TALES OF WYRE – THREAD 10
THE MESALLIANCE

This is a copy of Sepulchrave’s ‘Mesalliance – Part 2’ StoryHour at ENWorld
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a.html

POST 1: THE MESALLIANCE

Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 26th April 2004, 07:09 PM

I thought it was about time to start a new thread. We’re only five months behind in updates, so I think I’m doing pretty well 😊(:rolleys: is better).

At this point, we were playing by e-mail about 50% of the time - which suited me well: after a while it gets hard to sit opposite a bearded guy with a beer-belly and pretend I’m a succubus :\ (still not as good as :rolleys:).

Self-deprecation just isn't the same anymore...

So, anyway:

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Mésalliance

BREY: Sela, what does it mean, to 'Fall?'

TRAMST: To Fall is to reject that which you have experienced to be true, in favour of that which you know, in your heart, to be false.

BREY: And what is truth?

TRAMST: That, unfortunately, is subjective.

BREY: Is it therefore possible for two people who share similar experiences, to have different destinies in this regard? By virtue of their different perspectives, may one Fall, and another not?

TRAMST: That is more common than one may at first think.

BREY: And when two irrefutable truths come into conflict? How does one then decide?

TRAMST: That, Brey, is why we practice Saizhan.

BREY: Hence Saizhan always reveals the correct truth.

TRAMST: No, Brey. Saizhan always determines the correct truth. The distinction is crucial.

BREY: Should one always choose the harder truth?
TRAMST: Often this transpires to be the case, but to adopt it as a premise leads to the Adversarial paradigm, which Saizhan teaches us is incomplete. Evidently, this is so, or the Adversary himself would not have Fallen.

BREY: I understand.

TRAMST: No, Brey, you do not. Which is why I am the master, and you are the student.

**

The Sprite materialized within the deepest reaches of the Forest of Nizkur, picked an acorn from the ground, and examined it briefly.

Pressing the seed with its thumb into the soft earth, the Sprite waved his hand casually.

A sapling shot forth, and began to grow rapidly. The Sprite watched in satisfaction as a trunk fattened, boughs twisted, and leaflets unfurled from twigs. Bark became pitted, cracked and thick. Mistletoe and ivy appeared around the bole, and moss burgeoned inside of damp recesses. Within twenty seconds, the tree matured. It could have been there for five hundred years. The leaves turned a deep gold, and began to fall, as if in an effort to catch up with the surrounding forest.

The Sprite's legs bent, and he sprang upwards, leaping eighty feet into the air and alighting softly below the crown of the tree. He sat and waited.

Presently, he heard laughter. A nymph capered by, pursued by two lusty wood-gnomes with ruddy noses. Plucking an oak-apple from a nearby branch, the Sprite hurled it with considerable force, striking the nymph soundly on her rump.

She stopped abruptly and glared upwards. "How dare you interrupt my frolicking?" The nymph looked suspiciously at the tree – she didn't remember it being there, the last time she had passed through this part of the forest.

"Hlioth, it is I," the Sprite called down. "I'm back. Come, we need to talk!"

Hlioth, the Green Witch, squealed in delight and abandoned her would-be suitors with looks of disappointment on their faces. She appeared immediately on the branch next to the Sprite and embraced him.

"Back so soon, Fillein? I was expecting a longer absence."

"I am no longer Fillein," the Sprite sighed. "Nor was I last time, if you recall. I barely even remember who Fillein was."

Hlioth shrugged. "No matter. What is your name now?"

"I haven't decided yet."

Hlioth clapped. "Splendid. I will choose one for you."

"Very well," the Sprite seemed amused.
"Will you be a fey now?" Hlioth asked archly.

"Yes, Hlioth."

"What is your genus? I don’t recognize it."

"I am unique," the Sprite replied.

"Then your name is Huhip."

"That is somewhat too aspirated for my tastes."

"Then Gudge," Hlioth replied.

"It sounds like an affliction of the bowels," the Sprite observed.

"May I choose or not?" Hlioth grumbled.

"Only if you choose correctly," the Sprite laughed.

"Then your name is Teppu."

"That will do nicely," Teppu nodded.

Hlioth smiled. "I must say, I think you have made an excellent choice with regard to your form – although I admit I may be a little biased. Are you still a wizard?"

"No," Teppu replied. "I have chosen an instinctive, blended form,* in order to avoid the Injunction. Besides, I find wizardry dull."

Hlioth laughed. "I came to a similar conclusion some time ago. Can you show me?"

Teppu smiled, and quickly clapped his hands three times. A supernova of magic exploded outwards from him. It seemed as though, suddenly, sapience was everywhere.

Hlioth laughed and cried in happiness. "That is beautiful. How many did you awaken?"

"Oh, I don't know. Hundreds. Thousands, maybe."

"You are Green, Teppu."

"I am Green," he nodded.

"Do you still dream?"

"Of course I still dream, Hlioth."

A look of concern crossed her face briefly. "And the web of motes? Will you seek its return?"

"Why, Hlioth? Who cares about the future?"

She kissed him fondly on the forehead. The trees around him regarded him with
warmth.

**

Eadric stood on the roof of the Steeple, wrapped in a thick fur, and stared blankly northwards towards the gathering clouds of winter. The cloak was superfluous – he no longer felt the cold – and he wondered whether wearing it would remain an affectation on days when the wind blew from Tomur, down from the mountains.

He brooded upon Nhura. When **would she be ready?** For every day which passed in Faerie, a week dragged by in the World of Men: the delay was becoming unbearable, sapping his focus and resolve. He remembered the long period of uncertainty before he had marched on Morne, and this seemed a thousand times worse – a bleakness and desperation which he had never before experienced surrounded this venture. And constantly, he forced his thoughts away from dwelling upon his dream: the black ecstasy which Soneillon had forced upon him, and a foretaste of **what could be** if he so chose it. She had dominated him utterly, and to a large extent he felt the blame was his: he had all but insisted that she reveal her most malignant and brutal face to him. So she had *demonstrated*. But he had dreamed it, and he didn't know how real it had really been.

Five more nights had passed since then, and, although his sleep was troubled, the Ahma had received no visitation – either from Soneillon or the Sprite. Now he was *mind blanked* – Mostin said that, henceforth, they must always be *mind blanked*, to prevent covert observation from afar by Graz’zt. The Alienist had also warned that it might not be an effective defense, but it was the best that he could do.

Mostin had closeted himself within his study, and begun to work half-heartedly on yet another spell in the absence of news from Faerie: Eadric had seen little of him, and the interaction between them had been tense and uncomfortable.

The Alienist was preoccupied with his own troubles and his strained friendship with Mulissu – he had issued a number of *sendings* to the Elementalist, none of which received a reply. His insistence that she was safer near him – where she could be warded – had fallen of deaf ears. And Mostin was vexed by another dilemma: he could not enter the extradimensional portion of his retreat and *summon* anything there for fear of direct assault from Graz’zt; nor could he conjure anything outside of it, without violating the Injunction. The loophole outside of the Claviger's domain had been effectively closed to him, because the Celestial Interdict did not apply there either. In the times when his head was not full of esoteric formulae, Mostin ruminated upon the Horror, and whether to make another translation to the Far Realm or not. Or complained about his house-guests: both Ortwin and Koilimilou were lodged with the Alienist. Eadric received the distinct impression that the Satyr was avoiding him.

Nonetheless, at precisely eight o'clock every evening, Mostin would arrive and renew the ward upon Eadric. And for that, the Ahma was thankful. He groaned. He desperately wanted to confide in Nwm.

He descended from the tower and into the courtyard where a trio of supplicants waited – pilgrims from Trempa who sought his blessing. One suffered from a blight which had caused her skin to crack with sores and pustules, and a rheum had settled upon her eyes. Eadric performed a brief, perfunctory rite, did his best to smile, entered the keep, and bolted the door behind him. Within, it seemed
cold and unwelcoming.

He furrowed his brow, strode into the Great Hall – which seemed particularly damp – and picked up a wooden mallet. He began striking a large, iron bell, and did not desist until all eleven of his servants stood before him.

He turned to his clerk. "Bocere, bring me the ledgers."

Bocere, who managed the finances of three estates – Deorham, Hernath and Droming – on a day-to-day basis, and seldom left his small office, looked sceptical. "Are you sure, Ahma? It will take several weeks to go over them. It has been a long time, after all..."

Eadric grunted. "Then bring me a summary. The rest of you – except Hawi – open every shutter and every window, light every fire. Remove dust, dirt and debris – including from the library. This place is beginning to depress me."

He tossed a purse to the stablehand. Hawi caught it, opened it and gawked – it contained more gold than he would earn in five years.

"Go into Deorham," Eadric instructed, "and find some more help. Start at the Twelve Elms. Do not return until you have secured the services of another maid, two lackeys, two linkboys and a minstrel – not a juggler. Offer them twice what they ask for, and give them a month's advance."

The boy nodded enthusiastically.

"Try to find a good minstrel, Hawi," Eadric sighed. Although he didn't hold much hope, the village of Deorham was on the route from Morne to Trempa, and Hawi might get lucky. "You have two days. You may stay at the inn. Eat well, but do not consume too much ale – every penny should be accounted for."

"Why, Ahma, I..."

Eadric raised his hand. "You will also post a notice that I am seeking permanent retainers of quality. Including a castellan."

The announcement was greeted by a stunned silence.

"I realize this may be upsetting," Eadric said, although he felt unusually unsympathetic, "but it may be that presently I will leave for some time. In the event that I do not return – which is entirely possible – I would like my affairs set in order. Be assured that I will appoint someone of gentle birth and fair mind to guard your interests in the meanwhile." He knew that, as soon the news of his intentions became known, the younger brothers and second sons of dozens of nobles would clamour for the position. Gossip spread like wildfire amongst Trempa's aristocracy.

He turned again to Bocere. "How much of the endowment to the Temple remains to be paid?"

Bocere coughed. "One hundred and thirty-thousand crowns."

"I will sign over the deeds to Hernath."

"Ahma..."
Eadric raised an eyebrow.

"Yes, Ahma."

**

Ninit charged.

The red haze was upon her again, and she swung the spear *Rengh* around her head like a flail, whilst guiding Drût effortlessly with her knees. Her copper hair blazed in the wan sunlight, and her bloodstained form rippled with power and restless purpose. The stallion's hooves – bright with white fire – flashed to momentary incandescence as it reared and hammered down upon the creatures which assailed her. As usual, she was alone: seeking alone, stalking alone, slaying alone. And in her madness, none of those who considered her an ally could approach her in any event: her anger was elemental, and best avoided by those who purposed to live.

The demons recoiled.

The goddess pressed forwards, and slew. And slew. And slew. And when she had slain them all, and their grizzled, muscled forms lay in stinking, steaming heaps around her, the frenzy finally passed.

She spat, and cursed them. The ground shuddered, ripped open briefly, and swallowed their already festering remains.

Ninit whispered to Drût, and they rode north across the plains to find more. The hairy ones which jumped were easy prey – although not as easy as the fat, squat ones which drooled. The toad-like ones, and the ones with four arms were trickier – although they seemed comparatively rare. The ones with the hooks on their heads were sly and vicious, and she hated them most of all: they always seemed to slip away at the last minute. But however many she killed, there always seemed to be more. She squinted.

Somewhat later, from the corner of her eye, she spied a bird winging towards her at great speed: a kestrel or falcon, although at a distance of more than a mile it was hard for the goddess to be sure. She wheeled Drût about, and waited for it to reach her: she saw that it was a peregrine. Which meant that it was Lai.

Ninit groaned, and swore. The goddess of magic assumed her natural shape nearby.

"What do you want?" Ninit grunted.

"Rhul has departed for the place called Wyre."

"What do I care?"

"He seeks allies, Ninit."

Ninit shrugged.

"Where are you riding?" Lai asked.
"North," Ninit said through narrowed eyes.

"May I join you?"

"If you must," Ninit sighed. "But stay out of my way, Lai."

"If you were to return to Mulhuk..." Lai began.

"And shut up," Ninit said.

**

Titivilus waited.

He was becoming impatient – he had been kept for five days in an antechamber of black steel high in the north face of the Iron Tower. A single aperture, three feet square, offered a restricted view of the endless city of Dis two miles below – in the rare moments when the infernal haze and acrid fog lifted sufficiently to permit it. Thousands of erinyes constantly patrolled the airs outside – their vectors changing on every pass which they made.

When his summons finally came, a mixture of relief and foreboding replaced a feeling of paranoia and anxiety, and he followed a silent, scarred pit fiend through a tortuous maze of interconnecting chambers and corridors into a reception room of unfathomable height.

A conclave of powerful devils, arrayed in awful forms, awaited him. They sat grimly on carved iron sieges around an iron table etched with scenes which portrayed the Great Revolt.

Titivilus bowed suavely, whilst taking in their number, political allegiances, and relative dispositions in an instant. The fact that Neabaz, the Herald of Baalzebul, was present caused the convoluted mind of Titivilus to twist in a hundred new ways.

"Sit," Dispater smiled.

Titivilus sat.

"Our objectives have changed," Dispater said calmly.

Titivilus nodded. His mind raced. What objectives? By 'our' does he mean 'our' or 'my?' Or maybe 'his?'

"The Chief Protagonist of our Cause has ordered that the status quo must be maintained," Dispater said opaquely.

"Sire?" Titivilus asked. Evidently, he meant 'his.'

"The force currently under Murmuur's command will move to support Graz'zt in Afqithan," Dispater explained. "Shomei's petition to Bathym was quashed."

Titivilus resisted the urge to allow a look of amazement to cross his face.

"You will bring seals to Azzagrat, and then return to Afqithan," Dispater
continued. "Take a group as suits your needs. When you do return to the
demi-plane, you will find that your precedence has been diminished. I advise that
you do not attempt to undermine or subvert those who have been appointed to
the task: you will find them less lenient than I."

"Who has been given this responsibility, Sire?" Titivilus inquired.

"Azazel," Dispater smiled. "He will have three *Akesoli* with him."

The Nuncio's eyes flickered.

Dispater gave an inquisitive look. "Never before have I seen you evince genuine
surprise, Titivilus."

"Nor I, Sire," Titivilus agreed.

"That is all."

The Nuncio of Dis stood, bowed, and made to depart. But as he reached the
doors to the chamber, his master spoke again.

"And Titivilus?"

