TALES OF WYRE – THREAD 11
VIRIDITY AND SAIZHAN

This is a copy of Sepulchrave’s ‘Viridity and Saizhan’ StoryHour at ENWorld

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POST 1: VIRIDITY AND SAIZHAN

Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 4th May 2005, 01:55 PM

In this thread I complain in a self-indulgent manner about my lot, and seek words of sympathy and advice from fellow ENWorlders.

Many thanks for kind words.

So I’ve decided to take some of your collective advice (the parts I like best, obviously) and pick up the keyboard again. I’m shooting for smaller, more frequent updates; I’m starting at a place in the campaign where I want to write, and the rest will follow - either as backstory, or as an update to The Mesalliance at some vague, unspecified future date.

Bear with me on this one.

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VIRIDITY AND SAIZHAN

Mostin the Metagnostic walked slowly through the hallway, the sound of his passage muted by a thick, crimson carpet which possessed a texture akin to fine velvet. He was not alone: his arcane sight revealed several unseen servants as they went about their chores, and a spined devil – one of a dozen compacted by the mansion’s former mistress years before – flapped silently past. Its contract with Mostin had been renewed for a further three decades, and it was cautious to avoid irritating the Alienist.

He entered a study, the curious furnishings of which – upon his explicit instruction – had remained unaltered since the Alienist had taken possession of the place. Closing the door behind him, he walked to an ornate cabinet, opened its door, and removed a crystal decanter. Carefully, he poured himself a large goblet of kschiff. Taking a single sip – and briefly savouring its potency – Mostin sank into a large leather chair and introspected for an hour.

Thoughts of Shomei, the simulacra and Vhorzhe preoccupied him.

Finally, he stirred himself, removed a small stone from his robe, and issued a sending to his apprentice, Orolde: No change, I assume?.

None.

Mostin sighed. After so long, he would have expected at least some kind of revelation to be forthcoming. Some kind of reaction. A threat. An assault.
Anything.

*Set a fire. I am coming.*

Mostin stood, exited the study by another door, and passed through several reception chambers into an echoing corridor carved in intricate relief. Traversing its length, he reached a small wooden portal bound with polished brass. The door opened smoothly, and Mostin entered a huge library by way of an opening concealed behind heavy purple drapes. Purposefully, he retrieved an ancient tome from a pile of books stacked neatly upon a small desk, muttered, and *teleported* into the parlour of a rustic manse several hundred miles to the south.

In the hills of Scir Cellod on the borders of Wyre, twenty yards outside of the limit circumscribed by the Claviger – an entity of deific power which curbed the excesses of Wyrish arcanists through an Enforcer of terrible power – Mostin had erected his *comfortable retreat*. His choice of locale – a wooded dell, through which an icy stream chattered noisily – had been inspired primarily by its proximity to the intangible border, although it also offered a certain secluded charm which was not entirely lost on the Wizard.

Mostin wordlessly handed his cloak to Orolde – a maimed sprite who served the Alienist with eccentric devotion – sighed, and descended into his cellar. The area was replete with potent wards, the continual renewal of which occupied a not inconsiderable portion of Mostin's time and resources. A dim green light – testament to a *dimensional lock* – suffused the place.

"Greetings gentlemen. I trust you are all well?"

From thaumatugic diagrams etched in precious metals upon the floor of the summoning room, three devils gazed impassively upon the Wizard: Titivilus, Murmuur and Furcas – Infernal magnates of high bearing, wielding wide dominion. None answered him. Malice flowed from them all.

"Are any of you feeling talkative?" The Alienist asked.

None replied. A great irony, Mostin thought to himself: both Furcus and Titivilus were renowned for their loquacity.

"Let me know when you are," Mostin said smoothly.

Silence penetrated the summoning room.

Mostin repaired to his study, and issued a number of *sendings*.

**

The Sidhe leaned upon a balcony of Irknaan's Fortress in self-reflection. She considered her fortune with emotional detachment and cold, sharp precision. She could not rationalize her change: in previous transmigrations she had been bawdy; licentious almost without limit. Now, she was frigid, and possessed of an eerie clarity which was so inherently *magickal* that reality itself had shifted, and become a dream in which she was the calm protagonist. Everything had become fey.

Ahead, to the horizon, there stretched a bubble of Otherworld: pure,
uncontaminated, as fresh as when the first flower had bloomed, and the first sprite had sprung into being. Beyond, for uncounted miles, lay a Shadow which was slowly receding. But behind, hidden by the towering mass of the castle, in the space once occupied by Jetheeg's range, potent magic had attached the bubble of Afqithan to Faerie proper. Many of the realm's inhabitants were either stirring again, or – in the case of those whom the taint had overwhelmed – fleeing to safer, darker places. Others, entirely new to the former demiplane, had migrated in small numbers to what was – for them – an undiscovered corner of the world. It was a phenomenon that had occurred before: such intrusions were not uncommon in the scheme of things, and Faerie continually spawned bastard demiplanes, or silently absorbed them. Troops of fauns, sprites and pucks of various persuasions – but with shared curiosity – found places beneath the great banyans. Afqithan was a mezzanine between two worlds, and the Sidhe's stronghold – although it had proven not unassailable – was a powerful bastion which straddled realities.

She had styled herself Queen of Afqithan like many before her had, and, no doubt, many after her would. She entertained great heroes, and ancient spirits, and minor gods of various kinds. She brooded on the deaths of past lovers, but wondered how she could have actually felt what she had once felt. At other times, musical invention obsessed her, and she would spend an hour composing a symphony, or a day contemplating a single cadence. Time froze, and raced past at breakneck speed.

Her subjects were, for the most part, accepting of her rule. To many, she had appeared in person, simply announcing "I am the Queen, now." Those who had found this a difficult prospect – and there had been a few – she had roundly bested, either in combat, or magic, or in some artistic contest. Some had become enamoured of her, others had been duped by her promises and intimations. But most had simply acquiesced to her claim: it was obvious that no other could rival her, and what would Afqithan be without a tyrant? In the event, she transpired to be less than despotic, and made no particular demand from her subjects at all, other than to be called your majesty.

She stood, and adjusted her harness: a soft leather coat with heavy studs, and a belt which bore a delicately curved blade. She wore a travel-stained cloak and boots – vestiges of her former self – and bore a light diadem cut from a gemstone. Her sudden self-awareness erupted as a cascade of chords seeking to escape from her mind and into her harp. She grimaced, and began to play. It was bitter, brutal, and poignant; full of anger and loathing, tinged with a wry self-mockery which embraced the absurd. The irresistible fate of the fey: a timeless childhood, or a perpetual decline; the knowledge that what was is always better than what is to come.

Her music became dark and ominous. Below the throne room, in a deep chamber etched with powerful runes, a gate to Azzagrat slumbered. It had been sealed at both ends: by Graz'zt himself, as he sabotaged a hundred portals into the Argent Palace from planes where he perceived a possible threat; and by Mostin the Metagnostic in the aftermath of the Great Confrontation. Its very presence troubled her: she seldom enjoyed a peace of mind. Most of the Castle's inhabitants – sprites of low stature – were oblivious to its existence, although a few were not: gnomes and goblins who had eavesdropped on their former masters' conversations; or quickling spies, lulled into obedience by the new Queen's glamoury.

The tune ceased. She turned, and entered the cavernous throne-room from the balcony. Great crystal lamps illuminated the hall, and hundreds of feys danced,
sang and capered about. Gifts and curses were freely exchanged. Her mood lightened somewhat: association with her own kind, she observed, was reassuring and gave her a sense of identity. And, as always, she was the focus of all attention. She ascended a dais of carved onyx, and relaxed into a small siege cast from precious metal and adorned with opals.

As she sat upon her throne, a feeling of deep satiation and langour overcame her.

*It's good to be Queen*, she thought.

She greeted the *sending* from the wizard with an expression of mild annoyance.

*Not now*, she thought. *You are interrupting a pavanne.*

*I need you to pull the wool over my Dukes' eyes. Are you up to it?*

Her interest was piqued, much to her annoyance, but her manner remained insouciant.

*Let me think on it*, she thought.

*I think I may eliminate Murmuur in front of the other two. They might be more apt to talk.*

*Don't be a fool. I'll come in the morning.*

*Pay close heed to time. A year might pass before you realize it.*

*Enough! I will come. Now go.*

The Queen sat briefly, but found further enjoyment of the revel impossible. She stood in irritation, cursed, and exited abruptly.

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The *Sela* was clad in the armour once worn by Lord Rede of Dramore, a martial paragon from a previous era, when war had been the business of the Temple. At his waist, he bore a six-flanged mace, forged by the same celestial smiths who had hammered Enitharmon's sword from a shard of thought. He was, at once, a perfect, unified consciousness, an awareness of everything that was, or is, or could be; but frail, mortal, imperfect. There was no 'he;' no observer, and nothing observed. There was a moving stillness. The potentiality of infinite bifurcation. An Adversary taunting him with a Green Void.

He sighed.

He knew little of the arts of war. Even when he had served the Temple, rather than *been* it, his role had been mainly oracular. The peculiar blending of the conventional and the Absolute – which Tramst embodied – did not seem to preclude gaps in his knowledge of mundane things. Strategy in war – amongst other things, such as royal tax protocols and the latest fashion in headwear – was one of those gaps.

For his captains he had picked Brey and Sercion – toward whom, since his ascension, he had payed particular notice. Neither were ready for the task that he
had appointed them: their training was far from complete, and each still expected and presumed more than either would admit, even to themselves. Expectation and presumption were qualities which the Sela had striven to eliminate from those who had accepted him as their teacher. Nonetheless, Tramst was satisfied that their role was what it must be: he observed all action with calm understanding. Fatalism and free will were, to him, an empty duality, the refutation of which was amply testified by his very existence – at least for those who saw the truth.

The Sela observed ideas and emotions move through his mind: an unending torrent of desire, fear, concern, humour, regret and hope. He placed the tortuous ramblings of conventional thought to one side – whilst still honouring them – and embraced his ground of being; and saw once again, that they were no different. Insight and compassion welled up within him. But, even there, his Adversary was with him: tempting him in that moment to mould reality, to shuck off his mortality, and with a passing thought reorder things as he knew they should be. Any limitation which the Sela possessed was self-imposed.

Consciously, he hung his mace upon a weapon stand and began to cast off his armour. Tramst struck a light, the dull glow of an oil-lamp suffused his tent, and he turned to observe a slender young man with olive skin sitting on his pallet. He had a tangled mass of hair, a face which rested with an impudent expression, and held a tray of candied chestnuts in his hand. He offered one to the Sela with a boyish grin.

"Want one?" He asked. "They're from Bedesh. They're good."

The Sela sat next to the youth, took one of the sweets, and chewed thoughtfully.

"Another?"

"No, thank-you," the Sela smiled. "One is enough. I'm glad you came: I miss you."

The youth shrugged. "One has to make one's own way. I don't regret anything, you know."

"I know," the Sela laughed, "and I know that you aren't here for the reason that I wish you were. You are merely curious. You wanted to see, rather than See."

The youth nodded, and popped another chestnut into his mouth.

"You are feeling insecure?" Tramst asked.

"Somewhat," the youth smiled.

"Your place in the scheme of things is assured. Do not be concerned. Although why I flatter your ego so is beyond me: it hardly needs inflating."

"I seem to have caught you in a happy mood," the youth grinned. "Which is all to the good. I was wondering if you might tell me..?"

"Ahh," the Sela said drily. "Your name. Unfortunately, that information is still confidential. It can be bought, but I fear that the price might be too high for you."

"I guessed as much, although I had to ask."
"Of course you did, dear boy."

The youth stood, and bowed rakishly. "I will take my leave, then. I look forward to events with great anticipation."

"As do I," Tramst smiled. "Remember that I love you."

"I will try my hardest to forget," the youth sighed. He vanished.

*  

When the Ahma entered the tent an hour later, the taint was still so profound that it threatened to overwhelm him. His head reeled. Fear and concern possessed him.

"What happened here?" Eadric asked.

"I wavered for a moment," Tramst smiled. "There can be no truth without doubt."

Eadric scowled.

"You have my permission to go. Return within a fortnight."

The Ahma cocked his head. "I don't..."

Then he received the sending from Mostin.

POST 2: EXECUTION AND PARLEY

Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 7th May 2005, 04:57 PM

Bluff, Diplomacy, Intimidate and Sense Motive. Mostin still hadn't developed an epic spell to penetrate a mind blank. These skills enjoy a brief renaissance.

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Execution and Parley.

"We should try again," Eadric groaned. He was exhausted: interrogating devils was tedious, unrewarding work. He stared hard at Ortwin – now Ortwine – and shifted uncomfortably. His adjustment to his (former?) friend's recent femininity continued to be difficult, and had proceeded in an intermittent fashion as revelations spasmodically shaped his perception. Her hauteur seemed genuine, even when directed towards him. Although prior manifestations of Ortwin had seldom been prone to honestly emote, and had never revealed the true extent of his feelings on any matter, to the Ahma's recollection. Coupled with the scant contact that he and the Sidhe had had with one another, Eadric knew that he did not know this creature. At all.

She seemed asexual, which was the most bizarre and implausible change from Eadric's view. Overt sexuality was not, apparently, Ortwin/e's defining
characteristic. The essence was something else. An expression of some other truth, which Eadric could not grasp.

*And her wit*, Eadric quailed internally. *A little caustic, perhaps*, as Nwm had drily remarked. It was a snare; a wire with vicious hooks, which dripped contempt. So precise. So erudite. She seemed to know everything. She was *tapped in* to something much bigger, with which in every successive incarnation, Ortwine had become more identified. *What would she become next?* He wondered. What was more Fae than a Sidhe-Queen? He shuddered.

Ortwin had craved a kingdom, and Ortwine – now in possession of one – enjoyed her spoils with an easy display of ancient majesty. A quality which might take half-a-century for a mortal ruler to develop, seemed to be her natural demeanour. It was impossible to determine whether it was an affectation, or not.

Every time she died, she returned with increasing potency. Nwm brought her back. He would always bring her back. And if Nwm died, who would bring the Druid back? Teppu? Nehael? Mesikämmi? If any of them died, would they come back stronger? It was a truth, an aspect of the Viridity. *Absorb and transform. Deify the mundane. Death into life.* The perfect expression of the Green, which arose – or such was Nwm’s contention – in inevitable response to other influences. For Saizhan, it presented neither a conflict nor a congruence.

“Are the trolls of mysticism mustering for another attack on your enfeebled preconceptions, *Ahma*?” Ortwine read his mood accurately. “Should we banish them with fly-swats?”

“I like you better as a goat,” Eadric replied.

“Then we must be grateful that you are not consulted in the matter,” Ortwine smiled. “Time is precious to me, *Ahma*. I would prefer that dreary obligations are resolved quickly. We should simply kill one.”

Eadric nodded.

*Eadric leaned on *Lukarn, his gauntleted fists gripping the crosspiece, resting his whole weight upon the point of the blade. He stretched up onto his toes.

Next to him, Ortwine sat on a low wooden stool. She looked only mildly interested.

“Which paradigm will prove the ascendant, I wonder?” The *Ahma* mused.

Titivilus said nothing.

Eadric raised an eyebrow. “Your silence is unnerving. It seems to run counter to the natural order of things.”

“Which one?” Ortwine asked. “I confess that Titivilus is my favourite – his manner is smooth, and I appreciate the efforts he makes towards presenting an agreeable social face. Furcus is haughty, but I respect his mind. Murmuur is somewhat dull, and lacks any feature which deserves to be preserved; but he is a soldier, and the least conniving and manipulative. Is he the most *good*, do you think?”

Silence.
"I could cut you down," Eadric sighed. He turned to Murmuur and Furcas. "Each of you in turn. It would bring the wards down, but still, none of you would survive long enough to react before your deaths. Nor could you intervene in each other’s demise."

Eadric stared at Murmuur: of the Dukes he alone, the Ahma knew, could be read. The glibness possessed by Furcas and Titivilus was impenetrable.

The possibility of an emotion passed across the devil’s eyes. Murmuur immediately knew that his thought had been perceived. And he knew that Eadric was not lying.

"And it would be a just punishment," Eadric continued. "I have the right to administer it."

Murmuur sneered.

Ortwine sat, apparently nonplussed. "What happens to the estate of an Infernal Duke, while he is in captivity? Are his possessions redistributed amongst other devils in his absence, or held in fief by his master until his return? How much fear do you each feel, now? Does the prospect of annihilation fill you with dread, or do you anticipate a blessed release from your miserable lot? Perhaps an iota of your essence will remain, tormented in some yet deeper Hell by fiends to whom you appear the merest of shadows. Perhaps Orthon will welcome the memory and remnant of your spirits back into his bosom. Or will the ancient, formless evil of the Abyss swallow you in unbeing? These are questions which intrigue me, and I have never before had the opportunity to voice them to any who might know."

Murmuur’s spittle fizzled against the invisible barrier.

"You doubt my sincerity?" Eadric asked.

The Ahma turned, and with two swift strokes felled Furcas, advisor to the Archfiend Dispater, and respected for aeons as one of Hell’s most effective intellectual weapons. As the Duke crumpled, Ortwine leapt forward with blinding speed and seized him by the neck. She quickly drew a dagger of purified silver, and thrust deep into the devil’s waiting throat. Ichor spilled over her. She tossed the corpse to the ground in a perfunctory manner.

"We are at war," Eadric grimaced, ignoring Murmuur and turning to the Nuncio of Dis. "This is no longer a parlour game, Titivilus. Archetypes are slain in our times, and new ones born. And I am not benign, Titivilus. I am wrathful. I am the Ahma. Do you understand?"

"Given the circumstances, a certain degree of cooperation might prove sensible," Titivilus conceded. "But I require guarantee of my release after I have testified, and assurances that you will not subsequently harass me."

Eadric furrowed his brow and stared hard at Titivilus. But his consciousness was turned towards Murmuur, alert to signs which could be read.

"If I were to allow anything other than self-interest to inform my behaviour when my existence is threatened, I would be a traitor to my principles," Titivilus smiled. "In the final analysis, survival is the preferable route, and the court of Pazuzu is quite welcoming, I hear. Do not be alarmed – I have fallen out of favour before; a millennium or two passes, and I wheedle my way back in again. My eccentricities
are forgiven in the face of my scheming brilliance."

"Forgiven?" Eadric asked.

"Overlooked might be a better word for you," Titivilus smiled. "Although, from my perspective, they amount to the same thing. I must also insist that you slay Murmuur before I co-operate. I can allow no witnesses to our exchange."

Eadric shook his head. "I will retain Murmuur as a safeguard against your duplicity. If you prove faithless, I will release him to inform your masters of your conduct, and to seek whatever revenge he deems appropriate."

"You have grown cruel, Eadric," Titivilus smirked. "There is hope for you yet."

"Your attempts at badinage bore me, devil," the Ahma sighed.

"The fiend has a point," Ortwin said. "Or half-a-point."

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"This is intolerable," Waide snapped. "You would abide beyond the Claviger's purview, but seek aid therein when it is convenient for you? Any one of us could establish ourselves outside of Wyre, but by choosing not to, we demonstrate our solidarity. But you persist in your conjurations on the very borders."

"I reside in Shomei's former home..." Mostin began.

"Infrequently," Waide objected.

"For once, I concur with Waide," Daunton sighed. "Your contribution is greatly missed. Commit yourself to a shared enterprise, Mostin. Information is beginning to flow freely between us, for the first time in ten generations."

"My present undertaking makes this an unlikely prospect," Mostin glared. "The Enforcer would terminate me."

"Your right to call an Assembly will not be universally recognized," Daunton observed. "Many will not come, if only to irritate you." He looked pointedly at Waide.

"Then I will speak to the Wyrish Wizards as an outsider," Mostin said sourly. "An embassy, if you will. You will issue the call, Daunton."

"Do not indulge him," Waide hissed. "Such an act would force me – and many others – to ignore you. You would cause a rift, Daunton."

"Waide," Mostin almost screeched, "if you were anywhere else, anywhere within a billion other cosmoi, then I would blast you for your pig-ignorance and show you what transmutation really means."

"But you cannot," Daunton smiled. "Isn't that, in itself, worth something to you?"

"Yes," Mostin said, gesturing irritably, "but it is not worth everything to me. You must be reflexive, or what you have built will atrophy and die. I will make a concession, however, to demonstrate my commitment to the Wyrish experiment."
"I doubt there is anything which would impress," Waide said.

"I will make Shomei's library freely available," Mostin replied. "On a reference-only basis, of course. No tomes will be removed from the property. And I believe there is a clause regarding theft between wizards in the Injunction."

"You are outrageous!" Waide said indignantly. "Your right to that inheritance is contested, in any case."

"The library is mine, and I will vigorously defend it against any claim to the contrary," Mostin said with narrowed eyes. "So it's settled then? The bribe is sufficiently large?"

"From my perspective, more than adequate," Daunton sighed pragmatically. "And I doubt any Wizard would decline your request in light of such an offer."

"Waide?" Mostin asked drily. "I hope you don't intend to abandon your magical peers on such a momentous occasion?"

"No," Waide replied, "any more than you would seek to exclude Rimilin from such a gathering. I believe he also maintains a temporary residence in Morne."

"Quite," Mostin said through gritted teeth.

"Do I detect the stench of another rivalry, Mostin?" Waide asked sarcastically.

At that moment, Mostin considered whether to disintegrate Waide, although it would have meant his own, inevitable demise at the hands of the Enforcer. Turning red, he mastered himself with difficulty.

"Perhaps you are not the heir apparent, after all," Waide added.

Mostin twitched, and smiled madly. "We can accomplish great things together Waide..."

"NO!" Waide spat. "What you mean to say is 'I, Mostin the Metagnostic can accomplish great things with your aid.' You would attempt to corral every Wizard in Wyre into some ritual for your edification, not for the elevation of magic or understanding. I will not be your lackey in a cabal which serves your own, deranged agenda. Don't think that I don't understand your motive in this. You wish to bind Graz'zt."

"Amongst other things. And if we don't do it first, he will be invoked by the Cult of Cheshne."

"I will not be drawn into a religious conflict."

"The distinction you seek to make is irrelevant," Mostin retorted.

"It is the Law of the Injunction."

"Within Wyre, yes. I do not suggest that we act within Wyre."

"You would be a magical dictator, who acts without restraint beyond a sanctuary, and would cower in it when threatened? This is not acceptable to me."
Mostin paused. Waide had a good point, although he didn't see the bigger picture. He breathed slowly.

"If assurances were made – inviolable contracts which protected the interests of every wizard involved – would you be philosophically opposed to participating in a ritual which could be demonstrated to..."

"With you at the helm? Never."

"You are ignorant, Waide."

"I suggest arbitration," Daunton said slyly. "We could appeal to the Claviger."

"This is beyond the Claviger's purview," Waide and Mostin said in chorus.

"Exactly," Daunton smiled. "The Claviger has no interest in the outcome of this dispute. Hence, it would be the ideal arbiter."

"You suggest asking for advice from the Claviger?" Waide laughed.

"In a manner of speaking," Daunton nodded. "But its judgment would have to be binding."

"But it could not use the Enforcer in pursuance of such an arrangement."

"I am suggesting that you abide by its decision," Daunton replied. "Nothing else. Or have we all forgotten the ability to act with civility unless threatened with annihilation?"

"It has been a long time since I have not been threatened with annihilation," Mostin said sourly. "But I'm unsure if we could present a case in intelligible terms. Most of my conflict with Waide stems from the fact that he is loathsome."

"Our mutual hatred transcends any rational compromise," Waide nodded. "However, I will not be branded as the one who refused the advice of the Claviger. I will agree to its decision."

"As will I," Mostin quickly backtracked.

"It may demand certain concessions," Daunton said carefully. "Are you sure that you are prepared to accept that possibility?"

"Naturally," Mostin answered. Concessions? He thought. "But I would like to address the Assembly first, to see if some other route cannot be found."

"Good luck," Waide said snidely.

"Where, and when?" Daunton asked.

"In three days, at my manse outside of Morne," Mostin replied smoothly. "In my library."

Waide bristled silently.
ORTWINE

Some millennia before – at a time when most of Wyre sat beneath hundreds of feet of ice – a sidhe-cambion named Suoninguhol had ruled the demiplane of Afqithan.

His succession had been swift and brutal, and accompanied by all manner of atrocious acts – as was common in the history of the place. The previous tyrant – the Loquai sorceress Mileze – escaped to Azzagrat where, in Graz'zt's court, she plotted revenge. Mileze had enjoyed several powerful Abyssal sponsors – a fact which, in itself, testified to her ability – but was, at that time, sworn to Zelatar.

When Graz'zt inevitably moved demons into Afqithan – the Prince was notoriously possessive of worlds he had annexed – most observers were shocked by the fact that Suoninguhol resisted all attempts to displace him from his fortress. Over the course of a year, Graz'zt attempted in various ways to wrest the castle – which contained a strategically vital gate to Azzagrat* – from Suoninguhol's grasp. Balors and mariliths were thrown against the stronghold, teams of kelvezu were dispatched to eliminate Suoninguhol, and powerful magics were invoked: the Prince even went so far as to manifest a body within Afqithan in an effort to directly assail the barrier which the cambion had erected. Nothing was effective. To make matters worse, Mileze was ambushed and slain by Suoninguhol's sister, Koilimilou, forcing Graz'zt to identify a new instrument of his will.

Frustrated, Graz'zt retreated his spirit to the Argent Palace, and contrived a spell which would peel Suoninguhol's fortress away from Afqithan and fling it into some nameless Abyssal plane wracked by negative energy. Despite his prognostications to the contrary, Graz'zt's spell failed, sending the Prince into a violent rage.

When he finally emerged from his tirade, Graz'zt swallowed his immense pride and negotiated a settlement with Suoninguhol – content to wait and extract his revenge at a more opportune time. He occupied himself with attempting to learn the identity the cambion's sponsor (the Prince had no doubt that Suoninguhol possessed one), and to groom his own chosen candidate – a Loquai named Irknaan – in the duties expected of a loyal subject of Azzagrat.

Time passed. Graz'zt became distracted in wars with Orcus, Soneillon and Fraz Urb'luu. Suoninguhol entrenched himself yet further, tightening his grip on Afqithan and compacting hundreds of fiends from a variety of interested demonic parties. His ascendancy seemed assured until, abruptly and without warning, Suoninguhol vanished. News quickly found its way to Zelatar, prompting Graz'zt to again invest the demiplane and, this time, successfully install Irknaan as king. Koilimilou was captured, but Irknaan chose to humiliate rather than eliminate her.
The gate was reopened and, for a while, Graz’zt was content. Afqithan's status was monitored by the Prince's demons, and Irknaan paid a hefty tribute for which he gained recognition in Azzagrat. Graz’zt's minions became favoured compactees of Loquai sorcerers; Loquai mercenaries found themselves fighting in wars from Yutuf to Throile. Suoninguhol's abode became known as Irknaan's Fortress, and the new king was left to explore and expand the nineteen sub-levels below it.

* 

When Irknaan's Fortress passed into Ortwine's possession, the Sidhe inherited something of a mixed fortune.

The castle was established upon a precipitous bastion of rock, unscalable from three sides, and reached by a narrow path cut into the sheer wall of the fourth; although assault from the ground was as an afterthought to its real defense. Its highest towers, which soared many hundreds of feet into the purple skies, were linked with bridges less than a foot wide: each hung like a strand of silk which glistened in the dusk. All of the fortress – except for a reception chamber to which a previous queen had pactbonded a dozen of the largest jariliths – was dimensionally locked against unwanted intrusion, but demons could still be conjured and bound within. Its interior could not be scried. The outcrop itself was reinforced by a spell of tremendous power, wrought long before by a goddess named Shuae.

The art of the Loquai suffused the place, with moving murals and columns of shadow, fashioned by magic over long centuries. The air whispered as one walked through the lofty and insubstantial upper halls, but the deep chambers seemed to have walls of impossible density: here all sound was muted, and light subdued. Carven reliefs, which displayed scenes of glorious hunts – or grotesque tortures – writhed as their stories unfolded to the observer. Broad stairs led to a wide platform upon which were roosted the four remaining tenebrous griffons, and the evil specimen once owned by Duke Ytryn – a chimaeric monster of unique form and singular foul disposition. Ortwine had tried, without success, to subdue the beast; it remained tethered by a two-hundred pound chain of adamant to a plinth of unbreakable marble.

At its deepest point, in a cleft which had been hewn into the bedrock by some unknown force, lay the now-sealed gate to Azzagrat; above it lay the summoning rooms, with a jackal-headed arcana daemon confined in a circle of binding by Mileze long before. There was a cavern in which eerie shades moved across still waters; a repository of tomes written in dead and forgotten languages; a forge, where Ainhorr had maintained a team of Azer smiths; quickling warrens, and chambers filled with torture devices. An armory of Faerie weapons, in a vault which was guarded by a symbol of insanity placed by Mostin, now housed the ten-foot vorpal sword Heedless.

Gnome thralls moved silently and efficiently throughout the castle, and a handful of quicklings – enchanted to obey Ortwine's desires – were still retained by the Queen. Gaggles of minor sprites hovered and chattered continually, and bearded feys with cudgels and pipes sang and caroused with nymphs and sylphs in the many small courtyards. Walled gardens, once home to bloodthorns and viper trees, now also contained more benign shrubbery – although Ortwine had allowed a few demonic saplings to remain, mainly as a curiosity.

The Queen knew that Irknaan's Fortress sat upon a crossroad of realities, and for her, the World of Men was never more than a step away. Yet if one rode beyond
the limit of burgeoning Faerie, the umbral taint of Afqithan still clung.** Invoked at the climax of the incident, as Mostin had wryly dubbed it, the planar rift was a growing at an exceptional rate: it would take a mere two millennia for Afqithan to be entirely subsumed by Faerie. Understanding the cartography of the place had been Ortwine's first task to herself: mentally cataloging every gate and portal (there were many); identifying areas where other worlds were closest; understanding each nuance in Afqithan's planar symmetry. Knowing which paths which led to sylvan glades, and which led to haunted copses.

Her hegemony stretched into Faerie, across wide tracts of forest and heath-covered moorlands, within which were hidden deep, wooded ravines. Beyond them lay mountains, a wide river, and the courts of noble sidhe in realms which stretched through space and time. In Afqithan itself – where the remnants of the Loquai numbered a few hundred – her rule was uncontested. Menicau, three times a turncoat, still dwelt in her citadel, but even she presented no threat, and had bowed her head in deference. A dozen other families retained estates with Ortwine's permission. But the Queen herself kept no Loquai, demon or cambion in her train.

Ortwine surveyed the land south of her walls. Trees which had sprung over the heaped corpses of fiends; the great contusions in the ground – caused when Azazel smote Irzho from the sky, and the balor had fallen like a black comet – now covered with green creepers. The chasm, caused by Soneillon's final realization of nonexistence, become a deep pool to which mist clung, with an air only of deep sorrow. Nwm's hand, at work.

The Sidhe-Queen pulled a pair of leather gloves over her hands, shifted her scimitar, and tied her hair back. Her perception changed momentarily as she walked between worlds: from Afqithan, to an area of grassy knolls in Methelhar, near the borders of Nizkur Forest. She retrieved a small, ornate box from her belt pouch, performed a complex manual operation, and whispered nine syllables of power.

A shadow avenue opened to Deorham. There, she would meet with Nwm, who would bear her to Sisperi: the Goddess Lai had requested an audience with her, and Ortwine had grudgingly agreed.

*The gate to Azzagrat is of ancient origin. It is constructed, not natural: the result of an immensely potent spell. It cannot be freely disjoined, and the ward protecting it would require a large and powerful cabal to penetrate. It can be sealed – presumably the intention is to allow it to function as a door which can be locked from either side.*

**The initial bubble of Faerie invoked by Teppu was four virtual miles in diameter, with Irknaan's Fortress at the dead centre.*
Soneillon.

The name echoed in his mind, and caused his stomach to turn.

The Ahma stood alone upon the porch of Mostin's manse in the cold pre-dawn, mist rising from his mouth and nostrils. A waning moon, riding high in the West, illuminated the grassy hills of Scir Cellod on the borders of Wyre with a silver-blue sheen, and cast long, violet shadows.

Eadric brooded: he had dreamed of her again. Her shadow clung to him like an insubstantial mist, gnawing at the corners of his awareness. For the hundredth time, he reenacted the events in Afqithan in his mind, searching for clues which may have eluded him, attempting to gain new perspectives.

"Her vestige remains in Dream," Teppu had assured him in the aftermath of the Confrontation. "She will fade, if you allow it. If you permit her echo to intrude upon your consciousness, it will lend her memory substance. A semblance of ens will crystallize. Remember – Nothing Becomes. And you are the Ahma: your thought will become manifest before most others. Let her go. Let her remain cradled in the bosom of the Ancient."

Eadric's throat and chest tightened with the memory of what had gone before. A single, tiny, corner of reality, subject to the strain of so many competing Infinities. Graz'zt's main force crumbling under the assault of Soneillon and her horde of augmented monsters. The Horror, unleashed by Mostin, and its frenzy of destruction in the West, abruptly ended by a swift stroke of Kostchtchie's hammer. The untimely evaporation of the Quiescence of the Spheres, and the onslaught of devils which had followed, sweeping everything before them. Gates opening, and rifts appearing, space buckling as demons fled to Azzagrat at their master's behest: Graz'zt working desperate magic in his sanctum as the greater threat of Orcus overrode all other concerns.

Eadric had sought relentlessly for Ainhorr within Irknaan's Fortress, and as Chaya had invoked gruesome necromancies, Shomei had hurled compacted devils at their foes and burned the lesser demons away with a celestial fire which had caused him to gape in wonder. The Ahma had hewn his way through Nalfeshnee bodyguards to reach the Balor. But even in his moment of triumph, as he had struck Ainhorr down, an ecstatic scream of extinction had echoed in his mind, rushing in a wave across the battlefield. Soneillon had fallen.

His mind had darkened as a spell of terrific force settled upon them. Impotent, Eadric had watched as the Akesoli had descended upon Shomei, and, in a trice, flayed her body – stripping her essence away and binding it in a subtle net of Amaimon's devising. Infernal justice – for her numerous misdemeanours – swiftly served upon she who had broken compacts, and flouted the iron law of Dis. The Ahma, burned and bloody, with armour rent and shield shivered, his strength all but spent, had nonetheless brandished Lukarn defiantly. But the devil Nahuzihis had raised a clawed hand.

"Stay," the word had issued like a foul breeze. "You have no authority here."

Despite his wards, their power had washed over him, and Lukarn had fallen limp at his side. The devils vanished, and as the glamour lifted, he had turned to face Chaya. She stood naked and scarred, her black gem smoking with the spirits of
the fiends it had consumed. Her mistress vanquished, her hatred for him had suddenly become palpable.

Still, she was no match for him. She had withdrawn.

Briefly, the Ahma had stood alone in the wreck of the throne room, the mangled corpses of demons – and Shomei's diabolic servitors – all about him. He had made his way uncertainly to a balcony, and gazed upon the blasted landscape below. Narzugon cavalry thundered through the glades, slaying at will, their stained pennants bearing flies and mantises. Legions of bearded devils bearing hooked glaives followed. Ahead of them, unassailable, the standard of Hell had moved with ruthless purpose.

And then, suddenly and without warning, the declamation issued by Nwm, within whose titanic mental voice were overlaid the soft tones of Nehael – Nehael – and Teppu, and Hlioth, and Mesikämmi, and Lai and her handmaidens. The voice which penetrated into every corner of Afqithan, stirring sprites in their tumps; buckawns and quicklings in dark places; and the genii of trees, pools, rocks and glades from their languor. Within the awareness of every woodland spirit in Afqithan, was conjured a vision of what could be. The Druid had forged an empathic continuum, embracing everything which contained a vestige of Green, allowing energy to flow freely like water. Consciousness had unified and Goddess manifested.

If you be Fae, lend us now your strength.

It was both a command and a plea. The ancient inhabitants of the demiplane had answered. Teppu had gathered their power into himself, and a viridescent nova had purged Afqithan of interlopers, sealing every rip and fracture in the fabric of space.

As uncounted varieties of fiend and monster were expelled, so too were Eadric and Mostin: forced violently and abruptly away from Afqithan and into the sphere of Man. A nightmare was suddenly replaced with a cold, sick, wakefulness.

Alone, in the neatly tended fields of Hethio in Wyre, anger and frustration had utterly consumed the Ahma. He had screamed, and cursed Graz'zt, and Rhyxali, and the Adversary, and Soneillon.

“You are bewildered,” the voice, soft and familiar, had spoken to him from the very soil.

The blood had hammered in his temples. “Show yourself,” he had said, trembling.

A sapling had broken through the earth nearby, and quickly gained height and girth: it grew into a young ash, with black buds cracking with fresh, delicate leaves. She had stepped out of the tree, and stood before him. There had been a lightness and ease about her that he did not remember; and a confidence rooted in some other power which he could not know. No vestige of angel or demon remained, and an aura of deep jade surrounded her. Her eroticism – free and guiltless and profound – had somehow shamed him with its purity.

Madness had threatened to seize him.

“You teeter uncertainly,” she had said softly.

He had nodded, and hung his head.
Gently, she had embraced him, caressing hair caked with venom, blood and ichor. As he wept, she had sung quietly.

But the voice – the voice of the other demoness – had stayed in his mind. Soft, seductive syllables which repeated in a circle without end.

*Exult in your memory, Eadric. Because Nothing will ever again compare to me.*

*  

Eadric turned to see Orolde patiently standing close by, mindful to avoid intrusion upon his reverie. The sprite, aware of the other's sudden perception of him, offered Eadric a goblet of mulled firewine. The *Ahma* nodded briefly and quickly drained it. In the East, the sky was brightening.

“Is Mostin abroad yet?” Eadric inquired.

“Yes,” Orolde replied. “But he is in his study. He finds the mornings most conducive to work. I will inform him, if you wish to speak?”

“It can wait.” *They* can wait. *Titivilus* and Murmuur were still bound with magic below, as the painful process of extracting information from the – now former – Nuncio of Dis continued.

“Can you feel it, Orolde?” Eadric asked the Sprite.

“What would that be, *Ahma*?”

“This...*Viridity.*”

“Ah. Yes.” Orolde nodded.

“What is it like?”

“For me? I suppose it is like jumping into a lake, and then suddenly remembering that I can breathe underwater.”

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**POST 5:**

Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 10th May 2006, 03:45 AM

The real update is after this one. 😞

Note that inconsistencies referring to eyelids have been removed 😃
**She is magnificent,** Nwm observed as the goddess rode down the babau. *Drengh* was a bloody blur, flashing red about her head. The Druid was in a state of perfect, dynamic meditation: they had honed their rapport to the point of a wordless, instinctive knowledge of intent, where Nwm had become the agent of her thought.

Their quarry were diminishing in numbers: their leaders, and the most war-hardened among them, had been redeployed to another arena – a distant, violent conflict between two old enemies. Those that remained were diminished, and lacking the discipline enforced by the direct agents of Graz'zt's will, they had disintegrated into a violent rabble of clans, ruled by the most ruthless and cunning amongst them. They became easy prey for the bands of godlings and ancestors who rode forth to engage them.

Of the Nireem, Ninit had proven the most difficult to relate to. She seemed oblivious to the needs of Mulhuk, and countenanced no argument which conflicted with her desire. She was utterly impervious to reason. Her passion was only to ride, and to hunt.

Immediately, Nwm had adored her.

He had allowed himself to become subsumed in her, and relinquished himself utterly. An act of devotion inevitable, he wryly observed, when any aspect of Goddess presented itself to him. But the communion which Ninit provided for Nwm led to a reciprocity which The Rider had not anticipated. She needed him in order to slay more effectively, and now she guarded and protected him. Ninit had grown accustomed to a lack of worship – her cult had been extinct for centuries. Nwm's adoration – when directed towards her – had stirred certain deific needs which had been suppressed for too long. Ninit craved worship, once again. And the details of Nwm's broader henotheism were irrelevant to the goddess.

Nwm's mind reached out, connecting with the soil of Sisperi, and energy coursed through him. A profound agony – familiar and reassuring – fired every nerve in his body. His skin cracked like the bark of an ancient tree and began to bleed, green fire coursed over him, and a necromantic impulse of terrible potency exploded outwards from him in all directions. Demons dropped like flies.

In his thoughts, Ninit smiled savagely.

As the few remaining monsters winked out, Nwm healed himself of his self-inflicted trauma and mustered his strength again.

*You are weary,* Ninit's voice echoed in his mind. *Return to Mulhuk.*

Nwm bowed. He might have continued, but one did not gainsay The Rider. He would return to Mulhuk, and then make his way to Wyre and his appointed meeting with Ortwine.

* 

When not hunting, Nwm would spend long hours instructing Lai and her handmaidens in the arts he had mastered. His favoured location was a courtyard graced with crystal trees, where a warm sun always shone in the afternoon; demonstration was his preferred method. And the knowledge with which Nehael had imbued him, he eagerly disseminated. His role was paradoxical: both mentor and worshipper; teacher and priest.
At other times, he and Lai would leave Mulhuk, and walk beneath the trees in the region of Sisperi which had been called Soan, where the Werud – a confederation of tribes who had venerated the Nireem – had once dwelt. The desolation was absolute, as all sapience had been extinguished by the tide of demons which had ravaged the world.

One cold morning, not far from where Eadric had slain the babau Uort,* Druid and Goddess had come across the remains of a settlement, its inhabitants driven off or butchered a century before. The stench of death and decay still clung to the place; a pall of Abyssal misery, which might take millennia to clear. Nwm sat upon a moss-covered outcrop – all that remained of an ancient granary.

