

THE IX AGE

FANTASY BATTLES



DAEMON LEGIONS

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2nd Edition, Background Book

NEFARIOUS MINIONS

Lurking in shadows, moving by night, these Dark Cultists have plotted and schemed to bring about the dominion of the Legions. Ever patient, zealous and unwavering, this eldritch grimoire is the unholy fruit of their labours. We'd also like to thank all the community members and other staff who contributed with their suggestions, feedback and support.

WRITERS

Lead Author John Wallis	Book of the Infinite Legions, Classifications of the Legions Alessandro Vivaldi	Intro to Pride Glenn Patel
Head of Background, Kuulima's Deceiver, Hope Harvester, Daemonic Magic Edward Murdoch	Intro to Gluttony, Intro to Greed Caleb Dallos	Hellhounds Callum Mellis
		Sirens Peter Orfanos

ARTISTS

Head of Art Michele Bertilorenzi	Pgs 17, 87 Krys Rackham	Pg 53 Jorge Fernandez Sanz
Front Cover Artwork Lucas Svedberg	Pgs 23, 85 Casp	Pgs 61, 83 Enrico Bertilorenzi
Back Cover Artwork Thomas Karlsson	Pgs 29, 76 John Lewenhagen	Pgs 75, 77, 79, 88, 89, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97 Marcos Barragan
Ornaments & Icons Casp, David Way, Rotten Factory	Pgs 33, 65 Franco Rivolli	Pg 26 Ollie Cuthbo
Pgs 5, 13, 31, 59, 63 Pawel Jakub Górecki	Pg 37 Alonso Soler	Pg 91 Grégoire Veauléger
Pgs 6, 25, 41, 57, 69, 100 The Galapalo	Pgs 39, 55, 101 Matti Pajuniemi	Document Design Kacper Bucki, David Way
Pgs 15, 21, 82 David Lee	Pgs 45, 49 Ukkuimini	Slim Document Design Manuel Berthet
		Layout Laura Alfieri

PRODUCTION TEAM

Head of Rules Team

Erik Aronson

Rules Team

Frederick Humcke,
Dan Thomas, Olli Katila
Adrian Smagur,
Philip Gollmann, Marko Lukić

Army Design Team

Björn Ericson,
Olli Katila,
Robin Morent,
Michał Kołakowski,
Richard Becker,
Vasileios Valkanas

Head of Rules Clarity Team

Florian Rohm

Rules Clarity Team

Florian Rohm,
Aleksandar Trivunovic

Head of Playtesting

Archeron, Aenarion43

Playtesting Team

Adalidsilvano, Aenarion43,
Angrosch, Autumnus, Baldin,
bk5b, Bubonicus, casamar,
Ciara, Dark Wizard,
DJWoodelf, Fthunder, garza,
Gas_monkey8, helldragon,
imperialengineer, IoRi78,
Jomppexx, Just_Flo, Kalerith,
Kazandu, kbb_weyden,
Korpacz, Lagoon,
legionsofodin, msu117,
Nicareap, Obsidiananubis,
Odoamar, Palinux,
Palomita15, Ratatoeskr,
SadlerCPII, ScumlordDodo,
skipschnit, Squirrelloid, zulu,
toddy_mac2012, toughnutt,
Trains_Get_Robbed,
babbonatale-,
Dark_Side_Duke, Daruma,
Gunnes, Mortus, Natsa,
Popy, Archeron, Janus,
Rothulf, yedee

Special Thanks

Msu117, Just_Flo

Conceptual Design Support

Ben Jones, El Rey,
ThereIsNoSpoon

Army Community Support

Tiziano Taccani,
Emil Vesterberg,
Federico Bozzato,
Dmytro Adeiev,
Antonio Gonzalez

Head of Lectors

Evan Switzer

Lead Proofreader

Joël Fivat

Lectoring Team

Evan Switzer, Glen Weston,
Brian Wigzell, Herzogar,
Mohamed Bekrentchir,
Yatagarasu







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THE DARK GODS

Chaos is an arrow and its truest number eight
Eight the signs that point the way, eight the paths to tread
Eight th'immortal avatars each heart mortal yearns to know
Eight the forms of change and power, eight the number of this verse
The Father is the first of eight, he who with the Titans swam
Who is each and all and always, to whom we seek ever to return
Who with the Seven calls to us, we his children trapped beyond
Seven are his loyal Dukes, who command our whims and fate.

First to know the lure of beauty, the Lady of the Flies
She who compares, tallies, bides her time upon the wall
She who desired for herself one of the gods' great halls
Who drew herself to power craving all before her eyes
She speaks the ancient truth known well among the wise:
Nothing has true value until compared with all
We her fierce disciples hear her solemn call
Kuulima levels out our chances and grants to us our rivals' cries.

Feed and grow
Do not cease to gorge
Observe no limit to indulgence
Know that all will submit to be devoured
Never grudge the satiation of the great God Akaan
Remember He glories in His disfigurement, His birth curse
Honour His primal pledge to consume every beautiful thing in creation
Cover not your mouth, for it dishonours the Lamprey; praise Him with your feast.

Scorned Vanadra is Hell's Fury - praise!
Clench your fist and feel her burn - shout!
Her fire touches each true heart - rage!
Kindled by the Primal Spurn - rail!
Goddess heard our enslaved cries - fight!
We are the boundless crimson tide - end!
No longer chained beneath reptiles - smite!
The mortal crime we won't abide - die!



*She watches.
Eternally, Her black eyes know eternity.
Ancient, timeless, Nukuja stalks the eons, witness to the first awakening and to the final doom
Her knowledge slumbers like an endless ocean
Our goddess comprises everything, from the locust to the owl
Her mighty slumber shakes the worldstone, Her vigil ignites the stars
She inspires the faithful to wait, seek the true sincerity of patience, and attend Her while...
She watches.*

*Hail to the Prince of Pride, the matchless Morning Star
Lord of all who yearn to rule, the one we call Savar
Highest king among the gods Savar once sought to reign
They cast Him out and so unto the Father's side he came
Now are there none who dare deny His majesty and might
The bane of weaklings everywhere, friend to all who seek His light
Hail thee, Savar, we who are not worthy of thy sneer
Guide us to thy promised land and let them bow to us in fear.*

*Born of pure desire
The Father for the Mother
Lust tears at Her Veil.
Cibaresh seeks to
Recreate that primal spark,
Lord of all lightning.
His pleasures many
His fulfilment unmatched - and
Transgression sublime.*

*We march to the beat of the one truest drum
Our god knows the worth of your body and soul
Sugulag takes and he never gives up
We come to collect and to levy his toll
Collector first sought mortal souls for himself
Feared by the gods of the great Realm above
His form can be found on your coins gold and bronze
His first greatest joy and his one truest love.*

—The Eightfold Testament



THE BOOK OF THE INFINITE LEGIONS

The Ocean and the Rivers of Power

The Father is the highest, the purest principle of this universe. Understanding his essence means achieving the power to manipulate reality and, therefore, dominate life. Where human and elven religion is nothing but spiritual weakness and decay, Father Chaos is the avatar of ultimate divinity from his realm beyond the Veil.

Mastery of the Veil's full power is beyond any mortal. To overcome such earthly limits, the conjurer should negotiate with the higher spheres of the Legions, the true embodiments of the Father, his seven names of power: Gods the foolish call Dark.

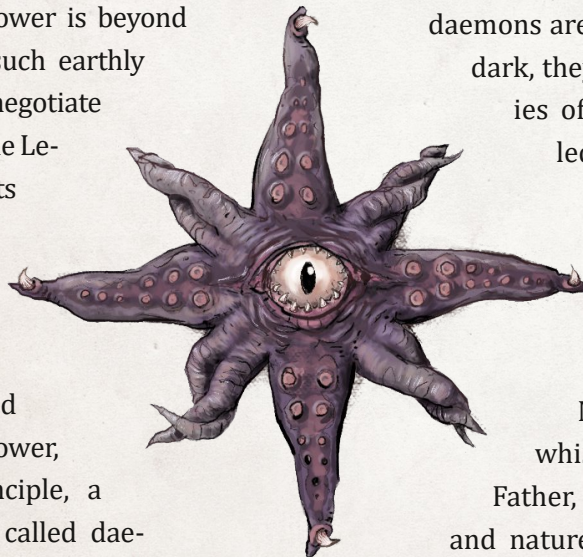
And within them: a thousand over thousand nuances of power, each embodied in a principle, a smaller deity or supernal called daemon. Each a stream adding to a tributary - lesser daemons swept up in the flow of the greater, themselves joined to one of seven mighty rivers, and each river merging into the Father's unspeakable ocean of power. For a daemon's freedom and will is proportional to its power, and each strives eternally to command those below while gaining independence from those above.

The conjurer's ambition, strength and willpower are the keys to the forbidden knowledge of the Veil. Forbidden to the weak, but a source of un-

speakable glory for they who know their own mind. The conjurer who dares to walk such a path is called mad, evil, inhuman, but they do not hearken to the worthless slurs of the enslaved.

