. "Are we talking a handful, like the Balors, or many more? And what of other demons, for that matter?"

"A few dozen Mariliths, I suppose," Shomei replied. "Not all are currently favoured – many, if not all, are former consorts. Some maintain armies in the field at his command. A few are probably in temporary exile. Some remain at court. And there may be a hundred Nalfeshnees, thousands of Succubi and Glabrezu, and probably tens or hundreds of thousands of Babau, Uridezu, Bar-Lgura, Chasme and Vrocks at his call. Other, more obscure types in smaller numbers fulfill specialized roles, and then, of course, the ubiquitous Dretch - who are close to numberless."

"We are rapidly drifting away from the focus of this discussion," Eadric sighed. "I have no objection to the containment of a demonic guide – provided that it can be undertaken safely, of course." The Paladin himself seemed surprised by the words which issued from his mouth.

"I had expected more resistance to the idea," Mostin said sarcastically.

"It is a logical proposal," Eadric admitted, "and, frankly, I've pretty much given up on conventional standards – they don't seem to apply to my life any more."

"I'm tired," Ortwin grumbled. "I say we take a vote. I favour Afgithan – it sounds interesting."

"As do I," Iua agreed. "It is neither too cold nor too hot."
"My thoughts exactly," Eadric said.

"I rather thought Saraf might be interesting," Mostin said. "But I suppose it can wait. Very well. Afqithan it is, unless Nwm or Shomei has an objection?"

"I would prefer Saraf, as it sounds the least unnatural – although I admit that Afqithan’s Green intrigues me," Nwm said.

"Shomei?" Eadric asked.

She shrugged. "I’m just along for the trip, Ahma. Whatever you decide is good with me."

Eadric scowled, unsure whether the reference to him in his religious capacity was sarcastic or not.

So, over the next hour, they hatched a plan. Ortwin’s contribution was significant, and his trademark cunning, boldness and braggadocio were written all over their strategy. It took another two full days in order to make preparations.

**

The Marilith was called Nufrut. She was less than happy to be reduced to the state of a disembodied head, and confined to a perfectly spherical jar twelve inches across, suspended on a metal chain. The chain had a convenient handle, for ease of transportation.

"Is it safe?" Eadric asked. He was inside the extradimensional area of Mostin’s retreat: the Alienist was reluctant to bring the bound demon into normal space, in the event that it would rouse the ire of the Claviger.

"It cannot escape, if that is what you mean," Mostin reassured him.

"What if you drop it? Will it break?"

"The jar is adamantine. I have polymorphed it into transparent adamantine. It is near indestructible."

"Does such a substance exist?" Ortwin inquired.

"It does now," Mostin grinned. "Excepting dispellings, disjunctions and disintegrations, we should be relatively safe – nonetheless I will keep the jar out of harm’s way in potentially dangerous situations. As Shomei was so willing to aid me – and us, I might add – we have agreed that she may keep Nufrut after we are finished."

Nufrut snarled, and cursed, her beautiful face contorting wildly.

"She doesn’t look very cooperative," Ortwin observed.

"We are still negotiating," Mostin explained. "The promise of freedom is, of course, the boon she seeks – we merely have to come to a mutually acceptable agreement. This is complicated by the fact that I have consented to pass Nufrut to Shomei. We will bicker for a few more hours, I am sure."
Eadric sighed and departed.

An hour after noon, Mostin and Shomei exited the manse. Both sported looks of smug satisfaction.

"I see you’ve reached a compromise." Ortwin said.

"Nufrut has acquiesced to our demands," Mostin replied. "We agreed that she will be released after ten years, if she cooperates. Her tenure with me will last for two months, and the remainder will be with Shomei."

"And you intend to dishonour that promise, I assume?"

Shomei looked genuinely offended. "Certainly not! An agreement with a fiend is a sacred enterprise. One does not violate such a trust."

Ortwin looked confused. Eadric nodded understandingly.

**

Orolde seemed unfazed by the responsibility that Mostin suddenly and unexpectedly foisted onto him – namely, the maintenance of the manse and the wizard’s affairs in his absence. He nodded in a resigned fashion as the Alienist enjoined him to ignore the nearby population of sprites, who were nothing but a gang of childish hooligans. Mostin left Orolde several large tomes with the express command that they should be memorized before his return – each was a treatment on various aspects of the Far Realm by Wizards the extent of whose insanity rivaled or even surpassed Mostin’s own. No-one was to be permitted entrance to the manse for any reason whatsoever, and in the unlikely event that it was assailed Orolde was to immediately retreat to the extradimensional area, seal it, and issue the sending which Mostin had hastily scribed.

"A prismatic sphere and several meteor swarms might also prove invaluable," Orolde suggested.

"You can rest assured that if there is any blasting to be done, I will not fail in my responsibilities." Mostin said drily.

The preparations were made within Mostin’s sanctum and, to the surprise of all, he took his mirror down and placed it within his portable hole.

"I will open a gate," he explained. "I am loathe to leave the mirror unattended, and any portal would only remain open for a day. Besides, it might be useful in a pinch if we need an emergency exit."

"Not that you’d ever leave it behind anywhere," Ortwin said.

"Probably not," Mostin admitted. "But a scrying device is always useful."

The Alienist and Infernalist proceeded to mind blank everyone present.

"We will need to repeat the same procedure tomorrow," Mostin said. "And the next day, and the next – for as long as we are abroad, in fact." He nodded to Shomei.
The Witch cast a *polymorph* on Ortwin, Eadric, Nwm and herself, which gave them the appearance of Sidhe: tall, graceful feys of unearthly beauty who had long since fled the Prime. Their clothing and equipment seemed to assume an equally elegant style. "If this ruse is to be successful," she said, "we should remember that Ortwin and Nwm are to be our spokesmen: both are fluent Sylvan speakers, and Ortwin is an adept liar. The rest of you should keep quiet unless either Mostin or I has time to use *tongues*: I also speak Fae, but I have no intention of acting as representative or negotiator. I will try to keep my communication to a minimum."

Shomei handed Ortwin an exquisite coronet which seemed to have been cut from a single, massive diamond. In fact, the Infernalist, a jeweler of no small ability, had used a *fabricate* spell on half of the stones which the Bard and Iua had received as their dowry. He placed it upon his head – the contours of which felt unfamiliar.

"King at last, eh?" Iua said sarcastically.

"I am a Duke, not a King," the Bard said coolly, effortlessly, and with utter conviction. His poise and movement spoke of natural command.

Shomei laughed despite herself. "Dammit, you’re good – I have to admit it. Watch your accent – we don’t want anyone to suspect that you’re a bumpkin from the Prime. The weight of scrutiny will fall upon you, and they will be looking for the smallest details and inconsistencies. Eadric – you should keep your helmet closed at all times. You are an inexpert liar, and manage to make even a Sidhe’s face look trustworthy and approachable. As a bodyguard, your role will be minimal in any case. And..."

She cast an empowered *cat’s grace*.

"...that should stop you lumbering inelegantly. Iua, you may still adopt another form if you prefer."

The Duelist shook her head. "I am the daughter of Ulao. I will masquerade as myself – an Auran princess is the role I am most accustomed to playing, in any case."

Mostin, not to be outdone in any matters of style, invoked a spell which turned him into a handsome fiend with ruddy skin, short horns and long, talon-like fingernails.

Shomei raised an eyebrow. "You cannot maintain that guise for long."

"On the contrary," Mostin grinned wickedly. "You forget that I have transcended your limited vibrational state. This is no obstacle to me.*"

Eadric gave an inquiring look.

"I am now a kelvezu," Mostin explained. "A demonic infiltrator and assassin. They are highly feared – it will give us an edge in negotiations, if they see that I am one of Ortwin’s retainers. I will remain enigmatic." He drew a long pair of gloves over his hands, and brought the hood of his cloak over his head so that his face became shadowed, and his features hidden.

"Then why are you covering up?" Eadric asked.
Ortwin sighed. "Ed, I really need to give you some lessons in duplicity."

"We are almost ready," Mostin said.

"This is the part that I don’t like, I assume," the Eadric said in a resigned voice.

Mostin nodded apologetically, and led them all into another area of his magnificent mansion.

**

An area had been cleared within the largest of the rooms in the extradimensional space. Its technical function – that of a banquet hall – had never, in fact, been observed.

Now it acted as a corral for six horses of fearsome visage. Nightmares conjured and confined by Mostin and Shomei, and subjected to torment from the Infernalist until they had submitted to her demands.

Mostin had finally seen her rod in action, and had been both awed and terrified by the power that, through it, she wielded.

"These are evil creatures," Eadric said. "And I am loathe to have one bear me."

"I am sure that they are equally loathe to bear us," Shomei sighed. "Nonetheless, we need them – both for the convenience of transportation that they grant, and the impression that riding them will convey to any who see us. We have them for nineteen days – no more, and no less. They will remain loyal – albeit reluctantly so."

"I hope so," Eadric said, "I do not wish to be borne away to some nameless Hell. And this compacting…"

"They are not compacted," Shomei shook her head. "They are coerced. Compacting would have been far easier, but Mostin forbade it for your sake."

"I fail to see the difference."

"Souls, Ahma, I would have paid them in souls."

Eadric looked aghast. "You use such currency? That is monstrous."

"They are damned already," Mostin said.

"It doesn't matter..." Eadric began.

"Wake up! Saizha!" Shomei said sharply, with no hint of irony. "I have compromised for your benefit. You will be forced to make many more choices that will be far more challenging before this is over. You are the Ahma. You are empowered to decide right from wrong, according to your belief. Look at me! Where is my taint? Why do I bear none?"

"I don't know," Eadric confessed. "You are anomalous."

"That much is true," Mostin leered, bearing his sharp fangs. "Shall we be on our
way? That was an attempt to diffuse the atmosphere, incidentally."

Eadric nodded. "We should remember that this is an open-ended sortie. We don’t know how long we have, how we will fare, whether we will return here before pursuing other avenues, or continue onwards. We don’t know whether we are spies, guerillas, instigators of unrest or any combination of the above. We are looking for potential allies. We are looking to thwart the Demon. We are seeking to release Nehael. And we are hoping to somehow augment Mostin’s power, to bring the spell within his reach."

"The last is most important," Mostin nodded, mounting one of the Nightmares, which champed restlessly and snorted fire. "Can we go now?"

In the purple skies, above the mists and shadows which lay upon the ancient woods of Afqithan, a Gate opened. A group of Sidhe, accompanied by a demon and an elemental, mounted on huge and malign steeds which issued smoke and fire, thundered through. A hunting party, from some dark region of Faerie, no doubt. One of them – accompanied by two magnificent eagles – concentrated briefly, and then called out in Sylvan.

"A chimera, five miles yonder," he pointed.

Their leader – a nobleman of some kind – spurred his mount onwards and drew a great, black bow which seemed to pulse grimly. Starlight glistened in the diamond coronet upon his brow.

On the walls of the castle, not a furlong from where the party had appeared, several guards dressed in ornate armour stared impassively at the spectacle for a few moments, betraying no emotion – or perhaps feeling none. Whoever this group was, they seemed oblivious to the fact that this was the castle of Irknaan, king of the Loquai, and they were trespassing in the airs above his demesne. One of the guards nodded silently, and another turned, and walked quickly but without hurrying to inform his captain.

*As an outsider, Mostin’s options for polymorphing are somewhat expanded.

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**POST 4: “IT WAS ONLY A CHIMERA...”**

Posted by: Sepuichrave II at ENWorld on 31st March 2003, 10:20 PM

The chamber was of blacks and muted greys. They flowed and rippled, as if they possessed a will of their own, absorbing all incident light, yet still conveying a sense of variance. If there were other colours present, then they were veiled by the pervasive gloom.

The Captain, whose name was Shupthul, stood before his King, Irknaan, and explained what had happened.
"Only a few moments ago, you say," Irknaan reclined in darkness in an unconcerned manner, not even deigning to look upon his retainer. "Have you dispatched a party?"

"Twelve, your Majesty," Shupthul said.

Despite his confidence and level voice, Irknaan perceived a measure of nervousness hidden behind the Captain’s expert façade. It made the King feel strangely comfortable – Shupthul’s apprehension was based on fear of him, rather than of any external threat. He smiled inwardly. "Which way were they headed?"

"Towards a chimera, five miles to the north. They are looking for quarry."

"And there is a demon with them? How curious. At this hour, the chimera will be Lorochtoh, of course. She is predictable in her habits. This may be amusing. How did they know where to find her, I wonder?"

"The guardsman who brought me the report indicated that it seemed a random choice – one of them sensed the beast, and they immediately took up the chase. The demon was cloaked – a kelvezu assassin, in all likelihood."

"I feel that I might observe." Irknaan clicked his fingers, and a sprite with a wicked expression hurried to fetch his scrying stone. Already, his mind raced with possibilities, although he evinced nothing to Shupthul. Who were they? How did one of them sense the beast? Was the demon an ally of the Prince, or a foe, or neither? They seemed potent. He would need to tread carefully. Irknaan wondered whether he was in disfavour, and his termination had been ordered by Graz’zt.

In any case, a confrontation with Lorochtoh would prove distracting for a few moments – others had made the mistake of underestimating her strength, and had paid dearly for it.

**

Nwm’s mind was bombarded with sensations as he switched between different aspects of their environment. The Green of Afqithan held a majesty that was warped by shadows and darkness, and possessed an alien quality that made him feel distinctly uncomfortable. As well as the chimera – the nearest of the nodes within his field of consciousness outside of the castle walls – other beasts flitted on the periphery of his thought. Manticores and griffons, displacer beasts and basilisks, a dragonne on the very edge of perception. Many of the trees possessed black and brooding sentience which filled the Druid with dread.

He turned his mind to feys, and they blazed across his inner landscape, too numerous to count, and then to outsiders, concentrated both in a knot within the fortress and also where other beasts were located. They overlapped in a confusing fashion, and Nwm noticed that the chimera – like many of the other denizens of Afqithan – was an indistinct type, and bore multiple conflicting signatures.

As did the griffons and their riders who were now following: they had taken flight from one of the castle’s tall towers. The Druid glanced over his shoulder, and saw specks in the sky to their rear. He yelled to Ortwin.
"There are twelve feys – or part-feys, at least – mounted on griffons – or part griffons – in pursuit. They are less than a mile behind."

