POST 23:

Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 15th April 2009, 02:51 AM

Quote:
Hey Sep, just wondering, is the campaign still running?

This campaign may never end. Sporadic e-mails keep it going, even if they're just vague ideas or declarations of intent. I'm at least 3 years behind in updates.

POST 24: VISUIT

Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 17th April 2009, 04:12 AM

The warm spring sun, filtered through the canopy of the forest, lent a greenish hue to the still air. Nehael smiled as she approached.

Behind the manse, above a small stream which gurgled enthusiastically, a figure lounged in a wicker hammock suspended between two young birch trees, chewing thoughtfully on a long blade of cooch-grass. He wore one of Mostin's favorite hats: an ochre felt, sporting a wide brim, and suitable for lazy afternoons.

Through many perceptions, the goddess apprehended him in a thousand guises: a fey; a mortal youth; an emperor, resplendent and dreadful; incandescence – a sliver of the Sun; the Will to Become. Here was the great Antinomos; the Nameless Fiend, exempt from the Law of Oronthon. Space and time warped in his vicinity: he was a singularity around whom cosmoii turned. Still, his totality eluded her. Deceiver.

The Adversary opened an eye as she drew closer. "You were never Nehael. What are you?" He asked, half-amused.

Nehael tilted her head. "Am I so opaque to you?"

"Oh, yes," he answered.

"There is much I might show you," Nehael suggested.

"You are empowered to realize the full potential of the urn?"

"Yes," Nehael replied.
"I suspected as much."

"Thank-you for letting Rintrah pass," Nehael nodded politely. "Will you trust me?"

"Let me think about it," the Adversary replied. He pulled Mostin's hat down over his eyes.

"Do you fear me?" Nehael inquired directly.

The Adversary gave a shrug. "Perhaps. I haven't yet decided as to whether I ought, or no."

"I should like to offer some advice," Nehael smiled.

"Feel free," the Adversary smiled drowsily.

"Read me. I am open to you."

"I cannot. That is my dilemma. But thank-you for your consideration."

"You cannot?"

"Humility becomes you, Who-Were-Never-Nehael. As does your genuine lack of guile. The Tree weaves a net around you so subtle that even you can't perceive it."

"And you can?"

"No," the Nameless Fiend sighed. "But I can infer it. I am in Nizkur. I have no power here, save by your grace. Or that of the Tree. Or Uedii. The puzzle intriguces me: I am an inquisitive sort."

"Why would you reveal these things to me? They diminish you and empower me. That is contrary to your nature."

"My Nature – normally my preferred topic of discussion – is of no consequence in this matter. Because I am not your Adversary. Do you doubt your invulnerability here?"

"I had not, until you asked me that very question," Nehael admitted.

"Touché," the Adversary tipped the brim of Mostin's hat. "Observe."

Without warning, he struck her with enough power to raze a continent.

Nehael merely witnessed him scattering a handful of acorns.

"What of the Claviger?" She asked.

"I'm wholly ignorant," the Adversary sighed.

"I cannot believe anything you say."

"Well, naturally," the Adversary smiled. "And there's the great irony, of course."

"Decide what you want to do," Nehael turned and walked away.
"Think of a name for me," he called after her. "Maybe I'll like it."

**

Nwm's interdiction, as Mostin dubbed the spell – although the Preceptor himself had not thought to name it – was a compound ward which excluded certain creatures of the unnatural order from proximity to the Sela. It was less comprehensive than Nwm would have secretly preferred, but – given that the bulk of the power required to evoke it was derived from Temple Adepts and Flamines – it would have been less than gracious of Nwm to exclude celestials from its zone of effect.

Nwm refused to relax the primary ward to allow the nascent devils of the Dark Choir access, regardless of their professed loyalty. This vexed many of the Irrenites present, who entertained notions of discourse with the fallen celestials.

"I'll not have them within a league of me. Nor will you unless you think that you're immune to subterfuge."

Nwm had a point, Eadric conceded.

The interdiction was quickly followed by a Nwm's mantle which settled upon those marching south – necromancies would henceforth prove ineffective against the Wyrish forces – and a Nwm's quickening which bestowed miraculous regenerative powers.

The primary ward moved as Wyre's armies moved, encapsulating an oblate hemisphere some six miles in diameter, and invisible to mortal perception. It was potent, but demanded a renewal at dawn every day: a substantial investment of time, and an effort of magic to effect; the mantle and quickening required less frequent reinforcement. Although bolstered to withstand disjunctions, to contrive a superb dispelling of sufficient magnitude to counter the interdiction was certainly within the ability of the Cheshnite leadership, were one or more of them to set their mind to it.

Nwm's concerns were justified, and Anumid initially approached Idyam with the task of devising a spell for such a purpose. The demilich – feeling such a chore was beneath him – ignored the request and continued his necromancies. Idyam felt in no hurry. Malign spirits attended him now: deathshriekers spawned by the horrors visited upon Jashat. Nwm's ward could not be used offensively; they would effectively need to cut a swathe forward for it at some point.

Choach accepted Anumid's offer, although with a counterbid for two hundred which made the Mouthpiece glower. Still, resources were plentiful: all of the Anantam were now able to act without fear of retaliation from the Claviger. Anumid felt pressure from the increasingly frenzied politicking of certain cliques within the cabals. It was only a matter of time before the assassinations began in earnest.

For four hundred, Choach offered to eliminate Fumaril's defense as well.

"How quickly can the spell be ready?"

"In twelve hours."
"I will give a provisional yes," Anumid grimaced.

The Mouthpiece subsequently gave thought to assailing Fumaril. Although the host which had set forth with Dhatri was immense, the chambers below the Temple of Cheshne were far from empty; Naatha and Guho – otherwise uncommitted – might be persuaded to undertake the magical leaguer of Fumaril if offered sufficient inducements.

The balance of power between the greatest of the Cheshnite immortals and the cabals was beginning to shift, Anumid observed. He found himself thankful that his own position until that point had been one of reserve; over-caution as Yeshe had preferred it.

*

Yeshe anointed herself with blood beside her pavillion and prepared to commune. Something was evading her notice, and she was determined to find out what.

Her divinations were interrupted by Visuit.

"We strike immediately. My instinct tells me the time is now," the Butcher growled.

"We must bring down the ward first," Yeshe retorted.

Dreadful runes kindled about Visuit as her mood darkened. Mortals nearby ran screaming. The goddess drew her weapon: a huge curved sword. "Do not seek to instruct me in the art of war."

"Your bloodlust must wait," Yeshe snapped. She was rapidly losing her temper.

Without warning, with a peal of thunder, the goddess smote Yeshe; a single blow which would have slain any mortal and many a godling. The Binder's armor, titan-forged, buckled but did not break.

Yeshe staggered back, insensible.

Visuit thrust out an arm and caught her by the throat. The goddess kicked Yeshe's legs from beneath her, and pushed the immortal to her knees.

Still, Yeshe could not make her limbs respond.

"You would presume?" Visuit threatened to break her neck.

Incapacity. The Binder crumpled to the ground.

"I am making a sortie," Visuit boomed; her voice carried for a mile, drowning all other sound. "Those who wish to accompany me, may."

"You will serve me," she hissed to the form at her feet.

"Goddess." Choking, Yeshe abased herself.

Visuit focused momentarily.

The enemy would be breaking camp soon. She reached out with her mind,
searching for purchase: a place in proximity to the Sela, where she might recently have been invoked by word or deed. An anchor in space. Her deific perception penetrated every ward erected by the Temple Adepts.

At the last, a green veil, supple but unyielding: Nehael's blessing. Her concentration evaporated, and her thought retreated.

Visuit cursed. Several of the Ushabam who pressed too close went mad.

Holding her dark blade aloft, she clove open a gate.

"Follow!" War demanded utter obedience.

She mounted Narh; steed and rider leaped through the rift.

A great press of demons and undead clamored behind her. After Yeshe, Prahar – unhinged as he already was – was the first to follow. On the Plain of Infinite Portals, the Sorrowsworn mustered hungrily.

**

Tensions ran high in Mostin's Infernal tower.

Eleven mages, in addition to Mostin and Orolde, were now ensconced in various chambers – some of them all-too-comfortably, Mostin ruefully considered. And Hlioth remained, which made Mostin suspicious and more than a little nervous: she had appropriated a stone courtyard, and modified it – greenified it – to her satisfaction and Mostin's chagrin.

Inevitably, the habits of certain of the Wizards – and all were guilty of odd behaviours of one kind or another – had come into conflict. Creq exuded a charnel reek which many found distasteful. Daunton pestered the Alienist constantly for use of the web of motes. Tozinak transmogrified various mundane objects for no apparent reason. Waide – who maintained a disciplined hauteur – insisted on an afternoon nap in one of Mostin's preferred spots: a conservatory in which various Hellish fruits grew on thorny trees. Mulissu's mephits and Jalael's quasits were on the verge of open warfare: spinegird devils ineffectively policed an uneasy truce between the two groups, until the Alienist conjured a barbazu to act as a more effective deterrent to hostilities.

Mostin himself sat poring over formulae, performing impossible contortions upon immutable laws of magic in his head. Graz'zt's jar sat before him on the desk. Upon it, placid, the dominated, polymorphed linnorm rested, coiled in miniscule.

Mostin's prolepsis had generated a number of uncomfortable arcs, which involved the scorned Queen Soneillon, the Region of Dreams and Uzzhin combining in some dreadful resonance. He tapped upon the sphere with his quill until the demonic countenance of Prince Graz'zt appeared.

"What is your intuition?" Mostin asked.

"Thou hast exceeded thy authority, and made something unholy," Graz'zt replied, sneering.

"Be more specific!" Mostin snapped.
Graz'zt's face vanished.

Mostin cursed him for his willfulness and *tormented* the captive demon, finally forcing his visage to reappear. Graz'zt's intractability seemed only moderately diminished; his hatred was palpable.

"Answer the question," Mostin groaned. "And dispense with the archaisms: they are tedious."

"You have sent What-is-Not to Where-it-Cannot-Be. As though realities do not bleed freely enough, Mostin the Metagnostic punches holes in continua to turn drips into torrents."

"You speak of Soneillon's pilgrimage?" the Alienist hissed.

"Vhorzhe made the same mistake," Graz'zt smiled wickedly. "Except it was no *chthonic* he sent hurtling into Delirium."

"Your terminology is outmoded," Mostin corrected him. "And the analogy is inexact, in any case. I have demonstrated this!"

"Rimilin will bring her back, for all your prattle." Graz'zt was obviously taking some pleasure in his words.

"Rimilin does not concern me," Mostin sighed.

"Then you will lose the race for Azzagrat."

Mostin scowled, and waved Graz'zt away irritably.

The demon remained, glowering at him.

"Bugger off." Mostin shoved the linnorm off its perch, picked up the globe, and dropped it in a drawer, slamming it shut.

He returned to his problem.

*

An hour later, Mostin announced his plan.

The mages were to accompany him to a location *within* what had been the Argent Palace in Azzagrat, after the Alienist had established a modicum of stability on the planar flux in its vicinity. Thereupon, Mostin would invoke his *quiescence of the spheres*.

They must next *disjoin* the chthonic *gates*, to permanently arrest the upwelling; subsequently, the *quiescence* could be *dispelled*, and the offending *gates* would be gone.

After *Pharamne's urn* was recovered – Mostin purported to know its exact location, now – the Alienist would hold a splendid party in celebration.

Various concerns were voiced: Would chthonics in manifest form still be nearby? Would the *gates* even be present after the *reality maelstrom* had been suppressed? How many demiplanes removed from Azzagrat was the *urn* in any
event?

"And how many *gates* are there Mostin?"

"I have calculated twenty-two," Mostin confessed. "But their usage has diminished considerably; a new equilibrium has already been established."

"You require twenty-two *disjunctions*?" Hlioth laughed.

"Certainly. This can be achieved with single-minded purpose."

"And the predicted length of our tenure in these regions?" Tozinak inquired, sniffing dismally.

"Around thirty minutes, if all goes to plan," Mostin grinned eagerly.

"Alas!" Tozinak wailed. "I may not live to see my egg hatch!"

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"I am perplexed," Teppu admitted, looking at Neheal. "The exchange would indicate that you have him at a gnostic disadvantage – so to speak."

"He was thwarted in Afqithan; his prescience failed. This is a new experience for him. He claims the Viridity is inscrutable to him."

"And *Saizhan*?" Teppu inquired.

"That relationship is more complex. I don't profess to understand it. I suspect that he is somehow instrumental."

**

They manifested in the fading half-light, within a bowshot of the *interdiction*, and within plain sight of the celestial guards who policed the perimeter. A ragged hole in the fabric of reality, slashed open by Visuit, through which a stream of demons poured.

The Dark Choir was upon them in an instant, wreaking havoc with maces and flaming swords; within Nwm's presidio, news spread like lightning, and clarions sounded: knights and Templars sprang to arms.

Visuit, who trusted her instincts, smiled. In the Aethers below, something stirred. To those who were sensitive – adepts and celestials – a ripple of Darkness ran across the still waters of Mind.

The Butcher gestured with her clenched fist.

Chthonics manifested.

The proto-devils cautiously withdrew to consider their options.

Visuit sliced open another *gate*, and vanished.
The rent in space remained open; through it, yet more demons and monsters began to rush.

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As the alarm spread, Nwm – who was stationed in the centre of the encampment with most of the spellcasters – reached out his mind to Eadric, whose tents were closer to the periphery.

[Nwm]: She is opening a gate every thirty seconds or so; they are appearing at apparently random locations around the circumference. Teleportation circles are also now beginning to open. The strongest has predictably asserted herself.

[Eadric]: I had hoped she might be more direct. Still, they cannot penetrate the ward. Something very dark just came.

[Nwm]: It is called Narake.

[Eadric]: How do you know?

[Nwm]: Uedii whispers it to me.

[Eadric]: What is our best recourse?

[Nwm]: Fortification.

[Tahl]: We are ready.

[Mesikammi]: As are we.

[Lai]: And we.

[Brey]: And we.

"I will brook no celestial interference!" Nwm hissed through gritted teeth.

"There will be none," the Ahma vowed. The words emerged from the mouths of all within the communion.

Nwm evoked a spell.

The Green Benediction settled upon Eadric and those nearest him.

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Lying in Mostin's hammock, the Adversary opened an eye. Now that was impressive, by any standards.

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**POST 25: EADRIC**
The Goddess inhaled sharply; her head span in an ecstasy. Her communion became perfect, and her form blazed as the Viridity flowed through her. Nwm had invoked her again as the conduit for a spell of staggering power.

Trees nearby erupted briefly into spontaneous sapience. Teppu capered madly. "Excellent," he clapped his hands.

Nehael's consciousness was immediately drawn to focus on Eadric and the thousand or so most stalwart knights in the Wyrish encampment; those whose tents were in proximity to those of the Ahma. Thence it extended to settle upon every griffon, every horse, every dog, every bird, every ant.

Nehael shook her head. "It will not be enough. Nwm must try harder. I hope he knows this."

**

Eadric's head hummed, as though he had imbibed some heady green wine which evoked an urge to pure enjoyment. Around his core, a warmth which nourished and sustained him. The Eye of Palamabron revealed the Aethers thick with archons and devas; myriads dispatched by Enitharmon to intercept the Chthonic threat and prevent further bleed into the World of Men.

Here and now, the twilight tasted fresh and new. Eadric's skin tingled. He mounted the griffon Hauhuts and took to the skies. Below him the camp stretched, many fires were burning: casting his eyes around, he noticed that three main fronts had opened, all to the east of the Interdiction, which – thankfully – still held.

Northernmost, a cluster of gates through which Prahar's undead cavalry poured, swiftly and repeatedly dispersing and reforming in cadres. Their movements seemed in execution of a long-prepared plan, although maybe the phenomenon was spontaneous; formations rippled like schools of black fish beyond the protective walls of the spell. They were followed by blood fiends, abyssal ghouls, and other things which ate flesh.

In the centre, Yeshe, Pazuzu, and the violet banners of the Ushabam held by their giant bodyguards; their leaders were burning dozens of candles of invocation, and balors were appearing in the skies above them. Others were conjuring lesser demons, as their ability permitted. Still more demons were simply manifesting.

To the south, in an arc, the chthonic menace. Narake, evoked last of all, was easternmost.

Irel had determined his reaction quickly: more than half of the Dark Choir – under the archon Hemah – remained in the fight with Yeshe and her minions, and were attempting to eliminate the spellcasters. Shokad, Oraios and Irel himself – with a smaller number of former celestial stalwarts – moved to intercept the chthonics.

Knights and Templars under the effects of the Benediction were already materializing within the ranks of the enemy, immolating with green fire and
quickly routing the half-giants, whilst enduring a barrage of blasphemies from the Ushabam themselves. In response, demons were being invoked even more rapidly; the balors were being flung against them.

From above, Eadric's vision rested on a heaving mass of nullity shaped like a demon, which emanated a destroying fire. All other creatures shunned it.

_Narake_, Nwm confirmed.

Bathed in green radiance, Eadric grunted and urged his steed to a dive; his plummet brushed aside a flight of chthonic succubi which strove to block his path, burning many from the sky. His task was simple: he should strive to slay as many as he could. He smote Narake a great blow as he wheeled past, only to have Hauhuts plucked in turn from the sky by a fiery tendril. Griffon and rider were flung to the ground; the earth shook as he struck it.

Visuit thundered past, slaying Hauhuts with a single blow which continued on to Eadric, striking Lukarn and causing the blade to shiver powerfully along its length.

A death spell spoken by Narake slid over him, dissipating harmlessly. In a trice, the demon – dwarfing the Ahma – leapt upon him, striking him with an object shaped like a mace and forged out of malice. In the vicinity of the chthonic, matter was beginning to smoke and evaporate.

Eadric fended the blow easily with his shield, and the sledge carved a hole in the earth next to him. Four more strikes he turned or withstood; black fire engulfed him, but nothing adhered.

By instinct, he moved his form subtly; or maybe the World shifted around him, reordering itself in response to some impulse of Uedii which he could not articulate. He followed invisible green tracheids, emerging instantly from the grass on the other side of the demon. He launched a powerful assault.