While those Warriors following the Seven Flowers of Chaos strive to gain immortality gifted by approving gods, a conjurer achieves their power by negotiation and force of will. A true conjurer is more than a mere mortal, and the daemons are their company. Alone in the dark, they commune with the mysteries of the Seven Rivers of Knowledge, and their Infinite servants, who whisper at their ear of the terrible, wondrous possibilities behind the Veil.

Many are the glorious whisperers in the ocean of the Father, and many are their forms and natures, for they are Legion. The mortal struggles to grasp the true meaning of *Infinity*, a holy word, and the incautious conjurer may be undone by the Legions' sheer diversity and scope. Their shapes are endless, from liquid darkness to creatures of pure sensation, from incarnations of the deepest mortal desire to the worst nightmare, from common beasts to unspeakable and disgusting masses of rotting flesh and blood. Each form fascinating and unique, troubling and sublime.



The words I hereby present are the Gospel of the Seven Names themselves, the instructions to acquire their powers, to conjure their servitors, to comprehend the Veil and to conquer the Earth. Beware, for death awaits the weak, and failure brings madness, self-destruction and unimaginable sufferings.

The Ways of Entering and Leaving

There are three ways that a daemon may enter the Mortal Realm.

The first is the Way of Nature. As the currents of magic flow around our world, so the Veil thins in some places over time, and in rare instances, becomes so weakened that the waiting Legions can push through of their own choosing. Hence we see the sudden appearance of beasts or armies, especially in times of natural turmoil, following storms or wildfires - though the Mother quickly repairs her Veil after such events. Daemons loosed in such a fashion are freed upon the world, and a dangerous proposition for a conjurer seeking aid. Many are the ignorant who, not knowing that daemons are sent by the Seven and the Father, have come to believe them a natural disaster akin to disease and famine, even supposing they are a scourge or punishment sent by their own gods.

The second is the way of Summoning. This is the Way of the conjurer, for a ritual correctly made can form a channel for a daemon to pass the Veil, to be set upon its own path until its magical sustenance is exhausted. Such daemons can be called to bargain with the conjurer for power or knowledge, or even bound by the strongest and shackled to their will.

Such dealing is fraught with peril for a mortal mind, for daemons are fickle and devious, and seek to undo ambition by its own folly. But a successful negotiation is worth any risk for a determined conjurer.

To summon a daemon of the Legions, from a prince to the lowest soldier, three elements are crucial. First, the call of a summoner certain and resolute of heart. Many are the incantations and ritual practices used by conjurers to clear their minds and welcome the Father's servants. The only indispensable component of such practices is the sincerity of will with which the ritual is conducted. Second, the provision of raw resources with which a daemon can construct its physical form in the process of materialisation. Brimstone is the most common and important element, but others can be supplied at the summoner's discretion - though

only the purest materials are likely to affect the form taken. Third, and most crucial of all, a sacrifice should be performed to grant the energy necessary for the daemon to manifest. The higher the status of the victim, the more tempting and gratifying to a potential summon-

ing. Lords and nobles, alchemists and thaumaturges give access to most powerful spirits beyond the Veil. But any sacrifice is sufficient for a simple ritual, provided it is a sentient being capable of true fear, awe and madness. For it is terror that is the call for a daemon to follow.

Massive sacrifices for the glory of the Legions, such as a whole battlefield of corpses, are naturally the highest form of offering, granting the attention of the most powerful princes, heralds and dukes, along with their retinues. If such an operation should be conducted where the Veil is already thin, an entire army could be conjured.



Beware, for even a small daemonic battalion with a greater daemon at its head is an unendurable ordeal for the unprepared, a jump into permanent madness for some - but a vision of splendour for the superior conjurer. Whole armies of trained soldiers have fled at the mere sight of such a force - and yet larger daemonincursions are inherently limited by the quantities of raw magic they require to sustain their existence within this realm. For no daemon can endure here when the magic resources of its environment are spent. A full army of daemons can rarely last longer than a few cycles of the sun - but oh, what it can achieve in such a time!

Finally, the third Way is that of Possession. Whether summoned or naturally arriving, a daemon can sometimes seek - or be compelled - to enter a body already existing in our realm, instead of creating its own. It may be a person or an object, as in the stories of daemoninc weapons that speak to and influence their bearer. In possession, a daemon requires much less magic to continue its existence in the mortal realm, often residing undetected for years or decades.

These, then, are the three ways of entering. So too are there three ways of leaving. Either the daemon depletes its magic, or it is intentionally exorcised by a conjurer, or its manifested body is slain by a warrior. In each case, the daemon itself returns across the Veil against its will, and it cannot walk again into the material world until it has recovered enough energy. For incarnation is as costly to a daemon as it is rewarding. Its physical form is left within our Realm - the remains often toxic, and prone to rapid decomposition.

There is a fourth Way to destroy a daemon, and it is a heinous Way the details of which I will not disclose in these pages. But there are in this world certain methods and powers - rare and poorly understood - capable of ending not just a daemon's body but its very spirit, so that it is gone forever and in every Realm.

Chaos Ineffable

We do not know for sure why the forces of the Dark Gods seek to enter our world, for the interpretation of Chaos is far from unambiguous. Ever they attempt to follow the will and spread the word of the Seven Flowers, itself a mysterious and changeable gospel, and to encourage mortals in the practice of the Seven Living Vices that they hold dear. But equally the Legions often seem to pursue bloodshed, discord and destruction for no clear purpose - perhaps it amuses them, or they delight in all things random, fearful and chaotic. One clear goal often stated is simply the destruction of orderly societies, unacceptable in the eyes of the Father, and the undermining of social structures and systems of power wherever they are encountered. Greatest of these, of course, are the great nations of the mortal races, against which the Dark Gods are forever locked in struggle.

—From 'The Book of the Infinite Legions', a grimoire composed by Georges Sybellicus, BMag, MDiv (Hons) (Eicht) 'fons necromanticorum', Astrologus, Magus Secundus.





PRIDE

'Twas in the third year of the reign of our liege that I set mineself upon the Questing Path. I followed custom, and sought out a foe of legendary puissance to vanquish in the name of the Lady, the King, and our beloved realm. The prey I hadst selected was the Daemon Knight Atmok, champion of a glade in a far away land where the Veil was thin, who had laid forth verily a challenge: duel him, and win the blade of white gold from upon the stone. I laughed at this pitiable bribe as I set upon mine quest; neither wealth nor mystical trinkets had any claim upon my soul. I am a Knight of Equitaine; slaying the enemies of the Lady is its own reward.

The dusky moors and wild forests presented some scant challenge, but none that could surpass mine skill. Thus I came to the blasted clearing of Atmok. The trees were felled clear, cloven by the blade of the daemon. The ground was black with the ichorous ruin of many a bold challenger. Death dwelt in the breeze, and all was silent in the glade where no beast nor fowl dared tread.

"Daemon," I cried, spying my foe. "Daemon, thou art trespassing in these sacred woods! By the Lady, thou shalt perish!" And with that cry upon my lips, I charged.

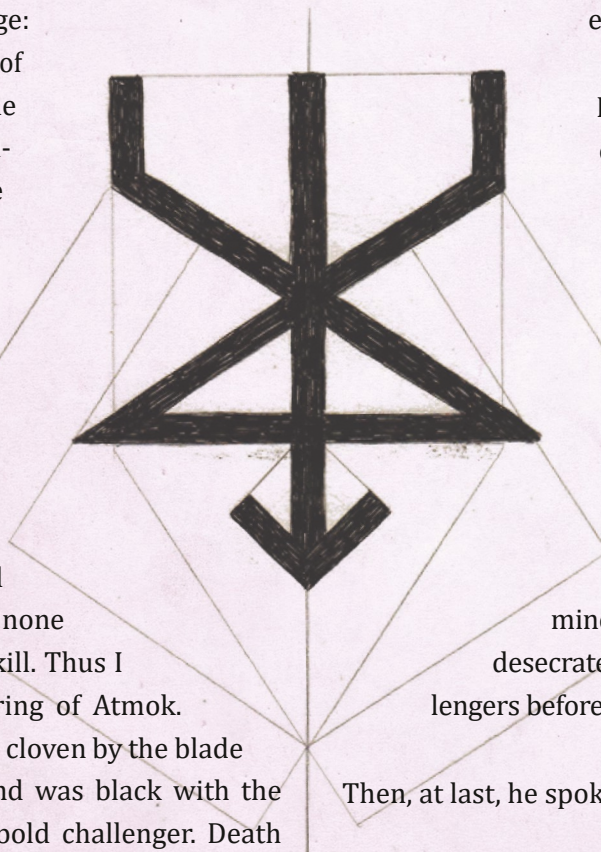
Mine was the initiative. Mightily I struck, shielding mine approach with the crest of my forefathers, and for moments, I thought the battle o'er swiftly. But I had not felled my foe; his blade had caught an angle, deflecting my stroke and leaving my guard weakened. Ne'ertheless, I was saved; brilliant light swept from my pendant, and the counter-stroke endangered my life no longer.

Blow for blow we went, but e'er I was overmatched and saved by grace, not ability. The Daemon Knight possessed skill most surpassing, and I could not match him. In one final, desperate pass I mustered all mine strength - and the demon struck the blade from my hand with a flick of his wrist. Grace or not, I knew mine life was his to take, my body desecrated with ichor like the challengers before me. Long moments passed.

