This is a copy of Sepulchrave’s ‘Soneillon – Part 2’ StoryHour at ENWorld

POST 1: SONEILLON – PART II

Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 7th July 2003, 04:50 AM

Tally ho! (And forgive the rambling footnotes).

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The Big Fight: Part 2

"Have you determined where the leader is?" Eadric asked Nwm. The party were
descending towards the ground.

The Druid nodded. "There is a clutch of extraplanars half a mile ahead of us.
Some are very powerful, Ed. We might be well advised to retreat."

The Paladin gritted his teeth. They had come a long way, in order to merely run
away at the first sign of serious resistance. He glanced briefly at the two solars
who flanked him. Surely, nothing could overcome them. They were safe, as long
as the celestials were present.

As if in response, something dreadful flickered across Eadric’s perception, and
reality darkened for a moment. The celestial to his left, the solar Taruz,
*communed* briefly, and then spoke directly into his mind.

*Immeasurable grief. Zhorion destroyed.*

*Zhorion?*

**A third solar, conjured by Shomei**

Eadric gaped. "Shomei. Is the dragon gone?"

"No," Nwm replied, pointing backwards.

Far behind, but closing rapidly, Crosod’s vast and now-visible form thundered
through the air.

Shomei reappeared. "Not good," she said. "He’s too fast. Mostin, if you get a
chance, hit him with a *disintegrate*. You might be luckier than I."

"I have no intention of staying around," Mostin answered. "I’m going to open a
gate back to the Prime..."

‘Wait,’ Eadric interrupted. He gave a quizzical look as he received a *sending*. 
One down, two to go. How many cherubs can the Ahma kill in one day? If you require arbitration, I am available. Titivilus.

"Titivilus just issued a sending to me."

"Screw that," Mostin said. "Are you ready?"

And everything became dark.

**

It was an impenetrable, cloying blackness of an altogether unnatural kind, stagnant and suffocating. Everything seemed to drift listlessly, and sounds were muffled.

The greater dispelling, which then struck the party from an unknown source had a devastating effect. The mind blanks which sat upon Iua, Eadric, Shomei and Nwm evaporated, the glamour upon Ortwin disappeared, and Mostin suddenly found himself vulnerable to death magic. A green ray struck him, anchoring him and then another, targeting Shomei, also found its mark.

"Sh*t," Mostin exclaimed.

"Nwm, do something," Ortwin groaned, "I can’t see anything."

"I see them," Shomei announced. "There are two of them. Eighty yards. Two o’clock to you, Mostin."

The darkness vanished abruptly as Taruz broke the spell which caused it. Mostin gasped as his vision returned and his magical sight rested on its source – a succubus, and a something, which seemed to flicker on the edge of reality. Something which, partially at least, was not.

Mostin’s mind reeled as he tried to absorb the paradox. Ortwin discharged a rapid volley of enervating magical arrows at the succubus, who lurched in the air.

The second solar, Pharanthe, was incanting under his breath, as Eadric turned his head to see a Loquai of unusual beauty flying towards him upon an umbral griffon of prodigious size. He was accompanied by a sinuous winged shadow which flew gracefully through the air – Irknaan and Nhura, no doubt, Eadric mused.

Shomei screamed and desiccated into a wrinkled corpse as the party were overwhelmed by two powerful horrid wiltings. Nightmares and ecylapses perished – through foresight, this time, the group were protected by magical flight. More wards collapsed as another greater dispelling ripped across them all and Ortwin – still fortunately mind blanked – shrugged off a feeblemind spell which would have otherwise utterly overwhelmed him. All around, succubi, pærethees, daemons and demodands were manifesting – and there was another something which was partially non-existent. Drawing Shupthul’s bow, the Paladin shot five arrows which burst into flame, thudding into the flank of the umbral lillend. She reeled in pain.

Mostin swore profusely, quickly erected a wall of force around them all, and opened a gate. "Everybody get through," he screeched. "Nwm, you have to get this damned anchor off of me!"
The Druid glanced briefly at Shomei’s body, and nodded. She could wait – they needed to get out of there, and quickly. "Get the rod and bracelet," he instructed Sem and Gheim. He quickly incanted a greater dispelling upon Mostin, but the dimensional anchor remained firmly in place.

Mostin swore. "Go!" He commanded. Nwm and Iua dashed through the gate, followed by the two eagles.

Inside of the protected area, another gate opened, conjured by the solar Pharanthe. A third solar stepped through. Mostin screamed again.

The wall of force shuddered briefly as a magical assault was absorbed, and several demons teleported within its confines. Mostin raised an eyebrow as the barrier quickly dissipated when a subsequent disintegrate struck it. It was followed by a violated storm of sound which tore at the flesh of those present, and another disintegrate, which reduced Ortwin to his component atoms.

Iua screamed.

From within her protective void, Soneillon hissed. Lehurze was going too far. She would have strong words with her after this. If she had killed the Ahma by accident...*

Taruz shot a barrage of fey slaying arrows at Irknaan, who was closing rapidly on their position. Several found their mark, but the Sidhe-King shook off their death magic, used a limited wish to shut the gate and pronounced a quick dismissal.

Two of the solars abruptly vanished.

Nhura’s will rested upon Eadric and Mostin in succession, attempting to immobilize them both, but failing to effect either. Pairethees hewed at both the Paladin and the Alienist as Mostin squawked at Eadric.

"Sh*t. Get close."

Shooting yet more darts at the Loquai king, Eadric moved towards Mostin, who shook his head, plane shifted Eadric, and invoked a prismatic sphere, encapsulating himself.

The protective bubble, scintillating with colour and power, hung motionless in the skies of Afqithan, thirty feet above the umbral canopy of its dense forest.

The remaining solar, Taruz, beset by demons, and upon the escape of Eadric, promptly vanished.

"Great." Mostin said.

Through the shifting colours of the sphere, demons could be seen moving outside. The wizard sighed, and wondered whether if, jointly, his enemies had the wherewithal to penetrate his defenses.

**

The gate opened in the courtyard of Kyrtill’s Burh, at the base of the ivy-covered
Steeple. Iua was shaking.

Nwm turned back to the portal, to see if anything else was coming through, but it abruptly dissolved.

"Ortwin..." Iua began.

"Will be fine," Nwm said. "He is merely experiencing a temporary disembodiment."

"When can you..."

"Tomorrow," Nwm answered. He scowled – around them, the devas appointed to guard the castle were gently alighting and manifesting. Their swords, rippling with flames, were already drawn.

"This is holy ground," one of them declared. "You should not be here."

Iua closed her eyes and clenched her jaw, and then breathed deeply for several seconds.

"Do not piss me off," she said.

*

Eadric appeared beneath an ancient beech-tree, the branches of which hung over a small stream which chattered over smooth pebbles. Around him, a forest, with its late summer colours enhanced by the dusk, was visible in all directions. He hardly felt as if he had moved.

The Paladin wondered where he was. Somewhere in Wyre, presumably. Hopefully.

He briefly contemplated the likely inaccuracy of Mostin’s plane shift, and decided that, wherever he was, Nwm would find him before he himself could do anything positive about finding Nwm.

Eadric set down his shield, removed his arms, took off his helm, and, laying his sword across his knees, meditated.

*

Irknaan glowered in disgust as he flew his griffon around the prismatic sphere before descending to the forest floor. Several summoned fiends were vanishing back to their respective glooms, although the compactees – of whom there were nearly a score – remained hovering in the skies nearby.

Soneillon approached, and assumed a stable form. Nhura eyed her suspiciously.

"Can you penetrate it?" Irknaan asked.

"Not without more preparation," the Demoness answered.
The king of the Loquai briefly considered his cloak – it might offer sufficient protection to enter. There again, it might not. And Irknaan was too old and cautious to test its powers to that extent.

"Then we have an impasse," Irknaan observed. "The dimensional anchor will fail before the sphere does. Who do you suppose the kelvezu is?"

"Either Mostin the Metagnostic or Shomei the Infernal," Soneillon answered. "I presume the former – I suspect that Shomei is dead."

"And the Weapon?"

"It would seem that the Weapon has eluded us," Soneillon remarked drily. Two of the palrethees approached with armfuls of items garnered from the treetops and forest floor – Ortwin’s cloak, scimitar, bow and leather jerkin; and Shomei’s pack, which contained a variety of fabulous items. Nhura inspected them, and drew the scimitar from its scabbard.

"This is Githla," she said. "The Azer Jodrumu forged it. It has a long history."

"Even all of these items do not suffice as a weregild for Shupthul and the others," Irknaan snapped.

"There is also a half-sidhe, strapped to a dead nightmare," the Palrethee reported. "She still lives."

Koilimilou, Irknaan smiled to himself.

"The celestials almost succeeded in a cascade," Nhura remarked. "More than three would have been a problem. This must not be allowed to happen again. Why is the Ahma in Afqithan, and why is my spouse and King consorting with Soneillon?" Nhura’s quick mind and knowledge of obscure lore was rapidly piecing things together.

"It is a complex matter," Soneillon purred.

"Then explain it, demoness," Nhura hissed.

"The Ahma is in Afqithan in order to vex Graz’zt. He perceives Irknaan as a loyal subject of the Prince. He may be beginning to understand that things are somewhat more convoluted than that."

Nhura’s eyes quickly scanned all of those present as she spoke again. In her peripheral vision, the shadow of the wyrm was moving rapidly. Her mind raced, and she elected to take an enormous risk.

"Lady Soneillon, you would find me more tractable than my husband," the Lillend said.

"Silence, bitch!" Irknaan screeched, as the full weight of his Will descended upon Nhura. Blood began to pour from her mouth, nostrils and ears, and the flesh began to peel from her.

Perceiving the truth of Nhura’s words, and without hesitation, Soneillon spoke two dreadful words which echoed across Afqithan. The outer shell of the prismatic sphere quivered in sympathetic vibration, as the magical lattice of the demiplane was stretched closer to its dilational limit.
Irknaan wailed as his cloak’s wards failed him. He burned rapidly into a black vapour, which was carried away on a frigid wind.

The Demoness bent down, slowly picked up the dark mantle, threw it over Nhura, and fastened its clasp about her neck.

"What will you do now, your Majesty?" Soneillon asked, half-amused.

"I think I will take a hunt to the Prime," Nhura replied.

"For what purpose?" Soneillon asked.

"If you have concerns that the Ahma might be dead," Nhura said, "you should put them aside. The sidhe who was disintegrated was not him – the sword of Eadric of Deorham is Lukarn, not Githla. I can deliver him to you. Demons are forbidden by the Interdict, but the Loquai are not. And neither is he," she pointed.

Crosod circled suspiciously at a distance of a thousand yards.

*  

Mostin fidgeted uncomfortably within the prismatic sphere, unaware of the events which transpired beyond the rainbow which surrounded him. Apparently, his enemies lacked a disjunction or the correct combination of spells to bring the ward down.

After forty minutes, the dimensional anchor which had barred his own passage from Afqithan failed. Mostin smiled ironically. He lacked sufficient remaining power to safely exit the demiplane. Gingerly, the Alienist thrust his head through the prismatic sphere before quickly retreating it back inside.

Demons. Lots of demons. Most were succubi, but some were very big, and dangerous. There were also a Shator, and two Nycadaemons. And a huge dragon.

Mostin swallowed. The sphere would last six more hours. Nearly two days in Prime Material reckoning. He wondered nervously if his friends could organize a rescue in that time.

He fidgeted again. Not good. Not good.

The Alienist briefly considered using his Mirror to escape, but the thought of leaving it in Afqithan while he fled was too painful.

He gritted his teeth, hasted himself again, floated through the sphere, and teleported to a location one thousand miles to the west, where he appeared in a dark and very remote corner of the shadowy realm.

Mostin’s heart pounded in his chest, and his eyes flitted around as he waited to see if a sensor would follow him.

He uttered a profanity. There it was. He had to go. There was no other way, or they would be on to him.

Space buckled around him, as Mostin invoked a reality maelstrom and was sucked through into another dimension.
It didn’t matter which one, he idly considered, as long as it wasn’t Afqithan.

*

Iua paced ceaselessly near Nwm’s glade, as the Druid, who had resumed a form similar to his natural one, sat in silent reverie with the Green.

He was infuriating in the level of nonchalance that he was exhibiting.

"Get some sleep. Eat something." He had instructed. "There is nothing that I can do until dawn."

Dawn was ten hours away. Iua had scowled, and resumed her pacing. The sun set, the moon rose, midnight passed her by, and in the small hours of the morning, the duelist was gripped by terrible fear.

Nwm remained sitting. Erect, composed, and absurdly serene – as mice scurried over him and investigated his beard and hair.

As the first rays of the sun struck him, he mumbled for ten seconds, smiled and stood up.

"Well?" Iua asked.

"Eadric is in the forest of Nizkur. Mostin is southeast of here, over the ocean." Nwm seemed somewhat surprised by his own words.

Iua gave a hopeful smile.

"Alright," he sighed. He wondered if she would ever understand how much it would cost him.

Ortwin returned as a satyr – although not the same satyr. His hair was ruddier, and he seemed wilder and more unkempt. His grin was unmistakable, however.

"How was death?" Nwm asked.

"The same as last time," Ortwin said easily. "Do you have a mirror?"

"Your weapons and equipment are lost," Nwm remarked. "I think that you’d better try and adjust."

Ortwin opened his mouth in horror.

*

When Shomei awoke, she screamed uncontrollably. Her form – although human and female – was unfamiliar. Nwm waited until the episode had passed before he spoke to her.

"I take it that death was an unpleasant experience?" The Druid asked.
She said nothing, but her face conveyed pain and trauma. She spent a moment inspecting the structure of her mind, noting the disposition of her higher valences.

"Nwm..." She began.

"You owe me," he said.***

She nodded.

From under his cloak, the Druid produced her rod and bracelet.

"You really owe me," he added.

Ortwin scowled. "I should have died first. Your birds might have grabbed my cloak and Githla. What happens now?"

"We find Ed and Mostin," Nwm replied. "I know where they are. We simply have to retrieve them." The Druid turned to Shomei. "Can you get them here?" He asked.

"Not yet," she answered. "I have a duplicate set of books at my home. I need to consult them. But I’m sure that Mostin is quite safe. He is very inventive."

Nwm looked dubious.

**

Mostin found himself in a churning whirlpool as the reality maelstrom deposited him in the Plane of Elemental Water. He groped around blindly for a moment, flapped his arms in an attempt to escape the vortex, and eventually retrieved an Ioun stone from his belt and set it spinning around his head.

His look of smug satisfaction was replaced by one of horror, as he glanced over his shoulder to observe three succubi, who had followed him through the maelstrom.

*These demons are crazy*, Mostin thought. Wearily, he disintegrated one of the demonesses and struck another with his last sonic orb – the latter spell was wholly unimpressive after the spectacular magical effects which Afqithan had bestowed.

Both remaining succubi attempted to charm him, and although he shrugged off their efforts, Mostin swallowed nervously. It was only a matter of time before his luck ran out.

The Alienist observed in fascination, as the reality maelstrom continued to suck random matter from Afqithan into the water around him: branches, stones and dirt drifted by.

Another succubus rode through the planar rift and appeared ten yards away. It was the one who had disintegrated his previous wall of force.

Mostin cursed. He summoned three pseudomarids and instructed two of them to attack his assailants. The third, he ordered to plane shift him back to the Prime.
Lehurze spoke, and the waters seemed to warp as a power word, stun overcame Mostin, rendering him insensible. The demoness activated her cubic gate, and Mostin’s eyes widened in terror as a portal to Afqithan appeared. The two other succubi closed and attempted to grapple with him as he floated impotently, whilst the summoned pseudoelementals struck at the demonesses.

Abruptly, the scene changed as the Alienist, together with the third pseudonatural genie, plane shifted. Half of the world seemed to become salt water above him, and half of it was air below him. Mostin bobbed upside-down in the water, stricken, at the interface of the two realms.

A minute passed, and the effects of Lehurze’s powerful attack subsided. Gingerly, Mostin arose from out of the water and hovered above it. He dried himself with a prestidigitation and glanced around.

The ocean extended as far as he could see, in every direction.

Mostin quickly calculated the time differential between Afqithan and the Material Plane, and knew that it should be night-time in Wyre. He looked at the sun. It was mid morning. Apparently, he was over the Eastern Ocean, and Wyre was at least five thousand miles away.

Mostin sighed, and began to fly west.

*

Eadric was drawn from his trance abruptly as a mote of light dashed across his field of vision. He glanced up, to notice the waxing moon riding high in the sky above him.

He scowled, and calling upon the Eye of Palamabron which hung around his neck, his vision penetrated the shadows which lay about. Nearly a hundred grigs, pixies, buckawns, sprites and other diminutive feys – either of obscure or unique type – were arranged in a wide circle around him. They watched him suspiciously.

Eadric smiled. He was, of course, a sidhe – at least to casual inspection. His observers seemed nervous of that fact: to say that the coolest and most civilized of feys were infrequent visitors to the World of Men would have been a laughable understatement.

The Paladin cleared his throat, and called out. "I am no sidhe," he assured them. "I am a mortal. My name is Eadric of Deorham."

For several seconds, there was no response. Then a shrill voice piped forth. "Naheen nehaar eleel chellaath?"

"I regret that I cannot understand you," Eadric admitted.

Noisy chattering followed for several minutes. Finally, a fat and singularly pompous-looking pixie fluttered forwards, attended by numerous moths of large size. When he spoke, his words ran together in an almost unintelligible stream, which Eadric found difficult in understanding.

"Itismostimpolitetoappearthuswithoutinvitation ,"
andsitbeneaththetreewhichiscalledNadholuridin."

"Should I have chosen another tree?" Eadric asked wrily.

"Youaremostrude! Nowyouinsultuswithsarcasticcomments. Weshouldmakeyoudanceuntilyoudropdeadfromexhaustion! Youarefortunatethatanotherhasintervenedonyourbehalf, oryowouldfeelourroyalwrathdescenduponyou! Mostgraciousandkindandrespectfulhewas, andthereforewearepreparedtobelenient. ButbeforeyouleaveyouwillapologizetoNadholuridin, fortheimpositionthatyouhavesubjectedherto!"

Eadric scowled, and wondered who had ‘intervenedonhisbehalf.’

The pixie raised his arm, and from somewhere behind him a tiny trumpet, more akin to a whistle than any other instrument, sounded forth.

A lone figure walked towards him from beneath the trees. His hair and beard were shaggy, and he wore a simple grey smock, drawn in loosely around his waist by a thin hemp rope.

Eadric gaped, and pressed his forehead to the earth.

Tramst, the Sela, touched him lightly on the shoulder, and the glamour which still sat upon the Paladin, hiding his true form, dissolved.

"And how are things with you, Eadric?" Tramst asked, smiling.

The Ahma, experiencing an upwelling of confusion, grief, and a sense of profound failure - mixed in unlikely measure with a feeling of complete safety in the presence of Oronthon’s proxy - wept cathartically.

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NOTES

*It seemed a reasonable tactic to use hit-point attrition – Eadric would probably be the last person standing, and the mages would get taken out first. Lehurze was still geased by Irknaan, and wasn’t operating to Soneillon’s complete satisfaction.

**A cascade occurs when a wizard or cleric gates a solar to a plane (usually the Prime), and it, in turn, opens more gates. The new arrivals open further gates etc. An uninterrupted cascade can be very quick and effective – there were more than three hundred celestials present at Khu within a minute of the initial gate. Half were Solars and Planetars.

‘Cascade’ is a technical term used by arcanists – most of whom view celestial descents as unwanted extraplanar meddling, in stark contrast to the ‘wondrous miracle’ that the pious experience.

***Nwm used a true reincarnation on both Ortwin and Shomei – there was no level loss associated with their deaths. Note that with the 9th level spell I simply allow the caster to choose the form that the new incarnation takes – fortunately,
Nwm’s player, Dave, is not prone to exploiting this power.

The spell spoken by Soneillon was *Be Not!*, an Epic Spell of her own contrivance:

**Be Not!**
Transmutation

Spellcraft DC: 36
Components: V
Casting Time: 1 action
Range: 300 feet
Target: One living creature
Duration: Instantaneous
Saving Throw: Fortitude partial
Spell Resistance: Yes

To Develop: Seeds: slay (DC 25); destroy (DC 29). Factors: decrease casting time to 1 action (+20 DC); increase spell’s save DC by +20 (+40 DC); no somatic component (+2 DC); gain +20 bonus on caster level check to overcome target’s spell resistance (+40 DC). Mitigating factor: burn 10000 xp (-100 DC), 20d6 backlash (-20 DC).

The caster utters a single, terrible phrase, destroying the target utterly and removing all traces of it from existence unless it succeeds at a fortitude saving throw (DC 40 + relevant ability modifier.) If the target saving throw succeeds or it has more than 80 levels / hit dice, then it instead sustains 13d6 +20 points of damage. Note that even if the save is successful but the target is reduced to –10 or fewer hit points, its existence is similarly erased.

**Other Notes:**

1. It’s worth mentioning that I knew that the party was heavily outmatched, and they should have guessed as much. They ought to have fled immediately, but they *dithered*.
2. I ruled that although Mostin was *dimensionally anchored* he could still cast spells which allowed interplanar travel – he simply couldn’t travel that way himself.
3. The idea to use *summoned* creatures to *plane shift* came a little late for Mostin. He would have saved himself grief if he’d thought of it earlier. Hats off for inventiveness, though.
4. Soneillon’s spell *Be Not!* is an example of exactly *why* she is so dangerous – and why Graz’zt fears her so much. Chthonic demons pay no XP cost for spells which normally require it – in Mostin’s terms, her ‘reservoir is limitless’. The 10,000XP burn becomes a standard mitigating factor. C.f.

**Shattersoul**
Transmutation
Spellcraft DC: 38
Components: V, S
Casting Time: 1 action
Range: 300 ft.
Target: One creature
Duration: Instantaneous
Saving Throw: Fortitude negates
Spell Resistance: Yes
To Develop: Seeds: Transform (DC 21), Transport (DC 27), Ward (DC 14).
Factors: transform into inanimate object (+10 DC); transform into seven components (ad hoc +30 DC); transport to extraplanar location (+2 DC); decrease casting time to 1 action (+20 DC); protect against discern location (+14 DC); increase saving throw DC by +10 (+20 DC). Mitigating Factors: burn 10,000 XP (-100 DC); 20d6 backlash (-20 DC).

Shattersoul instantly transforms a single creature into seven identical stone spheres of diminutive size unless it succeeds at a Fortitude saving throw (DC 30 + relevant modifier). The spheres are approximately six inches in diameter.

Each stone is sent to a random planar destination, where it remains until recovered. Only upon recovery of all of the stones is any kind of restoration possible for the victim of a shattersoul spell. A wish or miracle, or an appropriate epic spell which uses the transform seed may then be used to restore the target of the shattersoul.

All of the seven spheres are protected by a ward which renders them impervious to efforts to discover their whereabouts by means of the discern location spell. Epic spells which use the reveal seed must succeed at an opposed caster level check in order to determine the location of each of the stone spheres.

Shattersoul bends the rules close to breaking point but, hey, I'm the DM 😁

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**POST 2:**

**Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 7th July 2003, 10:41 PM**

Quote:
(Although I am surprised Mostin didn't gate anything using the epic pseudonatural template in, then promptly leaving it there as they fled...)

This was, in fact, his original plan - unfortunately he had to use his gate to get everyone out pronto. The problem with plane shift is that you have to be touching people in a circle - difficult when everyone is riding at full speed and spread over 60 ft.

Quote:
I'm still a little perplexed as to the group's plans on the plane.

As were they. It was more out of desperation - and the hope of finding a more substantive means of assailing Graz'zt.

Quote:
Are you familiar with the Albigensian (sp?) heresy that occurred in what is now southern France in the 1200's?... Have you ever examined this particular chapter in history and, if so, has it inspired you in you work on this particular campaign?
Yes - Cathars (& Bogomils & Manichaeans) could be compared with the Irrenites and/or Urgic Mystics at a stretch. It's that 'ole Gnostic thang...

Saizhan owes more to the Buddhist philosophy of Madhyamika, tho - with a bit of Zen thrown in for good measure.

Quote:
Yes! One question - Do the characters fear death anymore?

More on this later...

Quote:
Is there any place where all of your rules materials is archived, Sepulchrave, or at least a place where I could find links to all of it?

In a big heap of paper next to my desk at home. Unfortunately not online, though. Sorry 😞.

[random] BTW, Anabstercorian, I had always read your handle as an-a-bas-ter-cor-i-an - I just noticed that I was adding an extra 'a.' Strange how the mind fills in extra syllables sometimes. [/random]

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**POST 3: MUCH TALK AND LITTLE ACTION**

Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 15th July 2003, 05:28 AM

Quote:
Is there any significance to Tramst meeting Eadric in front of Nadholuridin? Or am I maybe reading too much into this?

The feys have names for all the trees in their area where they live. Nadholuridin is a beech-tree. I'm sure the local sprites would consider it very significant. 😊

Other questions might be answered in this post. Er... indirectly. Maybe.

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**Much Talk and Little Action**

The *Sela* and the *Ahma* sat beneath the beech-tree Nadholuridin deep within the Forest of Nizkur. Moonlight illuminated them both.

"Will you return?" Tramst asked. His question was simple and direct, and conveyed no sense of judgment.

"I don't know," Eadric replied.
"If you had died, would you have allowed Nwm the Preceptor to recall you?" The Sela’s question cut to the quick of another concern which had been nagging the Paladin. He had no doubt that Nwm would have reincarnated both Ortwin and Shomei: an act which – according to Orthodoxy, at least – verged on necromancy of the most dubious kind.

"I don’t know," Eadric replied honestly. "I am tired of continually weighing the means against the ends, and guessing which is the greater good, or the lesser evil."

"Such is the weight of responsibility," Tramst smiled.

"Before the assault, Titivilus issued me a sending. What was its purpose?"

"Devils seldom have uncomplicated reasons for their actions," the Sela said cryptically.

"He offered to act as an arbiter – although for what dispute, I cannot guess."

Tramst said nothing.

Eadric considered for a moment, before asking a different question altogether. "I am curious as to your actions regarding the feys here. They seemed to regard you in a favourable light."

"I gave them honey-cake, and firewine, and a mechanical clock," Tramst explained. "I also asked their permission to visit you here."

"But that was not necessary. You are the Sela."

"It was, nonetheless, polite," Tramst replied.

"But had you said nothing, and merely appeared to me, they would never have known of your presence – or mine."

"That is likely," the Sela nodded.

Eadric scowled. There was a paradox there somewhere, and a lesson to be learned from it.

"May I ask a philosophical question?" The Paladin ventured.

The Sela’s eyes twinkled. "If you really must," he answered.

"Titivilus comprehends the dialectic which underpins the transmetaphysic of saizhan. Can he be said to possess insight? Or is compassion a necessary precursor to actualizing saizhan?"

"Your question is flawed, as it presupposes a difference between insight and compassion."

"They are identical?"

"I will answer that with the standard fourfold negation.*"

Eadric laughed loudly – a sound that he realized had passed his lips too infrequently of late.
"Something is amusing?" Tramst asked.

"Forgive me, Sela, but getting a straight answer from you is harder than pulling teeth from a horse."

"This has been pointed out to me," Tramst nodded.

Eadric was silent for a moment, before asking another question. "Was there a specific reason that you chose to meet me now?"

"Merely to inform you that your actions have had consequences which you did not foresee. You do not exist in a vacuum."

"Is that a warning?"

"In a manner of speaking." Tramst replied. "Have you determined yet the purpose of your visit to Afqithan?"

"Not entirely," Eadric confessed. "But without other positive options, it seemed the obvious thing to do. What consequences do you refer to, Sela?"

"The challenging of Graz'zt's hegemony in the realm."

"I do not understand."

"Irknaan is dead, Eadric. And even before he died, he wavered. There will be much uncertainty as a new Queen asserts her dominion."

The Paladin looked astonished. "Did Mostin kill him?"

"No. Irknaan was slain by the demoness Soneillon, around two hours ago."

_The void_, Eadric immediately knew. "She was Graz'zt's concubine. We had considered Throile as a possible target. And she is now Queen there?"

"No. Soneillon has no interest in Afqithan – other than as a stick with which to taunt Graz'zt. She has a great interest in you, however. She perceives you as a vehicle through which Graz'zt's downfall may be accomplished."

Eadric shifted uncomfortably.

"If you were to ally yourself to her," Tramst continued, "then no doubt it could be accomplished."

"Are you recommending this course of action, Sela?" Eadric inquired uneasily.

"By no means," Tramst answered. "I am merely informing you of things as they are. You have condemned Graz'zt to death. You have vowed to release Nehael. You are dispensing Oronthon's justice – _my_ justice, if you will – as you have determined appropriate and necessary. You may have to confront this choice."

The Paladin clenched his jaw in frustration.

"Do you resent the lack of direction that I offer you, Eadric?" The Sela asked.

Eadric hesitated.
Tramst struck him soundly in the face. "You cannot offend me with what you feel, Ahma."

"I apologize," Eadric said, nodding. His lip bled freely.

After a period of silence, the Paladin spoke again. "The Queen of whom you spoke – is it Nhura, or one of Soneillon’s puppets?"

"I think that is not yet settled," Tramst responded. "There are several candidates. Nhura bears the title for the meantime." He stretched, and abruptly changed the topic. "You are not the only reason I am here, Eadric. Another is due to arrive in a few hours. Which leaves us time to make some corrections."

Eadric looked quizzical.

"Ahma, your meditation posture is terrible."

"Ahh," Eadric said.

**

Mostin sat wrapped in his robe of eyes by a small fire near Nwm’s glade in the warm sunlight. He sneezed.

By the time that Shomei and the Druid had wind walked to her mansion, and the Infernalist had consulted her books and teleported to the Alienist’s location, Mostin’s fly spell had long since expired. He had been floating in the water, disconsolate, and drained of magic to an extent that he hadn’t experienced in years.

"You should’ve asked the Marid to deposit you in a less inconvenient place," Ortwin observed whilst toasting a thick slice of bread.

"It was not the first thing on my mind," Mostin grumbled. "And I think you should put some clothes on. Your naked caprine form is less than agreeable to my current sensibilities. At least throw a cloak over yourself."

Ortwin’s hand suffered a brief spasm, and he dropped his toast into the fire.

"I have to get my gear back," the Satyr wailed.

"That could prove difficult," Nwm said dryly. "As without your gear, it will not be easy to retrieve your gear, so to speak."

"And my dowry," Ortwin whined.

"Our dowry," Iua sighed. "Mostin, we have Shupthul’s weapon – can you transform it into a scimitar?"

"I suppose so," the Alienist replied. "If we go back, we need to carefully consider our tactics, however. They were less than successful. I would guess that we are outmatched by two to one at least in spellpower. There isn’t even any opportunity to close and engage with them in combat. But we can do this – given the chance to prepare. I am thinking that the strategic use of antimagic may be the answer.
In which case, no weapon which is dweomered would be useful – and a polymorphed weapon would be worse than useless."

"To willingly have my spellcasting stymied thus is a daunting prospect," Nwm said sceptically. "I'm hardly an expert combatant."

"I am talking of the skillful use of antimagic, not a wholesale or blanket application," Mostin chided. "And I think that you would be better off unhindered. I had much time to consider this during my sojourn in the Eastern Ocean – watching fish becomes rather tedious after a while. One of us – either Shomei or I – would effectively act as a mobile protection device. We would be vulnerable to physical assault – all wards would be nonfunctioning. But this is somehow preferable to multiple greater dispellings, horrid wiltings, destructions and power words. Nwm and the other mage would remain outside of the field – and warded to a truly absurd degree – bear in mind that whoever was acting as the antimagic focus would have plenty of protective spells to lavish on those outside of the field."

"We have yet to witness the Loquai in physical combat," Nwm pointed out. "How effective are they likely to be?"

"If they are like the sidhe in general, then probably very adept. Also, probably no match for Eadric, Ortwin or I," Iua grinned. "I like this plan, Mostin."

"I advocate a full assault," the Alienist announced. Buoyed by Iua's support, he was beginning to get carried away. "We scry Irknaan's castle, summon, bind and gate a veritable army of extraplanar help. We use the Mirror to access a point outside of the stronghold. I blow a hole in the wall with a great shout, send in the footsoldiers, and erect an antimagic field. We charge in, kill everything inside, and it's all over with."

Ortwin turned to look at Nwm, and raised his eyebrows.

The Druid shrugged. "Why not? Hell, we've tried subtlety and guile. We've tried a magical confrontation. What's left?"

**

It was mid morning. Tramst clicked his fingers and pointed at the sensor.

"I do not see it," Eadric sighed.

"It requires considerable practice. It is there, however."

Seconds later, there was a displacement of air, and a single figure arrived. Eadric's mind suffered a cognitive dissonance as Shomei manifested. The Eye of Palamabron showed her true body – a youthful and fair-skinned woman – whereas his own eyesight revealed the figure that he was familiar with. As always, she bore her rod.

Suspiciously, the Infernalist looked at Tramst and readied a spell. "Who are you? Why did I not perceive you?" Shomei's arcane sight began to scrutinize the Sela's form.

Eadric was about to say something, but Tramst raised his hand in a gesture which
"You are Oronthon’s Proxy," Shomei said presently. Her head was spinning, and her heart was pounding hard within her chest. Her calm façade seemed stretched and shaky. She erected a *mind blank* almost instinctively.

"You are correct," Tramst smiled.

"Your form is disarmingly unprepossessing," Shomei continued, regaining her composure somewhat.

"Would you prefer my *ahmasaljan***?" The *Sela* inquired.

"NO!" Shomei said unequivocally.

"You fear me."

"I mistrust what you represent," the Infernalist replied.

"I think you misunderstand what I represent," Tramst countered.