_Lukarn_ opened huge, gaping wounds; Light poured into naked Void. Narake vanished from sight; whether destroyed or fled, Eadric could not tell: and perhaps it made no difference.

Before he could even draw breath, Visuit sped past again upon Narh and struck a great blow upon his shield, shearing the celestial metal from edge to edge, cleaving it cleanly in two. Her curved sword – if such it was – continued through the rebrace on his shield-arm into sinew. Visions of carnage passed through his mind, and voices called to him from unnamed hells. He felt warm blood flow over his elbow and down to his wrist.

Sixty yards past Eadric, Visuit leapt from her saddle and – with surprising elegance – twisted in the air like a cat, landing firmly to face him. She smiled. Life withered.

Casting off the remains of Melimpor’s Shield, the Ahma gripped his weapon in both hands and materialized immediately in front of the goddess, hewing at her ferociously with every ounce of strength he could muster, and burning her with green flames which issued from him in sheets. Lukarn fulminated, illuminating the battlefield as he smote her. She struck back, and with terrible speed. Raining blows down hard upon him, hammering him through helm and armor and forcing him backwards. He bled profusely.
Thus they exchanged buffets. Visuit had quickly gained the upper hand.

The Ahma prudently withdrew. He followed a strand of Green and appeared instantly before Nwm.

"I need more," he said simply.

"There is no more. Try harder," Nwm scowled as he healed him.

"Nwm..."

"My resources are not infinite!" Nwm snapped. "And a new front is about to open. And there will be others. Timing is critical. Do not be distracted. Now keep them at bay."

The Ahma nodded, understanding.

Moments later, the lich Choach – together with a large number of Anantam magi – arrived a league to the west, collapsing Nwm's Interdiction.

Demons began teleporting: probing unlocked areas closer to the centre of the camp. Every plant whispered; green ripples moved across the ground, as hundreds of Templars rapidly transported themselves back from the now-vanished periphery.

Two hundred yards from Eadric and Nwm, Narake reappeared.

Nwm vomited as the demon invoked a spell, enveloping everything within a mile in a maelstrom of black fire. Thousands died. Though many – adequately warded – survived, all plant matter was turned to ash.

Nwm coughed, regaining his composure. It has to be Now.

[Tahi]: We are ready.

[Mesikammi]: As are we.

[Lai]: And we.

[Brey]: And we.

A silent green nova.

Eadric knew it: he had felt it before in Afqithan. This was of more modest scope, but subtler. A frequency attuned to a specific vibration, married to a wave of banishment. Every demon, every chthonic vanished. Pazuzu and Visuit, vanished. Each expunged; shunted away to its proper place.

Yeshe cursed. Gating Visuit again would not be possible until the prescribed length of time had elapsed. The thirty-or-so balors who had been interposed between the dark celestials and the Ushabam had disappeared; Hemah and his brethren were already in their midst, sweeping their fiery swords in great arcs, and hewing them down.

Ablaze with her own magic, she emptied her reservoir and struck the former episeme with a pillar of blackness, slaying him. Wearily, the Binder opened yet another gate, and another; she drew now on a rod of ancient potency to fuel her
magic.

She staggered. Exhausted, she vanished with a word of recall. Those amongst the Ushabam who were able, followed her lead.

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The earth was black in the gathering night: Narake's carnage was ugly. Outside of the wasted area, the Temple forces were assembling.

Eadric stared at the body of Hemah; he had expected it to vaporize, or at least to smoulder. The great archon seemed serene in extinction. The devil's expression might have been one of mild perplexity. They were one and the same.

Irel alighted silently next to the Ahma.

*Whither?* Eadric wondered.

"To a lake of fire," the fallen deva replied.

"Or to an Ocean?"

"If you decree it."

"Let it be so."

Eadric heard a soft hoof-fall approaching; he turned to observe the stallion Narh pacing gently toward him. Somewhat behind, a lone figure wearing a worn studded jack and spattered with ichor.

Ortwine gave a hint of a smile as she approached, and tossed Sibud's head to the ground at the Ahma's feet.

"One for me," she said.

Eadric gaped.

"In order to write lays of one's exploits, it is necessary to first perform them," she explained.

[Nwm]: It must wait.

A magical wind was rising: the slightest breeze, invoked by Prahar, but tenacious: it rendered all flight impossible. Those who remained aloft across the battlefield found themselves without purchase, and plummeted.

Ortwine gazed north and east. Night had now fallen fully, but the sky – through Mesikammi's arts – was clear as crystal and the stars were bright. A tremor pulsed through the ground. Ancient carynxes were sounding brazenly, as evil godlings ordered their undead ranks.

"Prahar is preparing to charge with his death knights," the sidhe observed drily. "By lucky happenstance, the greatest horse ever sired is your eager steed."

The Ahma muttered an earnest prayer of thanks to Uedii.
"You may also thank me. You may not criticize me for my gnomes again," Ortwine smiled coldly.

"Thank-you," Eadric nodded. "And agreed. What will you do?"

Ortwine reached into her vest and withdrew a talisman which reeked utterly of evil. "I plan to sow discord – which appears to be my forte."

*Unfortunately for Eadric, Visuit resolves her melee attacks as touch attacks. DR 50/- helped a lot. DevCrits didn't work for either of them as they were both fortified. At this point, they were pretty evenly matched. Don't let her charge was the informed consensus.

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**POST 26: MOSTIN EX MACHINA**

Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 23rd May 2009, 06:33 PM

Temenun meditated in Dream. His ancient consciousness – elevated by powerful magics and attuned to destructive urges – rapidly took stock of the changing situation. Prescient impulses crowded his mind, each seeking to assert its own augury as truth.

Sibud had fallen; the Vampire had been an arrogant fool, and the Tiger felt only contempt. To taunt vindictive sidhe-queens entailed certain risks, and departing one's own fortifications to slake an urge as base as feeding brought the consequences it deserved. Masquerading as an agent hired by herself, Ortwine had infiltrated Thond, gained news of Sibud's whereabouts, and penetrated the spirits which attended him during his glut. A dirty, ignoble assassination.

Temenun smiled. Eventually, his Naztharunes would have accomplished the same task. But the sidhe had also succeeded in instigating a bloody feud between two opposing factions within the Truzha leadership; Thond's cohesion would soon be lost. Part of Dhatri's main force – bent on Jompa, where mortals were more abundant – would have to divert to Thond and resecure it.

Yeshe had vanished, presumably departing to a hidden sanctum to recoup. As many as half of the Ushabam were destroyed, and her authority was now questionable at best. But not her power; Temenun would not underestimate that.

The Tiger considered Idyam now the greatest threat to his own supremacy; the demilich, virtually indestructible, had been quietly extending his power base. Temenun knew through his spies that Anumid had spoken with him at least three times, but Idyam played a cool courtship and patiently bided his time.

Imperceptible to the oneiric guard which the Servants of the Sun had set in defense, Temenun dreamed his way in darkness to Scir Cello to watch events as they unfolded.
Choach, and the thirty Anantam who accompanied him, were entrenching quickly. They had cordoned a half-acre with walls of force and fortified their position with dimensional locks, symbols and a complex pattern of selective antimagic, overlayed by the lich himself. In unlocked areas, teleportation circles were opened; a quartet of compacted balors herded goristros through with goads of adamant. A ruddy glow illuminated the magical beachhead.

Perched on a skeletal dragon, Choach gazed across the dark of the rising plain, bending his thought north and east. Sunbursts strobed on the horizon over a low rise. He reached out with his mind to observe the main conflict, almost four miles away. Lacking adequate aerial support of his own, Prahar had pinned down the devas and griffons and forced a ground engagement.

By now, Choach knew, the nature-priest must be spent. The lich contacted Anumid.

The situation is precarious. You will need to send reinforcements if you deem victory important.

In Jashat, the Mouthpiece pondered. This might have been an ill-advised sortie, but one could hardly gainsay Visuit.

With exquisite timing, Temenun's voice purred into his mind. I am also here, Anumid. I can strike the decisive blow.

"How much?" Anumid asked aloud through gritted teeth.

Two thousand.

Anumid almost laughed. It was a preposterous sum; almost two thirds of the liquid assets of the convocations. "Even were your solution watertight, I could not persuade the cabals to invest so much."

Shvar Choryati, was Temenun's response.

The blood left Anumid's face. "I will communicate your offer."

Do not tarry in your deliberations. You have less than an hour before Nashhte sets.

Anumid swore, and commanded a dozen babau to ring the gongs and summon the remaining Anantam and as many of the Kesha-Dirghaa as could be persuaded. He sent entreaties to Naatha and Rishih to reinforce Choach with their compactees as soon as they might.

In the chill night air, Ortwine soared undetected above the melee, ignoring Prahar's spell of impeded flight, and gazed at the spectacle below.

The enemy's initial charge had been brutal, and backed by a magical impetus which had broken the half-ordered Temple ranks. Now three great kanistas, led
by the Penitents and the Illuminated, had rallied and penetrated the Cheshnite front. Ahead of them all, the goddess Ninit rode with the five Boars, cutting a swathe through everything in her path. Magical and supernatural detonations echoed across battlefield. Devas of varying moral persuasions acted as bulwarks around which Wyrish knights rallied.

Nwm had dismantled the ritual configuration; the saints, priests and adepts who had been involved were now free to engage the enemy: a task which they undertook with predictable gusto. Lai was reordering her handmaidens with Mesikammi; the shamaness was readying another rite.

Ortwine descended behind the Cheshnite lines, and wrought a powerful glamour: what was to pass here must go undetected, for a little while at least. She reached into a soft leather pouch and withdrew a slender black taper. Igniting it with a cantrip, she held the candle as it burned rapidly.

A balor appeared in a cloud of fire and smoke. It looked around suspiciously, its true seeing unable to pinpoint Ortwine.

"Wait there for a while," the sidhe commanded, her voice issuing from somewhere close by. "I will have further instructions for you presently."

Her eyes penetrated the darkness ahead to observe Mesikammi as she invoked a massive resurrection: hundreds of corpses sprang to life again; those who had been disintegrated incarnated in pristine forms.

Ortwine raised an eyebrow; even the death knights had been afforded random living bodies. Clothed in flesh again, some rejoiced, some wept, others fled or waxed furious; their variety was utterly bewildering: strange goblins and sprites; satyrs, mephits, nymphs and sylphs; animal spirits of every conceivable type. Other spirits for which Ortwine had no names.

_I have decided that I like your style_, Ortwine spoke with deific benevolence into Mesikammi's mind. _If you wish it, I will sponsor you._

_Power is power, and I accept; although I fear I might be too fickle a priestess._

_You may come to realize the absurdity of that sentiment._

Refocusing, Ortwine reached into her pouch and withdrew another candle.

* *

The Ahma fought upon Narh; on his left arm he bore a light buckler lent by Ortwine. The stallion seemed to anticipate his thought even before he did, and moved with a deadly, fluid grace. Already brimming with primal energy, Narh had been infused yet further with Green power by Nwm. Sundry wards and both the Mantle and the Quickening protected Eadric still, but the ecstasy of the Benediction had passed, and the grim reality of the conflict had returned to him.

It was a confused riot: cadres of dismounted knights formed protective rings around Flamines as they worked magic; Abyssal blasts issued from death knights, penetrating the Temple ranks. Celestials moved amongst the Wyrish troops, bringing respite wherever they showed themselves; Temple Scrollbearers were evoking flame strikes and sunbursts, wasting squadrons of undead cavalry. A hundred other magical lights had been struck. Protected by Nwm's Quickening, the Templars were proving exceptionally hard to kill. The Dark Choir slew
everything in its path.

Overhead, the stars winked as the fume generated by lesser magics was dispersed by the persistent breeze of Prahar's spell. Hyne winded Hemah's horn, a piercing call which echoed across the battlefield.

Striking down the enemy rapidly, the Ahma attempted to run a gauntlet of undead knights with Rede, Tarpion and Tahl in order to reach Prahar's standard; he hewed his way forwards until the press became so thick he could no longer move; the reek of the Cheshnite horses – drawn from demonic stock – was suffocating. He spoke a holy word, burning away the knights ahead and allowing him to push forward another twenty yards. Tarpion and Rede flanked him, pronouncing dicta and rendering the enemy insensible. Behind, Saint Tahl – grown ten feet tall – now fought on foot.

Prahar, also in the thick of combat but a furlong distant, uttered a profanity and struck Eadric and his company with a horrid wilting, which the Mantle deflected easily. As the Ahma fended the blows from some petty godling, he caught glimpses of Prahar's manner in battle. It made him more than a little nervous.

The undead warrior exhibited a slavering rage whilst raining down magical fire. And when any came within reach of his sword, he killed them instantly, with one stroke. Always.

Eadric cursed as he cut down his opponent, looking past him; now another gate was opening near Prahar.

The Ahma groaned as a great Ugra, hugely muscled and bearing a massive rod lurched through, smashing everything in his path. A distended gut hung over grotesque genitalia; vast horns curved down, then up, then out. Rank hair covered him. Aja, the Great Goat.

Eadric knew him as Orcus.

Matters worsened.

*

Ortwine clapped her hands. Twelve balors – suitably screened and veiled – now attended her. All were dominated.

"Your primary target – with whom I am sure you are all familiar – is Prince Orcus. Perhaps some of you may have been waiting for this opportunity for a long time. Kill Orcus. Kill Prahar. Kill Choach. Kill any other members of the Cheshnite faction. Then return here."

Ortwine waved a hand dismissively. The twelve balors teleported away.

And bring me trophies, she reminded them.

**

The Tiger dreamed his way back to Jashat; he would evoke his spell from a safe distance. Proximity to such a thing as this was never advisable. Beneath a great dome, the assembled magi were waiting for him.
Gathering his energies, Temenun reached out through Dream. Drawing on the pattern generated by the *Anantam*, he penetrated layers of veils, deep into ancient nightmares. His mind rested, still, within the primordial Dark. He breathed deeply.

*Shvar Choryati*, he whispered, and turned his thought back two hundred miles to the north.

**

The meticulous preparations for the Abyssal descent were nearing completion.

Thirteen Wizards now worked magic furiously. They conjured allies and warded themselves, haggling over access to one another's spells like children at a fig stand.

Mostin had been forced to revise his plan; yet another delay, but one insisted upon by a vocal minority led by Waide and Tozinak. They must first target the entire area in Azzagrat with the largest expulsive spell they could muster, *before* the *Quiescence* was evoked, ridding the area of chthonic nuisances before proceeding.

Mostin had been forced to reconfigure another spell, a process which took valuable time.

When he was finally ready, the Alienist consulted the *web of motes* again. Soneillon's significator was beginning a resonance with Rimilin; the wizard would soon bind her, as Graz'zt had indicated. Mostin felt uneasy. He hated it when demons told the truth; it made things so much more complicated.

Even as he observed, possibilities multiplied; an area of flux was causing dozens of motes to swerve along unlikely cateneries. Mostin swore profusely.

*No! Not now! Why was it always now? Why couldn't it wait?*

Eadric's mote suddenly careened towards him at breakneck speed, engulfing him.

Mostin snapped out of his reverie as he was struck by a desperate *sending* issued by Tahl.


"This is a most unfair choice," Mostin protested.

*Scenes of battle passed across the surface of the *Mirror of Urm-Nahat*. A ravenous darkness, rolling across the conflict, appeared to be consuming Wyrish troops by the company."

"It's simple," Daunton sighed. "Do you know nothing of committees? We vote; and quickly. Abstentions must also abide by the majority decision. Mostin, as host, must vote last. In the event of a tie, I have the casting vote. My vote is for a return to Wyre."
"To Azzagrat," Jalael said immediately.

"No vote," Tozinak sighed. "I simply cannot. I am overwrought."

"To Azzagrat," Muthollo concurred.

"To Azzagrat," Hlioth nodded.

Mostin cocked his head. Now that was unexpected.

"No vote," said Creq. "I have a mortuary in southern Hethio, and I would be loath to see it despoiled. But I am greedy, and wish to increase my power. I am genuinely conflicted."

"I cast no vote," Mulissu waved her hand dismissively. "I do not recognize the authority of the Wyrish Collegium, and reserve the right to ignore any decisions the committee reaches."

"To Wyre," Sho said unexpectedly. Mostin wondered which sentiment moved her; an inkling suggested it might be some sense of obligation to Nwm, but he had no evidence to support the theory.

"To Wyre, also," Troap nodded. "I am a mundane sort, by nature. Which makes me wonder as to which voice Hlioth is responding."

"Now is not the time to analyze motivation." Daunton groaned.

"To Wyre," Orolde answered.

"No vote," Waide growled. "At the moment, neither choice appeals. I am hungry, and I am late to bed."

"To Azzagrat," Droom of Morne spoke. "I would hate more to see the vote so uncontested."

Mostin glared at him.

Daunton looked desperately at the Alienist.

"Wyre," Mostin nodded. "Although I feel bound to point out that the target area is not actually in Wyre, either politically or magically. Ladies and gentlemen, we are unconstrained."

"If you insist on this course of action," Hlioth sighed wearily, "you must first neutralize Choach, before he disperses his demons and becomes a further nuisance."

"An opinion or a prophecy?" Mostin asked acidly.

"Quiet your ego!" Hlioth snapped. "And for once, do as I say. I will be busy dying elsewhere. Do not mourn. I will be back ere sunrise."

"Hence, I mourn."

"After you have eliminated Choach, evacuate as many as you can," Hlioth sighed. "You cannot overcome this darkness."
Daunton pinpointed one of the gaps in Choach's protective net with a potent divination.

The *Infernal Tower* appeared, unmasked by any illusion, within the lich's rapidly deploying force. The Collegiate mages stood on a wide balcony which Mostin had caused to be projected from the tower's wall at a height of fifty feet. The Alienist smashed the lattice of antimagic protecting the Cheshnite magi with a powerful *dispelling*.

A barrage of *disjunctions* – previously prepared by the Wyrish wizards for the purpose of sealing the twenty-two chthonic *gates of Azzagrat* – instead rained upon Choach and the *Anantam*, stripping them of protections, collapsing *walls of force* and rendering *teleportation circles* inert.

Mulissu struck Choach with a *Glance of Thunder*; before he could teleport, she struck with another. Mostin detonated a massive sonic.