He turned around.

"Your mandate for the temptation of Eadric of Deorham is hereby revoked."

He bowed again, but showed no sign of his irritation. Inwardly he was livid.

"May I inquire why?" He asked.

"No," Dispater smiled.

Titivilus departed in a calm fury.

**

A light dusting of snow – the first of that winter – lay upon the ground when
Soneillon visited Eadric again: he sat alone in his library, reading by the light of
an oil-lamp. It was late in the evening, and her appearance was foreshadowed by
a feeling of darker anxiety which played across the *Ahma*'s already troubled
thoughts. Her façade was, as always, entirely convincing: the demoness tilted her
head, and began scanning the spines of books upon the shelves. She walked
slowly, her footfall quieter than a cat.

He scowled. "Is there some purpose to your presence here, or are you merely
making a social visit?"

"Does everything have to have a purpose?" She asked in response.

"Yes," he answered.

"In that case," Soneillon smiled, "I am merely making a social visit. You have an
impressive library. How many tomes do you possess?"
Eadric sighed. "Are you attempting to engage me in small-talk, Soneillon?"

"I thought you might appreciate some company, as your friends are otherwise occupied." She walked towards him, and sat lightly upon the arm of his chair.

"And the Queen of Throile has no better way to spend her time?"

"Than seducing the Breath of God?" Soneillon laughed. "I think not. Some of the more interesting volumes in your collection are charred. Why?"

"Certain members of the Inquisition were over-zealous in their hunt for heretical books and manuscripts."

"Ahh. Before the notion of heresy was itself deemed heretical. What were you reading, before I interrupted you?"

He silently handed her the book. Its cover, of heavy leather, was cracked and worn; the vellum pages, soft and well-thumbed:

_Estates and Minor Houses of Trempa_

"How dreary," Soneillon sighed. "Do you occupy yourself with mundane affairs such as these, to avoid brooding on your experience of me?"

"In part. It is not a memory which I enjoy to recall." He stood up.

She held out a soft hand. Her talons were conspicuously absent. "Come, Eadric. Dream with me. I will show you something sweeter. Gentle. Tender."

"You are foul," he said bitterly.

She raised an eyebrow. "I think perhaps you need lessons in the art of courtship."

"When will you desist from this charade?" He hissed. "How can I speak more plainly? You are repellant. You disgust me. Everything that you are is antithetical to all that I value and hold true. You are an ally of circumstance: there is no commonality in our purpose, save by unhappy chance. You are base, vile, obscene. You are nothing but a manifestation of corruption."

"No," she said softly. "I am Soneillon. And you cannot see past a dogma which is outmoded in the philosophy which you purport to espouse. You do _Saizhan_ a disservice."

"That word has no place in your vocabulary. You degrade it by speaking it."

She laughed. "You are a sanctimonious fool. Your moralism merely reveals your ignorance of the Truth. Tell me, Eadric, what does it really mean – _Demogorgon_? What use is _Saizhan_ if it cannot reconcile Oronthon with _that_ truth?"

Reality seemed to momentarily darken as she invoked the name of the Ancient – its power, when spoken by her, was profound.

"Get out," he said through gritted teeth.

"You close your eyes and ears, Eadric. You shrink in fear from the Real as much as you crave it."
He cursed her. Power coursed through him, as he spoke a holy word.

She smiled, and pressed a finger to his lips.

Groping, Eadric drew Lukarn from where it hung in its scabbard on the back of the chair. Reality and memory collapsed to a single point in time, and he recalled another demoness standing in a similar position. Paradox and déjà vu almost overwhelmed him.

"Your desire for me has unbalanced you," Soneillon scoffed. "You are wracked with guilt and confusion."

"I will strike you down if you persist in this."

"I am your kius, Eadric: your enlightenment lies in me." She did not relent. "I am that which you are not. The Void shines, and you will not accept it: for do I not bring you closer to your God, Ahma?"

He smote her three times with all of his strength. Lukarn bit deep into her neck and shoulders, opening wounds which smoked and caused space to contort. Agony gripped her visage as the blade burned through her. Ichor poured from her, evaporating into nothingness as it struck the wooden floor of the library. She seemed to stagger uncertainly.

She did not beg, or cajole or threaten. She did not flee, and spoke no spell, although Eadric knew that she could have extinguished him with a thought. Instead, she assumed her most malevolent aspect – winged, naked, dark and terrible. Taint issued from her in potent waves.

"Remain ignorant then, Eadric. Finish me. I'll make it easy for you," her smile was that of a creature which exulted in evil and destruction.

He wavered.

"You are a coward," she screamed, spitting black blood. "Slay me or bed me, Eadric: you will need to choose sooner or later, in any case. Do so now. Do I consume your every waking thought, or no? Do I remind you of her, Ahma, or did she maybe presage me? Which do you think it is? Can you even recollect her face?" Her words were cruel and barbed.

Barely, he thought. He felt nauseous: grief and remorse briefly threatened to overcome him. He swallowed, breathed, lowered his sword, and held out his hand to her.

"Come," he said shakily. "You cannot mend those wounds."

"Compassion is wasted on me, Ahma." Her manner was ironic.

"I know. It is for my benefit, not yours."

"You have quite a temper, Eadric. Perhaps you should meditate more often."

The Demoness drew close, and he placed his hands on her neck. She hissed in pain and pleasure as his fingers probed the trauma.

"Do you never cease?" He sighed.
"I am what I am."

He gingerly released a little of his power, uncertain of the effect that it might have, before flooding her with light and warmth. She seemed infinitely passive.

"The scars will remain," Eadric said.

"I will bear them as a token of your high esteem," she said drily.

"We have a very unhealthy relationship, Soneillon."

"Do we? I can't say that I've noticed. May I stay?"

He nodded.

*The basic, mechanical premise for Fillein-Jovol-Teppu was one of a self-incarnating entity with only one restriction: the ECL of its new incarnation could be no higher than the ECL of its previous incarnation at death. All other variables are chosen by the incarnating entity as befits its new role and purpose.

**At this point in time, Eadric employed only eleven servants in Kyrtil's Burh: two cooks, three maids, a stablehand, a butler, a mason/carpenter, a gatekeeper, a clerk, and a valet. Although there was no shortage of potential employees seeking work at the Burh, Eadric was conscious of the fact that – between Inquisitorial burnings and demonic incursions – working for the Ahma entailed a certain risk.

***Eadric had made a commitment to pay a 200,000 gp donation to the Temple coffers in order to cover the debts incurred after the war.

POST 2: INNOCENCE

Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 2nd May 2004, 07:24 PM

I’m not sure whether this update addresses any of the speculation offered by some of the readers, or not. Oh, well.

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Innocence

Shomei reclined into an enormous leather chair, and tilted her head inquisitively. She sipped slowly from a large silver goblet, imbibing a volatile liquid of unknown potency. The Infernalist seemed unusually calm and languorous.

"Your dwelling is...beautiful," Eadric said with surprise and genuine feeling. He was sat upon the edge of a similar chair, absorbing his surroundings. The room
was exquisite – if somewhat bizarre – in its décor and furnishings. Purples and midnight blues predominated, and things hung upon walls or rested upon shelves. Crystal lamps emanated a soft, diffuse light, and a faint hint of incense hung within the air.

"Thank-you," she smiled.

A spined devil flew past quietly, and glowered at Eadric.

Shomei gestured, and it flapped away, closing a door silently as it exited.

"Would you care for a drink?" She offered, refilling the goblet from a huge crystal decanter.

"What is it?" He asked.

"It is called kschiff," she replied. "Do not consume too much – it will stupefy you. A little will relax you, however."

"How much is too much?" Eadric had the impression that Shomei was fast approaching that point.

"I will tell you when to stop."

The goblet floated gently towards him, and he caught it uncertainly. Its contents smelled faintly of orange blossoms, and the taste was astringent. But curiously agreeable.

"Thank-you for receiving me at such short notice," Eadric said. "I know that the time of a wizard is precious."

"That is particularly true in my case," she half-smiled.

He swallowed. "Shomei, I..."

She held up a hand. "We will not speak of it."

He sank back into the chair.

"You are here to talk about Soneillon," Shomei said.

He nodded, wondering whether she had foreseen it, guessed it, or determined it through some other means.

"Am I being asked in the capacity of friend, spiritual advisor, or advocate for the antinomian perspective?" She asked.

"I'm not sure," Eadric furrowed his brow. "Although the idea of you as a spiritual advisor is disturbing. You are something of an authority on fiends, however, and I thought your perspective might be useful."

"Have you considered speaking to the Sela?"

Eadric smiled. "I consider speaking to the Sela approximately once every three seconds."

"That is probably a good thing," Shomei ventured. "It would indicate that you are
in touch with the source of your Truth. Your internal dialogue has not been compromised. May I ask a number of difficult questions?"

"Er, yes," he said dubiously.

"If Nehael's release is achieved, how do you think Soneillon will react to a rival?"

He shifted uncomfortably.

"Perhaps it would be better for you if somehow Soneillon were conveniently destroyed prior to liberating Nehael?"

"Shomei, that is most unfair."

"These are practical considerations, Eadric." She gestured, and the goblet floated back towards him again. He hadn't noticed that, at some point, she had refilled it. "May I ask you another question?"

He nodded. He felt that he was beginning to relax.

"Have you entertained the possibility that Soneillon may be fertile? Succubi can enter the equivalent of oestrus at will, and the gestation is extremely fast – days, if I recall correctly. She may use this to exert leverage over you. How would you react if this transpired to be the case?"

His mind span.

"Let me posit another scenario," Shomei said, reaching out as the goblet returned to her.

Eadric found that he was watching her lips move. Her voice seemed to drift slowly through his head.

"What if Nehael perishes? I am assuming that she is presently alive, of course – the web of motes indicated as much. Can you retain your integrity of purpose under those circumstances? If Soneillon were to – for example – offer you a way out, would you accept it?"

He groaned.

"Because you could endure the Void, Eadric. I have no doubt on that count. I have seen the tendril of possibility."

"It will not happen," he said.

"Nor will Shomei the Infernal ever embrace Saizhan," Shomei smiled ironically.

The goblet seemed to appear from nowhere, hovering in front of Eadric's face. He grasped it, and set it down.

There was a brief silence.

"Why is the darkness so compelling, Shomei?" He asked.

She smiled. "Because it is dark, of course."

"Do you think Ortwin was correct – when he suggested that my desire to
overcome duality through any means is the source of my fascination? That it might prove my undoing?"

"The hierosgamos? Maybe. But I think there was no such moral judgment implicit in Ortwin's words, merely that you inferred one. Are you inclined to symbolic microcosmic speculation?"

"I might be, if I knew what it was," the goblet had appeared in front of him again. He sighed, and drank. He found his eyes resting on the curve of Shomei's neck, and tore them away.

She raised an eyebrow. "Perhaps I should have warned you that kschiff also possesses aphrodisiac qualities. Don't worry – I have no intention of seducing you. Your life is complicated enough already." She sighed. "I think you are teetering on the edge of oblivion, Eadric – this is a place rife with temptation, but it also possesses infinite spiritual possibility. Everything will become a paradox, and you will be forced to redefine who you are on a continual basis."

"Now you begin to sound like an advocate for the short, steep path," he said grimly.

"I think your role is ultimately Adversarial, Eadric."

"The Sela once said something similar to me, regarding my place in the downfall of Orthodoxy."

"Perhaps you should have listened to him," she remarked wryly. "To avoid falling, all you must do is remain grounded in Saizhan. Everything else is superfluous."

A longer silence followed.

"In the past I have misjudged you, Shomei," Eadric sighed. "I'm sorry."

She shrugged, and looked away.

"You are very defensive."

"Yes," she replied.

"I feel I've missed the opportunity of a good friendship."

She swallowed, unwilling to meet his gaze.

"Bliss is not so bad, Shomei. If the weight of becoming is so heavy..."

She raised a hand, her eyes filling with tears. "There is no possibility that I have not considered, Ahma."

He held her hand gently. It seemed tiny.

She wept.

*

After Eadric had returned to Deorham through the portal which Mostin had
opened, Shomei sat alone in reflection.

Somewhat before midnight, she renewed her mind blank, protected herself with other, sundry wards, grasped her rod, and opened a gate to Phlegethos. Soon thereafter she met with Bathym for their third – and Shomei hoped last – series of negotiations.

She was furious to discover that the Duke of Hell had reneged on their agreement utterly, and would no longer be committing a single devil to the 'situation' in Afqithan. Nor would he explain why.

It made no sense. The reason for Shomei's initial involvement in Afqithan had been because certain powerful devils had expressed a desire that Graz'zt be removed from the cosmic scheme of things. She wondered what had changed.

She returned to Wyre.

Mostin was awakened at two in the morning – from his usual bizarre dreams – by an incessant banging on his door.

* 

The Alienist appeared in his robe of eyes. Shomei glared at him, and wondered whether he wore it to bed like a night-gown, to avoid being surprised by things which might otherwise surprise him.

"I've been f*cked over," the Infernalist spat, barging in.

"I see the kschiff has worn off," Mostin remarked.

"Bathym has backed out."

Orolde arrived from his room in order to answer the door. Mostin sighed.

The two Wizards repaired to Mostin's study, and the Alienist instructed that the Sprite bring them cakes and hot buttered firewine. He kindled a fire, and spent several moments adjusting the illumination such that it was just so.

Shomei fidgeted. She glanced around. Mostin's workplace was uncharacteristically cluttered and disorganized.

"What are you working on?" She asked suspiciously.

"A pseudonatural summons," he grumbled. "When I have the time and inclination – which seems seldom at present. What is happening, Shomei?"

"Bathym was on the verge of committing five legions of his devils. Belial had already sanctioned it."

Mostin gaped. "Five legions? Shomei, how do you do it?"

"Well, I don't – evidently. Support has been withdrawn. Presumably the interest has changed."

"Have you considered petitioning Belial directly?"
"I suspect that he is responsible for the about-face."

"Do you have any indication why?" Mostin inquired.


"I had not considered a sizable force of devils crucial to success," Mostin said. "The web of motes offered a number of other scenarios."

"Maybe not," Shomei conceded. "But thirty thousand barbazu would have guaranteed it, and acted as a balance on Rhyxali at the very least."