"I do not seek redemption, whether you dress it in dialectic clothes or no."

"I do not offer it," the *Sela* said easily. "You are an Infernalist. I attach no moral significance to your chosen path. I can help you perfect your technique. Hone your spirit. Discipline your Will."

"Your attempt at expediency does not move me."

"Shomei," Tramst smiled, "if I were to be truly expedient with you, do you think you would know it?"***

"I don’t know. Would *you* know it?" Shomei replied wrily.

"Saizho," the *Sela* said, bowing.

"You bastard," Shomei sighed, as reality shifted.

"Your contract with Zhorion is fulfilled," Tramst pointed out.

Shomei cocked her head. "I neither sought you out, nor have I received instruction."

"You have demonstrated the Truth to yourself. What else can I teach you?"

The Infernalist gaped. "That is absurd. Nothing is that easy."

Tramst smiled sadly. "Yes, Shomei. It is that easy. Have you already forgotten, although it was only seconds ago? It will elude you as you reach out to grasp it again. And therein lies the tragedy."

Shomei swallowed, and scowled.

Tramst reached down, and picked a buttercup from near the base of the beech-tree. He pressed it into the palm of her hand.

Her world shattered into a billion fragments and reformed in an instant.
"You are not what I expected," she said.

Eadric wondered why it was that, for him, the Sela had made things so difficult, but for Shomei – who consorted with the unholiest of creatures – he had freely offered bliss and a vision of the Absolute.

He experienced a moment of impossible irony.

**

Nufrut’s disembodied face squinted at Eadric and Mostin from inside her transparent adamantine prison. The Eye of Palamabron illuminated her.

"I require information regarding the demoness Soneillon," Eadric stated.

"Mendacity would be pointless," Mostin added smugly.

"What do you wish to know?" Nufrut sighed.

"Her power relative to the Prince of Azzagrat," Mostin began, "both personal, and with regard to their respective subjects and thralls. The disposition of her servants in Throile. Her modi operandorum. Her motivations – beyond merely iring her former consort. Possible weaknesses which may be exploited. And her ontological status, which is a matter of some interest to me personally – from a purely academic perspective."

"This may take some while," Nufrut grumbled.

"Be as swift as you may," Eadric said acidly.

"Power is a difficult thing to measure when one speaks of Abyssal dignitaries," Nufrut replied. "Absolutes are impossible to determine."

"Is she always this forthcoming?" Eadric asked Mostin, drily.

"Invariably," Mostin nodded.

"Perhaps we should make a translation to the vestibule of Oronthon’s Heaven," Eadric suggested. "The Archons might have an easier time of persuading her to talk."

Mostin shook his head. "That is a journey I would prefer not to undertake. I can easily open a gate to allow you access, however."

"That will not be necessary," Nufrut interrupted. "I will try to formulate answers which are meaningful to your limited mortal perspectives."

"That is all we require," Eadric smiled. "Proceed."

"Soneillon’s sorcerous power is, in some regards, greater than that of Graz’zt," Nufrut reluctantly admitted.

Mostin inhaled sharply. "I think that statement requires some explanation."
"She is touched by infinite nothingness," Nufrut snapped. The subject was one which evidently disturbed even her. "She is Demogorgon’s spawn. A scion of Cheshne. She has entered oblivion, and returned from it."

Eadric blanched. The name of the Ancient was anathema. A taboo which none violated.

"I am speaking figuratively, of course," Nufrut added. "The wellspring of her power has no bounds – it is limited only by her own capacity to understand it."

"That is impossible," Mostin grunted.

"As you wish," Nufrut replied.

"Do not patronize me, Nufrut. Certain laws are inviolable within the bounded cosmos."

"If so, then this is not one of them," Nufrut said caustically.

"She does not lie," Eadric sighed.

"And it is borne out by your suspicions regarding her partial nonexistence," Nufrut continued. "I assume that was the reason for your inquiry about her ontic status?"

Mostin nodded wrily.

"I am somewhat confused," Eadric admitted.

"Soneillon has been to the bottom of the Abyss, and returned," Mostin explained. "She has tasted unbeing."

"The Abyss has no bottom, Mostin."

"My point exactly," Mostin replied.

"Hmph!" Eadric turned his attention back to the Demoness. "Please continue, Nufrut."

"Soneillon maintains few servants of any power – most of her closest attendants are succubi, and a handful of these are favoured and have learned sorcery from her."

"Such as the other who assailed us?" Mostin asked.

"As I was secure within your portable hole, I cannot answer this question with certainty."

"Names," Mostin demanded.

"Adyell, Helithai, Orychne, Chaya," Nufrut replied. "Others of less note. No doubt also others, who are wholly unknown."

"I was struck by a power word, stun and a violated sonic acid storm," Mostin explained. "Who might that be?"
"Probably none of those four," Nufrut smiled wickedly.

"You are most vexatious," Mostin said irritably. "Would you care to speculate who might have access to such spells?"

"Many of Soneillon’s former protegés have found positions in the courts of other demonic nobles. Many have also managed to keep their tutelage under her secret. It is hard to say."

"There was another demon who, like her, existed on the threshold on nonbeing. Who was that?"

"I do not know," Nufrut scowled. "There are others who have descended, and returned, but most of their names are not known to me."

"But some are," Mostin pointed out. "Be so kind as to share those you do know."

"I am loath to speak their names," Nufrut groaned.

"And I am anxious to hear them!" Mostin retorted. "And a brief description, if you please."

"Seven only are known to me."

"Speak!" The Alienist demanded.

So Nufrut spat their names out: Saduch and Tavel – shadow demons; Xanoriz – a glabrezu; Tiqa – a succubus, like Soneillon herself, but of less power than the Mistress of Throile; Iarathym – a babau; Arhuz – a nalfeshnee of tremendous power, who dwelt five hundred circles from Azzagrat in a palace of slime; and Carasch.

"Carasch?" Mostin inquired.

"A balor. Once. Perhaps a deva before that? Who can remember that far back anymore?" There was a hint of melancholy in her voice.

"Could it be him?" The Alienist asked nervously.

Nufrut laughed harshly. "You fool! Carasch, subordinate himself to any other? How little you know, Mostin. Graz'zt and all his minions would flee before him. Yea, Ahma, maybe even Enitharmon himself would think twice before challenging him. No, Mostin, it was not Carasch – or you would all be dead, and Afqithan itself might be no more."

Mostin sniffed. "I find it hard to believe that an entity of such power exists and I have never heard of him."

"You know nothing," Nufrut sneered. "And I know but little in comparison to others," she added wryly. "Soneillon herself is well versed in the nature and disposition of more exotic Abyssal denizens. Pazuzu knows more than any other..."

"Return to the topic at hand if you would," Eadric interjected. "We do not have time for your random musings, Nufrut, although no doubt they are interesting."

"Soneillon is a dreamer, and a seductress without peer," the Demoness
continued. "Her schemes and motivations are as impenetrable as the darkness which surrounds her when she wills it – no, Mostin, I do not dissemble. She is most enigmatic."

"And weaknesses?" Eadric inquired.

"None that I know of," Nufrut answered. "But if she has marked you, Ahma, then your life is about to become very complicated."

Eadric sighed. As if it wasn’t already.

*i.e. insight and compassion are neither identical, nor different, nor both identical and different, nor neither identical nor different.  
** ‘Spiritual essence,’ ‘indwelling spirit’ or ‘perfect body.’ Normally perceivable only through the divine version of true seeing or similar magic.  
***I think I may have touched on this before, but it is quite normal for Ascended Masters – and by extension the Sela – to dispense wisdom according to the understanding of those who hear it. Less enlightened souls might misconstrue this as an economy of truth, or even outright lies.

It is important to clarify exactly what happened in the exchange between Tramst and Shomei, as it is easily misunderstood:

Saizho means ‘I see’ (not ‘you see’ which is saizha – and may be either present tense or imperative). Tramst is in no way ‘bestowing’ or ‘forcing’ a moment of insight or enlightenment upon Shomei.

Shomei’s question ‘Would you know it?’ (i.e. would the teacher know if he were being expedient) stimulates an insight in the Sela. According to Saizhan, ultimately there is no ‘you’ that knows, and there is no knowing – there is only direct, unmediated experience of the Truth. True expediency cannot be conscious or premeditated, it must arise spontaneously and instinctively.

It is typical of the Sela’s teaching style that he will gracefully acknowledge an insight provided by someone else – usually a student – also implying that he, himself still has much to learn in the process. This is, however, a spiritual lesson in itself – doubly so in the case of Shomei: the ‘Adversarial’ philosophy endorsed by Shomei (and Mostin, although in a different way) is based on infinite becoming and perpetual self-transcendence. By accepting an insight provided by Shomei, the Sela implicitly endorses the validity of the Infernalist’s philosophy and pays homage to her holiness and perfection, but at the same time asserts his own spiritual authority.

The paradox which results is a perfect expression of the dialectic of Saizhan: Shomei’s mind no longer has anything tangible upon which it can find purchase. Inevitably, she experiences Saizhan, but brought about by her own words, not by those of Tramst.

When Shomei realizes this, she says ‘You bastard.’ It would seem that Shomei has somehow maneuvered herself into a glimpse of the Truth. Thus, Tramst has
been expedient, because he has been effective. Moreover, he has done so spontaneously, instinctively and without effort.

POST 4:

Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 16th July 2003, 03:44 PM

I'll try and address some questions quickly - I should go to work at some point, though 😔

Quote:
I'm curious to know how much of the NPC interplay is vocalized for the players' benefit,

Some, but not all. A lot is filled in afterwards.

Quote:
It is also appropriate, as in many beliefs system, some have found enlightenment under a tree.

This wasn't intentional - in fact I didn't realize the connection until you pointed it out to me! Archetypes tend to have a habit of popping up even if you don't mean them to.

Quote:
I realise that D&D alignments are farcically inadequate when discussing a religious and philosophical system as detailed as you have for your setting, but what result does the new Orthodoxy have on the alignment of Oronthan?

Good question! I'm not sure I can answer it, other than to say that in Tramst's stat block, his alignment is listed as 'special.'

Quote:
Now, per the Interdict, aren't outsiders prevented from entering Wyre?

The Celestial Interdict prevents demons, devils - the 'fallen' - from entering the Prime without help: i.e. conjuration or summoning. Arch-fiends can circumvent it to a certain extent - presumably with Oronthon's permission/knowledge.

Quote:
quote:
---------------------------------------------------------------
Soneillon spoke two dreadful words which echoed across Afqithan. The outer shell of the prismatic sphere quivered in sympathetic vibration, as the magical lattice of the demiplane was stretched closer to its dilational limit.
---------------------------------------------------------------

So, epic magic can impact demiplanes through its usage? That seems to further emphasize (to me anyway) the difference between a demiplane/alternate PMP and Wyre as the real PMP. Would epic spells create similar aftershocks within...
Wyre itself?

I had a long discussion with Dan about this. He compared it to dropping a stone into a bucket of water, as opposed to dropping a stone in an ocean. In a finite, bounded space such as Afqithan (albeit, a reticulated, non-Euclidian one) the effect of magic on the fabric of reality is more pronounced. If one were to apply a kind of pseudo-science to it, then it would be possible to say that - vibrationally - Afqithan is already very highly strung. Magic is everywhere.

*Enough* magic might make it 'snap' altogether - forcing it to dissolve, rejoin with Faerie, be sucked into the Plane of Shadow etc. Note that we are talking a lot of magic here - epic spells with a DC in the 10s of thousands, maybe.

A finite space can dilate to accommodate magical effects, and then return to its natural vibrational state.

**Quote:**

Lastly, Tramst mentioned a mechanical clock as a gift to the feys. What is Wyre's approximate technology level? That seems more advanced than I had been imagining.

Largely early Renaissance, with a few quirks thrown in.

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**POST 5: THE WEB OF MOTES**

**Posted by:** Sepulchrevae II at ENWorld on 24th July 2003, 09:22 PM

This is a very long post, and I hope it makes sense. I have actually cut out some stuff. At some future point - hopefully sooner rather than later - I will post the mechanics of the singular item which is the focus of this installment. Suffice to say, for the time being, that to derive information from it requires various Knowledge (Arcana) checks with absurdly high DCs, and that a mage can 'take 20' on these checks.

[Edit - make that 2 posts. I can't fit it all in one. :rolleyes: ]

Soo...

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

**The Web of Motes**

After Mostin and Eadric had quizzed Nufrit, the Paladin related the news conveyed to him by Tramst in full. A bitter argument ensued.

"There is no *need* for us to return," Nwm sighed. "It would serve no purpose. We have – in a roundabout way – succeeded in what we set out to do. Irknaan is
dead. The Demon’s precarious hold on the demiplane is compromised. We have vexed him. When we initially spoke of this, the plan was to assail him on as many fronts as we could. We should change tack accordingly now."

"My gear remains in Afqithan," Ortwin snapped.

"Forget your gear," Nwm replied unsympathetically. "Live with it – you are alive, if you would notice. Goddess, you’re a selfish bastard, Ortwin."

"But we have already formulated a plan," the Satyr continued, ignoring the insult. "We can do this. It will work."

"It would be an unnecessary waste of time and effort," Nwm retorted. "What would we gain? Eadric?"

"I don’t know," Eadric admitted.

"Pah!" Nwm snorted. "This is absurd. Why Afqithan? What’s the point?"

"It is some kind of key," Eadric replied.

Nwm looked exasperated. "Why? Have you had some kind of revelation?"

"No."

The Druid closed his eyes, and clenched his fists. "I have humoured you thus far, Eadric, but you need to seriously reappraise. Genuine visions I can accept, but some vague feeling is not sufficient."

"I trust vague feelings more than divinely inspired visions," Mostin said unhelpfully.

"I’m not suggesting that is the key," Eadric said. "But perhaps it is a key. Or perhaps we can turn it into one. There is the gate to Azzagrat..."

"Which opens both ways, I might remind you. And it is periodic – who knows what else has walked through it since we were last there."

"Soneillon." Eadric said again. "She is pivotal – or could be, if we allowed her to be. She lusts after the fall of the Lord of Azzagrat more than anything else."

"Do not presume to understand the motives of demons," Shomei warned. "Especially one such as her. If you use her as a tool – if you use each other I should say – then she will exact a price which may surprise you at a later time."

"Do you then intend to strike a bargain with Soneillon?" Ortwin asked.

"I don’t know. Titivilus offered to act as an arbiter – maybe for this purpose. Perhaps opening some kind of dialogue..."

"For me to regard something as questionable means that it must be very questionable," Ortwin said sardonically. "But I suspect that this is one barrel of maggots that you do not want to open."

Overcome by a sudden wave of irony, Nwm guffawed. "Eadric of Deorham purposes to compact with a Demon Queen? Ah, the world has changed. And maybe not for the better."
"There is opportunity, here," Eadric replied patiently. "And I am in the unfortunate position of having to decide the least evil."

"Do you have that authority?" Nwm countered. "Or sufficient information?"

"Yes, and no," the Paladin answered with a wry smile. "That is my lot. I am resigned to it. Things will unfold according to Oronthon’s will, irrespective of my actions."

"That is a depressing fatalism," Nwm groaned.

"Not so," Shomei unexpectedly came to Eadric’s defense. "To exert individual will and to submit to destiny need not be mutually exclusive perspectives. This is well established."

"Shomei, your philosophical sophistry is irrelevant to me," Nwm replied. "Your world-view is under assault. You are confused, and your intellect is trying to grasp at dialectical straws."

The Infernalist looked mildly offended, opened her mouth to say something, thought better of it, and clamped it shut again.

"Through sustained application of Will, we can force a confluence of events to occur in Afqithan," Mostin nodded. "We cannot control it, however. It may backfire. There are too many variables. We lack Jovol’s prescience."

Shomei raised her eyebrows. "Your euphemism is transparent, Mostin. You are too anxious to unleash the Pseudonatural Horror."

"I am not that anxious," Mostin said. "Or I would have done so already."

"I still do not understand what this thing is, of which you speak," Eadric sighed.

"It is the creature which slew Vhorzhe – in all likelihood." Shomei answered. "And probably other adepts who thought they could control it."


"Although not alone," Shomei pointed out. "And enlisting a cabal will be far harder than speaking the incantation."

Mostin shrugged. "We are going in circles. I have some possible solutions, if any of you have the stomach to hear them: bear with me before you shoot me down. First, Soneillon: I can bind her, although I doubt I can hold her for long. Second, the gate: we can use it, or seal it with a disjunction. Third, Mulissu: it may be that she has made progress in interpreting Jovol’s web of motes – it may give us an idea on how to proceed which we have not previously considered. Fourth, the Pseudonatural: I can likewise bind it, and probably not hold it. Fifth, and I am loath to even suggest it: Shomei – or even I, for that matter – could enlist celestial support."

"There will be no cascade in Afqithan," Shomei said simply. "Tramst made that clear to me before I left him – this is no concern of the Host. And I have worries on that count which I haven’t yet voiced: there is no doubt that – irrespective of Nhura’s current inclinations – news of a celestial presence in the demiplane has
already been reported to Graz’zt. Information such as that has a habit of spreading quickly."

"But would he have suspected who caused it?" Eadric asked.

"Perhaps not," Shomei conceded, "but the Prince is supremely paranoid, as I have said before. News of Irknaan’s death has probably reached him already. Who can guess the loyalty of the other Loqui?"

"We need information," Nwm sighed. "And we need it badly. Things are finely balanced. Factions are forming faster than we can apprehend them. They change before we have a chance to begin to understand them. There is too much flux."

"We are dealing with demons and their allies," Mostin said. "What do you expect? Our own presence has skewed events rapidly."

"Everything in Afqithan seemed relatively stable before we arrived," Nwm said laconically.

"Chaos and inertia have a great deal in common," Shomei smiled.

"Then we should take one more day," Eadric said grimly. "One more day, before we decide to act – and then ten hours or so will have passed in Afqithan since our flight. As Nwm says, we need information – to garner as much as we can. And when we do act, it needs to be decisive. No more vacillation. Mostin, you are the Diviner – the onus lies on you. Can you contact Mulissu?"

The Alienist nodded. "I have yet to prepare my spells. But I had determined to make a metagnostic inquiry before anything else. This will involve a translation."

"How long will it take?" The Paladin asked.

"Exactly no time at all," Mostin replied. "I will go to the Far Realm."

**

Beyond the glooms created by an uncounted number of fears – the terrors which lurked in the recesses of human souls, the darkest imaginings of demonic lust, and the nightmares of creatures which bore no shape or name – Soneillon dreamed a dream.

Annihilation, the threat of unbeing, the primeval void in which all meaning ceased, held no mystery for her. She was it, and it was she. From the blank tablet of unmanifest reality, the succubus drew forth a tendril of possibility. Fashioned by her dark spirit – which had, by the dubious virtue of sheer force of will, survived or transcended the insurmountable necessity of ontological cohesion – a shadowy phantasy began to coalesce.

She strove to give it form and meaning, to imbue it with qualities which marked it as real. Madness and meaninglessness flowed away. The numinous slowly subsided, and became the phenomenal. A vision of trees, of sky, of streams, animals, birds and men assumed tangibility. A small castle, with whitewashed walls, ivy-clad and perched upon a rocky knoll.

Paradox rapidly spiralled into infinity, and potentiality shrunk to a single point in
space and time. The interstices snapped, and unbeing retreated.

Soneillon stood in dappled sunlight, clad in flesh and blood. Nearby, an ancient oak-tree stood. The demoness glanced at Kyrtil’s Burh, erected a ward around herself, and assumed a pleasing form.

Soneillon smiled. She smiled at the hopeless lot of mortals, like pigs who were destined for slaughter. She smiled at the pathos which she perceived in Graz’zt: his interminable wheedling and plotting and conniving for the slightest of transient gains. She smiled at Wyre, and its magical Law, embodied in the Claviger and its servant Gihaahia – in the full knowledge that she herself needed no agent to bring here there and, thus, no infraction had occurred. And she smiled at Oronthon, and the Celestial Host, and their Interdict against the millions that had rebelled before time began.

Once, she had been one of them. But no longer. Her paradigm had shifted. Unreality was hers, and she made her own laws now.

**

The creature interrogated by Mostin was a writhing mass of matter which would have defied all attempts at classification, had the Alienist been inclined to attempt to categorize it. Two things only concerned him: it was of the lower order, and thus unlikely to resist his compulsion, and it was of reasonable intelligence – the latter inferred by Mostin who, invisible and mind blanked, had watched it interact with numerous other creatures of less stature than itself.

Transfixed, it swayed eerily beneath the Wizard’s gaze, its pseudopodia stretching and rippling simultaneously through several overlapping dimensions.

Mostin’s question was generic. He sought guidance, not definitive answers.

*Can you enlighten me with regard to the events and possibilities which currently preoccupy me?*

The creature’s consciousness was catapulted into the deepest reaches of madness and euphoria, and a barrage of scenes and feelings flooded into Mostin’s mind as it filtered them to him.


Mostin quailed, and fled back to the bounded cosmos.

*

"I think that a slightly more structured question may have been in order," Mulissu said sarcastically, as she poured a smoking liquid into a tall, blue flute, and
handed it to Mostin. "You might as well have asked 'Can you please reveal all of my deepest fears to me?'"

The pair sat beneath the pomegranate tree in Mulissu’s courtyard, as several mephits capered nearby. The dome of the sky was, as usual, a perfect, unbroken cyan.

"It is within my nature to risk frequent assault upon my psyche," Mostin replied shakily. "You may have a point, however."

"Did you uncover anything worthwhile?"

"That remains to be seen," Mostin downed his drink rapidly and held out his glass for another draught, "but I think so. Interpretation is always the hardest part. This is a fine beverage. What is it?"

Mulissu shrugged, and poured again. "I don’t think it has a name. I acquired it from a passing Djinn. The pseudonatural entity seems foremost in your mind. Have you made an effort to contact it?"

"Not yet. I have not judged the time to be ripe. It soon will be, however."

"And you plan to gate it into this 'Afqithan'?"

"Perhaps. Or I may loose it against the Prince, if we ever have the misfortune to meet. Mulissu, I need guidance."

The Witch groaned. "I prefer not to dispense advice, where possible."

"Jovol’s web of motes," Mostin persisted. "Have you made headway in understanding it?"

Mulissu sighed. "I have thought of little else. It continually distracts me from my work."

"But do you understand it?"

"No," she replied. "Or, I should say, I understand its principles and its function, but not how to read it – as you said, interpretation is always the hardest part. Would you like a demonstration?"

Mostin nodded. "Of course."

"Then we should go inside – it is best if we see it in relative darkness."

"I will bring the bottle," Mostin said. His mood was improving rapidly.

Mulissu had dedicated the space within the largest of the five minarets of her mansion-cum-castle to Jovol’s device. When she activated it – a flat metal plate some twelve inches square – by merely passing her hand over it, Mostin’s jaw dropped.

The darkness around them was suddenly illuminated by a hundred thousand points of light which coruscated in every colour imaginable. Some pulsed, and hummed, and seemed to move on unpredictable trajectories. Some quivered, some darted here and there, others stayed fixed, or orbited fathomless loci which
could not be identified. Almost imperceptibly, slender threads wove them together, joining them for brief periods before they separated, or binding them tightly into pairs, triplets or larger clusters.

"Every mote represents a packet of consciousness – an individual entity, or a single perspective. They are shown in relation to one another."

Mulissu looked around briefly, before locating a bluish mote which blazed more brightly than those around it. She touched it with an outstretched finger, and it grew noticeably. Thousands of other motes winked out, but new ones came into being in their place. A puzzled look crossed her face.

"You seem perplexed," Mostin observed.

"The mote which I selected represents myself," Mulissu said. "That much, at least, I have determined. Notice the bright mote which winks nearby. Its pattern seems random and insubstantial: I suspect that this is you, although I cannot read the significance of its behaviour."

"I am mind blanked. This may be reflected in the web’s powers of scrutiny. How did you isolate the mote which represents you?"

"I just knew," the Witch answered. "Do not ask me to explain – I cannot."

"Eadric said that Jovol could infer certain things," Mostin speculated, "even when he could not accurately determine them. It may be possible to locate anyone or anything at any time, past, present or future – given a user with sufficient ability. Beyond even Jovol’s powers, I suspect."

"Indeed," Mulissu raised an eyebrow. "Or mine. It may also be possible to advance or regress the whole web – currently, I believe it shows things as they are. It should be able to reveal things as they were or even as they will be. This is beyond me. Nor can I determine the spatial coordinates of any of the motes – that is to say where in any reality the individual to whom the mote belongs is located. Observe this."

The witch traced a thin tendril from her own mote with her finger. Around them both, lights flashed rapidly, as the thread twisted and gyred. Slowly, in the centre of the chamber, a deep, purplish radiance grew. It seemed somehow serene. Perfect in its shape and form.

From it, a thousand strings, gossamer-thin, radiated outwards, connecting it to a myriad of other motes – including, somewhat detached, the bright blue light which was Mulissu herself. Around the central radiance, slowly orbiting on its periphery, was a single spark of deepest red, filled with malevolence and conveying a sense of foreboding.

"Behold the Claviger," Mulissu smiled, "and the Enforcer. At the end of every tendril, there is a Wizard, Mostin. We are all bound together, and there is nothing we can do about it."

"But which is whom?" Mostin asked in awe.

Mulissu sighed. "That is the question."

The Alienist paused in thought for a moment, before reaching out to touch Gihaahia’s mote, eliciting a doubtful expression from Mulissu.
"Mostin..." She began.

"Sshh!"

The Enforcer’s mote grew, and that of the Claviger retreated, until the red ellipsoid outshone all others. A feeling of subservience – tinged with an ancient, ineffable anger – emanated from it.

"Remarkable," Mostin said. As the radicles which anchored it to other luminous points came in to view, its connection to the Claviger assumed a different shape – appearing as a long, tense cord, which glowered with coercive power.

Many of the motes were now black, or deep scarlet, or midnight blue in hue. From all, violence, and lust, and pain, and fear flowed forth – stifling and suffocating. Many flickered and seemed to jump unpredictably.

"Are we seeing reality from Gihaahia’s perspective, now?" Mostin asked.

"I think these motes around her represent the contacts which she has made. The significant entities which have shaped – and maybe continue to shape – her reality."

Mostin’s eyes darted about rapidly, following the tendrils which sprang from the Enforcer. Where is the connection? It must be here. Is it this?

A fuliginous mote, but somehow vague and indistinct came into view. He touched it. It grew, threatening to consume all else. Beyond it, past incomprehensible connections which spanned realities and stretched the bounds of apprehension, was a yet deeper void.

Mulissu touched him gently on the shoulder. "Stop, Mostin. It will not avail you, and madness lies that way. You do not have the understanding. Sometimes you need to accept your limits."

Mostin exhaled, and nodded.

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**POST 6: THE WEB OF MOTES - CONTINUED**

They sat outside again. At Mulissu’s command, a cool breeze had arisen.

"The dark mote that you evoked – what was it?"

"Cheshne, or her echo," Mostin answered. "At least, I think it was. Nothingness has been weighing on my mind recently. Tell me, Mulissu: is it possible for a demon to survive annihilation?"

Mulissu shrugged. "The ontological paradox holds no interest for me. Speculating about such things is pointless."

"Did you see the void beyond the void?" Mostin asked.
"Yes, Mostin, I did – and I am superstitious enough to say ‘do not speak its name in my house.’ Why does it interest you?"

"It is the key to understanding the demoness Soneillon. If I can locate the mote which represents her, and then the mote which represents Eadric, Tramst, the Prince of Azzagrat…"

"It is an exceedingly long and arduous task," Mulissu sighed, and stretched. "I have attempted the process of cross-referencing, but there are hundreds of variables, and isolating many of them is near to impossible."

"Cosmic entities are easy enough to locate, if you can find one they lead from each to the next – the Enforcer is an excellent place to begin."

Mulissu shook her head. "And if you locate Cheshne, or Astaroth, what then? Can you tell which of Shûth’s accursed gods is which, or which Arch-fiend is Belial and which Amaimon? They flicker and shift."

"How did Jovol interpret it? Did he use a spell?"

"Perhaps. Or perhaps his insight was simply far greater than either of us."

*The bracelet*, Mostin thought at once, and struck his forehead with his hand.

"I am an idiot," Mostin explained.

* Shomei eyed the mephits with an expression of weary tedium on her face.

"How can you tolerate their continual antics?" She asked Mulissu.

"They are acting according to their nature," the Elementalist replied.

"They are fractious and ill-disciplined. I would choose retainers who are more reliable."

"And no doubt far duller and more serious. Mostin says that the bracelet that Jovol bequeathed to you enhances perception in certain areas."

Shomei raised an eyebrow. "Evidently he has studied it more than I gave him credit for. Or his speculation is, for once, accurate. He is correct."

"I wish to borrow it for a short while," Mulissu said impassively – a statement which verged upon a command, or at least an expectation that she would not be denied.

"In order to better interpret Jovol’s web of motes," Shomei nodded. "I, too, would like the opportunity to further realize my bracelet’s potential."

Mostin sighed. He saw where this argument was leading. "It seems plain to me that your respective egos – colossal and yet simultaneously fragile as they both
are – would require each of you to assert your right to first use the bracelet and web in conjunction. I can offer a solution to this impasse by volunteering my services – humbly, of course – thereby sparing each of you further embarrassment. I would also like to point out that I am, by native disposition and years of rigorous training, a Diviner. The web is likely to respond favorably to my benign aura."

"That is utterly spurious," Mulissu moaned. "and I will not even deign to refute it formally. Shomei, follow me – the honour is yours. Forgive my presumption."

Mostin squinted, and traipsed behind the two witches into the dome.

Mulissu floated three inches above the marble floor, arms folded across her chest, whilst Mostin half-sulked and half-scrutinized Shomei, who stood at the centre of the web of motes.

Points of light wheeled around her at incredible speed. She reached out, touched motes which arose, grew, merged, separated, shifted and winked out.

"What do you see?" Mostin asked.

"Wait," the Infernalist replied. "There are more potential viewpoints than I had anticipated." She touched a mote, and it blossomed.

"Well?" Mostin grumbled impatiently.

"There are numerous space-times represented by intersecting parabolae," Shomei answered. "All cosmoi are represented here. And the sum of all possibility."


Shomei glanced around, and interlocking systems rapidly flashed past. She touched another mote, and it assumed a central position and seemed to glow more brightly. The Infernalist laughed – predictably, it was green.

"Are you sure that's him?" Mostin asked.

"Oh yes," she replied.

"Where is he?"

"As I already know where Nwm is – at his glade near Deorham – that would hardly be a fair trial of the web’s power."

"Let me try," Mostin said.

"I’m next," Mulissu smiled.

Mostin scowled.

After several frustrating hours, he finally got to play.

When the Alienist engaged with the web for the second time, he drew in his
breath sharply in wonder.

New levels of complexity were revealed, and others suggested or hinted at. Nuances which had eluded him entirely during his first encounter were suddenly plainly visible: possibilities, probabilities, connections on levels which he did not comprehend. Visions shared, perspectives held in common, affinities with concepts or geographical locations. Space, time and consciousness locked together in a latticework of impossible subtlety and intricacy. The web of motes was a true microcosm. A mirror of reality – or of many realities.


Quickly, he isolated the mote which he knew represented himself and examined it. Hundreds of connections emanated from it to other points of light: Eadric, Nwm, Shomei, Mulissu, Orolde, the Pseudonatural which he had only recently quizzed, the Horror and uncounted others.

Mostin concentrated, and the web receded. Motes flashed as time regressed, but larger patterns remained constant for long periods, as though some overriding principle – an organizing factor – was in play. When they changed, they seemed to do so sometimes slowly and deliberately, sometimes wholesale – imposing a new set of guiding rules and paradigms upon the interwoven gestalt.

Mostin observed Khu: realities collided where gates blazed open and celestials descended in legions. A maze of motes and taut connections which formed a huge knot with many facets. A nodality.

Mostin studied it for three hours, familiarizing himself with its patterns and undercurrents. A variety of hypothetical scenarios which had never been actualized overlapped with events as he remembered them: the death of Ainhorr, the death of himself, the successful flight of Feezuu, the failure of Mulissu to initiate the cascade. The reflection of Graz’zt – the demon’s simulacrum – surviving the assault. Mostin selected an unrealized past future where Eadric had been slain, and gingerly advanced the web into chaos.

Feezuu carving out an empire. Tens of thousands of motes in bondage or annihilated. Her lichdom – which had been so narrowly avoided. Rapid bifurcation, and incomprehensibility.

Mostin sighed, and returned to the Now. He selected Graz’zt’s mote and scrutinized it briefly – it seemed absurdly complex in its connections. It resonated closely with Eadric, with Soneillon – the demoness was now plainly visible to the Alienist – and with hundreds of fiends and powerful servitors or thralls. Another mote, which was burdened with suffering beyond the ability of any mortal flesh to endure, was tightly enmeshed with the others.

Mostin swallowed, and touched Nehael.

A plethora of cosmoi wheeled in a pattern which bore an uncanny symmetry. Like a chiaroscuro in perfect balance, Nehael’s picture revealed Rintrah, Eadric, Graz’zt, Soneillon, Nwm, Titivilus and even Mostin himself in orbit around her. She was the lynchpin, the focus of all activity, and the calm centre around whom infinities – Oronthon, the Far Realm, Unbeing, Dream, the Green, the Adversary – seemed poised through their representatives to assert their claims to reality. Her resonance with Tramst was extraordinary – like Oronthon’s proxy, her role was to reveal all accepted truths as empty. Mostin tried to advance the web, but it
immediately fractured into trillions of possibilities.

"Ngaarh!" He yelled in frustration.

Mulissu stood smiling, looking at him. "It is late, Mostin. I am hungry. Will you stay for dinner?"