"Take out the balors, you idiots!" Mostin barked at the other wizards, who seemed to be targeting groups of demons indiscriminately.

Tozinak grew wings and hovered exitedly. "My egg has hatched! My egg has hatched!"

Mulissu collapsed unconscious, blood pouring from her nose.

Deprived of his physical form, Choach fled back to his phylactery.

Five miles away, Eadric was alerted to the presence of the wizards by a peal of distant thunder.

*

**

*POST 27: MOONRISE*

*Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 31st May 2009, 02:47 AM*

Hlioth appeared before Nwm. The Preceptor looked haggard.

"Go to Mostin and sort things out," she instructed. "Then start thinking of a way to get rid of that." The witch gestured irritably to a billowing void which absorbed everything in its path.

"I am spent," Nwm shook his head.

"But you cannot be!" Hlioth groaned. "Mostin is missing me from his ritual; I had elected you my substitute."
Nwm glared at her. He was spent; aside from a few restorative spells, he had almost nothing left.

"Work something out," Hlioth said irritably. "Is this all there is?" She glanced around: Lai and her handmaidens, a few Uediian priests and priestesses. Most seemed exhausted; at least Lai retained some of her power.

"You are late to the party," Nwm smiled stonily.

"It will have to do. Give me what you've got."

Hlioth drew on their magic, invoked a powerful ward – on herself alone – and then vanished.


"I'll go," the goddess said. She vanished into the earth.

*

Eadric was closer to it: an inky darkness which slithered across the ground like malign fog. It emanated terror; those which it touched, it snuffed out. Everything recoiled from it; it seemed bent only on destroying vibrancy and life. The telepathic screams issued by celestials which had encountered it still echoed in the Ahma's mind.

He had no time to muse on such things. Orcus's mace slammed into his buckler, numbing his left arm; a sting like a wyvern's tail punched through a gap in his armor and potent venom threatened to overwhelm him. Horns, a maw, claws. A foul, rank, cloying smell. Aja was a bastion around which all evil things rallied and from which all that was good was moved to flee. Lukarn was impotent against the demon's defenses; the Prince of the Undead had erected a ward of indomitability about himself.

Orcus spoke a dark blasphemy. Eadric endured it; Rede and Tarpion reeled. Others nearby exploded into dust.

Eadric groaned. Balors were now manifesting all around him.

*They're on your side,* Ortwine's voice echoed in his head.

*Your timing is a little tight. Orcus is warded.*

*Noted.*

The dominated balors targeted Aja with dispellings.

**

The stars shone brighter still.

Mesikammi had now waxed to her full power; the spell which she had wrought an hour before came into effect.
Reaching skywards, she plucked a meteor from the heavens and pulled it to the earth; the light as it struck the ground illuminated the countryside for miles around. Its impact vaporized an entire company of undead mercenaries, and left a smoking hole a hundred feet wide.

Nwm glanced upwards. More stars seemed to be shifting.

"How many more do you have?" He asked.


"Make 'em count," Nwm cautioned her.

Mind my balors, Ortwine's voice carried to the shamaness.

**

The Ahma enjoyed a brief lacuna in the combat; everything within a hundred feet was dead. Orcus had fled or obscured himself – a dozen balors was enough to cause even him pause for thought. Prahar had done the same, although Eadric anticipated that either or both would soon reappear.

In their absence, the demons had set upon the enemy knights.

Ortwine became visible and descended to the ground, her hand upon the pommel of her weapon. Eadric leaned heavily on Lukarn, and spat blood.

She gave a cool smile, and bowed. "I should apologize for doubting your capacity to keep me entertained. I have burned all but one of my candles; unfortunately, those fellows cannot linger too long. Still we're not doing so badly."

Eadric gestured with Lukarn towards the consuming Void.

"There is that," Ortwine conceded. Her face became deadly serious. "You should consider sounding a general retreat."

Eadric nodded. He knew it.

**

Hlioth materialized within a translucent jade sphere atop a precipice; below her, waves crashed at its base, the foam catching starlight. The moon was still a rumor on the eastern horizon. Nearby, an iron tower reared high into the sky.

You. Rimilin spoke into her mind.

As demons materialized around her, the Green Witch struck her staff upon the rock, sending forth a massive vibration which caused the ground to heave and ripple. Like a rising bore, it rapidly carried the tower and its contents over the edge of the cliff, toppling it into ocean below. The air around her was suddenly thick with fiends teleporting away from the collapsing structure, hurling magic and bodies against her.
Unperturbed, Hlioth pronounced a swift banishment of great power; green light flashed. Abruptly, all was quiet.

Rimilin arose from the wreck of his abode and alighted on the cliff-top twenty yards away.

"Are you done?" He asked. He struck her with a disjunction and blasted her with arcane fire.

Hlioth smiled. The spell she cast – possessed of immense penetrative power – could not be turned. Rimilin knew that it had been crafted just for him.

A look of mild astonishment crossed his face; he had not expected another of that magnitude. And not this...

Rimilin vanished.

Hlioth sighed. The presence of another. A void with many tendrils. She saw Queen Soneillon quietly walking towards her, even as an annihilating fire consumed her.

"You have seen too much," the witch whispered, as she expired.

**

Mostin grumbled. Goristros were hurling themselves at the base of the tower, and palrethees were appearing before him. The threat of the balors had – fortunately – been eliminated in quick measure: Jalael had dominated one and hurled it at another; the two remaining had wisely chosen to avoid the same fate, and vanished.

The Alienist sighed. They were probably loose in the world. Somewhere. Tracking them and dispatching them was not a chore which concerned him.

Mostin invoked a chained polymorph; the demons directly ahead were transformed into trout and dropped to the ground. Those who were fortunate enough to avoid the hooves of the goristros flapped briefly before dying.

Creq was administering some necromantic elixir to Mulissu in order to revive her. Tozinak made encouraging sounds.

"Can't you do something?" Mostin asked of Tozinak, incredulous. "Even Waide is doing something." The other transmuter had reversed gravity, causing three of the enormous demons to bob in the air unceremoniously.

Tozinak pursed his lip – Mostin had no doubt that he had taken genuine offense – and pointed. A goristro began to dance.

Lai sprang out of the ground, assumed the form of a falcon, shot upwards, dived, and landed on the balcony, resuming her normal shape in a single, seamless movement.

Mostin blanched.
"Hlioth indicated that you need another for your spell," Lai explained. She reached down and healed Mulissu, saving her from Creq's dubious ministrations.

Mostin's prolepsis warned him of an impending explosion of planar conduits. Naatha and Rishih, with their allies. Too many; the force previously gathered to assault Fumaril. More teleportation circles began to appear, a quarter-mile to the north. Three gates flashed open. Demons, giants, magi. Immortals. Mostin knew they were loaded with magic. They were coming through fast.

"Sh*t," the Alienist cursed.

"Well?" Mulissu asked groggily.

"We have to," Mostin nodded glumly.

Drawing on the cabal, he invoked a massive Quiescence of the Spheres. The air became still, and all dimensional traffic within ten miles was stifled. Silence.

An acidic storm struck the tower. Orode, Troap, Creq and Daunton perished.

"That it should come to this," Mulissu erected an antimagic field.

"Deploy the compactees," Mostin screamed, skin hanging from his nose like molten wax.

A portal to the tower – no small postern, but a great gate – was opened. Dozens of compacted daemons, devils, hags and elementals – retained as security against Abyssal entanglements – poured forth. Quasits and mephits bickered in the air above them.

"After we get out of the vacuum, please tell me you can wind walk?" Mostin asked Lai.

"Only to a certain point," Lai said. "Prahah has forbidden flight beyond it."

Mostin groaned.

An old moon – a slender sickle, the colour of deep rust – finally arose from behind distant hills, casting morbid rays across the field.

**

Prahah had invoked a pitch darkness which defied all attempts to dispel it. It encapsulated an area of fierce combat, where a great mob of undead horsemen were attempting to push through to a heavily defended Temple centre. Within the shadow, the void – famished and profane – rolled forward and consumed. Hysteria descended on the Wyrish forces. Their enemy – seemingly unaffected – struck at them ruthlessly. Tahl, separated from the others and finally surrounded and overwhelmed, self-immolated in a swirling column of fire and vanished, burning the enemy in a wide circle.

Nwm stumbled blindly toward the Sela's redoubt, where he knew many of the hardiest knights were stationed; even his supernatural vision had been subdued. He cursed himself, assumed the shape of a wolf, and sniffed his way forwards. More than a few hacked at him in panic as he moved, mistaking him for the
enemy; he shrugged off their blows.

Behind him, it was coming. He could feel it; Green was buckling like a warped plank to accommodate it.

*

*Shvar Choryati* encroached. Now it phased nearby in contempt of the *Quiescence of the Spheres*, first here and then there, slaying hundreds each time it appeared; half at random, but always closer, as if some instinct drew it obliquely inwards.

Nwm stilled his thought and considered his options. He observed its pattern, and pondered.

"You will not escape it," Nwm spoke to the *Sela*. "No magic can speed you fast enough now; all has been stilled. It hungers for you, albeit circuitously; it is does not perceive the route to you in linear fashion. Many are dying as it seeks you; we may never recover them. It will eat everything near you. Will you trust me and do as I say?" Nwm asked.

"Yes," Tramst replied. Even in the darkness, Nwm knew that his expression was open.

Nwm reached out and felt the *Sela*'s helm, and placed a hand on either side.

"Invoke her," the Preceptor said.

"Nehael," Tramst whispered. A supplication.

"Rest until the morning. I will wake you at sunrise." With a strong twist, Nwm snapped the *Sela*'s neck.

His death passed unnoticed by all except the Darkness.

Become an enormous hunting cat, Nwm bounded north and west. Two minutes later, beyond the range of Prahar's invocation, he assumed the form of a great eagle, and powered his way away, in search of a likely refuge.

Meanwhile, the void turned its attention to the brightest remaining source of light.

**

Lai led six wizards – Mostin, Mulissu, Jalael, Tozinak, Waide, and Droom – north and west across the battlefield in vaporous form. Sho and Muthollo had retreated into the Tower, in the event that one amongst the Cheshnite immortals was to prove intent upon – and capable of – breaching it. *Disjoining* the wards upon the solar in the vestibule had been the Alienist's suggestion as to their first line of defense.

As Mostin sped away from his fortress, he noticed that a number of large nozzles had emerged at intervals around the tower, and were projecting some kind of
hellfire at the advancing demons.

Evidently, Sho had been referencing more obscure tomes than he; this function was unknown to him.

To hasten their passage, Mulissu had evoked a roaring wind which verged on agonizing to ride. Only moments later, Naatha, Guho and a group of Kesha-Dirghaa theurges were in swift pursuit, employing similar tactics. The savant immediately conjured elementals to delay them.

Below, isolated skirmishes persisted between death knights and paladins; ahead, a blank hemisphere a half-mile in diameter had sprung up. Around it – and presumably within it – the main conflict surged to and fro.

[Mostin]: What is your evacuation plan?

[Mulissu]: I?

[Jalael]: He means any but he.

[Mostin]: I am not equipped to move large numbers of mundanes. What do we have left?

(Tally of spells).

[Jalael]: Were that we were better configured for offense.

[Mostin]: We will be next time.

[Waide]: There will be no 'next time.' I might also observe that the stress of our current predicament is having a deleterious effect upon Tozinak's delicate psyche.

[Tozinak]: Do not speak of me as though I am not here!

[Jalael]: The fat transmuter fears stress, Tozinak. Pay him no heed. Somehow, you have stumbled your way into transvalency.

[Tozinak] (emboldened): Quite so!

[Mostin]: A month previous would have been preferable.

[Tozinak]: I have a spell already at hand!

[Waide]: He is clearly deranged.

[Tozinak]: Preparation will take only a few moments. I must corporeate and study my petroglyphs.

[Mostin + Mulissu]: What do you speak of?

[Tozinak]: My slab, bequeathed by Jovol. His last work.

[Mostin]: What is it titled, idiot?

[Tozinak]: There is no need for rudeness, Mostin.

[Mostin]: Its name!
[Tozinak]: *A Flame Precedes the Aeon*

[Mulissu] (exasperated): Just show us the pattern.

(A pause for inspection)

[Mostin]: A Grand Enochia? A conjuration, or a transmutation? It makes no sense. The spell is scribed in terms of Urgic Altitudes. It needs thirteen...

[Jalael]: Tozinak! You imbecile!

Mostin groaned as he saw. The focus required was *Pharamne’s Urn*.

Ortwine's voice suddenly echoed in his head. *Mostin! You made it! How delightful!*

As they began to descend, Mostin looked down and sighed. The sidhe was waltzing with a balor upon a heap of the slain.

From without the magical darkness, the insatiable void now lurched uncertainly; but away from the conflict, south and east towards Jompa.

Ahead of it, drawing it onwards, a streak of brilliant light; Eadric brandishing *Lukarn* and riding upon *Narh*.

**

In Nizkur, the appeal reached her.

Teppu immediately stopped time.

"Thank-you," Nehael acknowledged. A moment to reflect was never a bad thing.

"It is an eventful night," Teppu observed. "And I am losing track. Has Nwm overstepped the mark, I wonder?"

"Frankly, I find Hlioth's play more outrageous."

"Enitharmon will be in flap," Teppu pointed out.

Nehael nodded. "I anticipate he will send episemes to penetrate the *Hahio*. I might need to have words with them."

"Be gentle with them," Teppu said wrily.

"I will invite them to stay," Nehael smiled. "I can be very accommodating. If you would..."

Time resumed its normal flow.

The goddess reached out to Tramst; Her grace enfolded his spirit, and kept him safe.

** ** **
By the light of a dim oil lamp, the Adversary relaxed in the study of Mostin's manse, sipping firewine and playing a game of chance with Mei.

"Alas," he remarked wrily to the *simulacrum*. "I fear that you have no ego and I have no name. We should each borrow a little from the other."

Mei was confused. She still didn't know why this sprite was here. He seemed pleasant enough, and his manners were always impeccable; although she could never tell if he was being serious.

"No, thank-you. I await my pseudogenesis," she answered, playing a red token with three sphinxes graven on it.

"Might I inquire why?" The Adversary asked.

"I must weigh transcendence against preservation; I favor a high ratio of the former to the latter."

"Your sister seems content enough." The Adversary carefully placed two white tokens – each bearing a yellow trifoil – on the table. "Hers is a rapid path."

"I wish for a greater leap," Mei shrugged.

"Ahh," the Adversary nodded. "I face a similar dilemma. Although mine is rather the reverse."

"I do not comprehend."

"The certitude of *diminishment*, or the high likelihood of *extinction*. You may remove that token from beneath your hand; you must learn more finesse if you are going to cheat at this game." He played another yellow trifoil.

"And if you choose to risk extinction, and yet persist?" Mei inquired, unabashed that her subterfuge was revealed.

"I fear I might be *forgiven*. From my perspective, this is the worst possible outcome."

"Diminishment is so untenable a proposition?"

"My circumstances are rather unique," the Adversary smiled.

"And extinction?"

"I speak metaphorically, of course."

Mei gave a puzzled look. "I can no longer follow this argument."

The Adversary sighed. "It is complex. I also regret to inform you that I have won the game."

He placed a blue tile bearing a pomegranate before him.

"You already played that token!" Mei objected.
"I'm sure I didn't. Perhaps you are mistaking the previous game with this."

"This game bores me," Mei remarked. "I never win."

"I have another," the Adversary suggested. "If you would prefer. It is called Requite."

"Are there more tokens?"

"Of a sort," the Adversary admitted. "But of a more abstract kind. We pretend to dispense judgement upon our devilish minions, pronouncing terrible dooms; their humiliation and subjugation serves to magnify us. We must maneuver our pieces cunningly; our minions are apt to squabble amongst themselves."

"It sounds involved."

"It is," the Adversary nodded. "But I am well-practiced, and I can teach you. Would you care to learn?"

Mei shrugged. It was something to pass the time.

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**POST 28: INTERPENETRATION (MOSTIN IN MACHINAM)**

Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 13th June 2009, 03:05 AM

The air rushed past the *Ahma* as he rode along the sward above the Hynt Coched. *As Shvar Choryati* had made its first dimensional lurch toward him, Eadric knew that its attention had become focused on him. Having considered that he would be able to draw it away and outpace it, the *Ahma* had veered sharply south. It quickly became apparent that he had miscalculated.

Some distance away, Mostin turned his *arcane sight* around him.

Wild magic danced intermittently in the air; auroras generated by the interplay of a half-dozen potent spells. Nearby, the wall of Prahar's *Utterdark* loomed, impenetrable to his vision; south, the vastness of the *Pall of Dhatri* was now visible in the moonlight. He gazed west: Naatha, Guho and the hierophants were almost upon them.

Eastward, where the plain rose away, Eadric blazed a path faster than any *wind walker*, opening a gap of over two miles between himself and the consuming blackness. The phenomenon shuddered forward again – and a little east – ripping the fabric of reality and stretching the *Quiescence of the Spheres* until it squeezed through, and the dimensional lock snapped back into place.

In an instant, the void sprang forwards almost mile. Mostin's *foresight* informed him that the *Ahma* wasn't going to make it. A series of presentiments impacted on his mind.

Mostin cursed, dismissed the *Quiescence*, and invoked a *time stop*. He *teleported* to a point immediately ahead of Eadric, opened a *gate*, and hopped through. It was a strategy which the Alienist had previously used to extricate Mulissu from Graz'zt's clutches.
Time recommenced.

Eadric blinked, saw Mostin beckoning toward a serene vista, and was instantly transported.

*

The Ahma, sat astride Narh, was high on a mountain; a narrow path wound downwards and away from him. Monasteries clung to the wooded lower slopes; isolated hermitages were perched on bare, snowy shoulders higher up. Below, wide vistas stretched to blue. It was an idyll, as if stolen from a dream he had once had in an innocent youth: a view of the Blessed Plain from the Beatitudes. Now, he seemed to be awakening from a nightmare; he removed his battered helm and breathed. The air was sweet and sharp and full with energy. All was pristine. The sky seemed composed of tiny motes which danced before his eyes, until he focused his sight.