"I think that your perspective in this is flawed, Shomei – you are assuming that we can somehow retain sufficient control of this situation to actually direct the course of events. I have come to the conclusion that, at best, we can invoke a storm and let it blow as it will."

"Mostin..."

"It is realistic," he said. "We are dealing with entities of enormous power, any one of which can turn on us in an instant. We should be thinking in terms of self-preservation. You should be, at the very least."

"I am not getting into this argument again," she groaned.

"What other options remain open to you?"

"The glooms. Other Dukes. Possibly Murmuur: he is influential, commands a large force, and is – importantly – present. Time is running out to make such arrangements, however. And I have no relationship with Malbolge, other than vicariously through Belial – and he hardly seems reliable in this at present. Besides, I mistrust the involvement of Titivilus."

"You are still trying to control the situation," Mostin sighed. "Our first goal is the obliteration of Ainhorr's force in Afqithan – there is no need to be methodical about it. We can worry about Azzagrat afterwards."

"What exactly are you saying, Mostin?"

"I can dimensionally lock an area two miles across, Shomei. Outside of the quiescence – where demons will be forced to manifest – I can invoke a total of seventeen reality maelstroms if necessary. Afqithan is not my world, Shomei. There are no holds barred there. If I rip the spatial fabric of the demiplane to shreds, I don't care. If I can call the Horror, and bind it – as long as I can get away before the spell ends, I don't care. Shomei, even if I gate in Carasch and invoke an apocalypse I don't care. Are we on the same page here, Shomei?"

She looked at him. "Thank-you, Mostin. For a while, I was beginning to lose my perspective. I think you may have restored it to me."

"We are as gods, Shomei. Never forget it."
"You truly are at your best when you're at your craziest," she smiled.

**

She stood, and looked again at the tree for a long while.

It had an oddly compelling quality, which drew one's eyes to it and evoked a desire to run hands over soft, smooth bark. Its height and girth suggested that it was old, but it possessed a quality which seemed...youthful. Strange for a tree.

Around its base, bright flowers sprang between rocks and trailed into a pool fed by a small spring. The water moved, but she couldn't determine where it went, after it left the pool. Curious, she thought. She looked at the tree again.

Sometimes, she felt that it was watching her.

She gazed around, and wondered what else there was out there. Away from the tree. More than once, she had determined to leave – to walk away from the tree. To explore. But she never did.

Why leave the tree, after all? Whatever else there was, it couldn't be better than the tree.

She lay down against its warm bole, and it seemed to embrace her. She watched thoughts and memories pass through her mind, and wondered who had experienced them.

Bathe, she thought.

She vaguely recalled the fact that she liked to bathe. It seemed like a good idea – although she was unsure whether it had risen unbidden in her mind, or the tree had prompted the desire. She rose, walked the short distance over to the pool, and slid into the water. It was the perfect depth, and the perfect temperature. She immersed her head briefly – as that seemed the right thing to do – before leaning back and relaxing against a rock, which seemed to fit her head and neck very comfortably.

She suddenly noticed a small figure – maybe two thirds her own height – sitting on a branch of the tree, with its legs dangling freely. It wore grey hose and a leaf-green waistcoat.

"Hello," she said.

"Hello," the other replied. "Are you happy?"

"Yes," she said.

"Good," the other smiled.

"Where did you come from?" She asked. "I haven't seen you before."

"I came from the tree."

"Ahh," she nodded. She hauled herself easily from the water, and walked back towards the tree. She noticed that now she was covered in tiny flecks of silver –
she rubbed them gently, but they seemed somehow part of her skin.

"They will not come off," the other said.

"What are they?" She asked.

The other smiled sadly. "The memory of a great injustice."

She cocked her head inquisitively.

"It would take too long to explain," the other said. "Nor does it matter – the injustice never really happened now. Your transition is passed at last, and you have been finally surrendered: from one Truth to another. This place is two things: a prison hallowed by an angel, and a womb which has always been here. If sometimes the Truth that you chose seems cold and indifferent, then it is Her nature. Maybe She forgot you for a while. Don't blame Her: She doesn't love you any less."

"You think too much," she laughed. "What will happen now?"

"Something nobody expects," the other replied.

"And what is that?" She asked.

"A Viridity," the other said, his eyes blazing.

**

Nwm felt the snow and pine cones beneath his feet as he ran. The air was frigid, his breathing deep but measured. The smell of resin permeated everything, and his eyes streamed in the cold. His pulse was audible to him, above the noise of his passage, thumping through his skull.

His focus was perfect: he was meditating. No symbolism moved through his mind. No recollection of memory, nor thought for the future. No expectation of revelation, nor seeking for something other than moment in its fullness. There was reflection, but it was dynamic and engaged – not introspective and divorced. Each moment was precious – but Nwm did not cherish it. He merely experienced it.

He ran until he finally dropped from exhaustion, and collapsed gasping. Still, he meditated. Whilst he slept naked in the snow, he meditated, and when he woke again with the pale winter sun, he meditated.

He came to a rock under an icy waterfall, and sat. Water cascaded over him as he gazed over a frozen pond for nine days. He neither ate, nor drank; nor did he crave warmth nor comfort. He needed nothing.

He meditated. He began to run again, and meditated.

After a week, he rested, and allowed himself to engage in discursive thought. After an hour, he got bored.

He meditated again.
In the *tuerns* of the Linna, Tunthi shamans said that some primaeval spirit had awakened, and come from the forests which nestled in the deep vales, south of the Heaped Thunders.

**

Several rumours – substantiated by more or less reliable evidence and witnesses – were current among the inhabitants of western Trempa and southern Tomur, and spreading rapidly through the rest of Wyre.

First, a group of twenty pilgrims to Kyrtill’s Burh had, purportedly, undergone a terrifying ordeal wherein demonic or diabolic forces had manifested to them *within the castle*. The significance of this event was interpreted according to the various inclinations of those for whom it held an interest: a test of faith; a sign of the Ahma’s eccentricity, madness or evil; a cryptic revelation couched in terms which lesser mortals must strive to understand; or religious hysteria induced by too much privation and self-mortification – or perhaps the consumption of ergotized rye bread.

Second, Eadric, Earl of Deorham sought a steward for his castle and estates. This aroused much interest among various landless nobles, former church grandees who had surrendered estates at the end of the infeudation, as well as numerous unusual characters of mystical bent.

Third, in the face of the expectations of those who considered chastity a necessary prerequisite for the successful cultivation of *saizhan* – and there were many – the Ahma had taken a lover. She was seldom seen but was, by all accounts, beautiful and magnetic. Her lineage and credentials were unknown, and it was suspected that she was a peasant-girl. Or a foreigner. Or a celestial companion. Or a demoness. It depended on who you asked.

The *drip-drip* of pilgrims and mendicants to Kyrtill’s Burh rapidly became a steady stream, and then a rushing torrent. It expanded to include potential retainers, philosophers eager to engage the Ahma in conversation and debate, Urgic and Irrenite ex-heretics who no longer felt the need to practice in secret, atoning Templars, and the merely curious. They lodged in Deorham – which had never seen so many new faces – and occupied barns, fields and rooms in farmsteads for miles about. The Innkeeper of the *Twelve Elms* quickly became very rich.

Eadric closed the gates to the Burh, and returned to his impossibly circular, self-referential *kius*:

*What is Soneillon, if both Saizhan and extinction are not unattainable?*

But even as he sat in contemplation, she would come to him and any insight that he thought he might have gleaned would be dispelled. She would purposely arouse him, or drive him to distraction by her presence. Her heat never abated. There was no indication of artifice in her desire, only the need for continual and infinitely varied sensation: taboo did not exist, or existed only to be broken, and when they coupled violently on the shattered altar of the chapel, Eadric didn’t know whether they had profaned it, or sanctified it.

Constructed reality was overturned so swiftly, so thoroughly, that it seemed as though the cosmos disintegrated into its component atoms and they, in turn, evaporated into a Nothingness from which they were never unidentical.
This was the 'Path of Lightning' to which, he knew, Titivilus had referred – hard as a diamond, sharp as a razor, upon which only the mad could walk. But the Nuncio of Dis knew it by name only, and any formulation that Titivilus had posited regarding its nature was shallow and vacuous. The Abyss loomed on both sides of Eadric, and if he missed a single step, it would claim him.

On the night of the full moon before the winter solstice, Mostin arrived with Ortwin, Shomei, and Koilimilou at Kyrtil's Burh. Eadric ushered them into the great hall, and Ortwin raised an eyebrow: the place was as he had never before seen it.

A fire roared in the hearth, and wolf-hounds lounged before it. Lanterns hung from chains and torches burned in sconces: light was everywhere. Servants moved about busily. The smell of roasted game, wine and fresh bread filled the air. The sound of a lute carried over the hubbub.

Music? Ortwin was incredulous. At Kyrtil's Burh? Played poorly, to be sure, but music nonetheless.

The tune faltered as the Satyr, sidhe-cambion, Mostin – with his lidless eyes – and Shomei the Infernal entered the hall. Silence and uncertainty descended upon those present.

Eadric clapped his hands. "Go about your business," he smiled. "These people may appear odd, but there is no need for concern."

They went about their business, and soon the volume resumed its previous levels.*

The Satyr turned to Eadric. "So the rumours are true. You really have gone nuts. Where's the Queen of Darkness? Lurking in the crypt? Or embroidering a quilt in the drawing room?"

"I believe she Dreams. Why are you here?"

"You mean this is normal?" Ortwin gestured around. "I thought that you'd put it on for our benefit. Who's that boy over there?" The Satyr pointed to a handsome nobleman in a fashionable doublet.

"His name is Canec. He is my steward."

"A Uediian?"

"He is Caur's maternal uncle. He marched on Morne with us. Do you not remember?"

"I have a poor memory for aristocrats," Ortwin said drily, pouring himself a cup of wine. "Is everything alright, Ed? You're not schizo are you?"

"Yes. No. In that order."

"Is it true? Are you screwing her?"

Eadric groaned. "You have a foul mouth, Ortwin."
"Man, you're in big trouble," the Satyr grinned. "Let's get drunk."

"Will you always be a hedonist, Ortwin?"

"I hope so. But there again, I can. I have a supreme advantage over you."

"And what might that be?" Eadric sighed.

"I'm a fey, Ed. Sh*t doesn't stick to me."

Eadric smiled and shook his head. "Why are you here?" He asked.

"Mostin said something important is about to happen. A 'convergence of tendrils,' apparently. He had some flashback of a possible future that he'd seen. A kind of mini-nodality."

"Should I be nervous?" Eadric asked.

"Probably," Ortwin replied.

Within fifteen minutes, Soneillon returned: she had located the balor Irzho in an abandoned temple in the mountains of Bedesh, together with several succubi and the demonist Rimilin of the Skin. They were willing to aid the cause against Ainhorr in Afqithan, provided that a price could be agreed.

Before the information had sunk in, the gate-ward entered, with news that a traveller stood outside who would not be turned away.

"What is his name?" Eadric asked.

"He says he is called Rhul. He...er...forgive me, Ahma. He claims to be a god."

Moments later, the hag Jetheeg and two Loquai knights arrived. Nhura was finally ready.

* This is one of the minor social advantages of possessing a +39 Diplomacy score.

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**POST 3: RE: SAIZHAN**

**Posted by:** Sepulchrrave II at ENWorld on 4th May 2004, 07:35 AM

I've plundered pretty much every mystical tradition that exists for my campaign, so you'll find bits of many cropping up. *Saizhan* is based primarily on Buddhist Madhyamika, though.

The dialectic of negation certainly isn't mine - a 2nd century philosopher called Nagarjuna systematized it, and it was further refined by Candrakirti. The original
basis is a series of four questions - the *catuskoti* - said to have been posed to the Buddha:

1) Whether the world is eternal, or no, or both, or neither.
2) Whether the world is finite, or infinite, or both, or neither.
3) Whether the Buddha exists after death, or not, or both, or neither.
4) Is the soul identical to the body, or different from it?

The Buddha refused to answer the questions, because any categorical statement would deny the possibility of the other theses. This was 2000 years before Kant's antinomies, btw.

Point 3) is the one of most interest - the ens/non-ens question. In the SH this is the basis of the Ontological Paradox - note that the RL term 'Ontological Paradox' when used by Western philosophers has different connotations.

It seemed an interesting idea to superimpose basically Eastern philosophies (together with the accompanying idea that multiple truths are possible) onto an entrenched Western social model (with monotheism), and see what happened when players interacted with it.

This picture is much more important, however, and provided more inspiration than any philosophy.

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**POST 4:**

**Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 4th May 2004, 03:43 PM**

Quote:

Originally Posted by Wrath of the Swarm

*Saizhan is a process by which opposing concepts are brought together in a synthesis, yes?*

*By breaking down the boundaries between one thing and another, saizhan taken to its logical end incorporates and unifies all things. The resulting state which includes all concepts and thus can never be adequately described can equally be said to exclude all concepts. It's the totality, the unformed void, the emptiness that contains everything. It is to existence what Nirvana is to selfhood.*

*Such a state is compatible with all stories and thus is incompatible with all of them. If there are any characters or events about which any limited statements could be accurately made, saizhan is not complete.*

*Fortunately, applying saizhan to itself permits us to understand how the illusion of exclusive states arises from the totality.*

Absolutely. If you take the premise

*Not all truths are unequal*

and then proceed to posit the idea that *Saizhan* is the ultimate truth, then you have created a position which is untenable. *Saizhan* must *necessarily* be a
relative truth (not the 'Truth,' so to speak), otherwise its own, internal dialectic collapses.

Edit: I should add the fact that the distinction between truth and Truth is, itself, an empty concept - Saizhan reveals this to be the case.

**POST 5:**

*Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 11th June 2004, 08:37 AM*

**Quote:**

Would Soneillon's colourful distractions that she proffers to Eadric be similar to the Vajrayana tradition's chaotic-seeming mess of samsara? ... Defilement is Wisdom, Samsara is Nirvana.

Form is Void, Void is Form.

i have this image of Soneillon and Eadric in ritual "Yab-yum" if you catch the reference.. that's faintly disturbing..

Oh God, don't get me started. The urge to upset Eric's grandmother is almost too much to resist. Sex and religion.