Dumbly, Mostin nodded.

*

The Alienist, Elementalist and Infernalist sat around a small hexagonal table within an airy refectory, dining on a sumptuous meal of delicacies prepared by the mephit Shrix – who, apparently possessed a degree of culinary expertise normally eclipsed by his perverse sense of humour as Mulissu’s door-ward.

"This has been most productive," Mostin said through a mouthful of exquisite pastries stuffed with figs, almonds and pistachios. "We should meet more regularly."

Mulissu looked suspicious – her intolerance for frequent interruption was well known.

"Did you determine Soneillon’s location?" Shomei asked Mostin.

The Alienist shook his head. "I became somewhat preoccupied by other matters. Why?"

"She is on the Prime," Shomei replied.

Mostin coughed. "This information would have been better shared earlier."

"I had assumed that she would be first to fall under your scrutiny," the Infernalist jibed. "I merely noticed it in passing – my attention was directed towards the Infernal realms. Incidentally, Titivilus is in Afqithan, along with Furcas and Murmur – although I didn’t pursue that line of inquiry either."

Mostin almost choked.

"What did you look at, Mostin?" Mulissu asked. "I spent an hour minutely inspecting the Claviger and its connections and then proceeded to examine Ha’uh – a primal elemental with whom I should like to make peaceable contact, if possible."

Mostin raised an eyebrow. "The meta-structure of nodalities is fascinating. If I were to direct my energies in any one direction with regard to the web, then it would be here."

Mulissu sighed. "I think the dangers here are apparent – to be drawn in, and spend the rest of one’s life observing or contemplating cosmic plans, patterns and connections. Was it productive?"

"Yes and no," Mostin replied. "I found that advancing the web beyond its current reflection of the Now to be unsatisfying. I could not project it into the future with any degree of certainty."
"Nor could I," Mulissu nodded.

"Nor I," Shomei agreed. "It may be that Jovol’s bracelet is incapable of augmenting our faculties to this extent – his own native ability must have borne the brunt of his endeavours. It might behoove one of us to develop a spell for the express purpose of interpreting the web."

"I will do so," Mostin said, "when I have time."

"If it is ritualized I could easily perfect a formula in a matter of days," Mulissu said. "And with the minimum of fuss."

"My reservoir must stay unmolested," Mostin said sourly. "I want no repeat of Gihaahia’s binding – it set me back by a month at least."

"Noted," Mulissu nodded.

"Splendid," Shomei smiled. "Then I say that we reconvene in one week to discuss our options – assuming that Mostin and I are still alive. And every month thereafter."

Mulissu scowled. "Every year would suit me better."

"Then I would suggest every quarter, as a compromise," Mostin said. "We three would form a potent triad. We are peers, and few others compare to us in power and ability. Mulissu should be our leader – the first among equals."

"Not for long, I suspect," the Witch said drily.

**

"She is here?" Eadric asked, aghast.

Mostin gave a confirmatory nod. "There is more. Before we left, I inspected the web for a third time. It would appear that certain of those others whom we encountered have also made a translation."

Eadric looked sick. "Go on."

"Nhura. The Wyrm, and the Shadow who rode with him – most likely Threxu the Nymph mentioned by Nufrut. At least a dozen of the Loquai – including the one we briefly captured. The other chthonic thing. Nhura is accompanied by another creature: powerful, but heretofore unknown to us."

"A demon?"

"Demons may not enter the world of men unless called. The Interdict forbids it."

"But you just said..."

"It would seem that Soneillon has a way to circumvent it. Or perhaps it no longer applies to her. I would have said that perhaps she has an ally that we do not know about. One who brought her here – it would not be the first time. But the Enforcer would have intercepted a summoner and annihilated him or her. In any case, she is here."
"Where?" Nwm asked.

"Unfortunately, I currently lack the expertise to make an accurate assessment of her position without drawing attention to myself. Not that it matters – she can travel an unlimited distance at will."

"And the others?" Ortwin asked. "The Dragon?"

"Are split into two groups. I suspect one or more of them can plane shift: they may have arrived in two waves."

"I thought the sidhe were capable of that feat in any case," Ortwin said.

"Not the Loquai," Shomei answered. "They are bound to Shadow. Which is fortunate for us – several hundred of them would present a significant threat."

Eadric groaned. "We cannot allow them to remain here. They will cause untold damage."

Shomei shrugged. "It is you they seek, Ahma – your mote is replete with connections to them. Many minds are extended and focused in your direction. They may take some time to arrive here – the two groups are probably several hundred miles distant – both from us and each other. I don't think they will tarry to cause random mayhem."

"We need to intercept the Dragon," Eadric said.

Mostin nodded. "I will scry him shortly. But give me an hour to prepare the rest of my spells."

"An hour?"

"I cannot work miracles, Eadric! If I don't give this some thought, then the chances are that we'll all wind up dead anyway."

**

In the chapel at Deorham, the four devas chanted in unison as they strapped Eadric's armour to him and girded him with his sword belt. He hefted Melimpor's shield – perpetually burnished to an unnatural sheen – and slid Lukarn into its scabbard.

The potent runes and wards on his weapon, girdle and armour would, he knew, be of limited use to him. In an area of dead magic, their power would be suspended: he was relying in large part on skill and force alone. He recalled his own words to Hullu – that he was the greatest warrior of the age, unmatched in arms by any other in Wyre. He swallowed, and wondered if it had been an idle boast.

From his armoury, the Ahma had selected two powerful horn bows – one for himself, and another for Iua – together with quivers full of blue-fletched arrows. Ortwin would be using Shupthul’s bow – his own, Anguish – had been lost along with the rest of his equipment. Unlike the Satyr and duelist, however, Eadric would carry no further wards or augmentations.
Ortwin and Iua were highly mobile – it was expected that they would range beyond the *antimagic field*, attack, and retreat back within it again. Eadric would stay at the centre, protecting the locus of null magic – Shomei – by whatever means he could.

Eadric sighed. He could have commanded a dozen, or even a hundred of Wyre’s most stalwart Templars to accompany him, and didn’t doubt for an instant that they would have followed. But his actions now were far beyond the purview of the Temple, and dragging them off to possible death – or worse – would have weighed on his mind for the rest of his life. This was not their fight. And there was no time.

He hoped that Shomei’s assessment was accurate – that they were interested in him alone. His stomach turned. What havoc would they wreak here, in Wyre?

He closed his eyes, knelt, and prayed.

When he opened them again, he found that he could not rise. The celestials stood in unlikely poses near the altar, similarly paralyzed. Behind him, the Paladin heard gentle footsteps approaching.

A girl who was almost a woman, clad in the traditional folk costume of Trempa – a clean white dress drawn in around the waist, with brightly patterned hems – stood next to him. She leaned forward and lit an offertory candle from an oil lamp, which burned before the solar orb upon the small altar. The flame which kindled from the taper seemed to blaze with a colour that was darker than soot. Eadric’s eyes strained to see her face, oval and framed with a riot of black hair.

She knelt slightly too close for decency, her perfume a heady combination of musk and spice. She turned her head, and her breath was warm in his ear as she whispered.

"Nothing becomes."

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**POST 7: SONEILLON**

*Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 5th August 2003, 12:49 AM*

Arrgh! - I'm in the process of purchasing a house, so don't expect updates to be too frequent.

That said, here's one now.

grodog sometimes has an uncanny perception...

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

**Soneillon**

Soneillon shifted her position, placing a prayer cushion on the low dais before the Paladin, and sitting upon it – squarely in front of him – in the meditation posture
of saizhan. Whether an authentic act, or in dry mockery, Eadric could not tell. She reached forwards, and cupped the *Eye of Palamabron* which hung around Eadric’s neck in her delicate hand, snapped the chain which held it between thumb and forefinger, and casually tossed the amulet aside. As she straightened again, her hair – which smelled of lotus and sandalwood – brushed his face. She smiled.

Her every gesture possessed an effortless allure, replete with innuendo, and the promise of annihilation which rested in her eyes – fathomless voids – served only to heighten her magnetism. She was infinitely desirable. And something about her, not her appearance, but in some way her *essence* – if she was endowed with such – reminded him of Nehael.

Eadric closed his eyes.

"*Saizhan*," she said gently, "demands that you admit to your feelings, take note of them, and allow them to pass peacefully from your mind without judging them. Repression leads to madness. This is why Orthodoxy failed. And erotophobia was among its greatest flaws. You may speak."

The compulsion which transfixed him relaxed just a little. He opened his eyes again, looked at her, and nodded. "There is some merit in that statement," he said shakily. "But if you wish to act as my temptress, you should stand in line – that position is currently filled."

Soneillon laughed, and Eadric was surprised to find that it was a pleasant and agreeable sound. The Paladin recalled Nufrut’s words – *most enigmatic*, she had labeled the Succubus. He reluctantly found himself in agreement with the Marilith’s assessment.

"What do you want, Eadric?" She asked softly. The question penetrated to his core, assailing him on all levels – existential, emotional and physical – at once. "I can help you recover your demon-lover. I don’t doubt you have already speculated about how best to use me. You could have come to Throile and approached me directly – I am not unreasonable."

"And I am not in the habit of frequenting the Abyssal lairs of demonesses," Eadric replied. "Besides, I find far too many fiends far too reasonable. We determined early on that Throile was too high a risk."

"But you entertained the possibility," she smiled. "One of your allies – the devil Aoloz – is still interned there. The *Ahma* is wise to use fiends to do his dirty work – they are less conspicuous than solars, I suspect. Although their demise is also less spectacular." Her words bit deep.

"I am not responsible for Shomei’s choice of servants," Eadric sighed.

"Ahh." The fact that Soneillon evinced no sarcasm made her reply even more frustrating.

Eadric looked sceptical. "I’m surprised that you felt the need to discard Palamabron’s Eye. Titivilus felt no compunction about allowing me to wear it. Perhaps you lack his guile?"

"Perhaps," she shrugged. "Or perhaps unequal truths do not concern me."

The Paladin scowled. "I find your oblique references to *saizhan* baffling. What are you trying to accomplish?"
"They are hardly oblique, Eadric. If I perceive a kernel of wisdom in an idea, then I am not above admitting it – no matter where its source lies. But I am no philosopher and have no interest in debate – I lack the patience. As to the Eye, I’d hoped that you would trust your own ability to judge me, rather than the obsolete lens of a dead cherub. The Truth has changed."

Eadric shook his head wrily. "I can’t trust the authenticity of my own thoughts and actions whilst under the effect of a compulsion. The Eye might allow me to retain some sense of perspective." He sighed. "You wish to use me against Graz’zt. What is it that I can accomplish, which you cannot?"

"Force of arms is not my forte – nor that of my servants. And you are singularly driven in your desire for vengeance. One of Oronthon’s less ‘noble’ aspects, I would argue – but that’s beside the point."

"And what of those you sent here – the Wyrm, Nhura, the Loquai. Why are you here now, if they have come to whisk me back to you?"

"I did not send them – Nhura determined to come of her own volition. And while I’m sure that ingratiating themselves with me is one motive, there are many others. Nhura needs to assert her ascendancy. Koilimilou desires the return of her box of shades. Threxu always longs for new forests to rape and despoil, and the Wyrm to cause as much mischief as he can. And the Loquai? The Loquai can hunt – which is what they love best."

"But you command them?"

Soneillon smiled. "I have no particular attachment to them. You may relax, now. Do as you wish."

Eadric found that he could move again, and shifted his position accordingly. He stood uneasily, glanced at the quartet of unmoving celestials near the altar, at the door to the chapel, and at the demoness again – she looked strangely vulnerable. Somehow, Eadric felt even more uncomfortable than before. He could not read her. He looked at the Eye of Palamabron lying nearby, and sighed. On some level, her words regarding the amulet rang true.

"I would ask that you do not target my friends," Eadric said. "We are interdependent. If you eliminate them, then my effectiveness is diminished."

"I regret Ortwin’s disintegration," she answered. "I didn’t command it."

"And you will call your servants off."

"They are not my servants, Eadric. I am not responsible for their actions."

"You slew Irknaan for his intransigence."

"I slew Irknaan because he was an irritating bore," she replied.

She was maddening. Impossible.

"And what of the other demon? The one of your kind, who is now with Nhura? It is one of yours?"
Soneillon shook her head. "I suggested the name to Irknaan. Whatever compacts were arranged subsequently with Nhura are beyond my purview."

"You could ask the Lilend and her cohorts to return to Afqithan," Eadric said through gritted teeth.

"I could."

"Will you?" He asked.

"No," she replied. "Your actions have led to their presence here. They are your responsibility. And I would like to see how you deal with them."

"You would sacrifice them merely to gauge my suitability as an assassin?"

Soneillon stood up smoothly and stretched slowly, catlike. "If you need me, then call me with your mind when you are on the threshold of sleep. I will come to you."

"I need you to convince your allies to return to Afqithan."

"You know what I mean, Eadric."

He swallowed. "I think you should leave, now." Do not look at me thus.

"Until tonight, then."

"Go."

"Dream well," she smiled, and vanished.

Eadric shook, and cursed silently. He flung the doors to the chapel open, and stormed into the courtyard. The sun was bright, and caused him to squint.

"Nwm!" He thundered.

**

They sat in the Great Hall at Kyrtill’s Burh, around a huge oak table, stained and worn by centuries of feasts held by Eadric’s forebears. Shafts of light from the high windows – opened for the first time in several months – revealed more dust than Mostin felt was healthy. The handful of servants had been less than conscientious in maintaining the interior of the Keep, content instead to deplete the Paladin’s wine cellar. Eadric was unusually tolerant of their idleness – something which the Alienist found deplorable, but knew better than to mention. Mostin discreetly deployed a cantrip to clean the air and furniture.

"Perhaps you should have accepted Titivilus in his offer to act as mediator," the Druid said drily. "I suspect that he would have kept his head, and remained a little cooler. What is it with you and succubi, anyway?"

"Shut up, Ortwin," Eadric said, before the Satyr could open his mouth. The Bard gave a look of mock offense.
Nwm gestured airily. "She has demonstrated her power, in any case. It would seem to be considerable."

Shomei nodded. "I think we knew that – she has held the Prince of Azzagrat to a stalemate for millennia. That is no small feat."

"A simple protection spell should suffice to prevent her exercising further control," Mostin added. "Of course, if she determines that she really wants to – for whatever reason – then she can. We can smother you with wards, all of which would crumble before her magic."

Eadric groaned. "I had assumed that she had dismissed the enchantment."

"No," Mostin said ruefully.

"How long will it last?"

"I don't know. I could disjoin it, but I think we're probably better off just letting it run its course – I may need the spell. I doubt it's permanent – she was dominating the celestials as well."

"How did she appear?" Ortwin asked. "Was she pert, or curvaceous?"

Iua kicked him hard under the table.

"These are important considerations," the Satyr continued. "Would she be swayed by my not insignificant charms, I wonder?"

"Have you no principles at all?" Eadric asked. "The question is rhetorical – you need not answer it. As a girl of perhaps eighteen years. She was wearing a Trempan peasant’s clothes – the kind reserved for festivals and holidays."

Mostin raised an eyebrow. "Intriguing. I had a vision of such, although its significance was difficult to determine."

"That is an agreeable persona," Ortwin nodded. "Did it elicit the Ahma’s approval?"

"Where is this line of inquiry leading, Ortwin?" Eadric looked through narrowed eyes.

"I am an accomplished seducer," the Bard declared. "I am merely attempting to deduce her tactics. I appreciate professionalism in the field of love – hence I’ve always had a soft spot for succubi."

"She is far more," Eadric said irritably.

"Than Nehael?" The question was brutal.

"That is not what I meant."

"I’m just making sure," Ortwin smiled disarmingly. "Eadric, forbidden fruit always tastes sweetest – trust me, I’ve plucked enough of it in my time. Your sorry lot is compounded by the fact that you are driven by some religious urge to overcome duality – on whatever level it happens to manifest. Hence, I would speculate, your initial attraction to Nehael."
"They are hardly comparable circumstances."

"Let the Satyr continue," Mostin said. "This is interesting, and he may have a point. He is experiencing a rare moment of philosophical insight. Do not discourage him."

"You perceive the possibility of a union of opposites," Ortwin said.


"Quite," Ortwin raised an eyebrow.

"And she is playing to your understanding of saizhan," Shomei smiled, "to which the ontological paradox is central. Transcending the duality of ens and non-ens is one of the oldest conundrums of mysticism. Where does consciousness lie when it observes the duality? Does it exist or not? She promises oblivion, which attracts you."

Eadric grumbled. "If you are quite finished in dissecting my psyche..."

"I am not," Ortwin interrupted.

"Nor I," Mostin added. "Eroticism is dangerous because it clouds your perspective – you should exercise caution if you plan to pursue this route as a means to metagnosis. As a recreational activity, I have no problem with it."

"Enough!" Eadric snapped. "I have no desire to pursue 'metagnosis' so the point is moot. Can we leave now?"

"Soon," Mostin replied. "I would prefer to wait until they have passed over the deeper stretches of Lake Thahan – if the Dragon takes to the water, it may complicate things."

"I will go and put on that damned armour," Ortwin complained. "I want my gear back."

Outside, Iua turned to the Bard, exasperated. "Do you have to goad him so?"

"My Love, sometimes it is the only way to make him think."

"Do you have to enjoy it so much?"

Ortwin laughed.

Within the hall, Eadric turned to Nwm. "I was hoping that you might have some advice."

The Druid sighed. "It is difficult. I do not view carnality with the same suspicion that you do. Don't look offended, you know its true. Assuming that we survive this afternoon, then you will be tested again tonight."

"If I sleep within Mostin’s extradimensional space, mind blanked, then I should be safe. Correct, Mostin?"

The Alienist looked dubious. "I suppose so. I am no expert in the way that Dream
functions, but that seems reasonable. If she locates you, she can dispel the ward, though. And the fact remains: how long can you realistically avoid her, using this tactic?"

"I concur," Nwm nodded. "And I think that trying to place yourself beyond her ability to reach you might even be detrimental in the long run. It might pique her interest even more, if you set yourself up as a challenge. She seems to have a well-developed sense of humour – from what you’ve said, at least. No. You should retire as normal, and you’re not going to like this – maybe you should call to her."

Eadric’s jaw dropped. "Are you crazy?"

"You cannot avoid this confrontation now, Eadric. Maybe you can delay it, but I don’t think that would be productive. It will eat at your mind. You should ground yourself, embrace the paradox, and see where it leads. You must act in full consciousness, not in partial denial. If you refuse her attentions, it must be for the right reasons. Talk to her. Open a dialogue, as you said yourself."

"Something which you were against, I recall," Eadric said ironically.

"But now she has made the first move," Nwm pointed out, "and we should reappraise. Reflexivity is required. I am not you, Eadric, and I lack your understanding in certain areas. Shomei seems to think that Soneillon is the most evil, blasphemous, corrupt, tainted entity that she has ever had the misfortune to encounter – she is an expert in such matters, and I am not, so normally I would defer to her opinion. However, you are the Ahma, and your perspective is less than conventional. You must act from instinct, or insight, or whatever you want to call it."

"Sometimes you are very wise, Nwm."

"Yes," the Druid replied. "Although, as a caveat, I would add that it is entirely possible that Mostin is right, your judgement is skewed, and you are rationalizing a basic sexual urge in terms of mystical inquiry."

"That is not helpful," Eadric sighed.

Nwm shrugged. "Sorry," he said.

**

Mostin sat before the Looking-glass of Urm Nahat, idly commanding various scenes to appear upon its surface. Villages. Still, deep water. A small island with a rambling, ramshackle manse of modest proportions.

Eadric stood impatiently behind the Alienist. "What are you doing, Mostin?"

"Patience," Mostin replied. He issued a sending:

Whatever you are doing, desist. I will be in your study in five seconds. A matter of utmost importance. Mostin.

The return message began:
But...

Mostin ignored it. Upon the face of the mirror, the scene of a cluttered workspace appeared. Alembics, heaps of papers, homunculi in jars, and devices whose function Eadric could only begin to guess at were scattered and strewn around. A girl – perhaps six years old and wearing a bright yellow cloak which seemed far too large for her – sat at a table, her tiny hands holding a tome almost as large as she was. She scowled into the sensor.

Mostin raised an eyebrow, and stepped through the mirror.

* * *

"This is most irregular, Mostin," Tozinak said. "I have no party scheduled for three weeks."

"Pay attention," Mostin replied rudely.

Tozinak shifted into the form of a squat dwarf with chestnut skin, a bulbous nose and large, gnarled hands. He looked irritated.

"In approximately fifteen minutes," Mostin continued, "an enormous umbral fiendish dragon and several other creatures of an equally dubious nature will be passing some three miles from here – if they maintain their current course. I plan on intercepting them nearby."

Tozinak spluttered. "But..."

"Tozinak, if I thought there was any chance that you would aid me, then I would ask. You are renowned for your meek temperament – not that I am criticizing..."

"It sounds like you are to me," Tozinak grumbled.

"...but I thought I should warn you nonetheless. There will be magical fireworks in your vicinity – do not be alarmed. When Shomei and I..."

"Shomei is with you?"

"She will be. When..." Mostin paused, about to continue with his explanation – a white lie or two to draw the other Wizard’s interest. Perhaps the Dragon had swallowed an ingot of adamant. Perhaps one of the other ‘dubious’ creatures possessed something Tozinak desired. Mostin sighed.

"Tozinak, I can’t lie to you – you’re just too damn nice. Will you help?"

"Well, Mostin, I’d love to but..."

"Never mind," Mostin said. "One cannot expect too much, I suppose. You are not your sister."

"That is most unfair. Besides, you never even met my sister."

"Something which I deeply regret," Mostin replied.

"Bah!" Tozinak grunted, and transformed into a winged fey of uncertain genus. "I
will do what I can. But then all debts are settled."

"Thank-you, Tozinak."

"Do not expect too much!"

"Don’t worry, Tozinak – I don’t."

**

The inhabitants of Brinnan, a small fishing village nestled beneath the crags of the Gairu – a precipitous massif, which thrust far southwards of the western Thrumohars on the shores of Lake Thahan – did not, for the most part, notice anything untoward, unless it was the faintest acrid smell upon the breeze.

High above, invisible, Crosod, Threxu, Koilimilou and three Loquai champions upon umbral griffons passed rapidly through the sky. They ascended, the great, tenebrous wings of the Dragon somehow capturing the thermals, and granting him lift.

Disguised as a rock upon a granite outcrop, Tozinak shivered. With his magical Sight, he had observed them, and the spectre of the Wyrm – a vast, ravenous shape which ate all light – had almost caused him to fall into a catalepsy of fear and void his stony bowels when they flew overhead. His terror at their passing was matched only by his relief that they could not perceive him.

He swallowed, cast a greater dispelling, and immediately teleported back to his island retreat.

Crosod screeched as wards fell from him and he immediately became visible. He turned his head to locate the source of the spell, his blindsight rapidly scanning the scree. A small boulder vanished. The Wyrm cursed. He turned his head again and was suddenly overwhelmed by a squamous pulse which caused his two-foot thick armour to buckle and rupture.

The sound of his pain and fury was terrific. Rocks split under the force of the noise.

From another outcrop, some hundred yards distant, Eadric, Ortwin and Iua – hasted and invisible – began to launch a storm of enchanted arrows at the Dragon. From an unlocated source, Mostin struck him squarely with a sonic meteor swarm.

The Dragon still reeled, attempting to regain his coordination but Threxu, her face contorted in rage, reacted quickly. She rendered the Wyrm invulnerable to elements and invoked an unholy aura around them both. Nearby, upon her griffon and still warded from sight, Koilimilou targeted the outcrop from which the arrows had issued with an intense burst of dark sound.

Two miles away, on the lakeshore, the fisher-folk of Brinnan stopped in the streets and looked towards the Gairu suspiciously. Thunder echoed in the mountains, but the skies were clear. A mile further out upon the lake, Tozinak quailed in his overgrown garden.

Crosod screamed again as two more squamous pulses caused his scales to twist
and dig further into the flesh beneath them, and darts began to pierce his failing armour. Another immense sonic struck him, but harmlessly. He shook off a *disintegrate*. Above him, now revealed to his perception, a trio of birds descended towards him – two eagles, pulsing with magical power, and a roc of colossal size which dwarfed even his enormous form. The Wyrm’s wings powered him upwards, he invoked a *haste*, and struck the roc with a quickened *destruction* which immediately rebounded back upon him, dissipating quickly in the form of black fire over his body.

Sem and Gheim, acting as vehicles of Uedii’s distaste at the presence of the fiendish dragon in her realm, blazed with Green power as they outpaced the larger bird and tore into Crosod. Their claws and beaks ripped through his shivered scales, finding the gaps in his armour around his head and throat.

Shomei erected an *antimagic field*, and she, Eadric, Iua and Ortwin suddenly became visible upon a granite buttress. The mounted Loquai immediately dived at full speed towards them, leveling their lances. Threxu scowled – unsure of what their sudden appearance meant.

The Wasted Nymph lashed out with a *horrid wilting*, only to find that it evaporated harmlessly. Koilimilou took note, issued a *sending* to Nhura for immediate assistance – whatever and however it could arrive there – and quickly summoned a vrock which appeared in the air nearby.

Nwm, seething with powerful magic, broke upon Crosod at full speed, his immense claws and beak puncturing scales, muscle and sinew upon the Wyrm’s back. Shomei gaped from her vantage point as she watched the Roc pluck the writhing Dragon from the air, and toss him with contemptuous ease against a jagged pilon of stone which reared nearby, smashing it to pieces. Threxu gripped onto Crosod’s foreleg desperately, but was flung clear.

Now, upon the rocky platform, Paladin, Bard and Duelist found themselves engaged in a fierce melee with the Loquai and their griffons, trading blows in an area where wards were ineffective and all magic was suffocated. Shomei felt utterly vulnerable – as one unused to depending on the skill of others for her wellbeing, the voluntary surrender of power had been difficult to stomach. The Infernalist’s fears were misplaced – the sidhe were revealed to be totally outmatched, and were cut down in a matter of seconds.

Mostin – wherever he was – targeted Crosod with another *greater dispelling*, followed by another sonic *meteor swarm* and a quickened, maximized cluster of *magic missiles*.

Shattered, Crosod lurched briefly, and vanished into Shadow. Threxu screamed – in frustration and betrayal – even as the pair of eagles descended upon her with their claws bared. They lacerated her umbral flesh in a frenzy, as she strove to fend them off.

Cursing, the Nymph gestured and malice flowed from her. She targeted the base of the buttress upon which Eadric, Ortwin, Iua and Shomei stood with an *earthquake*, caused granite to crack and groan, and vanished using a *dimension door*. As the stack collapsed, Ortwin rode a crumbling section of cliff-face downwards, leapt from it as it toppled outwards, rolled, and stood up smoothly.

Shomei, bruised and bloody, sighed as she observed the Satyr and Iua. The Duelist appeared similarly unscathed.
Koilimilou vanished in terror, even as her *summoned* servitor – following its orders – swept down towards Eadric. The Paladin sighed and hefted Lukarn.

Above, Nwm’s mind reached out with his torc. Threxu was still within range, and although his Sight could not extend to discern her *invisible* form, he knew she was there. As he powered towards her and she came within view, Nwm shuddered as a *horrid wilting* coursed over him. It was her last, desperate effort.

Nwm spoke, and a column of viridescent fire erupted from the ground beneath Threxu. The Shadow burned away. For the briefest moment, Nwm fancied that he saw her as maybe she once had been, and then the Green gently reabsorbed her essence.

Before the demon reached Eadric, it entered the *antimagic field* which still emanated from Shomei, and winked out. Mostin alighted softly upon the ground and reappeared. He grinned wrily. Hovering in the air nearby were four sensors – obviously several parties were interested in their activities, but if one was Nhura, she was disinclined to reveal herself.

After they had returned to Kyrtill’s Burh, Mostin gestured for the others to follow him back through the mirror.

Within two minutes, Crosod was dead: tracked to the Plane of Shadow, and butchered methodically, unceremoniously, and with surprisingly little effort.

**

"Nhura will, no doubt, be reconsidering her options." Shomei closed her eyes and drank deeply from a crystal goblet, allowing the firewine to course through her veins and causing her head to spin.

"Koilimilou used a *limited wish* in order to *teleport*," Mostin sighed. "That could prove tedious – Irknaan may have used the same tactic. I suspect that she has joined Nhura and the other group. Still, if I were the Lillend, I would secure reinforcements before proceeding."

"I agree," Eadric nodded. "We are far from safe, but the Wyrm has been eliminated – frankly, he was my biggest concern. His sheer destructive potential was unmatched. The demon, of Soneillon’s ilk – *chthonic*, Shomei called it: what is its power?"

"That is hard to gauge," Mostin admitted.

"And the other? The ‘unknown?’ Does it remain so?"

Mostin nodded. "But, whatever it is, it cannot be *that* fearsome – or else we would have been assailed already. I am reluctant to *scry* them unless we intend to attack immediately afterwards. If they are warded – which seems likely – then a sensor may be ineffective in any case. When I discerned Nhura’s location she was three hundred miles away to the northeast, over Einir. The *web of motes* revealed Nhura, the Demon, the other creature, and nine more Loquai ‘stalwarts’ in that cluster. Koilimilou has, doubtless, joined them."

"How long before they reach us, assuming we don’t intercept them?"
"Six hours, maybe," Shomei answered. "But they may need to rest – even the griffons cannot fly tirelessly."

"The question is simple," Ortwin said. "Do we engage them here, or en route?"

"I favour the former," Nwm said. "We need to replenish our flagging reserves. Let them come. We will be ready for them. We should rest in the chapel. If they teleport here, it will be at great cost to them, in ineffective pairs or trios. And they will not fly in anytime soon."

"Why?" Eadric asked.

"Because I am going to conjure a large storm," Nwm replied. "So I suggest that you close your windows."

"The enchantment, upon the devas and myself..." Eadric began.

"I will disjoin it," Mostin sighed.

"Ahh, free will will be yours again, Ed," the Satyr said sarcastically. "Now, whatever happens, you have only yourself to blame."

Eadric scowled.

*Qiseze, the Fire Savant slain by Feezuu. Feezuu herself was, of course, subsequently killed by Mostin.

**Mostin had used a discern location to pinpoint Crosod some thirty minutes beforehand, but had opted not to use the mirror to scry him – it was likely that most of the enemy would detect the sensor, and react accordingly. Nwm used his torc to determine their path – there was much to-ing and fro-ing using the mirror, as the party assumed a favorable position. The mountains were chosen because they would afford a useful vantage for the archers, and were away from both forests and inhabited areas.

The two legendary eagles were very seriously buffed – animal growth, bear’s heart, greater magic fang, expeditious retreat and nature’s avatar. I didn’t realize quite how dangerous they could be until this encounter – their melee attacks were at +40 something, and they were dishing out 30 points of damage or more with each attack.

Yet more of Soneillon’s unreasonable Epic spells. She was under the influence the Renewal of Purpose and Desire, routinely invoked by her every month when she is in Throile – essentially a highly excessive buff spell. The Renewal involves the input of the four chief sorcerer-succubi who serve Soneillon. The compulsion afflicting Eadric and the devas, I had dubbed Do What I Will – a nod to the overt Crowleyanity which sometimes pervades the game.
Renewal of Purpose and Desire
Transmutation

Spellcraft DC: 34
Components: V, S, XP, Ritual
Casting Time: 10 minutes
Range: Personal
Target: You
Duration: 672 hours

To Develop: Seed: Fortify (DC 17), Ward (DC 14). Factors: increase Cha bonus by +19 (+38 DC); increase duration by 3250% (+65 DC); gain +30 on caster level check to beat foe’s dispel effect (+60 DC); ward against disjunction (+16 DC). Mitigating factors: increase casting time by 9 minutes (-18 DC); four other casters contributing 7th level slots (-56 DC); change from target to personal (-2 DC); burn 10,000 XP (-100 DC).

In a brief rite conducted every month (when the moon is new on the Prime Plane), the caster renews her focus and the ability to exercise her Will. She gains a +20 enhancement bonus to Charisma which lasts for one month – until the next invocation of Renewal of Purpose and Desire.

The spell itself enjoys a +30 bonus on the caster level check when targeted by dispel effects directed at it – effectively negating the bonus offered by superb dispelling. It otherwise requires two disjunctions to counter the Renewal of Purpose and Desire – the first eliminates the ward component of the spell, the second counters the enhancement bonus itself.

Do What I Will
Enchantment (Compulsion) [Mind-Affecting]

Spellcraft DC: 40
Components: None
Casting Time: 1 quickened action
Range: 75 ft.
Area: 20-ft. radius sphere
Duration: 23 hours 20 minutes
Saving Throw: Will negates
Spell Resistance: Yes

To Develop: Seeds: Compel (DC 19); Contact (DC 23). Factors: Quickened spell (+28 DC); no verbal or somatic components (+4 DC); dismissible by caster (+2 DC); increase duration by 600% (+24 DC); change from target to 20 ft. radius area (+10 DC); compel unreasonable course of action (+10 DC); Increase spell’s saving throw DC by +10 (+20 DC); Mitigating factor: burn 10000 XP.

The caster establishes an immediate telepathic bond with all creatures within the area of effect and issues a silent mental command forcing them to do her bidding. Each target is allowed a Will saving throw (DC 30 + relevant modifier) in order to resist the effect.

Once the compulsion is established, the caster may exercise her Will and telepathically command each of those affected – either singly or jointly – to perform actions as she sees fit. Distance is not a factor. Issuing subsequent commands is a free action, although only one such command may be given in
any round. Even instructions which would normally result in the death of those affected by Do What I Will are followed to the letter.