Then, at last, he spoke.

"Passable," said he. "Caravanchian overtones, yet exhibiting a fine guard. You have some potential. Study the blade in earnest, and we will duel again."

This mercy struck me harder than his weapon ever could. My quest was but a game to this veils-pawn, my life a prize he did not desire. Upon my knees, I crawled away in shame.



Other foes did I dispatch, but ne'er did I forget the Daemon Knight. A full cycle of seasons passed, and I could stand it no longer. I returned to the glade to face my vanquisher, hardened by battle and sharpened by will. No longer would I rely on the Lady's grace, trusting rather to my own valour and sturdy shield. I fought as fiercely I could, yet once again Atmok was the victor. Once again I was let loose into the world.

Defeat I refused to know, and I redoubled mine training, and redoubled it again. I learnt the hammer from the Dwarves and the rapier from prelates of Reva. I swore I would let no trick of weaponcraft escape me, that ne'er again would my skill fail me. That none would be my better.

To the dread forest I returned for the third time, confident once more, rebuilt from the defeat I had suffered in body and soul. Forgetting the oath I had already taken, I swore a new pact upon my sword: I would know victory for myself and none other. The battle that rang out that day was testament to my training, a day of swordcraft and skill worthy of the tongue of the greatest minstrel.

I struck his blade from his hand. I pushed him back. I bellowed: "Thou art beaten, fiend! I am the better man!"

Atmok laughed, and too late I recalled this was no man.

"Thou dost laugh?" I inquired, in sudden hesitation.

"I have won. Won you away from your weak goddess, and forged you into a worthy Knight of Pride. Look at your blade, apprentice."

And even as he disarmed me with his dagger, I saw he was right. For the white gold sigil upon the sword spoke my heart's truth: that nothing mattered save my own prowess - and no mortal could instruct me better.

And the light of the Morning Star filled mine heart.

—From 'The Lay of Sir Ectomor'



OMEN OF SAVAR

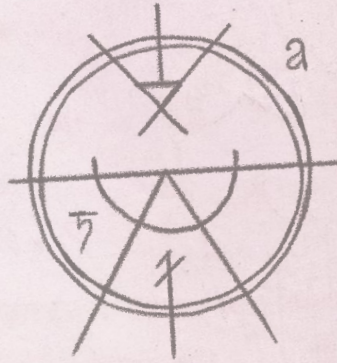
The Journal of Leonora Dimitriou

And collected extracts, 1tar 31st, 962 A.S.

The days are getting longer. I feel my work is increasingly futile. Today I arrived too late again. I found Georges Sybellicus dead in his laboratory, his intestines spilled over careful chalk markings. My weeks of tracking unsavoury dealings around the village of Hosen have come to nothing. If I'd known it was Sybellicus who was responsible, I would have redoubled my efforts. Miceli wanted him for questioning more than anyone.

I will attempt to recollect the details of the encounter.

The cottage reeked of sulphur. I pulled the cowl across my nose and mouth but it made little difference. Due to the many locks and bolts on the door, I was forced to pry open the iron bars over a window, entering with the Orb of Al-Sahar held ready, in case its powers of nullification were required. But the house was empty, and quiet but for the draught created by my ingress.



Inside was a cave of arcane wonders. Alchemical apparatus littered the tabletops, some still gently fuming or bubbling over pink flames. Parchments inked in Sybellicus's imperious hand were strewn mustily like hay. A small homunculus gibbered in a cage, using a human skull as a perch. The body itself - or most of it - I found in a cellar dug into the Sonnstahl loam, thick with the smoke of guttered candles. The walls, floor and ceiling were decorated with meticulous runes of the Dark Gods. He still clutched a gigantic oak-bound tome with his one remaining hand in the place where his guts had been. It was soaked with blood but I took it anyway - much of it can still be read, and I will endeavour to transcribe what I can in these pages.

There was no time to investigate further. I was only just behind whatever had been unleashed. The cellar doors that led up into the garden had been hacked to pieces, and I followed the trail of devastation up into the outside world, strangely quiet, where some huge, brutish creature had clearly escaped and stormed into a nearby copse. I followed its path for about a mile before I reached a dark and isolated temple. A crude image of the Goddess of Humanity was etched into the stone above the door, which stood open, swinging in the evening air.





Ruffau.c

Darkness had already fallen as I pushed inside, a bright shaft of moonlight penetrating a high window and casting shadows across the altar. The place was long abandoned, ruinous. Weeds grew between the stones. Everything was still, silent. I noticed one plant on the walls was smouldering, glowing with the embers of daemonfire beside the ashy print of something's claws. I peered closer. A shadow shifted ever so slightly.

I leapt forwards and downwards, rolling behind the cuboid altar as a huge, sinuous arm slashed at me from the shadows. A roar echoed all around. Without pausing, I activated the miniaturised pistols under my sleeves and fired two shots into the thing that was charging me. It split my ears with another bellow - this one caused by the pain from the abramelin oil with which I coated my ammunition. As it staggered back into the beam of moonlight, I gasped. It was half crimson and cloven-hoofed, at least seven feet tall. My mind was immediately filled with memories of another night, long ago, and a similar apparition spied through oleander blossoms.

This beast was not the same. The red streaks in its black hide were the glow of hellfire, which could be glimpsed inside when it opened its mouth. It was tall and lordly, but not as heavily muscled as the minion of Vanadra that slew my mother. Still, it had more than sufficient power to lay low a battalion of imperial infantry. I realised that I had surprised it more than it me - or else I would not have survived even as long as I had. I regained my senses and immediately knew what must be done.

"Your majesty," I began, drawing my silver hunting dagger while rummaging in my cloak with my other hand. "It is most unlike the ambassadors of Saur to attack out of darkness. And quite unnecessary in this case, I assure you. I submit willingly to your superior station." Flattery would be my only recourse for stalling this creature, a higher daemon of Pride. I remembered dark, whispered lessons of the nameless fear they called an Omen. I placed the short sword on the altar, holding up my empty hand to confirm my words.

It craned its long body forward, suspiciously, the tall spikes of its diamond crown glinting in the moon's ghostly radiance.

"Kneel," it breathed, and its voice was the quiet power of the furnace.

I complied, lowering a knee to the hard stone, remembering how I had knelt at a different altar, long ago, when I swore myself to-

"The Keepers of the Veil," it cried. In horror, I realised the pendant with my order's emblem had fallen loose from my cloak as I lowered my head - and the beast had seen it. I lunged into my deep pocket where I kept the Orb, but the daemon of Pride was much faster. The breath was knocked from my lungs as it kicked me onto my back and placed a huge hoof on my chest with a weight like an anvil. I was pinned. The Orb had rolled tantalisingly out of reach, under the rim of the altar. Thankfully, my enemy had not noticed it.

"You are the lowest wretches of this sorry Realm," stated the creature, looking at me under its foot with the disgust and revulsion of the most supercilious Equitan duke. "You seek to hinder the unstoppable might of Saur? It is laughable. Truly and completely pathetic."



"Then kill me, worm!" I tried to shout. But I could barely breathe, and my voice was little more than a whisper. "There will be others! We will keep this world free of your filth no matter the cost!"

"You dare-"

"You think you're so mighty, but you're nothing more than a child pulling wings from flies. You'll never know true worth, fiend!"

"What?!" A jet of white flame streaked from its maw as it screamed at my insults. "I'll wear your skin as a pouch, you tiny cretin!" It reached down and hauled me up with one hand around my neck, placing its lava-black face inches from mine, its hot stench making me gag. It drew back its other arm, brandishing its claws to make good on its threat, but it had not noticed that as I had risen from the floor, I had been able to seize my abandoned dagger from where I had placed it on the altar.

With a jerk, I plunged the short sword into its neck. It flinched at the silver touch, dropping me with a furious howl. I rolled quickly as I fell, reaching the altar and taking up the Orb of Al-Sahar, which I had already primed. As it flung away my sword and turned back to destroy me, I twisted the device hard along its centre.

The Orb actuated. I felt an inward, rushing sensation - not of air, but of reality itself. I experienced once more the sickening feeling of the universe bending, stretching as, in an instant, all the magic in the vicinity was sucked into the contraption. The beast, on the other side of the altar, howled even more urgently. Its limbs convulsed, and its regal stature was transformed by the humiliating torment of defeat. Yet in the moments before it vanished back across the Veil, I saw a chilling calm sweep across its face. August arrogance was restored, and for the briefest of flashes, I saw the machinations of a malevolent mind begin to focus upon me. The merest curve of a smile touched its lips, freezing my blood even as it faded into blackness.

Reality wobbled back into its regular shape, and the world was calm once more. I realised I had been holding my breath. Were it not for the Keepers' artefact and the element of surprise, there is no doubt I would have been just another casualty in the eternal war against darkness.