From my perspective, the answer is yes. Eadric's actions are definitely reminiscent of left-hand Tantra - or at least, the ramifications of them are. Without dropping a huge spoiler for the next update (sometime between now and never, as tleilaxu wrote), they have a profound effect on the development of method amongst some of those who practice Saizhan in Wyre. The parallels with Vajrayana are quite intentional: even the name 'The Path of Lightning' is a homage - although when Titivilus coined the phrase, I didn't know where it would end up (ironic, eh?). Soneillon can be viewed as a Dakini in that respect. Karuna + Sunyata = perfect enlightenment.

From Marc's (Eadric's player) point of view, however, it is much more tied to the alchemical marriage of sun and moon and Western Hermetic/Alchemical symbolism. We had quite different ideas as to its significance.

**Quote:**

And i also have an image of Teppu/ Nwm/ The Green stepping upon both Eadric and Soneillon, surpassing them both like Esoteric depictions of Nature Deities that go beyond form and void (kinda like Fudo Myo-O stepping upon both Shiva and his consort Sati).

This is the Viridity. But you forgot to add Nehael to the equation.

I'd like to apologize for the long delay: I've got lots of RL issues to deal with at present. Good issues, but issues nonetheless. I've been distracted and unfocused, and writing simply hasn't appealed recently. I can't say when I'll get it together to complete the next update (it's about half done), because I know that as soon as I do, I'll probably start writing again like mad. If you can be patient, I promise not to disappoint.
Hello 😊

I had originally vowed to myself not to post an update until I had detailed events as they transpired in Afqihan. In the event, this became impossible because too much other stuff was going down, and it took too long to document: if I omitted it, subsequent events would be incomprehensible. All of the pieces needed to be in place beforehand.

I've asked Eridanis to do some brutal pruning when he's got time. Nonetheless, many thanks for all of your 'bumps' in keeping this thread alive. Hopefully, it won't be quite as long before you see me again.

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**AFQITHAN: PROLOGUE (Part 1)**

[Soneillon]: If you should happen to slay Ainhorr today, you should grieve for him.
[Eadric]: (Contempt.)
[Soneillon]: Arrogance! You, at least, should lament his passing. A great warrior. Ever loyal to the master he loves and despises.
[Eadric]: Loves? Love is never that ugly.
[Soneillon]: Love is often that ugly, Eadric.
[Eadric]: And if you should perish today? How should I then react?
[Soneillon]: Exult in your memory, Eadric. Because nothing will ever again compare to me.
[Eadric]: For that, at least, I will be thankful.
[Soneillon]: You will be diminished.

* *

[Eadric]: What does Hell have to do with this?
[Shomei]: I don't know.
[Eadric]: I fear its agenda.
[Shomei]: That is wise. Many forget the single, overarching truth.
[Eadric] (Wrily): And what might that be?
[Shomei]: Hell is merely a vehicle for expressing the Will of the Nameless Fiend. Despite all appearances, it acts with one purpose.
[Eadric]: I had not forgotten.
[Shomei]: Do you believe the Will of Oronthon and the Will of the Adversary to be one and the same, Ahma?
[Eadric]: They are not unidentical.
[Shomei]: Do you believe that you are a focus through which the Will of the Adversary is expressed?
[Eadric]: Perhaps.
[Shomei]: Do you trust the Will of the Adversary?
[Eadric]: No.
[Shomei]: How do you resolve this paradox?
[Eadric]: I meditate to realize Saizhan.
[Shomei] (Exasperated): Must you always proselytize?

*

[Eadric]: Will you exercise restraint?
[Mostin]: I doubt it.
[Eadric]: Can you exercise restraint? Is it within your nature?
[Mostin]: I don't know. I've never tried, and have no plans to.
[Eadric]: Your lack of moral responsibility concerns me.
[Mostin]: A surfeit of it would concern me more. I abide by certain...axioms...Eadric, which you cannot hope to comprehend. You can rest assured that within your own framework, I am completely mad.
[Eadric]: And within yours?
[Mostin]: I am utterly pedestrian. There are things far madder than I.

*

[Eadric]: What of Iua?
[Ortwin]: She can look after herself.
[Eadric]: You have betrayed her.
[Ortwin]: Not so! Our arrangement made provision for outside interests.
[Eadric]: I am referring to how you went about this. Flaunting a lover in front of her is not discreet. You could have been more sensitive.
[Ortwin]: I have not lied to her. Are you suggesting that I should have?
[Eadric]: She is eighteen years old.
[Ortwin]: Life is full of hard lessons, Ed.
[Eadric]: That is facile. You have a duty towards her.
[Ortwin]: What can I say? I'm selfish.
[Eadric]: Kollimilou is a sidhe and a cambion, Ortwin. She venerates Rhyxali. She is without remorse or compassion. What can she offer you?
[Ortwin]: Inventiveness, and insatiability. Relief from the boredom of existence.
[Eadric]: Once you had principles, as much as you pretended not to.
[Ortwin]: Once, I was mortal. My perspective has changed.
[Eadric]: Your essential nature has changed.
[Ortwin]: No more than yours. And Eadric of Deorham is the one f*cking the Demon Queen of Throile.
[Eadric]: I remain conflicted in my actions, Ortwin. I am neither complacent nor fixated on sensation. I do what I must.
[Ortwin]: Oh, bullsh*t Ed. Grow up. You're just doing what we all have to do. It's biological. It's just been a long time coming for you, and you've decided to take an unconventional route. Guilt is an outdated emotion.
[Eadric]: Why are you even here, Ortwin?
[Ortwin]: I feel it in my blood, Eadric. I can smell it. Every tree whispers it to me.
[Eadric]: ?

**

Why the Nameless Adversary acts in the way he does is a cosmic imponderable. His reasonings are so complex, his plots so byzantine, his vision so broad in its
imagining, that no real hope exists in penetrating his motives.

The Irrenites – who had been generally sympathetic to the Adversarial paradigm – maintained the position that if the Oronthon beyond Oronthon was utterly ineffable, then the Adversary was the distillation of pure rationality. Every move that he made – to augment one incomprehensible factor, or to reduce another – was calculated with the utmost precision and played out within the framework of eternal potentiality. He nurtured tendrils of possibility which might not yield fruit for a billion years.

The nodality in Afqithan – although complex and multi-faceted – was itself only a minor aspect of a larger process of change: or so it could be interpreted, if one was inclined towards such speculation. The mind of God – which, from an Urgic perspective, included every iota of consciousness in existence at any time and every possible combination thereof – was engaged in a reorganization of its own, internal structure. This manifested in the World of Men in a number of ways: a resurgence in the cult of Cheshne, as concepts of Nothingness were articulated within the physical plane; long periods during which the Sela was engaged in intense meditation; and finally, the beginnings of a schism regarding the interpretation of the best way to implement and realize Saizhan itself.

Because Cheshne – who, if the cosmos possessed an objective truth, might be identical with Demogorgon, and might not – had stirred. Or maybe she shifted slightly in her sleep. In any event, a torrent of contradictory truths were suddenly unleashed upon an already strained Dialectic, forcing an explosion of insights to occur. Cheshne was real again, and always had been.

The liaison between the Ahma and Soneillon – it was suspected – was merely a physical symptom of the articulation of Nothingness within the Ideal realm. Eadric did not know it, but his relationship with the demoness was to have profound and far-reaching consequences for Oronthonian mysticism. Not with respect to the definition of Saizhan – after all, how can a state devoid of all qualities be rendered in sensible terms? But as far as praxis was concerned – the method by which one came to the final realization which Saizhan claimed to be – the Ahma was blazing a path which would appeal to a particular minority: those of antinomian bent within the broad and complex set of perspectives which comprised Oronthonian religion.

Many who had been Irrenites – before such labels became superfluous – immediately understood what Eadric of Deorham was attempting to do. They applauded his revolutionary vision, his rejection of conventional mores, and his apparent transcendence of notions such as good and evil – although the matter was far from resolved within the Ahma’s own mind. Several adepts – including the thaumaturges Sineig and Wrohs – went as far as to compact succubi in their exploration of Saizhan. Not so much in emulation of the Ahma, but in recognition that rapid deconstruction of conventional reality required radical tools, and demons were about as radical as it got.

The subschool which arose, Skôhsldaúr – the gate of demons – would produce works of extraordinary genius and subtlety. Its validity as an authentic vehicle for Saizhan was doubted by few, but its suitability as a universal tool – which many of its proponents advocated – was regarded with dubiety by more conservative elements. It was too controversial. Too hazardous. Too Adversarial for the tastes of many. It was the beyond even the most questionable of Goetic practices. It should be reserved only for those whom the Sela deemed ready.

Of course, the Sela himself declined to make such judgments.
It was in foreknowledge and anticipation of these events – and others beside – that the schemes of Hell were set into motion. To the amazement of the nobles Furcas and Murmuur, Azazel – and the Infernal Standard – arrived in Afqithan, together with three other devils of unusually wicked temperament. Sachir, Zaare and Nahuzihis were Akesoli, serving the arch-fiend Amaimon, and dispensing pain upon powerful and intractable thralls both mortal and diabolic. There was no question of challenging Azazel's authority in the demiplane by either of the entrenched Dukes. He needed neither seals nor letters of precedence to validate his assumption of command: he was Azazel. That was enough.

The presence of the Akesoli caused fearful speculation amongst Murmuur and his various captains and lieutenants – decorated narzugons high in the Order of the Fly. Murmuur was a straightforward soldier, and although subtle in the way that all Infernal aristocrats are subtle, he lacked the calculated finesse of intellectuals such as Furcas and Titivilus. He was not privy to the machinations of his liege in Malbolge, nor of his liege's liege in Maladomini. It was evident that the Akesoli's presence must have been authorized at the highest level: sanctioned by the Adversary himself, the Quatriumvirate, and possibly the silent council of the thirteen great Antagonists.**

Murmuur was, however, relieved that Azazel had been appointed the task of commanding the effort. Azazel was – like himself – a warrior, with little interest in devious schemes. Although a harsh taskmaster, Hell's standard-bearer recognized accomplishment upon the battlefield above all else, and Murmuur excelled in battle and deeds of martial prowess. The Duke mused drily whether Azazel's arrival had been a strategic decision designed to make Murmuur himself more tractable, or whether it in some way reflected the involvement of the Ahma: although Agalierept might have been a more obvious choice, he would possess less gravitas as far as mortals were concerned.***

Murmuur waited impatiently, eager to simultaneously align the nine gates within his tower to Malbolge, in order to permit his troops through: thirty legions, plus their auxiliaries. There were bearded devils, malebranche, horned devils and erinyes. And his knights, who numbered several thousand, would lead the narzugon charge – if and when it came.

*If it came.* Murmuur realized that he still had no idea what was really happening. But unlike Furcus or Titivilus, his political ignorance was a source of comfort rather than distress.

He grunted. Spined devils flapped silently around him, strapping his breastplate and vambraces – constructed of an unknown, greenish metal – over a fine mesh of infernal steel.

**

The galley – a vast, ponderous quadrieme from Shûth – lumbered at dusk into the bustling port of Jashat, and moored close to the weathered marble of an ancient wharf, fast by a sleek Thalassine jabeque. Her timbers groaned as she eclipsed the smaller ship, blotting out the sunset and irritating the dozen or so sailors who smoked and relaxed upon the jabeque's deck after a hard week's work. The quayside – stretching below a vast plaza crammed with temples to a hundred gods – was a riot of colour and activity.
The Gentleman from Thond – whose own preference for colour in his clothing was understated at best, and muted at worst – stood in the cool evening air upon wide steps, below a timeworn shrine to the god Pe’ahj. Six retainers attended him. He squinted through the scented clouds exuded by temple censers in an effort to suppress the effect upon his humours. His humours exhibited a particularly delicate balance. He was nervous, and agitated.

He watched impatiently as pulleys span and counterweights soared upon two great derricks near the stern, and the galley lowered a gangway half as wide as the road to Fumaril. She began to unload dozens of crates, chests and boxes from her hold, luged by huge slaves who bore intricate brands upon their arms and shoulders: the Gentleman from Thond wondered they were a giant-breed from some distant corner of Shûth. Before them, a company of guards – of similar type, but clad in dull breastplates and wearing cloaks of sombre red – marched silently down the walkway and arrayed themselves in a wide semicircle, blocking half the quayside and causing merchants and vendors to curse and grumble. Long, sharp glaives pointed outwards like a thicket, oblivious to the laws and customs of Jashat.

A second gangplank – less massive than the first – was hauled into place and dropped by a hundred muscled arms.

The Gentleman from Thond licked his lips apprehensively. A slow procession of magi began to issue from the galley. Some were cowled and hooded, others bare-headed, yet more bore hair arranged in long, intricate braids – all according to their station and function, at which the Gentleman could only guess. In the rear, a number of veiled palanquins – attended by servants or neophytes – swayed rhythmically, in time with the steady footsteps of their muscled bearers.

He swallowed, and strode forwards. Several of the guards – each a cubit taller than himself – immediately brought their weapons to bear on him. He smiled uncertainly, and coughed. Before he had the chance to speak, he heard another voice issue from behind them.

The wall of steel parted, to reveal a slender man with a terse manner dressed in a loose, silk robe of greenish-black.

"I have made the necessary arrangements, but..." the Gentleman from Thond began.

"Good," the other interrupted. "I am Anumid. You will address me – and me only. Here is a list of our requirements."

Anumid handed a long scroll to the Gentleman, who raised his eyes in surprise.

"The temple precinct has been cleared," the Gentleman from Thond said. "Vagrants were..."

"The details are irrelevant," Anumid interrupted again. "The site will be reconsecrated, in any case."

"I have had to call in many favours and line many purses, to make this happen, Anumid. I have had numerous unforeseen expenses."

"You will be recompensed," Anumid smiled. "Do you wish to continue in the capacity of our agent?"
"Yes, but..."

"Will fifty thousand be sufficient to begin with?"

"Yes." The Gentleman from Thond bowed perfunctorily.

As the train made its winding progress through the city of Jashat, they passed by two Wizards of middling power: a local enchantress named Luthlul, and her recent acquaintance Menniz, a conjurer who originally hailed from Lang Herath in Wyre.**** Luthlul gave Menniz a meaningful look.

"This is an unexpected development," Menniz said uncomfortably, scratching his neck. "Do you think they're genuine?"

Luthlul invoked her arcane sight and gaped.

"I assume from your expression that the answer is an unqualified yes," Menniz said laconically.