POST 8: CHURCH AND STEEPLE – PART 1

Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 25th August 2003, 05:01 AM

The chapel at Kyrtill’s Burh was a compact space, perhaps twenty-five feet in its longest dimension, which abutted the main keep. Like the rest of the castle, its exterior – recently repaired by Nwm’s efforts – was smothered in an ivy of an unusually prolific variety, which required continual management and pruning. And pruning seldom happened within the Burh.

There were two entrances to the sanctuary: a pair of stout oak double-doors which led into the courtyard, close to the archway at the base of the Steeple; and a smaller lintel, constructed of steel, which joined the portico in the keep proper. The metal door was hidden in a concave, behind the plain white arras which formed a backdrop to the altar space – raised upon a low dais reached by three shallow steps. The area below the dais was clear, except for a thick carpet some twenty feet long which stretched to the main doors, two low benches, and a dozen or so prayer cushions – some of which were extremely threadbare.

Ortwin sat in the centre of the floor, uncharacteristically tense. He disliked the chapel for a number of reasons, not the least of which was the draught – barely noticeable – which issued from beneath the floor covering: cold air from the crypt, finding its way through cracks in the flagstones. Nwm had specifically instructed the gnomes who had restored the rest of the keep’s interior to leave the chapel untouched: it was Eadric’s sanctum, and the Druid had felt that it would have been the worst breach of etiquette to engage in unapproved remodeling. Whilst Eadric appreciated the gesture, he had privately wished that Nwm had done something about the chapel. The austerity which had marked his earlier years had given way to a more balanced outlook, and sometimes comfort was no bad thing. Somehow, the chapel hadn’t caught up with him.

The Satyr grumbled about the cold. "Can’t we light a fire or something?" He watched as Shomei placed a dimensional lock in the centre of the sanctuary, barring all forms of extraplanar movement. The Infernalist had already invoked a screen upon the whole of Kyrtill’s Burh – it appeared as nothing more than a rugged outcrop of rock to magical scrutiny.

Eadric sighed. "Perhaps if you ask Mostin nicely, he will modify the temperature."

"Why are we here, anyway?" Ortwin continued. "Doesn’t the place need to be reconsecrated or something? I seem to recall there being a demoness of some power in here several hours ago."

"Yes," Eadric sighed, "it does. It is still the most defensible place in the keep, however."

"Consecration is highly advisable," Mostin said morbidly. "The Succubus might be tempted to turn your dead relatives into vampires."

"That is in particularly poor taste," Eadric replied nervously. "But you have a
point. I will send to Morne for someone to come here as soon as possible. Probably Asser. Unless Nwm would care to do the honours*?

"I had assumed that you would require someone of 'true faith' to perform the rite."

"I am more flexible in that regard than I was previously, as the definition of 'true' is now revealed to be somewhat ambiguous."

"Perhaps Mostin could gate a solar," Ortwin suggested. "It could perform the necessary magic, and would be a reassuring presence."

"For you maybe," Mostin said acidly. "And I am not sure that Gihaahia's subsequent punitive visit here would contribute to the sanctity of the place. We are safe enough for the moment, barring Soneillon herself – and I suspect that there is no precaution which we could take that would bar her if she were determined."

"If you had prepared a magnificent mansion..." Ortwin began.

"Or if you had spent your time studying magic instead of fornicating and drinking firewine," Mostin snapped irritably. "We will be fine. Those hideous cohorts of Eadric are outside keeping guard. Ungrateful creatures. At least they could of thanked me for dispelling their paralysis."

"They are grateful," Eadric reassured him. "But tend to communicate little. I was surprised that Soneillon didn't destroy them."

"She is wooing you," Nwm said wryly. "Killing celestials would make a bad impression, I'm sure."

"So is he safe?" Ortwin asked, with a wicked grin, "Or will she invade his dreams and cause him to experience impure thoughts?"

Mostin shrugged. "Good question. Technically, the dimensional lock should prevent a creature in dream-form from gaining ingress. I say technically because she may have tricks that we do not know of. And Dream is odd, to say the least."

"In 'dream-form?'" Ortwin persisted. "You mean she may be nearby?"

"Coterminous? Why not?"

"She is not," Eadric said. "At least, not very near. The Eye of Palamabron would reveal her if she were."

Ortwin smiled sarcastically and scratched his haunch. "Then your thoughts will remain pure! How blessed you must feel! You must teach me the secret someday."

Eadric sighed. Ortwin was beginning to get on his nerves. He closed his eyes, and experienced the frustration. He sighed again, stood up, and walked towards the doors.

"Er, where are you going, Ed?" Ortwin asked.

Excellent idea! You have a stash of fine firewine, and…

Alone, Ortwin. I am going alone.

Oh.

Mostin mind blanked him first.

**

Outside, the wind had picked up and the rain had begun to fall. Nwm’s storm – as promised – had arrived, and Eadric hoped that it wouldn’t prove too violent. He ascended sixty of the seventy-seven steps of the Steeple, passing through a small door into the chamber situated below the open roof.

It was a comfortable space – once a round guard room, but since adapted to the function of a parlour. During the garrisoning of Kyrtill’s Burh, it had briefly enjoyed a return to its original function, although the Templars stationed there had done nothing to alter its furnishings. A single window of lead glass in the west wall admitted the remaining light of the failing day. The room, and those below it, had been those ‘rented’ by Mostin in his attempts to fabricate a plausible story following his violation of the first Injunction – before the Claviger had acquiesced to act as the guardian of the moral fibre of Wyre’s Wizards.

Eadric lit an oil-lantern – the flame of which flickered unsteadily in the draught before he closed its shutter – threw off his armour, opened a tall cabinet, and retrieved a bottle of firewine. He smiled at the fact that Ortwin knew where he kept it – and poured himself a small glass. He was mildly amused that it should still feel such an indulgence to him: he had violated so many of his vows that ignoring the precept which warned against alcohol seemed utterly trivial in comparison.

Sitting on one of the three narrow pallets which served as the room’s couches, Eadric set Lukarn down next to himself, reached into his belt-pouch, and retrieved a tiny piece of tightly-rolled parchment. He opened the lantern hood, and thrust the paper into the flame, holding it between his fingers and watching as it quickly burned to nothing.

Soon after, a gate opened, and Titivilus stepped through.

"Thank-you for your prompt response," Eadric said.

The Devil smiled laconically. "Hello, Ahma. I had hoped to run into you in Afqithan but, alas, you fled before we had a chance to speak. If you had answered my sending then things may have advanced at a faster pace for you."

"I was reluctant to place myself in your hands at that time," Eadric raised an eyebrow. "And who would arbitrate between the arbiter and his client?"

"I have a friend called Furcas who might volunteer in that capacity," the Duke replied caustically.

"You have friends? That surprises me."

"You are correct," Titivilus answered. "In fact, I despise him. But we are working
together for the moment. This is a cosy little chamber. I almost prefer it to your study in the keep."

Eadric narrowed his eyes, unsure of whether the Devil jibed him or not. "I require advice, and perhaps mediation. If there is a price, then I would be grateful if you informed me of it prior to further communication."

"There is no price, Ahma," Titivilus replied easily. "Although my perspective is a little different from yours, and the advice I give may not necessarily be that which you seek. As both the voice of your conscience and your divinely ordained tempter, I have more than one agenda to maintain. I presume that your inquiry concerns the demoness Soneillon?"

Eadric sighed, and nodded.

"She is something, is she not?" Titivilus laughed. "And, I should say, she is nothing, if you understand my meaning. It was whispered in the narrow streets of Zelatar that she could bring a corpse to orgasm – forgive me, Ahma, I do not wish to offend your sense of propriety. I am sure that your interest in Graz’zt’s former concubine is purely pragmatic."

"You know her then? You have met her?"

"Perhaps. I do not recall." Titivilus replied vaguely.

"She is a potential ally," Eadric said.

"So I hear," Titivilus smiled.

"Does Graz’zt know of her interest in me?"

"Graz’zt has an extensive network of spies, but he is ultimately ill-informed and disorganized. I would hazard that he does not, but I make no assurances to that effect."

"If a confrontation occurs between the Prince and myself, I would – if possible – prefer to keep it out of Wyre and the World of Men. Do you think Afqithan would be a suitable locale?"

"It offers greatly augmented magic. Mostin – and Shomei, to whom, incidentally, you should extend my warmest regards – would benefit from this. As would Graz’zt himself, of course. I suspect that the risks would be greater, but the possibility of victory higher."

"Soneillon has powerful allies – and dangerous, it seems. She denies direct association with them, or rather seems reluctant to admit responsibility for their actions."

"This is not unusual for a Demon Queen," Titivilus replied drily.

"She subjected me to an extremely powerful compulsion. Could a mind blank have warded me?"

"Perhaps, although doubtless she possesses dweomers that can circumvent such magic. For a creature of her age, with her power, what can she not do, Ahma? Magic is formulaic, and in practical terms holds a finite – albeit astronomically large – set of possibilities. There might be a quintillion combinations which she is
technically capable of manifesting alone. If she has unlocked merely a hundred thousand of them – the most efficient, given a certain set of circumstances – how versatile do you think that makes her?"

Eadric swallowed. The Devil’s premise was plausible. "And Graz’zt? Could the same be said?"

"To a lesser degree. He possesses more raw native power, but lacks that which Soneillon draws freely and most heavily upon – unbeing. I do not claim to fully understand it."

Eadric stared hard at Titivilus. "You are unusually forthcoming. I wonder which of your numerous agendas you are serving by sharing this information."

The Duke of Hell smiled.

"I have other questions," Eadric said unsurely, "and I would be interested in hearing your perspective – or the Adversarial perspective, if you are towing a particular line. I should also, at this point, like to seek further assurances that there are no hidden fees, contracts, compacts, reciprocal obligations or responsibilities involved."

Titivilus raised an eyebrow. "Your caution is admirable, Ahma, but you are somewhat over-concerned. Ask away! There is no obligation upon you."

"The Marilith Nufrut mentioned an entity named Carasch. Mostin was unaware of its existence. A balor which fell within the orbit of the Ancient Void, and then rose from it again. Is the name familiar to you?"

"Yes," Titivilus answered. He seemed unperturbed, but Eadric knew that gauging the Confuser’s true reaction was close to impossible.

"What distinguishes one fiend from the next, insofar as some possess the ability to withstand annihilation?"

Titivilus laughed. "That is more profound than you understand. I do not know, Ahma. Perhaps they are endowed with a particular strength of Will which sets them apart from their peers. Perhaps they are lucky. Perhaps they apprehend some greater Truth which allows consciousness to persist, even in the face of nonexistence."

"Such an entity," Eadric continued, "Carasch. It would be as far removed from Rurunoth as Soneillon is from a succubus of the least stature."

"That is probably a reasonable parallel."

"How many of these entities – chthonics, as Shomei dubbed them – would you say exist?"

"I am not privy to that information," Titivilus admitted.


"I would not know, Ahma. I suspect we are talking in terms of relative infinities. How many fell from grace? How many fled to the Abyss? How many were enmeshed in the Ancient’s power? Mere numbers cease to have meaning, after a
certain point."

"Why is no reference made to them in texts – legitimate, heretical, magical or otherwise? I use those descriptors loosely – I do not wish to engage in a debate on the nature of heresy."

"Certain names and concepts are taboo. Unbeing, Demogorgon, existent nonexistence – this is an example of such. Before the Church of Oronthon was established, when it was still a tribal religion whose God vied with a dozen others – this was a taboo. It persisted."

"Saizhan addresses this issue."

"Saizhan claims to address many issues."

"Is Oronthon then rewriting the past? Changing the Truth of what has gone before?"

"That is one possible interpretation. I do not doubt there are others."

**

Mostin sat and leered at the effigy upon the altar – an eagle rearing above a solar orb – and felt a frisson of disgust at the avian symbol.

Nearby, Shomei sat in a contemplative trance, Ortwin snored loudly, and Iua – silent as a cat – practiced with her rapier, repeating maneuvers endlessly, each time with subtle variations on a complex theme. Nwm, apparently enraptured with the Green, paid no heed to any other.

The Alienist groped within his portable hole and retrieved an ornate box of carved wood from among the objects stored there. Opening it, he pulled the contents – a stone slab – from its red silk wrappings, and set it upon the rug in front of him.

Mostin closed his eyes, focussed inwards, and inspected his valences: nested shells which grew outwards from a central hub, rapidly blurring into an indistinct haze where no differentiation yet existed. He placed his mind beyond the order, beyond the haze, in the swirling, chaotic morass which surrounded it.

Tiny buds of potential were burgeoning, seeking to make contact with each other and the hub of consciousness at the centre. Deliberately, he focussed upon them, drawing on his reservoir. His mind opened like a sluice, pouring its contents forth. Rapidly, the buds blossomed gloriously, and bore fruit which ripened in a heartbeat. He shook, and sweated profusely.

The Alienist turned his attention to the tablet in front of him, his eyes scanning over it, and his fingertips tracing the etchings and designs upon it. There was a sudden crack, as the slab shattered, and the sound of grinding stone. An eddy of wind arose, and all that was left before him – a pile of dust – was blown across the floor of the chapel.

Shomei observed him with a mixture of envy and mirth.

"Congratulations," the Infernalist said drily.
"Thank-you," Mostin replied. "How long before you...?"

"A week at most. I had hoped to beat you to it."

"Hah! No chance. This means that I am – if only for a brief while – the most potent spellcaster in Wyre, and the first in two generations to achieve this notable achievement. I don’t include Mulissu in that statement – she is not native, and doesn’t count."

Nwm smiled quietly, but said nothing.

* 

As Mostin sat and contemplated the spell called Graz’zt – designed by Fillein-who-would-later-be-Jovol in the heyday of his power and influence – he shifted uncomfortably. Something was amiss. Within the perfectly executed formula which comprised the spell, there was no room for error: each component and factor was optimized for an efficiency of purpose which Mostin deeply appreciated, both functionally and aesthetically. 

_Fifty-five years. The Prince was bound for fifty-five years, if the stories are true. Why? Why was he not bound permanently? The dweomer indicates no provision for an expiry._

"I am uneasy," he whispered to Shomei.

"I am tired, Mostin. If you are having an episode of paranoia, then talk to Nwm."

"This is _important_," the Alienist hissed. Nearby, Ortwin grunted in response, and turned over in his sleep. Mostin resumed a quieter voice. "The spell which now resonates in my mind preoccupies me. There is an inconsistency."

Shomei yawned and gestured impatiently.

"The incarceration should have been _permanent_. Why was it not? According to tradition he was bound for fifty-five years. This leads me to three possible conclusions, none of which are particularly pleasant to entertain: One, the effect ‘wore off’ over time; two, the spell contains a flaw in its formula which I cannot perceive; or, three, he was released by someone."

Shomei raised an eyebrow. "I see your dilemma. Magic of this magnitude is enduring, and I find it hard to accept the first solution. Fillein was a perfectionist beyond compare, rendering the second answer even less likely. I would opt for the third possibility, or a fourth which you have not considered."

"Which would be?"

"I do not _have_ a fourth solution, Mostin. I am merely pointing out that it would be premature to discount the possibility of its existence. I think that he was probably released."

"By whom?"

"Who can tell now, Mostin? It was three hundred years ago. A rival mage?"

"Fillein – or Jovol – was – or is – without peer. He had – or has – no rival. Was he
in possession of the web of motes at that time? If so, surely he would have anticipated the possibility in any case."

"Then one of the cabal? Or Fillein himself, maybe, for whatever unknown reasons motivated him. This is idle speculation. We cannot know. They are all dead and gone."

"Hlioth remains," Mostin pointed out.

"Hlioth is deranged, but not stupid. Why would she release the Prince of Azzagrat? And if so, why did he not eliminate her afterwards?"

Nwm interrupted unexpectedly. Neither of the Wizards had been aware that he had been paying attention. "If she released Graz'zt, then I commend her actions. Such creatures have no place in this world, bound or not. Rurunoth was bad enough, but a Demon Prince?"

"Then she is most inconsistent," Mostin pointed out. "She participated in the binding of the Enforcer."

"To prevent further summonings in Wyre," Nwm smiled. "Didn't that clause in Jovol's Injunction ever strike you as odd, Mostin? Why do you think it was singled out, above and beyond the ban upon mages assaulting other mages?"

"Because of the circumstances prior to it," the Alienist replied. "There were too many bindings, too many gates opening. The possibility of too many more."

"Too many for what?" Nwm asked.

"For the established order to sustain," Mostin admitted. "But if you are somehow intimating that your Goddess insisted upon including a clause in the Injunction which would prevent further offense to her..."

"You are trapped in discursive thought – Uedii is a consciousness of what is Natural, not some other being 'out there.' Jovol was a Dreamer, who negotiated with Celestials, protected both Eadric and Tramst, acted in the interests of maintaining a peace, and directed the binding of an atavism from a previous reality. He was nothing, if not eclectic. I think you underestimate the scope of his vision."

"Hmph!" Mostin muttered. "Anyway. If we attempt to bind the Prince anytime soon, it will not be here. I have already given thought to it."

Shomei sighed, as Mostin proceeded to explain about permanent dimensional locks, pocket demiplanes and spells which foiled all perception.

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*All of Kyrtil’s Burh was consecrated by Tahl, and the chapel hallowed. Soneillon dispelled the effect in the chapel before dominating Eadric and the guardians. I use the ToH version of Movanic Devas (more martial, less magical), so hallow was not available to the celestials in order to restore the chapel.*
Nhura uttered a string of black profanities when she received the news from Koilimilou that Crosod had fled back to Shadow, and was, by now, probably dead. The hunting party descended into the woods of Hethio, two leagues from the ancient dolmens at Groba. A madness fell upon the birds and animals as they fled from the umbral sidhe and the creatures which accompanied them: griffons, the chthonic thing, and the Lamia Jetheeg – another sorceress of no mean ability. Koilimilou was incapable of subsequently scrying the Wyrm, which only made his death seem that much more likely. Threxu’s demise was all but certain.

Frustrated, and aware of the fact that it might prematurely attract undue attention, Nhura nonetheless instructed Koilimilou to scry Eadric of Deorham. Although the Lillend was aware of the general location of the Ahma’s stronghold, a lock upon him and a subsequent clairvoyance would pin him down. The Cambion’s efforts drew a blank.

Nhura cursed, and ordered Koilimilou to call and bind as many demons as she was capable of. A bitter argument ensued, but Koilimilou finally relented. Previously, she and the Lillend might have been well-matched; but now Nhura wore Irknaan’s mantle, and was unassailable by any magic which the Cambion possessed. As dusk fell, under the Lillend’s watchful eye – lest she order the creatures to turn upon her Queen – Koilimilou struck a series of bargains with profanities against which the soil of Wyre heaved in revulsion. Throughout, Nhura was poised to invoke destruction upon the Cambion if she spoke even a phrase out of turn.

Soneillon watched from behind a tree-trunk some fifty yards distant, hiding, invisible, and in the shape of a diminutive woodland spirit. She had not anticipated Nhura’s determination, nor the resources at the Lillend’s command – albeit vicariously. Neither had the Succubus considered the lengths to which Nhura would go in order to assert her claims to Afqithan – in her retinue were knights loyal to Samodoquol and Menicau, and they needed to be suitably impressed.

The Queen of Throile passed into the unconscious world again, and returned her attention to Eadric. The mental landscape of dreamers in Hethio was fraught with hideous nightmares, the significance of which none understood.

**

In the topmost chamber of the Steeple, the Ahma sat closeted with Titivilus, probing the Infernal Duke on a variety of subjects, but retaining a healthy sense of scepticism with regard to any answers that he received. When they returned to the matter of Soneillon, Eadric stayed true to his words with Titivilus at their first meeting: he preserved a total honesty in communication. He was struck with the realization that whether the Devil adhered to the same premise was, in the final analysis, irrelevant.

"You would advise me to use her," Eadric said. "To slake my lust, draw upon her
power, discard her when her utility has expired, and move on."

"That is what I would do, Ahma. I am not you, however. I lack your moral baggage."

"You lack compassion."

"If you prefer," Titivilus sighed. "Although I thought we had already agreed as to its redundancy as an effective tool."

"That is because you also lack the ability to understand it," Eadric smiled.

"As your understanding of compassion is obviously far more developed than mine," Titivilus laughed, "then perhaps you should also extend it to Graz’zt. And every other Demon and Devil between Azzagrat and Nessus. Set yourself up as a shining beacon of Love, Ahma, and watch as, no doubt, repentant fiends flock to your warm smile and welcoming arms. I will remain at the back of the line and observe as Astaroth and Moloch, like pubescent girls, shily jostle for their places and anxiously think ‘will he choose me next?’ I think not."

"Your mockery does you no credit, Titivilus, and merely reveals the fear that you experience in the face of that which you no longer comprehend but secretly long to become reacquainted with. I am not crippled by my doubt, but draw strength it. You resent me, because I am mortal but still you are forced to acknowledge my spiritual authority. I see the limits of your perspective – the ‘Adversarial’ paradigm – and recognize the partial truth which it contains. But you fail to transcend the dichotomy of total self-determination and absolute surrender to the Will of Oronthon: they are identical. Accompany me later to Morne, and I will introduce you to the Sela. I guarantee your safety – I would happily defend your right to speak with him."

"No, thank-you," Titivilus replied calmly. "Although I’m sure I appreciate the offer. Maybe another time – in an aeon or two."

"The door to the Fane will remain open."

"And I will remain outside," the Devil finished. "Now, Ahma, before I grow weary of your proselytizing, and my mood becomes less accommodating, let us turn to ‘mediation.’ You are ready for me to act as a go-between in communicating with Soneillon?"

"I require the benefit of your perspective in order to better inform mine. You are adept at dealing with fiends, and penetrating their motives."

"That much is true," Titivilus smiled archly. "Am I to act as a chaperone to you also, lest you feel an uncontrollable urge to bed this demoness?"

"You have a singular sense of humour."

"And your track history speaks for itself. Nonetheless, my raiillery may be pertinent – Soneillon is said to possess a peculiar way of eliciting sympathy."

"So I have discovered," Eadric said wryly.

"Now?"

"Now," the Paladin nodded.
Titivilus issued a *sending*. Three seconds later, Soneillon manifested. Dreamstuff swirled briefly around her – nightmares and visions of horror, which rapidly faded to nothing in the waking world. As before, her form – that of a Trempan peasant-girl – evoked a complex reaction in Eadric, despite a knowledge that it was entirely superficial.

* 

"Charmed, I’m sure," Titivilus bowed with mock politeness.

"Is there any particular reason why I should not extinguish this gnat?" The Succubus asked the Paladin.

"If I thought it would carry any weight," Eadric replied, "then I would say ‘because he is divinely mandated.’ As I know that you recognize no such authority, I will simply say ‘because I ask you not to.’ I have requested the services of Titivilus as an arbiter. He is, in a manner of speaking, my guardian angel – albeit a fallen one."

"I may have misjudged Oronthon’s sense of the absurd. This monster is hardly a disinterested party, Eadric. Still, he risks much by being here alone – I wonder how he is being recompensed. Where are Murmuur and Furchus, Devil? Three together might pose a challenge to me, but one alone is an easy target."

"Alas, they lack my boldness and appetite for adventure," Titivilus replied, "and my legal expertise," he added.

Soneillon tilted her head inquisitively. "You wish for a formal compact then, Eadric?"

Eadric shook his head. "I wish for a third opinion – however partial. I am also highly dubious of the extent to which you would regard any compact as binding. You seem oblivious to most other established fiendish conventions."

Soneillon moved closer, and her eyes bored into Eadric. "You are perceptive. I wonder if Nehael recognized your potential for transcendence when she was first attracted to you, or she saw you merely as a redeemer and was romantically fixated? She was always somewhat idealistic."

Eadric squinted. "What do you know of her?"

"I knew *all* of the succubi in Graz’zt’s harem, Eadric. And the mariliths, the lamias, and every other shade of fiendish slut that he could lay his hands on. Each bitch is more wicked and depraved than the last, although, no doubt, each has her charms. When one spends a million years as his chief concubine, there isn’t much that one doesn’t discover."

"And you, Queen Soneillon?" Titivilus asked with an amused expression. "How wicked and depraved are you? I would almost say the wickeder, the better, from the Ahma’s perspective. He has a powerful urge to heal, you know. It continues to lead him into all kinds of trouble."

"I will tolerate your presence, but will brook neither innuendo nor veiled insults, Devil. This creature is a viper, Eadric – do not let his apparent openess and easy mannerisms deceive you. His only goal is your damnation, and if he can use me
as a vehicle to achieve it then all the better for him."

Titivilus was about to speak, but Eadric held up his hand to stay him. "My circumstances are unusual," the Paladin said to Soneillon. "And it would seem that established mores do not apply to me. Somehow, I have been appointed a role in determining what is right from what is wrong, although I fail yet to fully understand my place in the new order. Damnation itself may be an outmoded concept – Saizhan is beyond such categories."

"You will be your own judge, Eadric. You know this. Who could be harsher?"

Eadric swallowed. He felt distinctly uncomfortable. Despite her subtleties, Soneillon seemed to possess an uncanny knack for presenting stark truths in uncompromising terms.

"I do not understand what motivates you," Eadric said.

"That is part of my appeal," she replied. "I am disappointed that you severed the connection between us: had the spell I wrought not been negated, you could have met me in Dream. What do you fear?"

"His lust confuses him," Titivilus said, "and he is unused to acting for the simple purpose of sensory gratification. Evil and pleasure are intimately connected in the Ahma’s mind: Temple conditioning is hard to shake off, even when one is the Breath of God."

"The Devil’s words have some merit," Eadric nodded. "I would also add, however, that Dream is something which I have little understanding of. In Afgithan, the Duke offered to act as a mediator between myself and the Loquai and their allies – I assume that he included you in the equation. I refused him for the same reason that I was dubious of encountering you in Dream – it was not a familiar environment. I prefer reality to be more tangible – there are enough variables to deal with already."

"That is a specious argument," Soneillon smiled, "but, as I have said, I am no philosopher and prefer not to be drawn into ontological debate. It would be a terrible thing if my intellect succeeded in denying the possibility of my own existence."

Eadric laughed despite himself, before staring at her with a mixture of wonder and suspicion: was her humour genuinely self-deprecating, or merely an affectation assumed for his benefit?

"We should address the question of Graz’zt," the lightness in the Demoness’s tone had vanished. "Are you now ready to hear the worst?"

"I don’t understand."

"Nehael, Eadric. Do you wish to know what has become of her?"

Be careful, Ahma, she lies almost as well as I.

"No doubt you will take a perverse pleasure in relaying this information," Eadric sighed.

I do not take my pleasure thus, sweet Eadric. "Nehael is currently held in a cell of adamant, deep below Zelatar, in immensely powerful magical bonds, and
subjected to pain that you cannot begin to comprehend – Graz’zt is particularly skilled and inventive in these matters. She is guarded by the Nalfeshnee Trakkao – who administers punishment on the Prince’s behalf." Soneillon’s expression was one that, if offered by any other, the Paladin would have interpreted as genuine empathy and sorrow.

This whore is outrageous!

"Proceed," Eadric said coldly, scowling at Titivilus. He was beginning to feel sick.

"Violation of the body is only the beginning, Eadric. There is a limit to the trauma that even Demonic flesh – once fashioned of Empyrean stuff – can sustain before it loses all ability to renew itself. And Nehael is fragile – she has already relinquished much of the strength that was native to her. Little of her as you remember her remains, and her physical form has been stripped away: she consists now largely of essence. As to the integrity of her personality, who can tell? He may have broken her altogether. Prolonged pain of that magnitude often leads to madness and evil – such is the way of things."

"I fail to see what benefit relaying this information conveys to anyone."

"You should be prepared for the worst, Eadric," Soneillon answered. "She may be unrecognizable – not merely her form, but who she is. I would not keep this information from you, and later hear that you were deceived or misled by me."

Titivilus raised an eyebrow.

Outside, the storm raged.

Eadric looked at Soneillon. "I would request a brief moment to confer with my counsellor."

The Demoness nodded, and casually lay down upon one of the narrow pallets, lazily stretching her arms above her head.

**

Within the sanctuary, Nwm sat motionless, his perception reaching outwards through the weather system that he himself had conjured, and rapidly engaging in a series of penetrating mental glances towards his environment.

Eadric was masked from his faculties, but the creatures who were near him were not. Titivilus appeared to the Druid’s inner vision as a familiar set of dissonances which, when combined, left no doubt in Nwm’s mind as to the identity of the Devil. The other outsider – which defied conventional classification – seemed to be a shadow of the real, a fantasy which eluded direct scrutiny, but whose presence could be inferred by its effects on the Green in its vicinity. Soneillon, Nwm mused.

He furrowed his brow in concern. Eadric was playing with high stakes. Attempting to force some epiphany, no doubt, or construct a radical synthesis which would inform his direction.

The Druid found himself reflecting upon Jovol, the Injunction – both in letter and in spirit – and his own words to Mostin earlier that evening. A niggling doubt
began to grow in his mind, quickly becoming an irritation with Eadric’s actions, and a realization that his own role in events had been too passive. The time for calculated inaction was passing.

Too many realities were in conflict, and the new one, offered by Tramst, did little to assuage Nwm’s concerns. *Saizhan* was too cerebral for his liking, despite its claims of relevance and immediacy. It was as though the devotional heart of Oronthonianism – however distorted and misaligned – had been ripped out and replaced with a philosophy which elevated the dialectical process itself to deific significance. Not that the majority of Oronthon worshippers would even notice, Nwm thought. Most would continue with the rites that they had observed for several hundred years, oblivious to the fact that their incarnate deity – or, rather, one aspect of him, his ‘gnostic intellect’ (whatever that was) – had utterly refuted half a millennium of dogma.

Nehael had spoken to him long before of a ‘Middle Way’ which avoided the extremes which had characterized Oronthonian thought and practice – of *all* thought and practice. Yet Nehael had rejected the Celestial Order a second time, when none other than Rintrah himself had offered to escort her back to Heaven. Uedii had calmly accepted her in the face of reason and expectation – an outsider to Nature’s order, admitted to her inmost secrets.

*Saizhan*. The Middle Way. The Dialectic. What had Eadric said that Titivilus named it? – Ahh, the ‘Path of Lightning.’ A suitably Left-handed spin on things. And Shomei had been moved on some level – but Shomei was Shomei, and carried her own fears and ghosts with her.

Somehow, Nehael was central – although, somewhere in the details, this had been conveniently forgotten. She had been the first to seek the reconciliation and transcendence of opposing Truths. She possessed a profound wisdom which the Druid missed.

Nwm sighed. If he understood the Green – and he was by no means certain of his own ability in that regard – then it would act accordingly through him. Would the tension between Oronthonianism and Uedii worship persist, although on a more rarefied level? *Saizhan* seemed to be a practice reserved for the educated classes. What relevance did it possess for a farmer, or for a trapper? What did they care for the much-vaunted ‘dialectic of negation?’

Retreat from the world into a life of contemplation was a luxury that few could afford, and was bought with the sweat and toil of Uedian peasants, however indirectly. The Church might be in the process of disestablishment, and its taxes lifted – as the *Ahma* had promised – but its principal funds still derived from the contributions of wealthy aristocrats. And their money was stolen from the farmers.

*I suppose I should speak with Tramst, at some point*, he thought. *Although I fail to see what he could tell me that I don’t already know. Still, I should give him a chance. I might be pleasantly surprised.*

The Druid returned his attention to the Steeple, where the Green warped uneasily around the interlopers.

*I am sick of this. I am sick of them, being here, interfering.*

He glanced at Mostin, who was fussing – attempting to arrange his padded mat to his satisfaction. Shomei was on the verge of sleep.
Nwm stroked his beard, and wondered how things would unfold.

**

You are enamoured.

Somewhat. But it will pass.

You haven’t used Palamabron’s Eye to interrogate her.

She subscribes to a different Truth. What use would it be?

[Laughter]. It is your truth which matters to you, Ahma, not hers.

You are incorrect.

Perhaps your lust blinds you.

No, it doesn’t, although it would be easier for you if it did. You are afraid of her.

[Irritated]. As should you be. She can annihilate you with a moment’s thought.

That is not what I meant. You are afraid of what she represents.

[Condescendingly]. And what may that be, Ahma?

An escape from the prison that you have created for yourself.

Your moralizing is becoming tedious, Ahma. Has she then escaped Oronthon as well? Has she placed herself beyond the infinite – your view of the infinite. Is she outside of his purview? That sword cuts both ways, Ahma. What is not Oronthon?

I will not be drawn into monistic thought.

You are avoiding the issue.

The issue is no longer a concern of mine. It is a road which leads nowhere. Now can we please consider the matter in hand – that of Soneillon. What is your opinion of her?

You are projecting your view of Nehael onto the Queen of Throile, Ahma. You have been seduced by her eloquence, wit and her – not inconsiderable – physical charm. You are confusing the two succubi in your mind. Both fly in the face of convention, and both have seized – or created – their own truth.

Are her words regarding Nehael’s current state plausible?

Utterly plausible. This does not mean that they are entirely true, however.

Do you believe that she is deceiving me?

If I told you either ‘yes’ or ‘no,’ then you would – quite rightly – question my motivation for doing so. I will therefore say ‘I do not know,’ although you might also suspect that I am withholding an answer for some unknown reason. In fact, I
do not know.

[Wrily] How hard it must be, to be Titivilus. Are there occasions when you speak the plain truth, and no-one believes you?

*If I speak the plain truth, then it is invariably in an effort to deceive, so the point is moot.*

Would you advise a formal compact, in order to insure me against any ill will that she might bear towards me?

*As you pointed out yourself, she may not regard such an agreement as binding.*

Does she have a history of compacting that you are aware of?

*I believe she prefers informal arrangements, such as with Irknaan.*

That is not reassuring.