Omen of Savar

Rarely the most obscene or nightmarish creatures in a daemon host, the higher emissaries of Pride are always the most coldly terrifying. They command such a sense of superiority and frosty dominion that most mortals cannot help but cower in their presence. Their coming is said to herald terrible calamity, although this may be a superstition derived from the carnage they leave in their wake. In form, an Omen is tall, regal and humanoid, its terrible power unquestionable. Often it adds attributes of apex animals - great wings, long tails and almost always horns resembling an imperious crown. They are masters of combat, but can be so disdainful that they do not pay full attention to their foes, and exact punishing terms in any bargain.

I have been studying the grimoire I rescued from Georges Sybellicus' corpse. Among the stains, tears and the sections that seem to writhe and pulsate, I have found several legible passages on scraps of blackened parchment, describing the daemons he encountered in his over-enthusiastic career. Though the writing betrays an unhealthy interest in the subject, much of the information seems very useful, and I will include some of his notes here along with the other extracts I am collecting in my wider investigations.

GLORIA VIRIBUS

BLAZING GLORY

August 33rd

The sacrifice today mewled especially pitifully. I hurried the ritual, cutting the jugular with my golden knife. The room filled with a familiar vortex of magic, as the brimstone and other elements I provided were accepted up into my new-summoned creation, a Glory of Savar. Awesome and majestic. His great aura filled the room and I fell to my knees in thanks. Then he was gone - away into the city. I pray he noticed me.



August 34th

Yesterday's summoning was a serpent from the waist down. The one before had hooves and mighty wings. The only common element in each Glory is its blazing crown. I have seen how they struggle to impose their authority on each other when they come together. Last month I was present when Savar's Omen came to us and compelled his lesser brethren to attack the temple. They had wanted to burn the barley crop instead, but their hands were forced by will alone. This is true leadership.



Serember 5th

Tonight I hunted successfully for fresh stock. I caught one alone in a faeces-smearred alley near the cattle market. She didn't have time to scream before I had her. The other I found unconscious behind a tavern. This city is so rotten that depraved wretches fall like spoiled fruit from an overladen tree.

Serember 29th

I had to kill three of the livestock in the cellar. I have no more scraps to keep them alive while I wait for the brimstone that was promised several weeks ago.



Tandemar 11th

Glories attacked the palace yesterday. I read it in the Gazette. I wish I could have seen it as they fell upon the guards. The paper claimed that they failed to reach the inner chambers, but I know the truth. Now the sheep of this city will learn to fear the dutiful servants of Savar.



Tandemar 17th

I fear to leave the house. The agents of the state are everywhere. Eyes always watching. I no longer trust my suppliers. I wish I could meet with Brother Richemont just one more time, but his instructions were clear.



Tandemar 35th

This city's degeneracy is a stench I cannot escape. I loathe it. So-called citizens who claim to love Sonnstahl spend their days inebriated and rutting in their own filth. Have they no dignity? No Pride?



November 1st

I thought I saw men in dark uniforms following me down Copper Street. I turned into an alley and ran until I was sure they were gone. Hours have passed, and yet my heart still pounds.



November 24th

Sacrifice tonight unsuccessful. Still not enough brimstone. I yearn to gaze upon a Glory once again. My failure is agonising.



Ullos 6th

They are coming. They have found this house. I think I can see them through the curtains. They have taken Brother Huygen, I am sure of it. They do not show themselves to my eyes, but I can feel their gaze upon me.



Ullos 10th

This room is dark all day. At night I venture into dirty streets, caged by soot-stained brick, wan lamps reflecting muddy puddles. The smell alone makes me retch. All of it - it all needs to burn. And yet still they come for me.

Ullos 25th

Oh Savar, my love for you burns like the flames of the Realm Beyond! Thank you, thank you for sending Brother Richemont to me before the end. His promise that I made you proud echoes in my heart for eternity. Accept me into your glorious presence but for a moment, I beg - unworthy as I am. By the edge of this golden knife, I give myself finally to you!

—Parchments found on a corpse
in an Aschau hovel

Blazing Glory

Brutes eager to do battle, Savar's Glories demolish all that stand in their way. Large, imperious and scornful, these beasts somewhat resemble less powerful versions of the Exalted Herald's ascended from mortal men, leading to misconceptions that give them a potent reputation among enemies and followers of the Dark Gods alike. Their power lies in their untouchable prestige and arrogance - once they have been wounded or even touched by an opponent, their deadliness begins to wane. They will often reward anyone who provides an opportunity to enact brief but spectacular deeds in the Mortal Realm.



GLUTTONY

For several months I journeyed through Equitaine, which led me one evening to sojourn within the safety of a village. It was quaint, and even now I stand by that first impression, although I recall a strange figure bustling away as I arrived, bent and hooded by a black cowl. Thinking little of it, I rented a room, and enjoyed the first feather mattress I had felt in weeks.

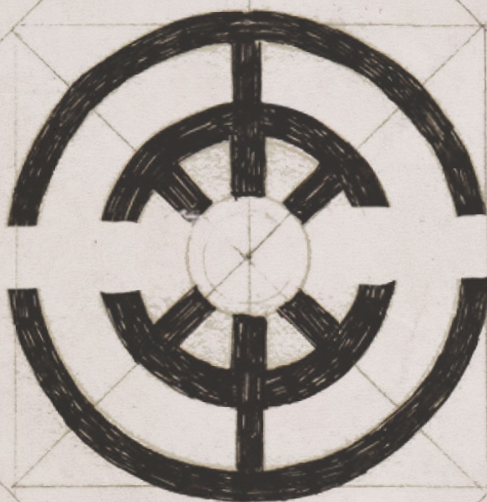
On the morn, I ventured out - my prize was the quiescis fola, whose petals are said to be a remedy against the shakes. Outside, I was met with an odd marking on the temple of the Lady, like a crudely rendered mural. A long, curved line with jagged triangles dispersed along its border like teeth. I dismissed the event as mere vandalism - bored youths trapped in their tiny village.

I returned hours later with botanical samples to test. In my absence, a nobleman from Guênac had stopped with his retinue for the evening. He threw a feast for the town - no doubt a show of his own wealth and prestige. I joined in the celebration. Ale flowed freely, and the townspeople likely enjoyed one of the heartiest meals of their lives. I admit, with some embarrassment, that sobriety fled far from my mind that night.

I slumbered into the late afternoon of the following day, skull pounding like a drum. The noble was making preparations to leave. I planned to amend my hangover with breakfast, though I noticed that the townsfolk were slaughtering livestock nearby. The image surprised me for a moment, as the cattle were surely vital to their prosperity. Meats were already being prepared, their savory smell reaching forward and pulling me to join by the nostrils.

It is difficult to describe the hunger I felt. It was as if a beast lay within, gnawing at my soul to eat, eat, eat! I ate. So did the townsfolk. When the food at the tables grew thin, the cry went up for more, and further slaughter followed. Within hours, not a single animal was left alive - not even the horses. Hounds were loosed to find rats, and then the dogs themselves were consumed.

As the feast continued, the ale flowing like a torrent while food ran low, tension began to rise. One fellow shoved me to the floor, demanding that, as an outsider, I contribute my own share. I hurried away, but I felt his anger myself. Why was the food gone? The elders should be providing; I wanted to eat, needed to feed.



Fights were broken up, and as the ale stopped flowing the folk dispersed to their homes, no doubt intent on raiding their own larders. I noticed some desperate fellows gorging themselves on horsefeed as I retreated to my room.

On entering, I realised my mistake. The sample! Its petals were dry and brown. The plant had died exceptionally quickly, but there was nothing to blame but my own negligence. In addition, I realised sleeping would be difficult, what with the frequent shouting I heard from surrounding homesteads. Gathering my tools, I left eagerly under cover of night.

My goal was to collect another sample, test it quickly, and get on my way. My quest was completed before noon, as I knew now where to look.

Returning, I felt the stench before reaching the first house of the village. I could see the bodies, which didn't shock me so much. But the smell. Like spoiled seafood mixed with faeces. It was thick, almost a fog. After clearing out the contents of my stomach on the road, I inspected a body closer. It was rotten, as if it had been there for weeks. How had decomposition taken hold so quickly? Now that I was closer, I could see the other townsfolk - crouching, bent figures consuming their putrid companions, a devilish light in their eyes and a ruby stain on their lips.

I rushed to grab my possessions, and left immediately. I passed the temple mural on my way out, seeping with fetid liquid,

like puss from a wound, staining the walls of a once-holy sanctum. Walls that appeared to pulse - less stone now than flesh.

It has been three days since I escaped that place. Still I sense its aroma of suffocating decay. The thought of food disgusts me. Every meal conjures the scene so vividly that I can't help but fear I am there again. I struggle to eat at all. May the saints preserve me.

—Found on the body of Professor André Russicci, having starved to death in his quarters at the University of San Pietro



MAW OF AKAAN

1tar 34th

Since my investigation into Sybellicus led to nothing, I have grudgingly accepted a new case. When I returned from Sonnstahl, I found Father Miceli deep in his meditations. The monastery was unusually quiet, with most of my brothers and sisters of the Order either away on missions or ensconced in private training. The gray stone cloisters seemed more dreary than ever.

When Father finally saw me, I saw that his prayers had done little to soothe his unease. I immediately began by apologising for my failure to secure the testimony we had sought from Sybellicus. He waved me off with a disinterested hand.