"What of Saes?" He had sighed. "Little can proceed without her."

"I have tried. She will not respond. The gate to Ruk is closed. She is mad. Bloated on Death.**"

"You must persist. She may, in time, be persuaded,"

Lai laughed drily. "You do not know her as I do. Another way must be found. But something else has occurred to you."

"There may be alternatives," Nwm said carefully. "There are tribes in the North of my world. Some may be willing to undertake the journey here. To begin afresh. But I will not deceive them: demons lurk around every corner, and I suspect Sisperi will never be rid of them entirely. How would they even understand an entreaty made by you or Rhul? And they would bring their own gods with them, Lai. It might serve only to speed your demise."

"A chance I am willing to take."

Nwm shrugged. "Others can come, and when they die, Saes will claim them. Trees can be awakened, and when they die, Saes will claim them too. Saes is the key – all other solutions are merely temporary."

"If another could be persuaded to go and speak with her. Eadric perhaps?"

Nwm shook his head. "It is unlikely. He has discharged his vow, and other matters concern him. And Saes might entrap him: Graz'zt would trade a whole world for the Ahma. I lack the necessary tact – or guile. No, I think Ortwine might be the answer."

Lai's lip curled, and the sky darkened momentarily. "I will return to Afqithan, if I must. But I mistrust her."

"And she, you. But her mendacity may be your ally." He smiled grimly, and became serious. "She is no pawn, Lai. If she condescends to aid you, it will be on her terms."

"I will send her a dream. It will be neutral territory."

"It might be preferable if I speak to her," Nwm suggested. "We have a bond that endures across four lifetimes, and she knows I will not deceive her."

"If you deem it best," the Goddess reluctantly agreed.
"I would like to extend my gratitude to the Assembly for allowing me to speak," the Alienist began. "My particular thanks to Daunton, for acting as my sponsor in this matter."

They had convened at Mostin’s – formerly Shomei’s – estate outside of Morne: thirty-one mages gathered in an audience hall around a great, oval table, carved from ebony and inlaid with scenes from Irrenite myth. Some sat. Some stood, or leaned on staves. Most were human. Rimilin of the Skin was there: he sat alone, shunned by all others.

Even Waide remained silent, aware that an untimely display of sarcasm might earn the ire of many of those present. Mostin – it was rumoured – was about to make some grand philanthropic gesture, and most were concerned that the Alienist was sufficiently eccentric to change his mind for no other reason than mild annoyance. Nothing should jeopardize this improbable event.

Mostin’s lidless eyes scanned those present as he fondled Mogus, the obscene, fist-sized pseudonatural which lived in a nondimensional space within his tunic. In sympathy, the orbs on his robe of eyes rotated in a disturbing fashion, fixing first one, and then another of those present.

"Mulissu and Shomei are gone," Mostin continued. "Two great lights have left us – to whichever fates they have chosen for themselves. We are diminished. I am left with the burden of being the greatest living Wizard in Wyre, although perhaps not on this plane - something I will come to in due course. Many of you consider me both aloof and deranged, and I will deny neither. I am, however, indisputably, a genius."

Waide sighed.

Mostin ignored him. "Jovol's legacy remains with us, and if we dwell within the borders of Wyre, we must abide by it. For those of us with the resources – and I count myself fortunate in this regard – the option of continuing our conjurations is open, if we have another base from which to operate. I have erected my portable manse outside of Wyre's borders in order to facilitate this. This has proven controversial amongst some of you gathered here, as it might be claimed that it circumvents the spirit – if not the letter – of the Second Injunction. I am not alone in this regard, however."

Mostin stared pointedly at the Hag Jalael, Rimilin, and Wigdryt – a smoke mephit.

"This is a testing time for us," Mostin continued, "but we must not waver in our faith in Jovol's wisdom. His vision was more complete than we can appreciate, and he had access to methods which are now lost to us."

A murmur rippled through the gathered mages. Rumour of the web of motes had been heard by all, although only a few knew of its true significance.

"I am about to make several assertions which may, on the surface, appear contradictory or paradoxical. Let me posit a scenario," Mostin sighed. "As one who has experienced the power of the web of motes first-hand, this is not as improbable as it might sound. Jovol knew of the explosion of religious power which Tramst – the so-called Sela – exemplifies. He knew of an impending
conflict with the Cult of Cheshne. Furthermore, he chose death – in violation of his own Injunction – as a course preferable to allowing a second conjuration of Graz'zt. He knew that a renaissance in Uedian power would act as the best balance on all other concerns. The entity who was Fillein, then Jovol, has self-incarnated again, in the guise of a Fey named Teppu."

The revelation left all of those present – except for Rimilin – dumbstruck. The brief silence was quickly replaced by thirty chattering voices.

Mostin held up his hand, and a gong sounded.

"Please allow me to continue," he smirked despite himself. An uneasy silence returned to the room. "There will be time for questions after I have spoken, but there are a number of other issues I would like to address first.

"Most importantly, Teppu is not Jovol, at least in any meaningful sense, any more than Jovol was Fillein. I am unsure of the extent to which even his memories are retained. Teppu's agenda is not Jovol's agenda. He is driven by a different set of desires and philosophies, although there is, somehow – perhaps hyperconsciously – a commonality of purpose. This higher purpose is related somehow to Dream, and was partially illuminated by the oblique references that Jovol made to his understanding of the dialectical process.

"If we deal with Teppu – and I suspect we must – we should not expect to enjoy any kind of special rapport. Teppu is Green. His concern is a complex of energies involving feys, nature spirits, the goddess Uedii, and the natural world – something which he refers to as the Viridity: a burgeoning node of elemental power centered around these principles. The Viridity may be arising as some kind of mediating effect to resolve the polarization of Oronthonian belief and the Cult of Nihilism from Shûth.

"Its effect in Afqithan superseded the designs of Oronthon's Adversary. Accordingly, I have designated it a Greater Infinity. Its relationship with Oronthon himself is unclear, as is the relationship between the two foci – the Sela on one hand, and Nehael on the other. When I inspected the web of motes the sympathetic energy between the two was astounding, which leads me to suspect that a higher order of Intelligence is at work – perhaps the same order which drives Teppu, perhaps not. In any event, the final turn of the wheel in Afqithan revealed the Adversary as nothing more than a cog in some transcendental purpose. He had no inkling of the Viridity, and knowledge of it was – or is still – shrouded from him."

Waide could no longer contain himself. "Nehael is the succubus who started all this mess in the first place, am I correct?"

"Not exactly," Mostin said smugly. "Nehael is no longer what she was. In fact, she may have never been what she formerly was – the Viridity is concerned primarily with the Now, the Moment. As such, what is past, and what is yet to come are in large measure irrelevant. According to that paradigm, all history is vacuous – and mutable."

"This is mystical babble," Jalael interjected. "I had expected more from you, Mostin."

"Indulge me!" Mostin snapped. "And Waide, kindly allow me to speak without further interruption. I am trying to contextualize my actions, not justify current trends in religious thought."
Daunton coughed. "Perhaps you might be a little more succinct, Mostin."

"Oh very well," the Alienist grumbled. He inhaled deeply, and thought for a moment.

"Let me speak of artifacts," Mostin clearly enunciated the last word, and was not disappointed by the effect that it had on all of those present. "You have, doubtless, heard rumours regarding the web of motes. Its whereabouts is currently undetermined: its last known guardian was the demon Surab, who possessed Mulissu's daughter, Iua, and was responsible for the death of the Savant. The web of motes itself is unlocatable by any means available to me. Surab is mind blanked by some device. It is of paramount importance that we retrieve this object. There is hope: I have made a metagnostic inquiry of a Pseudonatural entity named Ghom which dwells beyond the middle region. I believe that Surab is unaware of the true nature of the web of motes. I also believe that Iua is still alive – her form, which is young and nubile, may be pleasing to the demon. Surab may be unwilling – or unable – to reenter Azzagrat, and has retreated to the unnamed regions between Hell and the Abyss.

"Also, the chthonic demoness Soneillon spoke of something named Pharamne's Urn – an object of which she claimed ownership, but which had been appropriated by Prince Graz'zt at some point in the past. This item is of Aeonic potency: one in full possession of its powers – something which the Prince of Azzagrat is not – can create universes. Naturally, Graz'zt guards it jealously. Queen Soneillon could unlock it to a greater degree although, I suspect, she could not manifest its ultimate power: she was unusual for a demon in her command of ritual magic, something which is antithetical to the Abyssal mindset. She was also unique in many other ways." An ironic smile crossed the Alienist's face.

Mostin paused to take a sip of tea, and was mildly surprised – and gratified – to find his audience utterly enrapt.

"We are delicately poised," Mostin continued. "Currently, as I am sure even the most politically ignorant of you are aware, the Sela, Oronthon's proxy, is on the field of battle, south of Wyre's borders. Whilst Prince Tagur attempts to rally support for the campaign in secular circles, the Temple – and I trust we all recall that particular monolith – has effectively reformed, albeit with a more thoughtful perspective and without the stigma attached to the name Temple. I'll say the name again, for those of you who didn't hear me: Temple. It is the same band of lance-waving zealots as it was three years ago, and we must trust that Tramst has inculcated some measure of insight and tolerance in those involved.

"This war is magical. The initial skirmishes – which have proven inconclusive – have demonstrated that the Sela is fallible in this arena. His purview is enlightenment – whatever that means to an Oronthonian – and not conflict. We must decide – collectively – a policy in this matter. We are, of course, bound by the Injunction, although we can act beyond Wyre's borders. But of the three main sects within the Cult of Cheshne, only one is technically subject to the law of the Claviger, and this has yet to be tested in practice.

"A friend once described such a conflict as arcanoreligious and I scoffed at the term. I am, however, beginning to think he – now she – was correct. It is fraught with legalistic complexity, which the Injunction must adapt to – although I have no doubt that the Claviger itself can anticipate many of the vagaries. If I am a theurge, and I conjure a demon within Wyre's borders using arcane power, am I subject to the same set of laws as I would be if I used a divinely granted boon to
do the same? And we should not doubt that the devotees of Cheshne are both willing and able to do these things. Their vision is apocalyptic, in the extreme.

"This rather circuitous speech – and I apologize, Daunton, if I was less succinct than you had hoped, brings me to the main thrust of my argument today: there are mages and hierophants within the Order of Cheshne who wield considerable power. Possibly more than me, even. Their exact names, numbers and dispositions are hidden from us, but there are undoubtedly transvalent casters amongst them. We know only Anumid, who is their mouthpiece, and with whom Daunton was granted a brief audience.

"Their veneration of Cheshne is absolute. They regard demons – even demonic nobility – in an entirely different light to those of us exposed to Oronthonian dogma. Ugras – fierce protectors – of ancient methods and teachings. This is their Truth, and who are we to gainsay it?

"We cannot hide from this. We must adopt a position – even if it is one of noninvolvement: something, incidentally, which I most emphatically discourage. I am not asking you to submit to my whim in this matter, but I do request that my counsel is acknowledged, if nothing else. Waide distrusts and despises me – and the feeling is entirely mutual. But we have agreed to go to the Claviger for direction in our antipathy for one another, because both of us realize that our personal feelings for one another cannot be allowed to interfere with the larger picture.

"My appeal today is complex. First, I ask for help in recovering the web of motes. It is a tool which we can use to great effect – let me finish, Waide. Furthermore – as unlikely as this might seem – I owe it to Mulissu to see her daughter returned safely: I am rather fond of Iua.

"Second – and I will preempt cries of 'foul' before they are issued – I believe, for a variety of reasons, that it is within our mutual interest to confine the Demon Prince Graz'zt. He is one of the chief Ugras and we run the risk of him being conjured by our enemies and sent against us. The prize, if we can accomplish this, is Pharamne's Urn – if we can get to it before anyone else. I am in the possession of a transvalent spell bequeathed to me by Jovol which I believe can accomplish this infallibly if I have the unqualified support of the Assembly in this matter. The spell – which is outmoded, and I suspect against which Graz'zt has developed defenses – can be modified. Even a demon of Graz'zt's stature cannot withstand our combined power.

"Third, we must develop a coherent strategy to counter the threat from the Cult of Cheshne. We cannot be sidelined in this matter; neither can we allow ourselves to be overcome piecemeal, one-by-one. We must unite to address this danger. This runs counter to a thousand years of tradition, I know, but change is upon us. We live in a new world. We must adapt, or we will be broken. I have considered various possibilities as to how this can be accomplished, and I am willing to discuss them at length when the debate begins."

Mostin took another sip of tea – which had gone cold – before continuing, He swallowed reflexively, as if in great doubt.

"Word has probably already spread that I am willing to make Shomei's library available to the arcane community. This is so. But, in case any of you have doubts as to my earnestness in regard to the matters of which I have spoken – and my sense of urgency – I would like to go further. I have a well-deserved reputation for miserliness, I know, and this may come as something of a shock.
So consider this as a display of enlightened self-interest.

"I would like to turn over Shomei's entire estate in perpetuity to the Wizards of Wyre, as the starting point of a collective endeavour. I will donate my own library to the enterprise, and urge you all to do the same. I propose a repository of learning, and a testing ground for intellects as yet undiscovered. An Academy, if you will. We should embrace the Injunction, and display it above our gates as our Law, but also recognize it as our guiding principle. And I should like to nominate Daunton to be elected as our first President."

Thirty-one jaws, including that of Rimilin of the Skin, dropped.

When Waide had recovered his composure, he smiled bitterly. He knew that Mostin had finally won, and left his indelible mark on history.

* This story may have to wait for some time.

** Saes, the Nireem goddess concerned with death, had allied herself with Graz'zt when the demon invested the plane, seeing an opportunity to augment her own power when the inevitable tide of slaughter followed. She gathered the spirits of all dead things to herself, swelling her strength, and guarded her prizes jealously. When Graz'zt withdrew his main force to defend Azzagrat, Saes sealed the entrance to Ruk, the underworld. Nwm's efforts to use remains he had discovered to reincarnate some of those who had died in the conflict, in order to repopulate Sisperi, were foiled: Saes refused to relinquish their souls.

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POST 6: THE PROSPECT OF EMBASSIES

Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 10th May 2006, 04:17 AM

In the aftermath of the Confrontation in Afqithan, Nwm the Preceptor assumed the form of a great raven and took to the skies. He surveyed the scene below: had it been any ordinary battle, a glut of flesh would have been his for the taking. But amongst the heaped corpses of demons and monsters, all carrion was foul. Ichor, not blood, stained the glades beneath the towering trees.

Purposefully, he winged his way to where I lay dead upon the field: foes whom I had felled were scattered around. His pinions cracked once, and his talons came to rest upon a heap of varrangoin. I beheld him through lifeless eyes as he approached: my spirit lingered, unwilling to abandon my body.

"A third time will I restore you," he cawed. "And a fourth and a fifth, if need be. We are in need of every ally which we can find. The seed must sprout. The shoot must be tended."

Gently, he lifted me upwards, and screeched, invoking ancient goddesses who had slumbered for millennia, and whose names he alone knew. With a violent passion, life returned to me again.
"How was death?" He asked.

"Cold," I replied. I smiled, and exulted in my new form, relishing its power and subtlety. I cast my sight about, perceiving the interwoven lattice of life and magic which suffused the place. "This is your doing?" I asked.

"In part," he answered, winging his way toward Irknaan's Fortress. "What now?"

"I will remain here," I answered. "Afqithan is mine, now."

He cocked his head. "That is a bold claim. How will you enforce it?"

"With ruthless charm," I replied.

* 

Nwm stood beneath the sagging boughs of a great deodar, a tree not native to Trempa, but rather one of a dozen imported generations earlier, by an aristocrat with a taste for the exotic; some forebear of Eadric of Deorham, whose name the Druid could not recollect. The late afternoon sun shone warm through the deep green of its canopy. He watched her approach, studying her carefully.

Her poise and grace were effortless, and her natural footfall, silent. She wore the same, tattered cloak and stained jerkin that she always had, but bore a buckler of sidhe metal strapped to her arm, won in Afqithan from one of the thousands who had perished there. Her face – breathtaking in its beauty – displayed only the slightest hint of contempt.

"Will this take long?" She asked as she drew near.

"It may," Nwm replied. "Lai has a favour to ask you."

Ortwine's eyes narrowed. "And what does your deific protégé require of me?"

"To embark upon a series of negotiations, with a goddess named Saes." Nwm replied. He attempted to sound casual. "It is better if I say nothing else. I am merely the courier."

"Somehow, I doubt that," Ortwine replied. "Perhaps you think I might be less apt to view an old friend with suspicion?"

"There is no joy left in you, Ortwine."

"Let's just get this over with," Ortwine sighed.

**

As Nwm and Ortwine travelled to Sisperi, and Mostin addressed the largest gathering of mages for a century, Eadric sat confined with the devils Titivilus and Murmuur in the summoning room. It was the third day of the interrogation.

Mostin had been irked by the fact that Ortwine and the Ahma had caused Titivilus
to crumple so quickly: the Alienist had expected a more protracted negotiation. He had attempted for months to wheedle information from the confined Dukes, but had had neither the time nor the resources to develop a spell which would reliably subdue them: if an unprepared magick were to have failed, and a Duke were to break free, things would have become very messy, very quickly. One free would have become three free, and three of them together would have overwhelmed him. But the Wizard was relieved that he could – for a while, at least – avoid the two remaining Devils. He was implicated in the assassination of an Infernal magnate, and would enjoy the enmity of Dis until the end of his days.

The Ahma and Titivilus had spoken of the Adversary’s role in Afqithan, of the deployment of Devils under Azazel, of Murmuur’s Tower – now abandoned on the demiplane and, apparently, inert. Titivilus had speculated at length regarding the Infernal decision made to support Azzagrat – a subtle balancing act, to prevent Orcus gaining supremacy in his war with Graz'zt in the Abyss itself.

Many of Graz'zt's champions had perished, nonetheless, either in the Confrontation or shortly thereafter. Ainhorr, Cemdrei, Uort and a slew of others were no more. Melihaen had abandoned her master and fled to Throile, throwing in her lot with Adyell and the battered remnants of Soneillon's horde. Others had joined with Rhyxali, or Kostchtchie, or slunk away to Yutuf or Terkunuteng to lick their wounds, as their individual whim or interest dictated.

In Zelatar itself, Ilistet had rallied Graz'zt's army and led a savage counterattack against the undead host of Orcus. The war ebbed and flowed, but a stagnant impasse – which suited Hell's designs – seemed inevitable. The Prince of Azzagrat was fighting a defensive war which might last for millennia. His power had been curbed, and his ambition thwarted. Nehael was no longer captive. The Ahma had won, though the victory was bitter and empty.

Throughout the exchange with Titivilus, Murmuur had remained silent. Eadric regarded him with a mixed feeling, which included a grudging admiration. Here was a soldier, pure and simple. Loyal, steadfast, unwavering in his devotion to his beliefs, and utterly, irredeemably evil.

The Ahma sat, and laid Lukarn unsheathed across his knees.

"We have a few loose ends to tie up," Eadric sighed. "You may use surmise, but I will be alert to any attempted falsehood. If you try to mislead or prevaricate, I will annihilate you. Am I clear?"

"Yes," Titivilus grinned.

Eadric raised an eyebrow. The Devil already seemed cooperative. Did he think that Mostin's absence would make the Ahma more pliable, or was the prospect of his freedom causing him to be less opaque than normal? He grunted, and shifted his position.

"Tell me of Shomei. From your skewed perspective."

"Her soul is in a self-induced state of perdition. By rejecting Saizhan she made a conscious decision to consign herself to Hell. You have no authority in acts of individual volition."

"I have as much authority as I choose to assume," Eadric grimaced, "but I agree that it would be pointless to try to rectify the situation." He remembered his own conversation with Shomei too well, as well as the words and actions of the
"If you say so, Ahma."

"Is she in Dis?" Eadric asked, irritated.

"In Cania. Astaroth purchased her from the Akesoli. Perhaps neither Dispater nor Belial could meet their price: that is surmise, for the record."

"For what purpose?"

"She is a valuable prize," Titivilus smirked. "And the Grand Duke has an eye for the spirits of powerful mages."

"As currency?"

"To gloat over. Perhaps he will offer her unlife, for her immortal service. Pacts can extend beyond death, Ahma. Before you smite me, I should tell you that that is also surmise."

Eadric suppressed a shiver.

The Infernal Duke smiled. "The inducements offered by a Devil such as Astaroth are hard to resist," he persisted.

"And the web of motes, Titivilus?" Eadric asked, ignoring the goad. "Where might that be?"

"Frankly, I'm disappointed that Mostin has not contrived a spell to locate it. Find Surab, and you'll find the web. I do not know its location."

Eadric thought for a moment.

Titivilus spoke. "There is other information that I would like to impart to you. It is freely given."

"Or rather, the price is invisible," Eadric said stonily.

"Quite. Do you wish to hear it or no?" Titivilus gloated.

"I suppose I must."

"My mandate as your tempter was revoked some time ago. Before my embassy to Azzagrat, in fact."

"Why?" Eadric was suspicious.

"I do not know."

"Surmise!" Eadric snapped.

"To make way for one whom my superiors felt more suited, I assume. Or perhaps it was an abandonment of the task altogether."

"You failed, then?"

"I thought I was doing rather well. No matter. Are we finished, now? Will you
kindly release me?"

"I regret not. I fear that I have mislead you."

The Ahma prayed briefly, buoysing himself with Oronthon's power. Unholy auras flickered in response within the thaumaturgic diagrams as the devils anticipated Eadric's intention. Lukarn gained a silver sheen, and then the Ahma spoke a holy word. The devils' confining circles were shattered under the assault. Titivilus screamed silently, transfixed, as light overwhelmed him, but Murmuur withstood the barrage.

Incoherently, Titivilus struck Eadric with a quickened feeblemind and attempted to dispel the dimensional lock placed by Mostin on the chamber, but failed. Murmuur lashed out with a rapid meteor swarm and leapt at Eadric, smiting him with as much vile power as he could muster.

Titivilus, paralyzed, fell quickly to a series of brutal strokes from Lukarn.

Eadric stared at Murmuur, who remained defiant. Unexpectedly, compassion welled up within the Ahma. He had no choice but to act upon it.

"Yield!" Eadric's voice thundered in the confines of the summoning room. "Submit to my mercy. You are no match for me."

More blows were exchanged, and each hewed through the armour of the other. Murmuur staggered uncertainly.

"Yield!" Eadric demanded.

"I cannot," Murmuur smiled sadly. "We are forever lost, Ahma. Do you not yet understand?"

Lukarn fell three times, and the duke dropped to the floor.

Eadric closed his eyes as his mind contained the magnitude of his deed. The line had finally been drawn. There would be no more negotiation.

**

Lai sat cross-legged before a fire pit, in which a ruddy flame flickered. Runes lay cast about her, and her handmaidens fussed nearby, pouring nectar into bowls of exquisitely carved wood. She regarded Ortwine carefully, anxious to avoid a conflict.

Nwm, who stood nearby, was clad only in a simple green robe tied about his waist with a length of rough hemp. He scratched the dirt at his feet with slender staff cut from a young hornbeam, and avoided Ortwine's glare. His beard and hair seemed inordinately long to the sidhe, as though their cultivation might somehow hold the key to the mysteries into which the Druid had been initiated. A faint aura of Green surrounded Nwm – the dwimmerhame which protected him from hostile magicks. His hands and forearms were scarred from the massive backlash energies he routinely employed.

"You are welcome here as an honoured guest," Lai said smoothly, "and what is ours, is yours. Please sit."
Ortwine scowled, and lounged casually, resting on her left arm. Nwm coughed, and kneeled next to the goddess.

"Let's get straight to the point," Ortwine smiled coldly. "Nwm tells me that you wish me to act as your messenger. You wish me to enter the abode of the Goddess of Death – I have not forgotten who Saes is, Nwm – in order to strike some kind of bargain."

"Yes," Lai nodded. "To secure the release of the spirits which she has hoarded."

"This is no small task."

"Indeed," Lai admitted.

"If I were to agree, it would require sizeable recompense. What do you think that such an endeavour – if successful – is worth, Nwm?"

"I am gratified that you retain your mercenary tendencies," Nwm said drily.

"Do you have a price in mind?" Lai inquired.

"Divinity is acceptable to me."

Nwm guffawed. His expression changed to one of incredulity, when he saw that Ortwine was serious.

"You are a sidhe-queen, Ortwine! What more can you require?"

"Homage is pleasant, Nwm, but I think you'd agree that worship would be preferable."

"It is not within the power of the Nireem to grant you what you seek..." Lai began.

"Then you'd better find a way, goddess, because until you do, there will be no deal."

**

Eadric felt edgy. He looked from the highest window of the Steeple, casting his gaze south and east in the direction of the Sela’s forces – although they were two hundred leagues beyond the limit of his vision. Below, lights and campfires were kindling amid a sea of tents – not warriors and soldiers, but pilgrims who had made their way to Deorham in the hope of catching a glimpse of the Ahma, and to walk in holy places. He turned to Mostin, who sat preoccupied in thought. They had touched briefly upon the topic of the Cult of Cheshne, towards whom both now earnestly bent their will.

"What are they doing? Why do they not act?"

"The Hierophants are devising and casting spells," Mostin grimaced. "Very potent spells. This takes time."

"And then?"
“They unleash the storm.”

“Could you perhaps be a little more specific?” Eadric inquired.

“Opening a gate is child’s play to these mages, Eadric. They compact demonic nobility. Bhîtis and Ugras.”

“How long do we have? Who will they send?”

“I don't know. If it were me, I'd start with a few balors. Just to get things warmed up – pardon the pun. When that happens, you'll know that the big spells are ready – they won't begin before they're prepared. I think we have a month or two, at least.”

“Can we counter it?”

“If we pool our resources. A grand alliance, so to speak.”

“And the Injunction?” Eadric looked sceptical.

“Only applies within Wyre's borders.” Mostin's eyes suddenly narrowed. “Which is why the Assembly – which is demonstrating as much inertia as I expected – needs to come up with some solid offensive strategies. Fast. I would like to speak with your Sela. Can you arrange it?

“Er...yes,” the Ahma looked surprised. "I had intended to leave for the South in two days. Can you wait?

“No,” Mostin shook his head vigorously. "How about now?"  

“There is áuda tonight and tomorrow – blessings which I am duty-bound to bestow, when I can. And I'd like to speak to the thaumaturge, Sineig – Canec informed me earlier that he has made the journey here from Gibilrazen on foot."

“The Irrenite? He is rather controversial, I hear." Mostin seemed amused.

“And becoming increasingly popular. He has quite the following."

“People like sex,” Mostin shrugged. "If you include it in your praxis, it's bound to generate a lot of interest. And if you make intercourse with demons a central tenet, you will attract a certain kind of devotee."

“He is treading a dangerous path,” Eadric sighed.

“But one not without precedent,” Mostin replied drily.

“My religion has been transformed beyond all recognition,” Eadric groaned. "And I am responsible for much of it. Most cannot grasp the teachings which Sineig presents. Many of those who follow his example will be broken."

“But a few will shine,” Mostin insisted. "They choose, Eadric."

“Choice is overrated,” Eadric sighed.

“It is preferable to spiritual despotism.”
"Is that an ethical stance I detect, Mostin?"

"Only insofar as it applies to me. Now, can we leave?" Mostin nagged. "I'll have you back within an hour."

Eadric nodded.

**

"I require celestial sponsorship," Mostin sniffed, looking at Tramst. "My pseudonatural servitors are not suited for routine defense, and require a great deal of effort to summon and control. I have alienated many fiendish allies, and lack a versatile pool of potential compactees. I also suspect that Dispater may have placed a sizeable contract on my head, or will shortly. Can you help?"

Eadric gaped. The Sela seemed amused.

"How do you propose that I might do that?"

Mostin sighed. "Obviously, to sanction my gating of celestials and to waive any normal fees that I would otherwise incur for planar bindings. I don't see what the problem is. We're on the same side, here. I would stipulate only that celestials who serve me refrain from displaying their wings, or change them to something less offensive – those of bats or insects are acceptable."

"It is not within my remit to make compacts."

"That's absurd," Mostin waved a hand. "You're Oronthon as well as Tramst, aren't you? Just expand your remit."

Eadric groaned. "Sela..."

Tramst held up a hand. "I know." He turned to Mostin. "I appreciate any agency that you might provide, Mostin, despite your motivation. But you need to adopt a more conventional approach in this. I cannot ease your path to power, can I? How would that be of benefit to you? Perhaps you should speak to a celestial?"

"It is precisely in order to avoid their blinkered perspective that I am talking to you," Mostin groaned. "I do not require moral instruction."

The Ahma coughed politely.

"Oh shut up, Eadric. So the answer is 'no,' then? Must I look to another source because the Sela is unwilling to help me help him?"

Eadric turned beet red, and opened his mouth to deliver an angry admonishment. Once again, the Sela raised his hand, staying his words.

*We teach according to the wisdom of those who hear.*

"I do not deal with the conventional, Mostin," the Sela was imperturbable. "But allow me to speak for Enitharmon: if you demonstrate your commitment, I have no doubt that it will be regarded favourably by those high in the celestial host. I believe that Jovol and Rintrah enjoyed good relations."
"Commitment?" Mostin asked suspiciously.

"You would need to refrain from routinely invoking fiends."

"And their pseudonatural analogues?"

"The host would not recognize such a distinction," Tramst smiled.

"And other pseudonaturals?"

"They would make no distinction there, either. As such, these entities would be acceptable."

"I will abide by these terms for the nonce," Mostin said grudgingly, "although giving up the daemons will be a wrench."

"They are not terms, Mostin, and I am in no means acting as guarantor. But if you are seeking to curry celestial support, it is traditional that one show willing in certain areas. You might also aid the Ahma in his coming task."

Eadric cocked his head. "I have a task? That will be a refreshing change to determining my own fate. What is it?"

"On Nehael's initiative there will be a nonpartisan embassy which represents all Wyrish interests, spiritual and secular. You must parley with Anumid: we must attempt to resolve this peaceably, even if is doomed to fail. Both Prince Tagur and Daunton have agreed to the effort."

The Ahma swallowed reflexively. "And is my role to be religious or mundane?"

"Both. You are the Ahma and the Earl of Deorham."

"One high in the Order – a former Templar – would be of aid to me. Sercion or Brey."

"I can spare neither," the Sela said simply. "Nor would I, if I could. They are too unformed for such a task."

"There are no others," Eadric grimaced.

"Amongst the living."

Eadric was dumbstruck. Must I break every rule?

You are the Ahma. You do what needs to be done. If you cling to outdated dogma, then what hope do we have?

Must I slay you, as well?

Time will tell. The Sela smiled.

"And you also expect me to embark on this futile mission?" Mostin asked.

"Your presence would demonstrate a degree of cohesion; a unity of purpose."

"Which we do not possess," Mostin snapped.
"Yet," Tramst replied. "I remain optimistic, however. I think it is fair to suggest that all desire it, but none are quite sure about how to realize it."

**

The tomb and reliquary of Saint Tahl the Incorruptible were situated in a small chapel adjoining the Great Temple of Morne, and were reached from the main transept through a wrought iron gate which always remained open: the faithful, who sought Tahl's intercession, could at any time offer prayer to him.

When Eadric arrived, only a single petitioner kneeled in quiet contemplation. By her ascetic appearance – she wore little more than rags, and her hair and nails were long and filthy – the Ahma judged her to be an Urgic pilgrim from eastern Trempa or Ardan. Or rather, she would have been one, before such distinctions had become irrelevant. The air of the chapel was thick with incense, and slender candles burned steadily upon a small altar.

She gaped as Eadric lit a taper and kneeled next to her. "Ahma, I..." she began to whisper.

"I'm sorry for disturbing you," Eadric bowed. "What is your name?"

"Beka, Ahma."

"I would have you be a witness, Beka. If the later interpretation of events becomes fraught with untruths and idle speculation, you will remember what happened here. You are charged with preserving an accurate account. Will you accept this responsibility?"

"Ahma, I..."

"If you wish to leave, you may. I would prefer that you stayed, however. Will you indulge me?"

The pilgrim nodded dumbly.

Eadric stood, and removed his gauntlets. Reaching out, he ran his hand over the face of the marble effigy of Tahl: a figure lying in quiet repose, hands clasped upon the quillons of a greatsword, upon the lid of a sarcophagus. He mustered as much strength as he could.

Eadric hefted the lid, pushed it sideways, and lowered it carefully, so that it rested against the side of the tomb. Inside were a scourge, a sword, and a wooden casket, almost pristine. Eadric prised it open, gagging at the stench which rose up to greet him.

Beka turned her head away, aghast, and held her breath.

"In these days, even the dead will have no rest," he intoned.

There was a momentary flash, and Tahl's decayed form changed abruptly. His eyes opened.

"Ahma?"
"My apologies for interrupting your bliss, Tahl. There is much to be done, and I need your help."

"Of course," Tahl smiled. "Where is my armour?"

"Sercion wears it," Eadric laughed. Tears streamed down his face.

"Is the Sela here?"

"No. That meeting will have to wait."

"I am the first?"

"You will not be the last." Eadric nodded.

"Who is next?"

"Rede," the Ahma looked pained.

"He has become wrathful. A spirit of vengeance."

"So much the better," Eadric smiled grimly.

**

She was waiting quietly for the Alienist when he returned to his manse. When he saw her, blood hammered in his temples, and he briefly contemplated whether or not to flee. His arcane sight revealed no detail about her, impenetrable as she was to divination. Nonetheless, he knew her. Power radiated from her. The Claviger had magnified her.

"Am I to be arraigned?" He asked. "Eliminated?"

"You will make some tea," Gihaahia said with a wicked smile. "And then we will discuss the finer points of the Injunction."

"Do you take milk?" Mostin breathed a sigh of relief.

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**POST 7:**

**Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 23rd May 2006, 07:08 AM**

Quote:

Originally Posted by Jumbie

*I have a question regarding Ortwin/Ortwine...He, now she, seems like such a totally different entity with almost no ties to her old companions. I recall him being reincarnated once before from human to satyr and he didn't seem so aloof and removed as the sidhe is now.*
Two reasons, one in-game and one out:

1) Ortwin(e) has shown a marked tendency to become more fey in his/her perspective over successive incarnations, and the pattern continues.

2) Ortwine's prior player (a guy called Rob) dropped out and was replaced by another (Helen). The gender change also felt more natural in light of this.

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POST 8: UNTITLED UPDATE

Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 23rd May 2006, 07:25 AM

Iua paced back and forth. Violent impulses crowded within her mind, and the recollection of fell deeds felt sweet in her mouth. But huge gaps remained in her memory.

She touched the pommel of her rapier lightly, feeling reassured by its presence. Through her gloved hand, a frisson of power from the weapon made her head spin, as though she had consumed too much *kschiff*.

Egress from the chamber was impossible. As opulent as it might be, she was a prisoner there. The door to the place – if it was a door – showed no sign of lock or handle, and was constructed of some kind of adamant. She had attempted to *plane shift* without success, and even in a *gaseous form* she had been unable to pass through the embrasure – a spell prevented passage, and Iua lacked the means to counter it. Looking out, all she saw was a smoking slope which extended below her as far as she could see. At irregular intervals, the ground was wracked by convulsions and liquid fire erupted.

*I am Iua. I am in some Hell or other. I have had an enchantment laid on me: my memory has been selectively erased. I am not dead. I don't think I am.*

She knew that there were significant people and places in her life – Mulissu, Ortwin, Ulao, Fumaril, Magathei, Trempa – but she could not clearly remember any events connected with them. When she tried to construct any memory associated with them, it would elude her, and remain tantalizingly beyond her grasp.

She sat upon the bed and waited. She opened her bag – which contained a number of apparently potent items – and laid the contents before her again, as if they might hold the key to her past. A sapphire, rings, amulets, a tiny boat, a lump of dark stone, a sphere, a flat panel of curious design. She gazed at them for a long while, but became frustrated. She replaced them in her bag.

Time passed.

A sound – a low *click* – finally reached her ears. Iua leapt silently to the side of the portal, drawing her blade. As the door slid open, she dashed forth, intent on escape and slaying any in her way.

None stood there, but as her foot passed over the threshold to the chamber, her memory was suddenly restored to her in full.
She screamed.

**

It was the first time that the Ahma and Nehael had met since their brief exchange during the aftermath of Afqithan. Eadric had not so much purposefully shunned her, he told himself as he walked to meet her, as been occupied with other, more pressing duties. As had she.

_That must be why I feel like vomiting_, he sighed.

She was sitting in a wicker chair in the same spot which Cynric had favoured; the place where Feezuu had blasted the Prelate into oblivion. The same place where Graz'zt himself had stood and spoken the dreadful syllables which had resulted in the greatest carnage in Morne's long history. Her presence seemed like a potent salve applied to an open wound.

She smiled when she saw him, causing his head to spin yet further. He sat shakily next to her, and noticed that she smelled like summer rain. He thought briefly.

"Do you retain a sense of irony?" He asked.

She raised an eyebrow.

"That's a good sign," he breathed tensely. "I'm sorry for avoiding you. Too much has passed. I didn't know where to begin. We are not what we were. Other clichés to that effect. I'm now being facetious to cover my discomfort."

_Relax._

He relaxed a little.

"I would learn everything that has passed for you," Nehael said softly. "The totality of your experience. It will help me understand better."

"That may take some time."

"You need not speak. You need not even articulate thoughts and memories that are too uncomfortable for you. First, I would share myself with you in the same manner. It is the only way to heal the trauma. A perfect communion."

"Nehael, I..."

"Do not reject me now, Ahma."

He clenched his jaw, and nodded. "How?"

"Consider Saizhan, and what it teaches. Can you adopt a Sophist perspective for a moment? Allow that truth to assert itself?"

"How will that help?"

"It will contextualize your perceptions. Place them within a framework which is familiar."
Eadric groaned. "Others seem to alternate between religious truths far easier than I. My transitions are more fraught. But I will do as you ask."

"Are you ready?"

"Now?"

"Exactly," she smiled. "NOW."

A soft hand reached out, and gently touched his face. His eyelids became heavy.

"Do not close your eyes!" Nehael laughed.

Reality shattered into a billion fragments, and was replaced by Itself.

* 

Eadric was possessed of a piercing clarity, in which the world astounded him with its vibrancy and beauty. He looked at Nehael. She was perfect. The oranges hanging nearby – yet to come to full ripeness – were perfect. He listened to the conversation of Temple guards by the gates of the compound, smelled the incense which burned upon the high altar, felt the breeze upon his face on the roof of the Great Fane. He tasted the salt on his lips which blew on the wind from the marshes to the south of Morne. He beheld an ant climbing a rose-bush in a garden in the Bevel. All was perfect.

Beyond all – or beneath all – was a vibration which was inaudible, invisible, and without form. Infinite, yet apprehended in its entirety.

Viridity, he knew. His breath was quick and shallow.

Nehael smiled. "Know me."

The Ahma turned his consciousness – which had become all-encompassing – towards her.

In the space of a fleeting moment, he realized everything about her. Every thought, every memory, every feeling she had ever experienced within her life since her rebirth through the Tree, and a myriad of other lives in cycles within cycles. But stretching back uncounted aeons to the beginning of time itself were another set of memories: impressions which were like dreams, and belonged to one who was no more. Past the Fall, until the Nehael who never was existed only as an unmanifest thought within the Mind of Oronthon. A gnostic ecstasy swept over him.

Abruptly, it ended as she withdrew her power from him. He quaked at the separation from the source. As his ego emerged from the reverie and his persona recrystallized, his breathing slowed again. He focused his mind.

"Saizho," he bowed.

He looked at her as her mind absorbed his own experience in its fullness. A single tear ran down her cheek: he watched, and as it fell and struck the floor of the orangery, a thousand tiny flowers erupted from the flagstones.
"You loved her," she smiled.

"Very much," he nodded.

"I am sorry for your loss."

He sighed. "She was my kius. The shadow which brought the Good into sharp relief."

"And now?"

"I see the light with clear eyes. Much doubt has passed."

"But the dreams persist, Ahma. Her vestige has not abandoned you, and clings yet to your memories. She exists in you most of all."

**

Mostin fidgeted nervously, waiting for the tea to steep. He glanced sidelong at the Enforcer, who was examining a collection of infernal curios upon one of the shelves in his study. She had assumed a black-clad humanoid shape, approximately female, with impossibly red hair. She turned to face him, and her eyes bored into him. Mostin quickly looked away, jerked his hand spasmodically, and promptly spilled the sugar.

"Sh*t," he muttered.

"I relish the rare moments in which I am permitted to manifest a body," Gihaahia said, smiling.

_Gods, don't smile. It's too unnerving._

"And a discrete consciousness," the Enforcer added, almost as an afterthought. She sat. "Two sugars, please."

Mostin poured the tea shakily. Most of it found its way into the cup.

"You purport to champion the philosophical tenets which underpin the Injunction," Gihaahia took the cup from the Alienist's uncertain grasp. "Yet you evince a grudging literalism in your approach. As though it were a matter of convenience – or inconvenience – for you. I refer specifically, of course, to the fact that you have chosen to erect your abode here – less than a bowshot from the bounds of Wyre as defined in the nineteenth article. Some might view such a decision as purposely defiant and inflammatory."

"I think..."

"Shut up, Mostin. I haven't finished, yet. You are forgiven for this quasi-infraction. The Claviger loves all of her children, even the wayward ones."