"They can’t catch us," the Bard shouted back, the wind rushing past.

"They are closing in."

"Griffons can’t fly that fast," Ortwin objected.

"They are tenebrous," Shomei called to him. "part shadow-stuff. They slip through the gaps in space."

"The chimera is likewise a complex of different realities," Nwm yelled, "and should not be treated lightly. This could be interesting. What should we do?"

"Ignore the Loquai," declared Mostin. "It will irritate them."

"I agree," Ortwin nodded. "If they try to apprehend us, or behave aggressively, we should obliterate them with as much apparent ease as possible. We need to show both strength and disdain. Pay attention to the chimera."

"They will reach us, before we close on it," Nwm pointed out.

Iua concentrated briefly, and then yelled a warning. A powerful wind began to blow behind them, speeding them forwards. The Duelist and Eadric – both expert riders – dealt with the sudden change in pace without effort, although the Paladin found the increased smoke and fire kindled from his steed’s mane and hooves somewhat disconcerting. Likewise, Mostin and Shomei stayed in control of themselves and their mounts, albeit with more strain. Nwm clung on tightly.

Unfortunately, their leader, Ortwin, flamboyant as he seemed, was a poor rider. Iua’s warning had given him no time to prepare, and he was blown from his saddle, still clutching his bow.

Gods, how embarrassing, he thought as he tumbled towards the ground. He recovered quickly, and commanded his boots to action. As they sprouted tiny wings, the Bard did his best to make his mistake look intentional.

"It’s a good thing they can’t scry us," Mostin grumbled, as Ortwin drew level with him. "That’s precisely the kind of blunder we have to avoid, if we want to stay alive. I thought you could ride."

"I can," Ortwin lied. "I just haven’t, for a long time."

"I wish you’d take this more seriously," Eadric yelled.

"Nothing is further from my mind," the Bard grinned. "How far to the beastie, Nwm?"

"Half a mile," the Druid pointed.

"Will it sense us?"

As if in response to Ortwin’s question, the air was abruptly filled with demons.

"Somebody did," Shomei remarked drily.
Lorochtoh, who had lived for an untold age in the haunted woods of Afqithan, was a devious creature who had evaded or confounded the hunts that had been mounted in search of her on numerous occasions. Irknaan had long since given up on eliminating her, and had found that, left to her own devices, she posed no threat and proved an effective deterrent against the bands of sprites who occasionally vexed his patrols. The King of the Loquai had come to respect the chimera, and although it would have been within his power to remove her, the use of magic in a chase would have been a breach of the etiquette which existed between hunters and quarry – an unfulfilling exercise, against the spirit of the hunt in general. After all, if there was no risk to the participants, then the sport held little appeal and amounted to little more than execution.

Sat upon the branch of an immense banyan, immersed in shadows, Lorochtoh had gazed skywards with one of her three heads – her draconic eyes were her best – after catching the rumour of movement in her peripheral vision. A hunting party, headed towards her. The chimera wondered briefly if she was their target, and thought it best not to take any chances. She summoned five succubi.

"Go and charm those annoying Sidhe, my pretties," she instructed them. "And after they've chopped each other up, don't forget to bring me any baubles that they might have."

Lorochtoh shifted, and waited to see what transpired.

Ortwin, who had regained the lead, but had elected not to mount his steed again, was suddenly beset by four of the demonesses, who appeared directly in front of him. Still holding his bow in his left hand, the Bard drew his scimitar, whilst gaping at their naked beauty. Iua, acting with her usual speed, urged her mount forwards and instantly slew one of them before anyone else had even fully reacted to the situation.

"Mine," a succubus said to Ortwin, beckoning.

"Mine."

"Mine."

The three demonesses were bombarding Ortwin with erotic impulses, which he found himself uncharacteristically capable of resisting – due to the mind blank, he remarked to himself, rather than any overwhelming feelings of fidelity. Githla lashed out, and the Bard – feeling somewhat regretful – rapidly dispatched a succubus and wounded another. Eadric impaled a another with his lance. The remaining demoness – the fifth – who had appeared next to Mostin and whispered mine, was pulverized by a sonic that made Mostin’s eyes bulge. He had empowered it, but he hadn’t maximized it – nonetheless, the spell had borne the hallmarks of that metamagic.
Shomei raised an eyebrow. "That was rather an overkill."

"Did you check the magical trait of this plane?" Mostin asked.


The Alienist fired a clutch of quickened *magic missiles* at the last, wounded succubus. They blazed gloriously, and obliterated the demoness. "We need to seriously reconsider our options," Mostin sighed. "This puts things in a very different light." He glanced over his shoulder. The wind conjured by Iua still sped them onwards, and their pursuers were nothing but dots in the sky.

"You can ease up," Nwm called to the duelist, "or we will overshoot. The creature is close by."

Iua nodded, and the gale rapidly began to subside. But as the group began to descend, three hundred feet up, they received an unpleasant shock. Mostin knew the sensation which preceded it – he had experienced it when Feezuu had subjected him to it – but there was nothing he could do. An instant after the tickling feeling, his arms and legs twitched as the fluids were wilted from his body. Nwm, Shomei and Eadric were also struck by the necromantic assault: fortunately Ortwin and Iua were beyond the area of the spell’s effect. The pain was immense, and Mostin hysterically considered that Feezuu’s attack had been as nothing compared to this.

Infernalist, Paladin, Alienist and Druid began to drop like stones, their mounts withered to lifeless husks beneath them. Shomei wasn’t moving.

Lorochtoh broke from the treetops below. Blackness issued from her wings, and her form shivered with dismal power. Space twisted, and stretched uncomfortably around her. She was immense.

Nwm acted quickly, invoking a *reverse gravity* on the area around him, abruptly forcing himself, Mostin, Eadric, Shomei and the corpses of the Nightmares skywards again. Mostin cursed, uttered a quickened *haste*, cast a *fly* spell, aimed a *disintegrate* at the vast bulk of the chimera, and promptly missed. He swore profusely.

Ortwin sped a volley of arrows into the beast’s flank, where they quivered and caused her to screech. Iua struck Lorochtoh with a powerful blast of lightning, but still she climbed relentlessly towards them. Eadric drew Lukarn and waited, bobbing impatiently.

"Bad bad bad bad bad," Mostin grumbled. "Can you deal with Shomei, Nwm – assuming she’s still alive."

The Druid nodded, even as the chimera was closing, a foul draft blown before her by her wings. She spoke, and black fire began to kindle over Mostin, threatening to immolate him. His amulet absorbed it noiselessly.

Nwm waited, unwilling to act until he had seen Mostin’s retort.

Three colossal sonics issued from Mostin’s fingertips in rapid succession, swollen beyond all normal limits by the native magic of Afqithan. The noise was terrific as they detonated, superheating the air and causing massive ionization. As if by some trick of profound slipperiness, the chimera seemed to twist and gyre in space. She was unaffected.
Mostin gaped. *Impossible,* he thought.

Nwm glanced at Shomei, gauged that she would live, and struck Lorochtoh with a *finger of death.* Ortwin and Iua, descending on her flank, erupted into a vicious flurry of slashes and stabs.

The monster shrugged the spell effect off, effortlessly changed tack, and ploughed devastatingly into the Druid, ripping and rending him with horns, maws and claws. As her body swung around, finally within his range, Eadric hewed her with Lukarn – his blade blazed within the gloom which surrounded her. She screamed. Eadric struck again. And again. And again. Nwm blasted her with a *thunderswarm,* Mostin with more sonics, and both Bard and duelist continued to prosecute their attack.

Space folded. Concerned for her life, the chimera vanished into the Plane of Shadow.

Nwm, barely conscious, spoke with a mouthful of blood. "Get us out of here, Mostin."

The Alienist nodded.

Irknaan had watched the exchange with interest. From his perspective, only the steeds of those present and the chimera were apparent – some kind of ward prevented the observation of the interlopers themselves. Nonetheless, he could infer the use of powerful magic. Moments after the beast had vanished – no doubt fleeing to Shadow – the hunters' two remaining steeds likewise disappeared.

Irknaan cogitated, wondering whether they pursued her, or had passed into another reality altogether. Whoever they were, they weren't playing by the rules of the hunt – or *his* rules, at least. He shrugged. They probably wouldn't be back. Nonetheless, he would double the patrols and call on some demonic assistance – one couldn't be too careful.

**

They sat within a *magnificent mansion* hastily conjured by Mostin.

Shomei groaned. "It still hurts," she complained.

"The attack was charged with loathsome power," Nwm explained. "I need to be on hallowed ground in order to repair much of the damage done."

"We are behaving like rank amateurs," Eadric muttered. "We need to reappraise our situation. Prepare. Encase ourselves in wards and protective magics. We need back-up plans."

"Gods, Ed, we thought it was only a *chimera,*" Ortwin sighed. "None of us could have expected it to be capable of that."
"I tried to warn you," Nwm shrugged.

"Then try harder, next time," Ortwin snapped.

"If you weren't so concerned about creating an impression..." Nwm began in a reasonable voice.

Ortwin snorted. "That's exactly what this is about. It is a bluff. A ruse. We are wearing a façade. We are not appearing as ourselves."

"In any case," Shomei shifted uncomfortably, and winced, "we should note that our mounts are less durable than ourselves. That was the most potent horrid wilting that I have had the misfortune to encounter."

"And I," Mostin agreed. "The beast is part fiendish and part tenebrous. We should be on our guard. Now we have only two steeds left between the six of us."

"I will conjure more," Shomei sighed.

"They need to be potent," Mostin said. "I suggest ecalyptes – they will also give the impression that we have been to Shadow, where the chimera doubtless fled. It will reinforce the notion that we pursued it."

The Alienist reached into his portable hole, stroked Mogus briefly, and pulled the Looking-Glass of Urm-Nahat from within.

"What are you doing?" Nwm asked.

Mostin grinned. "I am lending credence to our ruse," he replied. "Ortwin, Eadric, Iua – if you would be so kind as to follow me?"

Eadric looked deeply suspicious.

"I will scry the beast, and we will attack and kill it. It is greatly weakened. We must strike before it can recover."

"You cannot be serious!" Nwm objected.

"It will involve only a brief sojourn in Shadow. We'll be back before you know it."

"Very well," Eadric groaned. "We should finish what we started."

Ortwin nodded, it was a matter of pride, now. Mostin drew upon the power stored in his amulet, and empowered the Paladin and Duelist with flight before scrying Lorochtoh with the mirror.

"Don't screw up," Iua said, and leapt through.

*

Immersed in shadowstuff, the chimera was aware of the sensor, but paid it little heed – she assumed it was Irknaan spying on her again. Suddenly, and without warning, the Auran with the rapier was attacking her ferociously, puncturing her thick hide with the slender blade. She was joined by the two Sidhe – one of whom bore the sword that had caused her so much pain. The demon appeared last of all, grinning widely.
Lorochtoh screamed in pain. Flames leapt from her dragon’s mouth as she lashed out with claws and horns in an uncoordinated fashion. But she was spent, and had nowhere left to hide. It was brief and brutal. She quickly cowered.

“Spare me,” she grunted in Draconic, and repeated it from her lion’s head in guttural Sylvan.

Ortwin slashed at her with his scimitar, and the blade bit deeply into one of her shoulders. Leaning forward, and applying all of his great strength, Eadric pushed Lukarn into Lorochtoh’s sternum. The blade sank in four feet to the quillons.

The chimera twitched once, and died. Eadric sighed, and black ichor cascaded over him as he withdrew his sword. He made a brief supplication for the creature’s soul, before looking around himself.

The Plane of Shadow was cold, and drab, and featureless. All colour and life, all vitality and variety seemed to have been bled from the place.

"This is a grim Limbo," he remarked, "and I would like to leave."

Ortwin hacked at Lorochttoh’s draconic head with Githla, until it parted from the thick neck. He dragged it behind himself as he walked back through the portal, and smiled.

That wasn’t so bad, after all, he thought.

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NOTE:

This post demonstrates how completely messed up conventional Challenge Ratings are. Officially, the beastie is CR14. Off the cuff, I’d pegged her at 16-17 and thought that it would be relatively easy - although not a cake-walk - for the characters.

In fact, it almost resulted in a three character fatalities. Shomei was unconscious. And Nwm and Mostin were in single-figure hp by the end of it. Do not underestimate advanced half-fiendish shadow chimerae! - especially when they face a bunch of complacent players.

They were much more careful after this...

POST 5:

Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 15th April 2003, 01:40 AM

I had hoped for time to write a longer update. The next week is likely to be a tad hectic. Oh well...
They had chosen a small hillock with a flat top, covered with short, springy grass, some sixty miles from Irknaan’s fortified palace – technically beyond his immediate hegemony, or so Nufrut had told them. It had once been the abode of sprites according to Nwm, although none now lived there. It was an isolated area, and their nearest neighbours were a bevy of Nereids who dwelt in a small lake three miles distant, and a solitary Redcap – perhaps the most unpleasant and disagreeable of all feys – who had taken up residence in a crumbling structure that may once have been a tower. None represented a threat to the party, although the Redcap had succumbed to – or willingly embraced – the mixture of umbral bleed and Abyssal taint that seeped into Afqithan.

At Ortwin’s request – and in keeping with the Bard’s general scheme to exhibit as much blustering grandiosity as possible – Mostin summoned a group of Djinn and had them erect a modestly-sized pavillion and several smaller tents on top of the hill, complete with banners and pennants which fluttered in the gentle breeze. Ortwin had chosen the device of a scarlet basilisk surrounded by nineteen oriels, which, although promising some esoteric heraldic significance, was in fact as vacuous as his own claim to nobility. Lorochtoh’s dragon-head sat upon a pike: the grim trophy of a hunt successfully – albeit painfully – executed. Presently, however, the camp was blanketed by a screen cast by Shomei, until their defenses were established. All, with the exception of Iua, maintained their respective disguises.

The group discussed the peculiar traits of Afqithan – notably its enhanced magic, and the implications of the shadowstuff which seemed to exist in varying concentrations. The demiplane was anomalous: according to Shomei, there were portals which linked it to Faerie proper, and at certain times sympathetic resonances would allow passage between the worlds. But, excepting powerful magic, there was no way of accessing the Prime other than through Shadow – which was an uncharted and likely perilous route.