High above, uncounted myriads of archons and devas whirled in the sky. Spheres of increasing brilliance seemed to issue up and away from him, defying laws of distance and perception. Beyond, the Magnitudes pulsed. The light – refracted through the planes of four interposing heavens – was still too overwhelming to gaze upon.

Ahma, the celestials sighed into his mind with one voice.

The massive vibration made Eadric shake.

Mostin stood looking back through the gate into the darkness of Shvar Choryati as it oozed around the portal, unable to penetrate. His pseudopod flexed nervously.

"Mostin..."

"I know they're above me," the Alienist said through gritted teeth. "That's why I'm not turning around and looking up."

"No. How did you..."

"We had to come a long way in. It might have followed you anywhere else. Believe me when I say I can think of more agreeable locales."

"I need to get back to the fight."

Mostin sighed. "That's precisely what you don't want to do, Eadric. It wants to eat your 'soul' – or whatever you term it. You need Nwm. This is out of your league."

"But the Sela..."

Sela! A pulse which made the mountain tremble.

"Tramst is dead," a familiar voice said.

Eadric turned to face Rintrah, Oronthon's Messenger. He was clad in a simple white gown.
"For the time being," the celestial added. "He is in transit, under Nehael's protection. There is some disagreement amongst the Host whether he is safe or not."

"Disagreement?" Mostin asked, averting his eyes. The notion amongst celestials was a novel one.

"Do you believe him safe?" The Ahma asked directly.

"Yes. But I am in the minority, and my opinion matters little."

"Ah, a demonstration of Empyreal initiative," Mostin sneered. He continued to look through the gate; the blackness had passed over, and was gravitating back to a more reliable source of light. There seemed to be no activity in the immediate vicinity; Shvar Choryati had scoured all bare. A ruddy moonlight had returned to the battlefield.

"I am fallible," Rintrah answered, unfazed. "Enitharmon, less so. How could I deny this basic fact?"

Mostin groaned, and turned to face the celestial, his expression one of nausea. "You are trite. You appeal to hierarchy to avoid responsibility: you are fundamentally disingenuous."

"I wish you were capable of understanding otherwise, Mostin..."

The Alienist became red and twitched. "Would it avoid the World being wracked because Oronthogorgon is having another existential crisis?"

"Enough!" Eadric's eyes flashed. "You forget where you are."

Wrath! Thunder echoed in the spheres above.

Mostin quailed – an expression which quickly became a pout – and turned back to look through the gate, positioning himself again so as not to observe Rintrah directly. Evidently, Eadric possessed some kind of home ground advantage.

Things seemed to be quiet through the portal.

"I'm done here," Mostin announced. "I'm going back through. As you're staying for a while, Eadric, maybe you can ask..."

"I can tell you nothing of the Aeon," Rintrah anticipated him.

"Whatever," Mostin grumbled. "I'm assuming you can figure out a way back. Mulissu was just as appreciative when I did the same for her."

Mostin vanished and the gate snapped shut.

"We should go this way," Rintrah smiled to Eadric. "The view is good."

"Rintrah, I cannot stay..."

"Certainly, you can – for a while. Mostin is correct in one thing; you can no longer meaningfully influence the outcome of this battle."
"Gone? Who is gone?" Eadric asked.

Rintrah raised an eyebrow. Evidently, this was also news to the Messenger. "The seven seraphs who entered Viridescence."

"Seraphim?" Aside from Enitharmon, none among the highest choir had left their Altitude since the Fall.

"These are eventful times," Rintrah nodded. "It would appear that Nehael has appropriated them."

(A Migration of Light).

Eadric was dumbfounded. Apparently, others amongst the Host were inclined to join them. A few – perhaps too eager – fell catastrophically, striking the plains below and vanishing.

Rintrah smiled. "Stay focused on the path ahead, and don't be distracted by what transpires above. Do not concern yourself too much; in Consciousness, all events are allegory. Let us walk a little way further; there is a tree I would like you to see."

"In the face of calamity, you seem in no hurry to act."

"I sense no diminishment in the quality of the light," Rintrah said wryly. "It is a prodigal spark which counsels action as the only means to induce motion. I am not here at Enitharmon's behest: I am His Messenger."

"Forgive me," Eadric nodded.

**

As the Quiescence of the Spheres dissolved and Mostin vanished, Ortwine, Lai and the remaining wizards found themselves in something of a predicament. The sidhe had quickly screened them, and Jalael had immediately disjoined Prahar's darkness in order to gain a better appreciation of the tactical situation. It was bad.

Temple units, who had been unable to endure the presence of Shvar Choryati, were routing to the north and west: great, curved swathes of lifeless corpses marked the passage of the Eater of Light.

Prince Tagur, who commanded the rearguard, had deployed a screen of knights to cover the retreat. Prahar led a vicious pursuit. Squadrons of death knights roamed and slew at will, cutting down stragglers and hurling themselves against any remaining pockets of resistance. Three large knots of Templars and their allies remained, but many of the doughtiest warriors – those in whom the light shone brightest – had been greedily devoured by the enemy.

Some distance away, outside of the zone where flight had been dampened, what remained of the Dark Choir – the arch-devas Irel and Shokad – gyrèd in the sky, locked in furious but inconclusive combat with Prince Orcus and a number of lesser demons.
Ortwine's perception identified Naatha, Guho and their wind-walking cabal half-a-minute distant. A hundred yards away, a demon materialized. And another. Rishih was active, and the teleportation circles were opening again. The consuming darkness – distracted momentarily a mile to the southeast – was moving back towards them. News of the disappearance of both the Ahma and the Sela was beginning to spread.

The sidhe turned to Mulissu.

"Remind me why it is exactly that you're here again?" She asked.

"Hlioth seems to think that some kind of evacuation is both possible and desirable."

Ortwine raised an eyebrow. "The witch?"

Mulissu nodded. "Her foresight is erratic, but occasionally inspired."

"I suppose so. I will negotiate some breathing space." She handed Mulissu her box of shades.

"You seek to parley?" Mulissu was incredulous. "At this juncture? Why would they listen to you? And why do you pay heed to Hlioth, of all people?"

Ortwine laughed.

Prahar, she spoke directly into his mind, but also into the thoughts of those other immortals who were present. I've got Sibud's talisman. Call off your dogs. I'm willing to make a deal.

[Guho + Rishih + Naatha]: Wait!

**

The Alienist glanced around nervously and licked his lips. He was nearing the point where he was becoming vulnerable; a decidedly undesirable situation. He reached out with his mind to contact Sho.

Moments later, the Infernal Tower appeared immediately before Mostin, rearing above him with its gate facing him.

[Sho]: I recommend that you embark quickly.

Mostin didn't need telling twice.

[Mulissu]: Mostin! Where the hell have you been? Never mind. Get to Kustus and what's left of the Flamines. Get them out of here.

[Mostin]: Why the hiatus?

[Jalael]: Ortwine is ceding the field and negotiating the safe recovery of casualties.

[Mostin] (Mad Laughter): Safe? I notice a certain chthonic void seems
undistracted by any diplomatic protocols. And since when did Ortwine become the
chief ambassador of Wyre?

[Mulissu] (Irritated): Since she could lie better than anyone else! Now make
haste!

**

"A weregild, so to speak," Ortwine smiled easily. "Or reparations if you prefer. Or
simply bribery, if we can speak more directly."

Her apparent nonchalance belied her caution, and she was ready to sidestep into
Faerie at the first sign of treachery, or if any magical energies were suddenly
gathered. Before her, four great Cheshnite immortals – Prahar, Guho, Rishih and
Naatha – were arrayed, surrounded by dozens of undead and demonic retainers.

Ortwine was alone. She was also surprised to find that Sibud’s token was
attracting this much attention, and lamented the fact that she might be grossly
underestimating its value. The sidhe scanned the opposition.

Naatha, she had encountered before, but the others were new to her. Guho
writhed, a festering heap of corruption; larvae – which seemed to comprise her
entirety – shifted and flowed in shapes which paused at times to resemble that of
a mortal visage.

Prahar was mounted on a black monster of approximately equine shape; he was
clad in full harness, but his raised visor displayed a shrivelled countenance; one
which indicated both a malice and a madness of unguessable depth. From his
jaws – punctuated by rows of razor-sharp teeth – a sticky secretion dripped. He
raved and slavered, and seemed barely in control of his faculties.

Rishih – who stood slightly to one side, with obvious distaste for his peers –
appeared human; albeit one ancient and wicked. A weight of being afflicted him,
as though he craved annihilation; he wore only an ascetic’s garb, but bore a staff
of tremendous power.

Before them all stood Anumid, grudgingly invoked by the immortals as arbiter.
His veneer of civility was thin.

"But to which oaths can I bind you?" Ortwine continued. "I suspect that each of
you is as inclined to malfeasance as I in contractual matters. The answer is none,
of course; hence I continue to speak."

"We give you one hour," Anumid spat. "I do not speak for Shvar Choryati. Give
me the talisman. There are no assurances."

"Prahar should first dismiss his spell," Ortwine said reasonably. Within range of
her deific sight, Mostin’s tower had materialized again. "It will expedite our
retreat."

Naatha, also sensing the relocation of the infernal device, immediately assumed
treachery and targeted Ortwine with chains of antimagic.

The sidhe had vanished before she had even raised her hand.
Too bad, Ortwine's voice echoed in their minds, moments later.

Prahar became enraged. The others withdrew from him.

"Fortify your position before sunrise," Anumid hissed to Rishih and Naatha. "Let the maniac be concerned with any pursuit. Consolidate. The field is ours."

Anumid scowled, but felt an inward relief that Sibud's token was not in Prahar's hands. At least his own presence had averted the immortals coming to blows with one another. That had to be worth something. For the moment, at least.

*

Jalael had conjured a teleportation circle – the only one available to any of the remaining collegiate mages – through which the remnants of the Temple centre were fleeing. Tozinak had opened a gate; Mulissu a shadow avenue. Temple scrollbearers and flamines were being ushered into the Infernal Tower against their better judgement. At Mostin's suggestion, egress from the battlefield was being offered first to spellcasters; others – who weren't as strategically important – would have to make their own arrangements.

Demons harried them in droves; banishments were discharged.

**

As the very first light of dawn stole over the battlefield, a pillar of flame appeared amid the slaughter, at the same spot where Saint Tahl the Incorruptible had self-immolated. Fiery wings – briefly appearing and then vanishing – cradled Tahl as he corporeated again.

Looking around him, he wept.

"Come," Hlioth said, appearing from nowhere. "Before they do. We have lost much tonight."

In her hand, she held Drengh, Ninit's spear.

*

Eighty miles to the north, perched on a rocky crag, Nwm – in the form of an eagle with a battered aspect – awoke and screeched. His head hurt. He remembered little of his exhausted journey to his roost.

As he stretched his wings, he started. Squatting motionless on her haunches above him, perched upon an outcrop and staring southwards at the Pall of Dhatri, a lean figure; sable-clad, with scarlet hair flapping in the wind. She said nothing.

In his mind, another voice.

[Nehael]: About time. You have a busy day ahead.
Nwm groaned.

**

Temenun relaxed in his suites at Jashat. A victory, to be certain. He apprised a Naztharune servant that he had a visitor, and to admit Yeshe the Binder. She entered calmly.

"What do you know of the Urn?" She asked.

"It reaches beyond the Veils," he replied.

"You incited Visuit to interrupt my meditation?"

"Her instinct for war needs no prompting," Temenun purred.

"And the Urn?"

"Is safely buried in the deep again. Gu-Kaama has recovered it. Mostin inadvertently empowered her."

"Shvar Choryati is out of control. It drives northwards now toward Wyre. The Enforcer will eliminate the Anantam who are implicated in its conjuration if it passes her threshold. I assume that you have some contingency in mind?"

"I have a while yet to consider," the Tiger said smoothly. "And always time to indulge your curiosity, Yeshe."

"You are most gracious, brother," Yeshe smiled insincerely.

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**POST 29: TREE**

Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 30th August 2009, 02:16 PM

[SKADDING]: What happened when the Sela died?
[BREY]: Mind does not die.
[SKADDING]: But Tramst died. The kas was destroyed.
[BREY]: Nwm the Preceptor afforded him another.
[SKADDING]: But the Sela? At this juncture – what was its nature?
[BREY]: Why would it be other than it is? Your mind is too focused on doctrinal questions. Apprehend the Moment and eschew theology.
[SKADDING]: You evade the question.
[BREY]: And will continue to do so! You must be flexible in your understanding of hypostases; rigid dogma in this area – more than any other – is detrimental to the cultivation of Saizhan.
[SKADDING]: Please, indulge me. Sineig suggests that the ahmasaljan was the only component to traverse the Hahio. He said that a Flame of Oronthon was present; that it lingered, and he perceived it.
[BREY]: Perhaps such chose to reveal itself to him: how else could Sineig sense the imperceptible? The Sublime Essence. He posits a quincunx of natures in Tramst; others a quaternity. They can argue until the end of time and it will avail
nothing. The Irrenite tendency to formulate mystery is apparent in this; I feel duty bound to point out that certain dubious thaumaturgic practices also accompany his point of view.

[SKADDING]: I had, in fact, considered Skohsldaur.
[BREY]: I would advise against it.
[SKADDING]: My father has voiced a similar opinion. My argument is solid.
[BREY]: And what might that be?
[SKADDING]: I have been to Heaven; you have not. I have a perspective which is difficult to communicate.
[BREY] (Wrily): So spake the Nameless Fiend! This experience must surely carry weight. Still, I find the prospect of such tension disagreeable. Who will look to my bees if I choose such a demanding vehicle?
[SKADDING]: And devotion is for old men...
[BREY]: Wise old men, Skadding. Both wise and old.
[SKADDING]: You cling to life! I knew it!
[BREY]: Cling? Not I. To me, life is a dream both surreal and utterly poignant; I have faced certain death more times than I care to count, yet still I stand here. This also affords a certain perspective; one difficult to communicate...
[SKADDING]: Saizho.
[BREY]: No. This is mundane wisdom.
[SKADDING]: Is there such a thing?
[BREY]: All Wisdom is Mundane. Saizha?

**

They reached the crest of a hill, and Eadric found himself gazing into a deep ravine. It seemed utterly wild; a virgin corner of the mountain. An ancient yew dominated the chasm, by virtue of its presence rather than its stature. They began to descend towards it, and Eadric noticed celestials in its vicinity.

"It is profoundly sapient," Rintrah explained. "More so than any in the Host. And benign – for the most part. Many devas have been drawn to it. And some former Masters. It is the Yew-ludja; the tree in the courtyard of the Temple in Morne is one of its scions."

"Are there others in the Heavens?"

"Yes and no. Yew is the only ludja here – it was invoked at the Reversal. One of Oak’s scions rises on the Blessed Plain; and a Beech also – these are still profound, although of less magnitude. Others are in other places: and not all are kind. All emanate from the great Tree-ludja in Nizkur.

"They are rapidly awakening," Rintrah continued. "Tree in Nizkur seeks to generate a new axis mundi, so to speak. Nwm’s portals between planes serve to mark channels for the roots of its scions. And Hlioth’s efforts also. Certain magicks which have been invoked have carved paths more vigorously; transiting entities have left wakes which Tree has been quick to exploit. You might tell Nwm that his fears were unjustified: the celestial case was not asserted without cost."

"Then some kind of equilibrium is being established." The Ahma slowed his steed to a halt.

"Mind precedes, but its workings may be more subtle than you perceive in this case. And the motion of the Adversary also speeds the differentiation. Descend. I will wait here for you."
The Ahma dismounted from Narh and approached Yew quietly; an emotional state which seemed to come naturally, yet as though responding to some external demand. He walked a slow circuit around it. That it was cognizant of his thoughts and feelings – to a far greater extent than he himself was – Eadric had no doubt. The sheer weight of its consciousness was palpable.

He turned to observe Rintrah, but the great celestial was a blurred figure now receded from his mind. From a source deeper than Yew, Eadric knew, the Primordial Tree itself was generating a continuum around the ludja. A resonance which transformed that which was around it.

Devas moved aside to let him pass, whispering Ahma into his thoughts. They had acquired a quality of indefinable measure, which had set them apart from others in the Host. Taint was not the correct word, but a transformative effect of equal significance, and one to which he was sensitive. Were they now viridescent? An imprecise terminology bothered him; yet why systematize?

Viridescent, they whispered. Apparently, a point of doctrine had been made.

The boughs stretched up high above him; they seemed to bask in the Radiance pouring down from the Magnitudes. Silence, as the tree breathed Wisdom of impossible depth.

If this is Heaven, then it pleases me, Eadric thought.

He sat and prayed for the safe passage of the Sela.

**

The reincarnation of Tramst by Nwm in Nizkur was a quiet event, untroubled by any fanfare or ceremony.

Nwm proceeded to recall the wizards, affording Daunton the Diviner a far younger body than the one which the wizard had previously enjoyed. Daunton's mood improved considerably with a more youthful and dashing aspect, and a general limberness. Two massive reincarnations, followed by dozens more; invoked by Mesikammi, Lai, the Uediians, Temple Adepts sympathetic to the Reconciliation.

The roll of those who could not be recovered was long and depressing: Ninit and the boars; eight of Lai's twelve handmaidens; Temple grandees, penitents and scrollbearers; common soldiers too numerous to count.

Afterwards, Nwm arranged a meeting between Nehael and Mostin. An encounter which the Preceptor dreaded.

*

Mostin breathed with conscious measure and attempted to remain focused.

Nwm had referred to this place as Kilthei or Kinthei or Qinthei or some such: the air was pregnant with a power which Mostin had never before experienced; all seemed doused in an abundant, fertile energy. The walls which separated any
The number of worlds were gossamer-thin; Faerie and its primordial analogues; unnamed spirit dimensions, inhabited by monstrous animal-deities; the forgotten heavens of shamans who had been dead for a hundred generations. All were contained within the Green hollow. Each merely a step away.

A tree – the pivotal node through which Tree manifested, Mostin realized – stood above a small pond possessed of unusual clarity, upon the surface of which tiny motes of silver-green danced or floated. His own presence seemed to go unheeded. Surely not unnoticed. Dwarfed, in fact, beyond imagining. Yet it seemed merely a tree...