_Her? Children? Uedii's teats. She's deranged._

"You remain embroiled in political maneuvering – _shut your mouth, Mostin. I'm still talking._ Before you accuse me of arbitrariness, I have already determined to
visit Daunton with the same warning. He's as bad as you are. Your Académie will sink before it has a chance to establish itself if you persist in this attitude. You are inciting other mages to violence. You are conspiring to conjure a demon prince – yes, I know you don't plan to bind him in Wyre. You are a rabble-rouser, and a danger to the body magickal. And as for Astaroth..."

Mostin gaped. Only hours before, a fleeting thought had passed through his mind regarding the Lord of Caina. The Alienist had mused – for all of two seconds – upon the possibility of binding the archdevil and forcing him to relinquish Shomei to him.

*She has made her choice, Mostin.*

Mostin scowled.

"I am sadistic and vindictive, Mostin," Gihaahia's eyes narrowed to burning slits. "And nothing would give me greater pleasure than to rend your body and hurl it into the Phlegethon. The Claviger is more reasonable, however – which is fortunate for you. You will desist forthwith from all political activity when you are within Wyre's confines. This includes plotting to assault the Cult of Cheshne; associating in councils of war with the Ahma, the Sela or any other representative of Oronthon; offering advice to any of Wyre's temporal leaders; or conspiring with other mages to summon demons. If you choose to engage in any of these activities, *let it be outside of Wyre.* If you violate these terms, you will be exiled for a period of one hundred years upon pain of obliteration if you re-enter the proscribed area. Am I clear?"

Mostin nodded dumbly.

"You would be well advised to reflect upon the spirit of the Injunction when making choices regarding these matters. Conjuring Graz'zt ten yards from Wyre's borders will be regarded as insolent, at the very least. Continuing your plots and machinations in a magnificent mansion which abuts Shomei's estate would be considered scandalous. Whilst neither would draw direct retribution, they would predispose the Claviger to a less lenient position if you were arraigned in the future. You may now speak. Be swift. Do you have any questions?"

"Many. Does the Injunction apply to arcanists from Shûth?"

"Of course."

"If I am assailed by a hierophant within Wyre, may I defend myself with impunity?"

"Defend, yes," Gihaahia sighed.

"If I open a permanent portal from Shomei's earthly demesne to her astral retreat and convene a council whose agenda is at odds with the Injunction, will it be held against me in the future?"

The threat of the Enforcer's titanic mental grip loomed over Mostin. He knew that she could squash his psyche with a passing thought.

"These are practical considerations," Mostin wailed. "Our existence is threatened."

"Adhere to the Injunction, Mostin. In letter and spirit. The Claviger looks after her own. You will not be abandoned."
"What do you mean?" Mostin asked.

"Precisely that," Gihaahia smiled her evil smile.

"I need to..." Mostin began.

But the Enforcer had vanished, without warning. The Alienist cursed, and hurled the teapot against a bookcase in a fury. What was happening? What was this talk of gender and maternity in relation to the Claviger? It was grossly inappropriate.

Still, somehow, he felt oddly reassured.

He issued a sending to Daunton: We need to talk. Where are you?

The reply was laden with fear and apprehension: Later, Mostin. I have an unexpected guest.

Mostin frowned. His hands were still shaking. He stood, walked to a small cabinet, retrieved an antique bottle, and poured himself a generous draught of vintage firewine. The liquor burned his throat and made him sneeze.

He fondled the stone of sendings briefly, swallowed, and then sent a message to Rimilin.

**

"Will she not compromise?" Lai asked, her voice evincing as much irritation as Nwm had ever before heard.

"Perhaps," the Druid replied. "She may have stated an unreasonably high bargaining position to begin with, with the intention of accepting other terms. But I think that she is genuine. Although it's impossible to tell."

"One of us could relinquish our power," Rhul suggested. "Although she would be bound to Mulhuk, much as we are."

"Would you make such a concession?" Jaliere asked. Smoke bellowed from his nostrils.

"To ensure our survival? Certainly."

"I suspect that Ortwine would find such a proposal unacceptable," Nwm smiled drily. "She wishes to take her divinity with her. Back to Afqithan.*"

"I find this entire conversation absurd," Jaliere grunted. "There must be another way."

"There is not," Lai sighed emphatically. "We cannot assault Saes. We cannot coerce her. This fey – who is unknown to her – may be able to achieve what we are incapable of."

"I don't see how." The God of the Forge was becoming agitated, and his beard began to kindle.
"Please remain calm," Lai's tone changed as she tried to placate Jaliere. "Ortwine is a greater liar than any I have met. She is conniving and duplicitous to an extreme degree. Moreover, if she is motivated sufficiently – if the prize is great enough – she will find a way."

"What of the Ahma?" Jaliere asked.

"His debt is paid to you," Nwm shook his head. "Three times over. And he is preoccupied with other matters – which I am neglecting in order to be here."

"But you had intended to accompany Ortwine?"

"Yes," Nwm nodded.

Lai looked shocked. "Why have you said nothing of this to me?"

Nwm shrugged. "I cannot let Ortwine do this alone. I thought you understood that."

"But this is..."

"Madness? Suicide?" Nwm suddenly became angry. "Then perhaps you should ask yourselves whether it is reasonable to ask this of her at all! Decide which this is Lai, because it was my impression that there was a possibility of success."

"Watch your tone, mortal," Jaliere threatened.

"Peace!" Lai raised her hand.

"All of this is moot," Rhul observed, "if we cannot find a way to grant Ortwine what she demands."

"*Ngaarh!*" Jaliere slammed a gauntleted fist upon the stone table. He barked at two spectral warriors – ancestral spirits who guarded the doors to the hallway.

"Bring in the Fey. This discussion is pointless without her presence."

**

The island – which rose from the ocean west of Pandicule like a jagged tooth – had been chosen by the mage Kothchori for its isolation and its peculiar aesthetic. Mostin wondered whether, at some time in the distant past, some wind-sorcerer had raised it from the sea bed in order to serve as a base – although the Alienist had no evidence to support such a theory. It was too eccentric, he observed, to be altogether natural.

Rimilin had claimed it as his own and – with a characteristic panache which Mostin grudgingly acknowledged – replaced the crumbling remains of Kothchori's abode with a three-hundred foot tall tower of red iron which pierced the sky like a great, bloody spearhead. The Alienist turned to Orolde.

"He has a certain style," Mostin admitted. "Don't you think?"

"I preferred it as it was," Orolde replied sadly. "Kothchori felt no need for such phallic ostentation."
"An interesting observation," Mostin nodded. "Which may have some merit. The Ritual of Bonding requires certain sacrifices which most would be unable to endure. Come, Orolde! We shall see whether Rimilin observes those niceties of conduct which transcend even the forced peace of the Claviger. It would be wise to omit any references to genitalia, however. Even after so long, that may still be a sensitive subject."

The duo ascended a hundred or so stone steps to arrive at the base of the tower, and stood before an intricate portal of black adamant, inlayed with precious metals and carved with dire warnings. It ground open to reveal a narrow staircase, lit by lurid green smokeless flambeaux. Mostin sighed, and strode in. Orolde scuttled in nervously behind. There was a brief sensation of dimension at once both stretching and contracting, and Mostin found himself in an echoing hall of great height. He glanced behind quickly to observe Orolde, who still followed him.

The chamber was circular, and was illuminated by a firepit which sat in its dead centre, as well as by seven immense bronze sconces which jutted out of its walls at regular intervals in its periphery. It tapered to an apex perhaps thirty fathoms above, and around the walls a staircase wound, reaching balconies and doors beyond which, presumably, other chambers lay.

"Welcome," a foul voice issued from above the Alienist. Rimilin stood upon a wide mezzanine which extended for three quarters of the chamber's circumference.

Mostin cleared his throat. "Thank-you. Should I come up, or will you come down?" His voice was louder than he had anticipated, as though some enchantment magnified the sound in the tower's interior.

"Ascend if you dare," Rimilin's voice taunted him. "I promise to be good."

Mostin scowled, and slowly climbed the staircase.

"Ahh, the hero of the hour," Rimilin said acidly as Mostin gained the balcony. The walls were lined with bookcases crammed with thousands of ancient tomes. "Your coup with the Assembly will merit discussion ten generations hence – if it survives at all."

Mostin stared hard at him. His hairless head and naked torso glistened with an oily black secretion, and he smelled rank.

"I have come to take counsel," Mostin said simply. "Aside from Daunton and Jalael, you are the only mage who openly advocates a proactive stance in our dealings with Shûth."

"The inertia of Wyre's wizards will be their undoing," Rimilin spat. "They all deserve to perish."

"It is incumbent upon us that we convince them to act in concert," Mostin sighed.

Rimilin snorted, and sat in a siege of wrought Abyssal bronze. He motioned to Mostin to do the same. Orolde fumbled nervously and produced a ledger and a quill pen – from which the feathers had been judiciously removed.

"Why did you insist to bring your scribe with you?" Rimilin's brow furrowed. "Did you think that it would cause me to moderate my tone?"
"Not at all," Mostin sat stiffly. He wasn't even sure himself why he had commanded Orolde to attend him. Perhaps he needed the unqualified moral support. Perhaps he felt that it was high time that the Sprite was exposed to the inner counsels of Wyre's most accomplished mages: Orolde's aptitude for magic was beginning to assert itself, and soon he would be faced with the choice of whether or not to remain with the Alienist. Mostin grimaced. Such was the way of things.

"Has the Enforcer paid you a visit, yet?" Mostin inquired.

Rimilin's eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"There are those among us, myself and Daunton included, who tread close to the legal boundaries – both physically and metaphorically – of the Injunction. Gihaahia was kind enough to point out the fact that sometimes my actions are questionable."

"I have received no such warning. Perhaps you are more controversial than I," Rimilin smiled.

*Perhaps physical proximity to Wyre is more important than I suspected,* Mostin thought.

"I have recently succoured the Sela for celestial aid," Mostin tapped his fingers on the arm of his chair.

"You? An Enochian?" Rimilin's voice oozed with contempt. "You have been reduced to a lowly estate, Mostin!"

"I am exploring every option!" Mostin hissed. "And I preclude nothing at this stage. I need reliable allies, not fickle compactees. Devils are out of the question."

"I heard of Furcas," Rimilin smiled. "That may prove a costly mistake."

"I take it then that word has not yet reached you of Titivilus and Murmuur? They are also destroyed."

"*Three Infernal Dukes?*" Rimilin was visibly impressed. "That must be some kind of record."

"It was Eadric, not I, who slew them."

"I doubt that Dispater – or the Fly-Lords – will differentiate your complicity."

"Indeed," Mostin acknowledged.

"You might petition Belial for aid," Rimilin suggested. "If you care to walk Shomei's path."

"I do not. And I do not have the resources to pursue pseudonatural servitors at this stage. I am in danger of further exhausting my reservoir if I do. My options are limited. And in the field of rapidly polarizing allegiances, I must side *against Cheshne*. That is the biggest threat to me, and to Wyre."

"You risk a great deal in telling me this," Rimilin was suspicious. "Why?"
"Because, despite your depravity, you are no nihilist, and you understand necessity."

"You seek to act as the catalyst for a Cascade," Rimilin realized. "You think that you can force the hand of the celestial host, if Enitharmon perceives a large enough threat? Those days are over, Mostin. The demise of the Temple ended that paradigm, and both the Ahma and the Sela sealed that door when they chose mysticism over Orthodoxy."

"For themselves, maybe. Personally, I will use whatever tools I need to. Think on that."

**

Ortwine strode slowly into the council chamber in Mulhuk. Rhul gazed at her in wonder as she approached: her beauty was undeniable, though cold, and her very presence seemed more profound than any there – who bore the title of god or goddess – could claim.

"Have you found a way?" She asked calmly.

"No," Lai admitted.

The Sidhe turned, and began to walk away.

"Ortwine, please," Rhul implored. "We are at a loss. If we could grant this freely, we would. We are but little gods," his voice was ironic. "You know this. You ask the impossible."

She turned to face them, and thought for a long moment.

"Very well," she finally said. "The payment can wait. As it depends upon my success in any event, here are the terms that I propose: Upon release of the spirits of the dead – assuming that such a deed can be accomplished – you will admit me nominally to your ranks. When Lai and Nwm reincarnate the disembodied en masse, my worship will be actively encouraged by your agents. As your power begins to wax again, as surely it will; you will, after all, have a monopoly on religion," sarcasm dripped from Ortwine's tongue, "then I will claim my divinity along with an equal – which is to say twenty percent – share of the veneration from Sisperi's burgeoning population. Which brings me to my portfolio."

Nwm gaped. Ortwine had some truly outrageous ideas.

"I choose lies and trickery. I have observed that you lack a suitable exemplar in these areas. But – and here is where you make a concession to me now, before we begin – Jaliere must first perform a task for me."

"Must he indeed?" Jaliere thundered.

Ortwine drew Githla, and handed it to the God of the Forge. "This blade was forged by the Azer Jodrumu, before he went mad."

Jaliere brandished it, feeling its balance and judging its temper with his mind's
eye. "This is a fine weapon. Jodrumu – whoever he was – was a gifted smith."

"Just so," Ortwine agreed.

"You wish it reforged by Jaliere?" Lai asked.

"Not exactly," Ortwine smiled slowly. "I wish it married with another blade. If such a task is within his abilities."

Jaliere guffawed. "If not I, then who? Which is this other weapon?"

But Nwm already knew. Just as he knew that Ortwine alone was most likely to succeed in deceiving Saes, because the Sidhe had played him – and the Nireem – already.

The Druid grimaced. "The sword is named Heedless. And I strongly advise against this course of action, Ortwine."

"Your concern is duly noted," Ortwine nodded. "And ignored. If I am to be a goddess, Nwm, I must have a blade worthy of me."

* The Chiefs of the Nireem (except Ninit) retain a divine rank of 1 only when within Mulhuk, the minor heaven which abuts Sisperi. Outside of its confines, they are treated as DR0 quasi-deities.

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**POST 9: UNTITLED UPDATE**

Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 25th June 2006, 05:32 PM

Tahl was first, and Rede was second.

When the Ahma brought the former Master of the Temple back, he found that Tahl’s assessment had been correct: a righteous wrath had been Orthon’s gift to Rede of Dramore, whose realization of the truth had come too late.

Eadric had descended together with Tahl into the catacombs, and they had smashed sarcophagi open. Saint Tahl prayed as the Ahma, who alone of Orthon’s mortal servants possessed the power,* had called them back, breathing life into them: Tuan Muat, an Inquisitor of singular determination; Kustus of Mord; Wurz, the founder of the Mission; Moda the Exorcist; Tarpion the Rash; Anaqiss Twice-Apostate, who had briefly supported both the Irrenites and the Sophics before recanting his heresies; Haubi of Thahan. Former grandees and luminaries in the Magistratum, some of whom had been dead for two centuries or more. All had perished violently: in war, or at the hands of demons or assassins, or through acts of betrayal by those who sought to supplant them. Unquiet spirits who – gifted with new life and vigour – pledged themselves both to Eadric and to the teachings of Saizhan, body and soul.

Tahl called steeds to serve them: a brood of ancient celestial griffons of
prodigious size, whose names were buried in forgotten temple tomes.** Eadric took Hauthuts, hot-tempered and proud, whose feathered mane bore a silver sheen. He knew that before the Fall, Murmuur's steed had been kin to them, and mused how many had descended with their masters into damnation: their adherence to virtue seemed already precarious. Within a week, there were twenty of them. They consumed horses more quickly than Eadric could have imagined possible.

The date of the embassy drew near, and Eadric considered his possibilities. After agonizing over the choices, he opted to retain Rede and Tarpion, deploying the others – including Kustus, who possessed great strategic insight – to order the Sela's position south of Wyre. Tuan Muat, Wurz, Moda and Anaqiss were powerful spellcasters whose presence was sorely needed in the Temple camp; Tahl, he would not spare.

Nehael's initiative would be formally ratified by the Small Council in the august presence of King Tiuhan, a political move organized by Prince Tagur: Tiuhan approached his fourteenth birthday, and his majority. But Mostin and Daunton would join the party later, beyond Wyre's borders. Mostin had indicated that there were diplomatic considerations that should not be overlooked which prevented his official involvement.

_Ugh. Politics_, Eadric thought.

"Will you seize power, if a time comes where it seems necessary?" Tahl inquired archly of him. "There are rules you have yet to break."

The Ahma sighed. "Probably, knowing my luck."

"Do you think if they get us all in one place, they will try to overwhelm us with one, swift stroke?"

"Maybe," Eadric nodded. "But I think they'll fail if they do. They are not yet prepared. And we aren't so helpless. Now uncertainty vexes them, and it may be we can force their hand. Time is no longer on their side."

Tahl nodded. There were nine hundred sarcophagi in the Temple catacombs.

**

The fortress, which perched upon an island of matter, drifted in a haphazard fashion through a grey, featureless astral planescape.

Sho stood in the courtyard and gazed up at the expanses above her. She felt no desire. No fear. No joy. But neither did she feel _nothing_: oblivion was a state denied to her. She experienced only a perpetual, mild discomfort, as her incomplete psyche attempted to balance two irreconcilable commands:

_Preserve what you are. Become other than what you are._

Her creator's gift to her – other than a semblance of life – had been a lingering existential malaise. She sighed – because that is what she understood was appropriate – and entered the keep: a round bastion pierced with narrow windows, from which issued the bluish-green light of a dimensional lock. She made her way by a narrow staircase into a chamber in the bedrock, where the
Alienist was closeted.

Potent wards protected the place. Mostin paced back and forth, irritated. Within a thaumaturgic diagram, a solar – Taruz – stood in glorious, radiant, blissful meditation. Captured by a superior planar binding – a spell developed by Shomei – the celestial had refused point-blank to deal with Mostin until it was released. Events were not transpiring as the Alienist had hoped.

Mostin glanced sidelong at Sho, but refused to meet her gaze. He would not look at her directly – something which Sho knew should make her feel upset. She decided to pout, but the expression was lost on Mostin.

Orolde – who sat on a low stool – smiled at her, and raised his stump. He hopped down, and scurried over.

"The celestial is being less than accommodating," the Sprite whispered. "Where is Mei?"

"She still reads," Sho answered. Orolde was kind to her. She felt that she should like him.

She coughed, in an effort to attract Mostin's attention.

The Alienist scowled.

"I should like to explore," Sho asserted. "May I leave the keep?"

Mostin raised an eyebrow. "I think you might find the landscape hereabouts rather dull – although I would advise caution nonetheless. But I am not your master. Do what you will. Perhaps Orolde will accompany you."

The Alienist watched as they departed. His clumsy efforts to nudge the simulacra towards self-realization had, thus far, had negligible results; they had demonstrated nothing which could be described as genuine individuation. It would take time, and magic of a magnitude he could barely begin to comprehend, to effect that change. And there was never enough time.

He dwelt briefly on the possibilities offered by Shomei's infinity of pseudoanalogues, before dismissing them from his mind.

After invoking powerful protections, Mostin turned to Taruz. "Don't try any funny business. Don't try to intimidate me – it won't work. And spare me your moralizing."

He waved his hand, and a little of the powdered silver which formed the protective circle around the celestial blew away. Taruz stepped forth.

"I know you have a very good reason for this, Mostin," the Solar's eyes bore into him.

**

The Arcanaloth, Tholhaluk, gazed into the scrying mirror, observing Iua's endless progress through the maze within his basalt fortress with an expression of malicious curiosity. At whiles, she would stop to regain her bearings; or,
alternatively collapse for an hour in uncontrolled bursts of tears as memories cascaded through her mind. She was perched precariously on the edge of sanity. The Daemon smiled – it was important that she not be pushed too far if she were to be effectively harnessed, and not utterly broken.

Surab, who had moved into her rapier, prompted her as necessary. Always in proximity to Iua, he could rehabit her at need – should her actions become too suspicious or threatening. He played masterfully on her wild, impulsive nature; the instinctual chaos which was her elemental self. She had taken to the corruption which he lavished on her, greedily absorbing the taint whilst simultaneously rejecting it in disgust. Angst raged through her: she was empowered and violated; stripped of her will, yet granted boons which no mortal could hope for. She found it increasingly difficult to separate her own identity from the evil which drove a dark desire to maim, rape and kill.

Sensing her own damnation, she wept spasmodically in despair, all the while exulting.

Within the shifting walls of the maze – from which, it was becoming apparent to Iua, there was no real exit – Tholhaluk had placed a number of conundrums. Perverse scenarios wrought of shadowstuff, in which Iua was forced to act as the protagonist in a play whose choices always dealt misery, pain and death – but, for her, granted an ecstatic release which left her calm and sated. But only for a little while.

Eadric – the Ahma – might have fared better, she mused as she watched fiendish trolls idly butcher children and gorge on their flesh. Her spirits soared as her body heaved in revulsion.

But I am not Eadric. What hope do I have? They are breaking me.

She laughed maniacally. She knew that the pain would finally end, when she could recall her own mother's murder with delicious satisfaction.

* 

Even after abandoning Graz'zt – a decision which Tholhaluk wryly observed he might later come to regret – the daemon remained on favorable terms with a number of Azzagrat's proxies. The initial assault upon Zelatar by death knights, blood fiends and Abyssal ghouls had seemed, at first, overwhelming. Tholhaluk had panicked; bursting free from the sealed palace with a powerful disjunction which had ripped a hole through defenses erected by Graz'zt; for which, the Arcanaloth knew, he had gained the everlasting enmity of the Dark Prince. However, Tholhaluk believed – correctly – that he was low on the list of Graz'zt's priorities as far as potential targets for revenge were concerned. He would have a few centuries, at least, before his former sponsor's eye was turned towards him: if Azzagrat endured at all through the current crisis.

Yaugot – the fearsome king of Terkenutung – still paid for the services of thugs provided by Tholhaluk, and the daemon had seized upon the vacuum of opportunity left by the withdrawal Graz'zt's troops from that world. Mazikreen – one of the few succubi to have successfully disentangled herself from the webs of Queen Alrunes to forge a kingdom of her own – had graced him with a visit in his citadel soon after Orcus had invested Azzagrat. Suudjut – a balor who rivalled Ainhorr in his power – had also made overtures to Tholhaluk; apparently eager for trade in souls but, in fact, the daemon knew, anxious to procure the sword Heedless, which was reported to be still in Afqithan. Tholhaluk, who had lost a
veritable host of mercenaries in the Confrontation, was understandably reluctant to pursue any enterprise there. And now the heart of Afqithan was in Faerie: woe betide any fiend who roused the Sidhe-Lords from their languor.

Tholhaluk was, as always, treading carefully. But Iua was an opportunity. He would work with Surab for as long as it took for one of them to destroy the other. With grim appreciation, Tholhaluk knew that he wouldn't be the corpse at the end of it.

**

"What would you require of me, in order to secure unqualified celestial aid?" Mostin asked bluntly. "If, for example, I needed a handful of cherubs to aid me in casting a spell?"

The solar's eyes went blank for a moment.

*The bastard is communing with his superiors,* Mostin knew. *Don't they ever think for themselves?*

"A genuine recantation of your prior crimes," Taruz smiled beatifically. "That you wholeheartedly embrace Oronthon, and demonstrate – through your deeds and words – a dedication to His cause. If you achieved such a state of grace, however, I suspect that the likelihood of you wanting to cast such a spell would be zero."

Mostin groaned. "Who are you speaking with? Enitharmon? You're certainly towing the Orthodox line, aren't you?"

"Your dealings with fiends have not endeared you to the celestial host."

Mostin held his tongue, as mentioning the name Soneillon would have merely elicited rhetoric from Taruz regarding the mission of the Ahma which the Alienist was in no mood to hear.

"The fact that I am in a position to defend Wyre – and the faithful – from an inevitable demonic assault, and that you show reluctance in aiding me in my efforts might be construed as rather short-sighted, don't you agree?"

"Your lack of faith in the vision of the Sela merely demonstrates your unworthiness in this area," Taruz observed.

"It was the Sela who suggested that I contact the host!" Mostin was becoming increasingly frustrated.

"That is known," Taruz nodded. "As is your participation in the coming mission to the Cheshnite sect. Hence, I am demonstrating a greater tolerance of your binding me than I might otherwise."

*Oh, for Shomei's rod,* Mostin lamented, and cursed the Akesoli. He thought deeply for a long while.

"I need allies, Taruz. Powerful, effective allies who can be trusted, and who will not bleed me dry in the coming months. Allies whose agendas are not entirely at odds with my own. But my spirit is mine, and you may not lay claim to it: I have
transcended, and I am beyond your grasp. I will not recant my sins, for in my judgment – the only judgment to which I am beholden – I have committed none. I propose a mutually beneficial arrangement. Is that so hard to wrap your feathery head around?"

"The thought of looking to the obvious has come late to you."

"Don't be so damned smug!"

"There will be no cascade," Taruz said firmly, "unless Enitharmon so decrees it. Nor will the celestial host aid or in any way condone your efforts to bind Graz'zt – or any other fiend for that matter. You will not subject celestials to bindings: it is inappropriate."

"Inappropriate? And why no cascade? You were willing enough at Khu."

"Why does Oronthon choose to incarnate himself? Why does he not reorder creation so that it is more to his liking?"

"Trust me," Mostin scowled. "You do not want to have this conversation with me. Go on."

"If you open a gate to call archons or devas you will find them well-disposed towards you. Payment will be waived and reciprocal service will be considered rendered if they are deployed in a manner consonant with the will of the Ahma and the Sela. I should also point out that your options are running out."

"Thank-you for your keen observation. I accept the terms – with one caveat. Under no circumstances are celestials called by me to trespass within the borders of Wyre as defined under article nineteen-point-zero of the Injunction. The Enforcer would have my head on a stick for such an infringement."

"That is understood."

"I also reserve the right to summon any fiend, in the knowledge that our agreement will expire at the moment that I do. I expect no retribution if this occurs."

"I can make no such promise."

"I'll take my chances," Mostin said drily.

**

The sword Heedless was brought to Jaliere – the smith of the gods – with great pomp and ceremony, as befitted Ortwine's whimsy. Nwm had opened a doorway between two great trees – a banyan in Afqithan and a fir in Sisperi – through which a procession of gnomes bearing the weapon appeared with great solemnity. They were followed by dancing nymphs and flights of portunes – the tiniest of sprites, each no bigger than a thumbnail. Satyrs blew copper horns. Sundry minor feys capered and applauded.

Ortwine signalled for quiet, and an excited hush fell upon the assembled throng. As Heedless was rendered to Jaliere's apprentices, one satyr could restrain himself no longer, and began blowing a raucous note on his horn. Ortwine quickly
silenced the offender, and smiled benignly. Her expression changed to a scowl as the doors to the smithy were closed and locked tight; Jaliere would admit his secrets to none.

As the feys cavorted through the roads and courtyards of Mulhuk, Nwm turned to Ortwine.

"How did you make the sword quiescent?"

"I charmed it, of course. I have utterly seduced it. It adores me."

"It may come to resent its bondage."

"I predict an uneasy relationship," Ortwine agreed. "Nonetheless, at present, Heedless and I are newlyweds. We should bask in the first flush of romance."

"I suspect that it may harbor less good feeling towards you after its shape has been contorted and bound to another blade."

"Love is pain, Nwm."

"How long will you be remaining?" Nwm asked. "Jaliere may take a month to complete his work."

"How long does the gate remain open?"

"The portal is permanent," Nwm replied calmly.

"What?" Ortwine screamed. A fury crossed her face.

"It is not the first."

"How dare you!" She was still screaming. Evidently, Ortwine valued her isolation more than Nwm had anticipated.

"Not just to Afqithan, but to other areas in Faerie, to Nizkur, to places which you are not worthy to behold. I forge connections, Ortwine. It is my fee to you and the Nireem. Call it a finder's fee."

"Contact me in a month, or whenever the thing is ready," Ortwine hissed.

"Trust my foresight!" Nwm snapped. "I do what I must; that includes squeezing my friends for their debts: if you think you can unravel yourself from your past deeds, you may not find it so easy."

"I will have it dispelled."

"Afqithan is in Faerie now, and you do not own Faerie," Nwm sighed. "Your direct hegemony is limited, whatever title you choose to assume. Do not thwart me, Ortwine, but accept that my vision is sound. Return with me to Wyre. Events transpire in which we should be part."

"Wyre bores me."

"Annihilation threatens."

"So what? You tell me this when I have no weapon?"
"I'm sure Eadric has a spare."

Ortwine glowered.

**

Anumid, the mouthpiece of Cheshne, knelt in supplication before his eleven masters – hierophants, necromancers and blood magi. Some were living, some were dead. Some were human – or had once been. All were immortal. His voice sounded as a dirge, as he recounted the disposition of the Wyrish embassy.

"The Ahma, and three of those whom he has resurrected – Tahl the Incorruptible, Rede and Tarpion; also Nwm the Preceptor, Mesikammi the Shamaness and the witch Hlioth; Prince Tagur of Einir, and twelve of the finest knights in Wyre; Ortwine the Sidhe, usurper of the throne of Afqithan; Daunton and Mostin, champions of Wyre's fledgeling collegiate system of wizardry."

"Ahh, the heralds of the new order," Sibud spoke. His inflection was two thousand years old, but well-known to those there: Sibud was a primal vampire of ancient pedigree, the sire of many masters.

"Daunton insists upon a dimensional lock. Mostin has enough magical support to invoke his quiescence of the spheres, and will likely do so."

"So be it," Yeshe the Binder nodded. "Let them spend their strength thus. I will go: I should like to meet the Ahma."

"And I," Naatha purred.

"As would I," Sibud smiled. "Set the meeting for midnight."

"At Galda?" Anumid inquired.

"If Mostin requires that it be outside of Wyre's borders, we should indulge him," the lich Choach rasped. "I will also attend."

"Anumid will accompany us, and Visuit," Yeshe decreed. "Let the remainder of the company, to the number of two dozen, be chosen as each of we four see fit."

*Long ago I house-ruled raise dead to be a 7th-level spell and (true) resurrection to be 9th-level. In the Temple's history, raise dead has only been cast a handful of times. Before Eadric, no resurrection had ever been made. Prior to the advent of Saizhan, there was a necromantic taboo associated with both spells.

**The griffons are advanced (10 HD) celestial monsters of legend with the haste and spell-turning special abilities. I rule that when templated creatures are called with planar ally spells, each +1CR of a template counts as 2HD for purposes of determining whether a creature is subject to it.
N.B.: Contundor got smushed by Nalfeshnees in Afqithan, something which I neglected to mention previously.

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**POST 10: THE LETTER**

Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 24th December 2006, 07:36 AM

_They are not nameless_, Eadric thought, although the fact provided no measure of comfort to him.

He had requested that Tahl divine the information; a direct communion with the Source would reveal their purpose and number. There were ancient names amongst them, to which rumours in only the earliest of temple chronicles alluded. Tahl issued a _sending_ to Mostin.

Unsurprisingly, the Alienist knew of their identities, and the myths associated with them. Orolde _teleported_ to see Eadric in Morne; the _Ahma_ was in temporary residence in the Temple compound, and it was uncharacteristically quiet: many of the devoted had taken up arms again, and accompanied the _Sela_ to Wyre's Southern march.

Orolde appeared bearing a scroll: he was nervous, his head twitching and his eyes flickering restlessly, as though every shadow might prove a lurking place for the Enforcer or one of her agents. The sprite was sure that he was trespassing in an area of dubious legality regarding the Injunction, and Eadric smiled benignly, in a vain effort to assuage Orolde's paranoia. The fey quickly handed the letter over, _teleported_ back to Mostin's manse, and breathed a sigh of relief when he realized that all of his faculties remained to him.

Eadric immediately broke the seal, and read the letter. Mostin had adopted an elegant script: evidently, the Alienist had been experimenting with a new calligraphic style.

_To the Ahma in Morne, greetings:_

_The names with which you have furnished me are a source of some concern. I have arranged them in what I deem the most likely order of precedence, although I should make it clear that my information is likely outmoded: note, then, a certain amount of conjecture follows._

_Temenun_ is a demonic spirit of primeval strain, native to the jungles of Utter Shuth. His form is feline. He was master of a wide dominion before the Sleeping Gods withdrew from the World of Men; a reign of sacrifice and terror, the memory of which still endures in the occult lore of nomadic wise-women. Wyre was still beneath two hundred feet of ice when Temenun was deposed and – purportedly – slain. I suspect Temenun may, in fact, have been subject to some form of imprisonment – only to have been recently freed (the same may be true of others amongst the Cheshnite sect). Temenun's prophetic ability is said to be unrivalled.

_Yeshe the Binder_ is at least five thousand years old; she is mentioned in cryptograms from the era of Shuth's First Empire, preserved in Siir Traag. Twenty-one centuries ago, Yeshe conjured Pazuzu at Khu and unleashed the
demon upon the desert kingdom of Durjan, destroying it. Fifty years later, she razed the port of Triptah through the depredations of a demon named Narake – possibly a Chthonic. In times past, she built massive edifices – sites of profane power – the wrecks of which still litter the ancient erg. Her bloodline – or those who boast descent from her – still exercise power in Shuth. It is of note that both Kothchori and Feezuu were scions of her house, or at least made claim to be. The source of her immortality is unknown, but she lacks the pretensions typical of divinity, and has no cult.

Idyam exists now in mostly unmanifest form; his consciousness was transferred to his remains, which were preserved in the Temple of Tejobih – a somnolent Power who absented himself even before the rest of Shuth's gods entered hibernation. Idyam was held to have ascended to godhood, although his contempt for those who supplicated him was well-known. Idyam is no deity, I suggest, but a demilich. This may prove the worse for us.

Sibud is a vampire – a progenitor from outside the World of Man; an abomination, birthed in some other cycle of being – he arrived in Shuth two millennia ago. His countless spawn have infested the deep desert for centuries, and have visited ruin upon many tribes. Sibud's mastery of the necromantic arts was once unsurpassed, and his bloodlust insatiable: his downfall is recorded in a document known as the Kash-haya (Shomei possessed a copy; if you wish to inspect her library, I can arrange it). His command of ritual magic was legendary; for a while, Urm-Nahat was his apprentice. Together they devised a spell known as the storm of blood, which slew the armies of a rival warlord, Kumaari. It is highly likely that Sibud can still convoke a respectable assembly of spellcasters; we can hope that he has not yet fully returned to his former power. If he can manifest his storm of blood, then we may be in trouble: I would advise against deploying any temple troops en masse until we find out – a fragment recounts that 'sixty thousand warriors of renown perished' when it was last invoked.

Jahi is a demigoddess, who appears as a marasmic child. Little is known of her, save her sparktheft – she is credited with stealing the divinity from a number of minor godlings in order to swell her own potency; some accounts refer to her as Jeshi's half-sister, who, unlike her sibling, 'suckled at Cheshne's teat'. The lack of other information is worrying; I advise utmost caution in any dealings with this entity. Although such advice is hardly necessary.

Naatha is a succubus of bestial mien, kin to Chaya and Chepez (but not Nathi). Ironically, she is likely to be one of our most direct antagonists. Naatha was once an Ugra – a fierce protector – but she misliked any form of contractual obligation, preferring to bind rather than be bound. What else I can write on the subject of succubi which is not already known to you?

Dhatri was once human – she appears now in the form of a bloated mass of undead flesh. She is gluttonous, and rumoured to savour the corpses of those she has slain. Her title translates as 'nurse' or 'midwife' – it is safe to assume that her nurturing urge is not directed toward the living. She has mastery over ghouls, ghasts, and other necrophages. She is venerated by several death-cults in Analah in southern Shuth.

Prahar is a great warrior, an Ur-Priest, and a undead psychotic. He ruled in Danhaan before his elevation by Orcus to the stewardship of another world – a lush plane known as Veddekeh. After several centuries as the incumbent despot – a dark age overwhelmed Veddekeh, if accounts are correct – Prahar rebelled against Orcus and shrugged off his yoke. This part is important:
Prahār bound Orcus with a spell, and forced the Prince to meet his demands.

This is no small accomplishment. Knowledge of this event is obscure – Orcus made a great effort to eliminate any witnesses and records after his quick release. I believe Orcus made an immediate, absolute concession to Prahar’s demands – whatever they were. Veddekeh became unreachable thereafter, and it’s reasonable to assume the events are connected.

Rishih is a Theurge and a Thaumaturge. He specializes in compacting middle-ranking demonic nobility – powerful mariliths and balors, and lords such as Ahazu and Munkir have submitted to him in the past.

Guho is an aberrant, festering heap of corruption – even by my liberal standards. She is a worm that walks. This is such a grubby method of transcendence. She was a Blood-Mage of high credentials before seizing her immortality – I’m sure she’s considerably more dangerous after a thousand years.

Choach – favoured by the dark gods – embraced unlife some eight centuries ago. He might be considered the ‘junior member’ of the sect’s leadership, although doubtless none amongst Wyre’s wizards – excepting possibly myself – can rival his power. Choach was renowned for his unbridled sadism, his perverse sense of humour, and, like Feezū – according to the literature upon the subject – a preference for acid evocations.

These are the eleven leaders, according to Tahl’s information. All equal or exceed me in their command of magic. Teppu may be more powerful than any of them, or he may not – the sprite’s potency is hard to gauge, and focussed in a narrow area. His exact agenda is not known in any case, so he cannot be considered a reliable ally.

If my calculations are correct, a spell synergy by these eleven alone – not including the cabals and priesthood – could achieve a result in the region of the three-thousandth order. I appreciate that this number means little to you, but it might help if I tell you that the wave of hate – from which Morne will likely never recover – was approximately a two-hundredth order effect.

I will expect you in two days.

Mostin.

*

The four of them – Eadric, Ortwine, Mostin and Nwm – finally met at the Alienist’s retreat. Oroilde had absented himself. She languished on the porch in a manner which made Eadric feel uncomfortable: some of her mannerisms were uncannily similar to her maker’s.

Mostin immediately grabbed Nwm’s arm, and drew him aside. The Alienist whispered in an agitated manner.

"So what exactly do you know about Hlioth. Is she safe? What’s her agenda? Did she say anything about releasing Graz’zt after Fillein bound him?"
Nwm groaned. "I know as much about her as you do, Mostin. She does what she does. At present, she is an ally. I don't know if that relationship will persist. And no, she made no comment regarding Graz'zt – although I am sympathetic to her action. It must have been a hard choice, but Fillein's behaviour was arrogant in the extreme."

"What have they been doing? Her and Teppu and Nehael? And you? What have you been doing?"

"It would take too long to explain," Nwm sighed.

"Then summarize," Mostin hissed.


Mostin twitched. "What magic?"

"I'm not entirely sure," Nwm confessed. "I suspect nothing too controversial. Hlioth is bound – at least in part – by the Injunction."

"Actually, Nizkur is beyond the Wyrish border – as far as the Claviger is concerned, at any rate. Besides, everything that Hlioth does is controversial. Tell me of the gates."

"I have opened a number of tree portals," Nwm nodded. "Connecting Afqithan, Sisperi, Nizkur, Groba, the receding Tunthi realm of spirit, the Shrine of Three Storrs in Ialde, Deorham, and several discrete regions of Faerie. They pass through the primordial Tree-ludja."

"You have been busy," Mostin remarked drily. He raised his eyebrows. "From Deorham to Sisperi? You don't seem afraid of stepping on your friends' toes. Aren't you concerned about unwanted traffic?"

"Any traffic is good. That is the purpose. To enable the movement of energy within the matrix of the Interwoven Green."

"Your concepts are curiously archaic." Mostin observed. "I predict that your gates will become bottlenecks. Petty lords will try to control them."

"These are feys and nature spirits we're talking about," Nwm sighed. "Not demons – or men for that matter. You can't ascribe such emotions as desire to rule to most of them."

"To most of them, maybe not. But to enough of them to cause a problem, I say yes. Ten thousand gold says that you have an incident within a month. Where something, maybe a wicked greedy fey – such things exist, you know – tries to take strategic control of one of your gates. It's a resource. Trust me."

"I have no money, Mostin. Alas, I cannot meet your wager."

"I'll take a reincarnation on credit."

Nwm laughed. "Really? I would think you already have some unspeakable contingency."
"That was my big plan," Mostin nodded. He sighed. "Unfortunately, it never seems to get any closer. I also had the notion to spellwarp myself. And bind Graz'zt. And locate the web of motes. And to evolve the consciousnesses of the simulacra. Frankly, there is too much to do, and too little time. I'm bogged down."

"If you were to look to a more natural solution to the simulacra, I might help..."

"Shomei directed me to her pseudoanalogues."

"For what? You think you can attempt some kind of synthesis? Why? Do you really want two pseudo-Shomeis running loose? Besides, you would need the most powerful cabal ever assembled in Wyre. You do not command that kind of respect – consider your efforts to gather even a half-dozen mages to aid you: they aren't interested in your desire to capture the Demon, and ascribe your idea to megalomania. Although I hardly blame them. Can you even honestly say that it's relevant to the current situation?"

Mostin stared hard at Nwm. "I don't know," he admitted. "It's mostly so that I can gloat. What do you suggest with regard to the simulacra?" 

"A natural solution, naturally. Or Dream-vestiges. Shomei has echoes in other places."

"I am no Dreamer," Mostin sniffed dismissively.

"Nor am I," Nwm smiled. "You would have to learn. Is that so abhorrent to you? Ask Teppu. He might advise you."

"And he might not," Mostin scowled.

Nwm sighed. "Whatever they become, the simulacra will not be Shomei, Mostin."

"I know that," Mostin snapped. "This is no adolescent fixation, Nwm. I am merely trying to find a solution within the terms Shomei asserted."