[Wickedly] *Of course, she may be attempting to avoid a compact precisely in order to give her greater latitude in her dealings with you later on.*

Your mind is truly tortuous.

*Why thank-you, Ahma.*

*

"Have you reached a decision, Eadric? Will you trust me?"

"I will never trust you Soneillon, because I will never understand you. You are both too alien and too human for comfort. I will, however, temporarily suspend my doubt – and possibly my better judgement. If you betray me – to death or perdition – then I will hold no ill-will towards you. The fault will be mine alone."

She smiled, and offered her hand. "Come with me. I will show you what we have to work with."

Eadric stepped backwards suspiciously. "Nhura is still loose. I must deal with her first – assuming that you still refuse to intervene and discourage her. I need time to prepare."

"This will take only a short while. I will return you in an hour or two."

The Paladin shot a glance towards Titivilus. The Devil’s face was totally impassive.

Eadric groaned and, tentatively, reached out to touch her. She dissolved, and seemed to flow both into him and around him.

The nightmares of demons – which raged all around – were impotent against the Void which cradled him, and bore him to Throile.

**POST 10: RE: INJUNCTION**
The Injunction applies to Wizards in Wyre - not sorcerers (from other planes, or otherwise) - hence Koilimilou is not subject to it. Nor are Clerics, Druids etc.

Bear in mind that the quorum of great Wizards who acquiesced to Jovol: Mulissu, Shomei, Mostin, Tozinak, Waide, Hlioth, Daunton - did so in full knowledge of the Injunction's contents. It was really outside of their remit to extend it to other forms of magic, and probably would have caused all kinds of trouble if they'd tried (no, Sela, you may not gate in that solar, or the Infernal will bite your head off).

Nwm's argument - that the Injunction doesn't go far enough - certainly has merit, though. Of course, others would argue that it goes too far. The controversy surrounding it is far from over...

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**POST 11: MOSTLY NWM**

Hi All

Sorry for the slight delay :rolleyes: I'm afraid that I must beg your indulgence again: my wife and I have purchased a house (hooray!), but now the process of packing begins (boo!). We close at the end of October, so it may be a while again before another update. The stressful part is over though, thank the gods.

In the meantime...

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**Mostly Nwm**

Nwm fretted. It was nearly midnight, the two fiends had departed from his field of consciousness, and Eadric had not returned to the chapel. The fact that the Paladin was mind blanked did not help matters – it was impossible to discern whether he was in the vicinity or not.

When Gheim returned through the open window, the Eagle confirmed that the Ahma was no longer in the Steeple by dropping Lukarn at Nwm's feet.

"The room is empty, although his armour is still within. Do not make me fly in search of him, Nwm – or at least calm the wind somewhat, if you do."

Nwm scowled. He feared manipulation and betrayal by either the Infernal Duke, the Succubus, or both. The possibility that the two fiends might be in cahoots with one another also troubled him.

Iua glanced at the Druid. Other than Nwm, she was the only one of the group still
awake.

"Should I wake Mostin?"

Nwm shook his head. "What use would it serve? Eadric is unlocatable. We just have to wait. Stay here – I’ll be back presently."

He opened the chapel door and strode into the storm.

**

Nwm’s contention that Nhura could not mount an effective assault upon Kyrtill’s Burh until the next day was based on incomplete information, and a gross underestimate of the power at the Lillend’s command. Likewise, Mostin’s belief that the screen invoked by Shomei, together with the dimensional lock would prove a sufficient protection for the few hours they needed, was equally flawed.

Nhura was resourceful, merciless, and never one to cede the initiative in any conflict in which she was engaged. Five teams of demons conjured by Koilimilou – each consisting of a glabrezu and a succubus – had been dispatched, and one pair finally returned with useful news for the Lillend.

At Koilimilou’s command, the fiends had systematically scoured the countryside in Western Trempa, looking for Deorham and Kyrtill’s Burh, which – after questioning local farmers in an outlying stead near Hernath – was revealed to a succubus to be only twelve miles distant.

Elated with the news, the demoness slew several families in a fit of glee, before returning to her dark mistress and her even darker queen.

The castle, it appeared, was hidden by a powerful illusion, and at the centre of a highly localized weather system. The nearby village of Deorham, however, was plainly visible. The glabrezu had penetrated the screen about the keep with its vision, but subsequently retreated upon finding a quartet of devas – appearing from nowhere – which had hewn at him with their flaming swords.

When the glabrezu returned, eighteen seconds later, it was in the company of four others of its kind, five succubi, three summoned vrocks, and the creature Hazihe – the chthonic babau originally enlisted by Irknaan, and now serving Nhura.

The rewards promised to the fiends by Nhura were lavish, and included a diamond circlet of immense value, an Azer blade of fabled power, a cloak of displacement, and a robe of stars.

The demons were well motivated.

**

As Nwm began to walk the short distance across the courtyard to the base of the Steeple, one of the devas – his name was Saphrez, although the Druid neither knew nor cared – manifested before him. Nwm was bathed in light from the holy aura which surrounded the deva.
"There are demons abroad," the Celestial announced. "Where is the Ahma?"

Nwm cursed, and shook his head.

"I suggest that you retreat within."

The Druid dashed back through the doors, and yelled, jarring Shomei, Ortwin and Mostin from sleep.

"Demons. We must act now."

Blearily, Mostin invoked a *wall of force*.

In the courtyard, confusion reigned. The demons were materializing, but only the glabrezu – possessed of an extraordinary perceptive faculty – could readily pierce the *screen* which protected the area. Through force of will, the babau Hazihe summoned sufficient insight to mentally overcome the illusion. Neither the succubi nor the vrocks were capable of clear perception, however. Despite a knowledge that they were standing within the castle walls, all they saw was a rocky knoll.

The deva Tarquam, somewhat disoriented by the sudden appearance of numbers of demons – some of whom appeared very confused – nonetheless reacted quickly. He spoke a *holy word*, instantly sending two succubi and a glabrezu back to their Abyssal home.

Seconds later, Hazihe – a yawning void which pulsed with unlight – leaped upon him, ripping effortlessly through celestial flesh with claws and maw, and, in the blink of an eye, permanently extinguished the deva’s shining essence.

Nazaihemahaht and Rôrex, the two other devas in the courtyard, both pronounced further *holy words* in succession, banishing yet more of the fiends screaming back to the lower planes. Hazihe, two of the glabrezu, and one of the succubi were unaffected.

From within the confines of the chapel, Mostin grimaced as he heard two *power words* echo within the courtyard above the noise of the storm. There was a brief pause as the demons dispatched the devas, and then the glabrezu ripped the doors of the chapel off of their hinges.

One tried pushing forwards, but encountered the *wall of force*.

The other attempted to *teleport* into the sanctum behind where the party stood, but could not penetrate the *dimensional lock*.

Ortwin smiled, and stuck his finger up.

"I think that gesture may be a little premature," Nwm remarked drily.

**

The Void embraced him. It was warm, soft, yielding, welcoming. It showed its power through its capacity for absorption – which had no limit – and a profound
silence, free of all worry and distraction. Eadric felt as though he teetered upon the edge of oblivion, and was vaguely surprised that the threat of annihilation did not seem so terrible. Beyond, fear and madness – the thought-forms and unconscious ravings of fiends – seemed a universe away. He wanted Nothing. He needed Nothing.

She is deadly. This truth is too easy. [Thought fails. Bliss. Emptiness.]

He corporeated again within an opulent chamber, draped with crimson and fuligin. It was replete with fantastic art of a most abstract and disturbing nature – although what it portrayed, he could not tell. Dimension seemed warped and unnatural, as though curves existed where none should, and angles played at the corners of his mind only to disappear when observed directly. His perceptions buckled with layered dissonances. Nearby, a small silver bell hung from a delicate chain.

Soneillon had assumed a guise that her servants and thralls were familiar with, and Eadric swallowed. No longer a young girl, but a demoness of indeterminate age. Still beautiful, but cold, aloof, serene, worshipful; at ease with the terrible power which she commanded. She was as tall as he was, and wore only a diadem studded with black jewels.

The Succubus smiled disarmingly, and, for the Paladin’s benefit, modestly shrouded her form with her sable wings.

"Welcome to Throile," she said coyly. "I have been somewhat neglectful, and there are matters that I must attend to – do not be alarmed, I will return very shortly. Strike the bell if there is anything which you require – Helitihai will meet any need that you might have."

Although the word any was not pronounced with undue emphasis, it still carried a meaning beyond the obvious.

Eadric sighed. "I would ask two things. First, that you do not present an expurgated view of this place in order to protect my feelings – my actions must be made in full consciousness, and the more that is hidden from me, the less I will feel inclined to trust my judgement. I am in the Abyss, and I do not expect to encounter scenes which I find agreeable. Second, I do not wish to linger here too long – I am a willing ambassador, but I have other responsibilities that I must meet before I can commit to any course of action in Throile. I would feel uncomfortable if my stay lasted beyond an hour – an hour in Wyre, to be clear."

"Your concerns are duly noted, and I will observe your wishes. If you would prefer, you may accompany me now. But you should be warned: there are things here which you would regard as obscene, debased and insane. You are likely to be offended."

"I’ve come this far," Eadric pointed out. "I will reserve judgement."

"It will still shake you to your core."

Eadric found that she was right. The suffering there knew no limits, and the pleasure derived by those who inflicted it was transient, grotesque and depraved. It was, after all, the Abyss.

He earnestly hoped that he would never become inured to it.
The demons had vanished from view, although they still appeared as nearby blots within Nwm’s mind.

"Is he mad?" Ortwin groaned. "He didn’t take his weapon with him? Where is he?"

Nwm shrugged. "Presumably with either Titivilus, or Soneillon. Or perhaps both."

"I hope the former, for his sake," Shomei sighed. "This is tedious. I am utterly depleted, and so is Mostin. And this dimensional lock may now prove more a prison than protection. How many are out there, Nwm?"

"Four. One is very unpleasant. There are no celestials within range – they’re either destroyed or fled."

"I suspect that we are in no shape to deal with the chthonic," Shomei swallowed. "This is very bad news."

"We are safe unless they can disintegrate the wall of force," Mostin replied. "Don’t panic quite yet. We have twenty minutes or so before it collapses. I have time to prepare a banishment and another spell or two."

"Can you issue a sending to Ed?" Ortwin asked.

The Alienist shook his head glumly. "By the time I’ve prepared it and cast it, the wall of force will be down. And even if I renewed the barrier and Eadric manages to return, he will be out there, and us in here. He cannot come into the chapel any more than the demons can."

"I still have a few tricks left," Nwm said wearily. His expression changed to one of horror as he shot a glance towards the open doorway of the chapel.

The demons had returned, and had brought Eadric’s small staff of retainers with them. Dwarfed by the looming presence of the glabrezu, the servants – valets and maids, stablehands and gardener – cowered in terror.

The huge demons proceeded to dismember and eat the cook. The succubus danced nearby.

"Bring out the Ahma," the Void called Hazihe demanded.

Nwm groaned. "This is intolerable. Why must it always be the innocents? Mostin, bring the wall down on my signal."

"You are joking, of course?"

Nwm began to cast a ward upon himself.

"Nwm?"

"Now, Mostin."

"Nwm, I..."

"Just for once, trust me Mostin."
The Alienist sighed, and reluctantly complied. The *wall of force* dissipated.

Nwm grimaced and struck his blackthorn staff once upon the flagstone inside the door. The slabs which formed the chapel floor began to crack. "*She is tired of your interference,*" he announced to the demons, although it would have been spoken with equal vehemence to Soneillon, the Loquai, the devas, and perhaps even to the *Sela* himself.

Green fire blazed over the Druid, threatening to consume him. His skin blistered and cracked, his cloak ignited. His mouth, ears and eyes dripped a liquid that might have been blood, or sap, or both. A colossal discharge of viridescent emanated from him. His staff sank into the floor, burning in a brilliant flash of green, and the *orb of storms* which had topped it fell off and rolled away.

For the briefest moment, Ortwin fancied that he saw the silhouette of a woman in Nwm’s place: a shape of great girth and dignity; fecund, bearing a thousand swollen breasts.

The demons were transfixed with expressions of bewilderment – impaled through limb and torso on vast, thorny boughs which erupted from the paved courtyard, penetrating their hides and instantly slaying them. The corpse of the babau, Hazihe, flickered disconcertingly on the edge of consciousness: destroyed, nullified – whatever became of things that had already survived annihilation.

Nwm collapsed.

"I should like to sleep now," he said.

Mostin gaped. "I had no idea..."

Iua smiled wrily. "Thankfully, we are not all wanton braggarts."

The Bard scowled, and then rapidly dismissed his vision as the imaginings of tired eyes and a still sluggish mind. Besides, nobody else seemed to have noticed.

*

Nhura waited.

The Demons did not return. The Lillend attempted to reach them with magical sight. Nothing. They were gone.

She cursed, and glanced at Koilimilou. The Cambion was slumped exhausted, in deep trance. Nhura resisted the urge to slay her out of spite – Koilimilou was too useful – and glanced at Jetheeg.

The Lamia was, as her custom dictated, *polymorphed* into the form of a crone – approximately human in shape – but of great height, and possessing an unusually bestial and vicious aspect. Jetheeg was accustomed to riding a griffon, and if forced into physical combat – something which she was generally cautious to avoid – her hag-like form served her well.

"The demons have failed," Jetheeg remarked drily.
"Koilimilou will conjure more tomorrow," Nhura scowled.

"She will run out of potential compactees at this rate. Her patroness will be most displeased with her in any case – losing five glabrezu is an act of reprehensible carelessness."

"If Rhyxali cannot provide them then we will try another," Nhura countered. "Soneillon has..."

"Soneillon." Jetheeg scoffed. "Do not place too much trust in Throile, or its Queen. You are precariously perched, majesty," the word majesty carried the slightest hint of condescension.

"She may provide more of Hazihe’s ilk. She knows many names. I still suspect that she will pay a high price for the Ahma."

"If she ever deigns to answer your sendings," Jetheeg sneered.

"We will prevail," Nhura hissed. "Watch your tongue, Jetheeg – I am not above removing it. We know the exact location of the castle. You will issue more sendings tomorrow – Irzho is still here, somewhere in this world. He can be solicited – I suspect that he, like us, is now somewhat indifferent to Graz’zt’s rule. And give the Cambion an hour to conjure more demons in the morning. When we assault the place, we will be prepared. Others will be glad to compact – there are sweet rewards for those who succeed."

Jetheeg nodded – the promise was directed towards her as much as any other.

But, as later that night, Nhura rested – coiled around a tree of evil temper within the woods of Hethio – she herself received a succession of sendings from her glabrezu lover and cohort, Narab. He had been charged – together with Tebdeluz** – with maintaining a close guard upon Lehurze, whose capacity for treachery, Nhura suspected, was exceeded only by her usefulness as a tool. Lehurze had been appointed the task of reopening a dialogue with the Devils who maintained a presence in Afqithan. In fact, the suavity of the succubus did not match the oratory finesse of Titivilus and Furcas – two of Hell’s foremost rhetoricians – and she quickly found herself beating a hasty diplomatic retreat.

None of this mattered, because Narab’s sendings conveyed a dire message to the Lillend. Mere hours had passed in the demiplane since the departure of the Ahma and his party:


No, not sweet Tebdeluz! Nhura swore profusely. Disposition and location of enemy? Generals? Ainhorr returned to favour? What of Soneillon? Graz’zt?


Nhura groaned. She had half-anticipated some form of inquiry from Zelatar when
the periodic gate opened – hence her own intentional absence. But this was unexpected. Lehurze may have sold her out. As could any one of a dozen others, for that matter. And three legions – close to twenty thousand demons – was hardly a token presence.

*What to do now?, she wondered.*

**

"You expect me to do what?" Eadric asked, incredulous.

"Do you think that you could deal with him – hand-to-hand – if his magic were neutralized?"

"No. Not alone."

"But with – for example – Ortwin and Iua?"

"Probably," Eadric conceded. "But I think that they would both require extensive inducements to participate. Ortwin would be the first to admit that he favours the appearance of valour over valour itself; and generally prefers money to morals."

"When Zelatar is looted, Eadric – as it certainly will be, after the fall of one of Graz’zt’s stature – then Ortwin, I suspect, will be there to take the choicest pickings. Have you any idea of the extent of the Prince’s wealth? Scavengers from a thousand different realities will descend upon Azzagrat like flies. News travels quickly."

"Then it would rapidly become the least desirable place in the cosmos to be," Eadric sighed.

"I doubt that Ortwin will see it that way."

"You speak as though the outcome is a foregone conclusion."

"Graz’zt can be eliminated. You must be the bait."

"He will not rise to it."

"You must force his hand. You are capable of doing this, Eadric: rousing his ire to such a degree, that he loses all perspective in his lust for vengeance."

"I had considered Afqithan to be a possible locale for an encounter."

"As had I," Soneillon agreed. "And his mind is already turned there. He is attempting to unravel the events that transpired there."

Eadric gave an inquisitive look.

"Ainhorr has just annexed the demiplane."

Eadric groaned and his eyes bulged. He considered briefly. "Why? I mean, why you, now? What do you stand to gain? I don’t believe that all of your action springs from vindictiveness and the desire for revenge. You are too considered. Too methodical."
The Demoness laughed. "The Ahma sees with clear eyes. Because there is something of mine that I would dearly like returned to me. He stole it. I want it back."

In Nhura’s throne room, in the palace built by Irknaan in Afqithan, Ainhorr gloated over the loot brought to him by the bar-lgura which leapt madly through the halls. Most of the Loquai who dwelt in the fortress had translated to Shadow or Faerie and eluded capture, but grizzly examples were made of their servants and those unfortunate enough to have been caught unawares.

Demons and sendings had raced back and forth. Menicau, Samodoquol and a dozen other nobles had immediately sued for peace. Within an hour, tributes had been lavished upon the Balor by fawning aristocrats. Ainhorr’s contempt for them was offset by his immense greed, and a recognition that the Loquai – ultimately pragmatic in their outlook – would prove no threat.

The Demon set his pristine slaadi-forged blade across his knees, and relaxed into an immense throne of steel – erected in place of Irknaan’s delicate chair of tenebrous coral. He intended to enjoy his tenure as despot of Afqithan.

He gazed through the deep-set windows across the lawns – strewn with the bodies of demons, Loquai, and fey and goblin slaves – and through the trees. Fifty nycadaemons now soared menacingly around the diabolic tower. Its inhabitants – three Dukes of Hell and their retinue – were reportedly contained. As much as it was possible to contain three Infernal magnates.

Which was to say, Ainhorr sneered to himself, not at all.

*At this point, Mostin had two fifth-level, one sixth level and one seventh-level open slots left. All of his prepared high-level spells, except for a plane shift and a discern location had already been cast.*

**Narab and Tebdeluz: big glabrezu – advanced to 24 HD – and bound to Nhura by Irknaan himself as part of their nuptial agreement. Narab was given the stone of sendings – lost by Shomei – to continually apprise Nhura of Lehurze’s actions, as well as the maneuvering of the various Loquai nobles in her absence.**

Note:

Nwm’s spell (She is tired of your interference) was a spontaneous variation of another that his player, Dave had been working on. I had ruled that DC0 Epic Spells could be invented and cast "on the fly." In this case I also allowed the staff of the woodlands to be used as a (fabulously expensive) material component – I permitted the normal XP cost to create the item (3600 XP) to be used in lieu of part of the XP mitigating factors (i.e. –36 DC). It had wholly appropriate symbolism for the mood that Nwm was in, and the spell’s visual effects reflected that.
So Nwm was the first PC to cast an Epic Spell in the game – to the immense surprise of the other players, who had no idea that Nwm was capable (or even that he was 21st level, IIRC).

The demonic attack was kind of mean of me, I’ll admit (although the players had great fun playing the devas for a round or two), but it was within Nhura’s capabilities to organize the ambush, so I could hardly let it pass. The PCs were still all completely spent from their encounter with Crosod, Eadric was missing, and to throw the chthonic babau (CR 20 or so) and a bunch of glabrezu at them at this point was a little bit ruthless.

On a related note, this opened a whole new can of worms – that of allowing magical items to serve as material components for Epic Spells. I actually quite like the idea: its not as though such things can be freely purchased in the campaign, and I think it actually balances quite well – one form of XP sink (the item) is converted into another (the Epic Spell). The purpose and symbolism needs to be consistent on some level – so it wouldn’t be possible to use, say, Daern’s instant fortress to fuel a fire evocation.

POST 12: THE PARLEY – PART ONE

The meeting took place in early autumn at dusk, three days after the full moon, in a glade deep within the woods of Hethio. Mid-way – Nwm remarked ironically to himself – between Groba, where the Uediian rebellion had begun, and the eaves where Hullu’s last encampment of Bagaudas had been set. With the Tunthi tribesman’s abdication of leadership, the focussed organization of the Uediian uprising had rapidly degenerated into a motley rabble of outlaws and bandits, who now prowled the farmlands of Wyre’s richest province in gangs of twenty or more.

But not near here. All shunned this spot. Fear had descended upon the woods.

The Umbral Lillend, Nhura, was coiled in a posture which suggested both calm and confidence. To her left, mounted upon a griffon of singular size and evil disposition, Jetheeg – in her hag-form – sat impatiently, a look of cynicism and contempt upon her hideous face. Around them were arrayed Loquai knights of varying stature and reputation, who appeared as numinous shades from whom darkness flowed. To the right of Nhura, standing impassively below the Lillend’s standard – a hanging sable pennant upon which the device was utterly obscured – was Koilimiliou the sidhe-cambion. All the company were surrounded by compacted demons – a score of jariliths which prowled and circled ceaselessly.

Sh*t, Ortwin thought to himself. This better be for real, or we’re all dead meat. Despite Eadric’s assurances to the contrary, the Satyr felt less than confident in the motives of the recently styled – and now exiled – Queen of Afqithan or her entourage.

Ortwin glanced over his shoulder. Behind him, Mostin, Shomei and Nwm stood silently; telepathically bonded and buoyed by potent wards and augmentations, and ready to unleash a devastating magical attack if things went awry. Iua raised
her eyebrows in a gesture which combined reassurance with a sense of deeply appreciative irony.

Ortwin grinned, and trotted forwards.

"Beautiful ladies," he bowed, causing Jetheeg to scowl yet further. "Elevated Triptych of incomparable grace and poise. I am King Ortwin – welcome to my realm."

Jetheeg snarled.

The Satyr smiled appreciatively before continuing. "I believe that, in our haste to create a favourable impression with one another, we may have overstepped the normal bounds of propriety and – inadvertently – caused each other mutual inconvenience."

"Must we endure this fool’s prattling?" Jetheeg snapped, at no-one in particular. "Get to the point, Satyr. Bring out the box, bow and armour. And the other treasures which you have looted. And then we’ll speak."

"My apologies," Ortwin bowed again. "In a previous parley we may have acted somewhat precipitously, and this time I wanted to be sure to observe the formal niceties." The Satyr gave Koilimidou a sideways glance. "Believe me, I share your impatience."

He strode forward five paces, and unslung a heavy sack from his back. As he hurled it to the ground, it opened. Armour, a slender sword, a buckler, a compound bow, and several other enchanted objects of enormous power spilled forth. The box of shades fell upon the moss, and the Cambion inhaled sharply.

Nhura gestured, and two of her knights approached Ortwin with a black canvas held between them. It sagged with the weight of gear won from the Satyr and the Infernalist.

Nhura smiled. "I regret that, at this time, it is impossible for me to return your stone of sendings. It remains in Afqithan in the hands of one of my servants."

Inwardly, Shomei groaned. For her, it was a particularly useful item.

Ortwin licked his lips, and prepared to engage in more small-talk, but from behind him he heard Nwm – who appeared wilder and more unkempt than ever before – grunt disapprovingly.

"They are here."

**

Eadric’s return, some days before, had been a solemn event. The Ahma had seemed weighed down with concern, and his eyes had conveyed a sense of pain and horror. He had witnessed near infinite brutality and suffering. The brief ecstasies enjoyed by demons – at the expense of naked souls, whose eternal lot was perdition within Soneillon’s Abyssal demesne – coupled with Throile’s madness-inducing warp of dimension and time, had left a knot of sickness and loathing in his gut.
Upon his arrival at Deorham, at the climax of a furious storm of Nwm’s devising, his heart had sunk yet further. The courtyard of Kyrill’s Burh had been spattered with celestial and demonic ichor; human entrails lay strewn about, and the doors to the chapel were smashed against the base of the Steeple.

Outside of the entranceway to the sanctum, a great blackthorn reared, its sudden growth demonstrated by the shattered cobblestones nearby. Several of its branches were like huge, barbed lances, upon which the stricken forms of demons hung motionless, pierced and raised skywards as if in dreadful sacrifice to the storm and the Goddess.

Eadric had barely glanced at the tree as he walked into the chapel. Inside, his servants sat quietly in a small group whilst Iua had stood guard over them. Mostin and Shomei had been close in whispered conversation, and Nwm had appeared catatonic and wrapped in a heavy cloak.

Ortwin had grinned, and tossed him his weapon. "Glad you could make it. Better late than never, I suppose."

"I have struck a deal with Soneillon," Eadric had said.

Shomei had looked up with an expression which combined awe with profound concern.

"Welcome to the Path Sinister," she had sighed. "May your progress be as traumatic and as bewildering as mine."

"There are no paths, nor were there ever any. I act from instinct now."

"You are an adept already," she had smiled.

* 

It had happened as the Ahma had predicted. The next morning, a summoned succubus had arrived in order to impart a message from Nhura: a parley in five days, if all were willing. An exchange of captured goods was to take place. Eadric had explained that it was part of the agreement reached with the Queen of Throile.

Nwm had groaned loudly. "She has maneuvered everyone into this situation. Irknaan and Crosod are conveniently eliminated – no doubt Soneillon doubted their tractability. Has it occurred to you that she may herself have had a hand in betraying Nhura to Graz'zt?"

Eadric had nodded.

Shomei had shrugged. "Such is the nature of demonic alliances – they shift from hour to hour. It requires considerable will and insight for a leader to maintain any kind of cohesion. We should not even begin to think that we understand her true purpose, however. It will remain hidden for some time yet."

Eadric had mentioned that the demoness wanted something ‘returned to her.’

Mostin had tutted and shaken his head. "I don’t suppose that she mentioned – in passing – what this ‘thing’ was?"

"No."
"I thought not," the Alienist had sighed. "You are perceptive, Eadric – that much I reluctantly concede. But surely you cannot actually trust this creature?"

"I trust her to do that which is in her own best interest," Eadric had answered. "I think it is up to us to try to determine exactly what that is. I don’t pretend that it will be easy. We have little other choice. Afqithan is an obvious locale for a confrontation – and neither you nor Shomei will be bound by the Injunction there. You may conjure hideous entities to your heart’s content."

"I fully intend to," Mostin had replied casually. "But why five days? Why not today?"

"I need time for reflection," Eadric had said simply.

Four days later, he had returned to Throile again, to the dismay of Nwm. He would meet them at the appointed time and place.

"Is he ensorcelled?" The Druid had asked Mostin.

"Not to my knowledge," the Alienist had answered. "But I make no claim to omniscience."

**

Within the glade, Ortwin took several hasty steps back again as the Void began to manifest. Fear spilled from it – dream-phantoms which lingered in the waking world, before evaporating in the ruddy sunset.

Eadric’s form materialized. Next to him, almost as though she were a ward in his care – or his lover, the Satyr wrily observed – was a slender girl clad in a traditional folk dress.

So that is her, Ortwin thought. Intriguing. Less compelling than I had imagined.

As if in response, her eyes brushed over him for the briefest moment. The Satyr immediately felt desire of a magnitude he had never before experienced. His stomach twisted into a knot, and his head span.* He was thankful that he was mind blanked and he knew instantly that, without protective magic, had she laid even the simplest enchantment upon him, he would have been utterly incapable of resisting.

Under the watchful eyes of Nhura, Jetheeg and Koilimilou – suspicious that the Alienist might attempt a time stop and attack – Shomei erected a screen and Mostin fabricated a large, circular table and thirteen chairs from an oak tree, together with a wooden awning supported by slender pillars.

"Not bad," Shomei remarked nonchalantly, and immediately sat down. Eadric watched her – despite her bravado, he knew that she was tense and nervous. Demons – and their allies – were less predictable than her usual diabolic associates.

Soneillon stepped away from the Ahma and smiled.

"Thank-you all for coming," the Queen of Throile said softly. "As you either know,
or have guessed, I am Soneillon. At this moment, we share a common purpose which outweighs any other petty concerns which we might have. How we have arrived here is now irrelevant, and we should put these thoughts behind us. This is a parley and a truce. No weapon will be drawn, and no offensive magic will be invoked on pain of annihilation."

Mostin looked sceptical. "You are powerful, but hardly omnipotent, Soneillon. The same conditions apply to you: I will blast you if I suspect counterfeit or magical manipulation, and if the last act I commit is to have you dragged screaming to Uzzhin then I will die happy – I suspect that your dubious ontological status will prove to be of no importance in that paradigm. You should be aware that you cannot effectively be both an arbiter and an interested party in this matter."

"Graz’zt is your enemy, Mostin, not I."

"That remains to be seen," the Alienist countered. "But as none of us trust each other, I am inclined to proceed with utmost caution. I should like to ask several questions before we go any further."

"Are all Wyrish Wizards so arrogant and disrespectful?" Jetheeg asked incredulously. "And openly insulting a Demon Queen is an act of questionable wisdom."

"Truth – even if presented in a most bombastic way – may be my ally at present. I would be misrepresenting myself if I allowed Soneillon to dictate the terms of this arrangement."

Ortwin’s eyes bulged. Eadric smiled. Nhura said nothing, but her eyes narrowed as she studied the Alienist. Very powerful. Very dangerous, she thought.

Soneillon seemed unfazed, and opened her palm, indicating that Mostin should proceed.

"What is this thing that you desire to repossess from the Prince of Azzagrat, and what is Rhyxali’s role in this? What becomes of his sanctum if he is eliminated: can another demon – magnate or no – benefit from its power, or is it attuned only to him? How many succubi within your retinue are sorceresses, and what is their relative power? And what is your defense in Throile against assault from Azzagrat? I assume that, on that count, there is some kind of ongoing spell or magical protection in effect – or the Prince would have overwhelmed you long ago. Finally, I would be grateful if you enlightened me with regard to Pazuzu’s involvement – if any – and, out of intellectual curiosity, any information regarding the entity Carasch would be much appreciated."

Eadric glanced over the Loquai. Despite their practiced hauteur, he detected discomfort among several of them when the name of Rhyxali was mentioned. Nhura’s emotion, if she experienced any, was unreadable.

[Shomei]: ?
[Mostin]: There are hidden fingers in this pie. I am merely informing her that I have considered the possibilities of who they might be.

Soneillon gave a wry smile and leaned forwards towards Mostin. "Your speculation is insightful. Have you heard of Pharamne’s Urn?"

Mostin wracked his brains. "I confess that I have not."
"This is the item that I wish returned to me," the Succubus said simply.

"Evidently, it is not yours by right, else it would be called *Soneillon’s Urn*. What is its function, and who is – or was – Pharamne?"

"An Aeon**," Soneillon answered.

Mostin looked dumbfounded and stared at the *Ahma*.

Eadric groaned. "Please, Mostin, explanations surrounding these matters may take all night. Since I last mentioned this item, I have made inquiries and Soneillon has been forthcoming – I will explain later. Rhyxali’s involvement will also become clear in due course."

"Then she is implicated?"

"She is the heretofore secret co-sponsor of the Loquai. Koilimilou is her chief representative."

The Cambion tilted her head, and stared venomously at Eadric. The air seethed with unmanifest arcane power. Nearby, the jariliths began to bay and snarl.

"Stay your temper, Koi," Nhura said drily. "It would appear that Queen Soneillon has thoroughly instructed the *Ahma* – for reasons I’m sure she will divulge presently."

"Rhyxali will lend aid in any effort to retake Afqithan," Soneillon explained.

"I would have been informed," Koilimilou hissed.

"You are a thrall, nothing more," Soneillon said lightly. "Do not overestimate your importance."

**

The two kelvezu, Cociz and Dramalaz – erstwhile servants of Prince Socothbenoth, but lately retained by Graz’zt – took due pleasure and satisfaction in the task appointed to them in Afqithan. As Ainhorr’s chief inquisitors, they left, in a matter of hours, a trail of mangled and mutilated forms which stretched across the breadth of the demiplane. Their retinue – which consisted of a variety of lesser demons – soon found that the fear evoked by the rumour of their arrival manifested itself in generous bribes from a number of Loquai nobility.

The information which was relayed back to Ainhorr, and thence to Graz’zt, was of a conflicting nature. A Duke from Faerie – Rhalid – had been in Afqithan with a hunting party. Rhalid or one of his cohorts had, in fact, been the despised Eadric of Deorham. Soneillon was implicated. Irknaan had been involved, but was slain because of an internal feud. Leherze. The Infernal nobles Murmuur, Titivilus and Furcus were somehow enmeshed in the affair, as were a number of Afqithan’s significant figures who were now, apparently, on the Prime – Nhura, Koilimilou, Jetheeg, Crosod and Threxu.

Graz’zt immediately smelled a plot, retired to his sanctum, and deployed a potent divination.
Upon emerging from his reverie, the Prince of Azzagrat acted swiftly. The periodic portal in Afqithan – upon which Irknaan’s palace had been built – had closed, but Graz’zt opened a series of further gates. He reinforced Ainhorr’s contingent with thirty nalfeshnees and around a hundred glabrezu. He issued orders to the marilith Janiq – one of his most experienced, competent and trusted generals in the field – to vigorously renew her assault within Throile, and bolstered her armies there. For the sake of completeness, the ongoing war against Orcus – which had raged inconclusively for millennia across a dozen planes, and absorbed most of the Prince’s resources – was stepped up a notch.