"Shadow and Faerie are not mutually coextant," the Infernalist explained. "Afqithan should be seen as a threshold between two realities which do not normally interact."

"And the taint?" Eadric asked, sighing.

"I suspect that that was here long before Graz’zt took an interest in the place. Perhaps other fiends have had connections here in the past. Perhaps a legion or two of damned spirits fell through here on their way to Hell, and the gravity of their passing caused a bubble to break away from Faerie. I have no idea. As I have said, within Irknaan’s palace there may be a Gate to the Abyss. But this combination of shadow and taint has been owned by the Loquai, and others – such as the Redcap who lives four miles yonder."

"And the chimera," Mostin rasped, still suffering from dehydration. "As I see it, we are dealing with a notoriously tricky group of creatures who have been rendered even trickier by the local conditions. They will be difficult, at best. How many of them can invoke horrid wiltings, for example? Shomei indicated that their leaders may possess as much magical potency as she and I. If one factors in control of the umbral and demonic energies, we may be heavily outmatched in terms of sheer power, although not in utility and versatility. And there is another question – the passage of time here is altered, so do we retreat to Wyre in order to prepare, or do we take advantage of the natural empowerment of magic that
Afqithan offers? We need to weigh the benefits of the two options."

"We can do both," Shomei said. "I will return to the Prime – although not to Wyre – and perform my conjurations. A day here is a week there – and I can accomplish a great deal in a week. I assume that areas of Shadow which are coterminous with Afqithan also suffer from the temporal dilation – Shadow will reflect the local conditions on any plane it touches. As far as the power of the Loquai is concerned, I agree that we must tread carefully: the one thing to remember is that many Sidhe focus on enchantments – the mind blanks are likely to prove useful in that regard."

Mostin grumbled, and shook his head. "All it takes is for each of them to know just one evocation, and we’re in trouble. They’re bards and sorcerers, and they can drop as many empowered maximized whatevers on us as they like. And there is no spell that effectively protects against horrid wilting without negating our own effectiveness."

Shomei nodded. "It was never going to be easy. And it’s enervations that I’m afraid of."

Eadric groaned. "This place is rapidly beginning to lose its charm. And if a week in Wyre passes for every day that we spend here, that is doubly concerning. And you speak of conjurations, Shomei. Why does this give me a bad feeling, I wonder?"

"I admit that there may be a certain moral ambiguity – from your perspective, at least."

"It’s not that I dislike you. It’s just that I don’t entirely trust you," Eadric explained.

"Ahma, I am returning to the Prime. If you wish, you may accompany me, and we can visit Morne, and you may confer with the Sela. If he instructs you to discontinue our acquaintance…"

"He will not," Eadric smiled grimly, "as you well know. I am both sanctioned and expected to exercise my own judgement. Which is difficult," he added wrily, "when I lack the clarity of vision possessed by Oronthon’s proxy."

Shomei laughed. "Saizhan requires a great deal from its practitioners. It is ruthless and uncompromising in its demand for self-perfection."

"Your view is partially correct, but..." Eadric began.

Ortwin held up his hand. "No philosophy," he demanded. "It will only lead to unhappiness, and one or both of you will end up upset or frustrated. We need to concentrate on the matter in hand."

"That sentiment is always true," Nwm added wrily.

"We need to think to defense. Can we be attacked from Shadow?" Ortwin asked.


"Can we do anything about it?" The Bard pressed.

"I need to think about that," the Alienist sighed. "It depends on how accessible
the Plane is to the locals."

"Very accessible," Shomei said, looking slightly apologetic.

"Can they teleport in?" Ortwin asked.

Mostin grimaced. "When they have determined our position – which shouldn't be too long, when we reveal our gaudy tents – that will be a possibility, I suppose."

"I will hallow this area," Nwm said, "and will tie it to a dimensional anchor that Mostin will cast. We have done something similar before, if you recall. We will designate those currently present as being unaffected by the anchor. Hallowed ground will also allow me to repair the long-term damage from the chimera’s attack."

"Very inventive," Shomei nodded approvingly.

"In which case," Mostin grumbled, "someone will need to procure the relevant herbs and oils. Which means I need to return to Morne, I suppose."

"I will go to Magathei," Iua offered. "You can buy anything and everything there."

"Hallowed ground here will be rather a giveaway, don’t you think?" Ortwin asked.

"Only if they think to look for it," Nwm replied. "And, let’s face it, would you?"

Ortwin grinned.

Eadric sighed. "If. If. If. There are too many ifs for my liking."

"Relax, Ed," Ortwin said. "I’ve pulled off bigger lies than this one before."

"Have you?" Eadric asked. "Which ones?"

"My memory fails me," Ortwin replied.

**

After Shomei had departed and Iua had returned from a brief excursion to Magathei on the Plane of Air, Nwm hallowed the hilltop in a long rite, until it became an island of brighter Green amidst a sea of long shadows.

"Where is Ortwin?" Iua asked Mostin, as the Alienist sat outside one of the smaller tents. Half of his attention was directed to Nufrut, whose disembodied head leered from out of her crystal prison, and half was focused on Nwm, who had begun to pace in a circle, mumbling the spell.

"He is reconnoitering," Mostin said distractedly. "He is invisible and flying, so he will be quite safe from casual observation. Sem has accompanied him – hopefully the avian’s eyes should see anything before it or they see him. Barring sidhe hunting parties, of course." The word avian was spoken with ill-concealed loathing.

Iua raised an eyebrow, and made an educated guess as to where Ortwin’s ‘reconnoitering’ had taken him.
Mostin ignored her and returned his attention to Nufrut, whose face seemed to be caught in a continual scowl.

"What can you tell me of Irknaan, o happy one?" Mostin asked drily.

"What do you wish to know?" The Marilith pouted.

"The means by which his connection with your master is maintained; the number and disposition of his forces; the extent of his personal magical power; his resources – does he, for example, possess any rarities which might interest me? Any information, in fact, that I might have overlooked which may prove useful."

"These questions are late in coming," Nufrut observed.

"I know or can guess the answers to most in broad terms, but now is the time for specifics," Mostin replied. "Is there an Abyssal gate within his fortress?"

"Yes," Nufrut answered grumpily.

"If you are more forthcoming, your incarceration will be briefer!"

"That is not in our agreement," the Marilith objected.

"Nor is your reticence or dissembling," Mostin replied. "I assume that the gate is a permanent, two-way portal?"

"It is periodic."

"And the length and regularity of its period?"

"This information is not known to me," Nufrut replied.

"I should remind you that even a single lie will render our agreement void, and you will remain in your sphere for the rest of your days. Do I need to ask the Ahma over? The Eye of Palamabron penetrates all counterfeits, they say."

"A period of twenty-four hours springs to mind for some reason," Nufrut said. "Although I may be thinking of another gate entirely."

"Would that be twenty-four hours here, or in the Abyss?" Mostin asked archly.

"I suppose it would be here," the Marilith said sourly.

"And it opens in Zelatar, I expect."

"That would certainly be logical," Nufrut conceded. "Does it open in Zelatar, Nufrut?"

"Yes," the Demoness answered.

"Just making sure," Mostin said acidly. "How long does the portal remain open, in local time, Nufrut. Try to be precise."

"Three hours, twenty-five minutes and forty-two seconds," the Demoness said sarcastically.
“Thank-you,” Mostin said with dry condescension. “That wasn’t so hard, was it? Are there other gates, other than the one within Irknaan’s stronghold?”

“There are many gates in Afqithan to many worlds,” Nufrut answered. “Are there others to Zelatar?”

“Not to my knowledge.”

“Perhaps. If there are, I am not privy to them.”

“Good,” Mostin sighed, finally feeling that he was making headway. “Now let’s speak of Irknaan himself. He reveres your master, as do many of the Loquai. What does he gain in reward for his loyalty?”

“Power, you fool,” Nufrut sneered. “More specifically, please. And you may dispense with the insults, they do not make me sympathetic to your plight.”

“Prince Gra….”

“Hup!” Mostin interrupted. “You will henceforth refer to him as my master, if you please.”

Nufrut raised an eyebrow in an expression of amusement. “If you are concerned about him hearing his name, bear in mind how many billions say it every day in a billion worlds.”

“Nonetheless, I would prefer not to take the risk. Most of those billions are not high on his list of ‘people to be dealt with.’ As I was asking, what does Irknaan receive as a boon from your master?”

“Irknaan is particularly favoured. The Loquai in general enjoy the attentions of succubi – or incubi – depending on their gender and preference. They have learned the secret language. They have demonic allies and servants. My master and his minions have taught them many arts – Irknaan most of all.”

“And they crave erotic sensation above all else?”

“All sensation is erotic if you learn how to experience it,” Nufrut answered.

“We can engage in such philosophical speculation at another time, Nufrut. For the time being, let us confine ourselves to Irknaan. Which arts do you speak of?”

“Efficacious magic, Mostin. Violated magic.”

“And in return, what has the Prince received? How far does Irknaan’s loyalty extend? Are there Loquai within the Lord of Azzagrat’s retinue? Do they pay him tribute?”

“There are sidhe within his armies, yes. Many are capable warriors. Your encounter with Xerulko* is testament to my master’s eclecticism.”

“How many Loquai dwell within Irknaan’s fortress?” Mostin persisted.
"Perhaps two hundred."

Inwardly, Mostin groaned. "And the location and disposition of his principal vassals within Afqithan?"

"They are numerous," Nufrut answered.

"Other fortresses of Loquai, or other creatures who support him," Mostin said, somewhat exasperated.

"Yytryn, a powerful Duke, two hundred miles to the northeast of here; the Queen Menicau; the Lamia Jetheeg; Threux, the Wasted Nymph; King Samodoquol; the Wyrm Crosod..."

"A Wyrm? Of what kind?"

"A black one. He often flies to converse with Irknaan."

Mostin recalled the very first time that he had looked through his mirror with Shomei into this twisted world. Something huge had passed across the stars in the distance. *It could have been a dragon, I suppose,* he thought.

"And Crosod has embraced the umbral taint, no doubt?"

"Most certainly," Nufrut smiled.

"And within Irknaan’s fortress: are there other individuals who might pose a particular threat to us, beside the king himself?"

"His queen and consort, Nhura. His captain, Shupthul. He is served by an elite guard who may be more than a match for your puny gang. Fiendish umbral griffons, maybe a dozen succubi and several glabrezu at any one time. Who knows, Mostin – perhaps even a kelvezu or two?"

"You seem to be enjoying this."

"I must take my recreation when it presents itself to me. I am not equipped to go and find it myself."

"Nhura is a succubus, I assume?"

"No, indeed," Nufrut smiled wickedly. "Nhura is a rare creature indeed. She was once a Lillend."

Mostin’s stomach tightened in a knot.

Eadric spent much of the day, if it was a day – there was neither sun nor moon to mark the passage of time – in prayer and contemplation, still unaccustomed to his sidhe form. He meditated upon their current predicament, and the absurdity of it struck him: they were in a foreign world, full of potent magic, where taint was rampant, and with no overarching plan or purpose. As usual, Ortwin didn’t seem to be taking things very seriously, and Shomei was a nagging source of concern. Penetrating her motives was impossible. Mostin seemed to trust her, but Mostin’s perspective was more skewed than anyone else that Eadric knew, and
was little cause for comfort.

*Thank heaven for Nwm,* he thought, as he emerged from his reverie. The Druid still paced, chanting quietly under his breath. Iua practiced impossibly complex maneuvers nearby.

As Mostin approached him, the Paladin resigned himself to the inevitable complications that the Alienist always managed to find. His demonic visage was distinctly unsettling.

"I have good news and bad news: which would you first prefer?" Mostin casually swung the globe containing Nufrut’s head.

"I would rather not hear the bad news at all," Eadric replied.

"Then I will tell you the good news: Nufrut is a veritable mine of information! Shomei was inspired when she suggested her name."

"I was an ambassador to many worlds, you imbecile! What do you expect?" The Demoness snapped from her prison.

Mostin opened his *portable hole* and dropped her inside. "She is, however, somewhat irascible, and is prone to petulance."

"What other good news is there?" Eadric asked.

"None," Mostin admitted. He proceeded to recount all that he had learned, drinking deeply from a waterskin at regular intervals.

"I do not like umbral fiendish black wyrmis," Eadric moaned. "This is a disturbing development."

"I am in agreement," Mostin nodded, "but we can rest assured that such a creature will register in Nwm’s mind long before it finds us."

"If he is looking," Eadric added.

"Nwm immerses himself in the Green on a fairly regular basis, so I have no concerns there. Irknaan sounds well entrenched, however: finding any to oppose him is likely to be difficult."

"This is no revelation," Eadric sighed. "There are those here which the taint has not touched, according to Nwm. They may be potential allies."

"Pixies and Grigs?" Mostin laughed hoarsely. "Dryads? Satyrs? Nymphs and Nereids? Squeakers, Buckawns and *Wood Gnomes*? You cannot be serious! Even if these were normal Sidhe that we were dealing with, Eadric, that would be an ill-advised course of action. The Loquai are not such easy targets."

"Don't let Ortwin hear you speaking thus," Iua interrupted, "he is, after all, King of the Feys in Wyre."

"Any fool can make that claim, and I'm sure he's not the only one to covet that title," Mostin said drily. "Where is he, anyway?"

Iua drew a dagger from her boot. "About now," she said coolly, "I expect he is discovering whether his attempt to seduce one, or perhaps all, of the three
Nereids who live yonder has been successful."

Left-handed, she hurled the blade with strength and precision at Lorochtoh’s head, where it sank into the skull between the dead chimera’s glazed draconic eyes.

POST 6: SCHEMES

Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 29th April 2003, 07:38 PM

Things were getting complicated, although the party didn’t know quite how complicated at this point. Eadric, Nwm, Ortwin and Mostin - together with Iua and Shomei - were playing with the big boys and the big girls, now. The big boys and the big girls were very clever, and very powerful.
The statistics of some of the clever and powerful big boys and big girls will be posted in the Rogues’ Gallery today.

Later, it would get very messy.