"Did she specify a pseudonatural synthesis?"

"Not exactly," Mostin said. "Or at least, I don't think so."

"What precisely did she say?"

"Begin with the premise that all creatures have multiple pseudonatural analogues."

Nwm laughed loudly, causing Ortwine – who stood nearby in conversation with Eadric – to glare at him.

Mostin seemed mildly offended. "I fail to see what is funny."

"What other premise would Mostin the Metagnostic bring to bear upon any problem?"

"You may have a point," the Alienist shrugged. "But she said that it would be my magnum opus. I can't see what other direction it could take."

"Just reify them with a wish, and let them develop in whichever direction they
choose to go, Mostin. Surely she would have wanted that? To have you determine their course of unfolding would surely be antithetical to everything she believed. Besides, Shomei never exhibited any particular aptitude in the prescient arts – what makes you think that she possessed any special insight into the subsequent evolution of her simulacra?”

"The web of motes, you dummy. She saw it in the web of motes."

"You are overanalyzing an off-hand comment made by someone you cared about and affording it too much significance," Nwm sighed.

"Shomei never made off-hand comments."

"And you are idealizing her in your memory," Nwm continued relentlessly. "She was no less fallible than you or I. Goddess, Mostin. How old was she? Twenty-five? How much wisdom and experience can one of her age really have acquired?"

"More than most," Mostin snapped, his nostrils flaring. "And more than I, certainly. I was still chasing sylphs when I was twenty-five, and Vhorzhe had only recently apprenticed me. Shomei was summoning glooms and compacting with Belial. We are talking orders of magnitude here, Nwm."

"Fine. Have it your way. But you can't break Hell open, Mostin. If you meet her again, she will likely be your enemy: I assume Eadric spoke to you of Titivilus's veiled threats? That Astaroth could offer her some kind of deal?"

"Titivilus was full of sh*t," Mostin snorted. "And if Ed hadn't killed him, I think I probably would have by now. I've had it with fiends. They're too much work to keep in line. I've gone Enochian – for a while, at least."

"Celestials are no better," Nwm grumbled.

"Agreed," Mostin smiled. "But they're cheaper. The Host cut me a special deal, based on my connections."

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"Aid me in this," Ortwine pleaded. "I need you."

"There are other matters, far more pressing." Eadric was unyielding.

She seized him by his pauldrons, pushed him backwards, and stared him in the face. Eadric noticed that she was as tall as he was.

"I'm coming out of this a goddess, Eadric. I can bring a lot of weight to bear on a situation if that happens. In the idiom of my former self: when I get my newly divine ass on the battlefield and I've got a vorpal sword in my hand, who's gonna try it on, eh? Right – no-one."

"Gods are plentiful, these days." Eadric smiled.

"True. And they're not all on your side," Ortwine retorted. "I will be. If you help me. You know it makes sense." She flashed a smile.

"I think not," the Ahma sighed. "Your apotheosis is not my first concern. Did you
just use a suggestion on me?"

"Certainly not. The defense of Wyre and the Temple is a complex strategy, Eadric," Ortwine changed tack. "Consider your moves carefully. At least hear me out."

"Go on," he grumbled. "Try to be quick."

"I have to convince an insane death-goddess to relinquish a million or so souls so that life can begin again in Sisperi. As lunatic an enterprise as this might sound, I think I have a good chance of doing it. If I can get to her. That's where you come in."

"I have no desire to fight my way through some pagan underworld at present."

"Gaining entrance will be the tricky part. The entrance – Saivo – is a double-bottomed lake. It's...upside-down on the other side...for want of a better description."

"I assume it's guarded?"

"Naturally."

"A dragon? A huge dog?"

"No," Ortwine said brightly. "Neither of those. Demons left by Graz'zt, in fact. If you recall, Saes was allied with him for some time. His minions have...gone native...if you catch my meaning."

"I'm not sure that I do."

"Saes has changed them."

"How do you mean, changed?"

"Augmented. Infused."

"With what?"

"Well, with death of course. That is her portfolio, after all."

"Which means what, exactly?"

"The details are hazy," Ortwine admitted. "After we pass the vestibule, we enter Ruk proper. If the reports are correct."

"If." The Ahma said acidly. "Whose reports are these, Ortwine?"

"You know. Rumours. Speculation."

Eadric looked exasperated. "Is there any concrete information?"

"No."

"Why do you think that is, Ortwine? Perhaps because nobody has ever returned from this underworld alive?"
"That is the consensus amongst the Nireem. I plan to be the first, however."

"Let's assume that you get to Saes," Eadric sighed, "but your powers of persuasion fail to move her: I would deem this likely, if she is insane. What then? Do you plan to kill her?"

"I would prefer not to. Admittedly, she is a minor goddess in the grand scheme of things, but her role in the natural balance of Sisperi must be respected. Eadric we are talking about returning life to a world raped by Graz'zt. However selfish my interest is, yours should not be. Remember your vow to Rhul..."

"Aye," the Ahma glowered. "I remember it, and it is discharged. Uort is slain; the babau purged from Soan. I cannot leave Wyre at present."

"Rhul and Lai won't ask you. I am less reticent, however. In a month or so, when my weapon is complete. A queen begs you, Eadric. Forty-eight hours: that's all I ask of you."

"You are optimistic."

"I am motivated."

"If anything happens in my absence; if I get stuck there: by Oronthon I will make you pay, Ortwine."

Ortwine bowed her head. "I will take your oath as testament to your seriousness."

"I will consider the terms of service which I would require from you in return," Eadric gazed stonily at her.

Ortwine stepped back. "I am no man's vassal."

"You will do what is necessary, Ortwine. Like you said, you need me."

"I can shower you with gifts. Would you care for some gnomes?"

"I do not want your slaves."

"They adore me!"

"Service in kind, Ortwine."

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"Mostin mentioned the enemy using big spells," Eadric looked at Nwm. "He seemed reluctant to expand on the topic – other than make mention of an invocation known as the storm of blood, which seems worrying enough. And numbers which seemed distressingly large, if somewhat unfathomable."

"He was probably sparing you the stress that would ensue."

"You think he has an idea of what might be involved?"

"I'm sure he does. Or has at least speculated. I have. The names that Tahl
divined, Eadric – suffice to say that Mostin is more concerned than I have seen him before."

"And you are not?"

"The names themselves mean little to me," Nwm shrugged. "But the fact that it has Mostin worried has me worried. 'Eleven transvalent casters,' he keeps mumbling."

"And what do you think they can do?"

"If they can bring a large group of spellcasters to bear in invoking a single spell, I'd say pretty much anything. They could waste a few hundred square miles with a single dweomer."

"Is that likely?"

"I don't know," Nwm admitted. "I'm hoping that enough distrust exists amongst the leadership that they wouldn't be willing to pool their resources thus."

"I think their unity of purpose is apparent," Eadric sighed.

"And it's only 'apparent.' We, in fact, know nothing of their purpose."

"It is malign," Eadric grunted. "Let me rephrase. What would you do if you were assaulting Wyre."

"Why is their purpose to assault Wyre?"

"Perhaps some kind of divine edict?"

"Let me posit another theory," Nwm grimaced. "What has arisen in Shuth, and subsequently established itself in the Thalassine, has done so in direct response to the principle of Annihilation being invoked in the World of Men. By the Ahma. In other words, your sin caused this. Understand that I am framing this concept within terms familiar to you: I do not personally subscribe to the notion of sin."

"Are you serious?"

"Why have you not fallen? Because you are the Ahma. The rules are different for you. But what you do – how you act – this is reflected in the world around you."

"That's something of a stretch," Eadric was dubious.

"I would think that it was manifestly true, from a certain point of view: such truth is the cause of your veneration by thousands of people. I am not the first to take this perspective."

Eadric raised an eyebrow.

Nwm smiled, and assumed a voice of mock piety. "The Ahma has invoked the apocalypse. He has fornicated with demons, and betrayed us."

"They're saying that?"

"Some of them," Nwm nodded.
"I am the Breath of God, not the body of the world. It sounds like misunderstood Irrenite dogma."

"Even your flaws are perfect, Eadric. You need not worry."

"What an odd thing to say."

"Perhaps God can breathe darkness would suit better."

"That is brutal, Nwm."

"Are you the chief agent of the Adversary, Eadric?"

"Perhaps," the Ahma slowly exhaled. "The thought had occurred to me."

**

At midnight, Eadric received a sending from Tahl. He looked nervously at Mostin.

"What now?" The Alienist sighed.

"I will be invested as Earl Marshal by King Tiuhan tomorrow. All of the Small Council have ratified it. It will consolidate the Temple battalions and secular armies under my leadership. I fought a war in pursuit of disestablishment, and what do they do?"

"Can you refuse?" Nwm asked.

"No," Eadric said simply. "Nor would I, if I could. At least I won't step on any toes this way – Tahl intimated that I might have to take command at some point otherwise. I imagine that he leaned on Tagur."

"It's just a formality, then?"

"Right." The Ahma seemed unconvinced.

"Believe it," Mostin scoffed. "Ten thousand knights will do you about as much good as ten thousand monkeys with sticks at present."

"Every little helps," Nwm stroked his beard. "And don't knock the monkeys."

Eadric's face went blank as another sending reached him.

"What now?" Mostin sighed.

The Ahma was unsure whether to laugh.

"It was from Tahl: Sela informs Mostin that Mulissu has reincarnated."

"Is she Green?" Mostin looked horrified at the prospect.

Eadric shrugged.

Mostin fussed, and drew his robe of eyes about himself. Lids opened, and orbs rotated in woven sockets in a disconcerting manner. Mogus emerged briefly from
"You still have that thing, then," Ortwine's expression was one of mild distaste. Mostin ignored her, and unrolled a scroll.

"Mostin?" Eadric asked nervously.

Potent syllables rolled from the Alienist's lips. A gate opened. Madness flowed from it.

"I am journeying to the middle region of Uzzhin and beyond," Mostin announced. "to confer with the entity Ghom. If any of you wish to accompany me, you may; it might entail certain risks, for the..."

"Sane?" Ortwine offered. "No, thank-you."

Mostin stepped through the gate, and reappeared a split second later.

"Were you gone long?" Ortwine inquired. "I see you have a new hat."

But the length and colour of Mostin's beard – which seemed strangely animated – and the appendage which issued from his robe of eyes in place of an arm, testified to the duration of his stay Outside.

"Longer than I expected," he nodded.

"What did you uncover?" Eadric asked with trepidation.

"Many things," the Alienist evinced a sage madness. "Including the location of the web of motes – and Iua. We have to go immediately. There is no choice, and no time for preparation. Do you understand?"

"Mostin..." Eadric began.

Mostin opened another gate. "Follow me," he said, stepping through.

"But I want my vorpal sword," Ortwine complained.

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**POST 11:**

**Posted by:** Sepulchrevae II at ENWorld on 28th December 2006, 07:00 PM

Given his oft-voiced concerns, Cheiromancer will appreciate the irony of two particular spells. The double-whammy of Mostin casting a disjunction and Eadric speaking a holy word would become a staple opening gambit in combat. Nwm preferred spontaneous epic [death] effects, or to shapechange into a dragon or phoenix.

Mostin's Moment in Time was devised by the Alienist during his tutelage under the entity Ghom, who dwells beyond the middle-region.
Its premise is simple – to look inside when one is Outside is to observe the bounded cosmos transfixed in time, as though one were under the effect of a time stop. Or it can be, which is all that matters for the type of magic that Mostin practices.

In any event, imagine, for a moment, that you are Outside. You turn your consciousness inside to observe the Moment, while you perceive time passing normally for you – or as normally as it does when one is Outside.

Your target – Surab-Iua – is warded by a mind blank, the web of motes is undetectable by any magic, and the only other name with which you have been furnished by your metagnostic inquiry – a daemon named Tholhaluk – is likewise impenetrable to your divination.

But you have your Moment. You use a limited wish to commune with pseudodeities of terrible knowledge, and invoke visions. You determine the location of Tholhaluk's stronghold, and discover that he has severed his link with the Demon Graz'zt. The fact that Tholhaluk’s chief henchman is the arcandaemon Xufu is also revealed to you. You learn of the garden of mind – a magical locus which is controlled by Tholhaluk.

You scry Xufu and are delighted to find that your spell penetrates his ward. Moreover, he is in an audience chamber, kneeling before an empty throne – whoever sits upon it is doubtless mind blanked, and hence cannot be perceived by you. Daemonic mercenaries throng about. You inspect their gazes, and the hidden messages which lie behind them: with your insight you infer the location of another presence in the room, also invisible to your spell.

With successive divinations, you determine the protections which ward the chamber, and the areas which abut it. A hundred feet below, you locate an abandoned cyst once home to a pack of barghests. It is outside of the dimensional lock.

You meditate, and gather your strength. Once you are inside again, you must act quickly. Your Moment will have passed.

- Orolde's Third Temporal Treatise.

That they were in some kind of Hell was immediately apparent.

The evil was palpable, seeping from the floors and walls of a hewn chamber. Distant screams from damned souls echoed disturbingly. The air seemed ruddy.

The Ahma invoked a holy aura, and Lukarn kindled. As he watched Mostin mumble spells, Eadric was aghast at the transformation that the Alienist had undergone.

"I understand your awe at my beauty," Mostin said earnestly. His visage resumed its more familiar cast, and his organ became a hand. "I will spare you the spiritual conflict that it must evoke in you."

"Indeed," Eadric agreed diplomatically.
Mostin scowled sharply, and pointed. 'What is she doing here?'

Sho stood behind Nwm. She had followed him through the gate.

"I am here for my edification," Sho remarked calmly.

"You are a blank slate, begging to be possessed," Mostin was agitated. "There is no time for this nonsense. Return at once."

"Can you not...?"

Eadric warded her.

The Alienist scowled again. "Listen carefully. We are about to assault a jackal-daemon, an arcanaloth named Tholhaluk. He is a powerful sorcerer; currently we are below his throne-room, which is dimensionally locked. We must kill or drive off the fiend as quickly as possible – he has yagnodaemon guards, but they should prove reasonably easy to overcome. Iua will be there: her weapon is inhabited by the demon Surab, and she is quite mad. Try not to kill her. Notice the direction in which I face: the daemon will be fifty feet, dead ahead, when we gain the chamber. When I scried, there was a gap between two yagnoloths..."

Ortwine sighed. It would be her – she was the fastest.

"How did you..." Nwm began.

"There is no time," Mostin opened a passwall directly above their heads. Then three more, each delving a shaft deeper and higher into the rock above them. The Alienist bestowed the power of flight upon them all.

They ascended the shaft swiftly, and Mostin removed their last obstacle – the three feet of magically reinforced adamantine which was the floor of Tholhaluk's sanctum – with a quickened disintegrate. A lurid, red-green light immediately illuminated the shaft, vying with Lukarn's brilliance.

Mostin, followed by Eadric, Nwm and Sho, shot upwards into the centre of a tall chamber wherein hundreds of fiends were gathered. The Alienist unleashed a disjunction immediately. Space buckled as Eadric spoke a holy word: a swathe of grossly misshapen daemons burned away in a wide circle, instantly turned to ash by his power. Nwm invoked a spell: great metallic barbs, like spiked lances, erupted from the floor, impaling dozens.

Fiends fled away from them in every direction.

Eadric glanced toward where Mostin's disjunction had fallen: the Eye of Palamabron revealed an unweaving cloth of impossible colours, which rapidly evaporated into nothingness.

Ortwine's invisible form flashed through the demagicked area at breakneck speed towards a group of daemons who were gathered on a low dais. The Ahma observed that the Sidhe bore the scimitar won from the succubus Cemdre in Afqithan, and hoped it would prove equal to the task. Iua also stood there.

Her reactions were undiminished.

Even as Ortwine's scimitar found its mark, Iua had leapt the distance between
them and was about her in a fury, stabbing with uncanny speed.

Ortwine glanced toward Iua and caught her eye for a split second, *hypnotizing* her.

"Tholhaluk presents far more of a threat to you than I," Ortwine spoke quite reasonably as she proceeded to tear into Tholhaluk with her scimitar, slashing wildly; the daemon smote her with a *destruction* but it seemed to slide off of her. She deftly avoided the blows of two yagnodaemons as they struck the floor with their *tol kendars*, sending sparks flying into the air.

Tholhaluk disappeared in an instant.

Surab abandoned Iua's rapier and likewise vanished. But Iua's assault on Ortwine was just as determined.

She froze, as Mostin *dominated* her. The Alienist gestured again, opening another *gate*.

"Why the *disjunction*?" Eadric inquired.

"I know he's got one," Mostin replied. "I had to get mine in first. Quick. Before they return."

**

*I have the web of motes* Mostin's head span. He sat in a comfortable chair in his study, fondling it with his pseudopod.

"Are you keeping it?" Eadric asked pointedly, trying not to look too closely at the Alienist's appendage. "Is Mulissu still its steward? What is the protocol?"

"Finders keepers," Mostin cackled. He sighed. "Oh, I don't know. I must first confer with Mulissu: she has returned as a fey. Teppu persuaded her. Although I suspect that she is less *Green* than Teppu would have liked: that, at least, should be some comfort."

Nwm guffawed. "Are you serious?"

"How delicious," Ortwine smiled. "One point to the *Viridity*, I say. You'd better get *resurrecting*, Eadric or you'll lose the race. Are you edified, Sho?"

The *simulacrum* stared at her, and then looked at Mostin. "Nwm informs me that you plan to combine me with a pseudonatural analogue of my maker. Is this correct?"

"Yes," Mostin nodded, glaring briefly at Nwm. "It is your destiny. Shomei predicted it."

"She may have," Nwm interrupted. "And she may not have. It's all a matter of interpretation."

"Don't start trying to seduce my students with your *green-ness*," Mostin barked. He turned again to Sho. "Nwm thinks I should reify you with a *wish*. Would you wish for such a mundane noogenesis? One should start on the highest available
rung of the ladder of consciousness."

"I have no preference in this regard," Sho admitted.

"And therein lies the dilemma," Nwm sighed. "How can one best determine the mode of one's being when one is not empowered with an existential appreciation of the choice?"

"Do not let Nwm mislead you into thinking he is any saner than Mostin," Ortwine poured herself a glass of kschiff, sniffed it, and placed it on the table with a look of distaste. "Although I would still recommend against Mostin's preferred course of action: if you possessed an ethical locus, you would feel the same way."

Sho stood uncertainly, and looked at Eadric. "You are the Ahma – and are thus bound up in Shomei's world-view. What is your advice?"

"You lack the capacity for reflective thought," Eadric smiled sadly. "I'm not sure I have a position."

"I can awaken you," Nwm said. "What's more, I can do it now. It will contextualize your perception."

"You will be choosing an inferior state of being," Mostin was rapidly becoming agitated.

"When will this pseudosynthesis be possible?" She asked Mostin.

"It is some time distant," the Alienist admitted. "It has not been foremost in my thoughts."

"I am at a higher risk of annihilation as a simulacrum."

Mostin nodded dumbly. He knew what was coming next.

Sho spoke clearly. "I invoke both governing axioms, preserve thyself and transcend thyself, and choose Nwm's awakening as the best way to satisfy both. Is my logic flawed?"

"No," Mostin sighed. "But let me say this: what I have to offer, you will fear when your consciousness is so confined. A limitless ocean of possibility will appear beyond your ken, and you will be repelled by it. If you assume such a mundane state, try to recall the fact that at this moment you feel no abhorrence and no trepidation. Your natural aptitude will be for conjuration – much as your maker. I will teach you the secret method, if you are so inclined."

"And what of Mei?" Eadric asked.

"She can make her own choice," Nwm rose up. "Come. Don't be disturbed at the sight of my skin boiling away – I recover quickly."

*

When they returned, an hour later, Sho was silent. Mostin looked long at her.

"Is this the weight of being?" She asked.
"Yes," Mostin said enthusiastically. "You must strive to overcome it! Destroy yourself a hundred million times."

"And then?"

"The gods will fear you."

"This philosophy sits well with me."

"It should. I suspect you are rather predisposed to appreciate it. But you should contemplate your paradigm carefully."

"Unnecessary. I choose Goetia as my vehicle," Sho announced.

Nwm groaned. Eadric hung his head. Mostin sighed.

"You are choosing a lesser infinity," Mostin had a pained expression.

"I find your theories untenable," Sho replied.

The Alienist sat back, and pondered briefly. "Very well. My summoning room is at your disposal. Use the mirror as much as you need. Any spell in my collection is yours for the transcription. Please refrain from using my scrolls. Study the Injunction carefully, especially article nineteen."

"Thank-you," Sho nodded.

"Where will you start?" Mostin inquired.

"With Erinyes."

"Beware of Dispater! I would choose an unaffiliated duke, away from the main axes of power. Seere counts Erinyes in his train." Mostin silently unclasped the mantle which first Irknaan, and then Nhura, had worn before him, and handed it to Sho. "Consider this an indefinite loan."

Eadric raised an eyebrow. It was a fabulously extravagant gesture.*

"Mei is still considering her options," Nwm was exhausted. "But she is an impression from a later epoch of Shomei's consciousness, after her reincarnation. Her decision may surprise us."

**

The inauguration of the Ahma as Earl Marshal of Wyre was a subdued and informal affair, as Eadric had requested. It was silently ratified by the small council, each magnate witnessing in succession, and approved by the King.

Ortwine and Nwm were present in no specific capacity; Tahl, Rede and Tarpion – a saint and two vengeful spirits – also came in the Ahma's train. Mostin had absented himself to avoid being politically compromised, and had instead travelled with Daunton to open a dialogue with Mulissu.

It came after the first major spells of the conflict had been cast; not the
destructive magicks and compacted demons which Eadric had feared and anticipated, but a series of massive enchantments which had fired the uncertain masses of a dozen Thalassine cities into a bellicose fervour. Daunton's spies reported bizarre behaviour among the aristocrats of Jeshat, and a notable increase in anti-Wyrish rhetoric. The diviner ascribed the change to dozens of strategically-placed compulsions, which would prove difficult to locate – much less counteract.

After the ceremony, Eadric took counsel with Prince Tagur, Attar, and Sihu. Foide left on 'urgent business,' the nature of which, Tahl guessed, involved putting as great a distance between himself and the Ahma as was practical.

"Until the threat has been properly assessed, we will deploy troops in cadres of no more than one hundred," Eadric removed his gauntlets and sank into a carved siege. "Any more is inviting disaster. Twenty knights, plus infantry and outrider support. They will adopt a defensive strategy – there will be no heroic charges.

"Each cell will have a number of Templars attached to it. I have authorized the full use of the scrolls from the vaults below the Temple scriptorium: now I regret that so many were squandered during Trempa's secession. Certain more independently-minded mages have expressed an interest in joining the effort, as long as the conflict remains south of Hrim Eorth and the remit of the Claviger: their contribution should be welcomed.

"Orders will be simple: harass the enemy where possible; stay alive at all costs. Gallant dead knights are no use to me. Adopt a guerilla style of warfare. Strike and flee. Burn baggage trains. Poison enemy wells. Kill them in their sleep. Use whatever means necessary. Keep moving. This is about survival. Make them bleed for every inch they advance.

"As Ahma, I take the moral burden of the atrocities to be committed entirely upon myself. Make it clear that all who join us are absolved of all sin. This is a Holy War: their entry to paradise is assured. Are there any questions?"

* 

"Where is she?" The Alienist complained. "And why did you choose this locale?"
Daunton and Mostin stood upon a jagged pylon of rock; the ocean crashed at its base.

"I am here, idiot." Mulissu was aerial, manifesting before them in a blue haze.

"I trust your transmigration was satisfactory?"

"What choice did I have? Teppu was unwavering in the weight of guilt which he applied to me."

"Are you sympathetic to his cause?"

"Oh, broadly, I suppose," Mulissu seemed distracted. "But I am still Mulissu and he is no longer Jovol."

"Hlioth traces the continuity."
"Hlioth is deranged. I bear no comparison with that crone."

"I have secured Iua," Mostin said.

"I know. You suddenly felt it necessary after many months – lest my ire descend upon you, I suppose?"

"Quite so. She is currently dominated."

"That is a wise precaution," Mulissu nodded. "I would suggest returning her to the Temple of Jeshi, but the Thalassine is rife with unrest. Magathei will be safer."

"To Ulao?" Mostin asked. "Is that wise?"

"Perhaps not. But I cannot guard her,"

"There is a demon. Surab..."

"Can you deal with it?" Mulissu asked.

"Regrettably, I cannot," Mostin looked apologetic. "I am under Empyreal contract, and must abstain from Goetic practices for the nonce."

"Must I do everything?" Mulissu scowled.

"I recommend a finger of death. He is warded against enchantments, and your evocations won't even tickle him."

"How long is this bizarre Enochian phase likely to last?"

"A few more weeks, at least," Mostin grinned.

"Don't get too comfortable, Mostin. Death has not lessened my anger towards you. And what have you done to yourself?"

"Evolved," Mostin nodded.

*This apparent act of generosity belies the fact that Mostin already had high SR and groovy spell absorption powers. His tenure in Uzzhin (which served as a useful way to advance the plot) had gained him the Pseudonatural (CA) and Spellwarped (MMIII) templates. They brought him up to ECL 30 or so, on par with Ortwine and Eadric.

Nwm was 28th-level, with a revised VOP and two powerful permanent epic wards on him: dwimmerhame (which grants SR 38) and anathema ward which prevents bodily contact with outsiders.

I should probably update the rogues' gallery at some point

Sho's Awakening looks like this:
Instantaneous DC=0 epic spell. Seed: animate (DC 25), life (DC27), fortify (
DC17); Mitigating: 11-min casting time (-10 DC), 50d6 backlash (-50 DC), burn 900 XP (-9 DC).

POST 12: THE ROAD TO GALDA

Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 8th September 2007, 05:29 PM

WYRE, to the furthest extent of its ancient bounds, stretched from the Ocean of Iarn in the east, to the rocky slopes of Harland in the west. Its northern frontiers were marked by the Thrumohar Mountains – the Heaped Thunders beyond which the frigid and inhospitable plateau of Tun Hartha stretched. In the south, it marched upon the cities which bustled around the warm and shallow waters of the Thalassine, where the winters were mild, and olive and almond trees grew in great profusion. For more than six hundred years, Wyre – in more determined fashion than its precursor, Borchiea – had dominated the political landscape of the subcontinent.

It was, for the most part, a fertile and well-watered land, strewn with numerous lakes in its inner regions, and hilly or mountainous at its margins. The forests which had once covered Wyre’s landscape had, by the diligent effort of fifty generations of farmers, been first contained, and then forced into retreat; save for the vast tracts of Nizkur in the west, where feys and older spirits still held sway. Wyre enjoyed the seasons in roughly equal measure, although the snows of winter had a tendency to linger.

Wyre lacked the ancient pedigree of the civilizations far to the south, or the enthusiastic dynamism of its closer neighbours in the Thalassine, but possessed a middle-aged dignity which had not been entirely leached of youthful vigour. Its stability, like most feodalities, was tenuous at best, and Wyre was often beset by internal strife. In its worst guise this manifested as open warfare between its grasping nobles but, more frequently, the internecine squabbles of Wyre’s aristocracy were resolved through the more elegant and precise medium of assassination. Millennia of history – mostly forgotten – underpinned Wyre’s traditions, but without the decadent self-obsession of Shûth, or the ponderous grandeur of Bedesh. The Wyrish, whether of noble or common birth, were not a people preoccupied with tradition and ceremony; although, in matters of faith and philosophy, opinions tended to be more jealously guarded – and more passionately voiced – than elsewhere.

Whilst power ebbed and flowed between great noble houses, its reins held by first one, and then another branch of the same huge family, the Orthodox Church of Oronthon prospered. By the beginning of the seventh century since Wyre’s foundation, the Temple – as it had become known in all of its guises – had firmly quashed any rivals to its supremacy, and sat, gross and distended, at the center of matters both spiritual and mundane. The plethora of heterodox philosophies which it had once tolerated had been reduced to the state of heretical cults by the Temple, and their adherents forced to Wyre’s geographical periphery.

The Temple levied its own taxes, dispensed its own justice, maintained its own army, and prosecuted its own wars – albeit with the sanction of whichever monarch happened to sit upon the throne in Wyre’s capital, Morne. The boundaries of ecclesiastical and temporal law became so blurred that an exclusive class of barrister had evolved in order to negotiate this perilous field – where a
charge of heresy was often the price for failing in the defense of one under the scrutiny of the Inquisition. Nonetheless, despite its cumbersome bureaucracy and dubious methods, the Temple retained an attraction for those whose motives were pure and selfless. And, provided they could endure the stagnation and inertia which Orthodoxy routinely presented to them, such individuals would find that, near the centre, was a kernel of truth, and a light which had not yet gone out.

At odds with the Temple, subject to higher taxes and frequent harassment – and occasional open persecution – an older faith persisted. It concerned itself with the cycles of growth and death and decay, with the rocks, the rivers and trees, and the numerous spirits which dwelled therein. It lacked a formal body of dogma, was not graced (or burdened) by an organized priesthood, and boasted no central locus of power. In fact, its practices were so diffuse and various that to call it one name would be to do an injustice to the diversity of perspectives which comprised it. Less ecumenically inclined members of the Temple simply dubbed the practice pagan or heathen, and identified the woodland demigods and spirits venerated by the older faith with outcast members of their own hierarchy of celestial beings. Those clergy in Morne who adopted a more tolerant stance – often at some risk to themselves – called the other faith Uedilian, after an earth-goddess whose cult had flourished in southern and eastern Wyre prior to the Temple’s ascendancy. The term, although simplistic, was deemed politer and was even adopted by members of the faith themselves. It was a name which simply identified them as ‘those who do not worship Oronthon,’ although downtrodden might have been more apt. The interface between the two faiths, tense and dynamic, bred several interesting schools of inquiry, all of which were considered heretical by the prelacy.

In contrast to both religious movements, a third group existed. It had evolved from the undisciplined arcanism practiced before Wyre’s emergence. Its members concerned themselves with the pursuit of knowledge and understanding, and their methods and language were esoteric and complex. They shunned involvement in politics and regarded the desire for temporal power as aberrant and bizarre, seeking only to deepen their own understanding of obscure and hidden lore. They worked alone or, occasionally, in small cabals. They were mysterious, furtive and utterly obsessed with their own, elite clique: the raw talent required to become apprenticed to one of them precluded all but one in ten thousand of Wyre’s inhabitants. The Temple loathed and feared them, the Uedians distrusted them, and the temporal rulers of Wyre begged them for favours – often to be rejected on the grounds of some mysterious Injunction, the terms of which, when cited, made no sense to those who were not initiated. They dealt with feys, elementals, and all manner of more sinister entities, in a seemingly undiscerning manner. They were the Wizards.

Each of these three traditions had, in recent times, undergone a transformation.

The Temple, beset by internal strife, had disestablished; its hierarchy was dissolved, and it’s structure became cellular: the meditational practice known as Saizhan became emphasized above all else. Involvement in temporal matters was frowned upon, although not expressly forbidden. Simultaneously fragmenting and synthesizing, the Temple underwent an explosive renaissance in philosophy.

The ancient cults of Wyre which venerated Nature and Goddess were striving to coalesce into a single world-view which held that a Viridity – a "Greennification" of the world – was underway. Some viewed this phenomenon as a periodic awakening in the cycle of the Goddess herself.
The Wizards – finally frustrated by their own isolating paranoia – had relinquished the proctorship of matters arcane to the mysterious entity known as the Claviger, and, in an atmosphere of suspicious camaraderie, information had begun to flow more freely between them.

It was against this backdrop of revolution in philosophy and praxis that a fourth perspective – ancient and sinister – was revealed. It was foreign to Wyre, and the cause of its re-emergence after centuries of brooding silence, the source of much speculation. Its exoteric teachings were of nihilism and death, although its true purpose was impenetrable to all rational scrutiny; its appeal was visceral in the extreme.

*

Mesikammi flitted as an insubstantial mist through the night sky. A swift breeze bore her southwards with Hlioth to their appointed rendezvous with Mostin and Daunton. It was cloudless, and the young moon had already set; low in the east, the ruddy Eye of Cheshne – Soneillon’s star – hung with her daughters. As Mesikammi gazed at it, it seemed to pulse with a menace which caused the shamaness to shiver; she shifted her perception rapidly, and concentrated instead on the rolling hills of Scir Cellod. A light frost clung to the ground below.

Hlioth spied a light and gestured. Both descended to where the Alienist had, in an effort to make himself comfortable, magically erected a small pavilion and a secure shelter on a hilltop, and conjured a number of minor pseudoelementals to do his bidding. Daunton sat, cross-legged on the ground, staring into a crystal ball. Flambeaux burned in a wide circle about them.

"Perhaps you could make yourself even more conspicuous?" Hlioth snidely remarked as she corporeated. She assumed the form of an alluring woman of early middle-age, which may or may not have been authentic.

Mostin ignored her. They were warded against magical observation, and that was all that mattered to him.

Daunton barely raised his head. "The appointed area is nineteen miles West. We can screen this location if it makes you more comfortable, but I doubt that any scouts are trying to pinpoint us visually. We should also make a move soon: we need to be outside of the quiescence again an hour before the meeting begins. We will be entering on foot or on horseback."

"How quaint," Hlioth grumbled.

"Eadric says that it would be 'proper form' for a diplomatic party. For what it's worth, I've got no issue with it – I don't anticipate crossed swords just yet."

"You are optimistic," Hlioth said caustically.

Mostin handed her a scroll, with arcane glyphs smothered across it. "Here is the formula."

Hlioth glanced at it. "You require a transvalent contribution? And ten gallons of my psyche, apparently."

"I have modified the spell. It is more robust."

"It better be."
"What have you been doing, Hlioth?" Mostin inquired. "In Nizkur?"

"The Forest will be our last defense. It must be secure."

A chill went down Mostin's spine. Daunton glanced upwards. "If you have some prescience which you wish to share, Hlioth..."

"I am not the one with the web of motes," Hlioth gazed at Mostin.

"And I've not yet had the time and resources to inspect it," Mostin snapped. "Were others than I committed to Wyre's defense; if I were to benefit a modicum of support from the body magickal..."

"You lack the ability to rouse conviction in others, Mostin. When will you realize this?"

"As soon as any other takes responsibility," the Alienist retorted. "Something which, thus far, none have had the spine to do."

"Perhaps Mulissu is the prophet you are waiting for?"

"Perhaps you are," the Alienist replied drily. "Although being chased by fauns is more to your liking."

"Do not denigrate simplicity, Mostin."

"Nor should you overlook the collective. You have become too selfish, Hlioth."

Hlioth laughed. "You know nothing of me or my means. I see wider and deeper than you, Mostin."

"Then share your insight," Mostin hissed.

"Not yet; but soon, maybe."

"You are arrogant beyond belief!"

"I am a cog in a larger wheel, which is turning through more dimensions than you can readily apprehend."

Mostin raised an eyebrow. "Now that, I most sincerely doubt."

**

They moved at fantastic speed, phantoms of fear from which all that lived, fled.

Before they reached the limit of the quiescence, the stars seemed to wink out and, for a moment, utter darkness prevailed. The ground shook as in some terrible impact ahead of them. Space warped briefly. Gihaahia stood before them: her aspect was gigantic; winged and wrathful, and magnified to terrifying proportions. Flames kindled about her.

Choach invoked a shimmering ward which encapsulated them all, stretching the fabric of reality into a semipermeable interface of null-magic. It crackled darkly.

The Enforcer shattered it with a contumacious glance. The lich reeled.
"You act beyond your purview," Yeshe was undaunted. "We are outside of Wyre and no transgression has occurred."

**Silence your tongue. Speak not to me of my responsibility.**

"Sister..." Naatha began.

**And you, lest I deem your head unsuited to your body.**

Naatha promptly closed her mouth.

From a huge, clawed hand, Gihahia let a tablet drop with a *thud*. She sneered – evidently she preserved her sense of humour.

**The Rules Have Changed. I suggest you read them before you proceed. Consider this a polite warning.**

The Enforcer vanished.

Yeshe cursed. She didn't need to be told what the tablet was.

"She was three times thrice..." Choach began.

"I know it," Yeshe replied dismissively, waving a hand.*

"Need I remind you of..."

"*I know it!*" Yeshe screamed, her face contorting. Her calm – whether mood or façade – reasserted itself in an instant. "We have underestimated the Claviger. That could prove problematic."

"It is a strategy devised to allow the Ahma time to prepare," Sibud grimaced. "Jovol's prescience should not be underestimated. Who can tell how his negotiations with the Claviger proceeded? Jovol's Oronthonian sympathies were well attested to."

"As is your paranoia," Yeshe replied.

Sibud remained silent.

"My apologies, brother," Yeshe gave a curt bow. "Forgive my words – they were spoken in haste. Please continue."

"Thank-you," Sibud smiled. "If the Claviger..."

Yeshe pretended to listen, but her own head span. She waited for a suitable length of time as the Vampire spoke – *his power should not be underestimated* - before gesturing. The tablets rose from the ground and hung before her. She inspected them swiftly for any revisions: prudence had demanded her own familiarity with the Wyrish Injunction.

As her eyes scanned the engraved text, her face contorted in anger and disbelief.

"...dispensation to the Enforcer to act unilaterally..."

"...extension of the Injunction's remit to include aspects of Shûthite theurgy
within the ..."

"...the preservation of the Wyrish Collegium..."

Yeshe closed her eyes, and brooded silently. Sibud might be right: maybe it was an Oronthonian conspiracy, after all. She issued a sending to Temenun.

The Tiger-Who-Waits was nonchalant.

_She is still finite. Let her flap her wings._

**

It was twilight. The company rode south to Galda.

"One wonders what would have happened, had you slain Despina," Nwm remarked drily. He rode bareback – and expertly – upon a charger lent him by Prince Tagur. The horse had seemed absorbed in an ecstatic trance since its temporary adoption by the Druid.

Eadric shrugged. He felt uncomfortable.

"Perhaps reality would not have unravelled to quite such a degree," Nwm continued. "Sparing her was an ambiguous act, wouldn't you agree? Rooted as much in lust as in compassion."

Tarpion scowled. Nwm smiled back.

Eadric sighed. "My conscience is fraught enough as is, Nwm. Why add more to my misery? I've thought long on this – and Nehael's rejection of Oronthon. I know it well."

"She asked me to remind you," Nwm grinned.

Eadric squinted.

"She said other things, do you wish to hear them?"

"I'm not sure," the Ahma shifted in his saddle. "Will they depress me?"

"Perhaps they can wait."

Eadric shook his head ironically.

"I can quote her verbatim, if you wish?"

"Spit it out, Nwm," Eadric groaned.

"Enjoin the Ahma to recall that moment, and to reflect upon his motivation at that point – before his awareness had expanded to embrace a larger reality, when his concerns were more human and less divine. The seed of discord in his mind – the tension between his desire and his mercy – has been the source of his strength. The root of the Path of Lightning, which has unshackled him from morality. For a while, that path and the Middle Way were congruent, but no longer; if the antinomian view becomes dogmatic, he will fall as surely as the Adversary."
The Viridity arises in response to the ontological paradox. It grounds the abstract in the present. Notions of ens and non-ens are abandoned in the face of the Now, and when the Sela apprehends the Viridity through Saizhan, he is pleased: the vibrancy of life crushes all philosophy."

Eadric reflected for a while, and scowled. "She has become no less opaque."

Nwm drew to a halt, and called out to Tagur, who led the company. "We will rest here for one hour. The Ahma and I will return shortly." The Druid began riding towards a lone cypress, a hundred yards from the roadside.

Eadric paused uncertainly for a long moment, and then spurred his mount to follow. "Where are we going?" He called to Nwm.

"To Afqithan," Nwm replied.

Eadric immediately reined his steed in, and shook his head. "I have no desire to return there."

Nwm wheeled about and stared hard at him.

"Oh, very well," Eadric grumbled.

**

The pool was black as pitch, and utterly still. Tendrils of dark mist clung to its surface.

"Welcome to the source of your nightmares."

"I am past grieving, Nwm."

"You are disconnected from your humanity," Nwm opined.

"So you bring me to the grave of the demoness? This serves little purpose."

"Your reluctance to be here would suggest otherwise."

"I am wary of invoking her: her memory yet resides."

"She is merely a phantom which clings to the real."

"What is the purpose of this excursion, Nwm?" The Ahma was wary.

"Consider the Viridity, Eadric. Aside from the truth of it – and you have experienced that, so you cannot deny it – your words can sway thousands. If you were to adopt a reconciliatory perspective, you could effect the synthesis and flowering of religious thought for generations to come. An end to ethnic strife in Wyre. The Sela must surely agree..."

"The Sela would express no opinion, I'm sure," Eadric smiled wrily.

"It must happen," Nwm seemed adamant. "It is only a matter of how and when. You have a responsibility to posterity: you must exercise it wisely."
"The weight of history is not mine to bear."

"I do not shirk my duty thus," Nwm was acid. "I still strive to effect change for the better. My concerns are human."

"When you are not pursuing the elusive Goddess."

Nwm smiled. "My perspective is balanced. But if you wish to speak of the devouring feminine, Eadric, I'm all ears."

The Ahma pondered briefly.

"There is much common ground here, Ed. You know it. A mystic is a mystic, after all."

"I do not determine doctrine," Eadric groaned. "And I will not be drawn into a debate involving comparative mysticism. At least, not until I've eaten. And I will not make sweeping religious reforms."