The succubus, Nehael – by Graz’zt’s arts now stripped of her flesh, rendered insane, and subjected to continual torment – was confined alone within a prison world mere yards across, and warded against location by any form of magic or supernatural power. The only gate to the prison was sealed and similarly hidden, and the key – a silver cylinder some twelve inches long, and carved with indecipherable glyphs – was secreted in a location known only to the Prince himself.

Graz’zt turned his mind to the three Infernal Dukes present in Afqithan, and pondered upon Murmuur’s tower and how best to overcome it. The connection between Titivilus and the Ahma was known to him, but Murmuur was a Duke of the Order of the Fly, not a vassal of Dispai. His involvement was a concern, and bespoke the machinations of subtler devils, and tacit agreements between Dis and Malbolge. And Murmuur’s tower was close to impregnable: Graz’zt recalled its deployment upon the Blessed Plain – along with the other contrivances of the Adversary and Belial – in the early stages of the Great Revolt.

For an instant, a feeling of enormous poignancy welled up from within him: a profound melancholy, which consumed him utterly. Ideals and ancient oaths broken, and bright visions of bliss and freedom brought guttering to cold ash.

When it had passed, his brow furrowed in dark reflection. It was becoming hard to recall, and the memories seemed like dreams: divorced and incomplete, as though another, and not he, had taken part in those awful events.

**

"What of the succubus who followed me through the reality maelstrom," Mostin asked. "She is your cohort?"

Soneillon smiled. "Sometimes."

"And presently?" Mostin asked irritably.

"Her name is Lehurze," Nhura answered. "Narab indicated that she disappeared prior to Ainhorr’s attack. She is very slippery. If we meet again, I will likely kill her out of caution. I suspect that she covets Afqithan; Irknaan intended for her to supplant me."

"And where is she?" Mostin asked, exasperated.

Soneillon stared hard at the Alienist: she had no doubt that he could locate Lehurze if he so desired. "She has returned to Azzagrat."

Nhura cursed. "I knew that the whore was a turncoat, but..."
"Graz'zt does not know that she is there," Soneillon interrupted, "although, doubtless, he knows that she is somehow involved in events to date. He probably also guesses that she has Maihodrot's cubic gate. Before you ask, Mostin, Maihodrot was the demon responsible for overseeing Afqithan. Graz'zt executed him for dereliction."

"That was long overdue," Nhura remarked acidly. "He was an incompetent fool."

"What of the devils?" Shomei asked. "What is their rôle in this?"

"I suspect that they are waiting to see how events unfold before acting." The Succubus answered.

"Ainhorr has more than sufficient strength to force their retreat."

"Not so," Soneillon countered. "He can partially contain them, nothing more. They have erected a tower which is all but impenetrable. It is also a planar nexus, and leads to a number of worlds – including several Hells, no doubt."

"But Graz'zt himself could overcome it?" Mostin asked.

"Yes, given sufficient preparation. As could I. Or you maybe, Mostin; or Shomei. Or the understated Nwm. I know what you did to Hazihe, Druid. It was most impressive."

"I would have done the same to you," Nwm said coolly. "My current concern is to see you – all of you – return to whatever grim, depressing realities that you issued from. Or at least out of mine, in any case. I am hoping that this parley might expedite the process."

"You arrogant bastard," Jetheeg snapped. "As I recall it was first you who trespassed in Afqithan. And now you cry foul at our presence here? Mortals are perpetual hypocrites."

Eadric held up his hand. "The point is well-made. I think, however, we should move on before it becomes a point of contention. What has passed, has passed. The root question, which everyone is carefully avoiding, is this: can Graz'zt be lured to Afqithan and eliminated? Do we have the wherewithal? More importantly, I have yet to be convinced of the authenticity of you, Nhura, and your company: when allegiances change as quickly as yours, you must understand that it is impossible for me to hold even a modicum of trust. I speak the plain truth. What is preventing you from betraying us to Graz'zt?"

The Umbral Lilwend laughed. "Nothing at all, Ahma. But Graz'zt is somewhat unforgiving of those that deceive him. And Soneillon would, doubtless, punish me for any transgression against her. And Ainhorr sits on my throne, which irks me more than a little."

Shomei shook her head. "I think that if Eadric of Deorham were delivered into Graz'zt's hands, then he would forgive more than a little. Perhaps even the Queen of Throle has considered as much. We can, however, assume that this course of action did not appeal to her: she has had the opportunity, and did not act upon it. Here is your answer, Nhura: if you betray us, be sure that we are all dead. Because if either Mostin or I survive, we will find you, and kill you. But first, the glooms will stalk you, and the horrors will tear your mind apart. I am more vindictive than others here."
*It’s worth bearing in mind that Soneillon’s stratospheric Charisma – 50, when buffed – is close to impossible to portray meaningfully in game terms. Given the fact that she is primarily a sexual being (or nonbeing), Ortwin’s response – given his predilections – was natural.

**Aeons are (or were) understood to be cosmic celestial entities; emanations (or possibly avatars) of Oronthon. They are charged with tasks of great magnitude: establishing physical and metaphysical laws; the creation and maintenance of matter, space, energy and time. Orthodox Oronthonianism denies their existence, and long ago branded speculation regarding Aeons as heretical. Both Irrenite and Urgic belief, however, have a place for Aeons within their respective schemas: they are amoral or trans-moral but finite; removed by several degrees from the standard celestial hierarchy, and unconcerned by relative terms such as good and evil. Irrenite belief links them with the Inevitables, who otherwise occupy a very inconsistent place within the Orthodox world-view.

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**POST 13: THE PARLEY – PART TWO. AND AFTERWARDS**

Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 23rd November 2003

The jariliths prowled ceaselessly around them.

Nwm observed Soneillon with curiosity as she spoke. The demoness seemed utterly calm and imperturbable, as though she possessed every answer to every question that might cross a troubled mind. Somehow, in her own way, she seemed to have resolved all paradox. He understood Eadric’s fascination with her – if it was fascination – but simultaneously wondered whether it was a façade, and hoped that the Ahma held the same doubts.

The Queen of Throile spoke at length about Graz’zt: his subtlety, guile and prescience; his dominion, and the worlds that it extended to; his insatiable ambition; his allies, great and small; and his personal power, which, if he were given the opportunity to augment through sorcery before any meeting with them, might prove beyond even their collective ability to counter.

Kostchtchie, his most formidable ally, was discussed: to what extent would he remain steadfast? Who amongst the Prince’s servants – demons, daemons, demodands, lamias and half-fiends of every hue – would be loyal in the event of a serious threat to his hegemony? How far was his control already compromised: three of his balors had been eliminated and two – including Rurunoth – were missing. Only Ainhorr remained.

"Ainhorr is now armoured," Nhura said, "and, according to Narab, wields a slaadi blade."

"The weapon is called...Heedless," Soneillon said, after searching briefly for an accurate translation of its name. "It is a ten-foot vorpal sword. He won it from the death slaad champion Rshgu in the Vestibule of Lamentation: he was not idle
after you broke his blade, Eadric, and sought eagerly for a replacement. *Needless is, as its name suggests, a notoriously fickle weapon, even by slaadi standards.* It is immensely powerful, and may actually present more of a threat than the Balor himself. Ainhorr may or may not be capable of controlling it – it has only been in his ownership briefly. Graz’zt must have lent him aid in his efforts to secure it, prior to the assault upon Afqithan – Rshgu would have crushed him under normal circumstances."

"Charming," Ortwin smiled. Privately, his stomach turned over. Ainhorr remained something of a bugaboo for him. "You seem remarkably well-informed regarding these matters."

"Yes," Soneillon agreed.

"You are also less than altogether forthcoming," Mostin added, "but this is not entirely unexpected. Earlier, I posited a question regarding the Prince’s sanctum. He is an arch-fiend, and much of his power stems from it – would it benefit you, if you were in possession of it? Could you actualize its potential?"

"I have no interest in replacing Graz’zt as the ruler of Azzagrat, if that is what you are asking – albeit obliquely. And no, it is his. Neither Ainhorr, nor even Kostchtchie could ascend and claim it. It would quickly wither upon his demise."

"And Azzagrat itself? Does his Will maintain the cohesion of the realm?"

"Azzagrat would eventually return to Void, from which it was carved. But only after a billion life-ages of the universe. In this regard it is no different from any other Abyssal domain."

"Your brand of nihilism is unique," Shomei said. "Perhaps you could expand further upon this theory?"

"Philosophy does not interest me," Soneillon replied dismissively.

"Adyell, Helithai, Orychne and Chaya," Mostin pressed on. "These are your chief servants. Given your propensity for powerful spells, Soneillon, I assume that they are well-used to acting with you in magical concert? And by drawing energy from them into yourself, or diffusing it, you prevent them ever becoming a challenge to you."

[Soneillon]: Your mind is exquisitely tortuous, Alienist. I would greatly enjoy penetrating its mysteries. [Image] [Image]

Nwm coughed and Shomei raised an eyebrow as the telepathic bond relayed the information to them. Eadric smiled sympathetically. Mostin seemed to be somewhat flushed and embarrassed.

"I am intrigued by where your questions are leading," Soneillon remarked, apparently nonplussed.

[Shomei]: !? Mostin, you cannot be serious...

[Mostin]: With you, and Nwm, and Mulissu, and Jetheeg, and Koiilmilou, and the succubi it would be possible. I would need to fine tune the spell. We should not discount the possibility.

Mostin breathed deeply. "Heretofore, you may have considered two options: to
negate the Prince’s spellcasting and to overcome him through force of arms, or to subject him to a titanic magical barrage in Afqithan and hope that his defenses can be overcome. Both involve considerable risk. There are two other choices, which you are not aware of: given a cabal of sufficient ability, it is within my means to conjure the Prince and contain him; or I can gate a pseudonatural entity which I have come to know affectionately as The Horror and attempt to deploy it against Graz'zt.” The Alienist winced as he said the demon’s name.

Soneillon looked dubious. "I doubt your ability to devise such a spell."

"It is mine already. I inherited it from Fillein."


"The dweomer is perfect," Mostin countered. "I believe that the Prince was intentionally released the last time he was bound."

"Then there is no need to leave this place until that is accomplished," Koilimilou said. "He can be bound here, and..."

"No," Nwm said.

"The Druid refers to the Injunction," Nhura explained. "Outside of the proscribed area, however..."

"No," Nwm said, "I do not. I will neither participate in nor condone the imprisonment of a Demon Prince within the Green. If you proceed regardless, I will release him."

Mostin sighed and nodded. They had already discussed this at length. "We would need to find another location."

"In this case I would not recommend Afqithan," Nhura said coldly. "Not out of any concern that he would be bound in my vicinity, but because his release might be too easily accomplished by his own agents: there are many cultists loyal to him."

"I will seek for a suitable locale," Shomei grimaced. "An obscure demi-plane would be the best option. Alternatively, I could create one – although I currently lack the wherewithal to do so. And I suspect that the debt incurred in casting the binding spell would be large."

"Colossal," Mostin corrected her. "I also currently lack the means."

"Then why are we even having this discussion?" Jetheeg snarled. "You spend too much time in idle speculation. We should assault Ainhorr before his grip tightens – enough of the Loquai have escaped to Shadow or Faerie or obscure regions of the Abyss. They can be rallied and deployed en masse. If Rhyxali really purposes to lend aid, it will be easy enough to retake Afqithan. Graz'zt cannot denude his forces elsewhere to that great an extent. And if this mortal here," Jetheeg waved curtly towards Eadric, "is really such a prize, and Graz'zt comes in person to add his weight to the fray, then all the better."

Eadric shook his head. "He must be lured, if we follow that route. If he comes expecting war – armed to the teeth, surrounded by bodyguards and warded by spells that we cannot hope to penetrate – then it will go badly for us."

"Challenge him to single combat," Ortwin said drily.
"I beg your pardon?"

"I'm not suggesting that you actually go through with it," Ortwin said, as if instructing a child. "But he probably knows that you'd like to, and therefore it wouldn't come as a total surprise to him if you did, in fact, issue the challenge. It is a plausible deception."

"It is absurd," Eadric replied.

"If he refuses, then brand him as craven before his peers. Kostchtchie, Pazuzu, Fraz Urb'Luu, Orcus, Rhyxali. The gentle Lady Soneillon." Ortwin gave a mock bow. "Issue multiple sendings to a variety of Abyssal dignitaries declaring your intentions."

"You are insane."

"I will act as your herald to Graz'zt. I can make him believe it. Outside of the Infernal host, few liars approach me in guile or believability."

"That is quite a boast, Satyr," Jetheeg hissed. "And even if it were true, so what? Deceiving a mortal, or even a demon of low rank is one thing. But Graz'zt? I think not."

"I am capable," Ortwin replied nonchalantly. "Graz'zt is no different to any other demon, except that he is less gullible than most. In order to make him believe, one simply needs to be a better liar. If a mind blank is not adequate to the task, then Nwm will devise a spell to make my lies undetectable by Graz'zt's magic..."

"Will he?" The Druid raised an eyebrow.

"But not yet," Ortwin added quickly. "We need to rile him beyond all rational behaviour first. And I agree that it would be better if he were not accompanied by a dozen mariliths. His reaction needs to be so utterly violent and deranged that he immediately translates to Afqithan in order to kill Eadric. Overwhelming his forces there and eliminating Ainhorr might be a good start in our achieving this state of transcendental ire in the Prince – although I would recommend that we keep our identities hidden again for the meantime."

"He will obliterate you before you can even deliver the message," Nhura scoffed, "and if not, then certainly in response to such a challenge."

"Perhaps," Ortwin said, "in which case Nwm will reincarnate me. Although I suspect that he will not assail me. I will, after all, be in disguise."

"And what would you be disguised as?" Nwm asked, sighing.

"Not what, but who. As Titivilus, dear Nwm. As Titivilus."

"You would dare impersonate an Infernal magnate?" Jetheeg asked, incredulous.

"Yes," Ortwin replied. "Diplomatic immunity would be useful in negotiating with Graz'zt."

"That is unwise," Shomei said quietly. "It would attract displeasure in unwanted quarters. And the Nuncio of Dis himself might be your least concern."
"I will weather it," Ortwin grinned. "The opportunity of executing one of the greatest counterfeits in history is difficult to resist. It will be my *magnum opus*."

Eadric exhaled sharply. "We have a variety of options, it would seem. Having multiple redundancies in our plans is no bad thing, however. Nhura – how long before you could assemble the remaining Loquai?"

"They are dispersed. Some weeks, in your time. Several days in mine."

"And the creature you have mentioned, Mostin. Is it reliable?"

"I don’t know," the Alienist replied. "If Shomei and Nwm were to help me, I believe I could coerce it. A fourth caster would guarantee success and a reasonable degree of safety." Mostin stared meaningfully at Koilimilou.

"Now just wait a minute..." Nwm began.

"It will involve an immense backlash," Mostin continued.

"Would you *gate* it?" Koilimilou asked.

Mostin shook his head. "I think with four of us, I would use a *planar binding*. Holding it long enough to subject it to a compulsion would be no problem."

[Nwm]: *I am uneasy about involving this cambion in magical concert.*

[Mostin]: *As am I. She has raw power, however, and is now our ally. Fillein/Jovol was right: cooperative casting is where we should focus ourselves, Nwm. The potential is immense.*

"Nhura will translate to Faerie," Soneillon said, "and rally the Loquai. I will send word to those that have fled to Shadow, or to Rhyxali’s demesne. I will also speak again to Rhyxali herself, and contact Lehurze in Azzagrat." *Eadric, return with me to Throile. There is much that I would share with you.*

Eadric swallowed. "We should meet again in three weeks. We have some breathing time, at least. Nhura, issue a *sending* and we will translate to your location."

"We have yet to find a suitable staging ground," Nhura remarked. "Faerie and Shadow both entail certain risks."

"I will leave it to your discretion," Eadric replied.

"Is that *trust* I hear, Ahma?"

"It is pragmatism."

[Soneillon]: *Come with me, Eadric...*

Eadric closed his eyes, and refocused. "I will go to Morne," he said.

Mostin nodded, but felt uncomfortable. The connection between Graz’zt and Rhyxali was the subject of scholarly debate amongst those with more than a passing interest in demonology. Was their resemblance to one another merely superficial, or were they cut from the same block? Did they share a common
essence? Was she, somehow, his anima?

His stomach knotted. He desperately needed to consult the web of motes.

**

The Triune met for the second time on the autumn equinox, at Mostin's manse, in the woods southwest of Deorham. Orold – somewhat awed by the presence of the three powerful mages – nonetheless ensured an agreeable environment in which they could discuss whatever weighty matters they needed to discuss. Unlike Mostin, the apprentice had made peaceable contact with the nearby sprites, and several pixies – whom Mostin eyed suspiciously – acted as temporary cooks and waiters.

After a sumptuous repast, the Infernalist, Elementalist and Alienist sat upon the porch in silent telepathic communion.

[Mulissu]: *Here is the spell [Formula] I have avoided any unnecessary squandering of your valuable reservoir, Mostin.*

[Mostin]: (Analyzes) *If Nwm can be co-opted, collectively we could do this: [New Formula]*

[Mulissu]: (Eyes widen) *That is most impressive.*

[Mostin]: (Smiles) *That is only the beginning. We could then do this [Formula] and then this [Formula].*

[Mulissu]: (Dumbstruck).

[Shomei]: (Wrily) *Effectively, the Green dissipates the backlash. Nwm has set certain conditions upon his involvement, however.*

[Mulissu]: *Whatever they are, we should accept them. No-one has ever gone this far before. Whatever secrets Jovol could unlock from the web of motes will be trivial in comparison to the insights that we could gain. What does the Druid require?*

[Mostin]: *That, collectively, we petition the Claviger for an amendment to the Injunction. And assurances from each of us that while the augmented condition persists, we will only use its benefits for the purpose of divination.*

[Mulissu]: (Ruefully) *The latter, I will happily guarantee. But I am not sure that the Claviger can be so easily persuaded. What is Nwm’s request?*

[Shomei]: *A tightening of the rules regarding summoning.*

[Mulissu]: *In response to the actions of the Loquai?*

[Mostin]: *Partly. And Soneillon. And the devas at Kyrtill’s Burh, amongst others.*

[Shomei]: *No extraplanar entity should be permitted to enter Wyre. Period. Or the Claviger will dispatch the Enforcer to eliminate them.*

[Mulissu]: *I have no objection to approaching the Claviger on this point. I am*
dubious about its reaction, however.

[Shomei]: Is a quorum more likely to gain a favourable response?

[Mulissu]: I would say no. The Claviger is the Claviger. It abides by its own rules. Its motives are unguessable, and its intelligence quite alien.

[Mostin]: I believe that it would compromise the Claviger’s paradigm – which is geared towards the actions of Wizards. What if the Sela were to gate a solar to Morne? Would Gihaahia intercept it? It would be a conflict of interests, and would, in fact, throw the entire Injunction into question: its key tenet is still ‘no intervention in non-arcane politics.’ Moreover, an incident between the Enforcer and a cascade of celestials would be better avoided.

[Mulissu]: You forget that Rintrah was complicit in the idea of a Second Injunction. Jovol’s relationship to the Celestial Host and Tramst was – or is, assuming that Jovol’s essence persists – ambiguous, to say the least.

[Mostin]: It is beyond the Claviger’s purview. However sympathetic I am to Nwm’s position, I think he is on his own.

[Mulissu]: I am surprised that Nwm doesn’t object to the presence of the Claviger itself.

[Mostin]: (Humourously) He does. I think he regards it as the lesser of two evils, however. Untrammelled summoning is worse for him. It is amusing to speculate upon an organizing principle in this regard. Jovol, Rintrah, Nwm – all are working within the same framework, but to attain different ends.

[Shomei+Mulissu]: !

[Mostin]: I said amusing. I am not suggesting some metacosmic conspiracy.

[Shomei]: In any case, we should approach the Claviger. It can do no harm. And I am curious to experience it.

[Mostin]: Agreed. Nwm himself also indicated that he would like to join us in the petition.

[Mulissu]: (Sardonically) Then if the Enforcer is unleashed against us, we may, at least last a few seconds longer.

[Shomei]: I doubt it. When I inspected the web of motes it was quite apparent that the Claviger possessed significant deific powers. It would likely magnify** the Enforcer before any encounter with an entity that might otherwise prove a viable threat.

[Mostin]: Are you then suggesting that the four of us acting in concert might present a ‘viable threat’ to the unaugmented Enforcer?

[Shomei]: Certainly. We are, after all, the most potent spellcasters in the world.

[Mostin]: That is worrying. I had simply assumed Gihaahia to be unassailable. If a cabal of powerful mages were to attack her…I am thinking of posterity, here.

[Mulissu]: (Acidly) The point is moot. The Claviger has great prescience, and is virtually omniscient with regard to all things magical. It knows we are having this
conversation, and has already determined its course of action with regard to our petition. It may have reached its decision ten billion years ago. Things will unfold as they were meant to.

[Mostin]: I expected better from you, Mulissu. I am tired of fatalistic musings – is it a philosophical fashion that somehow escaped me?

[Mulissu]: Realities are changing faster than I can apprehend them, Mostin. One must find some kind of calm center. Angst becomes tedious after a while. Should I contact Nwm now?

[Mostin]: (Nods).

*

Mulissu issued a sending and, shortly thereafter, Nwm stepped from a nearby elm-tree.

"I assume that my proposal received a favourable response?" The Druid asked wryly.

"It is ingenious," Mulissu agreed. "I should caution you that, even collectively, we cannot assure a similar reaction from the Claviger. We cannot coerce it – only appeal to its guiding principles."

"If it agrees, how will its decision manifest?"

"I don’t know," the Elementalist replied.

"When can we make the petition?"

"There is no time like the present."

"Should we forewarn it of our impending visit?" Nwm asked.

Shomei smiled. "Don’t worry Nwm. It already knows."

Nwm raised an eyebrow.

*

In a small, dry cave in the hills of Mord, a child – with shoulder-length blonde hair and possessed of an ambiguous gender – suddenly materialized before an upright marble slab nine feet tall.

The great tablet, engraved with a thousand or more paragraphs of detailed arcane legalese, seemed to hum inaudibly and pulse invisibly. It had presence of an unusual kind, although the exact quality of its sentence was difficult to determine – its very inscrutability was the quality which marked it as far removed from the mundane.

The child watched patiently as, descending into the chamber down a narrow flight of rough-hewn steps, a trio of Wizards and a Uediian priest shuffled nervously.

Upon seeing the child waiting, Mostin was seized by an almost uncontrollable bout
of panic, and attempted to push past Mulissu, and back up the staircase.

The Druid scowled at him, blocked his egress, and gestured for him to continue on into the cave, to which he only reluctantly complied. As the four assembled before the diminutive figure, Nwm watched the Alienist carefully. The last thing he needed was for Mostin to suffer one of his ‘episodes.’

"I am..." Nwm began.

"...Nwm," the child finished for him.

"Are you..."

"...the Claviger, or the Enforcer?" The child completed his sentence again. "We are joined now. It makes little difference. I am the mostly benign part."

Mostin relaxed somewhat.

"You know why we are here," Nwm, Mostin, Mulissu, Shomei and the child said in perfect synchrony.

"Yes," the child said.

Mostin swallowed. "Is the..."

"...Injunction immutable, or is it subject to change? Both. You should have read it more closely. It contains a clause which ultimately gives the Claviger discretionary power in its interpretation. A law which is static and unyielding is of limited utility. The answer to your question, incidentally, is no. The Enforcer will not be deployed against ‘extraplanar’ targets – if you insist on using such naïve terminology – simply because they are present."

Mostin grinned smugly, his confidence returning. "I told you..."

"Your analysis is incomplete," the child interrupted. "Unfortunately, due to your meager perceptual faculty, you lack the ability to reach a comprehensive understanding."

Mostin scowled. "Perhaps you could..."

"...enlighten you? It would be a futile exercise to even attempt it. Could you instruct a rodent meaningfully in the higher magical arts?"

"It could be..."

"...awakened, yes. In which case it would no longer be a rodent per se. The metaphor is apt – if the Claviger were to change your faculty to be capable of understanding, you would no longer be Mostin the Metagnostic. Dismiss the possibility from your mind – the Claviger has no intention of deifying you. You may now ask one question regarding the web of motes."

Mostin shook his head, and gestured vaguely in the air. Obviously, vocalizing his question was an entirely superfluous act.

"Yes," the child answered unequivocally, and vanished.

Mulissu gave a quizzical look. Her hair crackled in mild irritation.
*Slaadi blades are almost invariably sapient.

** i.e. bestow one or more divine ranks.

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**POST 14: AN UNTITLED UPDATE**

Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 15th December 2003

Eadric stood next to Sercion upon the roof of the Temple in the warm autumn sun, and gazed out across Morne. Much of the damage caused to a thousand private residences in the wake of the *wave of hate* had been repaired, although, in places, clusters of blackened buildings remained. Industrious craftsmen still busied themselves with numerous minor projects, and from sunrise until dusk the *tap-tapping* of stone hammers, and the rasp of saws echoed across the city. The scaffolding which surrounded the Fane itself, however, was silent and abandoned – no mason or carpenter had worked there for two weeks.

The Temple coffers were empty. Many of Wyre’s aristocrats – appalled at the fact that the new Primate had distributed huge quantities of gold to Uedian peasants – had ceased to pay the now-voluntary tax. Promissory notes issued some months before had been delayed by church bureaucrats to such an extent that most of the guilds in Morne now refused to deal with the Temple at all.

Eadric scowled. "What is the debt, Sercion?"

The Templar grimaced. "Around two hundred thousand crowns, *Ahma*. Or so I am told."

"I will honour it," Eadric sighed.

"Good," the *Sela* said, ascending onto the roof behind them.

Eadric bowed.

"For long term sponsorship, we need to look to Sihu and Tagur to set the example," Sercion said. "Unfortunately, they are still paying for the war. Wars are expensive."

"There needs to be a coherent financial strategy," the *Sela* remarked wryly. "Alas, Oronthon chose one with no expertise in this area to be his representative – hence I depend upon a staff who are more competent in these matters than I."

"The Temple estates are vast," Eadric pointed out.

"But undergoing a sweeping monasticization," Sercion added. "Negotiating their relationship with the secular order will be a huge challenge. Foide and Skilla are already grumbling about the tax differentials."
“I confess that I am somewhat behind the times,” Eadric said.

“How is your relationship with Skadding?” Sercion asked.

Eadric looked confused.

“Will you be attending the investiture, Ahma?” The Templar continued.

“He will be sworn in as Duke of Trempa in ten days,” the Sela explained. He seemed rather amused.

Eadric sighed, and shrugged. This was news to him. The mundane affairs of Wyre – even those which concerned him directly – seemed a world away.

Tramst gestured for Eadric to follow him. “Come. We need to talk.”

*

The Sela – whose demeanour that particular morning, Eadric noted, seemed more mortal than divine – opened a small cabinet, retrieved a bottle of amygdala, and gestured for Eadric to sit in a wooden chair with a worn leather cushion. The reception room – once sumptuously furnished during Cynric’s tenure as Archbishop – was now bright, airy and spartan. Eadric smiled. The Sela had, after all, achieved his perfection in the company of Urgic Mystics in Ardan, renowned for their austerity and modesty.

“How is Titivilus?” The Sela asked ironically, handing Eadric a carved wooden goblet filled with the almond liqueur.

“He is enigmatic and confusing,” Eadric replied.

“And Soneillon?”

“Doubly so. I have yet to comprehend her place in the scheme of things.”

“It will doubtless become clear in due course,” Tramst said opaquely.

“I should like to voice my concerns, and ask some questions, if I might,” Eadric ventured.

“Try to avoid metaphysics,” the Sela smiled.

“I will address them tangentially, if at all,” Eadric replied. “Pharamne’s Urn…” Eadric began.

The Sela groaned.

“I am not about to ask questions regarding the ‘truth’ in what was previously considered heretical doctrine, nor am I about to inquire regarding the properties of this thing. But if such an object were to exist – is there any reason that I should not allow it to fall into the hands of the Demoness. Actually, I do not seek an answer to that question either, Sela, I merely wish to impress upon you that it is something which currently preoccupies me.”

“As it should,” Tramst agreed.
“There is also the question of those I number my allies: A demon queen – or possibly two, if I include Rhyxali – and a variety of umbral fiendish feys and their cohorts. Not to mention Mostin and Shomei, who have dubious connections, to say the least.”

“And Nwm?” The Sela inquired.

Eadric laughed. “Once, I considered my friendship with Nwm to be scandalous. Others felt that it compromised my faith. These days, we argue little – our philosophical differences are relatively minor compared to the others with whom I deal.”

“What is your relationship to me, Eadric?” Tramst asked unexpectedly.

“I do not understand…”

“I mean, do you regard me as your confessor? As your teacher? The absolute spiritual authority whom you follow? Your Archbishop? Or do you regard yourself as my equal in some ways?”

Eadric looked horrified. “You are the Sela. You are…”

Tramst held up his hand. “Yes, yes. The Infinite Perception of God. No value judgement is implied in the question, Ahma. What is your function? What is the purpose of the Ahma?”

“To pave the way for you.”

“Well, now I am here. You remain the Ahma, however. What is your purpose now?”

“I think I am still defining it,” Eadric answered carefully.

“I once asked you if vengeance and retribution were within your purview. Have you come to a conclusion yet?”

“To define my rôle purely in those terms makes me somewhat uncomfortable.”

“I said nothing about vengeance and retribution being exclusive qualities. They do not preclude mercy, for instance. But the question remains: is this now the primary purpose of the Ahma? Is this why he wages war on Graz’zt?”

Eadric shook his head. “I would bring aid to Nehael. None other will come.”

“For mercy or love then? Perhaps you resent the fact that Enitharmon has not ordered a host to descend into Azzagrat?”

“I do not resent it – who am I to dictate action to the Celestial Marshal?” Eadric sighed. “Although, sometimes, I regret it,” he added ruefully.

“But if Oronthon were to appoint a powerful representative in order to expedite Nehael’s release, and to bring justice to Graz’zt, you would deem it appropriate?”

“Yes, I would.”

“Despite the fact that she turned her back upon Rintrah when he extended
Oronthon’s grace to her?”

“Perhaps because of it,” Eadric answered. “She seeks a higher perspective.”

“Maybe Rintrah was sent to tempt her,” the Sela said, smiling. “To offer her an easy way out.”

“That is a peculiar inversion of conventional truth.”

“The fact that it can be inverted is the quality which defines it as conventional, Eadric. And perhaps Enitharmon cannot act, because he relates to that aspect of Oronthon which is conventional, bounded and finite. It is not within his remit.”

“That is unfortunate for Nehael,” Eadric said grimly.

“I don’t see why. Oronthon has merely opted to use a more unconventional tool.”

Eadric looked confused.

The Sela sighed. “You, Ahma, you. Whilst your humility is an endearing trait, sometimes it can be painfully difficult to make you understand your own importance. You are a liminal entity, Eadric. You relate to facets of reality which have no place within the beliefs of Orthodoxy, or the understanding of celestials. This is why the acceptance of self-determination is most important to you – perhaps Cynric himself foresaw this. After all, whatever you do, it is the Will of Oronthon.”

“But I can still Fall.”

“Oh yes,” Tramst nodded. “And harder, faster and with more brilliance than any have done for a long while. Do not make the mistake of thinking that you have transcended the paradox, or even that the paradox can be transcended.”

“You give most conflicting lessons, Sela.”

“Thank-you,” Tramst said.

“I have another question,” Eadric said, averting his eyes. “It is somewhat presumptuous. You may feel the need to chastise me for asking it.”

The Sela smiled. “This should be interesting.”

“It regards your nature – both finite and unbounded. I recognize that this is a necessary dialectic for the transmission of saizhan: you cannot be purely Man or purely God.”

“I had not perceived it in those terms. It is an interesting speculation. You are also trespassing dangerously near the province of metaphysics, now.”

“Sometimes, you appear as more mortal than divine to me. At others, you are the Godhead manifest. Is this merely a reflection of my understanding, or does it have a basis outside of my own experience?”

“Is there a difference?” Tramst asked.

The Ahma nodded. Saizho. The capacity for the human mind to perceive is also something which I frequently meditate upon. I refer to Mostin’s plans...
“You are concerned that his expanded awareness may be dangerous?”

“Yes,” Eadric replied. “Especially with regard to the web of motes. The idea that he can acquire as much prescience as that offers. And Shomei…”

“Do not concern yourself with Shomei. She has a healthier perspective than Mostin, although she will soon be confronted with an enormous burden.” Do you wish to know what it is?

Will the knowledge benefit her, or anyone else?

“It might,” the Sela replied. A look of sympathy briefly crossed his face. “Shomei will soon die.”

Eadric’s jaw dropped. “But…”

“She will perceive her own demise when she inspects the web of motes, just as Jovol did.”

“It cannot be averted?”

“She can choose to make the manner of her passing meaningful.” Tramst explained.

“But Nwm can…”

“I have opened the door for her, Eadric. Death will be a less unpleasant experience for her, the second time around. She may be unwilling to give it up. Bliss is not easily surrendered.”

“Then she will have failed, according to her own philosophy,” Eadric sighed. “When the struggle ceases, what then for Shomei? It defines her being. It is the essence of what she is.”

The Sela smiled. “I think that, for Shomei, overcoming her desire to overcome may be the ultimate antinomian act.”

Eadric grimaced, and nodded.

“That is all, for the moment. Has this conversation helped you?”

“Oddly, yes,” Eadric replied.

“Good. And beware of Soneillon, Eadric.”

“Yes,” the Ahma replied.