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Schemes

The succubus Lehurze – who regarded herself as an occasional ally of Graz’zt, rather than his abject thrall – adjusted her visage to her satisfaction before pressing the face of the **cubic gate** which was keyed to Afqithan. She was unwilling to wait for two days until the portal opened, and even more loath to ask her Abyssal master to expedite her transit: the Prince’s mood had been particularly dark and violent of late. This was no special cause for concern in and of itself, but neither was he known for granting boons at such times. And had he been reminded of her, and chosen to slake his lust upon her instead, she feared that it may have resulted in her demise – over the aeons, more than a few succubi had been annihilated during or after the act of passion, whether or not they had begged a favour from him. Best not to draw attention to herself, she thought.

Lehurze played a dangerous game. Graz’zt knew that she was on amicable terms with Pazuzu, but was content to allow her to pass tidbits of information to agents of the Aerial Prince as long as the flow back towards the Lord of Azzagrat was greater in both volume and quality. Demons generally expected disloyalty and duplicity, and, in fact, became suspicious when it seemed absent.

Graz’zt also knew that Lehurze was still close in the confidence of his former ally and paramour, Soneillon – the abstruse and enigmatic succubus whose dark designs may have rivaled even his own. During their aeon-long association, Soneillon had initiated a number of demons nominally loyal to Graz’zt into her clique of followers, of whom Lehurze was one. Lehurze had seized every shred of knowledge which was presented to her, and developed a sorcerous talent of some ability – which she carefully hid from those around her. Lehurze was shrewd enough to appear to reveal the majority of her findings regarding Soneillon to one of Graz’zt’s agents – a Glabrezu named Shonchuk – who paid her handsomely for
her information. She knew that Shonchuk was retained directly by Graz’zt – despite the fact that the other demon masqueraded as an informant for one of the Dark Prince’s frequent supporters, Lord Kostchtchie.

Lehurze was therefore surprised when events unfolded as they did. Irknaan, one of the warped sidhe kings from Afqithan, had issued the Nalfeshnee Maihodrot a *sending*, requesting information on a kelvezu and a group of rogue sidhe who had entered his realm. Maihodrot, the demon who oversaw events in Afqithan and with whom Lehurze at times found collaboration beneficial, had intimated that unusual events might be passing in the little demiplane. Upon further probing he had suggested that Irknaan – whose name was known to Lehurze – might be concerned that Prince Graz’zt bore him some unknown enmity. Lehurze was silent when quizzed by the other demon – her mind working furiously, as she tried to piece together possible scenarios. Many things were known to her, and she was privy to the plots of a number of Abyssal magnates.

Irknaan, she knew, had genuine cause for concern: if Graz’zt had discovered that the Loquai were also sponsored by the demoness Rhyxali, he may have acted to suppress the potential rivalry. Or he may have known for some time, and determined that things had reached a critical juncture. Her curiosity was piqued. Nonetheless, the succubus would have ignored the entreaty, had it not been for a quasit dispatched from her erstwhile mistress in Throile – the disputed Abyssal jungle where Graz’zt and Soneillon warred interminably with one another:

*Inquire into Afqithan. A captured Devil has indicated that interesting events may be transpiring there. Shomei the Infernal is somehow involved.*

Never one to believe in coincidence, Lehurze had slain the quasit without a moment’s thought, and approached Maihodrot again. After indulging the Nalfeshnee’s violent desires, she had secured the temporary use of the *cubic gate* which Maihodrot used to access Afqithan and a number of other worlds which he was charged with supervising. Unaware of the greater patterns which were moving, but nonetheless suspicious of the motives of the succubus, Maihodrot agreed to allow Lehurze to act in his stead – confident that he could extract at least a few scraps of gossip from her upon her return. From the Nalfeshnee’s perspective, Afqithan was a tedious and complex world, and he was wise enough to know that he lacked the guile necessary to wheedle anything substantive from Irknaan.

As she stepped through the *gate*, Lehurze felt a frisson of excitement: as much as she felt at home amid the tortuous intrigues of Azzagrat, occasional escape from the place, if merely to a pocket Faerie, was always desirable.

**

Iua was only partially correct in her suspicions regarding Ortwin. The *polymorphed* and *invisible* Satyr had made his roundabout way to the nereids’ pool, where he sat upon a rock and watched the three feys cavort happily in the water. Those with eyes to see would have observed an inane grin of huge proportions fixed onto his face.

After an unknown time had elapsed – it may have been minutes or hours – and seeing no abatement to the nereids’ antics, Ortwin removed his pipes from his belt and began a haunting melody of such enormous poignancy that, had he had tear ducts, Sem – who sat upon a nearby branch – would have begun to weep.
The water-nymphs stopped abruptly, seized their shawls from the bank of the pool, and vanished into its depths.

Ortwin raised an invisible eyebrow, and continued to play – the tempo and mood of his music changing to become lighter and less melancholy, although still graced with a sweetness and depth which belied his own fickle and superficial nature. He concluded the tune, and waited.

And waited.

Ortwin frowned, and replaced his pipes at his belt. He pulled his small harp from its case on his back, and struck up another tune – this time accompanying the music with a voice which he hardly recognized as his own. Sidhe vocal chords had a smoothness he was unfamiliar with. He measured the passage of time by the songs that he played, and perhaps a further half hour had elapsed before he sighed and ceased his music. He waited again, glancing up at the eagle – who appeared to have dozed off. He picked up a stick and threw it at the bird, who screeched indignantly.

"Come on," Ortwin picked himself up. "We’re going."

"Better luck next time," Sem replied sarcastically.

"You are no Loquai," a honeyed voice said from the water at his feet. "And you play the pipes passably well for a sidhe – did a satyr teach you?"

Ortwin started, and looked down to observe only his own reflection in the water. He smiled ironically – apparently the invisibility had worn off at some time during his performance.

"Passably well? I am a satyr, lady," he said with quickly recovered charm. "I am Ortwin the Great, King of the Feys of Wyre and the Northern World – not your world, I hasten to add. I am currently in disguise."

"That is an implausible tale."

"But nonetheless true," Ortwin answered, surprised that less than fifty percent of his claim was a lie.

"And why are you here by our pool, ‘King’ Ortwin?"

"I have lustful urges," he admitted, "but that is not the only reason why I’m here. I am looking for information. What can you tell me of the Loquai?"

"Now you make me suspicious that you are a spy," the voice replied with acid humour.

"Please understand that I mean you no harm," Ortwin insisted. "If I had wished to, I could have stolen all of your shawls and forced you into submitting to all manner of lewd acts, and into divulging whatever I wished to know. I am looking for allies. I am the enemy of Irknaan, and his sponsors, and of the umbral bleed, and the taint which lies upon this place. Can you help me?"

"I cannot," the voice replied. "Now begone!"

"What is your name?" the Bard asked. But there was no response. She had fled.
Ortwin cursed.

**

Mostin watched as Nwm made his final invocations on the hilltop. "If you did that every day for ten thousand years, you might make a small impression on this place," Mostin scoffed, as he cast a *dimensional anchor*.

Nwm ignored him, and repaired the damage caused by the violated *horrid wilting* that they had sustained. He waited until Mostin apologized before attending to his needs: in the meantime, the Alienist had consumed several gallons of water in his unquenchable thirst.

When Shomei returned, it was in the company of four ecalypses that she had enlisted as steeds – six-legged horses native to Shadow. Mostin guessed that the Infernalist had struck deals with other creatures, although Shomei did not mention them, and the Alienist did not press her: she looked exhausted, itself an indicator that she had busied herself with *summonings* and *callings*.

To Eadric, Iua and Nwm, the witch handed small vials containing a transparent liquid which smelled vaguely acidic.

"Consume these," she instructed, sighing.

Eadric looked suspicious.

"They will allow you to master the beasts – currently, they are *charmed*, but you need to bond with them. The draught will simply allow you to stay on them while you break them. Ecalypses are notoriously willful."

"Where did you procure these potions?" The Paladin asked. The flasks had a faint aura of taint which clung to them.

"Abriymoch," Shomei grimaced. "But they were not made in the Hells, *Ahma*, only purchased there – with some difficulty, I might add."

"Does every choice that you present to me compromise my principles and threaten to erode my integrity?"

"That is for you to decide."

"And why do you inconvenience yourself for us to such an extent? Do you require payment for your services?"

"No," she said flatly. "And my debt to Nwm is still unsettled: I would have died had he not intervened."

"There is no debt," the Druid said easily.

"Yes," she replied, "there is."

Shomei opened yet another *magnificent mansion* to corral both the ecalypses and the two remaining nightmares – now that the hilltop itself was *hallowed*, they could not freely tread there.
"Where is Ortwin?" Shomei asked.

"He is reconnoitering," Mostin replied, avoiding Iua’s gaze.

"Is he warded?"

"Somewhat," the Alienist answered.

Shomei sighed. "We need to be more careful, Mostin. One of my devils is missing."

Mostin raised an eyebrow. "Which one?"

"One of the erinyes, named Aoloz. She was the one I dispatched to Throile."

"This complicates matters," Mostin said drily.

**

Lehurze arrived in Afqithan only moments after Ortwin had begun his flight back to the encampment, and immediately teleported to the gates of Irknaan’s palace. She was granted an audience with the King in private, and was greeted by his customary mixture of inscrutability and condescension. Their exchange was civil, as each probed the other for possible weaknesses. For the most part, Lehurze remained demure, sensing the power of the dark perception that the sidhe possessed – he was ancient, and as cunning as an Abyssal Lord, and she knew that she must tread carefully. Potency and command flowed effortlessly from him, but seemed to find no purchase on her – Lehurze had long since mastered the art of utter passivity, and transformed it into an effective tool for domination. She absorbed all. Soneillon had taught her well.

When the succubus casually mentioned the demoness Rhyxali, she was unsure whether she caught the merest flicker in Irknaan’s impenetrable gaze. She smiled inwardly, as she knew now that the King’s thoughts would be turning rapidly, seeking to make connections and attempting to place her within the larger picture.

Lehurze made no mention of the kelvezu, nor of the sidhe hunting party, until Irknaan broached the subject at the gruesome and shadowy revel which was held later that evening. Nine other succubi were present – compacted to Loquai nobles of varying station – as well as the glabrezu Tebdelu and Narab, advisors and lovers to Nhura, Irknaan’s beautiful, sinuous, and deadly consort. The presence of Lehurze was a cause for doubt amongst the other demons – the succubus had a reputation for intricate and tangled schemes in Azzagrat, and they, themselves, suddenly felt under scrutiny. Lehurze delighted in the fear that she evoked, and many of the lesser sidhe to whom she spoke, despite their subtlety and guile, were no match for her shrewd and circuitous interrogations.

Irknaan watched her as she mingled. He was confident that he had gauged her correctly: here was one with the ruthless determination and ambition typical of her kind, but also with the skill and patience to actualize her goals – a much more valuable commodity. After their satiation of blood, and grim pleasure, and exquisite pain, Irknaan’s court retired for meditation or private indulgence.

The King and Queen – the latter flanked by the hulking presence of the two
glabrezu – remained and questioned Lehurze, who seemed unfazed by the penetrating gazes of the two huge demons. All regarded each other with mutual distrust and cynicism, and beneath an opaque veneer of civility and etiquette, deals were struck, information was exchanged, and secrets were alluded to.

But when Shupthul entered at a late hour with his report, none could have expected the news that he brought with him. He bowed before Irknaan, Nhura, and their guest.

"My Lord and Lady, there are devils at the gate. They seek an audience."

The King’s eyes widened in an uncharacteristic display of surprise. "Their number, arrangement and purpose?" He asked.

"There are thirteen of them, Lord. Their purpose they would not divulge. Ten are Narzugons who wear many honours and decorations."

"And the three remaining?"

"Furcas, Murmuur and Titivilus, my Lord. Infernal nobility."

Irknaan turned to Lehurze. "Perhaps you possess some insight into the presence of Devils in my realm?" He asked acidly.

"I have no more information than you," the Succubus lied, as she considered Soneillon’s mention of Shomei.

The King’s eyes narrowed, and he pondered briefly. "Tell them to return in a day," he instructed Shupthul. "I am disinclined to deal with them presently."

"Offending them too much may be unwise," Nhura said, "at least until we discover their purpose. We should send them a token, and grant them the privilege to hunt, at least. There may be others in their wake."

Irknaan gave a cursory nod. Thirteen devils – even ten knights and three Dukes of Hell – were no particular threat to him in his own fortress, but he was nonetheless cautious. And like Lehurze, King Irknaan did not believe in coincidence. The image of the unknown sidhe hunting party was still fresh in his mind.

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**POST 7: SHORT UPDATE**

Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 6th May 2003, 02:00 AM

Time for a mini-update.

I’m on vacation next week, so its likely to be a fortnight before I can update again. Grodog - I’ll answer your (growing backlog of) outstanding questions when I get back - you’ll have to excuse a slight delay until then.

Wrt. Caer Sidi in Q1 (and I remember it well) - the name, and the 'Pharisees,' the ruling caste, were both taken from "Three Hearts and Three Lions" by Poul Anderson - mentioned at the back of the 1e DMG "recommended reading" IIRC. A
very charming story indeed.

Anyway...

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**Short Update**

Iua had sat largely quiet during the discussions, her emotions churning rapidly, but conscious of the inappropriateness of an untimely confrontation with Ortwin, who evinced his usual swagger and nonchalance.

When the Bard had recounted his encounter with the nereids – speaking no falsehood, but leaving sufficient room for all kinds of inference – she had sighed inwardly, aware of his capacity for gross insensitivity. Mostin had fidgeted uncomfortably, and Nwm had kept his eyes diplomatically lowered. Eadric, as always, had retained an open and accommodating expression which did not suit his current sidhe features. The duelist was glad that he would be wearing a helm – subterfuge was not one of the Paladin’s strong points. Subtlety, and reading others’ moods, however, could be.

"You should be cautious of roaming too far afield," Eadric said vaguely to Ortwin. "It may have unforeseen consequences."

Ortwin squinted, unsure of the Paladin’s meaning.

"It is important to maintain the group’s cohesion and unity of purpose," Eadric continued obliquely. "And one of us alone is too easy a target – invisibility is no protection against the sidhe, or a passing dragon, for that matter. Forays should be made in pairs – preferably in the company of a spellcaster – in case a speedy retreat is necessary."

"Good idea," Ortwin nodded. "Perhaps Nwm should come next time. You like nereids, don’t you Nwm?"