"Why not? Who says you can't? Or shouldn't? You say that the Sela would have no opinion on the matter, and why should he? But you can. You are the Ahma. You are not the 'gnostic intellect of God.' If not you, then who?"

"Bah! Perhaps. But it is not my immediate concern. And even as we stand here, hours fly past in the World."

"There is something you should see. Please indulge me!"

"Be quick!"

Nwm shifted into the form of a raven with a thirty-foot wingspan, and made an odd clicking sound, indicating that Eadric should climb onto his back. He powered upwards through the canopy, into the violet and saffron gloaming of Afqithan's sky, and bore off in a direction away from Ortwine's Fortress.

"Look through the Eye of Palamabron," Nwm croaked.

Eadric did so, and gaped. Nearby, soaring above the treetops, was Murmuur's tower, abandoned. Coiled about its upper quarter was a linnorm of dreadful size, dark with shadowy power – some ancient vestige from the umbral fringe of Afqithan. Teppu had bound it, and set it about the place in guard, before hiding the tower itself from all but the most penetrating sight.

"Hlioth is of the opinion that Mostin, were he to use the web of motes in his inquiry, could determine the mode of operation of this device."

"I think that Mostin owning a planar nexus to the Hells is a bad idea," Eadric said. "Besides, why has it not been retrieved?"

"Devils do not step here. They have no place now."

"Nor do I."

"Ah, but you are here by invitation. My question is precisely this: should we tell Mostin?"

"I suspect we have to, now," Eadric said glumly. "Can you imagine how he'd react
"if he found out that we knew about it, and had said nothing?"

Nwm nodded his avian head. "There is one other thing..."

"How many other 'one other things' are there likely to be?"

"No more. I am wary of your reaction to this, however."

"Thank-you for the warning."

Nwm squawked. "Around now, Mulissu has seized control of the City of Fumaril."

Eadric was aghast. "You cannot be serious!"

"The Temple of Jeshi has endorsed her coup, and a dozen wind-sorcerers are backing her. She is erecting a barrier – similar to Soneillon's paling – around the city."

"The Injunction?"

"She is outside it."

"But the other Wyrish Wizards...this is a massive breach of etiquette."

"Who cares? She's Mulissu. No-one dare challenge her. Especially if they know that Mostin would jump to her aid."

"It seems most unlike her," Eadric mused.

"Teppu is persuasive. And Jovol was the only Wizard that Mulissu ever deferred to."

"And you support this course of action?"

"I'm not sure," Nwm admitted. "It risks a great deal – it is a response to the compulsions which were laid down by the Cheshnite cabals, and ups the ante more than I'm altogether comfortable with. But she will bring order to the city very quickly, either by persuasion or by domination."

"Does she intend for this to be a permanent arrangement?"

"She is styling herself Tyrant of Fumaril, so one would assume so."

"At least she makes no pretence as to her role. I wish I could say the same. Is this the same Mulissu? I mean, has her reincarnation changed her?"

"It always does," Nwm seemed matter-of-fact.

"But how much?"

"Enough that she has stepped into the political arena. But I think the integrity of her ego has remained intact." Nwm landed upon the ground, and resumed his human form.

"Unlike Jovol-Teppu?"

"Unlike Ortwin-Ortwine," Nwm smiled. "Teppu is...well, who knows, really?"
Eadric drew alongside Prince Tagur. "Highness, if I might have a word?"

Tagur scowled. *Highness?* This man – if such he still was – retained an odd respect for conventional forms. Or perhaps he was simply the consummate diplomat. There was no particular need for the *Ahma* to address him at all – Tagur was under no illusion that his presence was anything other than ceremonial. There was nothing that Tagur could actually *do* to influence the course of events. He sighed, and nodded.

"I should like to speak with you regarding the possibility of things...ah...coming to blows, shall we say."

"I’m sure I shall die very quickly," Tagur smiled.

"I suspect you will have as good a chance as I," Eadric said wryly, "considering I will be their principal target."

"Ah, yes," Tagur half-apologized. "There is that."

"Before we meet them, there will be a period of *preparation.*"

Tagur raised an eyebrow.

"It is customary to fortify oneself as best as possible before this kind of parley – the kind that can degenerate quickly into a bloodbath. Especially if Mostin is present."

"Are you quite serious? Why is this madman even involved?"

"I wish I knew," Eadric groaned. "In any event, do not be concerned that you will be ineffective. You will be bolstered with numerous spells, and will prove quite handy. I suspect you’ll find things more evenly-matched than you fear."

"You may spare my pride in this matter, *Ahma.*"

"Trust me. A large part of me hopes that it does come to swords. When I get the opportunity to hit something in the head, the odds tend to favour me."

"Have you considered simply striking first?"

"Oh yes," Eadric nodded. "I consider it all the time."

**

Ortwine rode on ahead, utterly self-absorbed.

*I want my sword. My Heedless Githla.* She realized that her desire for the weapon bordered on obsession, and shrugged.

Ripples in consciousness, to which Ortwine seemed to be becoming increasingly sensitive, spoke to the sidhe of the Green in motion: Nizkur was awakening, the
ancient spirits of the land stirring. In the south, feys and elementals were agitating.

Despite herself, Ortwine felt the Viridity drawing her in. The lure was impossible to resist, as much because she felt it was stemming from her as calling to her. It made her uncomfortable.

What do I want? It was the perennial question for her. Her existence was so often a jaded malaise. An ennui which had persisted through four successive incarnations. A sword? A throne? Divinity? All was empty. Ortwine turned her head, and gazed over her shoulder.

Nwm, who rode behind her, stared impassively at her.

Ortwine's eyes narrowed. "Your religious machinations will not determine my purpose," she said acidly.

"I seek only to inform it," Nwm smiled.


**

Mulissu floated above the balcony before an immense throng; they screamed in frenzied adulation. Redemptrix, they called her. Goddess. The euphoria was intoxicating.

Temporal power is dangerous, she observed silently. Still, I will not have my city tampered with. The savant raised a hand, and an excited hush fell.

"I am Mulissu, your new Tyrant," Mulissu announced. The proclamation was greeted with rapturous applause. The witch waited for it to subside.

"My apologies to any council members present for the inconvenience of your displacement; rest assured that you will remain unharmed, and your mundane duties will be mostly unaffected.

"You will find me largely benign, if somewhat aloof; my occasional fits of pique seldom result in malicious transmogrifications. Please refrain from engaging in civil uprisings, as such would be doomed to failure. Your day-to-day activities are of no concern to me, and I have no interest in managing your affairs beyond providing you with protection. Continue to pay your taxes. Put your children to bed at the normal time. For the moment, you are safe."

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*The numerological significance of the Enforcer's magnification was not lost on members of the Cheshnite delegation. Enitharmon was said to have been three times thrice magnified – i.e. to have been bestowed with nine divine ranks – for the purpose of expelling Oronthon's Adversary from heaven.
I am curious if there is still a game behind the story, or if the original players still have any input into the continuing development of their characters.

Yes, but not conventionally. There were long periods of down-time, emailed games, a change of player (Ortwine), and general statements of intent which had to be fitted as events by me into the campaign. Some things have been glossed over ignored entirely. I've tried to speed up the pace of the narrative when things were slow, and slow it down when things were fast. I've taken huge license with the metaplot, of course - its going on three years, I think.

The boy with the olive skin and tousled hair smiled, pulled up a chair, and sat. His appearance was as one scarce out of adolescence. He looked hard at Shomei, and absorbed every detail surrounding her in an instant. Except one.

"Why did you reject Saizhan?" He asked. "Forgive my abruptness. But, frankly, this question still puzzles me. It was a bold gambit; I only wish I knew what prize it was that you sought. You may refrain from using honorifics when addressing me; I am already surrounded by sycophants. Please speak openly; treat me as any you would any other in conversation."

"I am not sure of my motive," Shomei admitted, her mind reeling. "It wasn't rational, and may have simply been an act of perversity. Do you think my choice was wrong?"

"No. I suspect that your Will directed you to act without the permission of your mind."

"To precipitate this meeting?"

"How should I know?" The other asked. "It is your Will, not mine. In any case, you are now here. Outcast with the rest of us."

"Might I inquire where here is, precisely?"

"In Caïna, for the time being. Astaroth purchased you from Amaimon – but at my instruction. Actually, the Akesoli were also dispatched at my instruction."

"I have been treated well," Shomei remarked, "aside from the initial flaying, of course. I had assumed that I would already be enduring unending tortures. When you say 'for the time being,' am I to be moved elsewhere?"
The boy nodded. "To the library, in Cocytus. If you so wish."

*If I so wish?*

"I would never stifle your potential, Shomei. You have earned rights that few others have won. Your loyalty has been unwavering; not to me, but to the idea. This is rare, and precious."

Her pulse hammered in her head. "I fear duplicity," she said.

"Your honesty is likewise remarkable," the other seemed amused. "Perhaps the Sela has been a positive influence on you."

Shomei glanced down at her hand, and gripped the skin between her thumb and index finger. "This form is..."

"Infernal," the youth nodded. "You cannot go back now, unless called. You must abide by the terms of the Interdict and the Accord."

Suddenly, everything she had foreseen in the web of motes made sense.

He stood. "Seek out the devils Agei and Ugales; you will discover their temperaments are reflective, not unlike your own. I suspect you will find discourse with them productive. Avoid the petty squabbles of the Dukes; you are above them. Hell is what you make of it, Shomei."

"I think I fear your mercy more than your wrath," Shomei remarked wryly.

The Adversary raised an eyebrow. "And so you should. I am the Left Hand of God, after all."

* 

After he had departed, she sat in contemplation for a long while before rising and exiting the chamber. The corridor beyond was empty and echoing; she turned left, and walked past open embrasures: they looked out upon a vast glacier beneath a sky which crackled darkly. The air was frigid, so much so that even her newly-endowed flesh began to feel numb: away from the strongholds, she knew few devils could endure Caïna for long. Below, the damned wailed, immersed in ice.

Shomei turned left again, and descended a flight of many thousand steps; she noticed that the darkness was absolute, although her sight was unimpeded. Finally, she reached the chamber at the bottom. Devils abased themselves. A mirror stood before her.

As they draped her cloak over her shoulders, slid her bracelet over her wrist, and pressed her rod into her hand, Shomei gazed at her reflection: aside from a complex device upon her forehead – which she knew marked her as His – it seemed unchanged. She touched the brand, but felt nothing unusual. She knew its import, a dire message to those who could read such things: *Do not interfere with this one.*

She passed swiftly through the mirror, and the fires of Nessus welled around her.
An ancient stone circle on a low hill west of Galda – a small village which nestled in a valley at the southernmost tip of Scir Cellod – bore the uncertain honour of being the meeting point between the Cheshnite delegation and the Wyrish embassy. It was technically outside of the borders of Wyre proper, within the fief of a Marchioness named Siliste; the noblewoman's family had rendered a hefty annual tribute to Morne for more than a hundred years in order to retain their precarious right of self-government. The markland sat upon Hynt Coched, the main artery which ran south to Jashat, and enjoyed healthy tax perquisites from the trade which passed through it.

Outside of the quiescence of the spheres – hardened now by Mostin to resist disjunctions and superb dispellings – the Aethers sang with the horns of archons, and battalions of devas were massing to the north. Messengers from interested parties reconnoitered the edge of the quiescence; temporary ethereal presidios were quickly established nearby by several Ugras of terrible power bringing blackness: the vomit of Cheshne.

Inside, the Green writhed, potent and oblivious.

Eadric's stomach was turning. Mostin, attuned to his spell, felt ripples along its periphery.

In his time, the Ahma had engaged in more than a few parleys with demons, devils and other monstrosities. For the sake of his sanity, he carefully censored his awareness of those present at Galda. None conformed to the images which he had formed in his mind – despite his best efforts to limit his expectations in that regard.

They manifested themselves at first as a great, dark cloud which billowed around a lone rider – Anumid the Mouthpiece – before relaxing into more choate forms which intimated at distinct personalities: demons, gods, godlings, undead, hierophants, theurges, great warriors of unguessable age.

As the two parties gazed at one another, a long silence endured: a furious exchange of thought, speculation and surmise consumed each group at once.

Mostin reflected. It was all about the reservoirs, he was beginning to realize. And the divinations. Each transvalent spell which would be cast – and they would shake the world; of that, Mostin had no doubt – was drawn against limited resources. They would need to be played carefully to maximum effect, like pieces in some vast strategic game. And to do that required foreknowledge. And Mostin had the web of motes. But they had the cabals. It was a strange, asymmetric balance.

The Alienist scowled. Their wards were utterly inscrutable, although Mostin had no doubt that each was vastly augmented, laden with protective magics. Whilst he had expected no less, it made gauging their strength impossible; the insight of Hlioth and the gut of Eadric were their best tools in reading any purpose in the Cheshnites. He hoped that his own party was as veiled. A nagging suspicion in him was that they were not. Transvalent divinations employed by the other might break through. How secure was the quiescence? He was sure that he could feel things testing its potency. Mostin was feeling acutely paranoid. His fingers were getting twitchy.

The Ahma's gaze was drawn first to Yeshe, who had entered the world when
magic was young and abundant. With each breath she drew there seemed fused the threat of explosion. Clad in adamant and black iron, and bearing ancient weapons of destructive potency, Eadric quickly estimated her mettle in battle as formidable. And her magical art, he knew, surpassed that of Mostin, by the Alienist's own admission. She seemed youthful and hale; dynamic and energized. Each new act of annihilation is fresh and exciting to you. The Void – and Eadric knew its signs well now – rested easily upon her; an undertow of black despair which grasped at frail sanity. All seemed cowed by her.

[Mostin]: (Concern). She is no arcanist; I willfully misconstrued. This woman is a High Priestess, so to speak. I didn't realize that her agenda was fuelled by such zeal.

[Ortwine]: Perhaps Eadric can seduce her? She seems his type.

[Eadric]: Perhaps Ortwine could refrain from sarcasm for a moment?

[Ortwine]: I am here under duress. Permit me at least my wit.

[Hlioth]: Silence, imbeciles!

Sibud – who did not breathe – emanated corruption and decadence in waves, and life wilted around him. His skin, grey and cracked, resembled shrivelled leather which moulted a fine dust; obscene black fingernails dripped a caustic venom, which smoked as it struck the withering grass at his feet. As Eadric's vision rested upon his form, he knew that only the vampire's resolute will maintained his quiddity, preventing his dissolution into a cloud of atoms. But into Sibud's face, the Ahma could not bring himself to look; it haunted the margin of his sight as the memory of his own death.

For Nwm, the vampire in particular was anathema. Only Threxu, the Wasted Nymph had before evoked that magnitude of revulsion. Despite it, Nwm seemed genuinely calm and confident; Eadric could not guess the reason why, but Mostin sensed subtle shiftings in magical attitudes with his arcane sight. Nwm and Hlioth and Mesikammi had prepared some contingency, no doubt.

[Mostin]: Evocation?

[Nwm]: And Necromancy.

[Mostin]:!? Are you mad? What good will that do? Half of them are dead already.

[Nwm]: You might be surprised. Uedii thinks dead things should stay properly dead. I'm not about to violate the truce, but I'm going to blast them all if they try anything, even if it kills us stone dead.

[Mesikammi]: (Clapping) Supernova! It will be beautiful! I will reincarnate as an unfettered wyrd; I have already chosen.

[Eadric]: Is she serious?

[Nwm]: Of course.

[Mostin]: If you die, stay within the quiescence! There are things beyond it which might eat your soul.

[Hlioth]: Let them try. They'll get indigestion.
The presences of Naatha and Choach – as foul and potent as they might be – Eadric could accept and absorb. Then the Ahma beheld another, behind Yeshe. A rider in similar harness to the Binder, but who sat sufficiently removed from the others within the group to indicate a disdain for the proceedings. An image of fear and bloodshed contrived in the mind of War itself. His first urge was to throw himself on the ground, and weep.

[Eadric]: Who is he?

[Mostin]: She. Visuit.

[Eadric]: We cannot prevail against such as her. We are overmatched. Why is she here?

[Daunton]: She brings war. She is war.

[Nwm]: (Smiling)

[Eadric]: I fail to see the humour, and sometimes I wonder who amongst us is the most unhinged.

[Nwm]: Her horse regards you with hope.

[Eadric]: That is small...

But the Ahma caught the animal's eye, and immediately fell in love.

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**POST 15: GALDA – PART 2**

*Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 18th February 2008, 08:14 PM*

Anumid spoke first. His suavity was effortless.

"The Oronthonians. The local fertility goddess also seems well represented. As do your nascent magi. What of Oronthon's Adversary? Does the Ahma speak for him also?"

"I am the Breath of God," Eadric stated calmly. "I speak for all present; and for the Sela, and for the Celestial Host, and for Oronthon. If the Adversary has elected me his representative also, he has not informed me of my appointment."

"Your claims may be tested," Anumid smiled.

Ortwine sighed. "You're already boring me. Make your case, and go. I have better things to do."

"Silence, sprite!" Sibud revealed himself from shadow. "Your immortal pretensions are pathetic! The slaadi already gather to reclaim Heedless."

"I think not. Afqithan is now inviolate. But these are facts: I will soon be a goddess, the vorpal sword is mine, and you are a vampire. To fear me would be prudent."
"The Ancient One does not regard divinity as a particularly noteworthy achievement," Yeshe's tone was conciliatory but didactic as she stepped forward; somehow she avoided condescension. "It is one path among many, and carries its own limitations, as you will discover if your quest proves fruitful. Immortality is merely immortality. Power is merely power."

Whether by the term Ancient One Yeshe meant Sibud, or Temenun, or Cheshne – or perhaps Demogorgon – was not clear.

"As to making cases," Yeshe continued, "it was you who arranged this meeting, not we. State the Wyrish argument, if you please. I am anxious to hear it."

"Why does the Tiger absent himself?" Eadric asked.

"Perhaps he is secretly trysting with Nehael," Yeshe smiled. "Or your Sela. None of us here are so deluded to think that this represents the sum of relevant interests, Ahma, so why pretend otherwise? Unlocking the morass of paradigms is central to this issue."

"You demonstrate an appreciation of a larger process," Nwm was surprised.

"Tell me more of my understanding, mortal. Your wisdom overwhelms me."

[Ortwine]: I'll admit, I'm starting to rather like this one.

"Enough!" Anumid interrupted. "Mistress, the Mouthpiece demands your silence. Lord Sibud, a little respect if you please."

Both immortals withdrew.

Eadric – guileless – could not help but evince surprise. What is the relationship here? Evidently more complex than he had first assumed. Or was this some ruse to deflect his attention?

Anumid smiled. "I speak with Cheshne's Voice, and broker the power of the convocations; do not underestimate me."

"You have much to learn in the art of dissemblance," Ortwine observed.

[Ortwine]: No, he lies almost as well as you.

Anumid ignored her, and addressed the Ahma. "Why did you solicit this meeting?"

"To see for myself, first-hand," Eadric answered honestly. "And in the vain hope that, if I asked politely, you might quietly depart from this continent."

"Doubtless, you consider us very wicked, Ahma," Anumid smiled grimly.

Eadric was cold. "The Thalassine states. Do you intend to send them to war against Wyre?"

Anumid was unreadable. "You must deal with the reality of us as you see fit, Ahma. I think you already know the answer to that question, but forgive me if I don't make you privy to our counsels."

"Are we negotiating?" Eadric asked gruffly. "If so, then a statement of purpose
would seem in order."

Yeshe gestured, and Anumid nodded and withdrew. Her manner was starkly different, her arrogance self-contained, as though she needed no external referents. "The South will be mobilizing for war soon. Wyre is large, but sparsely populated in comparison. Your wizards have censored themselves. Your Claviger has lapsed into a coma, and invested its power in its thug."

Eadric realized that she spoke the truth.

The Alienist sensed something akin to a moment of prescience flicker over Yeshe, but far deeper. Raw power she had, in abundance. Millennia of honing her magical skills. Mostin swallowed.

"And apparently, I am better informed than you on the subject," She read them all in an instant.

[Nehael]: The Claviger has recently entered a state of somnolence. Gihaahia has been fully activated.

[Mostin]: ?! What the...?

She wasn't anywhere near.

[Nehael]: Yeshe inadvertently invoked me.

Mostin scowled. Yeshe withdrew again.

"War is never inevitable," Anumid smiled. "It is a waste of resources, and if it can be avoided, we should be the happier."

Visuit snorted in contempt.

"For the most part," the Voice of Cheshne shot a look toward The Butcher before continuing. "If Wyre's mobilization is halted, and the Wyrish extend the same courtesy to the Cheshnites as they do other faiths – since the disestablishment of Orthodoxy – then a compromise is within reach."

[Hlioth]: They wish to establish temples within Wyre's borders.

[Eadric]: (Incredulous) Why?

[Nwm]: Why does anyone seek to further the cause of their religion, Ed? They think that they have the right answer, and you do not.

Eadric laughed aloud, to the surprise of many present. Layers of deceptions, threats and counterthreats suddenly seemed vacuous and irrelevant. "I was under the impression that the Cult of Cheshne had no missionary aspirations; the Mysteries are not for the cattle, as it were. What has changed? And why in the North? Shûth is a more fertile ground in every conceivable way."

In his gut, he already knew the answer: to arrest the spread of Saizhan.

Anumid smiled. "Consider the proposal. It will be you who chooses in the end, Ahma. The Sela is too passive; your grandees too tractable, and dependent on you. Your word is law."
Fumaril, although settled since ancient times, had only in the last generation risen to pre-eminence amongst the Thalassine cities. Sturdy merchantmen from its three harbours – clinker-built and lateen-rigged – plied the seas with oils, glassware, amygdala firewines, and all manner of more exotic goods. They sailed to Harland to procure fur and ivory; to Bedesh for silks, and the exquisite confections in demand amongst the Thalassine nobility; and to Shûth for its gems and gold, its secrets, and for *kschiff*.

Mulissu – together with her clutch of wind-sorcerers and elemental priestesses – had evoked an impenetrable barrier, four miles in diameter, completely isolating the city. It rapidly became clear that, for many, 'going about one's business' might prove difficult or impossible. The witch's solution was pragmatic and unburdened by ethical sentiment: she pacified much of the population with a powerful enchantment, succoured Ulao for aid, and instructed dozens of indentured djinn to fulfill any needs the citizenry might have for food, shelter and entertainment.

The holiday would continue until further notice.

With the burden of governance eased, Mulissu and her council turned their attention to devising a concrete strategy to deal with the Temple of Cheshne. The defenses would demand much of her energy: her wards against intrusion would need to be renewed every few days, and each casting would diminish her own reservoir. She wondered how long she could keep it up.

Jashat was a mere forty miles distant, and the Shûthite cabals – as best she could estimate – might invoke magicks a full order of magnitude greater than her own. Her aery charisma lent a dubious cohesion to the unlikely band: mages from Pandicule, clergy of Jeshi within Fumaril, two sylphs – Zimodee and Vouve – prior acquaintances of the eccentric sorcerer, Ehieu. She wooed a number of renegade Wyrish wizards – conjurers who had left the aegis of the Claviger to continue their practice – with the promise of an increased spell repertoire, and access to the names of obscure but accommodating elemental allies.

Upon due reflection, the savant herself began devising a spell which would conjure Ha'uuh – an air primal of unimaginable power – to defend the city if it were assailed.

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Ortwine kneeled, bowed her head, and lifted her palms upwards. She felt the weight of the blade as it came to rest in her hands: it was light and delicate; so wieldly, she knew. Gingerly, she raised her eyes to meet it: it was exquisite, with traceries of gold etched into black adamant. The hilt was replete with corundum and perfect moonstones.

Jaliere, God of the Forge scowled. "The weapon is accursed; it may be my finest work, but it's also the one I deplore the most. The intelligence which inhabits it is warped and schizoid."

Ortine stood, brandished the scimitar with a flourish, and slid it into its scabbard. She bowed perfunctorily. "My thanks, Jaliere. I will take better care of it than..."

"It will betray you; it despises you."
"I understand it better than you think," Ortwine smiled coldly.

"You understand nothing!" Jaliere snorted.

"You are becoming tedious, Jaliere."

The god acted quicker than lightning. In an instant he dwarfed Ortwine, and with titanic strength, grabbed the fey by the neck and hurled her against a stone column. She struck it with such force that it cracked.

"Fool," Jaliere bellowed. Flame issued from him in roaring sheets. "This sword screams its agony to the spheres. It will demand much of your energy to keep it subdued."

Ortwine rose slowly and easily, dusting herself. "Your deific tantrums do not move me. As I say, I understand **Heedless** better than you think." She sighed. "Jaliere, I appreciate your work, and Sisperi would be impoverished were you to leave it, but I will cut you down if ever you lay a finger on me again, be you god or no. This is a weapon worthy of my cause; I have no doubt I will never see its peer again."

"Cause?" Jaliere thundered. "You are your only cause."

"That is quite true," Ortwine nodded. "But in some things – as in this case, for instance – I also honor my word: I am perverse like that. I am departing for the underworld forthwith."

"It pains me that the future of my kin rests in your hands."

"And I am aggrieved by your lack of faith," Ortwine sighed. "We are speaking of **my** divinity, here. Whether earned or stolen, believe me when I say it is utmost in my thought. Consider, if you admitted Ninit to your pantheon, why am I such a terrible prospect?"

"Ninit is more ancient than any of us; you and she hardly bear comparison."

"And I will be the youngest amongst you: make way for new blood, Jaliere. The Nireem need revitalizing; I might prove more of an asset than you think. Perhaps I can stir you from your apathy."

"The apathy you perceive is the weariness of ten millennia of war," Lai entered unannounced. "Still, you may have a point. Do not fail us, Ortwine. And heed Jaliere: beware the sword. Its moods are more opaque than you guess."

***

Ilistet's armour was rent. The succubus bled smoking ichor from a dozen minor wounds and her perfect skin, where exposed, was shredded and raw – lacerated by powerful sonics. Around her, maimed demons mewed pitifully: hundreds of bar-lgura, amid a seething ocean of dretch. She cursed them, and screamed at them to hold as the maurezhi and abyssal ghouls tore into their disordered ranks. From above, varrangoin rained down spells and darts: the same mercenaries, Ilistet noted ruefully, alongside whom she had fought only a few months before.

*Graz’zt should have paid them more, or at least promised it.*

The battle was already lost, the succubus observed. Air superiority was
everything, and – predictably – her chasme had scattered like flies. She prepared to flee.

 Abruptly, a gate opened next to her. She was drawn through irresistibly, into a chamber thick with yellow smoke, which issued from a dozen censers.

 "Greetings," Rimilin smiled. He wore a long ceremonial robe of scarlet and gold, and bore a staff of ivory which Ilistet viewed suspiciously.

 "State your terms, eunuch," the demoness growled.

 The Acolyte of the Skin said nothing. His ego swollen by potent magic, Rimilin dominated the Herald of Azzagrat with a transvalent compulsion.

 ***

 The night before their departure for Ruk, the Ahma dreamed. It was altogether lucid, and thoroughly uncomfortable.

 It was a warm afternoon, and the sun was hazy. He sat upon a grey destrier, the flanks of which glistened with sweat, and trotted in a wide circle; inside a heavy casque, he felt beads of his own perspiration trickle down his cheeks. Glancing down, he noticed that he wore full harness, enamelled with gold and serpentine. Nearby, a knight lay upon the ground; Eadric knew that he had recently unhorsed him. Spectators were clapping; the applause was muted and genteel. He glanced up toward a box, where two indistinct figures sat in conversation, and urged his mount forward.

 Eadric presented his lance, and a lady whose features he could not discern grasped its shaft, tying a scarf of black silk below its head. She tossed a garland of black flowers to him. Despite the vagueness of her features, he knew who she was.

 Why do you vex me, still? He wanted to ask. Instead, he turned and prepared to joust with another opponent.

 A dozen bouts later, and he was still unbeaten. Throughout, he had remained conscious of the shapes in the booth, but had averted his eyes. Now she sat alone. Warily, Eadric dismounted and pulled off his gauntlets and helm, handing them to a squire who stood waiting for him; dust and grime caked his face and hands. He ascended a flight of wooden steps into the box and sat upon a chair which creaked under his weight. It was cooler there and shaded; a breeze stirred as if in further response to his thoughts. She silently handed him a glass of iced tea. A long moment passed.

 "Is this all that remains of you?" Eadric finally asked.

 Soneillon smiled her maddening smile. Her features had crystallized. The Ahma had the distinct impression that, even by acknowledging her existence, he had lent her a little more substance.

 "I am Void; without form. You perceive an echo."

 "You gnaw at the edges of my mind," he sighed. "And many of those considered wiser than I have advised me to release myself from you."
"Your reluctance to do so is revealing. Perhaps your prescience runs deeper than theirs."

Eadric felt a chill; the merest hint of a veiled threat.

Soneillon spoke grimly. "Yeshe is searching for me in Dream; I cannot elude her for long. She wishes to send me against you. She believes I am your weakness. A chink in your armour."

"You are no more," Eadric grimaced. "You cannot harm me."

"Annihilation is no obstacle to me, Eadric. I am birthed and rebirthed in Nothingness. That much at least should be clear to you by now." Her voice carried a note of desperation, and she forced the scarf into his hand, closing his fist tight about it. "I do not wish thralldom, to be bound as an Ugra. Remember me: I would be your strength, not your enemy. Invoke me. Breathe into me, Ahma. Bring me back, before she does."

He awoke clutching the scarf, and vomited.

Shortly afterwards, Nwm entered and viewed him suspiciously. "Perhaps your returning to Afqithan was a mistake, after all."

Eadric stared back. "Things are more complex than you suspect."

Nwm smiled sympathetically. "That is how I prefer it. Come. We are ready. Rhul will accompany us."

"Before we depart, I need to contact Canec. I am changing my colours, and my device."

Nwm cocked his head.


**POST 16:**

**Posted by:** Sepuichrave II at ENWorld on 25th February 2008, 03:55 PM

The overland passage to the Saivo – the entrance from Sisperi to its gloomy underworld, Rûk – was across a frigid and despoiled land filled with twisted trees, many of which had come to harbour malign intelligence. They wind walked, and although the Ahma was sure that they might have sped there immediately, he suspected that impressing the full magnitude of the corruption was important to Nwm. Or perhaps manifesting through one of the blighted trees was not an experience which Nwm wished to endure.

Ortwine's demeanour was serene and composed. Many strategies for dealing with Saes had crossed her mind, none of which seemed entirely satisfactory. Prior to her current state of insanity, the death-goddess had not been one apt to casual interaction with the other Nireem. As with most underworld deities, she had been content to dwell in morbid isolation with her shades, grudgingly releasing an annual quota of discarnate spirits so that the cycle of transmigration could
continue in Sisperi. Whatever inducements Graz’zt had offered her ally herself with him – and the sidhe could only speculate as to what those might be – Saes had become unbalanced. Before he had been slain, Uort, the ferocious babau who had led the demonic legions in Sisperi, had intimated that Graz’zt himself had laid some curse on the goddess. The truth of the matter had yet to be discovered.

They descended, crossing over a steep arête; below them, a still tarn glistened darkly in the wan sun. Other lakes nearby were frozen. Not so the Saivo; its supernatural nature was immediately apparent. They corporeated a hundred yards from the lakeside within a copse of stunted black birch trees. Fungi of an unusual variety grew nearby, somehow inured to the cold.

"This place is truly miserable," Eadric remarked. "Was it always thus?"

Rhul nodded. "I am well-travelled, by any account. Few places are as desolate."

Ortwine hitched Heedless across her back and tied back her hair in a businesslike fashion. She seemed nonplussed, although whether her mood was genuine or not was, as usual, impossible to tell.

"We will get wet," she observed. "Fortunately, none of us will freeze. If there were another way in, naturally I would suggest we take it. Unfortunately, there is not: Rûk is an isolated bubble of reality, with no other entrance, and the whole plane is locked by deific power. There may be other exits though – at least Mostin seems to think so. If there are, then Saes controls them. Once we pass through this way, we have to find another way out."

Eadric twitched. "May be? If? Ortwine, I would feel more comfortable in this endeavour, had you done your research more carefully."

"Time is a constraint we have all experienced recently," Ortwine snapped. "I am no different. It is logical surmise: prior to her current episode of covetousness, Saes must have had some means to liberate souls within her guardianship. In any event, there will be demons. Lai says in the inverse of the lake, as well as within the vestibule beyond. The Saivo is deep – maybe a quarter mile. Its magic is such that the pressure will not crush us, however. When down becomes up, we will be half way to the other side; up will remain up thereafter, there is no going back down. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly," Nwm said. "May we proceed, now?"

Ortwine nodded.

Nwm transformed himself into a black dragon of enormous proportions, and bestowed water breathing upon them.

"Grab onto a horn or something; we're going down fast. If you're struck by a dispelling, hold your breath: I'll get to you as soon as I can."

**

Daunton looked worried. He sat in a plush chair in Mostin's drawing room, and poured himself another drink. "How long is this state of torpor likely to last? Is the Enforcer even safe, without the Claviger's direction?"
The Alienist stared blankly at him. "The Claviger cannot act directly, hence it needs an agent. Gihaahia's empowerment is for her own protection, in this regard; unmagnified, she would be vulnerable. I suspect it will last for as long as the current crisis persists."

Orolde entered apologetically, clearing his throat. "Rimilin is without. He wishes to take counsel."

"To pry, more like," Mostin scowled. "I suppose I can't fault him for wanting to keep abreast of events; virtually every other Wizard I know is hiding under a rock." The Alienist sighed. "Show him in."

"He is not alone," Orolde added.

Mostin eyed the sprite suspiciously.

"He has a succubus with him. She seems docile enough."

The Alienist tilted his head. Rimilin was not renowned for compacting fiendish lemans, given his particular circumstances. Perhaps he would shapechange himself...Best not to go there.

"Did he give a name?"

"Ilistet," Orolde replied calmly.

In the name of all that is unholy Mostin's eyes widened to obscene green orbs. His pseudopod twitched involuntarily, scattering candied fruit across the floor.

"Are you a complete simpleton?" He hissed at Orolde. "Do you know who she is?"

"She is Graz'zt's herald," Orolde was unfazed. "What does it matter? Rimilin has her under a compulsion."

"He damn well better have her mind blanked as well, and more," Mostin screeched. "I do not want the eye of Azzagrat turning here at the moment."

"Should I show him in?"

"Ngaarh! Yes!" He glared at Orolde, who left hastily.

Daunton stood. "I think perhaps it is time I..."

"Siddown!" Mostin barked. "We're in this together, remember?"

Daunton readied a teleport. "I will remain temporarily. We are also outside of the proscribed area, if you recall."

* 

Rimilin barely nodded in greeting to Mostin and Daunton, and made even that gesture appear as though he were delivering some kind of benediction. His smile was as unctuous as usual, and he was laden with protective wards. The Acolyte began it: the negotiated exchange of information.

"My sources inform me that you plan to begin conjuring celestials tomorrow, is that true?"
"They are my new lackeys," Mostin decided to brag. "They will have bat wings, if their conventional form distresses you: it is their purpose which you should consider. I have been restricted to devas and archons; naturally I interpret that to include exemplars and episemes as well, as they were never specifically excluded. There will be no cascade; I am therefore relying on conventional tools."

"You mean to conjure the Princes of the Choirs? You believe they will come?" Rimilin couldn't help but appreciate the literalist manipulation of the contract. "Exalted celestials in the World of Men may serve to escalate the situation."

"We're playing catch-up. You have a demonic magnate dominated in my drawing-room; violating Goetic etiquette regarding compacts seems no taboo for you."

"I am establishing a temporal power base," Rimilin smiled. "It seems voguish; I didn't want to get left behind by the fashionable set. And who cares if I anger Graz'zt? He's in no position to assault anybody at the moment. His popularity as an ugra is waning amongst the convocations."

"You have walked among them?"

Rimilin merely smiled.

"They wish to establish a religious base in Wyre," Mostin reluctantly volunteered. It was valuable information, but would soon be common knowledge. "The Injunction does not apply to divine thaumaturgy. Eadric is understandably reluctant."

"He would rather send a continent to war?" Rimilin narrowed his eyes. "I suppose I will benefit, either way. Tell me of Visuit. Did she speak?"

"She grunted a few times. She is potent. She bore the sword."

"Yeshe is preparing to bind Pazuzu."

"How do you know this?" Mostin whispered fiercely. "How reliable is your information?"

"Very. She is wooing the convocations intently. Her rivalry with Sibud drives her."

Mostin's mind raced. Legend maintained that it was only at the very climax of the war with Durjan that Yeshe had conjured Pazuzu before. If she intended to make it her opening gambit in this one...

"What else do you know, Mostin? What of Prahar?"

"He was not present," the Alienist replied.

"That is not what I meant."

Mostin remained silent.

"Mostin? Fair trade, now." Rimilin's tone was unbearably condescending.

"He bound Orcus previously. So far he has remained silent."

Rimilin smiled.
"Do you wish to go higher?" Mostin asked. "There is one other piece of information: I set a tall price on it. Do you have something to match?"

"Perhaps," Rimilin answered carefully.

"Mine involves the Enforcer."

"Her magnification is already well-known..." Rimilin began.

"Not that," Mostin said. "Nehael says she appeared to the Cheshnite delegation and issued a warning. Certain articles in the Injunction have been amended."

"The theurges are excluded, then? That is news, I'll admit. Although not entirely unexpected. I know something of which may be of particular interest to you: it involves an Infernalist of your prior acquaintance."

Mostin twitched.

"Do you wish to hear more?"

"Speak, lest our relationship grow rapidly sour," Mostin hissed.

"The schemes of the Nameless Fiend, Mostin. Perhaps he is nervous that the eschaton is upon us and is drawing contingencies against the possibility. Shomei is in Cocytus. She is most recherché." The hint of envy in Rimilin's voice left little doubt that the Acolyte of the Skin was speaking the truth.

Mostin sighed. The wizardly ego would always abandon discretion in favour of the need to appear better informed. It was why they made such terrible politicians.

Throughout the exchange, Ilistet remained silent; seething with ill-concealed hatred, but unable to act. Her presence was an overt statement of power by Rimilin, and the Alienist wondered if the Acolyte could break her to his Will; domination was an effective temporary measure, but Ilistet was unfathomably loyal to Graz'zt. He shrugged. It wasn't his problem. Mostin felt immensely relieved that he didn't have to deal with conjured fiends on an ongoing basis.

**

The wastrilith slid through the water surrounded by an oily blackness. It was a creature of prodigious size, plucked from a watery abysm by Graz'zt and deposited at the entrance to Sisperi's underworld. A school of bestial fish-demons surrounded it, ravenous for flesh, deranged by their captivity within the Saivo; all were victims of false promises offered by the Prince of Azzagrat a millennium before. They were prisoners as much as the souls which Saes had gathered to herself.

Nwm, alerted to their presence with his true seeing, gyred in the water as they closed and increased his speed further; Ortwine, who clutched a bony protrusion from his draconic neck, was struck by the elegance and efficiency of the movement.

Nwm turned his head casually, discharging a great gout of acid. He was powering towards some unknown surface now: down had become up, and there was no turning back. Eadric invoked daylight on himself, illuminating their surroundings; a mire of darkness encroached upon it, and was closing quickly. Faster, Ortwine
drew *Heedless* and a wave of venomous hatred surged through her. She quickly mastered it, but Eadric shot her a suspicious glance.

Nwm *shapechanged* again, deciding to avoid conflict if possible. Reaching their goal unharmed was his primary goal; distractions such as these would only denude their energy. His form liquefied into that of an elemental, and cradling Eadric, Ortwine and Rhul in a torrent of churning water, he began to race upwards at breakneck speed. The demon – disinclined to let its quarry escape – paused and caused the water above them to suddenly freeze: it cracked and groaned as tendrils of ice rapidly formed into a solid mass. Nwm maneuvered around it easily, although in a motion which caused Eadric’s stomach to somersault. As they outpaced their pursuers, Nwm felt a weak tugging sensation – a last, desperate effort to drag them down again – but one easily eluded. A mental scream of hatred and frustration followed it.

They broke the surface, and Nwm resumed his draconic shape, launching himself into the air. The vestibule of Rûk was a vast cavern; a single unsupported dome which reached two hundred fathoms above black water. The light emanating from Eadric was like a candle held within a geode, and sparked glistering veins of gold and gems within the walls.

Ortwine gasped despite herself. It was staggeringly beautiful.

Rhul spat water and raised an eyebrow. "It seems that our sister has kept more than a few secrets – and more than just souls – to herself."

**

Prince Tagur paced restlessly through the winding corridors and halls of the royal palace in Morne. It was two hours before dawn, and torches guttered in sconces. Sentries, posted at every doorway and at thirty-foot intervals between, eyed him cautiously as he passed. He had been unrelenting in his insistence that the palace guard remain alert and fully mobilized at all times; every thane of the royal household had been ordered to sleep in a mail shirt. Tagur had bolstered the defenses with another hundred hand-picked knights, and assigned stern taskmasters from amongst his own retinue to oversee them.

*All utterly pointless*, he knew. If the enemy decided to strike, what could they do to resist? The Prince passed the doors to the royal bedchamber and sighed inwardly. Now was the time for a warrior-king; instead Wyre had a fourteen-year old boy, cajoled by a group of greedy relatives who still didn’t understand the magnitude of the threat.

At the Ahma’s insistence, key areas had been *hallowed* by Tahl, and wards of *forbiddance* laid upon them; nothing could manifest directly within the inner donjon. But Eadric had been honest with Tagur, contrary to the perceived security which he had allowed other members of the aristocracy to enjoy: *If they come for the king – I mean really come – it will not be enough. We can only hope that they deem it an inefficient investment of resources.* Tagur had drawn some small comfort from that argument, at least. In many ways, it was to the benefit of the enemy that an untested boy remain on the throne.