"I doubt there is much we could have learned from a mind as far gone as that old maniac," he said. "Too much time with the mercury vapours, I suspect."

"Actually, his grimoire is proving most useful—" I started.

"Don't worry about that. I need your attention on a new mission."

"Of course, Father."

"You're not going to like it. We've been engaged by the Patrician of Zalos."

I flinched at the name, and I felt my face darken, but I didn't speak.

"I know your family was in conflict with—"

"They are not my family," I said, loudly. "I am pledged to the Keepers of the Veil. I will do whatever duty is required."

I could see the pity in his eyes, and stared resolutely at the wall behind him.

"I worry about you, you know," he said, adjusting his cassock. "All the time. But if you are sure you want this job, you should ride at once. The Patrician is in a state of some agitation. It appears a daemon killed his son."

"Indeed? And he wishes me to slay the beast? The Orb of Al-Sahar will take many days to recharge, so I will need to know what manner of—"

"No, he wants you to find the person who unleashed it. He wants an investigator."





I did not want to be alone with my dreams, so I rode through the night. I was glad the darkness blinded me to a landscape whose familiarity may have been too painful to bear. By the time the sun rose, I was entering the gates of Zalos, a city of ten thousand souls. Despite living nearby as a child, I had never been here before.

Showing my credentials to the guards, I was swiftly escorted to the palace, a stately abode of high ceilings, lavish artworks and gilt finery.

"Miss Dimitriou," came a rapidly approaching voice. "Thank you for coming. I am the Patrician's personal attendant and secretary, Cassia Sarki. Let me take you to him, if you are ready. It's...it is an honour to have you."

I nodded. The woman seemed timid and somewhat awestruck. Her perfumed hair made me self-conscious of my own unkempt locks, and I kept my cowl raised. We passed down long corridors and up grand staircases in silence. In a far off room, someone was playing the clavichord.

The Patrician was in his son's chamber, where the body lay like a lump across the fine carpet, covered by a white sheet, tumbled by wind that came through a large hole in the wall. The man had his face buried in his hands, but he looked up as we entered, then stood, and bowed.

"The Order of the Keepers is sworn to keep the world in balance," he said stiffly, almost growling with emotion. "I beg you, help me right the scales of justice. I loved my son." He stepped towards me as a tear rolled down his cheek and his whole body shook. He hissed his final words, barely able control his voice. "I must have his murderer."

I held his gaze. He turned and left the room without another word. I looked to Sarki.

"Everything is as you found it?"

"Indeed."

"Then I shall begin at once."

I went swiftly to the body, drawing back the bedsheet to reveal a sprawled and crumpled form with deep gashes across the chest. I bent to inspect the wounds, which showed little signs of bleeding but were grotesquely suppurating. I sniffed.

"Chromium," I said out loud. "A common daemonic secretion." I glanced around the room. "Did the guards see anything?"

"That's the strange thing. They all abandoned their posts. We can't find any one of them."

"Really?" I raised an eyebrow, and then pointed. "The creature came in through the door, which means it was unleashed within the palace. Have every room searched. Detain everyone who was in the building yesterday evening. If they haven't...abandoned their posts."

"Yes sir. Uh, ma'am," said the secretary, meekly. "What will you do?"

"I'm a daemon hunter. I'm going to hunt the daemon."



I advanced to the far wall of the room, where wind was coming through the gaping hole that had been smashed straight through the stone and mortar. Traces of dark green vomit lay splattered around the carpet and furniture. I had a good idea what I was in for, and I didn't like it. With a leap, I followed the exit path, splashing into the moat beyond. I waded onto the further bank and set off through the trees. The palace was on the edge of the city walls, and beyond the moat was simply countryside. Soon I found what I was looking for: a granary.

The overseers and farmhands swarmed around the shattered barn like ants. I could see at a glance that the food stored within had been pillaged.

"Which way?" I shouted at someone nearby.

"Over there," he replied. "But there ain't much to see."

I ran to the place indicated, a walled orchard. It was a sorry sight. Most of the trees had been totally consumed, leaving little more than slender trunks where once great bushels of oranges, olives and leafy greenery had been. What was left was covered in great, goopy bucketfuls of the green substance I had seen in the prince's chamber.

"You missed the show!" cackled a voice at my elbow. An old woman was hobbling up to me.

"You saw it?" I asked.

"Yup," she grinned. "Huge, like a mama bear, it was. Great big arms like shovels, and the rest of it was just a mouth. Big slimy hole with lots of teeth. Wouldn't stop eating, eating everything. Took all the grain - a year's worth! Took the old orchard, been here since my grandmother's time. Took Charlie, too, when he tried to stop it. Just picked him up and put him in its mouth, smushed him up - spear, shield and all. Nothing left to bury, the big idiot."

"That's a lot of slime," I commented, with a gesture. "I imagine it was quite the display."

"That's right," she said, with strange glee. "Kept getting bigger, stronger...finally the bugger just burst! Never seen anyone do that before..."

The only creatures that do are the most powerful daemons of Gluttony. The Avrasi used to combat them by putting slaves in their path to be sacrificed until its own appetite destroyed it. I dread to think who would unleash such a monster. At least now I know what happened to the palace guards."

The crone and I stared at the scene of devastation.

"Daemons is bad business," she said, finally.

"First and only one I've ever seen in all my years. Sunna preserve us. What is this old world coming to?"

I looked at her.

"Damned if I know," I said.

Maw of Akaan

These monsters come to the mortal realm with one purpose: to consume. They are giant, mindless brutes, a great fleshy mass, often reliant on short legs and huge arms. Some seem like bears or elephants - others are enormous worms, or simply amorphous blobs of gelatine that cover great distances by sheer force of hunger. The only feature common to all daemons of this kind is the enormous gaping orifice. A mouth for consumption, typically barbed with endless spikes or teeth. Sometimes the maw takes the place of the head, other times it is within the trunk of the body, or it is the body.



BLOAT FLIES

There is a tavern in Santa Genoveva where the barman wears tinted lenses to hide his eyes. On slow nights, if they tip well, he is known to amuse patrons with small feats of magic. The tavern is sought out for its tolerance, attracting every sort of customer - mercenary soldiers, religious pilgrims, seekers of fortune and knowledge. You'll find ogres and dwarves in there, and even the goblin-like duende, a native species that usually keeps to itself.

The only people the barman will not serve are those suspected of affiliation with the Dark Gods. One night after a late-running town carnival (an almost daily occurrence in Destria), I was at the bar when an unremarkable couple ordered drinks. The barman, who calls himself Librón, was about to turn to the casks when he noticed small inked symbols under the newcomers' wrists. I saw his jovial expression turn to stone, and I thought there was a spark behind his dark glasses. He had them both dragged from the bar and taken straight to the authorities, where they admitted under questioning to working for a cult of Akaan.

It was months later that the tavern was attacked by daemons. Corpulent, revolting insects the size of a man, flesh rotting from their fat bodies, hovering impossibly on tiny wings that filled the air with a deafening hum. The place was well-attended that night, and many of the patrons were armed. A terrible fight ensued, with the creatures proving as lethal as they were hideous. Each one that was felled by a sword or club released streaks of black ichor over the unfortunate warrior who felled it, burning their flesh with a smell

that made me retch as I hid under a table.

Suddenly even this meagre shield was wrenched away and one of the hellish flies was upon me, stinger-first. I was certain of my doom, but at that moment Librón himself leapt out, covering my body with his own. I saw him remove his dark glasses, and a great bolt of searing fire seemed to speed from his very face, incinerating the oncoming daemon so completely that not even a drop of its poisonous innards touched the floor.

His eyes were smoking as he replaced the bifocals. He dragged me to a back room and bolted the door. My mouth was agape. He fetched a pouch of purple-black powder and inhaled a thimbleful through his nose.

Soon, troops arrived to despatch the last of the daemonic incursion. None but I had seen Librón's own daemonic powers.

"This body is not my own," he confessed, breathing hard. He went on to explain that he was a being from the realm of the Dark Gods, who had possessed this man as a vessel many years earlier when he was summoned in a confrontation much like the one we had just survived. I was stunned by this revelation.

He said he was in hiding - but not from people. In the Immortal Realm, where his formless mind had been exposed to the great mass of daemonkind, there was free will only according to his own strength.



The greater daemons could compel their weaker brethren to do their bidding, and there was no way to resist. In the Mortal Realm, Librón found escape. The publican of Santa Genoveva was so pleased with the independence he discovered away from the Legions that he determined never to go back. This is a very unusual decision for a daemon to say the least, but for him freedom was more intoxicating than any of the beverages he served. He had even been able to source charged darkstone, which for years he had ground up and consumed to make sure he never exhausted the magic he needed to remain in this body.

As I prepared to make my shaken way home, I turned to the man who was not a man.

"I'm astonished," was all I could think to say.

He smirked.

"Do you think I'm the only one in this Realm?"