"I am reluctant to categorize my feelings towards an entire race of creatures in such simple terms," Nwm replied evasively.

"Nonsense," Ortwin said archly. "When you were younger, Nwm..."

"Alas, I am no longer young," the Druid interrupted.

"But when you were," Ortwin persisted blithely, "you frolicked with nymphs and dryads and nereids and sirines with the best of them. You were never stuffy, like Ed is."

"Nor was I as selfish and hedonistic as you," Nwm snapped. "Just because I don’t have Eadric’s..."

"Hang-ups?" Ortwin suggested.

"Perspective," Nwm continued. "Bah! What’s the use? You wouldn’t know what sacred meant if the Goddess pissed in your face."
Shomei shot Mostin an inquiring look.

Yes, it's usually like this, was the Alienist’s unvoiced reply.

The Infernalist clicked her fingers. "Tactics," she said.

**

Mostin's intellect was amplified to a level he had never before experienced, and his mind was awash with powerful spells. They seemed to compete for space, and threatened to spill over. Almost every one of his higher valences was occupied – four more castings of mind blank had actually relieved the pressure on his consciousness.*

Every spell – arcane and divine – that the party possessed would be deployed to maximum effect. They had spent over an hour discussing strategy in an attempt to coordinate their resources. Eadric would be contributing death wards, and even Ortwin's paltry collection of spells would be used in order to free up some of Shomei's lower valences.

The Alienist had prepared gate, prismatic sphere, Mordenkainen’s disjunction, time stop, reality maelstrom; a chained phantasmal killer, a chained polymorph other, five disintegrates, and four sonically substituted fire orbs – he was intent on not having the targets slide out of the way again, as the chimera had done. He had prepared a pair of dimensional anchors in case they ran into anything that they didn’t want to get away, and two banishments in case they encountered anything that they did want to go away. He had prepared an insanity spell, his usual utility spells and divinations, and for his summoning he favoured pseudoimmoths – the idea being to conjure six or seven of them, and then ordering them to begin a magical barrage of their own. He had also prepared a chained flesh to stone spell – a tactic he had never before employed. He held a plane shift in reserve in case a speedy retreat was necessary.

Aside from two squamous pulses and a finger of death in the event that they met the dragon, Nwm would be acting primarily in a support role and providing a variety of wards, augmentations, and healing spells. Shomei was split between offense, defense and general utility, and would be deploying extended stoneskins and doubly empowered endurances – further augmented by the ambient magic – and two effulgent epurations, to limit the power of the initial assault if it came. She had a host of minor buffs, numerous abjurations and several powerful conjurations prepared – power word stun, maze and gate. She boasted a horrid wilting which would be empowered through her rod and further magnified – to truly stellar proportions – by the enhanced magic of the plane.

"If you thought that the chimera’s attack was bad," she said to Mostin, "you should wait until you see this one – if I have a chance to get it off."

"What is an effulgent epuration?" Eadric asked.

"You will see," Shomei half-smiled.

Mostin turned greedily to the Infernalist. "Perhaps that spell is tradeable?"

Shomei shrugged. "Maybe. Hopefully, it will not come to blows in any case – one of my highest valences will be invested in Ortwin. His charm is what stands
between us and an unpleasant situation."

"And I assume that your gate would be to bring devils here?" Eadric sighed.

"Not necessarily," Shomei replied. "I am not above calling on other entities if required."

"And yours, Mostin?" The Paladin inquired.

"It's a surprise," Mostin said, displaying a demonic grin.

Shomei shot him a glance filled with trepidation, before summoning a succubus and dispatching it to Irknaan’s fortress.

In its hand, it held a cordial invitation to hunt, from Duke Rhalid and his consort, the Auran Princess, Iua.

The screen which protected the encampment was lifted, and the hilltop – with its collection of tents – suddenly became visible.

**

Irknaan inwardly scowled, although his face betrayed no expression of his irritation. He stared from atop his tallest tower, a hundred fathoms above the base of the rock pinnacle upon which his castle was built.

The edifice, which had appeared at some stage in the past few hours, was less than a mile from his gates. Needle-sharp, black, lusterless and seemingly unpierced by any door or window, it vied for dominion of the sky with his own fortress.

Irknaan briefly considered whether allowing the devils into his own court may have been wiser than forcing them to ‘make camp’ outside of the walls. The infernal tower was, predictably, impervious to divinations of all kinds. Irknaan brooded about what was transpiring inside: they had opened at least one gate, as testified by the presence of sharp-eyed spined devils, in tireless flight about the place. And spinugons were the least of his concerns.

The three Dukes – technically one Duke, one Count and a Nuncio – who were, presumably, still closeted within the tower somewhere, had not shown themselves since Irknaan’s denial of an audience. Their actions, whilst provocative, were not entirely unexpected, and a good deal of posturing could be expected on both sides before any real communication of intent or purpose occurred.

Duke Murmuur, Irknaan knew, was the senior member of the diabolic envoy, although in guile and subtlety both Furcas and Titivilus no doubt outshone him. Whilst Murmuur was a relatively straightforward opponent – albeit a fierce and capable warrior – the others, both vassals of Disparator, were intellectuals without peer amongst the middle-ranking aristocracy. The Narzugons – Knights of the Order of the Fly – were Murmuur’s retainers, and were potentially dangerous opponents, although Irknaan’s own bodyguards were likely a match for them.

In any case, Irknaan considered ironically, if the Lords of Dis or Malbolge really want this place, what can I do to stop them?
Abruptly, Lehurze appeared behind him. Her words were a gamble.

"Will you petition Rhyxali for aid? Or Graz'zt?"

The King’s face remained emotionless. "You presume a great deal for one who has been here less than a day."

"I sometimes favour speed and efficiency of purpose over diplomacy," the Succubus replied.

Irknaan gestured briefly, and Lehurze was held with a look of astonishment upon her face. Suddenly, pain more intense than she had experienced in an aeon overwhelmed her. Her skin began to peel off in strips from body and her spirit screamed, but her mouth – clenched and unmoving – was incapable of vocalizing.

Irknaan waited until she was almost dead before he released her. Lehurze collapsed upon the marble flags of the rooftop, ichor pouring from her ruptured form. She lashed out at him with a power word, but space rippled around him and the syllables evaporated impotently.

He held her again. "You'll have to do better than that," he said. "You're one of Soneillon's whores, aren't you?"

I was.

"And whom do you serve now?"

Myself.

"But you still remain in communication with your former mistress?"

Amongst others. I have many contacts.

"I think that it is time that you were honest with me," King Irknaan smiled thinly. "There are a number of demons whom I can sue for help."

But at what cost? Irknaan mused. His grip on Afqithan, although relatively solid, would rapidly become tenuous if powerful demons with unknown agendas began appearing. More powerful demons with unknown agendas, he considered, as he observed Lehurze.

"What do you suggest, Lehurze?" He released her again, and her form became limp. She coughed dark bile.

"An alliance, whilst it remains to our mutual benefit."

"If you seek to supplant Nhura, then I would warn you: she is deadly. Do you have designs on Afqithan?"

"Every succubus desires to be a queen, Irknaan."

He had read her accurately – perhaps more accurately than she had read herself. Arcanists who came to Afqithan always reacted the same way. Whatever their initial view of the little demiplane – a parochial backwater, inward-looking and insignificant – they rapidly became enamoured.
The exhilaration of spellcasting was too much to resist. The magical power which coursed through everything. The effortless joy of manifesting. The dark, brooding beauty of the place.

A feeling of enormous poignancy threatened to overcome Irknaan. He would rather die a thousand times than surrender his kingdom to any other.

"I do not trust you one iota," he said to her.

"That is wise," she replied.

So he laid a *geas* on her, and bound her to him, which suited Lehurze well enough. Passivity was her oldest friend, and her greatest ally.

*Mostin rarely, if ever, fills every spell slot in the morning, preferring the flexibility of a quick fifteen or thirty minutes to cram another spell if required. He is usually at around two-thirds capacity. That morning, he was fully primed, and had an intelligence of 40 (he was under the effect of a trebly empowered fox’s *cunning*, further empowered and maximized by the magical trait of the plane): save DCs against his spells were as high as he could get them. He had just reached 20th level, and was relishing the power that it afforded: if it came to blows, the general tactic was to deploy fortitude-targeting spells, negating the *evasion* ability of the umbral feys and simultaneously forcing their weakest save.*

**POST 8: PREPARATIONS**

*Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 12th May 2003, 02:34 AM*

*Quote:*

Basically, a) I’m trying to understand your DMing style [where you fall on the wing-it vs. plan-it axes], and b) I’m trying to get a sense of how much background “ephemera” you have created for your lower planes (just what you need for play, or play details plus some sketch environs/surrounding contextual details that you round out as the directions/possibilities open [much like the original Q1 worlds for example], or a lot of detailed prep before play such that you can instantly throw Lehurze and Soneillon into the picture without any winging-it-like issues because you’ve already created and detailed them, their schemes and relations to the Loquai and Graz’zt, etc., etc.).

Generally I only prepare 1 session ahead in *detailed* terms - wrt. "who" and "where." Things often fly off at tangents, and I’m forced to wing it.

There are character strokes which define the game, tho: For example, the initial Irknaan note says:

Irknaan: tension Rhyxali/Graz’zt (Soneillon?). Fierce pride/independence.
Relations - Nhura (mistrust, interdependence); Shupthul (domination); Crosod

Things tend to be detailed in terms of relationships: Graz'zt to Ainhorr; Tramst to Oronthon; Oronthon to Eadric etc. I guess when you have a fair conception of the way that characters are likely to interact, then the plot direction kind of 'looks after itself,' so to speak.

Timing is another thing - I generally make sure that if the players are about to make a big decision which changes the whole direction of the campaign (have a war, go to Afqithan etc.), then it falls at the end of a gaming session, giving me time to pull the details together and fill in the gaps before the next time we sit down. It doesn't always work, and I end up winging it anyway - but as long as the characters of the npcs are solid in my mind, I can usually maintain consistency.

Quote:
A further difference is that the at least some of the worlds in Sep's version are demiplanes (Afqithan is explicitly named as such), whereas the worlds of Q1 were alternate Prime Material Planes. Perhaps in Wyre's planar cosmology other alternate PMPs don't exist?

I'm reluctant to give any definitive answer to that question.

Quote:
It sounds like Afqithan has definite boundaries which are self-reflexive; I wonder if the inhabitants don't know that their world is so small and has such explicit boundaries and edges?

That was my conception also - that it is very definitely a non-Newtonian place, where space is stretched and reticulated. Any place in Afqithan is always at the centre, and the centre is always 1500 miles away from the boundaries.

POST 9: MOSTIN DISCOVERS TIME STOP

Posted by: Sepulchrev II at ENWorld on 27th May 2003, 07:44 PM

Thanks for the many kind words, everyone. It's always much appreciated 😊

Quote:
I think it is time for an update.

I think you're right.

This post demonstrates how obscenely overpowered time stop is when it is cast in Afqithan, and why I will never again allow its effects to stack with haste; how things like 'EL26' and 'CR22' in fact mean diddly-squat; and how, what the DM thinks are overwhelming numbers - designed to force compliance or retreat from the players - are, in fact, nothing more than a minor annoyance.
The title of this update is therefore devoted to not just the *theoretical* possibilities that a spell offers - which had been long known - but to actually putting it into practice for the first time.

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**Mostin Discovers Time Stop**

Crosod’s immense pinions powered him forward at unnatural speed, and his sinuous body – which seemed to devour all light and belch it forth again as a cloying darkness – shivered with potency as space parted around him. Within his ebon form his eyes were lidless voids, filled with age, and wisdom, and infinite malice. Clinging to his foreleg, perched above his razor-sharp talons and exalting in the wind as it rushed over her was Threxu, the Wasted Nymph with whom, at times, the Dragon consorted. She was a lithe, supple shadow, whose delicate and beautiful form seemed incapable of performing the acts for which she had justly acquired her terrible reputation.

Below them, unaware of the passenger that he carried, wood-gnomes and sprites of every kind cowered, fearing that the slightest breath or movement would draw the Dragon to them. Crosod smelled them but had no interest in them – they offered little in the way of nourishment, and there was no time for sport.

Threxu, however, was thirsty. She glanced greedily at the forest below her.

"Here!" She yelled at Crosod, and pointed. The Wyrm banked abruptly, his wings emitting a thunderous crack which shook the treetops, before descending effortlessly to the forest floor and crushing a tump which housed a dozen grigs and pixies.

Threxu leapt from his leg and sank to the ground, pressing her lips to the soft grass. She drank voraciously, and rapidly – although only temporarily – she satisfied her thirst.

As the pair took to the sky again and made their way towards Irknaan’s fortress at the behest of their liege, the feys in the woods below wailed and cursed. Dryads wept in desperation, in the sure knowledge that, within a day, they, like their trees, and every other green thing within the blighted swathe that Threxu had left, would be dead.

**

The unknown sidhe had returned, it appeared.

Irknaan had been unable to capture their messenger and interrogate her – a *summoned* succubus – before she vanished back to her Abyssal abode. His attempts to *scry* the group had been unsuccessful, and *clairvoyance* of the locale that they described revealed only a collection of tents, with no inhabitants or owners. Nearby, one of Lorochtoh’s heads sat upon a pike.

They were warded, the King knew. Possibly even *mind blanked* – and that would prove awkward. His thoughts raced. Evidence of powerful spells had been left at
the site where the corpses of the nightmares had been found, and the loss of four steeds had seemed to do little to diminish their effectiveness.

They were not Loquai, but they had followed the chimera to Shadow. They had chosen a particularly isolated locale, in a region unclaimed by any noble and with few inhabitants. One of them at least possessed a magical ability which rivalled or even outstripped his own – the pursuing scouts that he had sent after them after their initial appearance had heard sonic detonations of great power. And the succubi that Lorochtou had summoned to deal with them had been dispatched with distressing ease – their charms apparently ineffective. And the kelvezu – where did it fit into the scheme of things? A retainer? He reluctantly approached Nhura, whose knowledge and wisdom regarding many things was deeper than his.

"Have you heard of Duke Rhalid?" He asked.

"No," she replied.

"An Auran Princess named Iua?"

She scowled. "The name is distantly familiar," she replied.