"The four in the palanquins are off the scale," Luthlul whispered. "I'm not getting anything from half a dozen others – they're probably mind blanked."

"Why aren't they using a more conventional mode of transport? Is it a ritual thing?"

"Probably," Luthlul nodded. "What should we do?"

"We can't do anything, Luthlul. But I'll issue a sending to Daunton in a while: he should probably know. Frankly, if they're staying here, I'm inclined to return to Wyre. At least it's safer there."

"From less than half of them," Luthlul grimaced. "I wonder if any more are coming."

"I doubt it. I'm surprised that there are that many in the whole of Shûth. What have they been doing for the past eight hundred years?"

"Preserving the tradition, apparently."

After Daunton received the sending in Gibirazen, news quickly became current among those mages he knew – and subsequently, through his friend Prince Tagur, passed into both temporal and spiritual circles.

When it reached the ears of the Sela, Tramst evinced neither surprise nor concern.

Within a day more rumours were circulating, and Daunton determined to visit Jashat himself – none of his divinations were proving effective in the matter.

Three miles outside of the city, the temple of Cheshne – abandoned and overgrown for a millennium – had risen again from its crumbling ruins. By their arts the magi – and now none doubted their authenticity – had restored the compound overnight.

Towers soared skywards to giddying heights, icons and statues of tormented
spirits – the ugras or ‘fierce protectors’ of the faith – adorned walls and bastions: they bore an uncanny resemblance to figures which, in the faith of Oronthon, were understood to be fallen celestials. In the beliefs of Shûth, however, their rôle was subtler and more complex. And far older. Embodiments of fear, lust or violence which must be both placated and overcome in order for reconciliation with Nothingness to be achieved.

Mostin – who had been inwardly concerned about the missing tendril in his convergence – received a sending from Daunton while he sat at the table in the Great Hall at Kyrtill’s Burh. His face remained impassive.

Queen Soneillon, who rested across from him in contemplative pose, looked into his eyes.

**

Iua’s defiance of her mother’s wishes was rooted in her need to refamiliarize herself with Fumaril – from which she had been absent for a year – almost as much as her obstinacy when it came to obeying Mulissu’s commands. Despite her mother’s insistence that Iua remain inconspicuous and protected by the wards of faith, the Duelist’s own curiosity and wanderlust – traits for which Mulissu herself had once been renowned – found her in any number of dubious locales. She took to the streets with a mind to finding anything which might distract her from brooding upon her brief, eccentric and ultimately empty relationship with Ortwin.

Mulissu herself was cloistered within one of several small temples to Jeshi – into whose cult, in her youth, she had been initiated. Whilst the Savant had maintained a relatively low profile amongst wizardly circles in Wyre and beyond, her reputation amongst the clergy of Jeshi – who shared many of the same aerial contacts as the Elementalist – was somewhat different. Her progress had been watched: lauded by some, criticized by others, and, by more than a few, recognized as a potential source of revivification for the cult’s flagging fortunes.

Mulissu, who abhorred politics almost as much as organized religion, avoided all attempts to convince her to renew her vows to Jeshi. But the hallowed ground of the temple was – from her perspective – too useful a defense to ignore, so she grudgingly acquiesced to the demands of the High Priestess to attend revels held in Jeshi’s name. In return, the Elementalist was granted several perquisites: the use of the roof-space above the Chamber of Chimes, a feigned ignorance of any magic that she might work, and assurances that she would be otherwise left alone.

Mulissu’s unique spirituality – cerebral in the extreme – had developed to regard devotional practices as bizarre and inexplicable. There was no reconnection with a deeper source, no feeling of unity or succour, no camaraderie, and no appreciation of a symbolism which might – to an initiate – possess profound revelatory significance: to Mulissu, it appeared as an alphabet inaccurately scrawled by a toddler.

But in Fumaril – which lay beyond the purview of the Claviger – Mulissu could summon. She haggled ad nauseum with powerful djinns in an effort to replenish her diminished supply of spells, and co-opted the services of a novice called Naimha to act in the capacity of a broker. Naimha scoured every marketplace and every hidden shop which dealt in oddities in an attempt to procure magical paraphernalia – mostly without success. Mulissu opened lines of communication with Tozinak, whom she liked; with Jalael, whom she distrusted; and with Waide,
whom she found intolerable. She also began to cultivate the friendship of Ehieu, a sorcerer from Pandicule whose flightiness made Mulissu seem positively stable. Ehieu roamed the seas south of Fumaril and – when not alternately vexing or aiding sailors – made infrequent visits to the Temple.

She pointedly – and somewhat petulantly – snubbed Shomei, who by virtue of close association with Mostin, was considered an undesirable acquaintance. Shomei was, to some degree at least, responsible for the Elementalist's decline in fortunes.

She sighed. She should have known better than to deal with Alienists and Infernalists, even if they were among the handful of people whose intellects she actually respected.

When Mulissu therefore received a sending from Daunton – who had been apprised of her presence on the Prime – her heart sunk:

*Cult of Cheshne resurfaced in Jashat. Powerful necromancers and blood-magi. Suspect at least six first-order wizards and four transvalent hierophants. Will advise further. Daunton.*

Mulissu groaned, and wondered if it was related to the nonsense that Mostin had involved himself in. She would keep all of her possessions on hand, in case a speedy exit from Fumaril proved necessary.

Jashat, after all, was only forty miles away.

She brooded briefly, and wondered whether relaying the information to Iua would be wise. He daughter was brilliant, but her judgment frequently poor.

Iua herself did not return until the early hours of the next morning. She was flushed from a number of encounters – some involving crossed blades, others not – and moderately inebriated.

Mulissu sighed. Parenting was not her strong suit. She chided Iua inexpertly and gestured, vaguely conscious that this might be the correct way to address a child.

Iua ignored her, and her eyes widened: she seemed to be looking at something behind Mulissu. The Elementalist's hackles rose, and she wheeled about, prepared to unleash a powerful necromancy.

*I see nothing*

The thought passed through Mulissu's mind a fraction of a second before she experienced an acute, stabbing agony, rapidly followed by a succession of further intense pains. Her eyes glazed over, and she glanced down to notice that around a foot of cold, slender steel was protruding from her stomach, and that blood was flowing freely from her. She felt Iua's blade withdraw from her, and as she collapsed and died, she idly wondered why her own daughter had slain her.

Thus passed Mulissu: counted among the greatest of evokers in Wyre's history, although she was not herself a native of that place. And this time, Mostin the Metagnostic experienced no feeling of foreboding prior to the danger in which the Savant found herself, no presentiment of her demise. Not even the faintest inkling of prescience remained to him now, and some time would pass before news of her death reached him. Mulissu, whom he had loved in his own, strange fashion.
Her spirit fled, and was dispersed upon the winds.

Iua screamed silently from within the prison which her body had become, and watched, helpless, as her hands began to rifle her mother's still-warm corpse for items beyond worth. She grabbed rings from Mulissu's fingers, ripped an amulet from her breast, and pulled the sapphire of mutable coruscations from its collar around her throat. She smiled wickedly as she delved into a glove of storing and felt the web of motes, and something else. She pulled forth a small lump of obsidian, shaped like a horse.

*How fortuitous*, the thought manifested with savage irony within Iua's mind, although it was not her own.

Iua, and her possessor – a demon named Surab – *plane shifted* to the Abyss upon a fantastic steed.

* * *

*Although Orthodoxy had boasted few magically potent priests in its heyday – and many had been slain during the war with Trempa – the heretical Irrenite fringe sheltered a number of competent thaumaturges.*

**Hell's hierarchy is, of course, immensely complex, and various devils exercise varying degrees of power in different areas. Governance is executed through Asmodeus, Astaroth, Baalzebul and Belial – amongst whom precedence is hotly contested. The Thirteen Great Antagonists are fallen seraphs who have no place in the day-to-day administration of Hell, and concern themselves entirely with the war against Heaven. Many scholars of diabolic politics insist that the arrangement is purposely tense and ambiguous – a dynamism in the hierarchy enforced by the Adversary to prevent stagnation.***

***Agalierept is the commander of Hell's second legion and Grand General of Hell. Among Hell's foremost soldiers, his cruelty and vindictiveness are legendary. The armoured cornugons who serve him are likewise renowned for their ruthless brutality.****

****After the Claviger's Injunction in Wyre, many wizards of more independent mind moved outside of the magically proscribed area. Of them, most found their way south to the Thalassine.*****

*****Mulissu's initial vocation – that of a priestess – had been quickly rejected. Jeshi is a Thalassine goddess of the winds, with a widespread but uninfluential following. The names *Jeshi* and *Jashat* are etymologically connected.******

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**POST 7: AFQITHAN: PROLOGUE – PART 2**

Post by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 11th July 2004, 07:45 PM

At least five infinities clashed in Afqithan. When forces collide in the metaphysical realm, it is only natural that this is reflected in our own.
Rhul's case had been delivered with such eloquence and such poignancy that all those who listened to him, excepting perhaps Jetheeg – the lamia cum hag who possessed neither a moral conscience nor artistic sensibilities – had been moved.

He had spoken of Sisperi: its clans, and history and traditions; its wide grasslands and virgin forests; its towns and villages; the customs and the temperament of its peoples. He had evoked scenes of soaring mountains riven with deep canyons, and sun shining on a rolling surf, and mists rising over cold, still lakes. His speech had possessed a natural rhythm which made all constructed meter seem crass and childish; his tone was mellifluous and enchanting.

And then he had spoken of death, and ruin, and the end of the world. Of the blight which consumed all things and turned them to filth and desolation. Of the razing of civilization, and the final extinction of sapience. Rhul's words had become a soft-spoken lament; there was no compromise in his description of the horror which had occurred, even until the bitter end. He had spoken of Mulhuk, and of Saes, and Lai, and the death of Hodh and other godlings besides. He had spoken of Ninit, and her wild, unquenchable fury.

Ortwin had sat silently, his head in his hands. Mostin had stared blankly. Bile and anger had arisen in Eadric's throat.

And then Rhul had begged for aid. Eadric had felt as though his soul had been cut in half.

* 

After he had left – and Rhul's message and entreaty had taken more than two hours to deliver – Eadric resumed his seat uncomfortably. He poured himself a large goblet of wine, and sat back in his chair. The fire in the hearth had dwindled to a dull glow, and moonlight illuminated the Great Hall through the windows high in its south wall. The servants – disturbed by the company which the Ahma chose to keep – had long since retired.

"You cannot waver now," Mostin groaned. "We are so close. How many other worlds could tell a similar tale?"

"The Wizard is right," Jetheeg scoffed. "Do not let your weakness and susceptibility to a well-spun story dictate your course of action in this. You have taken vows, and made assurances, Ahma. Would you add oathbreaking to your tally of crimes against your deity? The list gets longer every day, I hear." The innuendo was hardly subtle.

Eadric sighed. "How many has Nhura gathered?"

"A thousand Loquai knights – virtually all of those who were exiled. Some few sidhe. Compactees. More than a few slaadi may involve themselves."

"Slaadi?" Shomei gaped. "Is Nhura insane?" She furrowed her brow, and glanced at Mostin – who shrugged and scowled. Neither had foreseen the possibility.

"They are not waiting with her in Faerie or Shadow," Jetheeg snapped. "But several Anarchs have become aware of the situation. They have a vested interest, after all."
Realization crossed Mostin's face. "Heedless," he said.

Jetheeg nodded curtly.

Eadric swallowed. "Mostin, you've said many times that this will be no conventional war. That I need to think far beyond anything with which I am familiar. Do you have any idea how long this will take to resolve? Are we talking in terms of days? Weeks?"

Mostin laughed. "Eadric, if the situation in Afqithan is not decided within fifteen minutes, I will be surprised."

The Ahma nodded grimly. "Then I would ask you to issue a sending to Rhul: if I'm not in Sisperi in two days, it means I'm dead, and I'm not coming."

"You mean to go otherwise, then?"

"Yes."

Mostin turned to Soneillon, who had thus far only observed. "You have been conspicuously silent. I am surprised that you have had nothing to contribute. What of your own force? And what of Rhyxali, Soneillon? What is she sending?"

"Demons, dear Mostin. She is sending demons."

"How many?" He asked irritably.

"Rhyxali is not predisposed to act often," Soneillon smiled, "but when she does, she acts decisively. She is sending nearly all of them, Mostin."

Mostin's jaw dropped.

Koilimilou smiled.

"I smell a rat," Ortwin remarked.

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Mostin dreamed of devils.

Powerful devils. Terrible devils. One bore a chain with many barbed hooks which dripped a black venom; another had claws like scythes which clicked together as it flexed its fingers; a third wore a great hood, but Mostin knew that it was faceless beneath its cowl. The fourth devil was still an angel – a Virtue, of sorts. It was tall and beautiful, and wore a breastplate which had been forged before the beginning of time. Strength and power and wisdom were in its hand – but so were lust and greed and evil. It stood beneath a vast banner which depicted a meteor streaking through oblivion.

When he awoke, the details eluded him, and he was left with a vague feeling of dread. Dream had claimed his last precognition, and Mostin, who was no Dreamer, could not recall it.
Magic coursed again through Mostin's veins as he flew. Afqithan was wild, dark and potent.

This place, he thought. Out of a quintillion possible worlds, why had they chosen this one? What forces had conspired to make this time and place what it was? Mostin was no fatalist, but nor was he quite so arrogant to think that he had entirely mastered the cosmos.

He pondered whether Graz'zt would project himself to Afqithan, or whether he would choose to exercise restraint – the latter seemed more likely, according to Mostin's understanding of Graz'zt's paranoia. A combination of the terms silver cord and Heedless had sprung to the Alienist's mind – Graz'zt would not be safe from a vorpal sword, even if he was otherwise warded or fortified. Snip, and it would all be over. Even if Graz'zt knew a spell which specifically protected his cord from dangerous slaadi blades – entirely possible given his age and dedication to sorcery – then it was one less death impulse or desperate summons that he would be casting. And Graz'zt had no doubt considered the unlikely possibility that one of his enemies acquire the sword. Or if Ainhorr lost control...

Gods, Mostin thought. What happens if Ainhorr loses control of the sword? Who will he chop? What was the Sword's agenda?