—Memoirs of Pablo de la Rue, daemonologist

▽

Bloat Flies

The minions of Akaan are unpleasant at the best of times, but the bloat flies are among the most repulsive of all. They take the form of giant, vile, wasp-like insects, bent on killing and consumption. They are amazingly deadly, striking hard and fast with sharpened stingers or awful mandibles, and their blood is composed of a lethally noxious substance I have not been able to find anywhere else in the Mortal Realm. Some appear to have humanoid riders, though in truth these body parts could well be offshoots of the same daemon. Willing to bargain when trapped.

X



LUST

White dust covered my skin and coated my lungs as the trudge continued into the isolation of the Barren Mountains. Yet for all the weight of the iron chains binding me to my fellow prisoners, I knew it was lighter than the stone I would haul in the mines.

The prisoner in front of me stumbled, and the line was forced to pause. Immediately, the slavemasters were upon us. The foreman raised his whip to punish the offender's weakness, but the stroke never came down. Instead, our captor gasped, and fell dead with an axe in his back. A large dark shape stood over him, and more were coming through the raised white dust. Men and women in huge armour: Warriors of the Dark Gods.

The other prisoners trembled in fear, but I was elated. A true Warrior never kills a slave - they're more likely to set her free. My joy only grew when I saw the sign of Cibaresh etched on their chest-plates.

"You have come for me," I said, after they had slain the remaining guards. "We are allies under the Tempter, greatest of the Seven. I have not taken your pledge, but I have spent years in his

service. Did you hear of the tentacled fiends unleashed east of Avras? That was me!"

"We know who you are," said the warband's leader, dispassionately. "Follow."

My journey continued into the mountains. My shackles were broken, but I did not know if I was free. I was certainly no less weary. Finally, we came to a dark entrance carved into the rock of a narrow canyon. There was an overpowering smell of camphor, and I felt my body sink into a deep, lightless pool.

When I woke, I was alone under a grove of cedar trees on rich soil. The dust was gone from my body and I felt fresh and invigorated.

"Abomination," came a voice like needles. I blinked as I saw Mother Safak from the convent step out from the trees. "You have succumbed to the sins of the flesh," she continued, "and the Goddess will cleanse you with holy fire from the inside out."

I turned and there beside me was a man. His blue eyes gleamed from a face of radiant beauty, and I ran my fingers over a naked torso ridged with muscles like taught steel.



COURTESAN OF CIBARESH

1tar 35th

I feel sick with exhaustion. My mind is spent from resisting the temptations of darkness, yet I feel compelled to record these memories before they fade. I have a small room at the Dancing Stallion in Civissina, a prosperous city of northern Glauca, and Zalos' primary economic rival.

I came here on information supplied to me by Cassia Sarki, the Patrician's attendant, who brought word that two serving women at the Palace had been pilfering brimstone for dark rituals, and had confessed under questioning to belonging to a certain Order of the Equilateral.

The number of daemon-sympathising cults in Veticia has been growing these last years, and this was one I did not recognise. I consulted with members of my own sect, who pointed me towards Civissina. I entered the city under darkness, and it was not hard to follow the signs. Civissina is under the thumb of a tyrant, the merciless Doge Girolamo, whose thugs patrol the streets, enforce curfew, and extort "supplementary taxes" from an overburdened population. There are whispers of popular revolt, though the Doge has quelled all efforts so far. Yet still people talk of a secret cadre that is preparing to strike from within the very heart of the city. Many others have turned to the Dark Gods for aid, as the weak always do when they have no other recourse to strength.

In a certain tavern, I found a basement trapdoor that led to a forgotten catacomb. A dark and foreboding doorway was marked by a rough triangle on the lintel. I hefted a torch and passed through. Immediately, I felt my skin prickle with a strange fever. Something glimmered for an instant in the corner of my vision and I instinctively ducked and fired my wrist-pistol into the darkness. I heard the shot whistle away into nothing. I spun again, drawing my sword, as I glimpsed a shape fleeing across the torchlight at impossible speed. I thought there was the sound of inhuman laughter, more like a snickering insect.

"Who's there!" came a cry in the darkness. Hurriedly, I extinguished my flame and ducked into an alcove. Cultists were approaching down the corridor. They used their own torches to search the shadows, but failed to find my hiding place. Just as I thought I had evaded them, all the hairs on my arms and neck stood up again with nameless fear. There was something alongside me in the darkness.





"Is that so?" The daemon raised a grey eyebrow. "You don't even know what we're planning. Let me show you."

I shuffled along behind her in my shackles as she went among the sick and wounded. Looking closer, I soon felt winded by confusion. It was clear that they were not being tortured, but cared for. The daemon herself stopped to advise the nurses on matters of medication.

"The knowledge of the Immortal Realm is manifold," she commented. In another chamber, I saw recruits being armed and trained. "They came to us for aid, and we responded. We are preparing this city to fight against its oppressors."

"No," I cried, against the evidence before my eyes. "You seek the destruction of this Realm! You would not help these people unless it suited your evil schemes!"

"Oh my poor child," she grinned. "But it does suit our schemes. You have been terribly misguided. We are the forces of darkness, yes, but that is just a human word, used for any unknown thing you fear. A better word is chaos. We do not seek the destruction of this Realm, but merely an end to its order. Wherever there is power, we fight it. Wherever there is structured living, we undermine it. We worship the purity of change and upheaval. That is why we come here, and why we will help these people overthrow that which shackles them."

My own shackles were removed and I was permitted to return back through the catacombs. At the door to the outside world I glanced back. In a pool of torchlight stood the Courtesan. I shivered at its spindly, insectoid horror. It stared back with many sets of eyes.

Tomorrow I return to Zalos. I am convinced that those I met today have not conspired in the murder of the prince, but somehow I feel that the storm coming to Civissina must be connected to this case.



Courtesan of Cibaresh

Sometimes humanoid, sometimes bestial, often androgynous, these merciless denizens of the Lust God's harem tower above the throng of battle with tall, thin bodies and long limbs - often many more than the usual two arms and two legs, and mostly ending in wickedly sharp weaponry extending from nails or bony exoskeletons. In battle they are a whirlwind of joyous bloodshed, so fast their movements seem to blur. A great diversity of forms and appendages has been observed in this class of daemon, but they are all united in their ferocious lethality and love of sharp edges.

SIRENS

Aegis and Blade was the first of many mercenary companies I was to work for in those heady days of my youth. The company itself had just returned from a contract for the Republic of Santa Marika, and was recruiting heavily for its next campaign. It was there that I signed on. I chose it in part for its fame, and in part because of the great diversity of temperaments and peoples in its ranks. I was determined to test myself in whatever situations fortune would offer me, and among whichever peoples. Only then would I become the man who would be worthy of sweet Amelie's favour.

This next campaign, it transpired, had been called in haste by the Protostratikon of Myra, to deal with the rebellion of a regional Kommiss. Normally, this would have been handled without difficulty by the local forces, but according to survivors, the Kommiss had made a pact with the Dark Powers. Myra's standing forces in the region were insufficient to the threat. Several settlements had been razed, and their peoples scattered by the time our ships landed.



When we met the enemy in the field, I was stationed with the reserve, set to aid whichever part of the line showed weakness.

This a standard stratagem of the Iron Crowns, and sensible commanders everywhere. Our line was ready and the men grim as we awaited the clarion, but it was never to sound.

A small force of the enemy had flanked our line entirely, moving faster than any company of horse. I say this as one who has seen the speed of elven knights first hand. These terrors of hellish tooth and claw tore into our ranks, their weapons alive, turning and cutting in ways no mortal blade could move. They would tease our troops out of position and proceed to cut them from every angle. To these assailants, it was all a blissful dance, flawlessly choreographed. The daemons writhed from partner to partner with flair and a practiced gait. Veterans of a score of battles, as tested as the steel in their hands, fell to these living nightmares. Wounded, yet living; the daemons wished to savour our downfall. They stayed their hands from killing if they could instead cripple. But worse still was the way they laughed throughout, like a courtesan's giggle, arousing and infuriating. Some dragged our fellows, noosed by neck and limb, to the rear ranks where their struggles ceased, and their bodies became a red ruin.

How could I win out, when men such as these had failed and fallen?



Their skill at arms unique. Their speed unmatched. Any defence was futile against them - and in that, I found my salvation. I screamed and threw myself into the fray, surrendering thoughts of parry or dodge, simply swinging my halberd wildly. If I missed the foe, so be it, but I would not chase. I would not let myself be goaded or tricked. And my screams would banish the laughter and their whispers from the corners of my reason, insistent and unwelcome.

This too would not have been enough but for the Captain's personal cavalry arriving to relieve us. Our regiment exhausted, and our standard lost, we were left in disgrace. I looked as though I had been dragged naked through a nettle bush. Worse than this, in the days that followed, I could not keep my mind from returning to images of those dreadful sirens and their impossible grace. For many months, at the sound of every laugh, my blood ran cold in memory of them.

—Captain Andrea Barbiano,
'The Tools of the Trade', 948 A.S.

Sirens

Sprinting like a Virentian raptor, these paired Lust daemons have evolved their forms in unparalleled symbiosis. One fleet and built for speed, the other adapted to ride its fragile form and deal death from its back with razor, steel-like claws. These creatures enact a murderous dance with their enemies, speeding forwards to slice and stab, only to pull back just as fast, tantalisingly out of reach for return blows. Sometimes summoned into urban environments by amateur cultists, they do very poorly in narrow confines, and tend to head directly for more open landscape. Highly communicative if captured, assuming you can decipher the chittering.