"Take one of the succubi. Go first to Faerie, and make inquiries of this Duke. Spend no more than an hour there. Go then to the Plane of Air. Find out what you can regarding Iua. Return as speedily as you can."

She squinted, and nodded curtly.

After the departure of the Lillend – if that was, in fact, something which Nhura could still be called – Irknaan called Shupthul to him and instructed his Captain carefully. Somewhat later, Shupthul left the fortress in the company of the succubus Iemazai – his compacted mistress, and one of the wilier members of Irknaan’s court. They were accompanied by a dozen Loquai mounted on tenebrous griffons; the witch Koilimilou and her called and bound servitors – currently a trio of Jariliths – as well as six quicklings of particularly evil aspect, and thirty hell-hounds.

Koilimilou – cantankerous and eccentric – was one that Irknaan seldom approached, as the witch was dangerous and preferred her own company, or that of demons, to that of the Loquai. Under threat of flensing however, she acquiesced to Irknaan’s demands, and stirred herself from her reveries. She possessed a powerful item which, amongst other things, would expedite the passage of the hunting party. In the past, Irknaan had used it to wage war on his rivals – and only Koilimilou could unlock its secrets.

Shupthul would make preliminary contact with the group of interlopers, and assess their strengths and weaknesses – inviting them to the castle, if he deemed it appropriate. Leharze would attempt to reopen negotiations with the devils who were now entrenched nearby – they had yet to declare their purpose. In the meantime, Irknaan had ordered several of his most powerful vassals to attend him: the Wyrm, the nymph Threxu, King Samodoquol with eighty knights, and Duke Ytryn with thirty more.

After deliberating, Irknaan had yielded to his desire for demonic assistance, but reluctant to directly embroil either Graz’zt or Rhyxali had, at the suggestion of Leharze, scried Soneillon in her abysm of pain and depravity.
"She is there," Lehurze assured him, "and she knows you are watching."

Irknaan issued a *sending*. The enigmatic demoness did not reply.

Irknaan brooded. Soneillon was less dangerous than either of his patrons, but dealing with her still required considerable caution and a clear head. Although he trusted no-one – be they ally, subject, thrall or open enemy – the King had millennia of experience in dealing with some of the most devious and manipulative entities in creation.

He inwardly hoped that it would be enough. Any sign of weakness would be exploited by one or more of his own servants or allies.

**

"Should we send another one?" Ortwin asked irritably, an hour after the succubus had been *summoned* and dispatched to Irknaan's fortress. "There's still no reply."

He stood tensely, arms folded, whilst the others sat nearby upon ecalypses and nightmares which champed restlessly.

"He is no doubt machinating," Mostin replied.

"In which case," Nwm suggested, "we probably shouldn't give him too long. In case he prepares too well."

More time passed. Nwm's thoughts reached out in an attempt to discover perturbations in the Green nearby, but to no affect.

When they arrived, it was suddenly and without warning. They manifested at the base of the hillock where the party had set their tents, outside of the dimensionally anchored area. Shadowstuff swirled around them, gushing from the aperture through which they came, before sinking slowly into the ground. Ortwin immediately fell into character, resisting the urge to gape, and regretting that he did not have time to quaff his *philtre of glibness* without drawing attention to himself.

The Loquai were tall, elegant figures, their individual features rendered vague by the umbral energies which had suffused them. They appeared as dark shades, clad in darker armour and bearing lances, bows and long swords; they sat upon black-winged monstrosities that would have been griffons, had they been possessed of more real matter and less shadowstuff and taint. Tiny motes of sooty darkness darted about the riders: fiendish umbral quicklings, with only pinprick red eyes to lend them semblance of shape and form. Hunting demons – Jariliths – prowled amongst them, their maws full of sharp teeth. Hell-hounds bayed around them.

Their leader wore a helm and breastplate of jet, although the captured twilight hinted at other shades hidden within. Upon closer observation, his face – beautiful even for a sidhe – seemed serene; delicate features revealed in a thousand shades of insubstantial grey. In his left hand he carried a bow of impossible lightness, a slender dart nocked easily between his long fingers.

"I am Shupthul," he said in a soft voice. The words resonated, and seemed to hang in the air like smoke after he had spoken. Behind him, an invisible sensor
hung – Irknaan was doubtless watching.

"I am Rhalid," Ortwin replied, nodding politely. His eyes darted quickly over those others present. A succubus – currently without wings, yet unmistakably demonic – although not a threat, given their mind blanked state. Twelve knights, akin to Shupthul but lacking, Ortwin suspected, the magical gravity of their leader – whether in spells or enchanted items. And then he saw her.

Beautifulohgodssheissobeautifulihaventeverseen…don 't look at her...

Shades seemed to flash around her, but in her face was colour. Koilimilou was untouched by the shadowstuff which invaded Afqithan, although she bore more than a hint of the demonic.

Ortwin tore his eyes away from her, after they had rested the merest fraction of a second too long. She stared impassively back at him.

"I am hunting," Ortwin continued in a matter-of-fact way, his heart pounding silently. "I assume your master received my message? Would he care to join us?"

"It is customary to pay one's respects to a lord, before one engages in a hunt on his land," Shupthul said humorlessly.

"For which, I apologize," Ortwin said, with what seemed like complete sincerity. "I suspect we became over-excited, and neglected to observe the customary niceties. Please convey my deep regret for any offense I might have caused." The Bard removed his diamond circlet, and casually offered it to Shupthul. "A token of good will to your King," he said openly.

Under his hood, Mostin raised an eyebrow.

Shupthul said nothing, but gestured – causing Shomei to immediately ready a spell in preparation. Instead, on his cue, one of the quicklings darted forwards to snatch the coronet, and delivered it to Shupthul’s hand within the space of a heartbeat.

Abruptly, the Captain switched into another language – full of grating sound and harsh syllables – and addressed Mostin. "What is your purpose?"

"That is no concern of yours," Mostin replied, somewhat shocked at hearing the Abyssal Tongue, but maintaining his composure.

Ortwin swallowed. This was not supposed to happen.

"Who is your master?" Shupthul continued.

"That..." Mostin began.

But Ortwin quickly realized that if he let this line of inquiry continue, then Mostin would betray them – although dishonest enough in his own mean way, the Alienist was not practiced in the art of subterfuge.

"SILENCE!" Ortwin screamed at Mostin, "how dare you speak? My apologies, Shupthul," he continued in Sylvan, seeming to master himself, "but this demon is compacted to me. He may speak only with my approval, and currently I do not grant it."
Shupthul sat silently. Ortwin hoped that the Captain was already developing a set of complex misconceptions.

"Allow me to introduce the rest of my companions," Ortwin continued nonchalantly, attempting to divert attention before more questions were asked about Mostin. "My consort, Iua; the witch, Aotheen," the Bard waved a dismissive hand towards Shomei; "my counsellor, Jhondrosokaur," at which Nwm nodded gravely; "Munhulmuliolm the Dour," Ortwin remembered the name of an awakened oak tree that he had once encountered and randomly bestowed it upon Eadric; "and the demon Erizren. We are here to hunt, and although our arrival was not intentional, the quarry here present some interesting challenges."

"Afgithan," it was the female sidhe who spoke, the name rolling from her tongue and echoing in Ortwin’s mind. Aaf-kee-thaan. "This place is called Afgithan. Tell me, Duke Rhalid, does it strike you as an unusual coincidence – given your accidental arrival here – that of all the places that you might have appeared in this wide realm, by lucky happenstance your gate opened in the airs above King Irknaan’s fastness?" The words duke and accidental bore the slightest hint of irony.

"If it were coincidence," Ortwin quickly dissembled, "then I would call it lucky." His charm was effortless. "But our means of transportation is unconventional – we are drawn inexorably to existing portals and loci of power, siphoning a fraction of their energy in order to expedite translation. I can only assume that such a focus exists within your King’s walls?" It was a bold riposte, which elicited another question.

"Indeed? I would be fascinated to inspect such a device, if it exists. Will you show it to me?"

"I regret that the power exists within Aotheen herself. It is a unique ability, the secret of which is, unfortunately, lost to posterity. She is the last of her kin." Ortwin’s voice remained calm, with subtle overtones of condescension, as though he were patiently explaining a self-evident fact to an inquisitive child.

Inwardly, Eadric grimaced. They had just made contact with the Loquai, and already Ortwin had sown a convoluted web of lies which could only get worse as time went on. Behind his visor, the Paladin scanned the group of umbral feys and demons, looking for subtle cues and pointers to their motivation with regard to the interlopers.

The reek of taint which hung over them all was palpable. Shupthul was reticent and suspicious: the captain was a warrior who, no doubt, excelled in battle but – for a sidhe, at least – was relatively unpracticed in gauging the purposes of others. The woman was a different matter altogether, Eadric mused, and was opaque at best – although her inquiry regarding their imaginary means of transportation was couched in terms which could not disguise a tell-tale preoccupation with matters arcane. The succubus was silent and utterly inscrutable, and Eadric wondered what her role was – advisor, consort, spy, compactee – she could be any or all of those things. Eadric suspected that she was as focussed on penetrating their own motives as he was hers.

Shupthul spoke again, the merest hint of malice in his voice. "King Irknaan has issued instructions that you should attend him forthwith. We have been sent to escort you to his presence."

Sh*t, Ortwin thought. He smiled graciously. "I regret that, at present, such a visit
will be impossible, as today, I hunt. Perhaps in a day or two. My proposition stands, however: King Irknaan is most welcome to join us."

"You misunderstand," Shupthul said menacingly. "Afqithan’s King requires your presence. Your hunt must wait."

"I..." The Bard began, but never finished.

Because Mostin, whether in a fit of paranoia, or anticipating an inevitable coming to blows, acted unilaterally, and made a decision which would change the way that the travellers related with the inhabitants of Afqithan. To the others, it also demonstrated the power that an arcanist of Mostin’s stature could wield in Faerie or any of its orbiting demiplanes. He spat a number of syllables out, prompting bows to be drawn or shot, and eliciting a desperate but ineffectual gesture in response from Koilimilou.

**

Ortwin experienced a strange sensation which lasted less than a fraction of a second – the merest flash in his mind. Shomei immediately recognized it for what it was – a temporal discontinuity in their vicinity. After it had passed, there was a colossal discharge of magical energy, and the tapestry of reality threatened to rupture completely before it rewove itself. Echoes of Sonics hung in the air.

The three Jariliths, Shupthul, the Succubus and twenty-six of the thirty Hell-hounds had vanished: the Captain’s empty armour and arms collapsed to the ground in a noisy rattle. Eleven of the Loquai had been petrified, along with six of their griffon mounts – some frozen with grotesque expressions of terror upon their faces. One other sidhe was dead from fear, and all but one of the remaining steeds had likewise been slain by a phantasmal killer. Each of the umbral quicklings had been reduced to a pulp by sonic attacks. The female sidhe sat upon a stone griffon with a vacant expression on her face.*

The last griffon attempted to flee with its petrified rider, along with the four hell-hounds. Mostin turned them into flounders, which flapped impotently in the air before suffocating.

Eadric gaped, a mixed expression of awe and horror on his face. Shomei looked mildly irritated and cast a dimensional anchor on Koilimilou. "Dammit, Mostin, was that really necessary? Ortwin can you restrain her? She might regain her senses at any moment."

The Bard and Iua both dashed forwards to bind and gag Koilimilou – the single remaining member of Shupthul’s party.

The Alienist’s head swam, as the full impact of his actions dawned on him. He glimpsed a vision of his future self – effortlessly commanding that kind of power had a definite appeal. To the arcanist, Afqithan was like a heady wine, and Mostin had just tasted it for the first time.

Nwm was staggered. "Mostin, you just killed the ambassador. And his whole embassy, in fact."

"They would have attacked us," Mostin replied simply.
"You don’t know that," Ortwin grumbled, expertly tying Koilimilou’s hands behind her back, and pushing one of his gloves into her mouth. "Gods, Mostin. I concoct an elaborate ruse, and you go and petrify everyone."

Mostin sighed. "As the alternative was to submit to Shupthul’s demands to accompany him to visit Irknaan, I fail to see what the problem is. Unless you would rather have been dragged off to the Loquai stronghold, to take our chances there. I have merely tipped the scales in our favour somewhat."

"Eadric?" Ortwin asked desperately.

The Paladin sighed. Unexpectedly, he came to the Alienist’s defense. "Whilst I don’t necessarily agree with Mostin’s methods, I have to admit that his reasoning is sound. It would have come to violence – either here or later. They were jealous of our power and lustful of it. They bore only malice towards us, and the desire to exploit us for their own ends. And the stench of taint and corruption was almost overwhelming."

"Bah!" Nwm snorted. "This is absurd. I mean, look at us. You’re here because of some vendetta you’ve got with Graz’zt..."

Mostin winced as the name was spoken.

"Ortwin just thinks it’s a big game," Nwm continued, "and this crazy bastard," he pointed at Mostin, whose kelvezu features seemed mildly offended at the insult, "wants to demonstrate to himself how dangerous he’s become. As if we didn’t know already."

"We are not in some nice sylvan glade in Nizkur," Mostin said irritably. "Wake up! This is a bad place, Nwm. Many of the inhabitants are bad. You are letting your sympathies for feys dictate how you think we should act – and the Loquai are feys in name only. They are no less wicked, vile and irredeemable than Rurunoth, Feezuu or any one of a host of others we have dealt with."

"And don’t moralize with me you hypocritical sh*t," Nwm hissed. "As far as irredeemable goes, might I remind you why we are here – ostensibly, at any rate. Does anyone recall Nehael? And Ed, if you’re going to judge people on how much lust for power they possess, at least be consistent about it and start with Mostin."

Eadric groaned. "The question again now is ‘what next?’ I hope someone has some ideas, because I’m fast running out."

"Well, it would seem that any prospects of subtlety have been complicated by Mostin," Nwm squinted. "Are we waging war, now?"

"Frankly," Eadric said, turning to the Bard, "I find open conflict less complex than your schemes, Ortwin. What do you suggest?"

Ortwin grinned despite himself. "We should offer an apology to Irknaan for the ‘minor misunderstanding.’ We should send our regards to him, and hope that this incident does not provoke a ‘diplomatic impasse.’ Obviously, we hope that he will still join us in hunting."

Eadric opened his mouth in disbelief.