Kostchtchie was already in Afqithan: a 'visiting dignitary' who, in terms of power, was more-or-less matched with Ainhorr – certainly as long as Heedless remained in the Balor's possession. Kostchtchie's entourage was hardly diplomatic, however – armoured fiendish giant huscarls and sorcerers, white wyrms, a winter-wight and countess bar-lgura. Except for the wight, they were, at present, situated some six hundred miles from their current position, near the fortress of Irknaan. But many could also move instantly across any distance, so it barely mattered. The undead monster was harrowing large tracts of forest with no apparent rhyme or reason – the Alienist wondered whether it was even vaguely reliable as an ally of the Demon Lord.

According to Jetheeg, who had received news from Nhura, Graz'zt had opened a number of portals – most likely of a limited duration than of permanent nature – between the planes. Afqithan was now linked directly with Azzagrat in at least two other locations besides Irknaan's fortress, and also with the Ice Waste – presumably in the vicinity of Kostchtchie's force. The exact whereabouts of the new gates were uncertain: this was problematic.

The Alienist knew that most of Soneillon's faction would arrive the same way: through a portal opened by the demoness from one of Throile's "wrinkles," and assumed that Rhyxali's force would be similarly deployed. The little that Mostin did know about Rhyxali included the importance of the marilith Viractuth within the Shadow Princess's camp. Viractuth was a powerful sorceress who served in the capacity of general and confidante. She would be capable of a magical feat which could transport an army.

Mostin fervently hoped that his quiescence of the spheres would not be anticipated. He cursed, because Nwm would have been an invaluable ally. He made a brief, unfelt prayer to any benign deities who might be listening that Shomei should not die today – she was one of the few people with the wit to understand him. And he adjusted his hat – a huge affair, resembling a mortar-board, made from crimson silk, and boasting two-hundred cloth-of-gold tassles.
They had made the decision to split into two groups. The first contained Shomei, her conjured minions, Eadric and the succubus Chaya – one of Soneillon's 'handmaidens.' Chaya had a penchant for powerful necromantic spells. The second trio – Ortwin, Koilimilou, and the Alienist himself – was less of a concern for Mostin. As long as Rhyxali was on their side, then Koilimilou was not a tangible threat. If Rhyxali were to become their enemy, however – not entirely impossible, given the whims of powerful demonesses – then Koilimilou would be a dangerous adversary, with considerable tactical information useful to the Princess. Prompt elimination of the sidhe-cambion would be necessary.

Chaya, however, was a completely unknown factor. She was wild, bloodthirsty and crazy – even for a demon, Mostin ruefully considered. She had been instructed by Soneillon to guard the Queen of Throile's current favourite – namely, Eadric – and to make her reservoir available to Shomei on demand. Chaya was less than pleased. But she feared Soneillon.

A third group would consist of Soneillon herself (she had elected to become personally involved), the balor Irzho (who, by Soneillon's magic, would be augmented to terrifying power), and Rimilin (won't it be delightful to see him again, Mostin thought caustically). Rimilin's craft had reportedly increased to the extent that Mostin wondered if he might be on the verge of transvalency, or even if he had already achieved it. Rimilin had mastered Irzho. How? Mostin thought. Irzho had a mind blanking ring. How does one master a mind blanked balor? The price for their involvement? For Irzho, Heedless – what balor wouldn't like a huge, intelligent anarchic vorpal sword? For Rimilin, sinister pacts struck with Soneillon, and possibly Rhyxali. Mostin shuddered. The direct sponsorship of a wizard of Rimilin's prestige by a demoness of Rhyxali's power would place him on a par with Shomei in terms of fiendish clout. And Rimilin lacked Shomei's – admittedly idiosyncratic – principles.

The Alienist smiled. Despite his loathing of the Acolyte of the Skin, it was not without a certain degree of pride that he recognized that Rimilin was part of one of the most formidable generation of spellcasters that Wyre had yet produced. Although, for a golden age of magic, it seems strangely dark and bleak.

Mostin, Shomei, Ortwin and Eadric were all telepathically bonded, magically bolstered, and smothered with various wards. The Alienist lamented Nwm's absence again: more would have been better. Mostin was charged up with reality maelstroms as well as various sonics, conjurations and auxiliary spells. Shomei was loaded with necromancies, enchantments and conjurations.

Their greatest assets, however, were two spells: a protective dweomer devised by Shomei, and an abjuration invoked by Soneillon herself prior to their arrival in Afqithan – Mostin had later learned that Rimilin, Irzho, Nhura and several others had been similarly warded by the Queen of Throile. They were virtually invulnerable to magic, and unless struck by multiple disjunctions, or unless Graz'zt himself were to come and target them with his superb dispelling, all were safe from an unfortunate evaporation of magical protections at the hands of other spellcasters. Mostin knew that the succubus Adyell was capable of bringing down their wards, and hoped that Soneillon was correct in her assertion that her former handmaiden would not be present.

The Alienist circled nervously, and glanced downwards towards Shomei. He sighed. She is glorious, he had to admit to himself.

The Infernalist was flanked by four pit fiends, conjured via planar bindings and
then subjected to the power of her Will, focused through her rod. And they were Belial's pit fiends – bound in deliberate defiance of the Lord of Hell's Fourth Circle. She was clad in her robe of stars, and while – as always – she bore her rod, a globe now hung from her belt: a sphere of transparent adamant from which Nufrut's head leered. The marilith had passed into Shomei's possession, as previously agreed with Mostin.

Eadric sat nearby upon Contundor, and both steed and rider appeared impassive. The celestial charger had acquired a pair of huge feathery wings, which caused Mostin to feel nauseous every time he saw them: Mostin was profoundly thankful that he and the Ahma were not in the same team. Next to Eadric, in dark antiparallel, the succubus Chaya waited with her mount – a foul-tempered cauchemar which champed restlessly. Mostin studied her briefly: the demoness was naked and scarred, almost bestial in appearance. She bore no weapon, and carried but a single item – a smoking black diamond the size of a fist which oozed necromantic power.

Somewhat removed, displaying his characteristic nonchalance, Ortwin laughed and twirled his scimitar confidently. Koilimilou, perched upon an ecalypse and surrounded by jariliths, ignored him. She seemed even more introspective than normal, and Mostin watched her nervously: was she privy to Rhyxali's plans (which were certain to be other than had been revealed)? Did she possess a measure of genuine affection for Ortwin? It seemed unlikely – neither demons nor sidhe were renowned for warmth in their relations. Could Ortwin be trusted, anyway?

Except for Eadric, we are a gruesome, conceited and selfish bunch. Perhaps he is the moral glue which binds the feys, sociopaths and fiends together.

The Alienist shrugged, and descended. His thoughts reached out to Shomei.

[Mostin]: My fingers itch! How much longer?
[Shomei]: Three minutes, by my reckoning.
[Mostin]: Aren't your bodyguards restless?
[Shomei]: Devils are notoriously patient.
[Mostin]: I am having reservations.
[Shomei]: Good. Apparently your psychosis has limits.
[Mostin]: I am dubious about the quiescence of the spheres. I like retaining the option of instantaneous retreat.
[Shomei]: Mostin...
[Mostin]: Don't worry. I still intend to cast it.
[Shomei]: You'd damn well better, Mostin. Quite a lot hinges upon it. Still, you may have been better contriving the spell with yourself as a mobile locus, rather than designating a static one.
[Mostin]: And lose the opportunity to invoke reality maelstroms? Not bloody likely.
[Shomei]: I suspect that you won't get the chance in any case – you need to physically remove yourself two miles from your casting point.
[Mostin] (Grins): I've already thought of that. I will summon a pseudodjinn. We will wind walk together.

Shomei laughed. "You are ingenious." Then her manner suddenly became serious. "If I should die, Mostin..."

[Mostin]: Do not start this again.
[Shomei]: There are two simulacra at my mansion...
[Mostin]: !
[Shomei]: Together, they comprise most of what I am.
[Mostin]: They are lumps of ice, Shomei.
[Shomei]: You will need to find a way to reify them.
[Mostin]: That is not possible.
[Shomei]: Nonsense. It has merely never been accomplished before. It will be a task commensurate with your ability.
[Mostin]: They lack a Self, Shomei.
[Shomei]: I didn't say it would be easy. One is of me as I was – before Nwm reincarnated me. The other is of me as I am now. (Ironically) They are called Sho and Mei. You will tell them apart by their hair colour.
[Mostin]: This is distasteful!
[Shomei]: It will be your magnum opus, Mostin. The last challenge I set you. I would not leave the world bereft of my acquired knowledge.
[Mostin]: You are more than the sum of your learning. I wish you'd said something about this before.
[Shomei]: Do all creatures have multiple pseudonatural analogues, Mostin? If so, I would start with that premise.
[Mostin]: (Astonishment).
[Shomei]: I have left each with two contradictory impulses: preserve thyself and transcend thyself. Hopefully, the seeds of dialectical consciousness have already been sown. They will aid you in your research – both are familiar with my library. Everything I have is yours, Mostin.
[Mostin]: (Utter amazement). Shomei…
[Shomei]: Sho possesses the key to my astral retreat. I have not used it in some time, for fear of assault. If the current crisis is resolved favorably, it should be safe again. And try to establish a second Triune: three is a good number for productive magical inquiry. Consider Rimilin…
[Mostin]: You cannot be serious!
[Shomei]: You are the most powerful living wizard in Wyre, Mostin. You have a responsibility to act as a check on him.
[Mostin]: That is the Claviger's purpose.
[Shomei]: The Claviger acts within its own circumscribed limits.
[Mostin]: Mulissu…
[Shomei] (Sadly): Look no more to Mulissu for aid.

[SONEILLON]: NOW

Shomei smiled, unrolled a scroll, and opened a teleportation circle to a location previously scried.

Beneath a screen, in a small glade within sight of both the steep tor upon which Irknaan's palace stood, and of Murmuur's diabolic tower, Mostin – together with Shomei and Koilimilou – began to invoke the quiescence of the spheres.

A thought flickered through Mostin's mind: Murmuur's tower is outside of the quiescence. Had it moved? He couldn't recall its exact previous location.

Mere seconds before the spell was completed, tens of thousands of shadow demons began to manifest as Viractuth – Rhyxall's lieutenant – folded a huge area of a distant Abyssal layer, and brought it into vibrational congruence with Afgithan; a massive gate opened to a demiplane abutting Throile, spewing forth Soneillon's horde; and Nhura and her knights and sorcerers – along with compactees and sidhe mercenaries – simultaneously translated en masse from the Plane of Shadow.

The keen-eyed spined devils who circled Murmuur's tower relayed the information to Azazel – their commander-in-chief. Hell's standard-bearer issued an immediate
telepathic command to Murmuur: *Open the gates.*


Azazel scowled, and his knights and captains quailed before him. He entered a brief, silent reverie, and *communed* with his master. He did not doubt that all contingencies had been anticipated.

[Azazel]: What is your command?
[.........]: We will not intervene yet: a measure of uncertainty still exists. Wait. Hold your position until instructed otherwise.
[Azazel]: Yes, Majesty.

*Mostin had originally assumed that Rimilin was Irzho's slave, rather than vice-versa.*

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**POST 8:**

Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 20th July 2004, 03:43 PM

Quote:

I had a question for Sepulchrave, though... I'm guessing you house ruled that Vorpal swords can sever a silver cord like a Githyanki silver sword? It looks like the gith may not be in your cosmology, for one thing (we've seen both the astral and limbo and no gith, though both are just a lot of wasted space anyway). Likewise I'm guessing that a simple mind blank won't protect against this, unlike a `yanki sword?

Yep. I've always played vorpal as being able to sever the silver cord of astrally projecting creatures. Keeps 'em on their toes. I haven't ruled out including the gith at some future stage (the advantage of having multiple true cosmologies), although the same could be said for any creature which hasn't made an appearance in the campaign.

*

On an unrelated but important note, if you haven't read this thread here then you really should.

Destan's story hour is quite superb, and he has recently published his campaign setting, *Valus*, which I've been lucky enough to sneak preview.

In his story hour, Ryan evokes a feeling which is unique and insightful: his characters are subtle and complex, his descriptions, evocative, and his narrative compelling. In *Valus*, Ryan's eye for detail in creating a self-consistent world is nothing short of inspirational. Many familiar tropes are given a new and
unexpected twist, and appear fresh to the jaded eye: this is the art of fine campaign milieu design.

**POST 9: AFQITHAN - PART 1**

Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 28th November 2004, 04:39 PM

Hi. Sorry for the delay - once I started pulling things together, I realized that finding a suitable place to leave off and actually *post* was difficult. I anticipate that there will be several more installments of "Afqithan" after this one - things were coming to a head, and the various disparate threads were beginning to resolve.

Notice in promising an update I did write "provisional plan," however. I covered my arse, just in case 😊

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**AFQITHAN - Part One**

"Mulissu is dead," Daunton the Diviner announced to the assembled wizards.*

His words were greeted by a variety of reactions: by Troap, a look of stunned disbelief; by Tozinak – in the form of a sylph – with tears and a dramatic posture; by Waide, a smug grimace which conveyed the words 'I told you so – it was inevitable.' Jalael and Idro exhibited calm insouciance. A dozen other mages – and several of these were formidable in their own right – showed expressions which ranged from anguish, through curiosity, to total ignorance of the reclusive Savant's identity.

"Thank-you, Daunton," Waide said with nasal condescension. "Although..."

"There is more," Daunton interrupted, shooting the transmuter a look of barely concealed contempt. Waide surpassed him in terms of power, but Daunton enjoyed the respect of the entire magical community and the friendship of several influential personages – including Prince Tagur – outside of it. "An artifact bestowed upon her by Jovol has been stolen, along with other powerful items."

"She and Mostin were feuding, I hear," Waide ventured.

"Waide!" Daunton snapped. "There will be no rumourmongering and innuendo."

"It is hardly an idle thought," Waide persisted. "Mostin's assault upon Griel outside of the Claviger's domain is well known. Which artifact do you speak of?" Waide licked his lips.

"It is called the *web of motes*. It is potent."

"I have never heard of it," Waide sniffed.
"Nor I," Jalael agreed. "What is its purpose?"

Daunton sighed. "Divination," he said.

Waide laughed openly. "I think we can discern the purpose of your insistence upon this meeting, Daunton: you desire this item. And try telling me now that Mostin has no part in this."

"I make no such claim," the Diviner said dismissively. "But neither do I make the assertion that Mostin murdered Mulissu: he did not. Her own daughter, Iua, slew her. The priestesses of Jeshi confirm as much."