He stood, bowed, and exited the reception room, and began to walk down the steps towards the cloister. But before he had descended even half-way, he was met by a familiar figure – hooded in purple, bearing an ornate rod, and about whom the faintest hint of cinnamon hung. He swallowed, and his mind span. For a fraction of a second, he wondered what she and Tramst would talk about. He wondered how often that – since their initial exchange – she had come here to see the Sela. It was hardly the kind of detail that she would be inclined to share.

“Hello, Ahma,” she said with a wry half-smile.
He nodded in acknowledgement, but did not meet her eyes.

Passing out of the cloister, beneath the scaffolding and across the courtyard, Eadric made his way to the stable, where three score Temple steeds – many of celestial descent – were quartered. The place was strangely serene and, aside from the horses and two grooms, entirely empty. Contundor’s stall, like the others, was open and ungated. The destrier bore no harness, and stood waiting patiently.

“I will not ask you to come with me…” Eadric began.

I will come.

“Thank-you,” he smiled.

**

Ortwin and Iua – together with the sidhe-cambion, Koilimilou – sped through the twilit skies of Afqithan. They were *mind blanked, invisible, polymorphed* and buoyed by several other augmentations. Ortwin was, for once, serious in his attitude and demeanour. There were demons everywhere: they could afford to take no risks.

Koilimilou said nothing during their progress. Her face remained impassive. Ortwin found her presence and demeanour utterly disconcerting.

They were bound for Chaltipeluse, the castle of Ytryn, a Loquai noble who preferred the style of ‘duke’ rather than ‘king’ – although it reflected nothing on the actual power at his command. His fortress, carved by indentured dao from the rock of a mountain-peak long ages before, would – in a more conventional conflict – have been altogether unassailable. In Afqithan, it was no less vulnerable than an unwalled village upon an open plain.

Ytryn was, as Irknaan had been, an aristocrat with two demonic sponsors – although Koilimilou didn’t doubt that he had been one of the first to support Ainhorr when the Balor had invaded the demiplane. *Loyalty* to either Graz’zt or Rhyxal was not so much an issue as the *opportunity* offered by service to one, or the other, or both. Ortwin, in order to demonstrate his glibness and power of persuasion, had volunteered to address Ytryn, and win him on board – or at least find a way to compromise him sufficiently to turn Ainhorr’s suspicious eye towards the Duke. If his position became untenable, he might be forced to rally to Nhura out of desperation.

It was a dirty plan, Ortwin thought, but then again they were hardly observing the niceties of Wyrish chivalry. *Not that anyone really observes them in Wyre, either*, the Satyr mused.

If all else failed, Koilimilou would – hopefully – ensorcel Ytryn with a *geas*.*. They would likely also need to eliminate the Duke’s consort, a hag named Chavrille. And anyone else present when Ytryn was enchanted.

Ortwin felt his pouch nervously, to check that the two scrolls hastily scribed by Mostin and Shomei, a *plane shift* and a *sending* – to be used only in emergencies – were still there. It had been a long time since he had read a spell from a scroll.
He hoped they wouldn’t backfire.

“Will there be demons there?” Ortwin asked. “Or has Ainhorr granted a modicum of autonomy to his new subjects?”

“There will be demons,” Koilimilou replied stonily.

“Is that speculation, or do you know for a fact?”

“The palace will be crawling with Ainhorr’s agents. Some will be disguised. Others will be openly present in the capacity of ‘advisors.’ There may or may not be a garrison – which may be of a temporary, permanent or indefinite nature.”

“Then how can we even gain a private audience with Ytryn?” Ortwin groaned. “I mislike the idea of attempting to coerce him in the presence of a marilith and half a dozen glabrezu…”

“You work it out,” Koilimilou snapped. “You are the one who claims to be able to talk his way out of anything. And to think you had the presumption to assert your ability to dupe Graz’zt himself.”

“Actually, I am more concerned that my innuendo will need to be so subtle, that Ytryn himself may not understand it.”

Koilimilou scowled. This satyr was a braggart.

Iua sighed. “The real problem is, as Mostin continually points out, that any demon in Afqithan – and I include Ainhorr himself in that statement – is only two teleports away. Ten seconds.”

“If we see any demons abruptly vanish, then so should we,” Ortwin replied.

“And if we don’t see them at all?”

“Then we’re screwed,” Ortwin admitted. He groaned. “How can we fight this war? I see only repeated guerilla raids of teleporting demons, and umbral sidhe who vanish back to Shadow after brief forays. Is there nothing which can be likened to a conventional force?” The Satyr considered Mostin – the Alienist had, amongst other duties, agreed to reflect upon possible strategies for combating large numbers of demons.

“That is a conventional force,” Koilimilou said irritably. “At least by Loquai standards. They favour campaigns of bloody, :);):)-for-tat attrition. Graz’zt knows this, and has deployed leaping demons as his main troops – they are teleporters. Dretch would be of no use at all to him, even in vast numbers. Hence, also, the kelvezu, although no-one knows how many – their services are exceedingly expensive. There again, Graz’zt is unfathomably rich. Strike and retreat. Intimidate. But every Loquai stronghold has areas which are dimensionally locked to prevent precisely this kind of assault. And many sit on gates to one plane or another. Some are known, some are jealously guarded secrets.”

“And Ytryn’s fortress?” Ortwin asked.

“Has a portal which leads to Faerie,” Koilimilou answered. “But I do not know its location, or its appearance.”
“But his inner chambers – wherever his Ducal seat is – will be in a place which is proof against extradimensional movement?”

“And scrying,” Koilimilou replied.

“And his sanctum – where he practices magic?”

“Pah,” the Cambion sneered. “Ytryn has no great ability. He is a warrior, nothing more. Chavrille is a necromancer of some skill, however.”

“And, aside from the Loquai and any demons, is there anything which we should expect?”

“Gargoyles and manticores. Displacer beasts.”

“Of the umbral fiendish variety, no doubt?”

“Naturally,” Koilimilou replied humourlessly.

“Does this…quality…which Afqithan possesses have a source?” Ortwin had been about to say taint, but decided that it might be undiplomatic. “A wellspring? A locus? Is there a place where the umbral bleed is strongest?”

“You adequately demonstrate your cosmogonic ignorance with regard to Afqithan,” Koilimilou sneered.

“Shomei speculated that it may be a splinter of Faerie which was shivered during the Fall…”

A look of contempt crossed Koilimilou’s face.

“Pray enlighten me,” Ortwin said drily.

“Afqithan is Afqithan, just as Azzagrat is Azzagrat. Speculate all you like. The umbral flux ebbs and flows. Sometimes, Shadow is closer, at others it is further away.”

“But the pure malignancy,” Ortwin asked, deciding that diplomacy was wasted on the Cambion. “That is not a trait native to Shadow.”

Koilimilou smiled darkly. “That is the touch of the Lady Rhyxali.”

“But…”

“She was venerated here long before the name of Graz’zt was known. This place is sacred to her. And whatever temporary steward takes control, Afqithan is, and always has been, hers.”

“Ah,” Ortwin nodded dubiously, raising his eyebrows.

**

“There is too much to do,” Mostin grumbled. “And too little time.” Within the extradimensional space of his manse, his desk – normally immaculate in its organization – was strewn with books and papers. Several imps – temporarily
compacted – acted as scribes: finding references, bringing books to Mostin, or
taking notes as required. The Alienist’s mind held every title of each of the nine
hundred volumes which Shomei had loaned him. He merely needed to decrypt
them and scan them for relevant information – during the time that he wasn’t
working on the second in the series of spells designed to interpret the web of
motes. His head span.

Nhura.

“Perhaps you should retreat to a slower time-stream,” Orolde suggested
unhelpfully, eyeing one of the devils suspiciously. It leered back at him.

“Perhaps you could retrieve Tersimion’s Last Diatribes against Arcanism and
insert it into your fundament,” Mostin replied with uncharacteristic vulgarity. “It
would be a fitting resting place for that tome, in any case.”

“I will make some tea,” the Nixie sniffed.

“That is an excellent idea,” Mostin nodded. “Orolde, in case my attention lapses,
do not allow any imps into the house proper. If I were censured for violating the
Injunction at this time, it would be highly regrettable.”

Orolde nodded, and withdrew.

The Alienist issued a sending to Ortwin:

*What progress? Ytryn ally? News of Titivilus? Soneillon? Do we have timeline?
Need viable, secure base of operation.*

*Patience. No contact made yet. Still considering options. Dimensional Locks in
Chaltipeluse may prove defensible.*

Mostin sighed, and idly tapped upon the nigh-indestructible sphere of black
crystal which sat in front of him.

Nufrut’s head appeared. She scowled.

“Your knowledge of strategy and tactics in the sphere of Abyssal warfare is
immense,” Mostin said.

“Yes,” the Marilith sighed.

“And your knowledge of Afqithan itself, not inconsiderable.”

“That is correct. Get to the point, Mostin. You are being boring.”

“I would remind you that you are the disembodied head, and I am the powerful
wizard whose patience has recently been tried overmuch,” Mostin said drily.

“The point is well made,” Nufrut admitted.

“If you had eighteen thousand bar-lgura, a thousand or so chasme, several
hundred nycedaemons, as many succubi and palrethees, a hundred goristros, and
– how many kelvezu do you think Graz’zt has had the opportunity to enlist, by
the way?”

“Now that is an interesting question, isn’t it?” Nufrut smirked.

“In any case,” Mostin continued, “is there a classical model or scenario for annexing or invading a demiplane such as Afqithan?”

“I’m sure there are several hundred, at least,” Nufrut answered.

“But their organization – presuming they have any?”

“Do not make the error of assuming that because of their philosophical inclination towards freedom and satiation, that demons are an undisciplined rabble when gathered en masse,” Nufrut chided. “Who are the Generals? Captains?”

“Seven mariliths. And more recently arrived – according to Nhura – two dozen nalfeshnees and a hundred or so glabrezu.”

“Seven? Graz’zt is taking no chances, it would appear,” Nufrut’s condescending smile was beginning to irk Mostin. “You should give up now, Mostin. You have no hope at all.”

“Correct me if my analysis is wrong,” Mostin said, ignoring the Marilith’s enjoinment to despair. “Goristros are, being largely immobile, confined to the capacity of point-defense and guarding important tactical positions; succubi and palrethees act as scouts, messengers and aerial light cavalry, so to speak…”

“That is correct,” Nufrut replied enthusiastically. “They are seldom deployed in units of more than six to twelve. Also, the capacity of some succubi to act as infiltrators should not be underestimated.”

“But the chasme are deployed in larger groups?”

“Squadrons of forty or fifty,” Nufrut replied. “They are extremely effective when massed. Their collective drone will be close to irresistible.”

Mostin’s stomach tightened. He hadn’t even begun to consider the implications of that. “And the heavy-hitters? The nycadaemon mercenaries?”

“Three or four companies are sufficient to use as shock troops,” Nufrut leered, “and expendable. But I wouldn’t anticipate a pitched battle, in any case.”

The Alienist’s mind was already developing a plan. And the more he thought about it, the more he liked it. He needed to address the root of the problem. “Let me pose another question, Nufrut: if I could force a pitched confrontation. If the ability of these demons to teleport was temporarily suspended…”

“That is pointless speculation,” the Marilith sneered.

Mostin ignored her. Formulae were flooding through his psyche. He picked up Nufrut’s sphere, and handed it to the imps.

“Take a five-minute break,” he said to his compacted scribes. “Do not leave this extradimensional space.”

As the diminutive fiends gleefully tossed Nufrut’s head to one another, Mostin
brushed all of his collected books and papers from his desk with a swift sweep of his arm. He retrieved a single, blank sheet of paper, and with a quill pen which made him feel particularly dangerous – boldly still bearing its feather – he wrote at the top:

*Mostin’s Grand Astral Flux Inhibitor*

He sighed, crossed it out, and pondered briefly, before writing:

*Mostin’s Quiescence of the Spheres*

Much better, he thought. Not that he really had time to begin this. But it couldn’t hurt to analyze a few formulae. Just to see if it was a plausible idea.

Within five minutes, he had decided that it was plausible, and all thoughts of *Pharamne’s Urn* and *Carasch* had left his mind. He now had seventeen days to develop two transvalent spells.

Orolde returned shortly thereafter with a large pot of tea, which Mostin liberally fortified with a variety of alchemical stimulants.

*Koilimilou would use a limited wish to achieve the desired effect. 1 action being better than 10 minutes.*

**POST 15: THREE WEBS**

*Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 16th February 2004*

Eadric rode alone from Morne to Trempa upon Contundor, passing by his own keep at Deorham without pause late in the afternoon of the second day of the journey.

His decision not to take Tatterbrand, who had been quietly at work within the Temple apiary, was based in large measure upon the knowledge that his squire – upon learning of the *Ahma’s* intentions – would have insisted upon accompanying his master to Afqithan. And Afqithan was a place beyond Tatterbrand’s ability to comprehend and, likely, survive.

Mostin’s message, *I can lock part of the demiplane. It will be possible for you to go as yourself, without duplicity, if you so desire,* was a simultaneous cause of both relief and concern for him, and he considered the implications as he rode.

Somewhat later, when Eadric made camp by the wayside, Mostin himself appeared and they discussed the likely unfolding of events. Soneillon was engaged in delicate negotiations with Rhyxali, and Ortwin made overtures to Duke Ytryn in Afqithan. They waited for Nhura to rally the remaining Loquai in Faerie and Shadow, and give the signal. Mostin seemed confident that the spell that he was devising and – with the aid of Nwm and Shomei – would invoke, was proof against even Graz’zt’s attempts to dispel.
"Provided, of course, that he does not enlist a cabal of his own," Eadric said drily.

"Demons are not renowned for exhibiting a preference for cooperative magic," Mostin sniffed.

"Except Soneillon?" Eadric asked.

"She is unusual in that regard, but not unique," Mostin nodded. "You know her better than most. In your judgment, will she involve herself personally, or act through others?"

Eadric shrugged. "I've no idea. I'm surprised that you trust my ability to read her."

"I don't," Mostin agreed. "But I trust mine less in this regard. And I have not been to Throile. What did..."

"I'd really prefer not to talk about it, Mostin."

"Ahh," the Alienist nodded.

"And Throile itself is under renewed attack."

"Evidently, she keeps you well informed," Mostin raised an eyebrow. "When you were there, did she..."

"Mostin..." Eadric sighed.

"I'll not ask again. Apparently you feel a little reticent to speak of it."

"How perceptive of you, Mostin. And when will your spell be ready?"

"Soon enough," the Alienist answered. "I am somewhat pressed for time, however. And Shomei is nagging me to complete my part of the cycle which will allow us to interpret the web of motes. She is ready, and so is Nwm."

"Then don't let me keep you," Eadric said, arranging his blanket meaningfully.

"She is not idle, however," Mostin continued, ignoring the hint. "I believe she has approached several Infernal magnates regarding possible support in the Afqithan endeavour."

"On whose authority?" Eadric was aghast.

Mostin laughed. "I don't think that she requires any. Shomei is very well connected. And she is also making inquiries regarding the presence of Titivilus in the demiplane."

"This is becoming too complex." His mind boggled as he considered the connection between the Sela and the Infernalist. A microcosm of the Irrenite perception of Oronthon and the Adversary? The Left Hand of the Numinous. Do not start thinking that way. It leads to madness.

"What do you expect?" Mostin sighed. "The prize is enormous, after all."

"Afqithan? Hardly."
"Azzagrat is the prize, Eadric, with its untold wealth. And the fall of Graz'zt. Such events – or the promise of them – tend to attract attention. Lots of attention."

"Mmm. Yes. I suppose they do."

"Are you actually beginning to grasp the full ramifications of this, Eadric?" Mostin asked sarcastically. "You realize that the spill-over will be immense, of course? It will be like dropping a boulder into a puddle."

"Azzagrat is a puddle?"

"Cosmically speaking, yes. And if we succeed, we create something that Abyssal nature abhors the most."

Eadric gave a quizzical look.

"A power vacuum," Mostin explained.

**

Had Rintrah been mortal, and subject to the vagaries of pride or honour, he might have rejoiced in the grace bestowed upon him, or experienced ecstasy at his newfound closeness with the Godhood. As it was, lacking in such faculties, or even a differentiated sense of self, the temporary Perfection of the celestial registered as nothing more than a recognition that he was a more efficient tool for carrying out his Shining Master's Will. His thoughts reached out to find an omnipresence which mystics might have regarded as comforting and all-embracing. Lacking an ego to begin with, the experience was less profound for the Messenger.

Wreathing himself in flame and darkness, Rintrah descended rapidly into the lowest pit of Hell. After a brief and unknowable exchange had occurred, the celestial struck out across the infinities which stretched toward the Abyss, perceived by his mind's eye as a spiral which led to Nothingness.

In Morne, the Sela sat in a state of saizhan, the interaction of entities of tremendous power appearing merely as facets of the dialectic revealed to consciousness. Whether his mind reflected reality, or reality responded to his intention was unknown. Causality, synchronicity and coincidence: all were meaningless terms.

The Messenger reached an interface. A bubble of separation. Sealed, inviolable; the labour of centuries of sorcery. Even before he touched it, Rintrah knew that he could not penetrate it.

Oronthon Magnified him. He passed effortlessly through.

Pain waited beyond. It was as if all the agony in the cosmos had been distilled into this single space, mere yards across: a perfect sphere, the walls of which were graven with glyphs and runes of torment. Their power passed over the celestial, and around him, and through him, but caused less than the slightest discomfort. Rintrah's eyes, incandescent with potency now, glanced upwards to behold a semblance of a form: wracked, inchoate, stretched and twisted beyond recognition, its pattern diffuse at its margins. It seemed as if the slightest of
breezes would cause it to evaporate. Its grasp on existence was tenuous.

Under the force of the Planetar's selfless Will, the quiddity of the sphere began to change, and reshaped itself according to his direction. Empty space assumed pleasing forms: a tree, a small pool with lilies, a tiny rock garden. The upper hemisphere gave off a soft, azure radiance, reminiscent of a cloudless day in late summer.

Rintrah rested briefly: the effort of creation was not insignificant. He glanced at the artificial sky, still etched with sigils of dreadful power which emanated madness and pain, before his wings lifted him gently aloft. As his hand trailed lightly over the runes, each one shattered, disjoined into its separate components. They fell like a silver dust upon the rockery, or to float upon the surface of the pool.

The formless thing, still suspended in the centre of the sphere, quivered palpably and then relaxed. For an instant, Rintrah was concerned that the sudden removal of the tension that it had experienced might cause it to dissociate. He swiftly grasped the essence and held it in his hands. Cohesion and perception returned to it. Responsive to the celestial's ministrations, it corporeated rapidly.

Rintrah laid her by the bole of the tree, hallowed the sphere, and vanished. Nehael slept for the first time in her immeasurably long existence.

The Sela shifted his position, and a single bead of sweat trickled from his temple. It had been a particularly difficult meditation.

**

Ortwin, Iua and Koilimilou waited in an antechamber of blacks and muted greys, the vague and insubstantial walls of which were carved with exquisite yet gruesome scenes. They depicted torture, mutilation, and an erotic exultation in pain and depravity which upset even the Satyr's normally liberal sensibilities.

This may be the stupidest thing I have ever done, he thought to himself. Ainhorr must know of our presence by now. Inwardly, he fretted desperately. His outward appearance was one of practiced, imperturbable nonchalance.

Ytryn, one of the most powerful of Loquai nobles, had kept the trio waiting for an hour. What counsel was he taking? Whose orders was he following? Dammit, why hasn't anything happened yet?

The Cambion said nothing, her perfect face remained impassive, perhaps bearing the slightest hint of contempt.

Gods, I hope her name still carries some weight in these parts, Ortwin regarded Koilimilou. I hope they buy this. And then, He knows I am here. He must. He knows what I am, who I am. He knows that I was there when we hit Feezuu. He knows it was me – and Iua – at Khu. Why has he not acted? I should be dead by now, or at least undergoing painful dismemberment.

A pair of doors opened. Ortwin's stomach turned over, and bile rose in his throat. He smiled lazily.
"After you," he said easily to the Cambion.

*Polymorphed* and *mind-blanked*, Ortwin and Iua followed Koilmilou into the great hall. The Satyr had assumed the shape of a sidhe again. Iua's form – a death slaad – was designed to cause maximum confusion and concern amongst Ytryn's vassals and his demonic courtiers. Ortwin hoped that she could pull it off – Iua was a fine liar, but lacked his own finesse.

Koilmilou bowed her head.

Ortwin strode forward, aware of the many gazes upon him, bowed with considerable flair before Ytryn's throne, and spoke in a calm, confident voice. His Sylvan was full of archaic inflexion, as befitted a representative of the oldest of fae lineages.

"Greetings, your Grace. My thanks for receiving this embassy, and the hospitality of your court. Queen Nhura sends her regards from her exile in Faerie, and trusts that you remember your old acquaintance."

As Ortwin's head rose, his eyes took on the full scene before him. Ytryn reclined upon a low seat. To his left, coiled and menacing, a marilith was poised like a viper. Two kelvezu flanked the Duke, and at least thirty Loquai knights stood about in silent vigil. Umbral quicklings darted around the periphery of his vision, and a palrethee hovered in the air nearby.

*Sh*t*, the Satyr thought.

**

Eadric's decision to attend the investiture of Skadding, Foide's' son, as Duke of Trempa, had been made quickly. Despite his ambivalence towards the House of Thahan, and his distrust of the Lord Chamberlain and his tedious plots, Eadric actually felt a measure of confidence in Skadding. The boy was naïve and overly trusting – qualities which, in many ways, the Earl of Deorham regarded as positive and which his father had, apparently, failed to divest him of.

Besides, one must fulfill one's feudal obligations, after all.

After a brief detour to visit the Abbey of Osfrith – where he instructed the nuns to arrange the transport of the insane Urqual to the Fane in Morne – Eadric rode through the open gates of the castle at Trempa on the evening before the ceremony. The outer courtyards were crammed with tents and pavillions. Knights, courtiers, maids and entertainers ate, drank and mingled in the dusk. Heads turned quickly to regard him, and from somewhere his own *ladon* – his clarion call – rang out from a trumpet.

Passing swiftly beneath the Tower of Owls and into the inner bailey, his presence caused more chaos and hysteria than he was altogether comfortable with. Trempa's Oronthonians – the first to embrace the new order when it had swept across Wyre – prostrated themselves and hailed the *Ahma*, a virtual demigod. The Uediians – who comprised most of Trempa's northern aristocracy – regarded him as a saviour from Temple taxes and the indentureship of pagan farmers. In that regard, he had held true to his word. Caur of Har Kumil shouted and greeted
him warmly.

Foide regarded Eadric suspiciously behind a veneer of politeness and civility. The satisfaction that he had enjoyed for the past month – at his family's possession of two of Wyre's great fiefs – now turned to sourness in his mouth. Foide was reminded of one simple fact: with the blessing of King Tiuhan or no, this ceremony could only pass with the support – whether open or implicit – of Eadric of Deorham. He was above the law, whatever protestations he might make to the contrary. He was invulnerable: mortal weapons could not touch him, they said. Men would follow him happily to their death, assured of their place in paradise. And if he had wanted the duchy for himself, he could have taken it.

And he rides into Trempa, travel-stained and without an entourage, like some errant or hedge-knight.

Eadric dismounted, and knelt before Skadding, his new liege-lord. Somewhat abashed, the Duke-to-be ushered him to his feet.

"My sword is yours," Eadric bowed. "And my counsel and guidance, should you ever require it."

Foide of Lang Herath chewed his lip and brooded.

**

Mostin’s lidless green eyes were glazed and his body motionless, as he floated – transfixed – within an infinite sea of light. A hundred billion motes surrounded him.

His intellect, swollen by magic to titanic proportions, reflected briefly upon the series of spells which had brought him to this place. Potent dweomers, which only a handful of Wizards in Wyre’s long history would have been capable of mastering, seemed – from his new perspective – like paltry cantrips fit only for neophytes and dabblers.

Cradled in the palm of Mostin’s hand was Graz’zt’s mote: dark, erotic, brooding, and seething with potency. The Alienist inspected first one facet, and then another. The fact that he could not determine the location of Graz’zt – in spatiotemporal terms, at least – was indicative of the fact that the Prince was mind blanked. But it made no difference: there was another mote, anchored by a taught radicle, in close proximity. What one could not read directly, one could infer obliquely with little effort in an expanded state such as this: Lord Kostchtchie stood before Prince Graz’zt within the great hall of the Iron Palace in Zelatar.

Mostin scowled, and rapidly plotted the trajectories of several hundred possible futures, scanning each for resonances with Eadric, Nhura, Soneillon, Rhyxali, Ainhorr, Titivilus, Nehael and himself.

Kostchtchie will move to support Ainhorr in Afqithan, he thought. Fiendish giants, he mused, and some are powerful sorcerers. His eye caught a new thread of probability. What is that?

[Inspection. Analysis.] Blightfire, he groaned inwardly. The Lord of the Ice Wastes had potent allies of his own.
Mostin returned his attention to Graz'zt's mote, and abstracted his perspective. He noted the tenuous rapport between himself and the Prince of Azzagrat – alluding to Graz'zt's own prescience.

But I see both more clearly and more deeply than you, he thought. For the moment, at least. Your machinations are transparent to me. Graz'zt could not grasp the entirety of the Afqithan nodality any more than Mostin could, but the fragments of which Mostin was aware – scattered and incoherent as they were – were more complete. He considered the immense dimensional lock that he had developed, projected the catenary of the pseudonatural Horror onto the lattice of interconnected points, and then superimposed Shomei's glooms on top of that. The nodality rapidly reorganized itself to show a number of different probable futures.

None showed Graz'zt in Afqithan.

He is afraid, Mostin knew. And rightly so. He is not unassailable. He will not come.

Mostin cursed. One plan at least – to lure the Lord of Azzagrat to Afqithan with the promise of Eadric's head – could not be realized. Mostin did not underestimate Graz'zt's shrewdness or cunning, but had hoped that his temper would be sufficiently unstable to betray him.

The Alienist projected a scenario which involved the swift subdual of Afqithan, the removal of Ainhorr and Kostchtchie – and whatever wights the Ice Lord brought with him – and an immediate subsequent assault upon Azzagrat itself. It required Shomei to secure twelve legions of Bathym's barbed devils and the commitment of Rhyxali's main force of babaus in addition to her shadow demons. But there would be no second dimensional lock and no glooms – Shomei herself had vanished from the picture, slain by kelvezu before she could articulate her own power.

He examined a string of possible futures which involved the binding of the Horror, and its travel through a gate to Azzagrat in order to assassinate Graz'zt. Fourteen of the twenty-three outcomes resulted in Graz'zt escaping to his sanctum before the Horror could complete its mission. Five of the remaining futures involved the coercion of the Horror by Graz'zt and its subsequent redeployment against its summoner: I'd better make sure it's adequately buffed, If we go that route, Mostin thought. Two futures promised Graz'zt's demise, and two were ambiguous – depending on the reaction of the Arch-fiend's courtiers.

Mostin meditated upon the interaction between the motes of the Horror and Graz'zt, seeking tendrils of possibility to exploit. Graz'zt would need to be weakened – divested of a sizeable portion of his reservoir – before the Horror could be used efficiently. Of the hundreds of powerful spells within Graz'zt's repertoire, one – and the name exquisite domination sprang unbidden to Mostin's mind – was sufficiently potent to threaten even the Horror's virtual immunity to magic.* If Graz'zt could shoot off two spells – a superb dispelling variant followed by the compulsion – then the chances were good that the Prince could assert his will upon the pseudonatural. Graz'zt's reservoir was immense, and he could absorb an unholy amount of backlash before being troubled.

Mostin breathed deeply, and focused his mind. He remembered where he was – within the dome of Mulissu's mansion, floating within the web of motes. His thoughts reached out to the Infernalist.
[Mostin]: [Very complex semiotic pattern] (= The Horror cannot accomplish an assassination in Azzagrat without prior softening of the target. And he can dispel your glooms effortlessly, and still deal with the pseudonatural. And this assumes he is not even within his sanctum.)

[Shomei]: [Complex semiotic pattern] (=That is inconsequential. If he were, then he could prevent the gate opening in any case. Come what may, I will send the glooms tomorrow.)

[Mostin]: !

[Shomei]: (Emphatically) [Semiotic pattern] (=It is time that he realized he is vulnerable in a tangible way.)

[Mostin]: [Semiotic pattern] (=He will quickly overcome them.)

[Shomei]: [Semiotic pattern] (=He will bleed first. And they will cut deep.)

[Mostin]: [Semiotic pattern] (=Have you seen something I have not? If so, please share it.)

[Shomei]: [Complex semiotic pattern] (=I am walking a narrow line, Mostin. Every action I take from now onwards must be calculated for maximum effect.)

[Mostin]: [Complex semiotic pattern] (=Please do not sink into a fugue, Shomei. I thought that you had finally made it through the nihilism.)

Shomei smiled, and shook her head.

*The prime benefit conferred by Mostin’s insanely buffed Intelligence was the bonus granted to Knowledge (Arcana) checks. Whilst difficult to rationalize in terms that we might understand, the answers to questions such as "what spells does Graz'zt have in his repertoire which might affect this possible course of action " would spring into Mostin’s mind at appropriate times. I had already optimized around twenty ELH spell variants for Graz’zt – i.e. increased the XP burn and pumped up the backlash to bring them within his ability. I assumed that he had several hundred more – after all, he is X billion years old, and it only seemed reasonable. It is unfortunate that it is impossible to play a character with an Int of 22, much less one with a (temporary) Intelligence of 150. What does it mean to be that Intelligent? It is impossible to even begin to conceptualize how thought processes can work on that level. Thankfully, this has been the only time that such cosmic heights have been reached. It is simply too much of a headache to DM.

**POST 16: UNTITLED UPDATE**

Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 22nd February 2004
[Mostin]: Thus. (Conjure the Horror. Lock area around Irknaan's palace – two mile radius. Simultaneous arrival of Rhyxali's force here. Highest probability of Kostchtchie's appearance here. Portals to Faerie here and here and here will allow Nhura access to Afqithan, although I estimate thirty minutes before she can order her forces. Soneillon variable too complicated to calculate because of events in Throile [diagram].)

[Shomei]: Perhaps this. (Chaltipeluse secured as beach-head: already warded against teleportation. Ytryn ally/eliminated. Ortwin has a high chance of success in this endeavour.)

[Mostin]: But. (A Feint here [Picture: the stronghold of Queen Menicau] will draw out Ainhorr's main force. Then possible to open gates, then lock and assault Irknaan's palace directly.)

[Shomei]: Unlikely. (None will assume that role. Too dangerous. Unless you can persuade a group of demons to sacrifice themselves for the greater good. [Irony])

[Mostin]: We two and Nwm - look. (Shapechange and multiple conjurations can achieve the same effect. If you and I each open two gates...)

[Shomei]: My reservoir is close to empty, Mostin...

[Mostin]: Then this. (We should take a short holiday – In fact, I would suggest Afqithan. Get used to your new form, feel the power course through you again, and wreak some random havoc. And take the airs, of course. Nwm will likely come along – he enjoys flying around and destroying things, however much he denies it. And if we cause enough of a ruckus on our first visit, it will cause an overreaction on the second one – which is precisely what we want. [Diagram])

[Shomei]: [Calculating probabilities]. We must be something terrible, that will give Ainhorr pause for thought. Solars? Klurichirs?

[Mostin]: Hellfire Wyrms. [Diagram]

[Shomei]: Nice. Very nice, Mostin.

[Mostin]: Why, thank-you.

[Shomei]: But this. (Multiple summonings with multiple empowerments and I can pull around twenty narzugons into the fray and still retain a high enough valence to contribute to the quiescence of the spheres).

[Mostin]: (Nods). That might be preferable. I will gate a couple of pit fiends in, just to be sure we're taken seriously.

[Shomei]: Titivilus, Furcas and Murmuur will likely shoulder the blame.

[Mostin]: Such is life. I believe the augmentation just ended, by the way. My cognitive faculties have resumed their normal ant-like status.

Shomei sighed, a look of profound relief crossing her face. "I'm weary, Mostin. It has been insightful, but I'm glad it's over: my ego was beginning to fray. We should translate in a couple of days. Flex our muscles with an attack on Samodoquol's fortress."
Mostin nodded. "There are three hundred chasme there, and around a dozen glabrezu enforcers as well as other demonic agents. They are commanded by the nalfeshnee Jamua – who is something of a heavy-hitter. Samodoquol is fractious, and Ainhorr needs to keep him in line. But I suggest that we strike some smaller strongholds first – minor Loquai nobility who have capitulated with the current regime. It will send the message that the Balor's grip is less than ironclad, and won't give as much of an opportunity for Ainhorr to react. And when Nhura finally arrives, it may be that she can expect some support."

"Nhura in the capacity of redeemer and liberator?" Shomei asked ironically. "Now that is an amusing prospect."

"It's all relative," Mostin replied. "Still, attacking Samodoquol must be undertaken with the knowledge of the risk involved. Chasme are hardy."

Shomei shrugged. "Let the flies drone. We will burn them from the sky."

"Reinforcements will arrive within thirty seconds of our arrival."

"Then we will depart." Shomei said easily.

Mostin's eyes betrayed an excitement which made the Infernalist slightly nervous. "We could go tomorrow," he said.

"Two days, Mostin," she replied. "Tomorrow, I send the glooms to Azzagrat."

**

The anointment and investiture of Skadding as Duke of Trempa took place on a cold morning in late autumn on the Howe, a green hillock outside of the castle gates reserved for such grand occasions.