"I’m serious," Ortwin continued, rapidly recovering his braggadocio after the incident. "It will demonstrate the contemptuous ease with which we can deal with
"Irknaan’s henchmen."

"He will throw everything that he’s got at us," Eadric said.

"Maybe," Shomei replied. "But you are assuming that he will want to remove us. He is not motivated by some ‘honourable’ desire to avenge his retainers, nor is he saddened by their loss – except insofar as it undermines his own power. If he can see a way to harness us, it might be preferable to eliminating us – from his perspective." She retrieved her dimensional shackles from within her pack.

"Good idea," Mostin said, as Shomei affixed the chains around Koilimilou’s wrists and ankles.

"I don’t know why you didn’t just kill her with the others," Shomei grumbled. "Are you becoming sentimental for a pretty face in your old age, Mostin?"

The Alienist sniffed. "She is not one of the Loquai, but a Cambion Sidhe. I thought that she might provide an interesting perspective on things if questioned."

"So you rendered her insane?"

"That is remediable."

"Not without cost," Shomei sighed. "Will you meet it?"

Mostin scowled. "I suppose I’ll have to." His eyes scanned their captive.

"You’re not very subtle," Ortwin jibed.

"I’m looking for magic, you dunce," Mostin snapped. He removed Koilimilou’s belt pouch, and unclasped a pendant from around her neck which bore a single, trapezoidal stone of greyish colour. In the pouch was a small box, perhaps three inches on a side, engraved with indecipherable glyphs.

_Hmmm._ Mostin thought.

Koilimilou’s eyes suddenly gained a fresh clarity, and she struggled vainly in her shackles and tried to bite Mostin, before lapsing into a stupor again.

"An all-too brief moment of lucidity," Nwm remarked drily.

Ortwin picked up his diamond coronet, blew dust – part of the desiccated remains of Shupthul – from the circlet, and set it jauntily on his head again. "Let’s send another message to Irknaan, and then go hunting."

Eadric screwed up his face, and wondered if Afqithan’s taint was having a detrimental effect on certain of his friends.

**

In her sanctum of unlight, nestled deep within Throile, Soneillon meditated briefly before conjuring an obsidian thought-span of profound delicacy, and passing into the region of dreams. The name of _Shomei_ – revealed by the captured Erinyes – was still fresh in her mind. Further inquiries across several worlds had also yielded the names _Titivilus_ and _Ahma_ – amongst others – in association with the
Infernalist: an interesting coincidence as, according to her spies, the Infernal Duke was currently present in Afqithan. Apparently the Breath of Oronthon kept acquaintances which were unusual for a holy warrior.

Eadric of Deorham, the Ahma. Who had already indirectly aided Soneillon in her struggle with Graz’zt – her spies had indicated that it was he who was responsible for the removal of at least two balors. He was the sworn enemy of her greatest enemy. Certainly a potential friend – at least by demonic standards. Soneillon idly wondered how he could be used to her advantage.

*Mostin’s attack consisted of a time stop, empowered and maximized by the magical trait of the plane to 6 rounds of virtual time, during which he cast haste, a chained Flesh to stone, a chained phantasmal killer, two banishments directed at the demons and hell-hounds, disintegrations targeting Shupthul and the Succubus Iemazai, an insanity on Koilimilou, and various sonics. There were multiple redundancies in the spells – some of the Loquai were struck by both the flesh to stone and phantasmal killer. Shupthul avoided petrification but was disintegrated. Koilimilou succumbed to insanity. The save DCs were 25+ spell level because of Mostin’s augmented Intelligence, and even with the chained spells, most of the targets needed to roll 20s. Koilimilou initially attempted to counterspell the time stop with a greater dispelling she had readied, but failed.

POST 10:

Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 10th June 2003, 03:27 PM

Quote:
Sepulchrave,

How far behind is the story hour from what the party is currently up to?

This is February/March of this year - December and January were pretty ‘dead’ as far as the game went. I was working my @ss off, and adjusting to a new schedule.

Quote:
And (in real time) has Nehael been rescued yet? Is it close?

It's a secret 😜

Quote:
A little while ago, you mentioned that you didn't want to elaborate upon/reveal too much about the whole idea of the Q1 planes being demiplanes in Wyre vs. alternate Prime Material Planes in Q1. So, my question is, do some of the sects within or outside of Oronthonian orthodoxy address this query?
I'm uncomfortable with the distinction of 'alternate prime' vs 'demiplane' as I think its kind of artificial. From the Orthonthonian perspective, there is only one 'World of Men', together with Heaven, Hell, the Abyss, and a myriad of 'limbos' - of which Afqithan would be considered one. This is Orthodox dogma, but is not necessarily the view of Oronthon himself - or his celestials. The ambiguity is intentional, as various belief paradigms view the cosmos differently, and I'm reluctant to categorize any of them as being 'correct'.

Quote:
From what you've revealed, it would seem quite plausible for some sects (perhaps very conservative Heterodox sects, if such exist) to espouse a Zelanzy/Amber-like Wyre-centric view of creation, and for other such sects to counter these claims (perhaps the Transaxiomatic philosophy, the Irrenite Heresy, and/or the Urgic Mystics?). Basically, I'm asking if Oronthonism addresses the uniqueness of life/creation, and how the ramifications of that truth (Truth?) are applied within game/rules setting in which other gods, planes, demons, and non-divine philosophies/forces can power divine spells, planar energies, etc. (Does that make sense?).

Most of the mystical sects would prefer not to categorize the Truth at all - such is the inclination of mystics generally. Both Urgic Mysticism and the Transaxiomatic philosophy can be viewed as necessary precursors to saizhan - if you were to take an 'historical' view of the way that religion has developed in Wyre, and cosmogonic speculation is not something that saizhan favours precisely because it seeks to categorize the Truth in black-and-white terms. If you were to ask a saizhan adept about the origins of the universe, and the existence of other deities, he would simply say that you are asking the wrong questions.

On the other hand, Orthodox tradition has a very linear conception of reality: cosmogenesis -> the world unfolds according to Oronthon's design -> eschatological climax. It does not deny the existence of other deities - or at least powerful beings which have worshippers, grant spells etc. - but does not grant them the 'absolute' status which it affords Oronthon. As Oronthon is responsible for the creation and maintenance of reality, any other entities must have been created by him - there is no 'self-arising' or 'independence' of Oronthon's will. They are ghosts and phantoms which must be overcome by the devout. Ultimately, the World of Men is a testing ground, where those deserving of Oronthon's grace are wheedled out from the others.

POST 11: THE BIG FIGHT - PART 1

Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 15th June 2003, 07:15 PM

It may be quite a while before I update again. Note the imaginative title...

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The Big Fight: Part 1

Shomei had elected to feeblemind the incoherent Koilimilou, in the event that one
of her episodes of clarity returned: a glove stuffed into her mouth and a set of *dimensional shackles* might be proof against vocalized spells and interplanar escape, but did nothing to restrain the sidhe-cambion from using her arsenal of other powers and abilities.

Whilst watching approvingly, Ortwin idly considered where this creature stood in the grand cosmic scheme. The sidhe were capable of reaching near-godlike power. According to Nwm, in the past, wars had routinely been fought between feys – led by the sidhe and their kin – and various pantheons of minor nature deities with their attendant spirits. This one was less than a goddess, but the gap between her and the mortal race might be larger than that between her and divinity. Feys were strange creatures, seemingly capable of infinitely more variety of manifestation than men. Just so much more interesting, really, Ortwin thought.

His expression changed to one of disappointment when he considered what she had been reduced to. Ortwin wondered what her name was, how she ate, slept, sang, danced, laughed and fornicated. He wondered what her temperament was like – the apathy of the sidhe would be offset by a powerful demonic desire for satiation and experience. Probably a refined sense of the macabre. Intense eroticism. Had she resisted or rejected the umbral taint, or succumbed only to certain aspects of it?

For a perverse instant, Ortwin felt more of a connection with the Cambion than he did with anyone else present.

The party briefly discussed the implications of the sensor which had observed Mostin’s annihilation of Shupthul’s party – exactly what it would have witnessed before it vanished, and what the observer could have inferred from those that he could not directly see. As a precautionary measure, Shomei cast a *nondetection* upon Koilimilou – in the event that Irknaan attempted to later target her with another *scrying*. *A mind blank* would have been preferable, but neither the Infernalist nor Mostin were capable of casting the spell again that day, and Shomei was loath to draw on her bracelet’s power until she had further knowledge of Irknaan’s abilities.

After securing the most valuable items from the vanquished Loquai – including Shupthul’s armour and bow – Koilimilou was trussed across Mostin’s saddle. The delay in action – close to half an hour – would prove decisive.

**

Irknaan – still in a state of concealed shock at the obliteration of his envoy – paced within his dark chambers, waiting for Nhura to return with whatever information she had gleaned about Rhalid and his party.

The King had briefly contemplated an immediate retaliatory demonic assault with those forces still available to him, but quickly dismissed the possibility. Unsupported succubi would be no match for the interlopers if they were *mind blanked*, and he had no doubt that they would make short work of Nhura’s glabrezu cohorts – assuming that they chose to obey Irknaan at all. Their loyalty to him was, at best, questionable.

King Irknaan was, however, immensely powerful. If need drove him, and he had time to act, he could mobilize an impressive group of allies. When another *summoned* demon brought him an apologetic message regretting the
misunderstanding, and hoping that the King could join Rhalid's party for a future hunt, Irknaan squinted. If they meant him serious harm, surely they would have pressed on and attacked him in his fortress? What was their agenda? Obviously, they were overconfident, or stupid, or both. Did they think he was toothless? Irknaan snorted, and issued seven sendings in quick succession.

To King Samodoquol, Duke Ytryn and the Wyrm Crosod, he gave instructions not to fly to his demesne, but instead to pursue the rogue party of sidhe. Compacted demons, daemons, and demodands in the service of the other Loquai nobility were also to be sent to Irknaan's fortress immediately. He recalled Lehurze from her diplomatic efforts with the Devils ensconced only a mile away. He instructed Nhura in straightforward terms to resolve her inquiries in Faerie as hastily as possible: Be quick. We hunt. He alerted Jetheeg – a lamia Sorceress of no mean ability – to the presence of the rival group and instructed her to track them down. He dispatched the ten succubi who remained to locate them, and sent dozens of umbral quicklings in pursuit – they were not to engage the enemy, but to bring back news if they were located. The demons were to coordinate their efforts and stay in contact every ten minutes. His last sending was directed towards Duke Murmuur and the Devils, asking if they would care to join Irknaan in a hunt in one hour.

The King descended into his summoning room, intent on calling yet more demons to aid him. It was utterly black within, and the odour of musty tomes and incense hung in the claustrophobic air. Irknaan lit a single tall taper which emitted a greyish radiance, and purposefully strode to retrieve a book of forbidden names from a gloomy alcove. Suddenly, he was aware of another presence within the chamber. It stretched and challenged his perception of the real, and evoked a mixed feeling of terror and awe: a consciousness that was dark, sinister, and worshipful. Soneillon, he thought. She was a void, who promised either power or annihilation.

"It would appear that my wards did not prohibit your entry," he said without emotion.

"Your insouciance is tedious, Irknaan," the Demoness responded, "and your comprehension of the current situation is feeble and ill-informed. Wheels turn, and you have no conception of them."

"Perhaps you would care to elucidate," the King replied laconically. "Who are these newcomers, and why are there Devils in my realm?"

"That information has a price." She stepped forwards, and the intangibility which surrounded her evaporated. Her assumed form was supple, and her skin was possessed of a dusky, silken quality.

"And what would that be?"

"Throw in your lot wholesale with Rhyxali. I can promise you aid and protection from Graz'zt in your efforts. Instruct your forces to follow my lead and apprehend the sidhe who threaten you, then turn them over to me."

Irknaan sneered. "You ask a great deal for a few tidbits of gossip. Since when did Soneillon act as a broker for Rhyxali? And what interest does this group hold for you?"

"They may be useful to me."
"Then deal with them yourself, if it is not beyond you!" Irknaan snapped. "I have no interest in your wider schemes: do not embroil me in them."

Soneillon smiled darkly. "It was you who contacted me, Irknaan. What did you expect? An exchange which cost you nothing?"

"Ten thousand souls is my offer."

The Demoness threw back her head and laughed – a disturbingly genuine and heartfelt display of mirth. "That is a trifling, Loquai, which I have no use for. Listen to me: Afqithan is less secure than you might think. You juggle two Abyssal magnates as your sponsors. Your subjects are recalcitrant and imperfectly subdued. And if Graz’zt discovers your duplicity, then you will find that the gate to Zelatar is no longer the boon that it has proven to be in the past."

"My grip is tight enough. And do not think to threaten me with passing news to Graz’zt – he despises you more than he mistrusts me. What does he care if, out of the five hundred worlds he lays claim to, the King of Afqithan entertains fiends who are not his own slaves? If you were to betray me to him, then I would willingly abase myself before him, for the chance to bring him your head on a spit. My offer stands – your aid would be welcomed, but only a fool would let this group fall into your hands without knowing more."

"I have no designs on your dismal little realm, Irknaan," Soneillon was becoming impatient, "but I recognize your potential as an ally. There is much that I can teach you. With my aid you could quickly beat down any resistance that remains to your regime. I can ensure the permanent destruction of the gate to Azzagrat. Even if Graz’zt were to translate here himself with his most powerful servants – which he would not – he would be hard pressed to assail you."

"I think you underestimate Ainhorr and his ilk."

Soneillon gave a wry smile. "And I think you are somewhat behind in events. Ainhorr’s sword is shivered. Choeth, Djorm, Uruum and Rurunoth are no more. Only Irzho remains – and he is hiding. Both from his peers’ assassins and, I suspect, from Graz’zt himself."

"This was not known to me."

"They are not facts about which Graz’zt encourages speculation. His position is the most insecure that it has been since his return. His efforts at consolidation have received a serious setback – and you must know that you were not the only one of his thralls to seek new patronage in his absence." Her last words hung in the air temptingly – it was not a fact that Irknaan had previously considered. The Loquai were insular, at best.

Sensing doubt, Soneillon pressed on. "I can contrive a spell which would alert you to any incursions into your realm, Irknaan. No gate could open, no translation could occur into Afqithan without your knowledge. There could be no quiet assembly of demons poised to exact revenge on you. And as to your compactees..."