"Matricide?" Jalael said drily. "This gets more interesting. Where is Iua now?"

"I do not know. I suspect she is mind blanked. I have tried to discern her whereabouts twice."

"An accomplice?" Troap asked.

"Or a device," Daunton nodded. "Naturally, you suspect the former, Waide, and you suspect that it is Mostin."

"It is not his style," Tozinak sobbed. "He would have killed her with much more panache. Was Iua under a compulsion?"

"Perhaps. Graz'zt certainly bore Mulissu a grudge. He may have dominated Iua, although it would have been a potent compound spell to circumvent the temple wards – especially from Azzagrat. But the Prince had already personally assailed the Savant in her demiplane: hence her retreat to the Prime."

Waide's jaw dropped. "And she survived?"

Daunton nodded. "She was well prepared. Furthermore, Mostin anticipated the attack and provided a safe exit for her."

Waide swallowed nervously. Once he and the Alienist had been peers. But now he realized – and the knowledge caused him to grit his teeth in envy and frustration – that Mostin had utterly surpassed him.

"Had she other enemies?" Troap asked.

"Not to my knowledge – she carefully avoided making them, as a rule."

"How kind of Mostin to lend her one of his," Waide said snidely.

"It was Mulissu who invoked the cascade at Khu," Troap said drily, "not Mostin. I think that is enough to warrant the enmity of any number of powerful fiends."

"It was no doubt in response to Mostin's nagging," Waide replied.

"Because Mulissu was so weak-willed and impressionable, and Mostin so likes the company of celestials," Troap retorted acidly. The Goblin turned to Daunton. "Do you think the emerging Cheshne faction may have had a hand? They are in geographical proximity."

"The possibility had occurred to me," Daunton nodded. "Although a motive is harder to fathom."
"Mulissu could have crystallized magical resistance in Wyrish and Thalassine spellcasters, if it became required," Jalael suggested. "It may have been a preemptive strike."

"The Cult of Cheshne has never exhibited an historical desire to dominate in that manner," Daunton sighed. "Besides, why wait to remove her until after their arrival? And I am reluctant to pin every unfortunate event which transpires upon them – we do not know their agenda."

"Not good," Waide grumbled. "We know that much, at least. The Claviger may prove to be an aegis which we did not anticipate. Although maybe Jovol did."

"Jovol was not omniscient," Jalael grunted. "And his legacy has already stymied magical activity. It may yet deny us the ability to muster an effective defense."

"You seem fixated on some impending conflict, Jalael," Daunton scowled. "If it occurs – and I doubt that – it will likely be religious in nature, and will not concern us."

"If the ugras are invoked, I doubt they will make the distinction," Jalael smiled. "But the question remains: why now?"

"Nothing becomes," Daunton said grimly. "We cannot know why or where. Which brings me to events in the demiplane of Afqithan. I trust that we are all aware of what passes there?"

Jalael groaned. Tozinak fidgeted nervously. The other wizards evinced either blank stares or, in the case of Waide – ever reluctant to reveal his ignorance in such matters – an expression which could be interpreted as either inquisitiveness, or quiet understanding.

Daunton sighed. "I will tell you what I know – which is all that Mulissu related to me. Her information was, I don't doubt, incomplete. And I think that even those who are embroiled in its troubles have only a partial perspective."

"Mostin," Tozinak sighed.

"And Shomei," Daunton nodded. "But one could probably have inferred as much by their conspicuous absence from this meeting."

"The great luminaries of our magical brotherhood," Waide said snidely. "Do they even know of what has happened?"

"I issued a sending to Shomei," Daunton replied, "and instructed her to inform Mostin." The Diviner then proceeded to relate the tale of the Ahma, Graz'zt, Soneillon, and Afqithan.

After Daunton had completed his account, Tozinak – overly moved by the story – punctuated the silence with a long sigh.

"And the web of motes?" The Illusionist asked. "What exactly does it do?"

"It illuminates connections," Daunton explained. "Between people, places, thoughts, dreams, futures, and truths. It is the most potent object I have ever heard of."
"If Mulissu wasn't wildly exaggerating its power," Waide quipped.

"Why Mulissu?" The Necromancer Creq inquired. "She wasn't even Wyrish. Why did Jovol choose her?"

"Perhaps he liked her," Daunton snapped. He relaxed before continuing. "She was not alone. Shomei received something, as did Mostin, and Hlioth, and you, Waide. And you, Tozinak. All of those who took part in binding the Enforcer."

"And you?" Waide asked archly.

"A minor curio," Daunton answered. "I was the junior member, if you recall. Which, incidentally, leads me to another point: Jovol dwelt in the Thrumohars for fifty years, but where was his sanctum? There must still be a cache somewhere; a repository of knowledge and power."

"I have pondered this question," Jalael admitted. "And what else, Daunton. Have you heard what I have? I am apt to converse with demons, but I wonder what your sources tell you?"

"Rimilin," he nodded.

**

Nwm's eyes flashed open. He had been sitting beneath a fir-tree, listening to the soft pad, pad of an arctic fox, when he heard its pattern change in response to a new stimulus. Something else was close by. He waited.

The Druid inhaled sharply as she approached. She was beautiful. And curiously familiar.

She sat down in the snow before him, unabashed by her own nakedness, and smiled. Her skin possessed a soft, silver sheen, and her eyes – no longer demonic – were green within green.

"This is an unexpected pleasure," Nwm said wryly. "I should warn you: if my conversation seems stilted or awkward, it's because I haven't spoken for several months."

"Your social ineptitude was never much of a concern," she laughed.

"Can I assume that Eadric was successful in his efforts?" Nwm asked.

"Not yet." She raised an eyebrow.

"I am unsure as to whether I should worship you or not."

"That is your choice. It makes no difference to me. What were you doing?"

"You know, Nehael, I don't really know. Waiting for you, I suppose. I don't imagine that there's a rational explanation for your presence here?"

"Certainly not."

"And what happens now?" Nwm asked.
Nehael laughed. "I asked that very question myself."

"And what answer did you receive?"

"A Viridity," she replied.

"That is suitably vague," Nwm sighed.

"Strange," Nehael said drily. "I had the same reaction. There is something that I would like to share with you, Nwm. A place."

"What sort of place?" Nwm asked suspiciously.


Nwm felt a frisson of excitement as she spoke, but his voice was sceptical. "In my experience, nowhere is unassailable."

"Prepare to change your mind," Nehael smiled. She held out her hand, and he took it. Stretching forwards, she lightly touched the bark of the tree.

"Step into the tree," she said.

They dissolved into an ocean of jade, emerald and celadon. Another Tree, which was the same tree – it was, in fact, all trees – appeared.

* 

Nwm quaked. His mind screamed in fear, and soared in awe. His breath became rapid and shallow. He was dumbstruck, unwilling to believe, but knowing that it was there.

"Eadric's forebears would have referred to it as the Tree-ludja," Nehael said softly, touching the Tree. "Yours would have called it Derv.**"

"What have you become?" Nwm asked her.

"You know what I am," Nehael smiled. "I am merely Nehael. But now the way is open. You first showed it to me. She remembers. That is why it is Tree, and not Lake or Storm."

Nwm swallowed. She alluded to things which made him feel distinctly uncomfortable. Gingerly, he reached out.

Tree, he knew.

He looked out from the blackthorn in the courtyard of Kyrtill's Burh; from a huge banyan in Afqithan, around which demons clashed furiously; from a hornbeam with white bark and silver leaves, beneath which a goddess meditated; from a viper-tree amid a grove in Azzagrat, where acid rained and fire burned; from a lonely olive-tree on a deserted island in Pandicule; from a celestial oak which rose, impossibly perfect, upon the Blessed Plain.

Nwm withdrew his perception, and looked at Nehael.

"How?" He asked.
"This Way, she showed him.***

"Is there more?"

"Oh, yes. There is much more."

"But to look into Hell? Oronthon's Heaven? These places are not..."

"Of the Green?" She offered. "I think you need to revise your understanding, Nwm. The Viridity is a transcendental principle: it does not care for conventional labels. Green just became a lot bigger."

"Who was the goddess beneath the tree?" He asked.

"Her name is Lai," Nehael smiled. "You will meet her in due course."

"What is her rôle?" He asked dubiously.

"She is a student. Of magic. Of nature. Her world is all but dead. You will like her – which is all to the good."

Nwm gave a quizzical look.

"A student needs a teacher," Nehael explained, "and a goddess needs a priest."

**

The quiescence of the spheres began exactly five seconds after the Eye of Cheshne – a large, reddish star linked with ill-fortune, miscarriage and death – anticulminated at the necropolis of Khu in the World of Men.

Thus, when Soneillon and her host arrived in Afqithan – together with the Balor Irzho and the demonist Rimilin of the Skin – a mortal would have breathed but once, before she waxed to her full power again. Her first act – before even Ainhorr had issued the telepathic command for his minions to descend upon the hordes of interlopers – was to utter an incantation which caused a shimmering wave to issue from her. Soneillon poured forth the void, transforming it, and buoying those hundreds who were closest to her with an ecstasy of negation.

The palrethees, succubi and other monsters – the half-fiendish lamias, medusae, harpies and hags which swarmed in the sky around the Demoness – greedily drank of the essence which their mistress lavished on them. Irzho and Rimilin – already bloated with Soneillon's unlight – swelled yet further. Koilimilou inhaled sharply as power coursed through her and her Will was sharpened and intensified, before she abruptly disappeared to sight. And Eadric watched in trepidation as Chaya – the succubus appointed to him – threw back her head and exulted.

As the impulse washed through the Ahma, visions of unbeing passed through his tortured consciousness. A sweet, lingering taste, heavy with the promise of annihilation. He glanced at Shomei's devils, borne upon the invocation's wind and magnified. They terrified him. He terrified himself. And in his heart, he knew he was as potent as he had ever before been – save perhaps when he had fought at the Nund, where Grace had descended upon him. Now the darkest wards protected him. Blasphemy sustained him.
He drew his sword. At the limit of his vision, issuing in streams from Irknaan's citadel – unable to manifest closer, within the quiescence of the spheres – Ainhorr's demons were beginning to appear in ghastly flights and packs.

_Fifteen minutes_, Mostin had said. It would all be resolved within fifteen minutes. The mental clamour of the demons was already threatening to overwhelm him.

Mostin vanished. A _bound_ pseudodjinn – a grotesque parody which made Eadric grateful that Iua was _not_ there – bore the Alienist on a course which, for the sake of convenience, they had arbitrarily determined as 'west': in Afqithan, there were no cardinal directions. He sped towards a second materializing force – Kostchtchie, mounted upon his wyrm, together with his bar-lgura. Mostin purposed to eliminate the demon as quickly as possible. Ortwin and Koilimilou were with him. The three were _invisible_ and _mind blanked_.

The Alienist scowled. The air was rapidly becoming thick with varrangoin above Kostchtchie, pouring through a _teleportation circle_: they were a group whose presence he had not foreseen. Nhura and Jetheeg, together with hundreds of Loquai aristocrats and sidhe mercenaries mounted upon umbral griffons, moved towards the Demon Lord. A vast, black cloud of shadow demons followed them. The Alienist, Satyr and Cambion swiftly overtook them all.

_[Ortwin]: How long, before we intercept?_

_[Mostin]: Ninety seconds, give or take. We need to be patient. We must stay _wind walking_ until we reach the boundary of the _quiescence_. I will be far more effective at the interface._

Momentarily, he doubted. He feared that by the time they reached the invocation's limit, most of Kostchtchie's force would already be _inside_ the _dimensionally locked_ area – many of the leaping demons were pressing forwards restlessly. More _teleportation circles_ were opening outside of the _quiescence_. Abyssal giants – some riding white dragons – were arriving from wherever Kostchtchie's main force had been concentrated.

Mostin cursed. One of the sorcerers in the Demon Lord's train must possess an extremely potent device – there was no way that the spell could have been repeatedly cast in such short time. Doubtless, one of the varrangoin: they were _not_ natural _teleporters_, and moving large numbers of them effectively would otherwise prove problematic.

As they sped onwards, the Alienist grinned: Kostchtchie himself was not moving inside the _quiescence_. Evidently, the Ice Lord was reluctant to surrender his ability to instantly retreat.

_[Mostin]: We must achieve the perfect position before the _wind walk_ is dismissed. We should strike the Demon with everything we've got._

_[Koilimilou]: Watch for the dragons. Their noses will catch us, even if their eyes can't._
of the Daunton himself (diviner 10/loremaster 5), an accomplished facilitator whose impartiality was renowned; Waide (transmuter 17), generally conceded to be a supercilious pedant; Tozinak (illusionist 18), often hysterical, and in a semi-volitional state of morphic flux; the green hag Jalael (evoker 13/archmage 2), known to have devoured her lovers on several occasions; Sarpin (illusionist 5/shadow adept 7), a Shade, and Jalael's current concubine; the goblin Troap (enchanter 14); Gholu (generalist 8/loremaster 4), a pompous eunuch and hoarder of useless magical curios; Muthollo (abjurer 12), a Bedeshi newcomer regarded with suspicion by the other wizards; Tullifer (transmuter 7/master alchemist 5), who evidenced a vulgar interest in commerce; the sprite Shuk (illusionist 10); Droom of Morne (evoker 12), who stood in minor contempt of the Injunction, and had had his lips magically sealed for one year; Creq (necromancer 11), who helped to perpetrate the worst stereotypes regarding his magical lineage; Idro (generalist 12), intellectually stunted and now verging on senile; Wigdryt (transmuter 9/plane shifter4) – a smoke mephit who had recently reappeared from a thirty-year retreat; and Poylu (enchantress 11), who dwelt in a well near the town of Banda in Ialde.

Ehieu (sorcerer 10/air savant 8), introduced to Daunton by Mulissu, was also present – although he found the proceedings tedious at best.

**The Tree probably deserves some explanation. Before the rise of Oronthonianism, the migrant Borchian tribes (from whom Eadric and his kin are descended) venerated nature spirits of various kinds, manifestations of different aspects of the Hahio ("Interwoven [Green]"). These facets ("ludjas") were numerous and diverse, and never fully systematized: for example there was a ludja for Stream, for Valley, for Gorse-bush, for Snow etc. etc. Larger ludjas also subsumed smaller ones – e.g. the Stone-ludja superseded the Pebble-ludja, the Boulder-ludja etc. The three principal ludjas were considered to be Stone, Water and Tree.