In the past, the Abbot of Trempa (or the Bishop of Thahan, had his other duties permitted it) would have performed the ceremony. As it was, the prior incumbents of each position had, in the wake of the Sela's assumption of the Prelacy, opted for a monastic life: both had been conservative in their view, and the Bishop had been one of the Ahma's foremost detractors. Neither position had been since filled, and Tramst was in no hurry to reestablish the episcopacy until the internal revision of the Temple had been completed. It had therefore been assumed that the ascension of Skadding to the Ducal seat would be a secular affair, and, given the disestablishment of the Temple and the general move away from Church infeudation, that seemed appropriate.

During the feast before the investiture, to Foide's horror and dismay, the thane Ekkert – after consuming large quantities of mead – had suggested that Eadric perform the ceremony. The idea had been greeted by rapturous applause by Trempa's assembled aristocracy, despite the fact that it was highly irregular for an Earl to anoint a Duke. Trempa's customs had always been eccentric, but such a notion verged on the insane.

Eadric had politely declined.

"You would be acting in a religious capacity," Ekkert had drawled. "I don't see what the problem is."
"I am not empowered to anoint Dukes," Eadric had said simply. "Besides, a third of Trempa's inhabitants are Uediian. I am not about to begin a new round of disenfranchisement."

"Then ask Nwm to participate," Caur had suggested cannily.

"Regrettably, his whereabouts are unknown to me," Eadric had replied uneasily. It was true – he had no notion of the Druid's location, and no means to contact him.

Foide, thinking that the Ahma had closed the subject, had breathed a quiet sigh of relief.

Later that night, however, as Eadric had strolled in the gardens in an attempt to aid his digestion (he seldom ate rich food, and boar did not agree with him), the soil between two rose bushes had begun to warp and ripple. Nwm had appeared, rising from the ground in the shape of a pillar of earth which had rapidly assumed a more recognizable, human form.

The druid had shaken his head, and dirt had fallen out of his tangled hair.

"I understand that I am to officiate at Skadding's investiture tomorrow," he had said in a matter-of-fact way.

"How did Caur contact you?" Eadric had asked, sighing.

"He didn't," Nwm had answered.

"Then how do you know?"

"At this present moment, I know pretty much everything," Nwm had replied. It was true – the Druid had been buoyed by the cycle of augmentations devised by Mostin, and in which he had taken part. "Although, actually, a wizard of our mutual acquaintance informed me of the probability that you would be asked to anoint the new Duke, and that you would refuse on the grounds that it would alienate the Uediian faction."

"I assume that the interpretation of the web of motes is passing according to plan, then?"

Nwm had shrugged. "I'm leaving it to Mostin to work out."

"And what have you been doing?"

"Watching birds, mainly," Nwm had answered.

"And you have discovered...?"

"Nothing that I didn't already know," Nwm had admitted. "I'm telling you, Ed: omniscience isn't all it's cracked up to be."

Eadric guffawed.

"In any case, we'll both perform the ceremony tomorrow."

"I don't think so..." Eadric had begun.
"There is actually an eighty-eight percent chance that I will change your mind in that regard," Nwm had grinned, "so you may as well just throw in the towel now, and save yourself the argument."

Eadric had sighed. "Skadding will..."

"He'll agree too," Nwm had interrupted.

"But Foide..."

"Will come around. What choice does he have, Eadric? Vox populi and all that: he is nothing, if not politically astute. He won't want his son to begin his tenure in a climate of apathy and indifference. You'll be doing the boy a favour. Trust me, Ed. Press this point now, and save yourself some grief down the road. Now, I'm hungry. Is there any food left?"

So it was that Nwm the Preceptor placed the coronet – a twisted wreath of ivy, mistletoe and oak-leaves – upon the head of Skadding, and Eadric anointed him with holy water.

The company – over a hundred noble families – made a slow procession from the Howe to the Hall of the Seat, which had stood empty since Soraine's death at the hands of Rimilin five months before. Skadding assumed his place amidst much panoply, and began his large – and depressingly administrative – set of duties. He had a huge backlog to contend with. Aristocrats bickered about land ownership, hunting rights, debts, impending marriages and when the next tourney should be held. Commoners waited outside in droves to voice their complaints regarding the bread dole, the theft of pigs, taxes on beer, and the quantity of devalued coinage in circulation. Several sought recompense from soldiers for unwanted pregnancies in indiscreet daughters. Representatives from the Guild of Clockmakers preened themselves in anticipation of an audience. Entertainers seeking employment breathed fire, sang ditties or performed minor tricks of prestidigitation.

Eadric looked at Nwm. "And you wanted me to do this job?" He said in a low voice.

"On reflection, I think maybe you were right."

As the Ahma took his leave of the new Duke, he bowed, placed his hand upon the marble floor, incanted, and touched his eagle pendant in what most there assumed was a final blessing. A feeling of indescribable calm descended upon the Hall of the Seat. Nwm felt a frisson of power and suppressed a look of astonishment, and questioned Eadric as soon as they were outside again.

"Did you just do what I think you did?" The Druid asked.

"That is entirely possible," Eadric nodded.

"And since when could you just do that?"

"I don't know," Eadric shrugged. "I've never really tried before."

Nwm nodded. "Good," he said. "This may save me considerable effort and labour in the future."
With a passing thought, Eadric had hallowed the hall, and with his brief invocation had laid a zone of truth upon the place. No fiend – openly or in possession of another – could enter there, and, for a year at least, no lie could be spoken there without considerable effort.

Skadding was young and inexperienced, and already had enough to contend with without falling prey to the scheming mendacity of vassals, peers, ambassadors, and family. Or demons, for that matter.

**

Ortwin sang. Purportedly, a composition in Ytryn's honour, commissioned by Nhura as a gift to the Duke.

Whatever else he does, Iua mused to herself as she listened, lying aside, Ortwin does this best. He was an arrogant, self-indulgent, narcissistic erotomaniac – to be sure – but he had an uncanny ability to tap into the aesthetic sensibilities of his audience. His song was dark, brooding, and melancholic. It conveyed a lust for blood, it exalted pain, and suggested the promise of a grim satiation which would be all-fulfilling but transient; and then the birth of the next desire, which would, in turn, be pursued to its empty and bitter conclusion. Ennui. Psychosis and apathy. The fleeting release from the curse of immortality.

Iua didn't even understand the words: Ortwin sang in an archaic dialect of Sylvan.

The duelist watched Koilimilou carefully, but if the cambion was moved by the Bard's performance, she displayed no outward sign of it. But neither Iua, nor Koilimilou, nor the marilith Sethee were alerted to Ortwin's true message – directed at Ytryn alone, and concealed within the song.

[Make no response to this communication – I suspect you lack the subtlety possessed by yonder demoness, and she would quickly realize your intention.

Graz’zt's hegemony here will shortly end. His enemies already mobilize themselves. Nhura is returning, and her allies will crush Ainhorr. Rhyxali – your other patroness – is poised to retake her rightful property. Soneillon craves vengeance, and her designs will soon bear fruit.

Where will your loyalties lie, Duke Ytryn? To whom will you pledge your treacherous sword? Listen well, and you will survive the orgy of death and prosper in the aftermath. When the gates to the other worlds open, and the demons at Chaltipeluse are recalled to the battle before the walls of Irknaan's palace, you will slay those that remain here. You will mobilize your army, and join Queen Nhura in the fray.

In payment, Nhura will grant you Someranth: Menicau will likely not survive the upcoming conflict and if, by some strange chance she does, she will not survive long after it. If you fail, then Nhura's ire will turn towards you, and like those others who betray her, you will die painfully.

And Ytryn, in case you forget, I am an ambassador from Faerie and you will guarantee my safe passage and lend me such aid as custom dictates. Koilimilou and the slaad Qhrsjh are under my protection. Do not underestimate my
influence or my reach. If I am assailed, then the Hunters will descend upon you, and drag you to a doom which even you cannot imagine.]

...and of frost
and unrelenting pursuit
and jealous death.

Ortwin finished his song. His innuendo had conveyed information which was – to his knowledge – at least partially accurate. Admittedly, he might have been a little liberal with his interpretation of the facts, and his promises might not have been sanctioned by Nhura. No matter. He had no doubt that Ytryn believed him – it was merely a question of how the Duke would react to what he had heard.*

**

There had been two of them. They had been fast: faster than he was. Their motion was precise, calculated and deadly. He had been taking his pleasure when they struck.

His feeling had been one of outrage, coupled with incredulity. How had they reached him here? There were precious few areas in Zelatar where it was possible to teleport or open a gate. Places which – by necessity – were not dimensionally locked, and he knew them all intimately. Most of them were known only to him.

He had been alerted by a blur of shadowy motion, and a feeling of pain which ripped through his shoulder, piercing demonic flesh and sinew and spilling his ichor upon the floor of his own harem. He had been stabbed nine times more before he had reacted.**

Fearing for his very existence, Graz'zt had emanated a shroud of death and destruction which had instantly annihilated his assailants, together with three succubi and the marilith Chuschi – his current favorite.

The glooms had evaporated, returning to whatever shady realm they had issued from. They had been summoned creatures, and possessed no final reality.

Immediately afterwards, Graz'zt had locked the whole of Zelatar, except for the gate room – where the guard was quadrupled. Brutal interrogations of scores of demons – mainly nalfeshnees in possession of cubic gates who presided over various conquered worlds – ensued. A wave of tortures, mutilations and assassinations flooded through the citadel and city as the Prince's paranoia asserted itself, and his demonic servitors found an opportunity to settle old scores.

Graz'zt retreated to his sanctum, rapidly healed his wounds, and gave thought to revenge.

*Ortwin – benefitting from a multiply empowered eagle's splendour comfortably made a DC 50 Bluff check – enough to 1) convey his innuendo successfully without alerting the others present; and 2) simultaneously lie sufficiently well to convince Ytryn that he was an important sidhe of powerful connections, and
crossing him would result in the Duke's rapid demise. All was hidden within the context of a song which rivalled those composed by the most accomplished of faerie bards and minstrels.

**Graz'zt's DR – 20/Cold Iron and Epic and Good – actually saved his bacon. Still, the +10 keen daggers used by the glooms filled him full of holes.

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POST 17: DRAGONPLAY

Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 2nd March 2004

The tower was a slender, delicate structure, rising some thirty fathoms from a low hillock and twisting deliciously before reaching its crest. It was carved in intricate relief and inlaid with precious metals which seemed to capture and then amplify the perpetual twilight, and stars glistened softly at its apex. Around it, arranged in elegant symmetry, five more towers – the hues of which were subtly different – rose in close proximity to half the height of the central spire, their shoulders attached by narrow buttresses of both aesthetic and functional design.

It was the home of Shondipere, a Loquai aristocrat and vassal of Queen Menicau. Shondipere was a noble of middling means, who nonetheless boasted an excellent pedigree. His title – if translated from the Sylvan – might have been 'baron' or 'thane': in fact, the Loquai admitted to greater variation within their order of precedence than most human cultures.

Only fifteen Loquai dwelt with Shondipere, and all were related. The remainder of his household consisted of a handful of umbral quicklings who acted as messengers and spies, two charmed fiendish trolls who served as door-wards, a dozen slow-witted gnome slaves, and the noble's pet monster – an abyssal basilisk named Turchin. Shondipere kept a stable of twenty griffons, although he seldom ventured beyond the confines of his castle, content to busy himself composing morbid verse, or indulging his dark and violent fantasies.

Shondipere had spent the last several hours – or was it days? he paid little heed to the passage of time – closeted alone in an airy rotunda pondering upon various aspects of the nature of pain. His reverie had been interrupted when two palrethees and a small troop of bar-lgura – agents of the balor Ainhorr – had arrived and required that he surrender his daughter as hostage, together with a large portion of his portable wealth. Shondipere had remained impassive, and conceded to their demands – he felt no particular attachment to his offspring, and was anxious to return to his contemplation. His primary concern regarding his daughter was that, were she to die, he would be without an heir – precipitating a need to find another mate and to sire further progeny.

Shondipere was therefore vexed when the quickling Khimpa darted into the rotunda and bowed her tiny head to the glass floor at his feet. Shondipere gestured irritably, a sign that the sprite should speak.

"Two devils require an audience, Lord," Khimpa squeaked rapidly, her malevolent face betraying a certain wicked glee at the discomfort that she knew the news would cause her master.

Shondipere observed the quickling's features, and made a mental note to have
her punished for insubordination later. A brief spell with the trolls might encourage her to act with more civility, or at least hide her emotions better.

"What is their order?" Shondipere inquired coldly.

"A horned devil and an erinyes, Lord," Khimp replied.

Shondipere scowled. What was a cornugon doing here? He had been informed of the presence of the three dukes in Afqithan, of course, but whatever their purpose was, it didn't concern him. It seemed likely the arrival of two devils at his own gates was connected – unless it was a ruse devised by Menicau, or maybe Ainhorr himself: to test Shondipere's loyalty, or perhaps out of sheer perversity.

"Order the household to assemble," he sighed. "I will receive them in the heptagon in ten minutes."

As they approached, Shondipere – cautious of being drawn into some diabolic intrigue which he had no desire to enmesh himself in – studied the devils carefully.

Something isn't right, was his last thought.

**

Eadric and Nwm – together with Contundor, Sem and Gheim – wind walked to Deorham. The Druid intended to dispose of the blackthorn tree which occupied the courtyard of Kyrtill's Burh, together with its grizzly fruit – the carcasses of the demons who had assailed the keep. More than a fortnight had passed since the attack, but Eadric's servants had been disinclined to deal with the spectacle, concerned that some taint might infect them, and generally shunning the northern and western parts of the bailey. And the Ahma was anxious for things to return to normal – for their usual brief while, at least.

In the event, Eadric changed his mind. The remains of the demons should probably go, he suggested wryly, but the tree itself could stay. It would act as a reminder to himself – and any potential threats to him – that he was not without allies, albeit strange ones which he often failed to understand.

In a businesslike manner, Nwm used his magic to clean up the mess he had made, removing the flags which had shattered upon the sudden growth of the tree, and replacing them with a small garden around the blackthorn's bole. Concerned that the tree might still appear rather dark and gloomy, he caused it to flower, and tiny clusters of white and pale yellow appeared on its spiky twigs. It was out of season, but a justifiable tinkering, given the circumstances. The spell which Nwm invoked to achieve the effect was, however, of less than pinpoint accuracy, and the ivy which clung to the Steeple and the keep burgeoned into a thick cover. Eadric sighed and entered the chapel.

Of the quartet of celestials called by Tahl, the single remaining deva, Saphrez, was deputed by Eadric to guard the sanctum. The celestial remained near the altar, invisible, and was enjoined to bestow whatever blessings it might upon those who came to pray there. The decision was both timely and unfortunate – it transpired that a group of pilgrims from Ialde were already boarded at The Twelve Elms, the only inn in the village of Deorham, some two miles distant. When Eadric – reluctant that his home become a shrine – conveyed his concerns
to Nwm, he received an unsympathetic response.

"I'm surprised it took this long, actually," the Druid said laconically. "If it troubles you that much, just ask Mostin to move in. I'm sure he would discourage any pietists from undertaking the journey here."

Eadric grumbled. It occurred to him that his intent – to have the deva act as a support for his staff, and a source of healing for those locals who required it – would rapidly foster a situation which attracted zealots and fundamentalists. But he could hardly deny succour to those who came to Kyrtil's Burh seeking it.

"Keep the gates open," he wearily instructed his servants, "but allow visitors access to the well and the chapel only, and encourage them not to linger too long."

Later that day, after Nwm had retired to his glade, Eadric watched from a window within the Steeple as a party of twenty pilgrims with travel-stained clothes made a slow procession up the knoll, across the bridge, through the courtyard and into the chapel. Hopefully, he mused wryly, none of them were cursed, diseased or injured, Saphrez could remain inactive, and news of miraculous goings-on at Kyrtil's Burh would be delayed for a little while. But it was only a matter of time. And if any petitioned him directly for spiritual aid, he was duty-bound to provide it. Whilst he did not resent it, he could feel no upwelling of generosity or compassion while he still had so much more to do: first and foremost, he remained a soldier.

As the Ahma leaned upon the sill, gazed down from the tower, and ruminated on his various responsibilities, a sudden breeze caused his hackles to rise and the faint scent of death and lotus reached his nostrils. A pair of slender arms encircled his waist, and a soft face pressed against his back. Wings began to fold around him, beckoning him inwards. He swallowed, and pulled himself away.

The void-that-was-a-demon-who-was-a-girl had returned, apparently seeking reassurance.

**

Mostin rapidly changed his form, shedding his diabolic body and assuming the shape of a dragon fifty feet long which barely fit into the lofty reception chamber. His scales kindled to a searing flame, and he breathed a gout of infernal fire over Shondipere, the four knights who flanked him, and a pair of unlucky quicklings who happened to be hovering in the wrong place. All were instantly immolated.

Chaos erupted all around. Gnome slaves and sprites fled for cover, and several of the remaining Loquai immediately plane shifted to Shadow. Others shakily targeted Mostin with spells or arrows, none of which affected him. He leapt upwards, smashing his head through the delicate glass dome, shattering the plinths either side of it, and took to the sky briefly before settling upon a slender buttress, which began to crack under his weight. Mostin flapped his wings inexpertly to compensate.

Inside of the heptagon, Shomei had taken the form of another wyrm. Hellfire erupted again briefly, before she joined Mostin above the castle, perching upon the topmost spire.
"We should give the gnomes a few minutes to escape, and then just flatten the place," she called down.

Mostin nodded enthusiastically. Shapechange was rapidly becoming his new favourite spell.

**

"Are they yours?" Titivilus asked Furcus, smiling.

"No indeed," Furcas replied, stroking his beard.

Titivilus sighed inwardly. It was a pointless question – the Count of Rhetoric was almost as good a liar as himself.

"Apparently, they are very large ones." Titivilus said. "And they have levelled four strongholds already. I cannot scry them – they are warded. I am returning to Dis. Duke Allocer should know."

"Is that wise?" Furcas asked. "They might be his."

"They may also be rogue," Titivilus countered, wondering whether Furcas dissembled and, if so, what his motive was.

"One, perhaps; but two? Unlikely. Murmuur would..."

"I think it best that we do not inform Murmuur," Titivilus interrupted. "If they are his, it is better that he doesn't know that we know."

"Murmuur's knights are mandated to intervene in affairs if necessary," Furcas scowled. "And he is here. Are you suggesting that we withhold information from our commander? That is a bold course to take."

"Not at all," Titivilus replied, careful to avoid any possible accusations of insubordination. "I'm merely saying that, if they are his, then it may be that we are not meant to know. I would regret upsetting any wider plan because of our over-diligence in information gathering."

"It may be related to your former protégée's petition."

"Perhaps," Titivilus nodded, not knowing what it was that Furcas referred to, but unwilling to make that fact known, "but which petition? Now that another has been made, it merely complicates things further." He had to return to the Iron City, to find out what was going on. He discreetly studied the face of Furcas for a response, but the Count evinced none.

"And she may have made several others, news of which has not yet reached us," Furcas pointed out, curious as to whether Titivilus lied about the second petition and, if not, to whom it might have been addressed. "On reflection, perhaps you should return to Dis. I will guard our interests here in the meanwhile."

The mind of Titivilus twisted, wondering whether that had been Furcas's intent from the outset. The Confuser decided to play along with it. "It might be prudent to mobilize some of your troops," he suggested, "in the event that an unknown rival Duke is involved. I could bring a communiqué to Sobel* to that effect, if you
"I would prefer to relay such a message myself, should the need arise," Furcas said drily. "I would be embarrassed if the information was somehow misapprehended."

"That is understandable," Titivilus agreed. "Perhaps you should appoint an aide whose mental faculties are more sharply honed."

Furcas smiled thinly.

"Do you then have no requests?"

"That depends. Are you planning to visit Malbolge as well?" Furcas inquired.

"Only if our Dread Master demands it," Titivilus replied, the merest hint of sarcasm in his voice. Malbolge was a tedious, brutal environment, which lacked any sophistication: a far cry from the subtleties and intrigues of Dis.

"It might be prudent to ensure that Murmuur's troops are adequately prepared."

"That is a wise precaution," Titivilus concurred.

"And give my respects to our Lord, should you see him," Furcas smiled.

"Naturally," Titivilus lied.

Soneillon appeared in her natural form. She seemed utterly drained, although, at first, Eadric was nonetheless cautious that it might be a ruse. It was as though, somehow, the Void had diminished in stature. Ens had polluted her, diluting her with matter and energy. It had the effect of making her seem more tangible and real than normal.

A faint tracery of scars – wounds which she had recently received, and the vestiges of which had not yet entirely vanished – covered her arms, neck, wings and torso. Blackness stained the skin beneath her ears and nostrils, where enormous backlash energies had caused her demonic body to rupture. Her hands and fingernails were caked with dried ichor: when she had spent her last spell, Eadric knew, and they had grappled her within the unlight which surrounded her, she had torn at them in a frenzy with her claws.

"The Paling has been breached," she smiled wrily. "Adyell disjoined a section of it before she defected. Janiq's bar-lgura are pouring through. I am asking for your help."

Oronthon, he swore silently. She really is vulnerable. He sighed. "Very well. How long do we have?"

"Helitihai and Chaya patched the defenses with multiple walls of force, but they were being systematically disintegrated by daemon mercenaries as I left. It is impossible to say. Throile must not fall, Eadric."
He nodded. "We need Mostin. Can you issue a sending?"

"I am spent!" Soneillon snapped. "I have magic enough to return us to Throile, that is all."

"Or to issue a sending?"

The message sped to Afqithan:

_The Ahma commands that you attend him in his stronghold. Events are spiralling out of control in Throile. Your assistance is required._

Mostin raised a draconic eyebrow. He turned to Shomei. "I have just received a _sending_ from Soneillon – she is labouring under the impression that I am somehow Eadric's servant. No matter. It seems as though the second Throile thread is crystallizing."

Shomei groaned. "That's the one with the ultrodaemons."

"Unfortunately, yes."

*

The pious were gathered in the courtyard, speaking amongst themselves in hushed voices, when one of them noticed the Ahma walking towards them from the base of the Steeple. Excitedly, he pointed out Eadric to his companions.

Their sense of religious awe was replaced by a feeling of confusion as, beneath the blackthorn, Soneillon manifested. There was talk of a demoness associated with the _Ahma_, of course, but rumour spoke of her being _genteel_ in appearance. This creature was wild, naked, bloodstained.

Effortlessly reading their thoughts, Soneillon smiled. Despite all that had transpired, the temptation to _charm_ these hapless mortals was still almost too much to resist. Eadric stared stonily at her.

Above them, the sky darkened momentarily and a fissure in space ripped open. As two enormous wyrms, wreathed in infernal fire thundered through a _gate_, beyond them a scene from a dream – or nightmare – was briefly revealed: a twilit sky, streaked with deep indigo, saffron and vermillion.

The pilgrims fled from Kyrtill's Burh, adequately instructed, Eadric considered, in the application of the dialectic.

* Sobel – the lieutenant appointed to Furcas by Dispater – is an advanced erinyes with considerable tactical savvy. Although Furcas holds wide estates and can muster 29 legions of devils (primarily barbazu), he takes little pleasure in martial pursuits. Sobel watches the Duke of Rhetoric and communicates his activities to Dis, but Furcas still values her advice and military expertise.

** i.e. find out exactly who, and what, and how many, and whether any hellfire
wyrms had been deployed.

*** The enormous magical outer defense which surrounds Soneillon's citadel in Throile. It is impenetrable to normal physical movement, and inside it teleportation is severely restricted, although gates may open within its confines. Access to the citadel is controlled through three portals which open or close according to Soneillon's will.

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**POST 18: MORE THAN YOU CAN CHEW – PART 1**

*Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 8th March 2004*

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

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More Than You Can Chew: Part 1

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

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

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

"He will not come himself?" Eadric asked.

"No future that I have observed involves Graz'zt leaving Azzagrat," Mostin said. Eadric clenched his jaw. "But the plan..."

"The plan to lure him forth is unworkable," Mostin hissed. "My apologies – that was more condescending than I intended. These vocal cords are not equipped for comments that don't sound sarcastic. Graz'zt will remain closeted in Zelatar, irrespective of our actions. We shouldn't be surprised: if his venturing forth entailed even a one in ten thousand chance of his demise, then he would not do it. It would be foolhardy, from his perspective. He has not retained an aeons-long regime by acting precipitously."

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

"I would have guessed it," she smiled.

"But you allowed us to entertain the possibility, nonetheless?"
"You are the Ahma," she said simply. "It is reasonable to assume that you possess a degree of insight that I do not. Our perspectives are complimentary, Eadric, not antagonistic."

"Then..."

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

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

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

Soneillon looked bored, and yawned.

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

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

"What would I do?" Nwm asked.

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

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

*  

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Soneillon, Eadric spoke into her mind.

Her thoughts regarded him ironically.

You need to instruct your troops not to assail me.

Naturally, Eadric. The Void vanished, only to reappear an instant later, a thousand feet below them, and in the thick of the press.
"A prismatic wall would do the trick," Mostin sighed. "Unfortunately..."

"Nor I," Shomei nodded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Good," Eadric said, drawing Lukarn.

"Hmm," Mostin replied.

"And Mostin. Nwm."

"Mmm?" They answered in unison.

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

"You think?" Nwm replied drily.

"And Shomei."

She looked at him.

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

She swallowed. He knows. The bastard knows.

Mostin cocked his head.

**

For a brief period of time – which seemed like an altogether unpleasant eternity – the Ahma was alone. His appearance on the battlefield was a surreal event, which had even demons – who routinely dealt with the bizarre and the insane – baffled. The cursed ground at his feet smoked in revulsion at his presence as he
manifested within a knot of bar-lgura. They reacted rapidly and pounced on him. Eadric's shield and armour turned their buffets, and the demons which struck him recoiled, blinded by celestial light. He swung Lukarn in a great arc, slaying all of those within his arm's reach. *Scorching rays* struck him but fizzled impotently, and he shrugged off a *dispel magic* which targeted him. *Darkness* would not adhere to him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She groaned. *Are you sure?*

*Yes. No. Yes. I’m sure.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Deorham in Throile.*

The Prince's reply was equally succinct:

*Detain him. I will send aid.*

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

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

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

She dispatched Semhel with instructions to her reserve force of bar-lgura – who waited several thousand miles away – to join the fray, and smiled. Drawing six *unholy* swords from scabbards across her body, the Marilith prepared for battle.
Mostin gyred in the sky, his aura blinding the succubi around him. In his belly, he felt the fire rising again as dozens of nycadaemons began to take off, or to manifest in the air around him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Thank-you," he said to Nwm.

"Hmm," the Druid replied.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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**POST 19: MORE THAN YOU CAN CHEW – PART 2**

*Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 14th March 2004*

The bar-lgura pounced on him and attacked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[Symbol] = Payment

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

"Mirror," Mostin said, instantly regretting it.


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

[Symbol] = Faces.

Mostin cackled. "What kind of faces?"

[Symbol] = Faces like you.

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

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

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

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

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

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

*

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

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

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

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

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

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

*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Shomei, still in the form of a pit fiend and harangued by nycadaemons, flew
towards Eadric and Nwm and threw the remaining dominated ultroloth
desperately at Ainhorr. Outside of the magical barrier, she spied the *prismatic sphere*, and hoped that it was Mostin, and that he was sufficiently protected. She opened a *gate* next to the Druid and the *Ahma*.

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

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

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

Graz'zt.

**

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

Nwm and Eadric, exhausted, looked at her.

"Mostin..." Eadric began.

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

Nwm relaxed.

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

"She wasn't present at the battle?"

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

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

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

"I don't know."

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

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

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

Shomei nodded.

*

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

"Where are you?" The Druid asked.

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

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

**

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

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

"Which was?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Not to my recollection," Mostin answered.

"And what will happen now, in Throile?"

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

Shomei remained conspicuously silent.

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

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

"Humour me," Mostin said acidly.

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

**Man, this spell is broken.

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

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

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**POST 20: DREAM AND DEMON – PART 1**

Posted by: Sepuichrave II at ENWorld on 18th April 2004

It had been determined that Rhul – ever a patron of messengers and travellers – would undertake the journey. He was hardy, quick-witted, and wise in the ways of many worlds. The decision to send him had been unanimous.
His people were the Nireem, and, besides Rhul, only three of their chiefs remained: Lai, the goddess of magic; Ninit, who watched over horses; and a god of the forge called Jaliere. A tribal pantheon, they were aided by ancestral spirits and nature genii tied to significant locations. Predictably, the goddess of death, Saes, had aligned herself with Graz'zt: in a world in which the apocalypse had already come and gone, her power alone was waxing. The Nireem no longer counted her amongst their number.

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

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

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

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

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

"And are you one of them?"

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

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

"May I show you something?"

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

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

"Is this a prophecy?" Lai had asked uneasily. "If so, I think I would prefer to remain ignorant of the future."
"It is the abode of one of your allies," the Spirit said mysteriously.

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

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

"Can she be trusted?" Lai had asked.

"No," the Spirit had admitted.

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

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

"I concede that I am intrigued."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Another ally?"

The Spirit had nodded.

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

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

"And he wars with Graz'zt also?"

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

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

"His world has been stolen from him."

"It seems peaceful enough," Lai had observed.

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

"And he can be trusted?"

"Yes."

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

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

Lai had raised an eyebrow. "A mortal?"

"Sisperi is small, Lai."

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

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

\textit{Nwm}, Lai had thought.

**

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

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

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

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

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

"No," Shomei answered.

"Are we of a comparable age?"

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

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

"I was eleven."

"Titivilus?"

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

"I am forty-two," Mostin groaned.

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

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

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

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

"Tramst..." She began.

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

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

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

"I assume that the exact moment of your death is not known to you?" He asked
"That is correct," Shomei nodded. "The web of motes was suitably vague as to the details."

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

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

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

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

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

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

She sighed.

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

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

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

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

**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"She has returned to Fumaril for a while," Ortwin replied. "Which is fine. She was getting boring, in any case."
Eadric raised an eyebrow, but let it pass. "We can talk about this tomorrow. I am in no mood to deal with you when you're drunk. I'm going back to the Burgh."

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**POST 21: DREAM AND DEMON – PART 2**

**Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 18th April 2004**

The *Ahma* dreamed.

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

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

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

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

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

"Do you serve Oronthon?" Eadric asked.

"I serve the Dialectic," the Sprite replied.

"Is there a difference?"

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

"I do not trust you."

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

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

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

"And the Claviger?"

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

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

"It shouldn't. I serve the Dialectic, not Oronthon."
"Why are you speaking to me now?" Eadric asked.

"Because complexity must increase," the Sprite answered.

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

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

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

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

"What is your name?" Eadric asked.

"I haven't decided yet."

Eadric woke up and groaned.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"For a brief while in some place, maybe. Before entropy caused another random scene to appear, and then it too was swallowed by baseness and depravity."
"You cling to transience in the hope that it will be eternal," she shrugged. "I admit to the inevitability of change, and embrace it. Which of us is more authentic?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Power holds no attraction for me."

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

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

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

"You are very, very dangerous."

"You are afraid."

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

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

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

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

"Put the possibility from your mind, Soneillon."

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

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

Soneillon stretched, and her manner became more practical. "Shall we stroll? The sun is warm, and we can watch the joust while we iron out the details of how to proceed. We have much to discuss."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Wrinkles?" Eadric asked.

"Nondimensional spaces. Demiplanes. Pockets of time and space which abut Throile itself."
"And Adyell? How close was she in your confidence? How many of your secrets does she know?"

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

"Where is she now?"

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

Soneillon clapped politely as her chosen knight unhorsed another rival.

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

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

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

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

"Mostin is..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Is her manner as disarming as yours?"
"I'm sure it could be, if she so chose."

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

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

"Still you dissemble."

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

"Is this what you want?" She asked.

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

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

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

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

He turned his face away from her.

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

"It is merely another facet, Eadric. A persona. It is part of me, but I am more complex than that. Nothing becomes – you know this. Jump, Eadric. I will catch you."

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

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

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

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

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

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

A wolf kill, he knew.

Nwm descended to feed.

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

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

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

Nwm.

"This is inconvenient," Eadric remarked.

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

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

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

**
Mulissu exited the extradimensional space – a variation of Mostin's permanent magnificent mansion where she spent much time – and stepped into the courtyard of the small palace in her pocket demiplane.

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

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

She froze.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She fled away at breakneck speed. The restricted area could not be big – even for Graz'zt, such an act would surely require a monumental effort. She would retreat back into the magnificent mansion.
As she approached the portal to the extradimensional space, a breeze stirred from a bound elemental, alerting Mulissu to the fact that time had resumed its normal flow. To theElementalist's utter confusion, a gate was already open within her courtyard. The scene through the new portal was of another courtyard, in which Mostin stood, beckoning to her.

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

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

He had invoked a time stop, plane shifted and passed through into the courtyard of Mulissu's palace with a quickened dimension door. He had swallowed as he saw her, suspended in the air next to a fountain, the flow of which was frozen in time and space. Behind her, half-manifested from a teleportation, Graz'zt was an insubstantial haze. Mostin knew that the demon had dismissed whatever ward he had set upon the place in order to intercept the fleeing Elementalist. He knew that Mulissu was incapable of invoking another transportation spell. And he also knew that she must not enter her own extradimensional retreat: it was not safe. He had quickly interposed a wall of force between Mulissu and Graz'zt, blocking the demon's line of effect – opened a gate and retreated back to Wyre.

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Mulissu appeared next to Mostin.

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

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

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

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

"Mostin!" Mulissu screamed.

He closed the gate abruptly.

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

"Technically, he didn't," Mostin replied, smiling. "He corporeated a body from the Astral Plane. He was projecting."
"Does that make any difference?" Ortwin asked.

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

"Why didn't he simply eliminate Mulissu?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Where is Iua?" She hissed.

"Fumaril," Ortwin said.

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

The Alienist nodded.

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

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

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

**A kind of plane shift – teleport combo.