Irknaan feigned disinterest.

"...I can ensure servants who are more powerful and more versatile than succubi – although I have enough of those to spare as well."
"I have no interest in Rhyxali’s shades," Irknaan answered, "if you are indeed acting as a go-between."

"I am not. But she and I are on favourable terms – our spheres of interest do not overlap. Not shadow demons. I have descended into the deepest abysm, Irknaan. There are things in the uncharted regions, whose names are long forgotten. They would be yours in blood and spirit. Even a balor would pause and take thought before it confronted one – or would shrink from it in fear."

Irknaan wavered.

"And you may keep Lehurze," Soneillon added. "She is mine to give."

The King scowled. From his perspective, at least, the succubus was already his. Still, a formal compact could do no harm.

Soneillon stepped forwards, and her very being seemed to flicker on the edge of consciousness, a dark vision, the existence of which Irknaan half doubted. "Irknaan, if Graz’zt falls, his wealth will be free to all comers. Ainhorr cannot hold Azzagrat, and neither can Kostchtchie."

"Now you lie, even if you did not before."

"No." Soneillon was emphatic. "I have perceived the burgeoning tendril of possibility. It must not be allowed to perish."

"I have no faith in your auguries," Irknaan said derisively. "Nonetheless, your argument deserves consideration. What aid would you give me? I do not speak of temporary allies. They must be compacted, and they must be mine."

"That is negotiable," Soneillon smiled, content that she had won a victory. "But it will be enough. First, we must secure the weapon. Command your minions to help me restrain the sidhe who currently vex you, and I will speak with them."

"They have knowledge of this weapon?"

"They are the weapon. They are not what they appear to be."

The King’s eyes narrowed. That much, he had already guessed. But now he also knew that Soneillon feared to deal with them alone – that they were very dangerous – and that Graz’zt had not sent them to deal with him. Inwardly, he breathed a sigh of relief.

"Give me a sign of your commitment," Irknaan said, "and I will consider your proposal."

Before she left him, the Demoness gave Irknaan a single name – a token of her good will, she claimed, and the first of many to follow. He conjured the creature to whom it belonged, and when the King ascended from his sanctum into his throne room, it accompanied him. Lehurze and an assortment of other monsters waited for him.

The Succubus saw what towered behind Irknaan and smiled quietly: she knew that Soneillon had come and gone. Nhura’s glabrezu cohorts were filled with doubt.
"Ready the hounds," Irknaan commanded.

**

The armour which Eadric wore was marvelously light – constructed of a Fae metal of unknown type. It barely inhibited his movement, and its smooth contours – at first glance a seamless, absorptive sable – were, in fact, graven with exquisite cunning and subtlety. When the dim light caught it, shades of indigo and vermilion almost appeared, as if his mind wanted to perceive them, but his eyes would not cooperate. The casque which complemented the breastplate bore a crest which resembled some primordial bird, and a half-visor, covering the eyes and upper face, was formed by the creature’s cradled wings.

Ortwin, flying next to the Paladin, eyed the armour jealously.

"You can have it, if you want," Eadric said openly.

"It is too restrictive," Ortwin grumbled.

"Not at all," Eadric replied.

"For me it would be too restrictive," Ortwin sighed. The Bard fell back and hovered alongside Nwm, who sat awkwardly upon his ecalypse – the umbral steed moved with a disconcertingly smooth gait through the air.

"Haven’t you found anything yet?" Ortwin asked excitedly.

"No."

"There must be something out there."

"I’m sure there probably is," Nwm said irritably. "Can’t you be patient for once?"

"No," Ortwin replied. "Aren’t there more chimerae? Manticores, maybe?"

"If you think that a single Redcap is worthy of your attention, then I can direct you to it. We are in a sparsely populated area. Frankly, Ortwin, I find your enthusiasm for hunting sentients – of whatever persuasion – rather distasteful. I have no particular moral compunctions, and I appreciate the need for the ruse to appear genuine, but do you really have to enjoy it quite so much?"

"Hunting is an agreeable pastime," the Bard retorted.

"Hunting deer is an agreeable pastime, Ortwin. Hunting umbral fiendish whatever-they-ares is tricky and – as we have already discovered – potentially lethal."

"Pah! This time, we’re prepared. I’ve got more wards on me than I can count. And...."

Nwm closed his ears to the Bard’s ramblings and focussed on his torc again, his perception stretching outwards, and sifting through the vast quantities of information which flooded his consciousness. Ten minutes passed. The Druid gave a quizzical look.

"...despite the fact that she was naked," Ortwin concluded. "What do you think,
"I think you did the right thing," Nwm replied. "By the way, there is a dragon around eight miles behind us. It is following us. It has probably caught our scent. It is heavily tainted – I suspect it is the wyrm that Nufrut mentioned."

"Crosod," Mostin said. "Is he closing?"

"Oh, yes. He will reach us," Nwm made a quick calculation, and his jaw dropped, "in a little over four minutes."

"Is he wind-walking?" Ortwin asked.

"I don’t think so," the Druid answered, somewhat amazed. "He is just flying...very fast. There is another..."

Nwm shook, and resisted the urge to vomit. "There is something terrible with him."

"Should we turn and engage him?" Eadric asked. "Or try to flee? If Iua..."

"I cannot summon a wind to move us that fast," the Duelist replied.

But the blood drained from Nwm’s face as his inner vision perceived demons manifesting ahead of them and around them – they blinked in and out of his sight, successively teleporting to effortlessly pace the party, and remaining out of the reach of even their furthest-reaching spells.

"There is more bad news," Nwm said, and explained. "They are medium-order: probably succubi or vrocks."

Eadric immediately invoked a zone of revelation, and realities overlapped around them. To his partial relief, nothing was stalking them through the coexistent Shadow. At least, not yet.

"I don’t like this at all," Mostin mumbled. "We should be ready to flee back to the Prime if necessary."

Shomei cast a mass haste and transformed herself into an erinyes devil, causing Eadric to splutter and Ortwin to grin eagerly.

Nwm scowled. "Crosod is still closing."

Gheim squawked irritably. "How high up is he?"

"Only three hundred feet." Nwm answered. "Well, I can’t see him," the eagle muttered.

"Nor I," Sem added. "He must be invisible"

"This is a trap," Eadric groaned. "They are probably waiting for reinforcements."

"They are coming," Nwm said. "Goddess. What is happening out there?" Powerful extraplanar entities were manifesting across his psychic landscape.
"I suspect that they do not know that we know of their presence," Shomei said. "We may still have something of an advantage. I will deal with the Dragon – it will even the odds somewhat. Mostin, for what I am about to do, I sincerely apologize."

Drawing upon the power of the arcane bracelet that Jovol had bequeathed her, Shomei quickly opened two gates. Eadric clenched his teeth in trepidation.

Light flooded through. Two Solars appeared.

Mostin screamed at her. "No! Not again! Not you as well!"

"Do you know who I am?" Shomei asked the celestials.

"You are a devil," one of them replied. "Why have you called us?"

"I am Shomei the Infernal. You cannot perceive my form because I am mind blanked. The sidhe with the winged helmet is Eadric of Deorham, the Ahma. Do you believe me?"

But Eadric had already reached out with his mind and reassured them.

"Do whatever he tells you to do," Shomei instructed the celestials. She turned to the Alienist. "Be very sure that you know what you are doing if you open another gate Mostin. You know what I'm speaking of."

Mostin gurgled incoherently.

"How far back is the Dragon, Nwm?" Shomei asked.

"Twelve thousand feet or so."

She tested the direction of the wind and vanished, leaving her steed riderless.

A look of amazement still sat upon Eadric’s face at the Infernalist’s choice of allies. Catching it, and regaining his composure a little, Mostin spoke shakily.

"They are tools to her, Eadric. Nothing else."

**

Crosod and Threxu, upon receiving Irknaan’s sending, had sped their way to the scene of Shupthul’s disintegration and Koilimilou’s capture. The Dragon had launched into a furious pursuit of ‘Rhalid’ and his party – his speed augmented by a spell, and rendered invulnerable to death magic and any elemental assault by the Wasted Nymph’s power.

Crosod had issued a sending of his own to Irknaan upon catching the party’s scent, and sneered in contempt when he received the return message:

*Do not attack. I want them alive. Coordinate fully with the demons.*

What game was the fool playing now? A sensor appeared nearby, and the Wyrm’s lidless eyes glistened with anger. As much as he resented the Loquai King, he was wise enough not to defy him. Within a matter of seconds, ten succubi
appeared in the air nearby. Lehurze was with them.

"Where is he?" Crosod growled.

"He is on his way," Lehurze replied. "I have instructions for you."

Resentfully, the dragon formed a series of mental bonds with all of those present and rendered them invisible. They teleported away and, within five minutes, visual contact had been made with the intruders. The succubi and the dragon – now in common telepathic rapport – acted with a frightening focus and purpose.*

Meanwhile, Irknaan cursed. Events were moving faster than he had anticipated: Nhura and the remaining succubus, returning to Afgithan, had appeared over a hundred miles distant from his own palace and eighty miles from where Crosod now tracked Rhalid’s party. It would take her nearly two hours to reach the area where events were unfolding, even if she magically sped her passage.

The king gritted his teeth. He needed her there, and the only way to accomplish it was to draw heavily on his own reservoir of power. He instructed the forty Loquai who accompanied him to return to the fortress: at their speed, they had no hope of intercepting the intruders now. Irknaan lamented the loss of Koilimilou and her box of shadows – now it would prove most useful. Reality bent around him as he cast two powerful spells, and made his way first to Nhura and then returned with her to where the other fiends were assembling.**

When he arrived, as instructed, the creature that he had compacted less than an hour before was waiting for him.

Irknaan issued yet another sending: this time to Soneillon.

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The erinyes appeared three hundred yards behind Crosod, down-wind of him, invisible, and out of the range of his blindsight.

Unfortunately, the dragon was also hidden from her mundane vision, and out of the range of her perception – save for the gale and reek created by his passing.

Shomei opened another gate, exhausting her bracelet’s power. She waited nervously – somewhat longer than she was accustomed to. Finally, after what seemed an age – although it was less than five seconds – another solar appeared.

"I am Zhorion," the Cherub announced.

"I am not interested in your name, celestial," Shomei said irascibly. "I have a task for you."

The Solar ignored her. "Oronthon is curious why Shomei the Infernal has elected to open three gates to the Divine Sphere in less than a minute."

Shomei gaped.

"And do not think to use your association with the Ahma as an excuse for your actions. Reciprocity is required."
Shomei was flabbergasted. "I have no time for this," she snapped. "You are under compulsion by both magical law and divine mandate!"

"When you return to Morne," Zhorion continued, "you will seek out the Sela. He will instruct you in the correct application of the dialectic."

"How can there be a 'correct...'?" She began. "Oh, forget it. I probably understand saizhan better than you ever will. Alright. Whatever. Just help me kill the damn dragon."

Shomei sighed. Meaningful philosophical discourse with most solars was impossible. They were stubborn, unyielding and – ultimately – intellectually incapable.

She teleported two thousand feet ahead of where she suspected the dragon to be, and invoked an effulgent epuration – the silvery motes which hovered around her instantly betraying her location to Crosod’s remarkable eyesight. Shomei felt as though a gale was approaching as, invisible, he powered his way towards her at uncanny speed, and banked away before coming within range of her own magical sight. As his head turned and he finally became visible, he discharged an immense gout of corrupted acid and struck her with a horrid wilting. Simultaneously, from the slender shadow perched on his foreleg, yet another wilting struck her, and in the air palrethee demons began manifesting, summoned by both the Nymph and the Dragon. Evidently, Crosod was taking no chances. An effulgent epuration meant a very powerful spellcaster. He called mentally to the ten succubi with whom he was telepathically bonded.

Sh*t, Shomei thought. The acid burned her despite her diabolic resistance, and most of her epuration had already been denuded in the initial assault. She wondered wryly if she had bitten off more than she could chew. She flew rapidly forwards, gripped her rod, and struck Crosod with a potent enervation: twice empowered, magnified through her rod, and then twisted and amplified yet further by Afqithan’s magical trait. He reeled under the assault, but still survived the disintegration which followed.

Succubi were beginning to manifest all around Shomei as Zhorion descended and engaged with Crosod – a bright speck in the sky, dwarfed by the Dragon’s dark, titanic form, his slender brand flashing rapidly in his hands. Crosod screamed as the blade bit into him, and ichor poured from the wounds that the Solar delivered to his neck.

The Wyrm’s head stayed firmly attached to his body, however, and he gave a hideous grin. He said nothing, but brought his terrible will to bear upon the celestial.

A look of horrified fascination crossed Shomei’s face as, despite the palrethees who were now around her and hacking with their flaming swords, she watched black fire first kindle, and then cascade over Zhorion.

The Solar, dignified by Oronthon’s grace since before time began, perished in an unholy nimbus which consumed all trace of his existence. For the merest moment, the skies of Afqithan seemed to darken yet further, and swag with agony and wrath. Pain exploded over Shomei as Crosod thundered back towards her, calling forth an acid storm, heedless of his own summoned minions. Two flame strikes, evoked by Threxu, struck the Infernalist in series.
Before the succubi could descend upon her and tear her to pieces, Shomei teleported away.

She reappeared, burned and blasted, at the spot where she had left the others, only to find that the real battle was about to begin.

* Crosod used three castings of Rary’s telepathic bond with the succubi, acting as ‘anchor-man’ in their efforts to pinpoint Ortwin and the others. The succubi made multiple teleportations until one located the party, the news was passed to Crosod, and the Dragon related it to the rest of the demonesses. One of them teleported back to Irknaan’s fortress to inform the king of their exact whereabouts.

**Irknaan used two limited wishes: one to teleport to Nhura’s location, and another to bring them both to the vicinity of Crosod. Neither Irknaan nor Nhura were capable of instantaneous transport using more ‘conventional’ means. Six more succubi, a palrethee, two vrocks and a shator – compactees of the other Loquai nobility – had also now joined the pursuit. The shator – Ghuluk – was King Samodoquol’s majordomo.

**This was another nasty combo. The enervation – quadruply empowered and maximized – resulted in nine negative levels for Crosod. Luckily (from his perspective) he made the subsequent saving throw against the triply heightened disintegrate.