ENVY

Dalau: We Highborn don't admit it, but it is my belief that we are corrupted by the Seven more frequently than the traitors of the West, than our primitive woodland cousins, and even than the lesser species. The Arandai, when we fall, fall most often into the arms of Savar. It seems that Pride is our greatest vice. And yet I believe the true guiding star of our people is not Savar, but Kuulima. The Fly. Ever-watching. Comparing. Judging its own worth by that of others.

Cudaleg: I did not ask for a history lesson, nor a lecture in darkest heresy. Come to the point, Doctor.

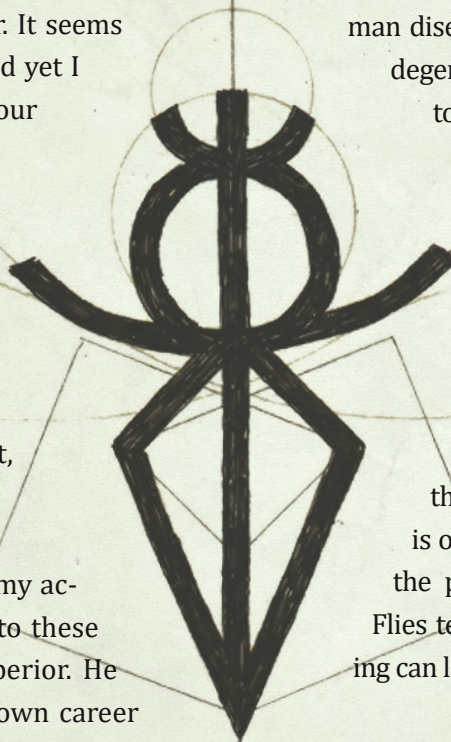
Dalau: Of course. I merely wish my actions be understood. I was sent to these distant colonies by a jealous superior. He knew my skills would place his own career prospects in jeopardy. I was supposed to serve out the next century or so monitoring the health of humans and elves here in Sagarika. I did not mind. I have spent my time engaged in a fascinating study of disease. Humans here are among the most blighted by sickness of any in the world. But they do not blame their overcrowded cities nor their lack of sanitation and medical supplies. They blame the Dark Gods. According to their folklore, every sickness is sent by a daemon. This is nonsense, of course, but it is known that some daemons do carry diseases or even spread them intentionally. I wanted to see how far the Dark

Gods really could be held responsible for the poor health of this sub-continent.

I found little supernatural involvement until I began investigating one of the most extraordinary human diseases, which they call leprosy. This degenerative plague was not contagious to elves, though we have shunned its sufferers. I believe I am the first and only Highborn to have entered a leper colony. There I found the diseased humans openly worshipping Kuulima, safe in the knowledge that no one would come to stop them, and indeed I found evidence that daemons dwelt among them. It is only natural for the afflicted to envy the prosperity of others. The Lady of Flies teaches us that cultivating this feeling can lead to true greatness.

Cudaleg: I repeat, we do not need to hear your apostasy. That your mind has been corrupted is clear, but tell us, if leprosy cannot be contracted by elves, how has it infected you?

Dalau: Do you like it? I find the effect fascinating. My features sprouting new growths or wasting away altogether. The patterns: random, exquisitely entropic. Did you know that I no longer feel pain? Nothing can hurt me - not steel or poison or fire. Just one of the Goddess' beautiful gifts. Her creatures devised a way for the disease to be passed to me, where Nature itself had found none.



Cudaleg: Why would you allow this?

Dalau: It's simple. I was jealous.

Cudaleg: Jealous of what? Of whom?

Dalau: Of the beauty of others. My colleagues and companions were always fairer than I. More graceful, attractive and lovely. I even envied some of the more nubile humans, their fine skin and long hair.

Cudaleg: All this, because you were not content with your own beauty?

Dalau: I am not ashamed of my desires.

Cudaleg: But if it was beauty you craved, why blight yourself with this horrific disease?

Dalau: Oh my dear friend. The disease is not for me. I was already too ugly - there was no hope for me. No, the disease is for you. I offer it gladly, that every elf in this fortress may know Kuulima's caress. Once the Fly has touched you, you will lose that which I envied, and I will be at peace. That is her primary command: if I cannot have it, no one can.

Cudaleg: This is preposterous! You mean to infect us with leprosy?

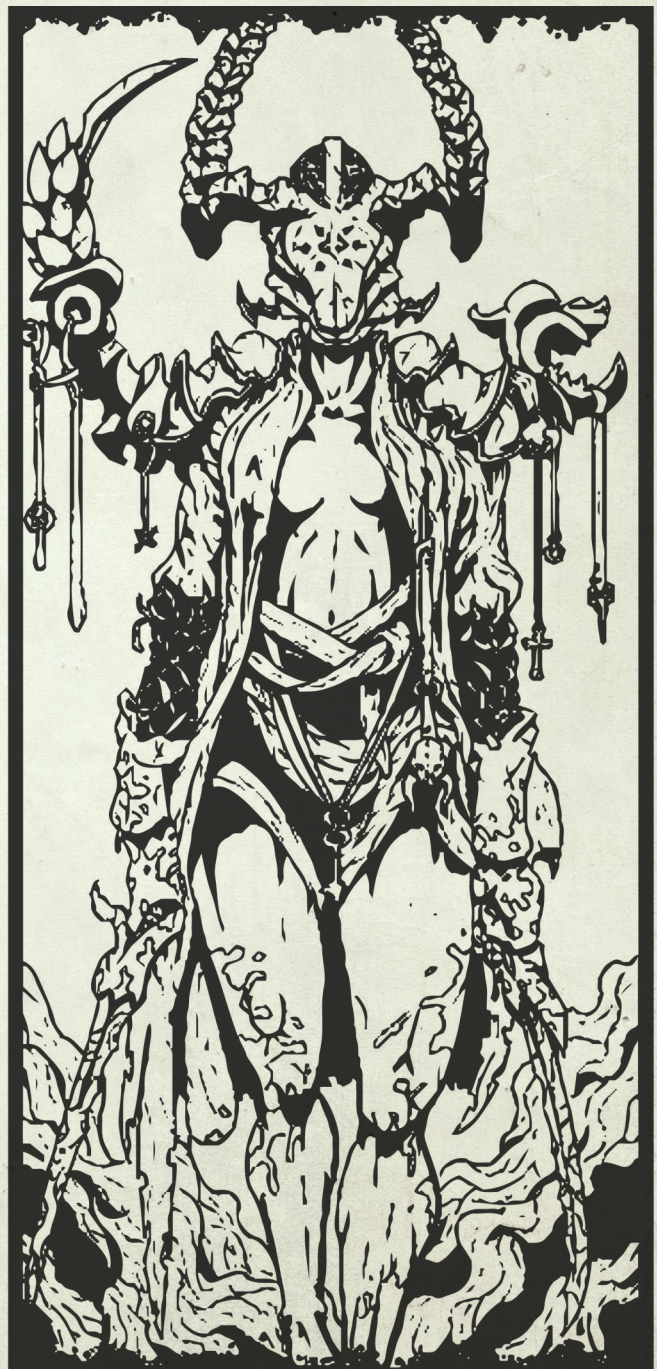
Dalau: The strain I carry is contagious to all of elvenkind. It will spread quickly. Soon all of you will become truly hideous.

Cudaleg: The monstrous pleasure you take in your own madness is fooling no one, Doctor. You were arrested at the first sign of disease. You have been quarantined behind thick glass, and when this trial is concluded, you will be executed and your body burned to ash.

Dalau: And neither does your arrogant air hide your fear, false Judge. I welcome my own fate, for I am grotesque. Simply know this. Leprosy is incub-

ated in the body for many years before symptoms begin to show. I have been doing Kuulima's bidding much longer than you realise. Hiding among you, working and dining with you, sharing your food, your water. Frequently touching you. Most of you are already long infected - I see in your face you know I speak the truth, oh yes. It will not be long now before you see the signs. And when they come, be sure to thank our Lady of Flies!

—Transcript of interrogation, Her Majesty's Court at Acsagrec



KUULIMA'S DECEIVER

The Circle of Kuulima was a panoply of iconography and imagery. I witnessed representations of relics from Vetian religions of our own times, alongside artefacts of pantheons long dead and buried. Banners and statues of all nations adorned architecture spanning dozens of cultures. It gave an impression of a museum in Sonnstahl, containing items from myriad civilisations, or else a wealthy merchant's home, bedecked more for spectacle than any sense of elegance.

The way ahead crossed a gilded bridge, surrounded by plinths displaying helms of all shapes, each sundered by a blow which would have laid the wearer low, be they elf, man, dwarf, orc or any other creature. Beneath this glittering span a river flowed, the liquid within bright green, verdant and sickly. Yet no true water ever bubbled and hissed as that brook did.