Nearby, Rimilin of the Skin sat cross-legged upon a flat stone, examining patterns within a leaf which the Tree had shed. He had been encysted or subsumed in some way; his Will erased, or captured and redirected. Unexpectedly, Mostin experienced a upwelling of profound empathy for the Acolyte. He turned to Nehael; her power was veiled, but still perceivable.

"Divinity becomes you," Mostin doffed his hat with his pseudopod. "Will you be taking a more proactive stance in the war?"

Nwm, standing to one side, sighed. This would be just too irritating. Ortwine observed lazily.

Nehael smiled. "I assert my inscrutability. You are here because of the Urn, Mostin. I also notice that you have Graz'zt in your robe pocket. Were I a vengeful goddess...but alas, I have no use for him. The Urn..."

"Soneillon has it."

"Yes," Teppu nodded. "This much I have determined. And for that, the prior I must assume some responsibility. Jovol's foresight was imperfect. I believe he layed a variety of other contingencies according to other possible futures."

"What are you?" Mostin fixed him with a stare.

"I have no idea," Teppu confessed. "I'll remember when I die."

"He is an agent of the Aeon," Nehael said.

"That is a theory," Teppu observed. "I have no evidence to support it. I am certainly Green; the question remains as to whether I can be both."

Nehael shrugged. "As far as culpability goes, the principal offender stands before us. Why did you send her Outside, Mostin?"

"Your judgements do not concern me," Mostin said haughtily.

"Four times Fallen now. She has escaped. Had you considered that she might build an Infinity around her?"

"You are familiar with my theories?" The Alienist was pleasantly surprised.

"I speak in a language you understand," Nehael said evenly. "I regret that the facts of the matter are incommunicable."

Mostin twitched.
"Do not mistake the truth for deific condescension," Nehael anticipated him.

"Or foresight, for that matter," she added before he could speak. "I know you well, Mostin."

"You've made your point," Mostin grumbled.

"The Viridity unfolds. The ludjas bind worlds together, but where will the remaining scions sprout? Tree is silent in this; all watch with anticipation. You should not berate yourself for abandoning the race for Azzagrat; you acted in good faith."

"I blame only Tozinak's stupidity," Mostin waved his appendage dismissively. "And his inappropriate use of oological metaphor when attempting to communicate. Nehael. What of the Aeon?"

"It is beyond my scrutiny," Nehael said. "I can offer you no advice. But I would ask you to reconsider your original plan."

Mostin cocked his head.

"The gates in Azzagrat, Mostin. You could still close them."

Mostin scowled. "Why? There is no longer any purpose."

"One single selfless act? A Flame Precedes the Aeon. What does it do, Mostin?"

"Ask your friend. He scribed it."

"My memory is poor," Teppu admitted. "You are better informed than I."

"It uncorks the Urn," Mostin explained. "In a manner of speaking. But the opportunity is passed. Did Jovol lay some kind of geas on Tozinak?"

Teppu sighed. "It is possible. He may also have been manipulated by another agent. I suspect that frustration with the imperfect game of prescience led to my abandoning it; I would urge you to do the same."

"I think not," Mostin smiled.

Nehael closed her eyes and exhaled.

Mostin condescended to give an inquiring look.

"Scions. An Oak and an Elm, north of Galda. Direct the Wyrish retreat towards them. And in response to your original question, yes."

"Reflexive is not pro-active."

"We have different methods," Nehael whispered. "Didn't you know? You may remain in Nizkur for now; I grant permission. Please refrain from disruptive activities."

"Permission?"

"Necessarily, when at war, a wise dictator invokes martial law," Nehael said drily.
"I also understand that you have seduced a clutch of Seraphim?"

Ortwine raised an eyebrow.

"News travels fast," Teppu sighed. "Or your sources are remarkably well-informed. And I have not even spoken with them. Tree has already dispatched them on various errands."

"The nature of which you are inclined to reveal?" The Alienist asked.

"If I knew what they were, I might."

Abruptly, the hairs on Ortwine's neck stood on end. Mostin's eyes bulged. A crescendo of magical energy which became almost deafening.

A pulse of tremendous power emanated from Tree. Dimension waxed sharp or retreated. A cascade of fortifying waves. Impregnability. Afterwards, silence. Somehow, the matrix possessed a pattern familiar to Mostin.

"What just happened?" Ortwine asked.

"NonGreen forms of interplanar travel have been discontinued," Teppu clapped.

"What?" Mostin's jaw dropped.

"Where?" Ortwine asked.

"Just this world," Nehael smiled. "Dreamers are unaffected."

"I do not dream," Mostin spoke the word as though it were an unsavory habit. "Is this a permanent imposition?"

"I would rather see it as a means to end other, temporary, impositions," Nwm grinned broadly.

Mostin flailed. "Well, you would. Your tree just dimensionally locked the whole damn planet. And what about my tower? What am I going to do now?"

"I recommend tree stride," Nwm said earnestly.

Mostin glared at Nehael. "And closing the gates? Recovering the Urn? How do you suggest I accomplish this?"

"Nwm. Hliothe. Or you could petition Cherry directly. Be careful – Cherry is a tricky one. And my instinct is that this is a temporary measure, if that is any consolation."

"If temporary means 'one billion years' then no, not particularly," the Alienist glared. "And exempting dreamers leaves a lot of big holes."

"Dream will be monitored," Nehael smiled.

The Seraphim, Mostin knew.

"A number of myriads have also joined them," Nehael caught the thought.

"The other scions?" Ortwine peered at her. "Are they all...sprouting? Do you know
"Where are they?"

"Not all," Nehael shook her head. "Some will remain hidden."

"Restricting traffic is wise," Ortwine nodded. "How do I get to Afqithan?"

"I believe previous portals will remain open," Nwm answered. "You should have asked me where they were earlier."

"Evidently," Ortwine raised an eyebrow.

"This is intolerable," Mostin spat. "I will find a way to circumvent this."

"No, Mostin, you will not," Nehael regarded him gravely. "For a little while, be patient. There are things specifically excluded or trapped here now against their will which dwarf you in significance. Perhaps it is better that you are restrained, or at least monitored."

"I?" He was incredulous.

"Mostin," she drew close. All notion of sophistry had vanished from her demeanour; she spoke into the core of his being. "Believe me when I say that I honour you and love you, Mostin, because such is my nature; but you must recognize that what you are – how you see and what you do – these things are anathema to me. You possess a potential for horror which disturbs me.

"And this," Nehael smiled as a clump of moss and sod grew in her hand. "This is Mine, Mostin. All of it. You are a guest. Don't forget it."

"Currently, I am a prisoner," Mostin seethed.

"If you wish egress, petition one who can transport you; I will do it if you request. I will take you outside – but not Outside. You will need to negotiate at a Green concursion if you wish to return inside. Unless you wish to dream."

"Bah!" Mostin grunted. "And what is a 'concursion' supposed to be?"

"A node. Interface. Gate."

"And how might I recognize these?"

"The scions, Mostin," Nehael smiled wryly. "Or in some cases, the ludjas themselves."

"I need to appeal to trees to be allowed to go about my normal business? Many of which, by your own admission, 'will remain hidden'?"

"Essentially, yes. Or one of we five."


Ah. Those five.

"Where are the ludjas themselves?" the Alienist demanded. "Assuming that you can be at least that forthcoming."

"Here in Nizkur: Oak, Elm and Ash. Others in the Beatitudes, Throile, Azzagrat."
On Avernus; in Faerie. In Mulhuk. In the Hidden Realm. Five have yet to manifest themselves..."

"Hidden Realm?"

"I can show you," Mesikammi offered.

"Your reality?" Mostin groaned. "You're as mad as I am. And what is this talk of Trees in Hell?"

"Some equilibria must be forced," Nehael smiled.

**

They gathered at Mostin's manse in the Forest of Nizkur; the building had acquired an eccentric turret of modest proportions, oddly at ease with the prevailing aesthetic and comfortable in the sylvan surroundings. The Infernal Tower's now-inaccessible extradimensional interior – like that of much of the manse itself – meant that Mostin had a much reduced living space. Nwm, and a number of goddesses, saints and wizards crowded around the Alienist's kitchen table.

Mostin had considered the significance of the Inertia of the Spheres – as he had scathingly termed Tree's reordering of planar reality – and determined that it was, in fact, utterly beyond his ability to bypass. He sighed, handing Nwm a piece of paper with many numbers and symbols scrawled upon it. It meant nothing to the Preceptor, whose magic was instinctive; the Alienist explained with forced patience.

"Half of the flamines have been consumed: tasty morsels, I'm sure. Many reservoirs are drained. The Pall of Dhatri is out of reach, and will likely remain so in any case. You can banish the Eater of Light; if you do, then you can say goodbye to those whom it ate. If you were to destroy it, they would be liberated: this would be preferable. Slay it. It'll hurt, but you've got enough juice at a stretch. Let me configure the spell, as I am otherwise now at a loose end." More than a hint of bitterness was present in Mostin's voice.

Nwm nodded.

Ortwine smiled coolly, and turned to Nwm. "I have a question. Did you really need to kill the Sela, or were you just making a point?"

"It seemed like a good idea at the time."

"I'm glad that you're carefully considering the ramifications of your actions," Mostin said acidly. "It's not like you've caused any problems so far."

"I approve of Tree's interdiction," Tahl spoke wearily. "The progress of Shvar Choryati has been slowed drastically. All enemy movements must also now occur conventionally."

Mulissu nodded. "I no longer need to invest more than half of my energy simply to maintain Fumaril's defense. We are in a better position than we were twelve hours ago."
"And elementals are considered sufficiently 'Green' to pass muster," Mostin complained.

"And I am tired of your incessant whining," Mulissu sighed. "Do you have nothing useful to contribute?"

"No," Mostin replied, staring at Nwm. "But I have a good many questions. What is Gihaahia's role in this? Why did you wake up with her looming over you?"

"I don't know that she has one," Nwm answered. "Her mandate is ... not incompatible ... with the exclusion. Perhaps Nehael has spoken with her."

"The succubus in her is exerting its charms," Ortwine said approvingly. "You can't keep a good demon down. She'll snare them all."

"Not all."

Ortwine shrugged. "Tree is acquiring an exciting variety of thralls. I believe I chose the right side."

"I have no doubt that you'll be on the winning side," Nwm remarked drily. "As to information which I possess to which you are not privy – yes, in a manner of speaking. Insofar as that nothing which has happened surprises me, although I wouldn't exactly say I've anticipated anything, either."

Tahl stood abruptly. "The Ahma has returned. He is at Galda, ordering the defense."

"Splendid. Assemble the minions," Ortwine waved her hand.

"And none of the other Great Wyrish Wizards have anything to contribute?" Mostin inquired.

"Not especially," Daunton said vaguely. "Do you think I should keep the beard?"

"Your hospitality is diminished," Waide grumbled. "Where are your fruit teas gone? And those little cakes? Your simulacrum is less attentive to replenishing your pantry than Orolde; she spends the day reclining, reading your insane scrawl."

Mostin had to agree. "I need a new apprentice."

"I have gnomes," Ortwine suggested.

Mostin's head bobbed. Gnomes were agreeable enough.

**

Shomei the Infernal exited the trance and pondered. It was as Ugales had described: two zones within Qematiel's range, in close proximity to one another, were inscrutable. None save the Adversary might have screened areas of such size from her spell, yet Shomei doubted it was his doing. She determined to investigate the first node: she suspected it was a Power, the presence of which could only be inferred obliquely.
Qematiel – an atavistic hellfire wyrm – abode within the realm of Mahazael Amaimon, King of the Fourth Quarter. An infernal monarch whose exact mandate – other than the reprobation of delinquent devils and distinguished wicked mortals – was hidden to all save the Nameless Fiend, Amaimon was unguessably powerful. He removed himself from Hell's routine workings altogether, and concerned himself with philosophical struggles on a more rarefied level.

Shomei herself had enjoyed the arch-fiend's hospitality for a brief while, after her abduction by the Akesoli in Afqithan. The outcasts and detritus of a hundred unnamed hells and abysms found their way to his demesnes, and were tolerated or punished for unknown reasons; Wyre's Enforcer had made her abode nearby, until she had been plucked to serve as the Claviger's slave.

Shomei armed herself with magic and opened a gate; she passed through into a blasted defile. Lightning wracked the dark skies. Descending carefully, she crossed poisonous rills and found herself in a wide, flat-bottomed canyon. A great thicket – an untended hazel coppice of willful aspect – filled much of it. It murmured power to her; Shomei paused suspiciously, unsure if it was a deific illusion or an empty lure set as some test.

Without warning, fire overwhelmed her and a great claw pushed her a hundred yards through the air, pinning her to the wall of the ravine. A vast, horned head reared before her; ancient draconic eyes – full of wisdom and malice – regarded her briefly, absorbing a thousand details in a glance. They rested on the sigils which the Infernalist bore upon her forehead.

"An Exempt." Qematiel snorted. "I am still inclined to break your body; the Tree recognizes you. It would have otherwise."

Shomei managed to scowl even as she writhed in pain. A ludja? Here? By whose permission?

Tree needs no permissions, Hazel whispered into her mind.

But which was the other? The second un-scryable area?

A brief, unendurable pain as barbs seemed to sink into Shomei's mind: evidently the other ludja was also fully aware of her thoughts. There was the looming threat of an execration so powerful that it would extinguish her.

Holly, she knew. She breathed deeply, mustered her will, and stared straight into Qematiel's eyes.

"What passes here?" Shomei the Infernal asked. The question was possessed of terrific power.

Qematiel regarded her quizzically; none before had ever been audacious enough to attempt to dominate her. It was a fair effort.

"You amuse me. I am not sure. But my role in it – after an eternity of preparation – is not the one I had anticipated."

"And the I?"

"It has migrated," the Wyrm replied. "As will I. Hell is receding."
In a dark abysm, Soneillon reflected on her circumstances. Events had not transpired as she might have preferred.

Atop her palace – a vast ziggurat which rose a mile into the skies above dense jungle – a tree had sprouted in a garden, sinking roots through marble and adamant, and fruiting in an instant: an event which coincided exactly with the return of the demoness – bearing Pharamne's Urn – from the wreck of Zelatar. It bore huge, ripe cherries which exuded an irresistible odor.

The demoness had warded herself in a heartbeat and retreated to a remote fastness, even as the tree had reached out to her mind and urged her to descend. She felt its consciousness pursue her, and she transported herself again. And again. She could not elude it.

Soneillon cursed, fled deep into a chthonic dream - a delirium of unbeing - and brooded.

**

**

POST 30: ARE WE READY?

Two miles to the north of Galda, the Sun was rising as squadrons of Templars hurried about their business. Mostin – floating inches above the ground - bent his thought northwest whilst eyeing the nearby Nwm suspiciously. The Preceptor stood before him, ankle-deep in mud and horsedung, and apparently enjoying the experience. A night of heavy rainfall and twenty thousand cavalry had turned the fields into a morass.

An hour before, Mostin – closeted within a secure shelter – had emerged from a reverie of motes with too many contraditors to even begin to make sense of. It was as though the universe – several universes, in fact – were being turned on their heads. And something had seemed to reach toward him through the Web. As if its ineffable divination had been somehow perceived. Impossible. He glanced around.

The Temple forces – swollen by more of the Illuminated of Morne, as well as Foide's skeptical vassals and the northern aristocracy of Ialde and Dramore – had entrenched at the southern end of the hills of Scir Cellod. In an ancient wood in a nearby valley, two scions – an Oak and an Elm – generated a power which encompassed the entire camp and a wide area beyond, excluding the enemy. The site was outside of Gihaahia's remit, but overlooked the Hynt Coched, the main artery which connected southern Wyre with the Thalassine cities.

Nwm had transported refugees who had fled to Nizkur or who had been reincarnated within its bounds; another ritual had opened a Green highway, speeding thousands – including the Wyrish Magi and many Temple grandees –
straight into the midst of Eadric's already swollen camp. Mostin had found the ego dissociation which accompanied the trip unsettling.

Galda – a town of some eighteen hundred which lay beneath the aegis of the scions – was now visible in the dawn, and its campaniles, rooftops and walls thronged with armed sentries. Picquets and outriders were spread in a wide arc to the limit of the Trees' protection and about the town.

Beyond was subject to the depredations of two demonic magnates – Orcus and Pazuzu – and those amongst the remaining fiendish population which they had gathered about them. Both were operating without reference to their respective invokers, Prahar and Yeshe; they skirmished continually with both each other and with archons and devas under the command of two more archfiends, Irel and Shokad: episeme princes who had recently adopted a more Adversarial view. In the absence of any extradimensional movement, wind walking had become the preferred means of travel amongst all; despite their inferior numbers, in this the celestials possessed a distinct advantage.

Cirone, another quaint walled settlement some twenty miles further south, had been utterly consumed by Shvar Choryati, and it was near its wreck that Prahar had elected to establish his camp: a hemisphere of darkness which defied the attempts of both Mostin and Daunton to penetrate with their sight. In a separate bubble – warded with even more potent defenses – Rishih and Naatha had raised a magical beachhead with a large contingent of Anantam magi, supported by compactees and bodyguards, the armored Giants of Danhaan. Against the backdrop of both, loomed the unpierceable wall of night which was the Pall of Dhatri: somewhere within that was the unguessably vast main Cheshnite force.

Shvar Choryati had eaten its way approximately north, on an eccentric path which made frequent detours to annihilate farming communities. It would reach Galda in three days and the Wyrish border in five, assuming a stimulus of light didn't draw it directly towards the Temple encampment. How it would interact with the scions would hopefully not be tested: Nwm planned to eliminate it before it advanced so far. It persisted on the edge of his perception like a cancer which infected the World.

*

Mostin scowled. "Yet another power is rising in Nizkur. What do you know of it?"

Nwm shook his head. "Nothing."

"A fey; most ancient." The Alienist studied his face minutely; Mostin's paranoia was becoming more acute and more evident by the hour. He was beginning to remind Nwm of a caged animal.

"Nothing," Nwm reiterated. "But the Green is moving in torrents everywhere, so I can't say I'm surprised."

"Go on," Ortwine turned her head. "Fey rivals hold an interest for me."

"You flatter yourself," Mostin sniffed. "You pose as much threat as a gnat to one such as this."