The Prince made his way to his own chambers, and sat at his desk. Sleep still eluded him, something which an hour of administrative tedium might cure. He reached for his papers and froze; atop a pile of legal pleas, aristocratic nuptial agreements, warrants, and proposed exchanges of lands and properties, lay a single note in handwritten scrawl:
Beware. There are already tigers amongst you.

POST 17:

Posted by:  Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 4th August 2008, 09:14 PM

Mostin stood within the summoning room in his cellar at dusk, and considered his peculiar circumstances. He was an unlikely Enochian: driven by necessity, rather than any philosophical sympathy with the celestial agenda, which he viewed just as suspiciously as the fiendish one.

Prior to the endeavour, he had made a brief journey to the cave of the Claviger in the hills of Mord, just to be sure that he had overlooked no detail regarding the Injunction. And to ensure that the Enforcer had not, in some perverse fit of humour, extended the proscribed area to encompass the locale of his manse. The chamber had seemed unchanged, except that – perhaps – the aura emanating from the tablets was somehow subdued.

As he had prepared to leave, She had appeared to him, and smiled wickedly.

"Be careful, Mostin. If one of your new friends places even a feathered toe within Wyre, I will take you. And there is no hiding from me."

Despite his terror – because now Gihaahia was suffused with godlike power – Mostin had clung tight to his own will, and forced himself to remain calm.

"Would you follow me Outside, even? Somehow, I doubt that." It had been an empty but necessary act of braggadocio; he knew that she would likely know of any violation before it happened, and certainly before he could react.

"Place your trust in the Claviger," Gihaahia had said unexpectedly. "I/She cares for you."

Mostin had departed feeling sick. Apparently, the infernal had now thoroughly conflated her own identity with that of the entity she served.

Now he stood with Sho, who wished to witness the conjuration despite her own inclinations; and Orolde, the maimed sprite; and Mei, still devoid of true sapience. He sighed. My esteemed cabal, he thought ironically. He stared at Shomei's lesser analogues; news of their creator's infernal assumption could wait. He suspected that neither would care anyway; Sho was rapidly individuating, and Mei was dead to any feelings.

Mostin turned, and inspected a mildewed tome which rested on a carved lectern, flicking through its pages with his appendage. Taruz, the captain of the Host with whom Mostin had struck his deal, had indicated that celestials of a stature greater than that of a deva or an archon were not suitable candidates for his conjurations, and had required that he not use planar bindings in order to secure aid from the Empyrean realms. Mostin had grumbled inwardly; opening a number of gates would be a massive drain on his psychic resources, even if no subsequent fee were involved. And for devas?
The Alienist had brooded on the situation, and finally decided that he would pressure the host to renegotiate the terms of the deal. He would conjure Oraios, an exalted movanic; one of the Twelve Princes of the Eighth Choir. Technically a deva, yes. The fact that Oraios packed as much punch as a half-dozen solars was neither here nor there. But Mostin was nervous; spirit and letter were very different things, and he was dealing with celestials here, not devils. And few had dared to invoke an episeme before.

Orolde coughed.

"Well?" Sho asked. "Are we to stand here all day? I had hoped to use the summoning room later."

"Very well," Mostin steeled himself. Stay focussed on the face. Do not look at the wings. And then: Screw the Host. It's my reservoir, and I damn well expect my money's worth.

*

In wheeling mansions of light, high in the Seraphic Sphere, a gate opened. After pausing for a moment's thought, during which he communed with the Marshal of the Host, Oraios passed through.

*

Beneath a tree on the southern marches of Wyre, the Sela sat cross-legged, surrounded by saints and talions, delivering a lesson to a wide circle of armored knights and templars. He paused briefly and smiled enigmatically, shaking his head at the wizard's audacity, before continuing.

*

In Nizkur, Nehael glanced at Teppu in the twilight. "Look what Mostin just did," she said, presenting him with a mental image.

The sprite sat on a tump, inspecting the petals of a flower. "Jovol would have half-approved," he said archly. "His relations with the Host were always good."

"And you?" She inquired.

"I defer to your authority," Teppu replied. "How do you feel about it?"

"I suppose I must tolerate it," she sighed. "Enitharmon is treading carefully; perhaps he doesn't wish to anger me. That much I appreciate, at least."

"I doubt he fully understands," Teppu grinned. "Celestials will never comprehend Saizhan: they are relics of a previous era of consciousness."

"Potent relics, nonetheless," Nehael smiled. "And atavisms have a habit of resurfacing after a millennium or two."

"Are you worried?"

"I will weep for those who suffer," Nehael replied. "But worry for myself and my charge? No. Nizkur is grounded in the Tree-ludja. I am unconquerable. This is a reassuring fact."
"Unless the Nameless Fiend comes," the sprite observed.

"I fear no Hellfire," Nehael laughed.

"And his rhetoric?"

"That has yet to be tested," Nehael conceded.

**

Mostin quailed. Its feathers were terrible, and its radiance was almost as bad. Mogus crooned eerily.

"No wrath, then?" Mostin inquired gingerly. The Alienist had amplified his own powers to the point where he believed he had a good chance if it came to blows, but would rather it not prove necessary.

"You abide by the contract," Oraios replied stonily, looking down at the Alienist.

Mostin scowled. Exalted celestials acted according to their special remit – whatever that was. They were beyond normal hierarchic status. This celestial specimen appeared particularly warlike.

"Then I may deploy you in a manner consonant with the will of the Ahma or the Sela. I also imagine that you regard yourself as better informed as to what that might be, and thus feel in no way, in actuality, beholden to me."

"That would a wise interpretation," Oraios affirmed.

"I think that it is contestable," Mostin said coolly. "I would also like you to consider this: my capacity to open gates is limited by my reservoir; my ability to use planar bindings is not. I..."

The celestial gave Mostin an unreadable look. "You may use planar bindings. I abide by the rules at this point. I will remain for one month.

Mostin frowned. He hadn't expected the monster to submit as quickly. "You must not tresspass within Wyre's boundaries."

"I am fully conversant with the Injunction," Oraios said drily. "I try to stay abreast of current events."

"I think that it is contestable," Mostin said coolly. "I would also like you to consider this: my capacity to open gates is limited by my reservoir; my ability to use planar bindings is not. I..."

"I am fully conversant with the Injunction," Oraios said drily. "I try to stay abreast of current events."

Mostin scowled. This celestial had a sense of humour?

"I should like to make an observation," the deva said unexpectedly, purposefully emphasizing the last word.

Mostin fidgeted nervously. This was highly irregular. "Go on."

"If you were to continue gating my peers, you would find them no less accommodating than I."

"If you were to continue gating my peers, you would find them no less accommodating than I."

Mostin tilted his head and fixed his unblinking eyes on Oraios. "That information is duly noted. You may now be about your business."

"That information is duly noted. You may now be about your business."

The celestial looked at Mostin as it discorporated. "Thank-you, Mostin."
Mostin shivered. Its light still clung to him; the promise of something true and wholesome. It made the Alienist feel dirty.

"What now?" Orolde asked.

Mostin thought silently for a few minutes, before raising his head. "Tomorrow, we shall conjure the deva Irel, who has the quaint title 'he who smites.'"

"Don't pull your punches, Mostin," Sho remarked.

"And also the archon Hemah, and the deva Shokad." Mostin added. "And a dozen or so minor devas."

Sho raised an eyebrow. "You will gain a reputation as Oronthon's bitch."

"I don't see arch-devils coming this cheap," Mostin replied.

"I don't see you in control here, either."

"You forget that I am a personal friend of the Breath of God," Mostin smiled. "That carries special benefits, and relieves me of certain concerns."

"And imposes certain others."

Mostin shrugged. He was interested in the broad canvas, not the details. And a penny saved here and there could help toward that pot of very purple paint, which he could then throw all over it.

He observed Sho. Her urge to overcome any limits was as pronounced as her creator's. Following her endowment by Nwm, she had quickly compacted several erinyes and – after procuring a scroll from an unrevealed source – a cornugon in the service of Seere, a disgraced infernal count who dwelt in Avernus. Now she courted pit fiends in Seere's bodyguard. Her rise had been predictably meteoric; in it, the cloak lent to her by Mostin, and the Mirror of Urm-Nahat had been instrumental. Mostin envied her: to have those tools with which to begin one's career. He regarded her approvingly, regretting only that she did not have another eye, or a maw.

***

Nwm alighted upon a wide platform of rock, thirty feet above the mere. He deposited Ortwine, Eadric and Rhul, and resumed his natural shape in a slick instant.

"No demons?" Nwm inquired.

"I suspect that this is only the beginning of the vestibule," Rhul pointed through an opening into another, massive cavern. "We have a long descent to make; the Underworld is deep, you know." He sounded wry.

"Forty-eight hours, Ortwine," Eadric scowled at the sidhe. He turned to Nwm, "Should we wind-walk?"

"We must trudge," Rhul observed. "Those are the rules."
As they trod, Eadric handed Nwm a scarf of black silk.

Nwm looked dubious. "What is its significance?"

"It is Soneillon's; she gave it to me in a dream." Eadric proceeded to explain his dilemma regarding the demoness; he could revive her, or Yeshe would find her first.

"Ah," Nwm said.

"Do you have a solution?" Eadric asked.

"Not really."

"I had considered imprisoning her..."

"Confinement would preclude her conjuration," Nwm was hesitant. "But I would be reluctant to condemn any location, anywhere, to such a fate."

"Could you do it?"


"She need not be confined within the World of Men," the Ahma ventured. "If some forsaken Limbo could be found..."

"One man's Limbo is another's Paradise," Nwm observed drily. "Still. Some locations would be less offensive than others."

"There is a place," Eadric spoke carefully. "It seems apt. The lake. It would resonate. It would require Ortwine's permission, at the very least. She owns that stretch of Faerie. Or at least has a better claim on it than any other. That wouldn't be so hard to obtain. She owes me."

"I think you underestimate the degree of control that Ortwine prefers to exert over her hegemony. She was livid when I revealed that I had opened portals to Afqithan. That said, despite the protestations of the sidhe, I think the very notion of ownership is absurd when speaking of Faerie."

"If I asked you, would you do it?"

"Perhaps," Nwm answered after a brief pause.

"Somehow, I had expected a flat no."

"Often, one must look at the bigger picture. And how best to protect. I remember her: I know how dangerous she is. But understand this, Ed: If I were to would lay a compulsion upon her, I'd drain every drop from your psyche to do it. And mine. And probably Ortwine's – which I think she'd be less than enthusiastic about. It would need to be robust. And it sits uncomfortably with me. It would be an act of hypocrisy; a violation of something I am sworn to protect."

"How long would such a confinement last?" Eadric inquired.
Nwm grimaced. "Until one more powerful than I came and broke it. Which might be tomorrow, or might be never. Goetia is hardly my speciality, Eadric. I can accomplish a great deal, but my power is raw; I lack the finesse of a wizard. Mostin would be a better choice."

"Mostin is under Empyreal contract. He's not really an option at this point."

Nwm stared at the Ahma. "You need to think hard about this, Eadric. You are compromised in more ways than you know; I'm not just talking about your romantic attachment to this particular fiend. You need to question every possible motive that you might have before acting. And an investment of my power in this would mean that it is not deployed elsewhere – and that concerns me as much as anything."

"Demons such as her don't die, Nwm. They have already been unmade. They merely arise from Nothingness into Being, and return to oblivion a while. Nothing Becomes."

"That is a perversion of Saizhan, and you know it. I can't believe I'm telling you this, of all people."

"It's the other side of the coin," Eadric shrugged. "Perhaps it's also an act of symbolic necessity; the Ahma must re-embody the Void; the Preceptor must confine its essence within The Green. It is a point of commonality."

"You suddenly seem well informed regarding my religious duties," Nwm said acidly. "You also posit a Hierarchy of Truths that I'm not altogether comfortable with."

Eadric stopped walking. "You were the one who was passionate about my taking a stance. About a reconciliation of ideals. Don't get upset at me if my interpretation is one you find you don't like; something which makes you uncomfortable because of what it might actually materially entail. I do not shirk my duty, thus? Remember? You're going to need to give a little, here."

Nwm scowled. "Point," he finally said. "Although if you're going to start establishing dogma, you'd better damn well make sure this time that it's clear that this is not an act to be emulated. News would get out; it always does. You would need to consider the ramifications of knowledge of the event amongst the 'faithful,' or whatever they are these days. And you need to decide if it's the Adversary who's driving your agenda."

Eadric glared. "You just had to get that one in, didn't you."

Nwm sighed. "It is a consideration."

"The alternative is that you reincarnate her into a more benign form."

"Absolutely not," Nwm replied. "I have no jurisdiction over immortal abominations. Or celestials, for that matter. Nor do I wish any."

"I do. And I recall that once you were less reluctant to step outside of your remit regarding another succubus."

"Hardly comparable," Nwm snapped. "Accepting an act of submission by one repentant individual – for the sake of expedience – is not the same as purposely incarnating a manifestation of evil. You would have me unleash this thing in the
world? You have no idea what you're suggesting."

"Then enlighten me, Nwm," Eadric said grimly. "I am merely exploring possibilities. Could you bring her back Green?"

"No."

"Why not?" Eadric asked. "Ortwine. Mulissu. Teppu. Nehael. If I've learned anything, it's that the Viridity can absorb anything. You awakened a simulacrum, Nwm."

"She would bring a blackness with her. A corruption."

"The Viridity arises in response to the ontological paradox. It grounds the abstract in the present. Notions of ens and non-ens are abandoned in the face of the Now. Your words, Nwm."

"Nehael's words," Nwm corrected him.

"So ask the Goddess," Eadric replied.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Ask Nehael if either solution is acceptable: imprisonment or incarnation. Or neither. We will abide by her decision."

Nwm squinted and cocked his head. "Very well."

"In any event, it will require Soneillon's consent."

Nwm stood stock still. "What?"

"I will not lie to her, Nwm," Eadric said simply. "I owe her that much, at least."

Nwm sighed.

Ahead, Ortwine stopped. They had entered a tall cavern. Great bronze doors lay beyond.

"Demons," she calmly observed.

*

The sidhe had been walking with Rhul, apparently in casual conversation, but in fact probing him for information, and wooing the godling toward her camp. Her interrogation was too skillful for Rhul to discern, and the subtlety of her intellectual seduction – which targeted his aesthetic sensibilities with deadly precision – was more than Rhul was equipped to deal with, despite his own sophistication.

Ortwine had the uncanny knack of presenting ideas to a subject of her willful manipulation as exactly as I would have thought in the mind of the listener. Her sexuality was a razor which she wielded with cool detachment, and could accommodate allusions to either coyness or abandon, but in innuendos so ethereal that they merely left a vague feeling of discomfort in those whom she targeted.
All must adore me, she knew. In that, her purpose was unchanged. Thus, can I brood better.

Rhul himself had admitted that the exact method of Ortwine's apotheosis was still in doubt, but the sidhe had developed a number of theories – or rather entertained a variety of notions – as to how it might be best effected. Outside of Mulhuk, the Nireem were diminished in stature, although that had not always been the case; in their heydey, when Sisperi had flourished, they had enjoyed the worship which that world's natives had lavished upon them.

Central to Ortwine's plans were the series of massive reincarnations – planned by Nwm and Lai – each of which would facilitate the simultaneous transmigration of thousands of disembodied spirits into new forms. For Nwm, this would be an act of metaphysical audacity which he had barely even begun to address; the ethical responsibility involved was truly staggering. Ortwine's view was more pragmatic; she needed a base of worshippers upon whom to draw to fuel her divinity, and who would venerate her based on her chosen role.

But the sidhe herself was not entirely without scruples. She understood the reciprocity demanded by the agreement and, at present at least, recognized her obligation. She would remain fey, of course, and that presented her with a good deal of leeway; Afqithan was already bound to Mulhuk through Nwm's conduits. Sisperi itself would become infused with Faerie – the Enchantment – as Ortwine had come to regard it in her mind. Not in some mundane wizardly fashion, but in a deep, abiding occult manner which she was beginning to understand.

The leaders of the Nireem – Lai, Rhul and Jaliere – had sworn solemn oaths regarding Ortwine's ascension. Ninit, who preferred to remain marginal to the dealings of Mulhuk, had expressed no opinion other than her usual disdain. Ortwine had decided that some rite must exist where each godling could invest her with a portion of their own strength, and that such might be a possibility. At the last, the death of Saes at her own hands might be an option, although Ortwine was nervous that such an act would mean that she herself would inherit Ruk, and its dismal responsibilities.

Ortwine drew Heedless and felt the blade's malign power course through her.

*  

They had once been demons but – by through instillation of morbid power by Saes in her delerium – had assumed a darker status. Blood fiends which fed on each other, and disgorged shadows of themselves in an unending cycle of consumption and regurgitation. They descended upon the party like a rabid pack, their thin screams echoing in the tall chambers of the vestibule.

Nwm swallowed. There were too many to count. He unleashed a sonic which ripped a swathe through them; the acoustic resonance shattered diamonds in the walls of the cavern. Lukam flared; brilliant sunlight exploded. Their numbers seemed barely diminished.

Nwm invoked potent wards. "Keep them at bay for a moment. Then we cut our way forward," he said. It was their only option: they had to trudge. He shot two parallel walls of green fire across the chamber, a narrow path between them. The blistering heat caused the undead to recoil for an instant, before they hurled themselves oblivious through the burning curtains, immolating themselves in a frenzy in order to attack the group.
"After you," Nwm said to Eadric.

The Ahma began to hew his way through the monsters. The others followed him.

**

Graz'zt stood within the Gate Room, a labyrinth of hallways containing many thousands of portals, all of which were sealed. The Prince had assumed the size and shape of a human of dark aspect, and was outfitted as a gentleman prepared for travel; an extra digit on each gloved hand remained to indicate his true nature, a vanity which Graz'zt always indulged.

He was accompanied by a dozen other demons of note, including Chepez the Vicious – a succubus whose animal nature Graz'zt trusted – and Hejiel, whose grasp of planar geography was unrivalled. Megual, a kelvezu assassin renowned for his subtlety, rode upon the Prince's right. The marilith Hirmis, a loyal general who in the past had delivered numerous victories to Graz'zt in his wars against Yeenoghu, had also joined him. Twenty metamorphosed cauchemars served as steeds, or as armor and baggage carriers for the troupe; their possessions included all of Zelatar's most portable wealth, stowed in a variety of extradimensional bags. Their façade might have been a squad of mercenary knights and their squires.

Above them, the hooves of nightmares bearing the undead cavalry of Orcus thundered through the halls of the Argent Palace. Ten hours before, their chiefs had come; every minute detail of the palace defenses had been known to them, and Graz'zt's walls had been disjoined in three different places at once. To the astonishment of those closest to him, the Prince had at once calmly opted to abandon his stronghold, but at a leisurely pace which allowed him to collect his thoughts and make arrangements first. The bulk of his court, he had dispatched to the Ice Waste of Kostchchie; were he to arrive in person, Graz'zt could assume control of that miserable, backward layer at any time. Others had been sent to the few remaining proxies which remained loyal to Azzagrat during tumultuous times.

A select group, he had kept to himself; the Prince had taken a fancy to the idea of a-wanderin', perhaps with the notion of wreaking a little havoc. Distraction in destruction was what he needed now. Ilistet could wait – he would rend her body and spirit for the secrets she must have divulged. Compacted by now, no doubt; eyewitnesses had reported his herald's abrupt disappearance through a gate. Inscrutable to his divinations, the Prince suspected Rimilin of the Skin, and information sold to Thanatos. He cursed them all.

With a gesture, Graz'zt dispelled the wards which held the portals closed, and hundreds of vistas – mostly terrible – opened up before them. A few other doorways remained blank and closed; gates sealed from the other side.

Graz'zt ignored them all, and with a small device instead opened a portal to yet another world. With his party, he passed swiftly through into a dreary wasteland named Suluvda, and into exile. The gate flashed closed behind him.

The death knights never reached the Gate Room. More than a few of the portals had been shut for good reason.

* 

In his meditations, Temenun knew that many chthonics had erupted into the
fourty-fifth abysm, and that the ugra named Angula had vacated his demesne. Void was buoyant, pushing closer to the surface. Temenun bade the other immortals attend him.

*Angula flirts with us. He dares one of us to conjure him. Who will raise his pavillion?*

Chooach bowed. "My brother, Draab, has already made pact with him."

Sibud sneered. "We do not observe outside arrangements."

Chooach gave a ghastly smile. "Neither does Draab."

"I bring Baramh," Yeshe announced. "His pavillion can be raised in three days. I plan to conjure the Gu Kaama shortly afterwards." Rumours already abounded; the Binder merely confirmed them. It was a goad directed at Prahar, who ignored it and slavered silently.

Temenun turned his gaze upon Anumid. "What does the Mouthpiece say?"

"Angula is currently unbalanced. Nonetheless, it will not be I who decides; I am authorized to offer five hundred to begin: you may bid on them as you will."

A furious haggling began.

Yeshe smiled. She had the advantage: she was wealthier than anybody else.

**

Eadric, Ortwine, Nwm and Rhul finally gained the gates: massive bronze valves, twenty feet high, replete with ornate scenes depicting the passage of souls through various spiritual ordeals. The press of fiends around them was unrelenting.

Eadric brandished Lukarn and invoked another sunburst. Nwm sealed the area immediately before the portals with a wall of stone. For a brief moment, an eerie silence descended upon the group, before a hideous scraping – the sound of hundreds of claws and maws upon granite – filled the encysted space.

"What now?" Eadric asked.

Ortwine pushed lightly upon the doors. They opened noiselessly.

"We trudge," the sidhe said drily.

Wearily, they continued their descent.

**

"I must do it *now!*" Yeshe hissed.

"The bids are not yet closed, Lady," Anumid replied calmly.

"I need the first and third cabals of the Anantam," Yeshe pressed on regardless.

"Then you need to up your tender," Anumid smiled.
"You owe me much, Anumid," Yeshe turned her scorn on the Mouthpiece. "I will offer you two analahs and a dozen gomukhs for one month. It is a royal price."

"It is a fair price," Anumid answered. "And must be split any number of ways."

"I need three hundred by nightfall. I must build fast."

"And I would remind you that you will have an advantage in future negotiations if your circle is made."

"The cabals may retain ownership of the circle," Yeshe immediately conceded. "Anumid, we need to act. Many enemies will soon come. We are losing the initiative. We must be prepared."

Anumid's eyes narrowed. "I will advocate for you. But at three analahs and thirty gomukhs."

Yeshe's face contorted into a snarl.

"And I will get you your three hundred. But know that the Anantam are dubious of angering the Wyrish Enforcer."

"Gihaahia will not come here. She cannot overcome us on this ground, and she knows it. You may vouchsafe for me. I swear it on my name."

Anumid nodded, and departed.

* 

An hour passed, and Anumid returned. "They accept."

* 

Three hours later, the demon prince Pazuzu and six armored balors stood within the confines of the inner precinct.

Yeshe knelt before them, but her supplication was ceremonial. They were already enslaved to her.

**

The cavern was vast and approximately conical; its apex, a swirling vortex without colour, which – Ortwine knew instinctively – led out of there. They entered warily, upon a solid surface which reflected like still water, but within the depths of which, a maelstrom of tormented souls raged.

It was not what they had expected.

On an island of rock in the dead centre was slouched the figure of a slender woman on a throne of bone and bronze, apparently insensible. She was possessed of great beauty, but her eyes were glazed and vacant.

Ortwine cautiously moved closer, drew Heedless and poked Saes lightly in the ribs. The figure was unresponsive. A trickle of divine blood from a tiny cut stained Saes's white robe. Ortwine gazed at it, fascinated. Heedless moved restlessly in her hand.
She turned to Nwm. "What now?"

"She needs to be healed," the Preceptor observed. "That is all."

Eadric raised an eyebrow. "Can you do that? Return sanity to a deity?"

Nwm shot the Ahma a glance. "Healing is what I do best, Eadric. Ortwine, be prepared to negotiate. Be warned: sane and nice should not be confused."

The sidhe paused. "Wait a…"

But Nwm had already touched Saes upon the forehead, flooding the goddess with green light, even as traces of jade fire crawled over him, charring his own flesh and causing him to writhe in pain. He reeled, and coughed blood upon the polished floor.

The malice which was Saes awoke from its stupor. Black eyes opened and regarded the quartet before her.

"You presume much," the goddess smiled thinly. Her consciousness rapidly expanded to embrace her domain, dwarfing the psyches of those others present. "You I know," she looked coldly at Rhul. "What are these?"

Ortwine lowered herself to one knee, and pointedly averted her eyes. "On behalf of your brothers and sisters, we beg for aid," she said simply.

Inwardly, Eadric relaxed a little. They were in the realm of negotiation. Ortwine could handle it alone from here.

**

_I need to know._ Mostin's voice echoed in Eadric's mind. The wizard was many worlds distant.

_Deploy them._ Eadric replied.

_Against whom?_

_We should target the cabals. Destroy their power base._

_Good in principle. But assaulting the main precinct would be futile. It would take half a myriad to accomplish._

_Do you have a better suggestion?_ The Ahma was irritable.

_An army musters outside of Thond's walls._

_Mortal thralls? Many who are innocent will perish._

_It is the doom of mortals to perish._ Mostin replied.

_There will be enough blood on my hands. I would rather my opening move be less ignoble._

_You have always lacked the pragmatism necessary to be an effective tyrant._ Mostin's voice was scornful. _Attack the vulnerable pieces first._
How many are gathered at Thond? Eadric was grim.

So far, around eleven thousand. Including bombards, battalions of condottieri, and the flower of Thond's chivalry.

Their composition was irrelevant. Eadric knew that they would stand no chance, and all would be quickly slain unless the Cheshnite spellcasters stopped to intervene directly.

And retaliation? Shouldn't I be concerned that a counterstrike will be just as indiscriminate?

Eadric, if you think that moderating your actions will somehow cause the Hierophants to reconsider theirs...

In the throne-room of Ruk, the underworld of Sisperi, the Ahma stood quietly and considered.

Unleash them. He finally commanded. But they must withdraw if Visuit or any other immortal appears in person at Thond.

*

Princes, attend me! Mostin issued a mass sending.

The four exalted celestials, who had assumed the metaphysical stewardship of Wyre's cardinal directions, manifested before the Alienist, bathed in radiance.

"I have a task consonant with the Will of the Ahma."

***

Graz'zt has vanished. Ur-fiends stalk Zelatar's byways, and Orcus cannot hold the plane. Carasch and his ilk have risen to the forty-fifth deep.

Jalael considered the sending which Daunton had issued an hour before. She sat within a booth in the library of the Academy; tomes containing the names and sigils of many demons surrounded her.

Celestial dignitaries had assumed the ethereal guardianship of Wyre. The Claviger had magnified the Enforcer. Fumaril was inaccessible, isolated by Mulissu's magicks. Something was awakening in Nizkur. Pazuzu had erected a temple south of Jashat: the olive groves were already stained black with the blood and smoke of sacrifice. And now madness and annihilation were spewing forth their effluvia into the middle Abyss.

Where to throw her lot? She reflected upon her position carefully for an hour, considering the merits of allegiance with the various axes which had formed. She contacted her occasional patron – a Pandemonic Hag named Kreta – whose agenda was opaque at best.

Jalael brooded long upon the whereabouts of Pharamne's Urn.

Finally, in a small refectory, she took counsel with the wizards Troap and Muthollo
– together, these three formed an unbalanced triad which nonetheless might yield remarkable results in the future. Jalael's *accelerando* was already underway. She knew that if she survived the current crisis, she would be a major player in the New Order.

She cursed Mostin for encumbering her with notions of commitment to posterity.

"We are fragmenting into triptychs, as Shomei foresaw," Jalael observed. "Ours is the most potent. Are we to take a proactive stance?"

"I suddenly have a deep appreciation for the magical economy of the Cheshnites," Troap smiled wrily. "It is a model which we might seek to adopt."

"It has its merits," Jalael agreed. "Loci are forming around Waide, Tullifer and Idro; around Tozinak, Shuk and Poylu; and around Creq, Droom and Gholu. Others remain marginal, although quadruplicities seem popular among the less accomplished. Mostin, Rimilin and Daunton are the unintegrated pinnacle,"

"Is Daunton transvalent?" Muthollo asked. "He is enigmatic."

"He is spineless," Jalael replied. "And yes, I believe so. And Tozinak is close. And so is Waide. I suspect Jovol engineered the whole situation."

"Jovol-who-is-Teppu," Troap hissed. "I vote for the Green camp. I may be biased." He smiled broadly.

"I am inclined to retain our autonomy at present," Muthollo seemed sceptical. "The goblin has viridescent urges which are clouding his vision."

"I am pragmatic," Jalael opined. "I say we back Mostin."

"Because insanity is recently fashionable?" Muthollo inquired.

"We need to deflate his Enochian bubble. We should offer to help him bind Graz'zt. The Dark Prince is abroad, and lacks the protections of his sanctum."

Troap inclined his head. "Mostin needs a bigger cabal."

Jalael shrugged. "He can reconfigure the spell. His use of celestials is becoming indiscriminate, and must be ended."

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**Note**

*Angula* ("Fingers"), *Baramh* ("Peacock Feathers") and *Aja* ("The Goat") refer to Graz'zt, Pazuzu and Orcus respectively. *Gu-Kaama* is Soneillon, "Darkness-Lust."

"Raising the Pavillion" of a demon lord occurs after it is thoroughly subjugated. After the initial domination expires, a longer-term compulsion kicks in. I've assumed that it is possible to coerce a dominated creature to surrender (voluntarily fail its save / lower its SR) to a subsequently targeted long-term epic compulsion.

*Service rendered by two balors and twelve babau.*
Quote:
Originally Posted by Eridanis
*I went through and pruned a year or so of bumps. Sep, if you'd like a more aggressive pruning, drop me a note.

Thanks, Eridanis. Pruning would be great, but I know it's tedious work.

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**Mostin Plays His Hand**

The dim light before dawn. In Soan, in the world of Sisperi, Nwm stood with the goddess Lai and her twelve handmaidens in a shallow bowl in the earth. The depression had once been a temple. Untended for more than a century, now it was overgrown with creepers; the roots of trees which had since sprouted and matured there had cracked the dressed stonework, obscuring the site's former purpose.

Nwm had *hallowed* the remains, washing away memories of the blasphemies which had occurred during the last, futile defense of the temple against demons sent by Graz'zt. Now, all was still, but the air was heavy with anticipation. The group was arranged in a wide circle, with Nwm and Lai in the centre.

The Preceptor, breathing slowly and easily in the chill air, lifted a flint knife, and began to chant. The echoing whispers of the handmaidens were barely audible.

Lai stretched out her arms, her palms upward. With two swift, brutal cuts, Nwm opened up the veins of the goddess from elbow to wrist. Lai began to bleed profusely. Nwm held her forearms and looked into her face; her blood flowed over him, and soaked into the ground at their feet. He continued to chant. A breeze began to stir.

The wind quickly grew to a tempest which raged around them, flinging leaves and debris into the air. Nwm's breathing became rapid, and his mind reached out into the storm.

*Arise*, he silently commanded. Green fire consumed him; a cyclone of viridescence erupted, and whirled for the briefest of moments. Abruptly, the storm ceased. Life kindled.

He caught Lai as she collapsed, although he himself was pale and shaking. He spoke more words, and strength flowed back into both of them.

Dawn broke in Sisperi, and the sun leapt into the sky, exulting. Many hundreds of souls, graced with new forms, stood around them and gazed at them in silence.
and wonder: those who had perished within the confines of the temple. Over the course of hours, thousands more – who had awakened in the surrounding countryside – made their way to the site. Ninit and the ancestors led them in long columns into the bowl.

Finally, when all had gathered – and now the sun rode high in the sky – the Nireem assembled together in the centre of the ruins. Saes was conspicuously absent, but with Jaliere's grudging acceptance, Ortwine had already taken her place amongst them.

Rhul stood upon a mound of rubble which had once been an altar, and began to tell a long, bitter story. As he recited, Lai drew Nwm aside and spoke in hushed tones.

"Stay," she implored. "Return to Mulhuk with us."

"In time," Nwm smiled. "But I have other duties." He reached out, grasped a nearby sapling, and vanished.

Ninit, who had observed the exchange, scowled.

**

Mostin floated amongst the smoking wreck of the encampment, his features impassive.

Hours before, at his direction, the four exalted celestials – Oraios, Irel, Hemah and Shokad – had descended in a fire of ruin upon the army gathered outside of Thond's walls, and slain upwards of ten thousand soldiers in a matter of minutes. The Alienist had observed the carnage from a discreet distance, impressed with the efficiency of the destruction.

Mulissu corporeated next to him. She raised an eyebrow.

"What a mess," she sighed. "We have become politicians, Mostin. We demean ourselves."

"We do what we must," Mostin shrugged. "I have no regrets."

"Well spoken," a voice spoke unexpectedly from behind them.

Mostin turned rapidly, prepared to unleash a barrage of disintegrates. Mulissu's power surged.

"Peace." It was a statement of profound simplicity, uttered with such power that the cosmos might bend to see it done. A youth stood there, offering his palm. He seemed wholly unperturbed.

"Who the hell are you?" Mostin asked.

"A many-layered question," the other replied. "I regret that I cannot share that information with you at this time." The boy – who from his complexion may have been a native of the area – seemed oddly amused.

Mostin furrowed his brow. "Why are you here?"
The youth cracked his knuckles casually. "To witness the handiwork of Oronthon's servants. You have done good work today, Mostin."

Mostin became nervous. Who is this? Mulissu's eyes narrowed.

The youth touched his nose. "You should know that the demon Pazuzu has begun to ravage Eastern Trempa; other demons are starting to infest Ardan. Many Ushabam thaumaturges accompany them."

Mostin was irritated, but could not help but be intrigued.

"Yeshe's nihilist fanatics," the youth explained.

"What is your interest in this situation?" Mulissu asked directly.

"At the risk of seeming evasive, that is also a more complex question than it might first appear. I would prefer not to go into it."

"You say little to engender trust," Mostin sighed.

"A fair observation; fortunately, I do not require your trust. But I do need you to convey a message to the Ahma for me. Tell him this exactly: 'Remember what the Sela said, regarding your place in the downfall of Orthodoxy.'"

Mostin was about to say Tell him yourself, but thought better of it. "Perhaps if..." he began.

But the youth had vanished.

Mostin turned to Mulissu and scowled. "This is disturbing. Could you read anything about him?"

"Not a whit."

"Nor I," Mostin concurred. "And I mislike being elected to communicate messages by unknown entities."

"And Pazuzu?"

"I should inform Eadric, if he doesn't know already. I cannot dispatch celestials within Wyre proper, anyway: this is up to him."

"Mostin, we need to talk. I can't hold the paling around Fumaril for much longer."

"Don't worry," Mostin appeared unconcerned. "The gears are shifting. Everything will happen quickly now."

"How comforting," Mulissu said.

**

"Graz'zt has abandoned the Argent Palace and unleashed a chthonic tide centered on Zelatar. You should be proud, Mostin. You were complicit in reducing him to such a desperate strategy." Rimilin seemed genuinely impressed, though no less condescending than usual.
"I had heard," Mostin replied smoothly.

"I will aid you in binding him. For a price."

"Strange. Jalael made a similar offer with her clique of wizards. I sense a renewed interest in the whereabouts of a certain urn."

"Every mage in Wyre has consulted Shomei's library in an attempt to glean tidbits of information regarding that pot, Mostin."

"Not I, alas," Mostin sighed.

"Nor I," Rimilin admitted. "There has been no time for scholarly research. Do I want the urn? Of course! How can there be any doubt on that count? I will find out how it works after I get it."

_Not just the urn. This bastard wants Azzagrat. Graz'zt's throne. The arrogance._

Mostin smiled, and shook his head. "You'll never do it."

"We'll see," Rimilin said smugly. "It's time: bring him in, Mostin. You won't have a better chance. I will aid you. As will Mulissu, I've no doubt: she holds onto a grudge, that one. Your sprite and your Shomeiete can contribute. Jalael, Troap, Muthollo. You have your cabal, Alienist."

"What is your price?"

"Access to the web of motes."

Mostin considered briefly. "Let us assume, for the moment, that I agree."

"It leaves the question of what to do with said bound Prince," Rimilin observed, somewhat surprised. "Imprisonment, extortion, domination or termination are all viable options; nor are they necessarily mutually exclusive choices."

"I cannot dominate him."

"I could, with help," Rimilin suggested.

"I would sooner cut off my pseudopod, than hand Graz'zt over to Rimilin of the Skin," Mostin snorted.

"So what do you suggest?"

"A very precise coordination of efforts," Mostin replied carefully. "It is rather risky; if it fails, we will need to flee or eliminate him immediately."

Rimilin looked at the Alienist suspiciously. "You have my attention."

"Understand that I have long pondered this question, Rimilin. It requires a certain spell synchrony. Graz'zt must be struck by a superb dispelling only a fraction of a second before he is subjected to a minimus containment. He will not have the opportunity to re-erect his mind blank before he is captured."

Rimilin gawked. "Ingenious, Mostin. I must admit it. Such a strategy would not have occurred to me."
"His receptacle will eventually need to be protected by a disjunction ward, although if due care is taken with it, such a precaution can wait for a little while."

"And when you have your Graz'zt-in-a-Jar? What then?"

"Your involvement in the process will end at that point," Mostin smiled. "You need not be concerned on that count."

"I wish to be present during any interrogation regarding the urn."

"I will convoke an assembly to discuss the urn," Mostin spoke calmly. "Any interrogation will be conducted under the full auspices of the Acadamy."

"Touché, Mostin. I will accompany you when you deliver it to Daunton. I do not trust you."

"Nor I, you. And Rimilin," Mostin stared madly, "if you do decide to betray me, you had better be sure that you are thorough in your efforts, and overlook no contingencies. I have dealt with you with due civility. You might rue it, were our relationship to change."

*

Mostin tried to grasp the mote again. It was elusive, and kept slipping into the region of space and time which Mostin had come to realize approximated to the Region of Dreams. The remnant of Murmuur was impossible to isolate, his memory fading rapidly.

Mostin spun another arc, this time for Azazel, and observed a convoluted knot of resonances. One radicle drew him onward and backwards, to a time when rebel smiths hammered furiously in forges upon the Blessed Plain, contriving engines of destruction to assault the Empyrean.

Murmuur's mote hovered nearby, as if attempting to taunt the Alienist. Mostin ignored it, concentrating instead on Sekabin, a proto-devil of immense cunning, who oversaw the construction of devices which breathed unholy fire, and artifacts whose purpose was otherwise long-forgotten. Sekabin, it had been, who had wrought the doors of Murmuur's Tower, and helped anchor it to unnamed worlds which would later be revealed to the rebels as the prison from which they could never escape.

He would need to conjure the devil, and extract the key to activating the Tower from it. A task well within his abilities. In his mind, he weighed the benefits of a return to Goetia against the practical reality of already having celestials on the ground.

The Alienist relaxed his thoughts and returned his perception to the present. The echoes of the deceased Dukes – Murmuur, Titivilus and Furcus – drifted on the edge of comprehension. Deeper in dream, Soneillon's mote flickered in and out of being; taut radicles bound it to familiar nodes: Graz'zt, Eadric, Rimilin, Yeshe. With a colossal effort of will, Mostin generated a connection between the demoness, his own significator, and the Prince of Azzagrat. A plethora of possible futures exploded into being, and he seized immediately upon one of them. Pharamne's Urn.

He gasped as new infinities were born to his inner sight.
The decision by Mostin to end his Enochian phase was made in a heartbeat.

**

An hour before midnight, the Ahma – together with Tahl, Tarpion and a number of other resurrected temple grandees – assembled beneath a canopy on a conical hill twenty miles south of Hrim Eorth in the Wyrish Marklands. Above them, flapping noisily in the wind, a massive banner stretched: a rising sun cradled within the outstretched boughs of a great tree. The green field of the standard appeared black in the torchlight; its device was a ruddy gold.

In the valleys below, thousands of campfires flickered. Against the Ahma's better judgment many companies were mustered together, but he felt powerless to deny the faithful proximity to the Sela. Those cadres which had been dispatched beyond the Claviger's remit were small, mobile, and bolstered with protective magicks.

Nehael's farspoken words still echoed in Eadric's mind. They had been less than reassuring:

*She is what she is, Ahma. If you want her back, then just do it: you have the power and authority. It is your decision to make.*

Which was to say that Nwm's assessment of the situation – that Soneillon would bring a corruption with her, were the Preceptor to reincarnate her – might be correct, after all. Nehael herself had surrendered to the Green, and had been relinquished by one Truth to another; on reflection, Eadric realized that perhaps the Ancient Void – which owned Soneillon – might be less accommodating than Oronthon in that regard. He stared at the Eye of Cheshne, which brooded on the horizon, pregnant with power.

As they waited, Tahl regarded the Ahma carefully. The saint's divinations had revealed that, in all likelihood, Yeshe would now move to embody the demoness within a day. Eadric had wavered, as though he were waiting for some other sign; none had been forthcoming. Furthermore, rumour of demonic depredations in the East had agitated Eadric's captains: all were restless, waiting for the Ahma to act.

Finally, Nwm appeared, sprouting upwards from the ground. He was shaky and haggard.

"You look awful," Eadric observed. "I take it you were successful?"