Derv is a Crixi word meaning "[prototypical or archetypal] Tree." There was considerable overlap and syncretism between early beliefs in the peoples who predated the foundation of Wyre, and certain concepts were held to be parallels of one another – Derv and the Tree-ludja possessed an obvious identity. For Derv to be an actual tree however was almost nonsensical from Nwm's perspective: it is like being shown the Platonic ideal of "Tree", manifested and fully real.

***Several new spells would be revealed to Nwm by Nehael.

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**POST 10: AFQITHAN - PART 2**

Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 28th November 2004, 04:46 PM

"Show me more," Hlioth, the Green Witch demanded.

Teppu laughed, and stroked the ash-tree which they stood next to. It seemed to croon lovingly to him. "It will involve a certain loss of individuality," he smiled. "Are you jealous of your discrete existence? Your autonomy of perception and Will?"

"Certainly not," Hlioth answered. "If I hadn't determined all arguments regarding Will to be specious, then I would never have abandoned wizardry."
"You should blend all elements into a harmonious whole," Teppu said. "And your song will be different to mine. Give me your hand."

The Green Witch complied, and Teppu pressed it to the trunk of the tree. Within moments, a cascade of new impressions flooded into her mind. Multiple realities became apparent. Her breathing became rapid and shallow.

"How many layers are there visible?" She gasped.

"They cannot be measured in numbers," Teppu laughed.

"I can see Faerie."

"I am surprised that you can distinguish it so readily. Although it is less sleepy than many of the others."

"Perhaps I am predisposed to easily apprehend it. One other seems close – within reach. What is it?"

"It is the half-hidden world of the Tunthi. Were you to go to Tun Hartha, you would see it more clearly. It is closer there than here."

"It has recently stirred?" Hlioth asked.

"Twice. Great spirits were awakened. Echoes remain within the visible Green. It was roused from its torpor near Hrim Eorth, then again at Groba."

"I recall hearing of Hrim Eorth – the river became a dragon. But Groba?"

"Groba is more ancient than most know. Mesikämmi woke its genius loci."

"To what purpose?"

Teppu smiled. "To swallow a sword, and keep it safe."

Hlioth's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "You have been following her activities?"

"Amongst others," his eyes twinkled.

"Which others?"

"Nehael. Nwm."

"What does the demoness have to do with this?"

Teppu threw back his head, and laughed. "Nehael is no demoness, nor was she ever one. The past is not immutable."

Hlioth scowled. "What are you plotting, Teppu?"

"I do not plot," Teppu replied sincerely. "I merely act according to need. There is a splinter of reality which must be realigned: purged of its umbral infestation. In order to accomplish this, I will need the concerted effort of several selfless individuals."

"I think perhaps you might explain a little more."
"I mean to eradicate the seeds of taint from the demiplane of Afqithan: it will be the first manifestation of the burgeoning Viridity. Faerie must reclaim its own."

Hlioth shrugged. "What is Afqithan, and why is it significant?"

Teppu sighed. "Your knowledge of current events is lamentably scant, Hlioth. This does not surprise me, but you cannot continue to view Green within the limited terms that you have previously described to yourself. Afqithan is a finite reality where demons, devils, tainted sidhe and various other monsters struggle to assert themselves: Oronthon's Ahma is embroiled in its troubles, as is the creature Soneillon – a demoness who has transcended her ontic state."

"I am dubious of your ability to manage such an act."

"It will be simple: trust me."

"And how do you propose to accomplish this?"

"Why," Teppu laughed, "with magic, of course."

"You are Jovol," Hlioth sighed. "And Fillein."

"Yes – and no," Teppu replied.

"I understand neither you nor your motives," Hlioth groaned.

"Nor do I," Teppu admitted.

**

Eadric and Shomei rode in the blazing trail carved by Irzho through the purple skies of Afqithan. Before them, Rimilin – whose grotesque, sexless form rippled black and oily – and Soneillon – into whom all light vanished – flew within the great fume of smoke and fire which emanated from the balor. Contundor was buffeted by the gale which issued from the pit fiends – invisible but the source of a palpable malice – who flanked them both. Demons, half-fiends and evil monsters of every conceivable hue surrounded them, jostling for space.

Ahead of the Ahma, Ainhorr's forces filled immensity, blackening the skies, their numbers still swelling as demons from across Afqithan heard the summons, and teleported to the unlocked areas beyond the quiescence of the spheres. From the towers of Irknaan's palace they gushed forth in a never-ending torrent, and below the flights of chasme, succubi and palrethees, the ground and treetops seethed with bar-lgura. Eadric scowled as the standards of the Mariliths in thrall to Ainhorr were being raised beyond the spell's limit. More demons flocked around them, and those Loquai who had thrown in their lot with Graz'zt.

[Eadric]: How so quickly?

[Shomei] (ruefully): I suspect that Ainhorr has my stone of sendings. He issues a command to a subordinate, they instantly relay the message to their subordinates, and within a few minutes nearly every demon in Afqithan will be here. Redeployment is seldom a problem for fiends.

[Eadric]: And Graz'zt?
[Shomei]: I don't doubt that he was the *first* to know.

[Eadric]: We should climb. How long will the *invisibility* last?

[Shomei]: We have time yet, but avoid any conflict for the moment. We need to retain the element of surprise for as long as possible. We must find Ainhorr.

[Eadric]: Within the palace.

[Shomei]: Doubtless. He will not commit himself personally yet. You will also notice that no Nalfeshnees have appeared – they remain close by their master. There were thirty, at last count.

[Eadric]: Thirty is too many, Shomei.

[Shomei]: It is not. Just watch out for the sword.

[Eadric] (pointing with his mind): What is that? You didn't mention a dragon. I thought Mostin got the dragons.

A grotesque shape, the wings of which beat slowly and rhythmically, was moving through the demons of Ainhorr's force towards them.

[Shomei]: That is Ilistet's Steed. Graz'zt's herald.

[Eadric]: His *herald*? Is he here himself?

[Shomei]: Not according to Mostin.

As if to punctuate the realization, a long, sonorous blast issued from Ilistet's horn, causing the ancient, twisted trees to shake, and the *Ahma*'s chest cavity to resonate.

Eadric, Chaya, Shomei and her quartet of devils peeled away from the main spearhead of demons, and began to climb rapidly. They were not alone: other fiends from both factions were attempting to assume positions which offered a higher vantage point.

*Climb*, he urged his mount.

Within one minute, they had reached nearly two thousand feet. Still, they needed to climb – flights of succubi and chasme, issuing from the tallest of the towers, had already reached that altitude. Eadric glanced downward and ahead of himself, and watched in fascination as Irzho ploughed into a mob of *invisible* nycadaemons which slowly revealed themselves to his sight.

**

[Mostin]: We must finish him as quickly as possible. His focus lies upon Nhura, at present, although no doubt the probability of *invisible, mind-blanked* assailants has occurred to him. I'm hoping that the *wind-walking* hasn't. We have a chance, here: it is the nature of demonic enthusiasm for a cause to crumple if the Lord or Prince who binds them – in this case Kostchtchie – is eliminated. It's all personality.
[Ortwin] (Drily): No doubt this is about us preventing him reaching you.

[Mostin]: In a nutshell, yes. The Djinn will remain nearby, wind-walking, in case you need to make a quick exit.

[Ortwin]: "You" need to make a quick exit? What's with the "You"? How will you escape?

[Mostin]: I will teleport. We will be outside of the quiescence.

[Ortwin]: So we're relying on some bitter, reluctant pseudoelemental?

[Mostin]: I have offered it suitable inducements. Do not be concerned.

[Ortwin]: Gods, Mostin. It's not just Kostchtchie. It's the dragon. And the other demons. And the other dragons. And that thing.

Mostin peered ahead. Close by the Demon Lord, shunned by demons but around whom fiendish giants grouped clumsily, a gaunt figure stood. It was clearly visible between the warriors' legs: the trio were closing rapidly, now.

[Mostin]: Sh*t. The winterwight. It's not supposed to be here.

[Ortwin]: Feeling nervous yet?

[Mostin]: You may have a point. Keep flying.

Varrangoin were all about them – although oblivious to their presence - when they materialized outside the quiescence. Hovering five hundred feet from the limit of the locked area, Mostin invoked a reality maelstrom. It was centered around Kostchtchie, the wight, and the teleportation circles. The dimensional tempest raged incoherently, stretching away from the quiescence in a sphere from which a section had been cut: along the interface between the two spells, a null-space suffused with paradoxical magical energy crackled. For a fraction of a second, Mostin became visible before hiding himself again with another spell.

[Ortwin] (Grinning): That's more like it.

[Mostin]: Brace yourself.

The magical response to the Alienist's assault was immediate and would have overwhelmed them all, had it not been for Soneillon's ward. Horrid wiltings, fireballs, a meteor swarm and numerous sonics blasted into them. The djinn was instantly vaporized, and Mostin's brief appearance had been sufficient to make him the target of three attempted disintegrations and numerous enervations. Rager varrangoin were all about him, attempting to rend his invisible form.

Centered on himself this time, as yet more spells struck them ineffectually, Mostin invoked a second reality maelstrom, content that their own wards would prevent their succumbing to it. This time, the Alienist remained invisible.

Ortwin swallowed as he stood poised on the verge of another reality. Mostin cackled, looking through the rent in space: a rift into Limbo.

[Mostin] (Madly): We're safe here.
[Ortwin]: Are you quite nuts?

Flying through the dimensional storm – and through hundreds of varrangoin being pulled helplessly to their fate – a huge white dragon powered its way purposefully towards them. It bore an ugly, squat, bandy-legged demon brandishing a great hammer.

Clinging to the flank of the dragon, of whose presence the wyrm seemed entirely oblivious, an arcanist varrangoin clung, drooling like a dog. It stretched out its hand, and delivered an empowered sonic meteor swarm to them.

**Bad**, Mostin thought, as several creatures nearby were disintegrated by the sound. The tassles on his hat swayed slightly. Two more dragons appeared behind the first: mounted upon each were giants wielding enormous axes.

Abruptly, the reality maelstrom vanished, struck by a greater dispelling. From the dragon’s jaws a terrible cold washed over them, numbing them despite their wards.

Koilimilou, buoyant with Soneillon's power, retaliated with a soundless gaze. Black fire coursed over the wyrm, and it bellowed in agony for a second, before silently vanishing in a cloud of dark ash. The varrangoin sorcerer took to the air with its own wings, but Kostchtchie himself began to tumble towards the ground.

[Ortwin] (Gaping): What the...?

[Mostin]: Kostchtchie can't fly.

[Ortwin]: (Hysterical laughter).

But in response to its master's telepathic command, one of the other dragons wheeled about and its rider climbed from his harness, and carelessly launched himself into the air.

Mostin anticipated that Kostchtchie would attempt to teleport into the vacant saddle. He opened a gate.

Koilimilou – a sidhe-cambion seldom prone to uncontrollable outbursts – screamed. The pseudonatural Horror – simultaneously both a daemon, and a writhing thing possessed of appendages with an unknown purpose – slid through the portal.

[Symbol] = Faces.

[Mostin] (Pointing mentally at Kostchtchie): His face (and then at the dragons), their faces.

With a gusto which surprised Mostin, the Horror launched itself from the gate towards their enemies.

There had to be a catch, Mostin knew. There was always a catch. It was never that easy.

**
The demon Surab, together with his host – a half-mortal named Iua – rode upon an obsidian steed across a blasted Abyssal landscape. A great, flat, plain – riven by yawning chasms which led to the domains of a thousand different demonic magnates – stretched as far as the eye could see. Surab relaxed into his new form – young, athletic, deadlier with the blade than any of the succubi mercenaries who served Graz'zt. He might keep her for a while – she seemed quiescent enough.

Through her eyes, he scanned the terrain ahead of him, eagerly seeking a familiar portal to Azzagrat where, he knew, its Lord would shower him with favour for his success in eliminating the Savant. Although the plan had been swiftly devised, it had been flawless in its execution. Pure simplicity.

Surab congratulated himself upon his ingenuity.

After riding hard for around an hour, the Demon nudged his steed towards a pit filled with lurid green flames, entered it, and, within seconds, emerged from a gate oven in the midst of Zelatar.

The scene which greeted him was violent, chaotic, brutal and filled with seething hatred. In that regard, Azzagrat was entirely normal.

What marked the Triple Realm as changed, however, was the nature of many of the creatures present. A frenzied pack of Abyssal ghouls were feeding nearby, and a cadre of death knights – mounted upon cauchemars – thundered past with some dire purpose.

Because, acutely conscious of Graz'zt's denuded power and overextended forces, and perceiving the chink in his usually impenetrable armour, Prince Orcus – acting on the gentle promptings of Rhyxali – had determined to invest Azzagrat and test his rival's defenses with a lightning-quick assault.

Surab panicked. The Argent palace, under normal circumstances visible from all parts of Zelatar, had vanished: the demon guessed that Graz'zt had obscured it with a spell.

Commanding his steed to plane shift, Surab, his host and his mount vanished. Any forsaken realm between Hell and the Abyss was preferable to Azzagrat at that moment.

Upon his throne, Graz'zt himself reflected. The purpose of the embassy delivered by Titivilus now seemed clear to him: the Nameless Adversary had, no doubt, known of the impending situation, and chosen to maintain the existing balance of Abyssal politics by reinforcing the Prince's armies in Afqithan. It had to be Afqithan: a diabolic presence in the Abyss would have caused outrage among the other Princes. Afqithan, because of the concentration of Graz'zt's force there; because that was where the Ahma had determined to start the war; because to hold Afqithan was yet another opportunity to defy the will of Oronthon. Afqithan had become an unlikely trophy in the Great Game. New impulses were revealing themselves.

Graz'zt spat venom, and cursed. He knew he would have been overwhelmed in Afqithan. He needed the devils: in order to secure Azzagrat he was being forced to withdraw from dozens of worlds – including Yutuf, Tirche, Sisperi and Saraf – and redeploy tens of thousands of demons. And now he doubted that he held Throile: the sweet prize dearly bought with the life of one of his favourite
generals. And bitterest of all, he realized that, despite all appearances to the contrary, he himself was *still* the pawn of the one who had sparked the Great Revolt.