"I prefer the gadfly metaphor. And no sidhe stands so far above me."
"I mentioned nothing of sidhe," Mostin sighed. "You are such a parochial queen."

"Currently, my parish is rather larger than yours," Ortwine smiled. "Speak more of this fey: do not let my witty quips distract you."

"That you are both so ignorant of events which reference your paradigm is a source of continual amazement to me," the Alienist grumbled. "This is no woodland sprite. It is rather... wild, in the instinctual, primal sense. The fact that it is present suggests massive change. It is masculine. It does not rise from the Tree-matrix, although its catenary is parallel."

"That sounds fine," Nwm nodded, distracted. Hlioth and Mulissu were becoming impatient. Mesikammi had already departed. "Are we ready?"

*

All but one of the demons – a babau lurking behind a ruined pillar – fled as the five entities manifested amid a green surge. Perhaps deities recently awakened from some hibernation, the power of their arrival caused the tiles in the courtyard to crack with a sudden growth of moss and lichen.

One, covered in a hundred rolling eyes, spied the babau and dominated it quickly.

Another, ragged and scarred, gestured toward a pomegranate tree which had long since been reduced to a stump. It immediately regrew its limbs and sprouted tender green leaves.

The third – an opaque, sylph-like creature who floated above the ground – swore profusely as she looked at the wreck of her former home. A number of obscene execrations were directed toward the eye-covered entity.

A fourth – apparently a female human of middling years – waited with a sour face. After a pause, during which the others collected their thoughts, she struck her staff upon the flags with a resounding crack. A brief but massive flurry of magical energy followed.

The last – a goddess with a curved sword – stared at the the artificial heaven above her, watching it shift and writhe like a thing alive. A wave radiated visibly out and away from the group, reordering the matrix of the real into a new form. Crumbled masonry flew back into place, and debris of all kinds vanished.

Mulissu's demiplane, restored to a pristine state, rested peacefully again beneath its blue vault.

"Do you want the demon?" Mostin asked.

Mulissu struck it with a spell, petrifying it.

"I'll take the statue," she said.

Nwm glanced around. "Again. Are we ready?"

Grumbles of assent.
Nwm evoked a spell, causing four more trees – an almond, an olive, a cypress and a deodar – to spring up within the courtyard. Within the trunk of each – and the pomegranate also – was a small wooden door, perhaps five feet high and two wide.

"Which is which?" Ortwine inquired.

Nwm sighed. "The olive leads to one in the palace at Fumaril; the almond to the elm at Mostin’s cramped retreat; the pomegranate to a banyan in the garden of the Academy outside of Morne; the deodar to one similar near Deorham; the cypress to a tree near the entrance to the Claviger’s cave. Mesikammi is accomplishing spirit bindings with genii at the terminal locations, to prevent passage for those who are not permitted. Here, I have chosen species most familiar to Mulissu, based on her childhood experience."

"And it is appreciated," the savant nodded. "Although I find it rather shady, and may need to adjust the illumination."

"And from here Mostin can reach outside of your miniverse?" Ortwine asked.

The Alienist laughed bitterly. "No. Hlioth annexed the plane. This is now a Green node."

"Then why else are we here?"

Mostin scowled, and gestured with his appendage toward Mulissu.

The savant smiled savagely. "I've come for my spellbooks."

**

"It is as wicked as I, or I'm no judge of character. Still, I like this not one jot."

Standing on a high balcony, Yeshe the Binder regarded Temenun carefully. The Tiger, in turn, was gazing down at a blackthorn which had sprung overnight to full height, next to a likeness of the disgraced Ugra, Angula.

"If this is Nwm's doing," Yeshe continued, "then it appears we have underestimated him."

Temenun remained sanguine. The Blackthorn, impenetrable to divination, was silent.

"What else?" The Tiger asked.

"Its parent tree has annexed a large swathe of what was Angula’s realm in the forty-fifth abysm. Gu-Analas which have entered its presidio have not exited. Planar breaches and reality maelstroms still rage around it, but it has established a quiescence in its immediate vicinity. Deeper, the Great Bhitis are assembling at the Veils. What is your intuition?"

Temenun smiled and bared his fangs. "If Carasch avoids the streets of Azzagrat – or what is left of it – for fear of a Tree, then the fact that we are not all dead is cause for celebration."
"This thing is so potent?"

"It is. But it deals in generalities; it is not concerned with the specifics of our actions. We're playing by its rules. For the time being."

Yeshe was grim. "We are outmaneuvered. My dreams are full of avalam jvalats*. Still, Dream is our best recourse. The weak link."

"I will give it some thought," Temenun purred. "In the meantime, we should abandon the compound. Mobilize all reserves. Relocate to Thond."

"Are you mad?"

"I foresee."

"I will take Fumaril first," Yeshe spoke steadily. "I won't have it sitting on my flank."

"Then be swift!" Temenun's eyes narrowed. "I anticipate their counterattack will be furious, and soon. First, they must deal with Shvar Choryati. That will require much of their strength."

"It will be an easy test."

"We shall see. I have yet to invoke the ward."

"There is a good deal which you keep hidden," Yeshe observed. "Now is not the time to remain jealous of your prescience."

The Tiger said nothing. Temenun was of Utter Shûth: twenty thousand years he could recollect. To him, the ascendancy of the Sun was but a recent phenomenon; he had witnessed far stranger and more ancient things. Ebony had been an ally for a while, long before, during the Ice in the North.

_The Trees of the South held a greater power_, he recalled. Or perhaps age and distance clouded his memory. All of Shûth had been jungle then; rich and verdant, and malign as Throile.

Yeshe turned her head, and a discordant clash of gongs sounded from deep within the Temple, signalling that Idyam, the demilich, was finally deigning to take counsel.

As if in response, Anumid's voice echoed in the minds of every immortal.

_The Tree is no threat: I have seen beyond the Veils. In her mercy Cheshne spares the interlopers on her threshold, but she exacts a price: one will return; one other will join her. A Great One. Kaala-anala demands that you raise her pavillion. Henceforth, the Fires of Death will abide in the Temple. Visuit will attend her. Jahi and Yeshe may remain. The rest of you will continue your removal to Thond: you will pay homage._

"Indeed?" Temenun spoke softly, but those a hundred miles distant still heard him.

_In this I am the Mouthpiece of Cheshne. I may not be gainsayed._
"Of course," the Tiger purred.

**

Eadric drew a heavy fur across the opening to his tent and turned to sit on a crude stool. An oil-lamp dimly lit the space: a ten-foot circle with spartan furnishings. There was no pallet; although he found the experience refreshing on occasion, the Ahma did not require sleep. Only privacy.

In his left hand, he held a sphere of adamant, upon the surface of which color might occasionally move; in his right, Lukarn, its light currently subdued.

He tapped the former with the latter, eliciting brief flashes of total illumination.

Show Yourself, the Ahma commanded.

The face of Prince Graz'zt appeared.

Eadric resisted the urge to smash the globe with his weapon and cut down the demon as he materialized. Instead, he breathed and slowly mastered himself.

"Times change. This will be our one and only conversation, Angula; or rather, you will remain silent and simply listen, as dialogue holds no interest for me: if you attempt to speak, I will annihilate you. That which you were is no more; you have exhausted your possibilities. You are no longer relevant.

"Now, I have a quandary: one you can probably appreciate. As the Ahma, I have pronounced death upon you: this judgment is infallible. Yet, at present, you persist; due in no small part to my being distracted by other, more pressing concerns. As you are also currently the property of Mostin the Metagnostic, it might be considered an act of legal trespass were I to smite you as you so richly deserve.

"Still, I am not inclined to commute this sentence, but merely suspend it on the basis of my friendship with the wizard and the fact that he recently saved my life again. Ironically, there are few others I would entrust you to: I am secure in the knowledge that Mostin can always out-think you, and that he cannot use you for anything that he couldn't find another way of doing anyway. This decision is pragmatic.

"This is your predicament: until such time as Mostin grows weary of your novelty and dispossess himself of you, your continued existence is relatively assured; at that point, your future becomes more uncertain. I will not exchange good Temple money to procure you, but moral persuasion might be brought to bear upon any subsequent owner to render you into the custody of the righteous. Assuming Mostin himself experiences no such urges. Here, then, are my words to you:

"First, as your moral instructor: use your remaining time to reflect on the eternity of suffering you have caused, and seek to experience one single iota of remorse: a task I deem at the very limit of your ability to achieve. I remind you of this out of duty, more than from any expectation that you will actually follow my advice.

"Second, as your judge and executioner: even were I persuaded of your contrition and moved to mercy, Prince Tagur reminds me that you are still eligible for the death penalty under Wyrish law, which makes no exception for your
demonic status. I would, of course, enforce the decision of any secular court in this matter. This knowledge will make your moral quest more achievable as possible notions of reward or release will not distract you from your purpose.

"Third, as one injured personally: my forgiveness, or lack thereof, is inconsequential. I am one of countless wronged, and to forgive is not my function – I am the Ahma. Nonetheless, I will cite my father's murder, the assassination of Cynric of Morne, and the abduction and torture of Nehael as those crimes which wounded me most grievously. If that knowledge stirs some measure of satisfaction in you, I refer you back to my first article of advice.

"If you have words, you may now speak. Please be concise in your delivery: I have many matters to attend to."

From his prison, the demon Graz'zt stared impassively at Eadric.

**

From a vantage point where Dream and Void and Madness met, a place where apparitions strove to manifest, and tendrils of unknown purpose writhed in the dreams of chthonic deities, the demoness Soneillon watched, and waited. Few immortal psychoses could reach so deep.

Black fire had kindled at the Veils of Oblivion, ascending in liquid sheets which incinerated all vestige of Being to reveal a vast, glorious emptiness. An ocean of nothingness which promised a final end to all suffering.

After what may have been eternities, on its margin a terrible shape began to form. In revulsion, it twisted at its own substance: a forced reification, effluxed by Unbeing itself, or its shadow to some unknown degree. Flame and death surrounded it. It demanded obedience.

The demoness abased herself.

With a passing thought, Kaalaanala – the Primordial Fear of Destruction – annihilated Soneillon in an agony of unguessable magnitude; moments later, the demoness arose again from the Void. The passage had left her sated and subdued. Soneillon swayed drowsily; she was permitted to enjoy the sensation only briefly.

A thought which was a command was turned toward her. Soneillon hurried to obey: locate the goddess Visuit in Dream and bring her to Azzagrat.

**

Nehael stood beside the Tree, feeling the texture of its bark with her fingertips. Nearby, Rimilin of the Skin slept with his face pressed to the moss. The goddess looked up to Teppu, who sat in the Tree's lower branches.

The sprite grinned. "A great Bhiti is coming. Do Uedii and Cheshne send ambassadors or exchange hostages?"

"Is there a distinction?" Nehael asked. "Some equilibria must be bought dearly."
She will remain in the Temple in Jashat. Her actions are circumscribed."

"Within which bounds?" Teppu inquired archly.

Nehael sighed. "She cannot leave the Temple. She may act to the limit of her natural senses."

"With impunity?"

"With impunity."

"Then Jashat cannot be assailed."

"Realistically? No. At least, not at present."

"You might want to inform Eadric of this tidbit."

"The Ahma has achieved his objective to a large extent thus far: keep Wyre safe. This is his principal charge. He will make no ill-informed assaults beneath the Pall of Dhatri."

"And the Wild God?"

"Has yet to show himself."

"Does he have a name?"

"Hummaz."

"I like it. Did you choose it?"

"No. He did."

"Can you placate him, should his mood become violent?"

"I doubt it," Nehael smiled grimly.

**

Nwm groaned wearily, and looked around him. Sixty spellcasters, including the wizards. Waiting.

Mostin had called proceedings to a halt. That odd cluster of pinkish-brown motes he had previously observed had suddenly made sense.

"You'll have to try something different," Mostin said. "Temenun has warded Shvar Choryati"

"All other divinations run to the contrary," Nwm sighed. "Why must you always be so special?"

[Mostin]: Because Temenun is considerably more subtle than the Temple oracles. Fortunately, I am subtler still. You cannot stage a direct magical attack of any kind.
"Ngarh!" Nwm snarled. "Find me a meteoroid. Not too big."

"Not so big," Mesikammi nodded sagely. "They go very fast."

The Alienist scowled and concentrated. Ten minutes elapsed.

[Mostin]: Here's one.

Nwm exhaled. "Alright. Are we ready?"

Mostin had expected more preparation from Nwm; at least an idea. Vectors. Something. There was a huge surge of magical power and a sense that his reservoir might be sucked dry, accompanied by another dissociation which Mostin found disturbingly euphoric. A backlash of green lightning coursed over all present, arcing between them and burning them.

There was bright flash on the horizon. Silence. Even those who were otherwise insensitive to such things felt a breath of release as millions of souls were liberated: all of those whom the Eater of Life had consumed in its unguessably long history.

Around a minute passed before the noise of the impact struck them: a growl like distant thunder. A breeze began to stir, and quickly stiffened.

"Very impressive," Mostin conceded.** "That almost counts as deicide."

Nwm groaned, and shook his head.

Even as he had erased *Shvar Choryati*, the very source of that shadow – or so it seemed to the Preceptor – had announced its arrival within the Interwoven Green with an expurgative necromancy: a spell which slew everything which remained alive within two leagues of Jashat which was not sworn in body and soul to the Dark Goddess.

Kaalaanala, the Fire of Death, abode in the Temple of Cheshne.

"Those which glow abominably," a term for powerful celestials.

**Epic conjuration/400d20 bludgeoning damage! Yay!"

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*POST 31: MINI-UPDATE*

Posted by: Sepulchrace II at ENWorld on 22nd October 2009, 08:09 AM

Which was to have been part of a longer update, but it seemed apt to post it now.

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[Jalael]: Observe.

The imp appeared with a *pop!*. It bowed.

[Mostin]: That was not a conjuration. That was a fly.

[Jalael]: In a small world, transmutation is the future. What you cannot conjure, you can transform and coerce: functionally, they equate to the same thing – one *dispel* and they're gone.

[Mostin]: I am no mere *summoner*. I am the binder of the Horror. I have mastered Celestial Princes. Dukes of Hell quail at the very mention of my name.

[Jalael]: You need to move with the times. Think about it: [equation].

[Mostin]: !

[Shomei]: Greetings.

[Mostin]: Finally, you condescend. What transpires?

[Shomei]: In the last hour? Agalaierept has seized the throne room and the citadel with the second legion. Chamosh is backing his bid, citing the need to maintain order; Astaroth manipulates both of them. Belial has crowned himself emperor in Abriymoch. Azazel is undeclared but has moved the standard and two hundred legions to Avernus, including Bune and his malebranche shock troops. The Iron City is locked tighter than...no cosmic superlative is possible. None of the Antagonists are condescending to involve themselves. Yet. When that happens, things will really heat up.

[Mostin]: And you?

[Shomei]: I remain in the library, observing all with wry detachment. Hell needs a good war, in any case; cull the weak and eliminate some bureaucrats, I say. Can't be bad. The Ludjas, Mostin. Two of them, a Hazel and a Holly: they are incredibly potent. Hazel's Will...Azazel understands where the real locus of power now lies.

[Mostin]: You are advising him?

[Shomei]: I admit I have a soft spot for him.

[Mostin]: You still play the same game, Shomei.

[Shomei]: Fear not. I play well.

[Mostin] (Wrily): And who pulls your strings? A Tree?

[Shomei]: Actually, I suspect Amaimon.

[Mostin]: I saw a wyrm in the Web. Why?

[Shomei]: Qematiel is on the Prime.

[Mostin]: *What? How?*

[Shomei]: Hazel has taken a liking to her.

[Mostin]: What has happened, Shomei?

[Shomei]: The *I* has shifted Its paradigm. It has incarnated as a deity in Nizkur.

[Mostin]: Ah. More of a Fey primal, really. Do you believe this is an artifice? [Shomei]: On balance, no. But nor do I think it's permanent.

Mostin opened his wine cabinet, and poured himself a large glass of *kschiff*. This news would require some readjustment.

**

"What news?" Eadric asked with mock enthusiasm.

Nwm sat, and gestured toward another stool. "I suggest you do the same. Those whom *Shvar Choryati* ate are gone."

"Gone?" Eadric asked.
"As in not recoverable. *Reincarnation* is not an option. They were...snatched. As it were. They have already been afforded new forms."

"By whom?"

"The principal suspect is a fey entity named *Hummaz*. Mostin equates him with 'Oronthon's Adversary in the diminishing Infinity.' Mostin's terminology is odd, but I understand his gist. The transition might be likened to Teppu's; or perhaps more akin to Nehael's."

Time seemed to slow to a crawl for the *Ahma*. He cocked his head and looked at Nwm. "You are telling me..."

"There is no Adversary."

There is no Adversary.

"And...this...Hummaz?" The *Ahma* inquired.

"That is a relationship you must negotiate. He is wild; fickle; violent; passionate. And prurient."


"None. More accurately, such concepts are not germane. Will has become Instinct."

"Magic?" The *Ahma* asked tentatively.

Nwm stretched his arms apart.

Eadric groaned.

"He's laid claim to a substantial tract of forest. He has a number of servitors around him."

"Servitors?"

"But I do not believe him to be overtly *political,*" Nwm added hastily. "He is innocent of such matters – and yes, I choose my language carefully. Eadric, if you have any remaining notions of sin, you would do best to divest yourself of them. The Axes have shifted. Wherever they're going, it's not back."

"I have only one question," Eadric spoke steadily. "Is it possible that Oronthon's Adversary – whom, lest we forget, possesses a not undeserved reputation for being the most conniving and deceitful entity in existence – has somehow duped the Tree-*Ludja*?"

Nwm considered briefly, and nodded. "That is a good question. I suppose time will tell."

"Do you bring other good news?"

"Oh yes," Nwm nodded. "Plenty. Remain seated. A chthonic deity named *Kaalaanala* has taken up residence in Jashat. Orcus has withdrawn from the front:
he fled from Irel over Ardan, and could be anywhere. Dhatri has settled in Thond – for the time being; she is hungry, after being carried around for so long. Two hosts have left the Temple compound: Visuit and Yeshe lead the smaller, and it will reach Fumaril in four days. The larger is bound for Thond: the demilich is moving with his deathshriekers and, I suspect, Temenun also. Aside from the goddess in residence and a few dozen priests, the Temple of Cheshne is empty."