"Thank-you," Nwm replied drily. "And yes. We have made a beginning. How is your current moral quandary progressing?"

"Very nicely, thank-you." Eadric sat unceremoniously in his armor. "Everything is messed up, Nwm. There are too many overlapping paradigms; things are becoming confusing."

"And the massacre at Thond?"

"A miserable reality."

"I sympathize," Nwm said earnestly. "Being an agent of retribution carries a certain weight with it. There was no intervention by the Hierophants?"
"If there had been, it might have allayed some of my reservations. I think the Cheshnite leadership would rather have me wallow in remorse."

"And do you?"

"I have no inkling to indulge my conscience: we are at war. Things are about to get much worse."

"Apparently you have a bright mood upon you. What of the demoness?"

"I see no future in such a liaison," Eadric said drily.

"A divorce, then?" Nwm inquired.

"Yes. And I foresee acrimony."

"I will be tactful," Nwm smiled. "So. Yeshe gets Soneillon. Is that wise?"

Eadric looked desperate. "Nwm! I thought you opposed her revival?"

"And so do I. I would oppose Yeshe's efforts no less than I would yours. She appears driven."

"The memory of the cascade at Khu propels her," Eadric explained. "In her mind, it was the greatest blasphemy which could have been visited upon the holiest of sites."

"Feeling sympathetic?"

"Hardly. I would still prefer her dead."

"Then you will be relieved to hear that I have a solution," Nwm said. "Mostin has expressed an interest in conjuring your demoness; he was reluctant to divulge his agenda precisely."

Eadric looked suspicious. "He said nothing to me earlier."

"You've spoken?"

Eadric nodded dumbly.

"Something is wrong?"

"He passed a message to me, from an 'interested party:' Remember what the Sela said, regarding your place in the downfall of Orthodoxy."

"That is all?" Nwm was baffled.

"It is sufficient. I understand its context well enough." Eadric swallowed.

"And the 'interested party'?"

The Ahma stared at the Preceptor, and raised his eyebrows.

"Oh." Nwm breathed. "Sh*t."
"Verily," Eadric agreed.

"Does Mostin know who it was?"

"I don't think so. And I'd prefer that it remain between you and I for now. I also find it interesting to note that after even the briefest exchange with said entity, during which no mention of fiendish allies was even mentioned, Mostin suddenly seems willing to renounce his Empyreal contract. In addition to the Exalted, he has conjured thirty celestials in two days, Nwm."

"Mostin is playing his hand," Nwm nodded.

"Except he keeps all his cards hidden."

Nwm laughed. "Whichever trumpet Mostin hears, it is not yours, Ed. Is that all?"

Eadric laughed bitterly. "No indeed. Get some rest, Nwm. You're going to need it. Tomorrow, we hunt demons."

"What kind?"

"The Pazuzu kind."

"Where?" The Preceptor groaned.

"In Trempa and Ardan."

"A strangely marginal choice for assault."

"Yes and no," the Ahma sighed. "It is also the spiritual homeland of Saizhan. Bring whatever allies you can, Nwm. I mean anybody. We need heavy firepower."

"Is there a plan?"

"We find him. The Saints use their power, so he can't slip away. I take him down."

"Is there a better plan?"

"Only if you can scry him. He is emanating a massive nondetection and we only know his general whereabouts."

"How hard can it be to locate a rampaging horde of demons?"

"More of a troupe than a horde, Nwm. And harder than you might think. He's slippery, this one. And he's in no rush. He's having fun at the moment. He's also beating us over the head with the arcane Injunction. His presence is a religious matter."

"Is it?" Nwm asked. "Then hand out the acorns. You will all assist me in a spell."

**

Temenun pondered.
In Zelatar, the eruption continued uninterrupted, and Ancient Darkness consumed Azzagrat. Prince Orcus quickly retreated what remained of his armies, fortified himself against conjurations by the Hierophants at Jashat, and gave thought to the tide of unbeing which might reach him in half a millennium. Companies of Death Knights – together with squads of kelvezu – were dispatched to a hundred likely worlds in search of Graz’zt.

Pazuzu – now joined by vrocks, succubi and flocks of fiendish corvids – razed villages on the shores of lakes in the Wyrish hinterland, crucifying the inhabitants for his amusement; balors were busy tearing down Urgic monasteries.

Yeshe was preparing to bind the first chthonic, Gu-Kaama: the apple of Cheshne's eye; Soneillon, Queen of Throile. She had intimated that the monster Arhuz would follow. The Binder cursed silently as Prahar – who had struck a deal with the Anantam – made use of the circle she had erected to enslave several middle-ranking demomic magnates in quick succession, including Dhenu, a bull-faced fierce protector. Three more pavillons had been raised. The ugras had been dispatched defensively in the neighbourhood of the Temple and reinforced with squadrons of goristros and succubi. Prahar's unlikely choice to play a more cautious game had won him the backing of three cabals of blood-magi who were otherwise subject to the Wyrish Injunction.

Idyam, Rishih and Choach courted the Kesha-Dirghaa – theurges who formed the bulk of the ritual pool – but whose activities had been curtailed by Gihaaahia. The compound – impregnable as it was – had been further garrisoned with dozens of glabrezu. Choach had invoked massive screens over subject Thalassine cities, and called a general mobilization of magically compelled allies. Idyam surrounded himself with malign spirits.

Sibud – whose tools extended beyond magic – had unleashed a ferocious tide of vampirism upon Jashat and Iea which threatened to consume the cities, and was rapidly spreading to the surrounding countryside. The creatures sired by Sibud were bestial and voracious. Temenun also knew that the vampire was wooing key spellcasters to aid him in his storm of blood.

Naatha made envoys to unaligned powers to seduce or coerce them, and it was known that she had spoken with several Wyrish mages. It was also rumoured that she had fled from Mulissu's wrath when attempting to gain access to Fumaril. Rimilin, she shunned, for fear of being dominated.

Jahi plotted in the dark. Dhatri prepared for her procession.

**

**Princes, attend me.** Mostin issued the command again. Part of him regretted that it was already the final time; a far larger part was relieved that he would no longer be required to deal with their noisome feathers and light.

"Gather the lesser devas," Mostin instructed, shielding his eyes with his appendage. "You will aid the Ahma in his efforts: seek out demons on Wyre's periphery – outside of the circumscribed area, in case I need to remind you – and eliminate them. When the threat is expunged from Ardan, set a watch upon the monastery at Esoc. Six devas and an archon should be sufficient.

"Take your remaining minions, and harry the demons in the vicinity of the
Cheshnite temple at Jashat. Destroy as many as you can, but do not attempt to invest the main compound. You may continue this activity intermittently for the remaining duration of our compact; otherwise, resume your patrols of Wyre's borders. I leave the exact details to you."

"Mostin," Irel-Who-Smites spoke, fixing the Alienist with his gaze. "These are not the Ahma's explicit instructoins."

"Not exactly," Mostin admitted. "But I must be permitted a certain amount of leeway in interpreting his wishes. My celestial alliance will soon end, and this will be the last command I will give you; you are still bound to carry it out."

"I must strongly advise against the conjuration of fiends," Oraios said sternly.

"That is because you don't have all of the information," Mostin gave an insane grin. "Thank-you, gentlemen. That is all. Enjoy your eternity, and I will enjoy mine."

*

It was utterly dark in the summoning room, and the smell of incense lingered in the air. Mostin was intimately conscious of his surroundings, his augmented perception penetrating the blackness around him. Nearby, there was a void within a void.

"Thank-you for the courtesy of manifesting as yourself," Mostin said drily. He was weary: the effort of invoking a metagnostic inquiry followed by a wish and a superb planar binding had left him dizzy.

A girl appeared. "Do not presume," Soneillon said. "Is this how the Ahma has chosen to deal with the situation?"

"I want Pharamne's urn, Soneillon. You are its former mistress. You have information."

Soneillon raised an eyebrow. "So I have something you want? That makes for an altogether more interesting discussion."

Mostin sighed.

"I would prefer a more relaxed environment," Soneillon suggested.

"I do not feel my Goetic Dunce hat on my head."

"This circle won't hold me for more than a day, Mostin."

"I pray that this doesn't take that long," Mostin groaned.

"I would overwhelm you in a contest of magic," Soneillon smiled. "I sense your reservoir is almost depleted."

Mostin stared at her, "Maybe," he finally said. "Although I doubt it. And I think you might be reluctant to risk being unmade again. I believe I have the advantage."

"Unmade? Mostin, you have much to learn regarding the Truth."
"I am less interested in the truth, than the urn," Mostin was unfazed. "How far did your control over it extend?"

"Are we bargaining now? Good. I will answer that question if you answer mine."

Mostin gave a shrug. "Very well."

"The demiplanes which abut Throile were made with the urn. With it, I have drained oceans. Levelled mountain ranges. Generated worlds."

"That sounds delightful," Mostin nodded. "Did your cabal participate in your efforts to control the urn?"

"Why must you always be so functional, Mostin? Pragmatic. In any event, it is my turn to pose a question. You have been consorting with Seraphim: I smell it. The stakes are higher than I suspected. Which demons have the immortals bound already, Mostin?"


"Do you plan to conjure Graz'zt?"

"I believe it is my turn," Mostin gave a ghastly grin. "I will rephrase my last question: which of your cabal members were party to your use of the urn?"

"If I agree to answer, you must issue a sending for me immediately."

"That would depend upon to whom it should be delivered," Mostin said carefully, "and the exact wording of the message."

"To Chaya. The message is this: This is Mostin the Metagnostic. I have a message from Soneillon: Prepare for my return."

Mostin's eyes widened. "You are optimistic regarding the outcome of our exchange then?"

"I'm confident I'll walk out of this summoning room," Soneillon said lightly. "Do you agree to communicate this message?"

Mostin considered. "I agree to your stipulation, on the condition that I may pose an additional question."

Soneillon sighed. "Fine. The names are: Adyell, Helitihai, Orychne, Chaya, Lehirze; the principal members only."

"Thank-you. That wasn't so hard, was it? How quickly could you generate a demiplane – by which I mean how soon did it reach its full extent – and to what degree did you deplete your collective psychic resources?"

"I perceive at least two questions, Mostin. Which would you like me to answer?"

Mostin scowled. "The latter is more germane."

"Each of my handmaidens was emptied of power; I myself suffered no such debilitating effects." Implicit in the answer was the reminder: I am chthonic. You would do well to remember it.
Mostin paused to consider, swiftly making a series of magical calculations in his mind.

"The sending, Mostin?" Soneillon raised an eyebrow.

Grudgingly, Mostin retrieved his stone and issued the message.

"What are you planning, Mostin?"

"Now that information would involve a year of servitude."

Soneillon smiled innocently. "Let me reverse the question. What is a year of my submission to you worth?"

Mostin gawked. "You cannot be serious."

"I am deadly serious, Mostin. What is access to my reservoir worth to you?"

Mostin rocked back and forth on his heels. "A lot," he finally conceded. *Especially if it means I can snub Rimilin. What do you want?"

"Give me Graz'zt, Mostin. Of all creatures which hate him, I despise him the most."

Mostin invoked a *moment of prescience*.

"You are also anxious to avoid a compact with Yeshe," the Alienist observed drily, "whose terms might be more demanding than mine. No, Soneillon. I think that to have Prince Graz'zt delivered as a gift – to do with as one will – that is worth more than a year of thralldom to me."

"And to Rimilin? What might my submission be worth to him?" Soneillon asked pointedly.

"Might I remind you that it is my thaumaturgic circle which holds you, not Rimilin's?"

Soneillon stretched lazily. "You could secure my confinement, Mostin. You could invest a great deal of energy in binding me to your will. It is my guess that you don't want to, however, as your limited resources are better deployed elsewhere."

"True. But I am stubborn, and I will not be foiled; even against my better judgment I would coerce you, just to make the point. Give me one year of service, and freely share all knowledge that you have of the urn. Give me names of the chthonics. Give me your reservoir. And I will deliver Graz'zt to you within a week."

"Out of generosity, and for aesthetic reasons, I will extend the bargain to a year and a day, Mostin. But I will consider the pact to have begun when he is mine."

"Which leaves us an uncomfortable honor period," Mostin scowled. "Might I suggest a less demanding contract to tide us over, until the main agreement takes effect?"

"State your terms," Soneillon breathed.
"You will protect me with your ecstasy of negation. You will aid me in retrieving Murmuur’s tower from Afqithan."

"These are no small tasks, Mostin..."

"I will give you Adyell."

Soneillon smiled graciously. "Thank-you, Mostin. Adyell will be a useful asset."

"You would exact no vengeance?" Mostin seemed surprised.

"No, Mostin. I can spare none."

**

In Jashat, Yeshe fumed. The ritual had been ineffective, despite her prognostications to the contrary. Fate had shifted course whimsically. She stormed from the circle, and confronted Temenun in the sanctum.

"I am thwarted. Did you foresee this?" She barked the question at him.

"No," Temenun purred.

"Do you have an explanation?"

"Our enemy has superior prolepsis." The Tiger remained calm.

"Mostin." Yeshe said. "Sibud must annihilate him."

"Feel free to argue that point with your Brother," Temenun replied. "My focus lies elsewhere. Yeshe, I will demonstrate the art of binding to you."

*

Yeshe watched from her tower and chewed her lip thoughtfully.

Below in the courtyard, within the circle and near it, demons were gathered. In four hours, Temenun had conjured twenty mariliths. Robed in purple and black and bearing his iron coronet upon his brow, he had foregone the usual niceties of compacting the demons, and simply dominated them all. Only now, he tapped his reservoir and spoke a powerful summons.

A void which burned – one of the kin of Carasch – erupted onto the edge of being. It emanated terrible power. Seconds later, another manifested.

Yeshe's eyes narrowed. Temenun knew primeval magic, and remembered names forgotten by all others.

He raised his hand and wove a dream rapidly. Abruptly, the courtyard was empty.

Yeshe paced briefly, before descending into the deep caverns below the compound. Here most of the Cheshnite forces were marshalling: demons conjured by the favored souls of the Naganam; desert-dwelling spirits of ill temper; companies of half-giants in enamelled armor, drawn through
Within an unlit chapel filled with death, Yeshe approached Visuit, who sat in meditation amongst the corpses.

Yeshe bowed. "The Tiger-who-Waits has pounced. He has had some prescience, which he has not shared."

"The Mouthpiece has not approached me," Visuit growled.

"Leave Anumid to me," Yeshe replied. "You'll get your war by nightfall."

* 

In the early morning – after the Ahma and his party had passed through a tree into Trempa – Temenun struck the Wyrish encampment. While he himself remained in Dream, the Tiger’s demons arrived a furlong distant from the Sela’s tent.

A barrage of dispelling magic followed from the chthonics; zones of forbiddance crumpled. Unholy auras flickered on, and blade barriers ripped through unwary Temple troops.

As Urqual sat in Saizhan, observing thought pass through Mind, he was aware that nearby Templars moved; his empty eyes followed them as though he watched them.

There was a sound like a roaring hurricane.

And death.

POST 19: DEMONSTRATING THE PROPHETIC ADVANTAGE

Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 17th November 2008, 06:59 PM

An hour before dawn, Nwm roused Eadric from prayer.

"Gather your Saints," he told him.

The air was chill. Esquires of the temple clad the Ahma in his armour and girt him with his sword. Adepts invoked protective magicks upon him.

The Saints assembled. The Preceptor instructed them all in a brief rite, and gathered their energy into him, staggering from its frequency. So bright. So unearthly. So much of it. It spilled out of him, incinerating trees in the vicinity and transporting their essence to the Blessed Plain.

Nwm discarnated and soared upwards on a torrent of light, all the while gazing down upon Wyre. Behind him, the Sun hung amid the Void. Warm. Beckoning. He turned to face it. It illuminated billions of devas.

Nwm swallowed.
He turned back, and his sight ranged across Trempa, quickly locating the disturbance which he knew to be Pazuzu and his troupe; violent perturbations in the otherwise harmonious whole. He brushed aside the Prince's screen and pinpointed him exactly.

Nwm rematerialized. "I have him. I can open a tree nearby."

Eadric nodded. "Then please do. But not too near. I'd rather not be thrown straight into combat."

Quickly, they made their preparations.

Tahl issued a sending, and Eadric summoned Ortwine. A brief remote conversation with Mostin ensued.

[Eadric]: We're preparing to strike Pazuzu.

[Mostin]: I have instructed the Episemes to purge demons outside of Wyre, but I was otherwise less than specific.

[Eadric]: They can be recalled if a particular task awaits them.

[Mostin]: Unfortunately not. I am investigating other avenues.

[Eadric]: Ah. Yes. Your glorious return to Goetia.

[Mostin]: The potential of that avenue is also exhausted.

[Eadric]: Your allegiances are more fleeting than those of Ortwine!

[Mostin]: But far more effective. I am returning to Afqithan in order to secure my new tower.

[Eadric]: You have penetrated its mysteries, then?

[Mostin]: The tower is indestructible, impervious to scrying and astral attack, may plane shift at the whim of the one who controls it, and may spin a gate to each and every Hell. It is opened by a password known to but a handful of devils. Its exterior demonstrates an extreme mutability of appearance, at the owner's discretion. Its interior is extradimensional and opulent. One has to admire the antique Infernal aesthetic.

[Eadric]: And your manse?

[Mostin]: I must have a summer retreat!

[Eadric]: You have acquired the passwords?

[Mostin]: From the devil Sekabin. And knowledge of the sigils to open the gates. I didn't even need to resort to torment; he seemed quite willing to impart the information. I imagine his superiors simply wish to see the tower active again; it is inert in Afqithan. I dismissed him forthwith; I have no desire for further enmity with Hell.

[Eadric]: Fear not. I'm sure Dis has forgiven you.

[Mostin]: You are unusually droll today.
[Eadric]: The Adversary is moving, Mostin. He is a player you cannot outclass. Be wary. How did he appear to you?

[Mostin]: !

[Eadric]: Well?

[Mostin]: Hmph. So that was he. Enigmatic. A tanned youth, with unruly black curls. Lean of frame. Suave, but somewhat understated. For Ego Incarnate, he seemed very restrained. My initial impressions were largely favorable.

[Eadric]: !?

[Mostin]: He was less overbearing than certain celestials of my recent acquaintance.

[Eadric]: And as Evil Incarnate?

[Mostin]: That question has no meaning. Our definitions of Evil are not altogether congruent in this regard. He is no mere devils, Eadric. He is the Adversary. His plan is hidden to all but himself and your glowing despot, of whom he is a function in any case: [display = complex, meaningless formula].

[Eadric]: Ahh.

[Mostin]: I do not expect you to understand the proof.

[Eadric]: That is fortunate.

[Mostin]: These minor infinities are of no particular concern to me, in any case.

[Eadric]: What else?

[Mostin]: I will use Soneillon's reservoir to allow me to bind Graz'zt in three days. Other mages have expressed an interest in aiding me.

[Eadric]: This egomaniacal nonsense again?

[Mostin]: Apparently my taste for vendetta runs deeper than yours, Ahma. He has wounded me deep, more than once. I am a wizard with a reputation to maintain: I do not forget a slight.

[Eadric]: Touché, Mostin. That I cannot deny you.

Abruptly, Ortwine issued from a shadowy portal. She seemed unusually pensive.

"Is the happy band ready?" Mesikammi asked with apparent innocence. Behind her there was a huge confusion of Temple troops; they were parting to allow the progress of five enormous golden boars. The ground shook as they approached.

Yet more gods, Ortwine observed silently.

**
Two Saints, four Talions, eleven Penitents, Mesikammi, five boars, Ortwine, and Nwm accompanied Eadric in his attack upon Pazuzu and his troupe. Many of the templar grandees – past and present – were riding celestial griffons of prodigious size. Ortwine veiled them all. Transformed into an unkindness of ravens, their approach was unnoticed; appearing to hug the ground, they passed below the mobs of fiendish crows which wheeled in the sky over Pazuzu's train. The Ahma felt distinctly uneasy at the sidhe's burgeoning power.

They descended on the demons, who were busy levelling a quaint Trempan village and visiting grotesque horrors upon its inhabitants. Nearby, a large group of ushabam conjurers gathered. Some were making sacrifices; some were conjuring more demons; some raved, or experienced religious ecstasies.

Nwm evoked a powerful wind which suddenly propelled them toward the demon prince's position; as they plunged, one of the balors noted them with its true seeing and gave telepathic warning. Saint Tahl, Tuan Muat and Moda the Exorcist simultaneously dropped dimensional locks centered on Pazuzu.

Ortwine's glamour evaporated, and the sidhe pounced, vorpal sword in hand. Heedless was screeching in telepathic jubilation as it bit home; the Ahma raised Lukarn and smote Pazuzu with all his power. Ichor sprayed, and the demon reeled. Talions and penitents descended on balors and nalfeshnees. Five-ton boars trampled through vrocks like they were grass.

Ortwine moved faster than thought and was already about the demon prince again, effortlessly slicing in a perfectly executed pattern.

[Mostin]: I guess you are engaging Pazuzu's force?

[Eadric]: This may not be the best time, Mostin.

The dimensional locks hadn't contained the arch-fiend. The Prince of the Lower Aerial Kingdoms dilated time, vanished, instantly reappeared a quarter of a mile above, and unleashed a tempest of eldritch power centered on the Ahma; a purple lightning penetrated everything. Griffons, vrocks, and Penitents perished. Eadric was scarred and blasted. Otwine somehow avoided the storm.

The few remaining vrocks launched themselves into the air. Mesikammi whistled. The boars – smoking but otherwise unfazed by the violet discharge – turned towards the gathered thaumaturges, and charged.

[Mostin]: Nonsense. A little multitasking is no great ordeal. Your strike is premature. You...

[Eadric]: Later, Mostin.

Nwm struck Pazuzu with a peal of thunder accompanied by an explosion of green fire.

Two more gates opened; two more balors manifested. Several of the ushabam were already taking to flight, speaking words of recall.

Eadric groaned. This had to stop. He leapt forward thirty yards and struck, instantly felling one the demons; the explosion flung him backwards and burned him through his armour.

[Mostin] (Frustrated): I can't see what's going on! What's happening?
[Eadric] (Resigned): I hate it when they blow up. These priests must be eliminated before the numbers of demons can be swollen further. Where are you, anyway?

[Mostin]: At home. Preparing to depart. I have been monitoring the activities of celestials; they have destroyed three balors. Unfortunately, those remaining have fled to join Pazuzu.

[Eadric]: I had noticed.

Two armored balors now assailed Saint Tahl the Incorruptible. He weathered their blows and pronounced a dictum, instantly banishing one of them to the Abyss. The other, uncowed, uttered blasphemy in retort. Tahl was unscathed, but two of the Penitents combusted and vanished.

Outside of the dimensional lock, two more gates opened; two more balors appeared. The boars thundered into the remaining ushabam, quickly trampling them to death.

Five balors and Pazuzu now remained.

Ortwine reappraised the situation in an instant. She turned her mind and quickly dominated the demon closest to Eadric; two of the others, she knew already, were protected by mind blanking rings. Straightaway, she instructed it to teleport and attack Pazuzu.

Pazuzu, climbing rapidly beyond range, issued a thin wail which made the Ahma’s blood curdle. Space began to bubble and warp in the demon prince’s vicinity. In response, Mesikammi began to cast another spell.

Eadric bounded forwards again, this time pronouncing a holy word, simultaneously expelling and obliterating the two most recently arrived demons. Two more holy words, spoken by Tahl and Moda, rang across the wreck of the village. The demons were being driven away.

Nwm, considering whether to unleash a terrible necromancy upon Pazuzu, suddenly received a communication from Daunton the Diviner. He paused, made a swift judgment, stepped into a tree, and vanished.

Eadric’s jaw dropped.

[Mostin]: What now?

[Eadric]: If you happen across Nwm, send him in this direction.

But the Preceptor’s appraisal of the situation had been accurate; the two remaining demons vanished. Pazuzu also elected to slip away, but not before an immense, grizzled balor had appeared below him.

Will they never stop, the Ahma was exasperated. He healed himself, steeled himself, and prepared for the onrush.

A tide of blasphemy washed over him, leaving him momentarily senseless; his wards protected him. Ortwine flung the dominated demon against the newcomer, and with a battered Rede, prosecuted a well-coordinated aerial attack at speed.
An air monolith, conjured by Mesikammi, encompassed the balor and forced it to the ground. Its whip and blade flailed ineffectively, as the boars thundered into it. Their tusks ripped it open; there was another explosion; their hooves trampled its remains into the steaming mire of ichor.

Eadric glanced around: smoke; entrails; blood. Six penitents and two Talions – including Rede, caught in the final explosion – had fallen. He, Tahl, Moda, Tarpion and Tuan Muat were blasted in varying degrees. Ortwine was largely unscathed; Mesikammi, descending from the sky had escaped all injury.

The Ahma walked to the mangled wreck of Rede's corpse, removed a gauntlet, and touched the erstwhile Grand Master upon the forehead, instantly resurrecting him. Rede arose grimly.

_You don't get off that easily_, Eadric thought. The others might be returned at a later time, if he needed them. Nervously, he looked toward the shamaness. The elemental hung in the sky above her; ancient boar-spirits attended her.

Abyssal slime evaporated as the area was hallowed by Saint Moda. Ortwine moved purposefully through the remains of the fallen, looking for items to plunder.

Eadric approached the nearest beast: nine feet at the shoulder and covered with a fur which glistened like gold. Whatever wounds it had received, they had already healed.

He abased himself. "Thank-you."

Mesikammi clapped. "Yes. Good. Very respectful. Three miracles I had to work to wake them. The Wyrish Royal House are an ancient lineage; they should look more to their roots."

The beast snorted.

**

The camp was in chaos.

The chthonics uttered _blasphemies_ which caused even the most devout to reel in shock, and obliterated less robust souls. Mariliths tore into squadrons of Temple troops who were hastily attempting to interpose themselves between the fiends and the most direct line to the Sela's tent.

Saint Kustus – who had been slain by demons some two hundred years previously – took stock and rapidly gauged the level of the threat.

_Those_. The Ahma had warned him about them.

The attack was well-timed, as only minutes before the Ahma had departed with many of the more potent warriors within the Temple ranks. Kustus knew that it was a direct probe, to make a practical test of the defenses around the Sela and to demonstrate a prophetic advantage. Whoever had launched the attack had avoided the Aethers altogether and had out-dreamed the planetars which had been set to intercept any oneiric assault.
Still, thirty-six concentric rings of forbiddance surrounded the Sela's tabernacle and a full celestial company was waiting in proximity; the Saints and the adepts had not been idle, and had covenanted with many devas within the host. A huge net of blasting glyphs and symbols encompassed the camp.

Kustus immediately summoned his celestial destrier and charged into the fray.

Closer to the impact point, Wurz was inciting New Temple zealots into a frenzy. Holy fire surrounded them. Saint Anaqiss the Apostate engaged the demons with his mace, grown to twice his height and wearing a crown of glory.

As Brey wind-walked beyond the zone of forbiddance, half of the celestials moved in ethereal tandem with him.


"Bring down the chthonics," he instructed them.

**

Daunton stood on the balcony of his suite at Prince Tagur's fortified palace at Gibilrazen, and gazed skywards. He had remained silent for days. His divinations preoccupied him, and he avoided any situation which might compromise his position with regard to the Injunction: that meant shunning anyone with a political interest, and that entailed everyone at present.

Clouds were beginning to gather. Greys and ochres; beyond lay hints of vermillion. A wind was rising.

Unnatural, he knew immediately. Daunton's worst fear gripped him, and he invoked prescience. His magical perceptions soared.

It was the storm of blood.

What to do? His mind reached out.

_Nwm: Daunton. The storm of blood is coming._

_How long?

_Not long._

_Sh*t. Your timing couldn’t be worse._

_Or Sibud's better._

Daunton's stomach turned as he watched the quickening clouds. He felt old and weary; the twists and turns of the world – and the powers which were now manifesting – were beyond his capacity to anticipate, much less deal with. He leaned heavily on his staff for a moment, and turned to reenter his apartments.

_She_ was standing directly behind him, silent, and their eyes met with barely eighteen inches between them. Her crimson hair stirred in the breeze and brushed his face, the scent of imminent death filled his nostrils.
He froze and tried to speak, but no sound issued from his mouth. No magic lay on him, but terror overcame him.

The Enforcer smiled. She seemed almost benign; a fact which troubled the archmage more than her usual overt malice.

"I have committed no violation," Daunton finally said, shaking. "But I need to know where my limits lie. Nwm will come here soon; may I aid him?"

"You are being assailed," Gihaahia said in a matter-of-fact way. "You may take reasonable precautions to counteract the threat. But you lack the power to foil this spell."

She reached out towards him, and Dauton barely resisted the urge to vomit and cower.

The Infernal touched his forehead with a burning palm, and the diviner's mind twisted as though suddenly caught in a vice. Reality altered. One of his highest valences vanished and was immediately replaced by a hitherto unknown configuration.

"I am the Claviger also," the Enforcer breathed. "I am entrusted with the articles, and the protection of the Wyrish Collegium. You are its president; demonstrate your authority."

She vanished.

Dauton, still shaking, examined the dweomer. Curiously, the language was utterly familiar to him, as though he himself might have contrived it. He found himself wondering if it had somehow been appropriated from a future iteration of himself.

With care and effort, he spoke the words and gestured, for the first time invoking *Daunton's Instant Convocation*.

Within moments, eleven other mages – including Jalael, Waide and Tozinak – stood in close proximity to him. As many had declined the invitation, and neither Mostin nor Rimilin had answered.

The Hag scowled. "Explain yourself, Daunton."

"It would seem I have been empowered," Daunton observed. "Note the clouds above."

Tozinak, manifesting as an ugly mannikin, looked upwards at the sky and wailed.

Creq looked aghast. "Do you have some means to counteract this Daunton, or did you simply bring us all here to die?"

Nwm the Preceptor emerged from an ornamental lime tree in the courtyard below, and leaped up onto the balcony.

"We have a minute yet," he sighed in relief. "Open your reservoirs to me."

A chorus of objections began.

"All of you!" Nwm screeched.
For a second time that same day, Nwm channeled the power of magic alien to his understanding, and it caused him discomfort. His sensitivity to such things, he noted wryly as he wrought the spell, had increased substantially.

Voices mumbled in his head. Formulae floated past his vision, distracting him. He focussed, and his perception became titanic; coterminous with the extent of the storm, which writhed in his conscious mind like an ungraspable idea.

He caught it, stilled it, snuffed it out. There was no struggle.

Suddenly, the sky was clear. The balcony was bathed in warm sunlight.

"I am spent," Nwm muttered.

The wizards were busy congratulating themselves on their ingenuity.

**

Mostin ignored Dauton's appeal; his prescience had already alerted him to the outcome.

Now he stood on his porch, dressed for travel. His higher valences were crammed with powerful spells which jostled with one another for space. His intellect was amplified to an improbable size. He had entrusted a number of scrolls to Orolde and Mei, in the event that the manse was attacked in his absence. Sho – in the company of several other wizards of dubious repute – had entrenched herself in the astral hold, which she had magically fortified.

"Remove the comfortable retreat to another location," Mostin intoned. "Take it deep into Nizkur forest, but beyond the bounds of the Injunction. Employ your best obfuscatory magicks; always have a teleport on hand: these are the golden rules of survival. Do not interfere with the symbols of insanity. Refrain from thaumaturgies beyond your certain ability to control.

"Be wary of the local feys, they are ancient and cunning; especially the trolls. Pay no heed to Hlioth's bluster if confronted with it; she is not the only witch living in Nizkur, merely the loudest. Hew no living wood. I will contact you in due course."

Mostin made a final adjustment to his hat and examined his plans for flaws. In dealing with Soneillon, the Alienist had protected himself as best he could from the Arcane Injunction. He made no formal compact; she would perform specific services only when conjured. As a dreamer, or a chthonic, or both, he already knew that she could slip under the Celestial Interdict and manifest freely within the World of Men. A measure of trust was required in their arrangement: Soneillon's desire to exact pain upon Graz'zt was the glue which bound it. The alternative – making a Goetic pact with a clause which required that Soneillon did not trespass within Wyre – seemed even more dubious to the Alienist, as culpability might be his were she to violate it.

He had conjured the devil Sekabin and the succubus Adyell – Soneillon's rebellious lieutenant – with superior planar bindings. Sekabin, he interrogated. Adyell, he released immediately from his service, and delivered to the demon queen. Soneillon quickly subdued her former protégé to her will, and returned her to Throile as her agent. Intelligence began to flow to Mostin regarding the current
state of demonic politics.

Now she corporeated on the porch of the manse, appearing as a slender girl dressed in austere black; her child-like face conveyed gravity and seriousness.

Mostin considered the strategy of her façade.

"Carasch has already ascended to the Plain of Infinite Portals," Soneillon smiled. "He is close now. Two steps away. Blackness sweeps through the upper Abyss, but the Ice Waste remains unmolested. Curious, given the fact that most of Azzagrat's nobility have chosen exile there."

"The speed of this phenomenon is disturbing."

"Graz'zt has uncapped his Gate Hall."

"Is that all?"

"Temenun struck the Oronthonist command and retreated to Dream," Soneillon replied. "He has exhausted himself and must rest; he is vulnerable to the other immortals until he regains his strength. He will hide for a while. He is wise."

Mostin sighed and shrugged. There was nothing he could do about it.

Augmented by her ecstasy of negation, the Alienist plane shifted with Soneillon to Afqithan.

**

Yeshe – warned of Mostin's intentions through a dark haruspicy performed on a living subject – had acted immediately, and with the recklessness she often occasioned to display at such critical junctures.

She gated the ugra called Angula.

The Fierce Protector condescended to appear, armor-clad and bearing a shield of unblazoned darkness. His eyes were slits of green fire; his visage was beautiful, but upon it aeons of cruelty were etched. He regarded her coolly. Yeshe looked up at him, undaunted.

"Supplication is customary, Binder," Angula smiled, "If I am to remain unbound." He drew his brand, and placed it at Yeshe's neck. Her skin smoked as the acid from the blade burned her.

"I require nothing," Yeshe maintained a steady gaze. "You may do as you will. I will conjure others, if you require it."

Angula scowled. She was ancient and potent, this one; coercion would not be possible. Still, a little humility might become her.

Yeshe recognized his mood, and gave a nod which might be interpreted as either cursory or deferential.

Angula recited a long list of names, each with many syllables. "First bring me the steed Tandava. We will consider all debts payed."
Yeshe opened another gate, through which a monstrous cauchemar careened.

"One of the Wyrish Wizards is preparing a cabal to bind you," Yeshe said drily. "Baramh and Dhenu are already abroad. The gates of the Temple open at midnight, and Dhatri's procession begins: Anumid the Mouthpiece has ordained it. Will you ride with Visuit?"

Angula mounted Tandava and smiled wickedly. "Perhaps, for a while."

**

That should have been tigresses, Prince Tagur mused as he attempted to rally the Household Knights of Morne.

He had no idea how many there were altogether. The terror visited on those within the palace in the last hour had been unrelenting; appearing from the shadows, they slew and vanished, and their butchery seemed utterly indiscriminate. Their strike was not pre-emptive; they acted in retaliation to one of their own being discovered. An error on their part, or a betrayal.

Now, in a small banquet chamber of the great castle, one Naztharune confronted sixty heavily armed Wyrish aristocrats, including knights of renown from the king's hearthguard. She moved with incredible speed; appearing, slitting a throat, and vanishing again. The tigress toyed with them masterfully, delighting in the slaughter; twice, she moved past Tagur and brushed his cheek before gutting one who stood close to him. His rapier had flashed out, but she was too fast.

Tagur hurled a glass vial upon the marble floor, and brilliant daylight illuminated the hall.

For a split second, she was revealed: a sleek black hunting cat, to which tendrils of shadowy mist clung.

She hissed and became invisible. For a while, matters worsened considerably.

Finally, somehow, they grappled her and pinned her down. Six burly knights could barely contain her slippery contortions.

She purred. "I am resigned to my death; are you to yours?"

Tagur squinted. A stiffening breeze outside had suddenly grown strong. Shutters strained, broke, and wind rushed in. A great agony ensued.

Prince Tagur screamed, as a fine mist of blood – his own – erupted from his skin and was carried away. Other screams rose all around him. Some cowered, but there was nowhere to hide, nowhere which granted surcease; the wind penetrated everything. Some fled from the chamber, the most robust running as far as the courtyard or the cellars before they succumbed.

The scene was repeated across all of Morne, and the countryside around. Every living creature within twenty miles died.

Sibud had invoked a second storm of blood.
Irel, who Smites, beat his wings with slow grace, resting in the skies above Jashat. At an altitude of five miles, the Aethers were quiet. He cast his celestial gaze in a great arc; his eyes penetrated everything.

Far to the north, horror was unfolding; he could do nothing to prevent it. Westward, locked in its shining bubble, Fumaril endured.

Below, closer to the north and east and south, a rotten plague of blackness centered on the great Temple of Cheshne stretched. Pyres smouldered and blood congealed. The southern cities sat beneath brooding clouds, their leaders dominated or possessed, their legions succumbing to vampirism, lycanthropy, or all manner of similar afflictions. Unquiet spirits prowled the land.

He communed.

[Irel]: I would still beseech intercession.

[Enitharmon]: And it would still be denied.

[Irel]: I beg of you, Marshal.

[Enitharmon]: And it is still denied. But your compassion magnifies. You are much loved. Know this always.

Irel signalled to the other celestials. They would start at the periphery. They wreathed themselves in holy fire and descended upon one of the more remote pavillions.

Before they could begin their assault, time slowed to a halt. Within arm's reach of Irel, a youth appeared in the sky. He munched casually on an apple. Seeming to notice the archon Prince Hemah, he gave a look of mock surprise.

"Why, you remind me so much of my own herald," he smiled. "So, before you proceed, I thought I'd offer you a different perspective. Relax. Don't feel rushed or compromised; we have as much time as we need for you to understand my central argument."

POST 20: REVERSAL

Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 27th November 2008, 05:32 AM

Mostin stood with Queen Soneillon in the dusk of Afqithan. The demoness was subdued; whether reflecting on the site of her prior demise, or merely hatching some other plot, Mostin could not tell. Around them, Faerie balked at their presence; fortunately, the local sidhe-lord was occupied elsewhere.

Before them, Murmuur's tower reared; about it, a vast umbral drake slowly slithered, its eyes penetrating the shadows nearby. The Alienist – shrouded to all perception – eyed it suspiciously. The thing was an atavism; a corpse tearer
imbued with darkness and evil. Against any but the most potent magicks, it was utterly immune.

Mostin had determined to keep it. He quickly dominated it and commanded it to assume a less imposing size; it became a seven-foot wyrmling which coiled itself neatly at the base of the tower. Mostin approached, giving a sidelong glance to the linnorm, before looking at the structure's circumference.

Within the black outer face of the wall – smoother and stronger than cut diamond – faint traceries of dormant gates were visible, accessible to those who knew the correct combinations of syllables and glyphs. The tower rose hundreds of feet above him, and Mostin gazed in wonder; its perfect magical geometry, he knew, spoke of symmetries accurate to the width of an atom. This was its true shape, if such it possessed; Murmuur's tower was an artifact of deception, as well as war.

The Alienist ran his appendage over the outside at a height of five feet, and whispered powerful words; a small door appeared, between the portals to Maladomini and Caïna. It opened soundlessly; beyond, a great reception hall stretched. The walls were panelled with ebony; couches were festooned with plush silks and velvets. Great sconces burned ruddily. Mostin stopped momentarily.

"There may still be menial devils present," he said in a low voice. "They will not be hostile; they are bound to the service of the tower, and may not leave it. Please do not annihilate them."

They continued. Soneillon paused by the entrance: bound in a temporal stasis, likely as a decoration, a solar stood in a striking pose, its sword raised as though ready to decapitate a foe of similar stature.

Mostin shivered and walked forward into the centre of the space, and slowly they began their exploration. Chamber upon chamber. Balcony upon balcony. Hall upon hall. The décor ranged from the austere to the fantastic; Mostin found himself generally agreeable to the various modes and themes present. Occasionally, spined devils would flap past, occupied with sundry tasks.

After an hour, when he had charted over two hundred rooms, including parlours, offices, torture chambers, conservatories, drawing rooms and private apartments, Mostin finally found his way to the conference hall where the Infernal Duke Murmuur had once held court.

With his ego amplified by Soneillon's magic, Mostin sat on a carved ivory chair at the head of a long table. Murmuur's ducal throne, but also – in a manner of speaking – the helm by which the tower was steered.

He wrestled with it briefly, before asserting his will and attuning the tower's resonances to himself.

With a passing thought, Mostin translated the entire edifice and its contents to the borders of Wyre where his manse had once stood. He disguised it as a rustic, overgrown keep of the late Borchian period.

**

Ortwine brandished Heedless lazily. Ichor covered her; her eyes blazed with an
old greed. In her left hand, she clutched a soft leather case containing a dozen black candles of invocation, won from the corpses of the Ushabam in the ruin of the Trempan village. Nearby, a dominated balor brooded like a black stormcloud, its skin intermittently flaring. Reverberations in the Green impinged upon the sidhe’s mind; she tried to shake them off, but to no avail.

As he meditated amidst the carnage, Eadric felt a low vibration. An archon, He’el, appeared before him, wordlessly communicating.

[He'el]: Hail, Ahma. Much evil transpires. Three storms of blood have been unleashed. The Adversary is abroad. The Sela is assailed; Sercion supplicates you.

Eadric rose immediately, addressing Tahl and Moda. "Get to the encampment as fast as you can."

The Ahma invoked a holy aura, drew Lukarn, and retrieved from beneath his breastplate a necklace upon which clay images of various adepts hung. He crushed a tiny icon of Sercion between his thumb and forefinger.

Instantly, he was transported into a nightmare.

Heaps of Templars and devas lay about him, their faces contorted in expressions of agony; blasphemies had slain them. Thirty yards away loomed two great shapes of burning void, emanating death. Only the Saints and the doughtiest of the celestials could withstand them. Kustus, Wurz and Anaqiss endured a storm of magic and blows. Sercion lay close by, stunned but still breathing.

Immediately aware of the presence of the Ahma, the chthonics turned their attention to him.

Eadric leapt at them.

**

Teppu scowled at the sky: clouds gathered above him. He waved his hand dismissively. A calm, clear morning reasserted itself.

Around him, Nizkur brooded and waited. The sprite looked into a pool of water, inspecting his appearance, and adjusted an eyebrow minutely. New tenants had taken up residence in an elm-grove situated in a deep vale some thirty miles away: a sprite and a simulacrum who made a peculiar couple. He would pay a visit and greet them formally, before Nodri – an ancient redcap who dwelled nearby – began to make mischief on them.

Teppu made his way through veils and glamours into a world which was both that and the other, and arrived before Nehael, who sat contemplating a leaf beneath the primeval Tree.

"Thank-you for dealing with the storm," she said. "I would've gotten to it."

"The vampire has made a statement of intent, even if he knew it was doomed to fail," Teppu observed. "I am planning on visiting Mostin's apprentices, who have commandeered an obscure nook of the forest. I've asked Hlioth not to threaten them."
Nehael raised an eyebrow. "Somehow I suspect your motives."

"They present an interesting conundrum," Teppu grinned. "One is a fey and the other lacks a persona entirely."

Nehael nodded. "Mostin was wise to secret them within Nizkur; there is nowhere now more secure."

"He takes great efforts to protect them."

"His actions are not always selfish," Nehael smiled. "Mostin possesses a peculiar loyalty."

"And you?" Teppu inquired. "Did your phyllomancy resolve your dilemma?"

"In a manner of speaking," Nehael sighed. "I feel the need to go and look at the Sun for a while."

"Mind your eyes," Teppu said wryly.

**

To an outside observer – one who could observe invisible, mind blanked celestials at any rate – the descent of Irel, Shokad, Hemah and Oraios and the two dozen devas who accompanied them would have made a magnificent spectacle.

Wings folded, plummeting, with swords drawn and auras blazing, their vibration was fundamentally changed at a height of around two hundred feet; a great fume of smoke arouse around them, ruddy fire kindled, and their aspect became terrible.

The conversation which had elapsed between the exalted celestials and the olive-skinned youth had taken the merest fraction of a second to transpire in the World of Men. In the demiplane which the Adversary had generated around the company, any length of time may have elapsed. Patient beyond all measure, perhaps the Nameless Fiend – after aeons of debate – finally swayed the four celestial princes with his relentless logic. Or he might, after a century, have become bored and simply coerced them to his irresistible Will.

In any event, before their attack began, the angels might be said to have become devils, although in fact their status was rather more ambiguous; as yet fully undescended, they retained all their beauty and nobility. A dark choir, their evil was fresh as virgin snow. The Adversary endowed them, and wrought about them wards of surpassing potency.

But they were still pactbonded with Mostin, and three weeks had yet to to pass before their agreement expired. Their descent continued, and they crashed like meteors through the apex of a ziggurat; an explosion of rubble accompanied their entrance into the chamber below. Irel raised his mace and smote the retainers of the demon Munkir, exulting in his awareness, his power, his lust for battle. His spirit soared.

*I am free,* he knew. And, if thereafter, he were condemned to an eternity of torture, he knew that for that one moment – to experience it in its fullness – it
would still be worth it. He was.

**

First came swarms of insects and vermin, sicknesses and poisonings.

At midnight, a plague of shadows and spectres then heralded Dhatri's procession from the Temple of Cheshne at Jashat. In the van, Visuit led a group of godlings, demonic nobility, undead knights, and an immense cavalry of half-giants from the far South; hideous beasts of every stripe followed. In the main battle, Dhatri's vast bulk was hauled in a great palanquin, and numberless ghasts surrounded her. A steady stream of sacrifice was brought to her; her hunger remained insatiable.

As she passed the threshold of the Temple, a gloom enshrouded the land. From Galda to northern Pandicule – encompassing the entire Thalassine region including Fumaril – all light was suddenly extinguished. The spell – the Pall of Dhatri – was far more potent than any that had yet been wrought: Anumid had commanded each of the five cabals of the Anantam and all of the Kesha-Dirghaa to participate. Within the darkness, creatures otherwise vulnerable to daylight might roam.

The company turned northeast, toward Thond and Jompa, once bustling towns but now living hells for the mortals who still abode there: these were the closest source of food for Dhatri.

Soon afterwards, Sibud – who also hungered – veiled himself with magic and flew out into the shadows.

**

They were already at Rimilin's doors, by the time that the Acolyte of the Skin perceived them; a function of his abode, which acted as an extension of his own consciousness in that regard. Eight demons – mariliths and succubi, but including a kelvezu assassin of high standing – riding great nightmares. To mundane perception, they had assumed the form of gallant knights; Rimilin found it curious that they persisted in the guise: surely they knew who they were dealing with?

"Where is Graz'zt?" Rimilin's voice echoed in the stones at the base of the tower. "Is he skulking nearby, or does he absent himself out of shyness?"

Megual dismounted. "The Prince has other debts to settle, of greater enormity. May we speak?"

"And so we are," the disembodied voice replied drily. "You will excuse me if I am reluctant to allow you ingress; I am generally suspicious of kelvezu. And your reputation precedes you, Megual. What message are you here to convey? If a threat, then begone; if I hear it I will quickly grow tired and blast you all. If a bribe, then proceed; I am eminently corruptible."

Megual smiled. "I wish for news: of Mostin the Metagnostic, Eadric of Deorham, the demoness Sonellon, and the plot to conjure Graz'zt. You may consider yourself pardoned in complicity, if of such you are guilty, if you render useful
information. Graz’zt will reward you richly."

There was a brief silence, as Rimilin considered his response.

He manifested before Megual, bearing a rod of ivory bound with steel. Impenetrable wards surrounded him. "In fact, you hold no fear for me; we should be clear on that count, before we continue. Tell Graz’zt that we will speak more on this matter when he renders Pharamne's urn to me. If my price seems outrageous, tell him to find another informant. Tell him also that Ilistet is mine, now; I have broken her to my will: there will be no negotiation on this point. If you or he – with his tawdry band – wish to assail me, feel free to try, but in all conscience I must advise you against such a course of action. You may go now."

Megual remained expressionless. If they attacked, Rimilin would quickly dominate one or more of them; no good would come of that. And if Ilistet were nearby... Megual wondered what other monsters Rimilin had bound. He bowed politely, and turned to leave.

Rimilin smiled. "Wise choice."

**

Through stiffening winds, Prince Graz’zt rode west with Chepez and Queen Mazikreen: succubi infamous for their fierceness and slipperiness respectively. The landscape between Jashat and Fumaril – in more settled times rich with vineyards and olive groves – was become a blighted, poisonous waste, stalked by demons and phantoms.

"The World bends easily to Darkness," the Prince observed. "All of the signs are here. The Celestial Era is over; soon the Interdict will be in shreds."

They reached Mulissu’s Paling and reined in their steeds; about them, tornados raged. Graz’zt and Mazikreen dismounted quickly, and – screaming – the Prince invoked powerful sorceries upon the succubus.

Silently, Queen Mazikreen vanished and strode through the winds – denser than iron – which surrounded Fumaril.

**

Eadric stood with Ortwine in the nave of the Great Fane in Morne. A curious detachment possessed him: heaps of bones shrouded in leathery skin lay around, and every surface was covered with a thin film of congealed blood. An iron reek filled the air.

_The mind cannot contain the enormity of this_, but also _I am the Ahma. This is the eschaton. I should hardly be surprised_. Everything in Morne which had walked, or crawled or flew was dead.

He brooded on the conversation he had had with Nwm only an hour before; the Preceptor had made a journey to Sisperi, to engage the help of Lai and her handmaidens. There was a precedent: with the Saints and Orthonist adepts, Nwm had said that he could _resurrect_ every single victim of the _storm of blood._
The Ahma had acquiesced, but his heart felt heavy. This was madness: it seemed too massive. Still, he would cede all authority and trust Nwm on this count: this must be quickly undone, and the Viridity must manifest; heal the wound. Death means nothing: this must be demonstrated.

Tahl had offered to be the sacrifice.

"I will bleed," Eadric had said. It was proper. He was the Ahma. He wondered if the slain would even return; most now basked in Radiance: such had been his pronouncement upon the Faithful who suffered in this war.

Dare I command them back? Who am I to deny bliss to any? But then It is not I, but Nwm who issues the plea. By whatever power.

After an hour, the Preceptor instructed the Ahma to attend an altar he had erected beneath an orange tree; the same spot upon which Feezuu had annihilated Cynric, and Graz'zt had pronounced his curse upon Morne. The wound was deepest there. There were assembled Saints and Talions, many flamines and scrollbearers of the Temple, Lai, Mesikammi and a half-dozen Uediian priestesses.

For the first time in his life, Nwm invoked the Sun-god; he offered the blood of the Ahma as sacrifice and named Nehael as his intercessor. He supplicated Uedii in her aspect as Wisdom, and evoked the full power of the Viridity. The same flint knife he had used to cut Lai, he now employed upon Eadric, opening gaping wounds upon his arms. His face became pale.

A great pneuma arose, and a vibrancy permeated everything. The rivers were suddenly rich with fish; life returned to the woods and fields; flocks of birds appeared in the skies above.

The two hundred thousand souls who were recalled by Nwm from the Serenities were not untouched by their tenure in the upper altitudes of the Empyrean. Each of them brought a little of it back with them.

As Tahl arrested the flow of blood from his arms, it dawned on Eadric suddenly; an irrefutable truth.

They could win.

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**POST 21: URBS COELESTIS**

Posted by: Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 3rd January 2009, 02:13 PM

The Sun was at its zenith when Tiuhan Gultheins, the boy-king of Wyre, awoke within his own chambers. He recalled a brief, hideous nightmare of great violence, followed by a glorious ecstasy which lay outside of time; a brilliance which persisted for uncounted aeons.

His choice to forego bliss – for such he had made – had issued from an ethical centre which Tiuhan had not known he possessed. A necessary selfless action, he knew, in response to a request which had arisen from the Ocean of Fire and Light, the memory of which filled him with warmth and fortified his soul. He
recalled that golden boars – archaic protectors of the royal house – had borne him away from it; once again, his spirit was housed in flesh.

He felt unusually peaceful; an urge to meditate and pray settled on him before even the fog of waking departed. He arose and gazed at himself in the mirror.

The Empyrean filled his face, in both memory and anticipation. There was no fear in him; he laughed and cried for joy. He could return again at any time; his abiding in this crude form would pass as the blink of an eye in eternity. He washed and dressed himself, and departed from his suite; it was noon, and others were also only just starting to go about their business.

Standing on the parapet, he noticed a calm industry and purpose seemed to possess the citizens of Morne, as though each were pursuing a task both ordained and well-practiced. Household knights and men-at-arms were beginning to assemble in the baileys beneath the inner walls of the palace; masons were loading the cranes around the Great Fane with cut marble. Servants toiled contentedly. Gardeners were pruning with particular attention to detail. There were no raised voices. No beatings. Light suffused everything.

Tiuhan gazed at the Temple compound. In a quiet corner, an old, bent yew-tree; it had taken root a thousand years before, but Tiuhan also recalled that before today, no such tree had stood there. He pondered its significance, as did another his own age or a little older: a youth stood near to it and inspected it, his arms folded.

The great bell in the tower of the Fane began to ring; a slow, steady note of enormous depth, with complex overtones. The campaniles around the city swiftly took up its cue, and a music at once both spontaneous and perfectly orchestrated suddenly flourished.

King Tiuhan stood and listened for a while, before tearing himself away. He had a vast administrative backlog which he had been neglecting, and the Small Council was meeting in an hour.

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In shadow, Mazikreen slipped unseen with great speed through the streets of Fumaril; its inhabitants were still milling in the streets, speculating as to the import of the darkness which covered the city. The succubus must locate and dispatch five targets: two priestesses of the goddess Jeshi, and three Pand Wind-Sorcerers who had taken up residence in the Tyrant’s palace. They were pivotal members of Mulissu’s cabal, and the ceremony for the reinvigoration of the Paling – which required their contribution – was due to take place in half an hour.

She moved along the waterfront, leaving a trail of corpses and charmed informants who directed her to the temple of the wind-goddess – a modest affair by Thalassine standards – and thence to the palace courtyards.

She discharged her mission efficiently, avoiding detection by the slow-witted djinn who acted as sentries, and eliminating all of her targets quickly; Mazikreen felt a touch of annoyance that her last – the sorcerer Ehieu – had noticed her presence before dying.

Alarms were being raised as she slid back over the city wall, and vanished like a
shade into the unnatural night.

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Mulissu immediately issued an appeal to Mostin, Daunton, and a half-dozen other Wyrish mages for aid: I need help. The Paling must go up in fifteen minutes, or Fumaril is doomed: make your choice.

Mostin cursed. He was due to convoke his cabal in three hours, but could hardly refuse. Mulissu conveyed the coordinates of a temporary exempt bubble within the lock of the Paling, and Mostin *teleported* to it forthwith.

Jalael and Troap – two of those whom Mostin had previously suborned – were already present.

He fixed Mulissu stonily. "I trust the drain on our collective reservoirs will be of small amplitude?"

"Your generosity overwhelms," Mulissu said drily. "It will be negligible. You did not predict this event?"

"No," Mostin confessed. "Or not exactly. But I knew that it would be an inopportune time to request your direct inclusion in the cabal; hence you will make the transference. Also, I trust no other wizard to be able to effectively *dominate* Graz'zt."

"Can I have him?"

"Sorry, Mulissu. I have already promised him to Soneillon. I have a year of informal compact with her, or six remaining discrete services, whichever passes first."

"If you were anyone else, that would mean other than it does."

"I am not oblivious to the existence of certain baser urges," Mostin explained, "but I have utterly transcended the notion of coitus. Nor do I any longer require the use of a latrine."

Daunton appeared.

"About time," the Savant said.

Once again, the Paling was erected. Mulissu sighed. She couldn't take much more of this.

**

"Infernal is very last epoch, Mostin," Jalael gazed around the tower's reception hall. "How much for the solar?"

"He is not for sale. He's an antique. Captured during the Fall."
"You need to develop an alternate strategy, Mostin," Soneillon was visibly irked. "One cannot conjure a demon who has already been called."

Mostin scowled. "I have anticipated the possibility. Do you think I'm a fool? He is unbound. The ritual proceeds as scheduled. He is outside his sanctum; his foresight will not avail him, nor his mind blank. He has erected another protection: a ward which will discharge upon contact with a hostile conjuration. That will fail also. I will bind him in the Astral."

Jalael's hideous face screwed up. Doubt now possessed her. The Hag's offer to aid Mostin had been made to head off what she had considered to be a celestial threat; events had since transpired to make the situation far more complex.

Mostin, sensing her ambivalence, fixed her with his uncanny gaze.

"I am not about to back out of this, and neither are you," he said.

"No," Jalael growled. "I'm not. But nor will I let you forget this. Had I known that you had switched your allegiance anyway, I might have been more reticent in rendering aid."

"It takes a quick mind to anticipate me," Mostin nodded sagely. "But had I known that the celestials themselves were about to reconsider their programming, I might not have been so eager to relinquish direct control. Still, what is done is done. Their orders remain the same; although the implementation may be rather more inventive. I trust that the rest of you are as good as your word?"

Muthollo nodded resentfully; Troap seemed unfazed: he liked Mostin and – for a wizard, at least – the goblin was unusually generous in his dealings with others. In the final configuration of spells which Mostin had opted for, only six mages – including Sho – would be required; Soneillon would cover the not insubstantial magickal deficit. Orolde would remain as an observer.

Mostin plane shifted his tower to a remote island of astral matter, where it abutted an already existing stronghold, merging seamlessly with its architecture. He removed himself to an obsidian binding chamber, and began to inscribe a thaumaturgic diagram from powdered celestial metals.

**

The Ahma was present when the Small Council convened: a dozen of Wyre's leading temporal magnates, amongst whom were Tagur, Sihu, Jholion of Methelhar and Attar the Warden. Six, including the Lord Chamberlain Foide and Skett of Mord, were absent, and remained in their own demesnes: nobles who had been subject to neither the storm of blood nor the subsequent Reversal. Saints and Talions sat upon the episcopal thrones which the Lords Spiritual of Wyre – whose bishoprics had been dissolved after the accession of the Sela – had once occupied.

"I will try to explain circumstances as best I understand them," Eadric sat in his armour on a low stool next to the king, which creaked under the weight. "First, the greatest of the Cheshnite spellcasters have already unleashed many of their most potent spells. A certain arcanaist of my acquaintance – whose methods of garnering intelligence are dubious, but the accuracy of which is generally high – posits the following situation:
"Yeshe is depleted, and will for some time have to content herself with binding nothing more significant than powerful balors – depletion is a relative term. Sibud has exhausted his credit – which was poor – with the Cheshnite cabals, and hopefully we can expect no more storms of blood for the time being. Temenun may have drawn a cupful of power from his reservoir, and remains strong; his armamentarium is already replenished.

"Guho, Choach and Rishih have been engaged in the solidifying of the Cheshnite defense, the erection of teleportation circles, and the subjugation of the Thalassine nobility, but it is likely that their real power has yet to be manifested. Rishih has also been active in conjuring demons: he has restricted himself to lesser nobility. Furthermore, he enjoys prestige amongst certain of the cabals; in general, his more conservative approach is well-received.

"The goddess Dhatri has invoked a blanket of darkness, and has set forth from Jashat in what is known as her Procession, an event which might be said to mark the formal beginning of hostilities. With her are Prahar, a number of evil godlings, and Visuit the Butcher, against whom we cannot yet stand. And many tens of thousands of lesser minions.

"The demons Graz'zt, Pazuzu, Alrunes, Ahazu and Baphomet are at large. Pazuzu is pactbonded with Yeshe and acts as the instrument of her will; Baphomet is enslaved by Prahar. Graz'zt is a wild card whose activities we cannot anticipate. Ahazu and Alrunes have yet to show themselves beyond their pavilions.

"Four celestial princes – those covenanted by Mostin the Metagnostic – have Fallen. The Adversary has seduced them. The motivations of the Nameless Fiend are unguessable. At present, the actions of the debased celestials have proven to be not antithetical to our own needs: they have eliminated the demon lord Munkir, and are disrupting affairs beneath the Pall of Dhatri. This congruence of purpose may or may not last."

Prince Tagur looked uncomfortable. "Then what do we do?"

Eadric sighed. "We find ourselves in a curious position. I suggest we move half of Morne's garrison – including all of the royal knights – immediately south to join the main Temple force; those who experienced the Reversal have become amongst our most formidable soldiers. Furthermore, we have to move outside of Wyre proper; the active participation of Wyre's wizards is more appealing than the incidental protection which the Enforcer offers us."

"Wizards are not trustworthy," Saint Anaqiss observed.

"You are correct," the Ahma agreed. "Still, that is the plan. We break camp tomorrow."

"So we march on the Thalassine?" Sihu inquired.

"Yes."

"All men will flock to your banner," Wurz declared.

I sincerely hope not, Eadric thought. I will have enough blood on my hands as it is.

"Which wizards have sworn oaths to Oronthon?" Saint Wurz asked.
"As yet, none," Eadric smiled at the naïveté of the question. "Nor do I expect any
to. We may depend on Daunton almost definitely, and on Mostin probably,
although any aid which he lends will doubtless be viewed dimly by the pious.
Mulissu, perhaps; although Fumaril's concerns preoccupy her. Hlioth is an unlikely
candidate, but I suspect she might prove the most useful of any of them were she
to act.

"At present, our best defense may be offered by Nwm the Preceptor, who is
capable of coordinating diverse magical energies. Currently, with the adepts, he is
engaged in protecting the Temple encampment more thoroughly from attack: I
wish no repeat of the assault launched by Temenun's demons. I have asked him
to invoke a mobile defense; it will move as the Sela's tabernacle moves.

"Lastly, we can expect a period of quiescence while the Cheshnites adjust to the
fact that death might be no particular obstacle to us. Mostin anticipates that they
will change tack."

Tagur gave an inquiring look.

"They'll try to imprison souls," the Ahma explained.

King Tiuhan swallowed. "I will take to the field. I will need guidance."

Sihu looked dubious. "Your Majesty..."

Saint Tahl interrupted her. "I agree with the King. There is nowhere safer. That
has been amply demonstrated."

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Nwm watched as the Sela gave a lesson. There was no sense that Oronthon's
proxy was in any way unsettled by events; being invested by the Supernal
apparently granted one a certain perspective to which ordinary mortals were not
privy.

*But ordinary mortals are a dwindling breed,* Nwm observed.

The Preceptor felt uncomfortable. He had struck compromises which – prior to
current events – he would not have even considered. Although, having counselled
the Ahma to adopt a Reconciliationist position, he could hardly do less himself.

But Nwm alone knew that – at the climax of the rite to revivify Morne – his
designs had been shifted; agents of the Sun-god had interfered with the pattern.
The massive matrix of magical energy which Nwm had created had been
reordered to better suit the celestial agenda. The Illumination of Morne's citizenry
had certainly not been his original intention.

As the lesson concluded and the devotees dispersed, Nwm approached the Sela,
who sat in Saizhan.

"You are perturbed," the Sela observed.

"No, I'm pissed off," Nwm replied.
"The Host does not answer to me. I understand your anger, but I cannot offer redress."

"You passivity is impossible," Nwm groaned.

"If you think so. I would gladly receive any wisdom in these matters." Tramst was ironic, yet perfectly earnest. "The Host is attempting to interpret Oronthon's will, and is sometimes fallible in its judgments, according to its own standards. Oronthon is utterly ineffable: celestials are not. The fact that four archfiends were recently born might be viewed as a cosmic blunder on the part of Enitharmon."

Nwm raised an eyebrow. "An opinion?"

"It is not within my purview; hence I make efforts to remove myself."

"You remain open," Nwm observed. "Your feelings may be changed in that regard."

Tramst smiled softly. "I mean no disrespect, Preceptor, but one rather more skillful than you views this as his ongoing project. I cannot become embroiled in politics. That is why there is an Ahma."

"And Oronthon's eschaton? How do you relate to that?"

"Saizhan is the disintegration of all previously held conception. The Viridity can be understood as a reflex; an inevitable rebirth. Saizhan itself is the eschaton, symbolically speaking."

Nwm gaped. "This is your belief?"

"Indeed, no," the Sela smiled. "I make no metaphysical assertions. On doctrinal matters, I also suggest consulting the Ahma."

"Ngaargh!" Nwm threw up his hands. "Can you not make one categorical statement of truth? Or at least posit an opinion which is your own?"

"Regarding what?"

"Regarding anything," Nwm groaned.

"Certainly," the Sela answered. "Nehael is the Supreme Empathy."

Nwm squinted. "There is a lot of Urgic baggage attached to that term, and its implicit philosophical gravity is lost on me."

"Then you have a chance to understand it," the Sela smiled broadly.

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Several hundred tapers burned steadily within the chamber.

Mostin had opted for a triangle in preference to a pentacle. The symbolic apex – where the Alienist would stand – was aligned with the Empyrean; Troap and Sho stood at either other trine, dexter and sinister as seen from the Throne of Oronthon; behind them were Muthollo and Jalael, respectively. A complex motif
of overlapping symbols connected an ideogram within the circle’s outer ring to a
second diagram of more modest dimension, wherein Soneillon was positioned,
opposed to Mostin. Here, a brazier of silver also stood, upon which exotic incense
burned.

Mulissu waited outside of the pattern. Pungent smoke billowed around her as she
floated.

As Ashva rose in Jashat, Mostin began to mutter and gesticulate, weaving a net of
little subtlety but great potency. Salt, silver and cold iron were flung generously
in all directions. Magic flowed; Soneillon opened her reservoir. Reality bent.

Graz’zt manifested, incredulous, and flung himself impotently against the barrier
which contained him. Even as the first wave of ritual energy around the room
dissipated, the Alienist had already begun to cast another spell of tremendous
power. Mulissu gathered her energies in synchrony.

Mostin unleashed a *dispelling; death wards* and *mind blanks* crashed, a hundred
dweomered items became comatose. Soneillon flickered on the edge of being.
Graz’zt became vulnerable.

At precisely that moment, Mulissu *dominated* the demon with a transvalent spell.

**YOUR MIND BLANK STAYS DOWN. INVOKE NO POWER. DO ONLY AS I COMMAND.**

The Savant turned to Mostin. "I have him."

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Orolde stepped forward, and, in a trice, magically divested Prince Graz’zt of all of
his personal effects.

The next minute – which was the time it took Mostin to complete the *binding*
ritual – was the longest of his life. At several junctures, acute paranoia
threatened to overcome him, but at the end of it, naked and humiliated, Graz’zt
was confined within a ten-inch globe of adamant.

Immediately, Soneillon proffered her upturned palm to receive the sphere. As he
watched his pseudopod – which was wrapped around the captured demon prince
– move toward her, a sudden prescience of indefinable quality but great surety
passed through the Alienist’s mind.

Instead of giving it to her, Mostin spoke two powerful syllables, and Soneillon
vanished.

Sho gaped.

Jalael, in anticipation of attack from Mostin, immediately erected a *mind blank*.

"She would have betrayed me," Mostin explained, holding up his hand in a
gesture of appeasement. "Goetic protocols just don’t command the respect that
they used to."

"Where did you send her?"

"Outside. She will need to find a way to come back through Dream. It will take
her some time."

Mulissu looked at him suspiciously. "What are you up to Mostin?"

But Mostin's eyes – and those of the other wizards – were turned toward Orolde.

"There are portable holes here," the sprite said. "There are a number of cubic gates also. And this."

Orolde held up Graz'zt's amulet.

"And this."

A small key.

Jalael cursed impatiently. "Open the holes. Empty everything out."

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**POST 22:**

**Posted by:** Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 7th March 2009, 09:30 PM

Sorry for the delay. Been busy. 😊

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Teppu strode up to the ramshackle building, and ascended the three steps onto its porch.

It was somewhat more than a cottage, but rather less than a mansion; its three levels boasted no more than twenty rooms, all told. Although the sprite perceived that two dozen extradimensional spaces – ranging in size from hidden cubby holes to a suite of dedicated summoning chambers – abutted it; its total internal volume might be four times larger. It occurred to Teppu that Mostin might possess a particular attachment to the notion of space.

Teppu adjusted his hat, coughed, and rapped upon the door. He placed his hands behind his back, whistled softly, and glanced around approvingly. The nymph who dwelt nearby had been persuaded to bring forth numerous wildflowers around the manse: sorrel and stitchwort; purslanes, bluebells and wood-anemones. The veranda had been situated for the perfect dappled shade beneath an ancient elm.

A slender fey – perhaps five-feet tall, with nut-brown skin and an impudent smile – opened the door.

Teppu raised an eyebrow. This was neither Orolde nor Mei. Who else lived here? A servant?

"Greetings," Teppu doffed his cap. "I was not expecting you."

The other seemed unfazed. "Teppu," he said warmly. "Please come in. Orolde is presently indisposed."
"You have me at a disadvantage," the sprite replied suspiciously.

"Do not concern yourself. I know of only One to whom that does not apply."

"Then inquiring as to your name would be pointless," Teppu nodded. "Is your manifestation as a fey for my benefit? Have you taken up residence here?"

"Temporarily," The Adversary nodded affably. "Although I've been spending a good deal of time in Morne. As to my chosen form, I attempt to remain unobtrusive in my actions. I have rather a reputation in that regard."

"And the simulacrum?" Teppu cocked his head.

"Is accepting of my presence. But I find this place quite charming; I also confess that my lodging here has a certain symmetry to it, given the owner's current choice of abode."

"That is an eloquent premise for circumventing Nehael's fence," Teppu bowed politely.

"I am gratified that you appreciate it," the other replied. His tone was self-mocking. "I boldly straddle paradigms. Now. Will you remain on the porch?"

Teppu shrugged, and followed him in, closing the door behind him. He glanced around; the place was cluttered but comfortable. Teppu suspected that Orolde had already begun to arrange things more to his liking.

"Would you care for tea?" The Adversary inquired.

"Certainly," Teppu nodded, sitting at Mostin's kitchen table.

"Where should we begin?"

"I think one should always warm the pot," Teppu replied drily.

"An argument? I would contend that the extra labor does not contribute to the quality of the brew."

Teppu nodded. "That may be so. But I find the ritual reinforces the experience."

The Adversary smiled, and sat opposite. "In my cosmic capacity – as the Embodiment of Pure Will – you will probably appreciate the limited use of ritual to me. However, I will follow your instruction; let it not be said that I am insensitive to others' observances."

Teppu sighed. "Allow me to gird my intellect, if you would; I suspect nuances to this exchange which will otherwise elude me."

"As you wish," the Adversary waved a hand casually. "Everyone is always so suspicious."

**

Screaming, inchoate rage. A desire to rend, profane and destroy all that was not
he. But also a furious plotting which followed a thousand permutations simultaneously.

He was Graz'zt. He had been caught before; he had escaped before.

Mostin’s face loomed above him, filling immensity.

"Your Highness," the idiot drawled like deranged sky-god. "We can be civil about this: you divulge information which I require, and I spare you from unimaginable tortures."

Graz'zt's intuition told him that the Alienist had no coercive spells available to him.

He remained silent.

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Mostin rattled the three cubic gates together in his closed palm and stared into the blank sphere. The treasure of Azzagrat lay heaped around him.

Inside the globe – although apparently shy at revealing his countenance on its surface – was trapped the demon prince Graz'zt. Mostin – who experienced a state of disappointed anticlimax with regard to the contained fiend – was presently unprepared to torment the Prince into a more receptive mood.

There was no damn urn. Just a key.

"Well?" Mulissu asked.

Mostin grimaced, and shook his pseudopod in a gesture which Mulissu interpreted as irritation.

"You think you can face them down?"

"I know I can. I have foreseen it; but other futures might hold better prospects."

"Choose swiftly," Mulissu groaned. "News travels fast. Divinations will be cast regarding Graz'zt's whereabouts and disposition. Inferences will be drawn. The truth will be quickly determined."

"Silence," Mostin snapped. "I know this."

"And if your temper gets the better of you, and you disintegrate Waide, you will make enemies."

"Are you deranged?" Mostin asked. "No. We're going back to Wyre, for this. I want the Enforcer watching my back on this one."

"You cannot take Graz'zt into Wyre," Jalael observed.

"We're in an extradimensional space," Mostin said. "It'll be fine."

"Gihaahia will permit this?"

"She did nothing about the solar; or the spined devils who do the cleaning. I assume so. Also, Graz'zt himself is removed from the continuum proper. I
perceive no breach of the Injunction."

"Then neither will she intervene if things go awry," Jalael said drily.

"I will stand on the threshold," Mostin said.

"She must appreciate your pedantry if nothing else," the Hag growled.

"We are settled then?"

Mostin grumbled and nodded.

They translated back to Scir Cellod, but within the Enforcer's remit. Mulissu issued a *sending* to Daunton, and the wizard arrived presently. Mostin apprised him of the situation, and in his official capacity Daunton called a convocation.

Sixteen mages attended, including Rimilin, Waide, Tozinak and – to the surprise of all present – the witch Hlioth.

Mostin, standing in the open doorway to Murmuur's Tower and brandishing the globe containing Graz'zt, sighed. He was tired.

Tozinak – whose present form included a number of disturbing insectoid features – clicked his mandibles together in excitement.

"I have captured Graz'zt," the Alienist announced boldly, although his fatigue was evident. "I am informing you of this myself, before the rumors begin to fly."

"Bravo, Mostin," Rimilin said drily, with more than a hint of resentment in his voice.

Mostin smiled eerily. "I purpose to seek for Pharamne's urn. Who will join me?"

Voices began to chatter excitedly.

Rimilin raised his eyebrows at the vulgar display.

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"You are lucky I came," Hlioth later snapped, after the others had dispersed. "Rimilin would have launched an assault, were it not for me."

"In Wyre? I hardly think so."

"In your tower."

"He cannot penetrate it." Mostin sighed

"He *can*, you fool. The *quiescence of the spheres* must necessarily provoke a counter-argument. Rimilin can bypass *dimensional locks*. Do not think to exclude him that way."

"I don't need nannying, you mad old hag," Mostin hissed. "Let him try."

"And how now do you purpose to penetrate Azzagrat? The planar flux is impossible. Your devilish artifact is not adequate to the task."
"I will conjure one of Ghom's servitors and equip it with a magical howdah."

"I? Mad?"

"Quite so," Mostin replied.

"I wish to speak with Graz'zt," Hlioth growled.

"Feel free to try," Mostin tossed her the globe. "I must reattune. If you release him again, brains may begin to disappear inexplicably in Nizkur. I take it you understand my meaning?"

Hlioth scowled, and gestured the Alienist away.

**

Ortwine – in the guise of a Thalassine gentleman-turned-vampire – walked with easy confidence through the dark promenades of Thond, impervious to scrutiny; whimsy informed her choice of apparent gender. The damned cowered behind barricaded doors as Abyssal ghouls prowled the streets.

Things went ill for Thond. The greatest of the town's remaining noble families – the Truzha – had undergone a collective transformation which had resulted in a haemophagic aristocracy being foisted upon Thond's hapless citizens. Under the auspices of the aging family matriarch, a dozen first cousins – and scores further removed – had enthusiastically embraced unlife as a useful tool to advance their power and interests. Initiation had become *de rigueur* amongst the fashionable set.

They counted Naatha, Sibud and Rishih as their sponsors; the immortals had invested heavily in the organization and defense of Thond subsequent to the annihilation of its armies. Naatha had lent Jariliths to sorcerers who pledged themselves to her; Rishih had erected a number of potent magical wards around the city; Sibud had bestowed a rare vampiric pedigree.

Ortwine entered a den where unspeakable tortures were inflicted on mortals by many-limbed demons. She drew *Heedless* and slew the closest fiend immediately. The others began to hastily disperse, but Ortwine arrested one before it could flee, pinned it to the wall, and *dominated* it.

"You are compacted by House Truzha. Inform your masters that Ortwine wants to talk to them."

The demon moved to oblige her.

Ortwine liked this game.

**

"Were you aware that the Adversary is squatting in Mostin's Manse not fifty miles from here?" Teppu asked.

"No," Nehael smiled. "I sense you had an exchange. Was it illuminating?"
"Disturbingly so," Teppu admitted. "He's even more disarming than you. He confused me utterly."

Nehael nodded. "That is his nature: to refute that which is."

"That is a generous assessment," Teppu was wry. "Others have been less forgiving. What can you anticipate of his actions?"

"Little or nothing," Nehael shook her head. "And try not to analyze his words. You will never guess his motives. Accept this; you will be happier."

"This is sound advice. He also requests an introduction," Teppu raised his eyebrows.

"That much, at least, I predicted."

"And you will indulge him?"

Nehael shrugged. "Why not? Do you fear he might successfully woo me to his cause?"

"Precisely thus," Teppu confessed. "What is your strategy?"

"That which I apply to you, so do I equally to myself. There is no strategy. I will play it by ear."

**

The Ahma stood with Tahl and Rede beneath a canopy south of Wyre's marches, receiving news of events which gave him pause for wonder. Orode intoned as though reading from an altogether mundane inventory.

"One amulet; one suit of baroque plate armor; one large shield of fearsome aspect; one glaive; a greatsword which drips acid..."

"Bastard sword," Eadric interrupted.

"One sacrificial dagger," Orode continued, "three cubic gates; three portable holes; one amulet of the planes; one crystal ball with several special applications; twenty-eight ioun stones of various function; one iron flask, determined to be the prison of the devil Sirchade; around one hundred books of spells – including those of Kothchori – which have yet to be translated and fully catalogued..."

Orode paused sadly.

"A scroll collection which I will not begin to bore you with: Mostin has suggested to tender to you those scribed by Orontionist sympathizers, and there are more than a few; material wealth in jewels, gold and adamant which might best be described as incomprehensibly large. The inventory was witnessed by all of the mages present. Pharamne's urn was noticeably absent. Mostin believes that the small key found on Graz'zt's person unlocks whichever space holds the urn – presumably somewhere in one of Azzagrat's nested demiplanes – but he needs to employ divinations of some magnitude in order to determine the exact truth."
Eadric raised an eyebrow. Mostin having the web of motes in his possession was bad enough. Mostin with Murmuur's tower was something which filled the Ahma with trepidation. Now the Alienist sought a generative power which was so far beyond his ability to safely manipulate, that Eadric experienced pure dread.

"I suspect that Mostin has become instrumental in the designs of the Adversary," the Ahma sighed, smiling grimly at Orolde.

"As to that, I could not say," the sprite bowed. "I do not concern myself with the machinations of entities within the Oronthonian pleroma."

"Has Shomei shown herself yet?" Eadric asked.

A look of discomfort crossed Orolde's face. "No. Is this something you anticipate?"

The Ahma shrugged. "Anticipate? No. But many patterns have been laid; this much is clear to me. I was there when Sacir dragged Shomei to Hell. I was impotent to prevent it. The Akesolí are the agents of Amaimon, perhaps, but there a greater mandate drove them. Mostin informed me of her current situation; do not be concerned as to a breach of confidence."

Orolde smiled. "I am not. I cannot match Mostin's prescience; hence, there is no reason to anticipate that his reaction to anything I might divulge will be unpremeditated. My own status is somewhere between apprentice and journeyman, if you understand my meaning: no proscriptions have been placed upon me; nor do I shy from the truth, as I perceive it."

"And what is your perception, Orolde?"

The sprite looked nonplussed. "That question is quite impossible. I cannot communicate the totality of my apprehension effectively; we have no common frame of reference."

The Ahma thought for a moment. "Do you ever seek solace, Orolde? And if so, where?"

"In whatever fashion seems appropriate at the time."

"And your stump – magic might have replaced your hand. Why?"

"I will grow a pseudopod in due course," Orolde said drily.

Eadric gave a thin smile. "Tell Mostin that the Ahma thinks he's way out of his depth. He can't now go to Azzagrat to retrieve the urn, in any case."

Orolde shifted slightly.

"You cannot be serious?" Eadric asked.

"His energies are now concentrated on accomplishing this task," Orolde admitted. "And as to Shomei, if you wish to speak with her she must be invoked; her nature is now Infernal."

"Foci are aligning sharply," Eadric said.

"Yes," Orolde replied.
The van – which contained the banners of the *Ahma*, the Talions and the Penitents – crawled south along the Hynt Coched in the direction of Jompa. Griffons wheeled and gyred in the skies above them. In the main battle, the *Sela* rode surrounded by Saints and many of the recently Illuminated of Morne, whose numbers continued to swell as companies *wind walked* from the capital. Hundreds of wagons churned up the road behind into deep mud, through which resentful Wyrish aristocrats and their retainers doggedly toiled. Eadric had stiffened the rearguard and reserve brigades with a battalion of Templars under Brey's command, in the event they were actually attacked: the King, his household knights, and the boars had yet to arrive. In all, the columns trailed for six miles through the low, rolling hills.

Ahead, bisecting reality at an indeterminable distance, a wall of night loomed. On a low knoll by the side of the road – beneath a tall finger of carved granite – a crimson-haired figure stood and observed the passing of Wyre's armies.

As the *Ahma* approached, she stared at him; his sight informed him that this one was not all she appeared to be: her ontology was complex. She said nothing, but her presence was significant: this was the edge of her remit. Beyond here, she exerted no influence.

As soon as Eadric passed a point due west of the menhir, the sky above seemed to crack open briefly and a squadron of celestials flashed into view. They shone darkly.

The *Ahma* remained expressionless. He had anticipated this – or something similar – but had hoped for a period of quietude before they showed themselves. They were already sworn to him; a powerful tool to execute his will in the world. Using them entailed a price he was reluctant to meet.

The wards which Nwm had erected around the column discouraged their close approach, and Eadric called a general halt to the vanguard's progress. He rode with Tahl through a detachment of Ardanese mercenaries and across a hundred yards of open ground, to where they stood or floated gently.

Eadric reined in and dismounted. Saint Tahl remained in his saddle.

"Hail, *Ahma*," the archfiend Irel bowed. "We finally meet, although under circumstances which few guessed likely. The covenant undertaken still holds. You may instruct us as you see fit; alternately, we must interpret your will to the best of our ability."

"Neither option thrills me," Eadric said, gazing at up Irel, who stood head and shoulders above him. Taint emanated from the Fallen in palpable waves but their nobility was all-too-apparent. Thus it might remain. These were a new breed.

Eadric gazed at them and sighed, and resigned himself to the inevitable. He turned to Tahl.

"Let it be known that the *Ahma* has perforce acquired a Left Hand," he said, "his right alone being inadequate to the task which our current predicament presents."
"They are loyal?"

"Absolutely," Eadric admitted. They were. He could still speak into their minds; know their thoughts. He suspected that Irren was smiling smugly in some Nessian Beatitude.

But against Visuit, how would they fare?

So the wheel turned.