"How do you know this?"

"Certain stones gossip too much."

"Are you suggesting an assault?" The Ahma asked.

Nwm shook his head fervently. "Quite the opposite. She would kill us all. Avoid going within ten miles, at all costs."

"We should move to intercept the smaller host. How many are there?"

"Twelve thousand, half of whom are cavalry. Plus light aerial support – succubi, mainly. And goristros – but only a few dozen: most of the temple defense is with the larger army. But Guho has joined them and there are lots of the longhairs in Visuit's train. They are currently grounded: Mulissu has made the weather uncomfortable. They are devising sorceries to counteract her spell."

"And Pazuzu?"

"Ortwine hunts him."

**

POST 32: STORM SORCERIES; DEMONS’ AMULETS

Nwm had described the weather as uncomfortable.

Mulissu had generated a windstorm thirty miles in diameter over the warm waters north of Pandicule, and moved it to occupy a position between Fumaril and Jashat; ahead of it, a derecho had formed through which tornados churned with distressing frequency.

Eadric sat upon Narh on a low rise in the darkness beneath the Pall of Dhatri, gazing southward at a large enemy host. Eastwards, the haunted city of Jashat and the soaring pinnacles of the Temple of Cheshne were a blot of corruption on his perception. The Ahma was magically concealed and his sight had been supernaturally enhanced to penetrate all shadows; still, his vision compared nothing to Lai’s, who balanced easily in hawk-shape upon his helm. The noise of the wind was deafening.

The enemy had erected a defense against the storm, creating a smaller bubble of calmer weather which mitigated – but did not altogether counter – the magicks invoked by Mulissu and her cabal. Conjured allies – monoliths, storm-drakes,
djinn and lesser elementals – skirmished continually with the Cheshnite outriders
and van: clouds formed, discharged lightning and dissipated, and downdrafts
erupted and vanished as a dozen competing sorcerous demands were placed on
the local weather system.

Visuit was less than a mile away, hewing her way through everything in her path.

[Lai]: You study your enemy?

[Eadric]: Yes.

[Lai]: Do you see any weakness?

[Eadric]: None. She is the perfect warrior.

[Lai]: And what is your strategy?

[Eadric]: Prayer. The adepts are exhausted; Nwm is almost empty of power.

An urge. The goddess paused in her butchery.

A feeling of quietude.

"She senses something is amiss. That she is being observed." Lai hissed and
squawked through the roaring wind.

"I thought we were inscrutable."

"And so we are," Lai nodded. "Warded from her sight, sound, touch, smell and all
her divine faculties. But not from her instincts."

"If that is the case..."

Before he could finish his sentence, a cloud passed over his consciousness,
numbing his soul.

*Kaalaanala*, he knew. Visuit had invoked the great *Bhiti*'s name; the Fires of
Death had instantly located him.

*"Enemy Captain. I know you're there."* Visuit's voice, and the urge to
unimaginable violence, carried to all across the battlefield.

The Butcher began to move towards them. She gestured with her hand: an
invitation to combat.

And now the ravenous perception of the Dark Goddess in Jashat was a terrible
presence in the *Ahma*'s mind.

*Get out of my head!*

...

*Get out!*

...

*Nehael!*
(I am powerless).

[YOU WILL DIE.]

"We have to get out of here," Lai said.

Eadric nodded.

The Green was warm as their forms dissolved into it. Annihilation became a memory.

**

Ortwine corporeated from wind walking and floated, invisible and mind blanked a mile above the water. The air was cold and clear. Heedless stirred restlessly in her hand.

She had chased a vaporous Pazuzu around the cape of Nivorn, across the hills of Ardan, and for more than a thousand miles over open ocean. The pursuit had lasted thirty-three hours, and had demanded a focus more than she thought herself capable of maintaining. Never losing sense of him. And he was more slippery than an eel; her initial attempts to dominate him had proven utterly futile.

Finally, convinced that he had eluded any pursuit, the demon gyred and turned towards the west. Ortwine waited patiently. She sheathed Heedless; it writhed as she forced it back into its scabbard, and then projected silent telepathic anger at the sidhe.

Pazuzu materialized and began to work magic; Ortwine cursed, and began to fly silently towards him at speed. She had no notion of his intention; she had no need: demon princes casting spells never boded well. She carefully scrutinized his shape as she closed, scanning him minutely.

Pazuzu – who had begun to invoke a ward of some complexity – stopped abruptly as he perceived the slightest breeze waft past him, and felt something snap. He began to scream with incredulity and rage and groped wildly at his throat.

Ortwine materialized a hundred yards ahead of him.

"You want this?" In her hand, she held his amulet.

He struck her, full force, with an eldritch thunderbolt. It dissipated upon contact with her.

Ortwine laughed.

He raised his hand as if to strike her again.

And instead became vaporous and vanished.

Ortwine scowled, and followed him with her Sight. She tied Pazuzu's amulet around her own neck.
Oh, that's good, she thought.
The chase resumed.

**

"What you seen to fail to appreciate," Mostin said to Nwm through gritted teeth, "Is the power of this dragon."

"She is a hellfire wyrm."

"Yes. No. Of sorts," the Alienist gave an irritated gesture. "She predates them. She may even predate the Fall. And she has not migrated in the sense of Hummaz. Not even in the sense of Mulissu – which is to say very little. She has been seduced by the Hazel-ludja; which apparently has connotations of magickal Will."

"Apparently so," Nwm nodded. "Although this is hardly a surprising correspondence."

"The Urn could..."

"Ngarh! You and your damned urn."

"It is pivotal," Mostin sighed. "If you think the Tree-ludja is omnipotent, think again. It is compromised by this admission of the Cheshnite Bhiti; and from the outset by permitting the I to remain here in any form. I use the Antinomian descriptor for Hummaz – which stands, according to Shomei, and she is reasonably well informed in such matters – because there are many infinities at work here invisible to you."

"And not to you?"

"Correct," Mostin nodded. "They are merely opaque. Many correspondences: Kaalaanala – Ancient Hellfire – the Wyrm – the Aeon."

"Why the Aeon?" Nwm asked suspiciously.

"I have concurred that it was the Aeon which...lurched...at me through the web of motes." [Formula]

"Why do you persist in..."

"It is my contention that the Aeon is fundamentally draconic," Mostin stared madly. "It was Qematiel who...lurched...at me through the web of motes."

"Wait!" Nwm held up his hand. "I am lost. Which is it?"

Mostin stopped speaking, and considered. "Infinities are bleeding. It makes divination complex. In any event, I don't have the Urn, and the reason I don't have the Urn was because I was saving your sorry skins from annihilation; a service for which I am rewarded by a massive curtailment of magical power.

"How fortunate for us that you are so selfless," Nwm said drily.
"Do you understand that Qematiel is Ancient Hellfire. The wyrm which the Adversary will ride to the Oronthonist eschaton?" Mostin asked steadily.

"That reality is dead."

"Maybe. But Qematiel is not. This assumes, of course, the Adversary himself is not making some cosmic play. I have a plan..."

Nwm groaned.

"Hear me out," Mostin raised his appendage. "I need to convene a cabal. And I need your help..."

"Why?"

"I have an inkling. I will conjure Soneillon again as I need to talk to her. Outside of your loop. You have to get me there."

"You're insane. How far outside?"

"I don't care. Just far enough. Then I'll make my way to the astral retreat. But give me a couple of days. There are tomes in Ardanese monasteries which I need to consult."

"You have twenty-four hours. I plan on being in Fumaril thereafter."

Mostin scowled. "Can you get me to Esoc?"

"You can get there yourself," Nwm answered. "You'll have to walk the last mile, but it's generally polite to approach on foot, in any case." [Look: oak -> oak -> beech -> oak -> rowan]

"How many of these things have you made?"

"A few dozen," he shrugged. "It's getting hard to remember where they all are. Hlioth has fashioned many more."

**

[Ortwine]: Priestess!

[Mesikammi]: Your largeness?

[Ortwine]: Mesi, now is not the time for banter. My foe will not turn to let me kill him. I bore of this chase.

[Mesikammi]: You wish for my help?

[Ortwine]: I am issuing a divine command. Conjure a storm and force him down.

[Mesikammi]: Such an effect would be tiring at this distance.

[Ortwine]: There is kelp nearby; you can manifest yourself closer.

[Mesikammi]: I must also get wet?
[Ortwine]: I will grant you a boon, as befits faithful service.

[Mesikammi]: Perhaps a pretty bauble, recently won?

[Ortwine]: Mesi, do you spy on me? Truly, you are a worthy servant.

[Mesikammi]: An image of your holiness appears in my mind.

[Ortwine]: Such devotion should not go unrewarded. The amulet is a delight, I confess; I will bestow a different bounty, if you show a little patience.

[Mesikammi]: I can spare a little, but not too much.

Close by, the shamaness appeared. A wind began to gather.

**

Voicing her name was enough to invoke her; Nehael could offer no protection against her. This boded ill.

Presently, Oak and Elm shielded the Wyrish encampment with their power – not just the scions in the nearby vale, but the ludjas themselves, from deep within Nizkur. But this was not an effect which the Ahma was comfortable relying on – trees having their own, peculiar agenda. Nor was it of much use beyond the zone of the ludjas’ perception. And Eadric had no intention of entrenching permanently at Galda, despite the rapidly completed fortification of the site.

The Ahma therefore issued an edict, announced by archons who attended him. Trumpets rang, and the voices of celestials carried the proclamation to all within the Wyrish camp:

*The name of the enemy in Jashat is anathema and may not be spoken: likewise, the name of the enemy war-goddess, and any of the abhorred names of Ancient Darkness. All iconography, all material representation, all literature containing reference to any such entities is forthwith deemed blasphemous and must be surrendered immediately.*

*Practice Saizhan.*

Eadric summoned Tuan Muat, a Talion whose prior acts had denied him bliss, and anointed him. The Inquisition was formally revived.

"Start with the aristocracy," Eadric motioned. "Refrain from physical coercion until they’ve had a chance to think about it."

"Ahma," the Inquistor began. "Many of the most ancient Temple texts..."

"Impound them," Eadric said. "In fact, confiscate them first, then start on the aristocracy. We need to set a good example, after all. This is a practical measure, not a philosophical one."

"The Irrenites aren't going to like this," Tuan Muat observed.
"Bring me Sineig." Eadric sighed.

"And the wizards?"

Eadric groaned. "Be politic, Inquisitor. A little pragmatic hypocrisy is no bad thing. My concern is with the ignorant; wizards must monitor themselves."

"And if one articulates these forbidden names or concepts in one's thoughts?" Tagur asked.

"Then they must be demonstrated to be un-True," the Ahma nodded. "Hence, we practice Saizhan. We must move. I need a sizeable force before noon tomorrow: I plan to relieve Fumaril."

"How many?"

"Two thousand horse and eight thousand foot – half pike and half archers. Illuminated and Templars. I'll take whatever Thalassine bombards you have, as well. With cold iron shot."

"A little more notice would be appreciated," Prince Tagur sighed.

"Just get them together in one place. Nwm will do the rest."

"I understand the principle," Tagur said. "And a little more notice would be appreciated."

"Noted," the Ahma nodded. "You have my apology, your Highness. Your tenure in the Serenities does not seem to have diminished your acidity."

"Oh," Prince Tagur sounded mildly disappointed. "I had rather hoped that it had."

**

At midnight, in Nizkur, all was darkness.

In a certain set of glades named Raithin Gabro, to the south of the forest and not too far from the marches of Tyndur, a power accumulated around an ancient stone named the Cleta; one of the many erratics or storrs which dotted the valleys nearby.

The area was a wild one: bare hilltops thrust above dense stands of pine. Further west, a forlorn strand stretched beneath rearing cliffs. Those tracts had a reputation for savage and malicious feys of every hue. It was here that Hummaz had elected to establish his realm: an area, to all intents and purposes, of Faerie proper.

From the bole of the Tree, a hundred miles to the north, Nehael's perception ranged wide over the land, absorbing all.

"What do you see?" Teppu asked excitedly. "He makes no efforts to impede your sight?"

"None," Nehael sighed. "Faerie awakens. I see areas of dusk and gloam and magic, and quicklings moving in the shadows. I see sidhe fortresses perched on
windy crags, and hoary hunters preparing to ride. There are eight scions...

"Eight?"

"Holly and Hazel, obviously. A Willow. Others. Curiously, also a Yew. Ninit. The Boars. They have reincarnated. And those whom the Eater of Light consumed; the forest is alive."

"I sense no Awakening."

"I speak figuratively. The trees remain dormant, for the most part. But all of the most robust who were were taken by Shvar Choryati have transmigrated. They have lost none of their potency; they are now fey."

"Sidhe?"

"Many. And tree-wyrds and other genii. And nymphs and satyrs. The latter revel as we speak. Hummaz is drunk."

"One hopes that this is not a prelude to some rampage," Teppu sighed.

"His mood seems amiable enough. He smiles drowsily at me."

**

Mostin augmented and warded himself with powerful spells, and plane shifted to an area where reality maelstroms churned through Void. Mile-long shards of matter span slowly on their axes, flickering on the edge of annihilation.

A telepathic bond connected him to Jalael, Troap and Daunton, who were ensconced in the astral retreat, forty-seven shattered dimensions distant. Mostin's sensory experience was conveyed directly into the other wizards' minds.

[Daunton]: Pan left. Up a little.

Mostin scowled.

In the far distance, dominating all, a redoubt of substance which the Blackthorn-ludja had gathered around itself. Like a vast mountain floating capsized in space, fragments of Zelatar – complete with minarets, domes and viper groves – comprised its inverted flanks. About its base, a fence of lesser peaks thrust upwards to surround a forested bowl twenty miles wide, at the centre of which, Mostin knew, the malign Blackthorn brooded. Flights of chthonics – which erupted spontaneously and vanished as quickly – avoided proximity to the great Tree.

Mostin wrought magic, and brought his will to bear upon the planar flux near him. In a previous cycle, Graz'zt had made spells of his own for the same purpose: vast in scope, and taking millennia to complete. Strands of plasm flowed; matter quickly agglomerated, assuming shapes and angles possessed of a disturbing quality. The aesthetic was peculiar in the extreme.

The Alienist drew a rod of cold iron two feet long from a portable hole, and scratched a wide circle about himself quickly. Within it, he scribed a set of complex runes and glyphs with uncanny speed and precision, pausing occasionally to recollect. With a motion, the rod vanished and the scrawl became
a perfectly engraved tracery of iron.

Mostin stood inside the circle, muttered, and made a brief gesture.

A gate opened, and Soneillon appeared without duress.

Mostin recoiled, and reflexively assumed his pseudonatural shape as a churning vortex of darkness attempted to engulf him. It failed – barely – to penetrate a hemisphere which had sprung into existence around the wizard. Mostin swallowed with many mouths: he had thought to err in his protective ward with a wide margin of safety.

Soneillon withdrew and immediately became a demure child with wide eyes.

"Mostin. How delightful to see you again. Forgive my enthusiasm to embrace you."

Mostin remained in tentacled form, a thousand eyes directed suspiciously at the demoness. He knew that she could endure any magic he presently had at his command: in Uzzhin, it appeared, she had not only undergone a powerful pseudogenesis, but had taken tutelage with one of the elder horrors; spellwarp clung heavily to her. A number of transvalent spells protected her.

"Let's negotiate," the Alienist said wisely.

"A Flame Precedes the Aeon, Mostin. It troubles my dreams. What does it mean?"

Mostin resumed his humanoid shape, looked at his hand, and cocked his head quizzically. "Why do we find such forms necessary?"

"For you, sentimentality; for me, habit. Mostin, your evasiveness needs much work: the question still stands."

"You might volunteer a little first," the Alienist smiled. "Given the level of mutual distrust which we must first overcome. Note that I have conjured you without compulsion in a locale which is suitably secure for you."

"I have accepted an invitation; that hardly qualifies as grounds for debt. And good luck in your efforts to bind me. Still, I will tell you this: Carasch gathers darkness to himself; he prepares an oneiric assault. It will come in three days."

Mostin raised his eyebrows. "He is bold to move against the Seraphim. The Tree may swat him for his insolence."

"Or ignore him, as a fly. The fence has holes for those who know where to look. Only the great bhitis dream deeper than Carasch. A Flame Precedes the Aeon?"

"An opportunity to actualize the Urn, now passed," Mostin sighed.

"Which Flame?"

"In the Urgic sense; an iota of Perfect Radiance. Manifested when the Sela transmigrated."

"But you lost the Flame," Soneillon understood. "You search for another. Still, you withhold much; some component of the equation is absent."
"This is to be expected," Mostin nodded. "You are my enemy."

"I am/not what I am/not," Soneillon snorted. "And you I bear no more malice than the rest of Creation, Mostin. If I were to proffer a little more, would you bite?"

"In this case, I regret I must decline. There is no article of knowledge which you possess which might be of equivalent value. You can surrender the Urn, to be privy."

Soneillon smiled sweetly. "Unlikely. But I am also reminded that analas – which is to say flames – come in a variety of colors. Perhaps ruddy or black? One might ask why there is a Hellfire Atavism lurking in the woods? Or would Carasch burn with sufficient heat, I wonder? Or the goddess in Jashat, the Death-Anala herself?"

Mostin shifted uncomfortably.

"You see," Soneillon placed her palms together. "The Void has opened, Mostin. It draws other forms spiralling into it. My power waxes."

"A Tree sits atop your palace and has enslaved your cabal," Mostin sneered. "You have no foundation."

Soneillon drew close to the circle's edge, placing childlike hands upon the invisible barrier. "The Cherry can wait. Chthonic axes will hew its roots in due course. Understand me, Mostin: I have been Outside and I have returned. I know what you know; I've seen what you have seen. Is there no potential for productive discourse?"

"Certainly. That is why I called you. Some topics must presently remain taboo, however. With which did you apprentice when you were Outside?"

Soneillon laughed. "You would not believe me if I told you."

"An entity of some reputation, I assume?"

"Something hidden, Mostin."

"Then this I must know," Mostin said wryly.

"Vhorzhe," Soneillon whispered. "My sponsor is Vhorzhe, Mostin."

The Alienist gaped at her.

"I told you that you wouldn't believe me."

"No," Mostin said grimly; the solutions to a number of nagging equations had already presented themselves in his mind. "I believe you well enough. You found a Pseudodaemonic Infinity."

"You should be more careful when targeting your banishments, Mostin. I didn't even have to look."

"The spell is named Pilgrimage," Mostin said bitterly. "An apt descriptor in your case, or so it would appear. Trust me Soneillon, were necromancy within my purview, I'd have happily obliterated you instead."
She smiled coyly. "Mostin, sometimes you speak such charming words."

"Nor did I name any particular pseudolocus for the spell. I find the prospect of coincidence improbable."

"To discover that one has been manipulated by an unknown agent is never a happy moment," Soneillon's eyes narrowed.

[Daunton]: Vhorzhe?

[Troap]: Enlighten me?

[Jalael]: Mostin was apprenticed to him. A disagreeable sort, by all accounts. Shomei knew him. Mostin's over-hyped Horror abducted him previously.

Mostin scowled. A wizard's dirty laundry was seldom a pleasant sight.

[Mostin]: Enough! Begone! I will relate the shabby details in Fumaril.

The Alienist summarily dismissed the other wizards from his mind.

In a chamber of the astral retreat, Jalael looked hard at Daunton. "He is so damnably arrogant. Will he now strike some deal without our knowledge? Why do we endure this tyrannical lunatic as our spokesman?"

Daunton raised an eyebrow, and glanced at Graz'zt's token, which hung around the Hag's neck; her greatest treasure gained from the binding of the demon prince.

"Profit," the diviner replied sagely.

**

Otwine swore. Divine blood erupted in a cloud from delicate fey skin as a sonic of great magnitude struck her. Heedless was a blur in her hand. It screamed ecstatically.

The Demon had gone to ground on an unnamed island; ancient olive groves, long abandoned by some ocean-going culture, clung to the steep slopes of a dormant volcanic peak. The trees were being ripped from their roots and hurled into the sky from the force of the wind which Mesikammi had conjured.

Pazuzu spat a gout of corrupted acid over Ortwine; she saw the droplets spin through the air towards her and somehow avoided each. The wind carried the black vapor harmlessly away.

"This."

Ortwine opened a gashing wound across the demon's chest.

"Is."

And another.
"Just."
And another.
"Too."
And another.
"Easy."
And another.

It was. The cornered demon prince screamed in rage and frustration. His remaining magic was impotent against her; his claws could find no purchase to inject their ineffectual venom. She outpaced him. Out-fought him. Out-thought him. He was stuck in this accursed place.

"I yield," Pazuzu screeched above the wind. It was a violation of his pact with Yeshe, but he cared nothing for that any longer; all of the old rules had been overturned.

"Thanks," Ortwine cut his head off.

The gale subsided abruptly.

Reaching down, the sidhe-goddess retrieved a rod of intricate design ending in a golden claw. She plucked a long feather from the fallen demon's wing.

"For Mostin," she smiled to Mesikammi.

The clouds parted: for a moment, the Sun shone brighter; a great bird seemed to pass across its disc. Upon the ground, the broken remains of the Prince of the Lower Aerial Kingdoms burned swiftly; ash was carried away on a gentle breeze.

Ortwine made a rude gesture towards the Luminary. "I didn't ask for your opinion. I'd have taken another feather, if I'd known."

**

The Ahma retired grimly to his tent. As he entered, a movement within it prompted him to draw Lukarn in a flash.

He found himself gazing at his own reflection and swallowed. Resting on a stand, not a mirror but a round shield, burnished to perfection. Once Melimpur's shield, hammered fresh by celestial smiths, then cloven by Visuit; it had been cast yet again. A delicate device of Tree-and-Sun was etched upon it. Around its circle, between its rim and wide boss, phoenixes took flight; they seemed to wheel incessantly as the observer moved this way and that. Lukarn's light was reflected as with a green and gold fire.

"Strike it," a voice said from behind him. It was Jaliere.

"I..."

"Strike it!" The god demanded. "Hew at it with all your strength. Smash it. Shiver
it."

The Ahma gathered his power and dealt a terrific blow with his weapon, two-handed, striking the shield's upper rim. The stand shattered. The shield sank into the dirt floor under the force of the assault, but otherwise bore no mark.

"Good," Jaliere nodded.

"I..."

"Don't bother," the god of the forge grunted. "Your account is still firmly in the black."

"There is no debt. I have never expected payment." Eadric shook his head.

"Hence, you deserve it," Jaliere replied. The god regarded him. "Ahma, in Soan they build a great temple to you."

"No!" Eadric stepped back and his face contorted. "I cannot be worshipped."

"Then you must disabuse your worshippers of their prayerful notions," Jaliere sighed. "I wish you all the best in that endeavour."

"And why are they building temples? A few thousands; barely returned from death. They must feed themselves. Clothe themselves. Build shelter."

Jaliere laughed. "The gods and ancestors are not idle in Sisperi, Ahma. And it has already been five years."

"Five years?"

"In Sisperi. Saes changed the passage of time; increased the pace of mortality – if only for a little while. The negotiation between her and Ortwine? Were you not present?"

"In body only," the Ahma smiled.

Eadric lifted the shield, and wiped the dirt from its rim. The tree in its design was – unmistakeably – a yew.

"How did you know it was a Yew?" He asked.

"Lai sees much," Jaliere replied.

**

POST 33: FUMARIL – PART 1

Posted by: Sepuichrave II at ENWorld on 25th December 2009, 06:42 PM

The Ahma stood on the balcony of the Tyrant's palace and gazed eastwards. Tents now crowded the baileys below, but all was gloomy and indistinct, save the
throne room behind him; in that narrow space alone, Mulissu had found enough power to counteract the oppressive darkness of the Pall of Dhatri. It was the only light for a hundred miles.

Nwm – who rested after the transportation of many companies of Wyrish troops – had resolved to counter the spell locally, at least to a mile or two beyond Fumaril's walls. Mostin – unusually animated – had made calculations which made the Preceptor groan. To do so would be a massive drain on their already stretched magical resources.

Initially, Mostin had been sceptical; news of vampires and spectres had caused him to reconsider. "You need get the timing right. Fry as many as you can. And you need to start conserving resources. Squeeze every drop. I have it. Look: [Formula]."

"You may use plain speak."

"Lukarn," Mostin said. "As the focus. Gather them up and perform the ritual now. Then you take a rest. Be fresh later.

Nwm stared blankly.

"Limited resources," Mostin reminded him. "Visuit will be knocking on the doors in less than twelve hours."

"Very well. Limited resources. You're in. Help spread the pain around."

Eadric remained solemn throughout, brooding upon the strategic situation. As he handed Lukarn to Nwm for the purpose of the spell; a general presentiment of unease possessed him.

Visuit's maneuver with the multiple gates and chthonic summons at Cirone had demonstrated to the Ahma that the goddess – while relishing direct, bloody conflict – had a number of other tools at her disposal. Her assault would be fast, brutal, and extraordinarily well-coordinated. No chthonic intervention could tip the scales this time; in that regard, the threat was at least more quantifiable. Mostin had observed that banishing her again was also not possible as long as the Tree's interdict held. She must therefore be killed; Eadric's preferred solution, certainly, but not one which was obviously achievable.

The hairs of the back of his neck stood abruptly, and his eyes widened.

She was.

Here.

"Nwm!" He screamed. "Sword!"

The Preceptor tossed him back his weapon.

**

In the courtyard directly below the balcony there was an eruption of earth and rock which hurled flagstones fifty feet into the air; the ground heaved and rippled like liquid. Guho had conjured an earth-spirit – a dao prince of considerable
prestige – and negotiated a terrene passage for four travellers. The Worm-that-Walks was accompanied by the goddess Visuit, Yeshe the Binder, and Choach, manifesting a fresh form from his hidden phylactery.

Upon his arrival, the lich immediately scoured all trace of life from the courtyard with a massive acid evocation. Yeshe struck the façade of the palace with a powerful vibration which caused it to collapse. The Ahma and Nwm were borne away in an avalanche of rubble. The Alienist – alerted by a moment of prescience – had hopped onto a more secure foundation, now a pilon of masonry extending from the stricken building.

Mostin stopped time.

*

He considered, and many eyes absorbed many details; his mind processed perception rapidly. Why this moment? What was the qualifier which had divined this point in time for their attack? The Ahma parted momentarily from Lukam? Their foresight was subtle, or the synchronicity apt.

Visuit was in mid-leap, her monstrous weapon raised above her head and ready to fall; whether her target was Nwm or Eadric was impossible to say: it was likely that the goddess herself had not yet made that determination.

Guho was in the act of casting another transvalent spell; the accretion of magic around her revealed much. It was an enchantment; a bad one, designed to punch through mind blanks. And her attention was turned in his direction.

Choach and Yeshe were both gathering their power again, but their specific intention was unknown. Furthermore, a complex lattice of unidirectional antimagic protected both; a network of fine gaps in Mostin's arcane perception. That would be a problem.

Behind him, in the throne-room, Mesikammi was conjuring...something. Mulissu was fortifying herself: air crackled; the metallic reek of ozone reached his nose. Daunton had begun to protect himself as best he could. Tahl was roaring Get Out! at everyone else.

Ortwine's location was unknown.

Mostin augmented his consciousness to godlike proportions and refocused. Backlash cascaded over him.

*

As time recommenced, he targeted Guho with the Mhuerh Resonance, a sonic of terrific power. The aberration exploded into a million pieces.

The Alienist launched a disjunction at Yeshe and Choach, but it slithered off of their protective shells.

From nowhere, Heedless, flying through the air, bit into Visuit's gorget but was turned by the hammered layers of black adamant. Her armor pulsed with death runes in anger.
Mostin experienced a brief dissonance: in an unrealized future, the goddess had brought her weapon down upon Nwm, slaying him instantly, and cleaving into Eadric, smashing through his armor; in the realized, Ortwine had used a spell to avert the possibility at the last moment. Instead, Visuit's sword opened a wound from the Preceptor's shoulder to his belly and left him senseless.

The Ahma smote her with all his power. She leered at him.

At the behest of the goddess, Choach sealed the area surrounding Nwm, Eadric and Visuit with a transvalent spell: a spherical wall of force which encapsulated a bubble of antimagic. All dweomers failed within it, but Ortwine did not manifest; Mostin guessed that she had somehow jumped free.

Visuit smiled. As potent as her own artifacts might be, in an area of dead magic she had a huge advantage.

Yeshe struck Mostin with a spell contrived to imprison souls; his spellwarp absorbed it, energizing him. She followed with a quickened superb dispelling, divesting him of most of his magical protections.

Mulissu stopped time.

*

Mostin was poised upon the remains of the balcony at the very edge of illumination. Below, in shadow, Yeshe's contorted face was caught in the act of voicing an execration. Mulissu considered the bubble around Eadric and Visuit, and glanced at Yeshe and Choach. It would be one or the other.

She erected a prismatic wall directly in front of Mostin, sealing off three-quarters of the opening in the blasted façade, and preventing Choach from targeting either the Alienist or Daunton. Next, she conjured an air monolith, which remained in a paradoxical stasis, its unmoving-churning base threatening Yeshe and the lich. The savant gathered her thoughts.

Time recommenced.

*

Mulissu darted into the air and targeted the encysted antimagic surrounding the Ahma with a superb dispelling, evaporating it instantly. Simultaneously, the monolith was a churning vortex which sucked Choach into it.

With a thought, Mulissu stopped time again.

*

The savant scowled at Visuit. The Butcher was nigh-invulnerable to her magic, and her options with regard to the goddess were limited. She quickly scanned Yeshe with a powerful spell and raised an eyebrow.

You stupid, arrogant bitch, Mulissu thought. You have no idea

She invoked a mantle of egregious might, and concentrated.

Time recommenced.
Mulissu struck Yeshe with an *antimagic ray* and conjured two spheres of ball lightning which blazed as they hammered into the immortal. Yeshe gaped in pain and amazement. Tendrils of lightning wrapped around her.

Choach uttered a swift *destruction*, causing the elemental around him to disintegrate in an explosion of black fire, and directed an empowered *energy drain* at Mulissu which failed to pierce her wards.

Mostin stopped time.

The Alienist was shaken; his most potent defenses were stripped from him. He granted himself the power of flight, moved out from behind the *prismatic wall*, and briefly surveyed the scene. His magical sight had also been suppressed; shapes were blurry and vague.

Mulissu was floating above the courtyard, traceries of static lightning surrounding her. Choach was below her. Yeshe's power was muted by *antimagic*.

Mostin descended, conjured a *prismatic sphere* directly in front of Choach, and refocused.

Time recommenced.

Mostin became a hideous *thing*. A barbed tentacle lashed out and dragged the lich through the seven layers of shimmering light which surrounded the Alienist. Undaunted and unaffected, Choach dropped another *superb dispelling* — this time on the entire area below the *prismatic wall*.

All magic ceased, save for the *Pall of Dhatri* only. The pervasive gloom reasserted itself in the perception of all present; suddenly, everything became real, and shadowy.

For a brief moment, all eyes turned to Mostin.

His form remained the same.

From nowhere, a subdued *Heedless* was about Yeshe: Ortwine — now visible as a swift shadow — was finding gaps within the Binder's armor. Yeshe staggered under the assault.

Visuit glowered at the insensible Nwm and cut him down in an instant. She continued with a ferocious attack upon Eadric, dealing huge punishment to him and forcing him backwards. He could barely stand, much less focus; *Lukarn* dropped from his hand; his strength ebbed away.

A boar — one of the enormous *Gultheins*, conjured by Mesikammi — burst out of the throne-room and ploughed into Visuit, carrying her thirty feet into a
balustrade with an explosion of rubble. Yeshe became insubstantial and flitted away as Mulissu targeted her with a barrage of lightning orbs. Tahl leapt down to Nwm's side, and revivified him.

Mostin, a writhing mass of appendages, ripped Choach apart and flung skeletal remains in all directions.

Magic surged as a score of artifacts reawakened.

*

Visuit slew the boar with a single, great swipe of her sword. Power coursed through her again now. She turned her attention back to Eadric.

In a heartbeat, Ortwine closed the distance, scooped up Lukarn and pressed it into the Ahma's gauntleted fist. The weapon stirred; Eadric's faculties returned abruptly.

"That way," Ortwine said, orienting him. "You're doing fine."

Daunton erected a wall of force in front of the Butcher, sealing her into a corner.

"How long do we have?" Eadric asked.

"I'd guess about six seconds," Ortwine replied.

"Did I miss much?" Nwm asked. Tahl had healed him.

Another spell from Daunton facilitated a telepathic bond amongst all present.

**

[Mostin]: Ignore Yeshe. Target Visuit.

[Mulissu]: Forget it. I've got nothing. We need to take out her goon.

Yeshe – vaporous and hidden somewhere nearby in the gloom – used telekinesis to lift Visuit into the air over the wall of force and deposited her directly in front of Eadric, Nwm and Ortwine.

Mulissu – aware only of the Binder's approximate location – blasted the area around Yeshe and Mostin with a string of powerful electrical evocations. The Alienist – happily immune to lightning, and realizing the wisdom of Mulissu's words – followed suit with a sonic barrage.

[Nwm]: I'll take whatever you've got.

[Eadric + Mesikammi + Tahl]: Ready.

[Ortwine]: You'd better finish this.

A pillar of green fire consumed Visuit. She screamed in agony; a sound which rocked the foundations of Fumaril. Thundering forwards in a rage, she slew Nwm for a second time, her great, curved sword, cutting him limb from limb in a flurry
of deadly strokes.

Daunton struck the goddess with a *dispelling*; momentarily, her armor subsided into quiescence.

Yeshe had vanished into the darkness.

Mostin smote Visuit with a sonic *meteor swarm* – his last remaining big evocation. Mulissu began to conjure another elemental.

Ortwine, sensing opportunity, attacked in earnest; all of her focus was directed at parting Visuit's head from her shoulders. From the opposite side, Eadric hewed into her with *Lukarn*.

With three mighty strokes, Visuit dropped the *Ahma* like a stone, whirled her blade over her head, and clove into Ortwine, driving her backwards in a daze. With a back-handed swipe she slew Tahl the Incorruptible – who was moving to *revivify* Eadric – as an afterthought. Mostin had resorted to *magic missiles* which pulsed into the goddess.

Another boar crashed into Visuit, a great tusk impaling her through her armor and forcing her back yet again.

Yeshe corporeated for an instant beside Visuit before both dissolved into mist.

Mulissu cursed.

Mostin experienced it as a shiver; the subtlest aethers were singing in resonance.

Mesikammi gaped. She saw and heard, although no other might. The radiance was overwhelming; the sonority, perfect. She danced and clapped. "Beautiful Flames! Beautiful Flames!"

In the darkness, Mostin assumed a humanoid shape and considered. Nwm would self-incarnate in a few hours. The lich would slink away to his phylactery. Guho had more than a few worms hidden, no doubt.

But Eadric of Deorham had passed. He would be presented with a variety of choices.

*  

Ortwine's senses returned to her and she wiped the blood from her eyes. Her faculties reached out through the shadows, groping in search of Visuit and Yeshe. Nothing.

*Next time, Faerie.* Visuit's voice, echoing in Ortwine's mind.

The sidhe focused.

*Lai. Get here now. We need you.*

Mulissu turned to Daunton. "You will convoke the Wyrish Academy."

Daunton protested. "We are not in Wyre. And the Collegium is not Mulissu's to
command. And the Interdict prevents the spell, in any case. Mostin?"

"Do as she says," Mostin nodded. "Tell them to get here as fast as they can, by whatever means they can."

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I've been avoiding footnotes. But:

*Mulissu's main attack spells are electrically-substituted energy orbs with a variety of secondary (entangling, sickening etc.) and metamagic effects attached; I ruled that energy conjurations logically penetrate antimagic as well as ignore SR. Sketchy, but there you go. Yeshe had native resistance to electricity as well, but not much. She botched two DC 50 Fort saves.

*Mostin gets 9 tentacle attacks at +44 (2d8+14).

*Devastating Critical is the most broken feat ever.

*DM Note: I may have underestimated Visuit's CR for this encounter.