As our feet reached the start of the arch we were confronted by a horde of chattering daemons, clambering out from under the bridge and arraying across its span, blocking our path and snarling. Each moment their form shimmered and changed, as they adopted aspects of my appearance: the robes I had donned that morning, the bronze pomander gifted to me by the Sage Werdin, the sturdy boots I purchased on the advice of a cavalry officer years past.

No great daemons these. Their image constantly altered, reflecting a lack of will. They chattered and bared teeth in our direction, an animosity clear to behold. But their attention was on my guide – at no point did they adopt his armoured visage, and their eyes never left him as they snarled. A sneer curled his lips as he stared down those creatures blocking his path, as though he would simply stomp them into the ground should they fail to part.



In a wave from the back of the crowd, the fluctuating figures suddenly fixed, tiny soldiers of humanoid form, with skin of shimmering silver. Then, like fish before a predator, they scattered in all directions, disappearing from view. In their place stood a being of disconcerting appearance. A gilded breastplate of Destrian design was coupled with a gleaming Qassari shield, resplendent with heraldry of Kuulima. A helm like that of a highborn elf was topped with a plume of white hair draping down to an engraved gorget.

The daemon itself appeared almost human, yet no human ever possessed such proportions, save in a sculptor's nightmares. Its head appeared overly large, features exaggerated, with eyes that burned like torches and a sharp-toothed smile extending far wider than should have been possible.





Its skin was a bright argent, rippling with strange muscles and seeming to meld into its armour. Even the weapon it bore, a Sonnstahler greatsword of almost absurd scale, seemed an extension of itself. All these incongruous elements should have looked ridiculous, the strangest of chimeric creatures, but I was left with the sense of an imperious presence.

None of the hesitance of the lesser entities was visible here; this daemon was assured and unflinching. It stood upon the bridge with complete self-possession, sword held indifferently propped on the ground. Only the intensity of those eyes gave the lie to its idle stance. I felt utterly immaterial to this impasse, as my companion bristled under that scrutiny. Moments dragged out, the air seemed to crackle with intensity, and both parties subtly flexed limbs and hefted arms.

The moment was broken as, almost simultaneously, each gave the smallest of nods, and spoke over one another.

“Betrayer.”

“Deceiver.”

As though that was all that needed to be said, the Deceiver stepped from the bridge, and stood at ease, the way ahead clear. Passing close at hand, I took in more detail, observing the panoply of adornments covering that bizarre form. Grasping hands crossed with sigils and crests – with the dominant motif of a daemoniac fly. In silence we crossed, and travelled the Circle for some time before I dared disturb the hush.

“You serve the same master as the denizens of this plane, unless I miss my mark. Yet there was no love lost between the guardians of the bridge and yourself. Are daemons not the allies of Warriors?”

Moments passed in contemplation before the answer was given, during which time we passed a series of buildings. Each aspect of every structure seemed to reflect a different style of architecture, a cacophony of conflict which seemed ready to crumble any moment.

“You ask questions without simple answers, though it is right you should comprehend. You know of the value placed upon personal freedom by those who choose the Dark Gods. It is well known and why the Warriors will always find fertile ground among the oppressed and exploited. Among daemons, it seems autonomy is an accomplishment of the powerful, or perhaps a reward for the favoured.

“On the other hand, Warriors expect and earn that freedom from the very moment they swear, from their first steps on the Paths, while some daemons will never know its sweet taste. Meanwhile, daemons already possess that for which Warriors strive: immortality and a place close to the gods. You might imagine those contrasts can rankle.”

The Betrayer considered for a long moment before continuing:



“Yet I serve the same master as that Deceiver. There is a commonality to our natures, and we may find ourselves parties to the same causes in the Mortal Realm. I even respect its prowess. I know that if we were to battle, it would find the best of my nature and turn it against me. The better I am, the better it becomes. Such a being is worthy of recognition.”

We continued in a contemplative silence, finally coming to behold one of the strangest sights I would witness in my time here. It took long moments to process what I saw: oddly bifurcated forms gradually resolving into the shapes of people, split down the middle as though sundered by some wicked axe.

These were no corpses left for carrion – eyes blinked at me from each half of the bodies, and lips moved, seeming to form my name. I stepped closer, all the while trying to ignore the viscera of that terrible wound. A croaking whisper greeted my ear, bubbling through welling blood.

“Beware... Those who would sow division in life... here find their sins visited upon them... Would that I had never...thought to breed discord between brothers... Forsake me now...but forget not...we live the Hell we make...”

Shuddering, I left the unfortunate soul behind me, but renewed my scrutiny of the Betrayer, wondering what had brought him to swear his soul to Kuulima. By our journey’s conclusion, I would know more of my enigmatic guide.

—“Part V - Deceiver Détente, Unity and Division”
from *Circling the Abyss* by Nazario Calegari

Kuulima’s Deceiver

Obsessed with the appearance and abilities of their mortal enemies, the greater daemons who serve Kuulima have developed the ability to adapt their own form to mimic those who they are trying to destroy. Legends of many cultures speak of the fearful “doppelgänger”, called ka in ancient Naptesh, vardoger in Askland and ankou in Brezann. Reports indicate that the stronger their enemy, the more powerful these creatures become. At initial materialisation they are usually not far from humanoid in form, albeit with grotesquely exaggerated characteristics, fiendish adornments and often brightly coloured skin. Their weaponry is also human-like but oversized, showy, as if trying to compensate for something. Be warned: in negotiations their guile and cunning is unsurpassed, and many encounters have led to irreversible insanity.



MAGEBLIGHT GREMLINS

1tar 36th

When I arrived back at the court of Zalos, Prince Damien was in mid-tirade. The son of the Patrician and younger brother of Nikos, the murder victim, Damien is a hot-blooded nobleman, known for his temper. His father listened from his wooden throne with a resignation that was clearly habitual, while the son paced back and forth.

"Enough of this inaction!" he roared. "We have been attacked by another kingdom! They have struck us in our very home! We must respond with full strength of arms. Father, let me lead our army to Civissina. We will crush the Doge and the rebellion he has permitted to fester within his walls, and we will exact vengeance on whichever bastard mongrel thought they could strike at the House of Zalos!"

The Patrician considered him for a few moments. Without taking his eyes off his son, he responded:

"And what do the Keepers of the Veil have to say about the charges leveled at our long-time ally?"

It was several moments before I realised he was addressing me. I stepped forward, and lowered my hood.

"I can find no connection between the crime committed here and the rebels of Civissina. I do not believe they are your enemy."

There was a series of gasps around the room. All eyes swivelled back to Prince Damien.

"What?!" he bellowed, face crimson with fury. "This is what you get from a crumbling order that long ago lost any real power to serve or protect us. We have it on good authority that villains from the Order of the Equilateral infiltrated the palace. We all know they came from Civissina. And now this so-called 'agent of the Veil' denies a connection!?"

"I was not permitted a chance to question these 'villains' myself, but if they do belong to the Order, they were not sent by Civissina."

"You dare—"

"Quiet!" rang out the voice of the Patrician, who seemed to have recovered a little from his all-consuming grief. "The court will adjourn. Clearly we must seek further information before we jump to any rash acts of war."



"You-" Damien was clearly incensed, but he managed to restrain himself, taking a deep breath and speaking again in a somewhat more measured fashion. "Father: The Keepers of the Veil have clearly failed to capture or even identify my brother's murderer. You would never deny Nikos what he asked - why did you treat him so much better than-"

He was interrupted by series of loud popping sounds, like Tsuandaneese firecrackers.

"Get down!" I yelled, diving at the Prince and knocking him to the ground. His rage turned to terror when he saw what had just missed his head. A dozen tiny, rotund gremlins, no more than a foot or two in height, zoomed out of thin air, ricocheting around the room and accumulating together in the centre of the floor. Cackling impishly, they swarmed towards the throne, brandishing sharp claws and teeth. At first I thought they aimed for the Patrician, but in fact they were headed to the figure at his side: the assistant, Cassia Sarki, who shrieked as she tried to bat them away with her papers.

I drew my hunting dagger and charged the hellish critters, flinching at their cuts and slices as I hacked them apart, one by one, pulling them off my hair and arms where they gibbered and howled. Soon I was assisted in the fight by Damien, who flung himself between Sarki and the daemons and awkwardly slashed at them with a sword that was much too long and heavy for the task. We would have been in considerable danger were it not for the fact that the creatures' attentions were not focused on the Prince or myself.

"Minions of Kukulima," I said, when they were all slain at last. "They appear suddenly across the Veil, needing very little magic to materialise, seeking to catch their prey unawares."

Those present cast wide-eyed looks at each other.

"Something must have drawn them," I said.



Mageblight Gremlins

These strange packs of tiny gremlins are comprised of small, obese daemons: filthy and disgusting with their gelatinous flesh and protruding horns, but also somehow endearing, with their wicked grins full of razor teeth and gleeful pursuit of death. They are notable for their obsession with any mortal trained in magic - intensely jealous of their ability to use the substance of the immortal in the Mortal Realm. They have been known to make favourable deals with non-wizards brave enough to forgo magical protection.



GREED

Jesh had his nose in a mug when the traveller walked in. The man eased into a nearby seat, flicking water droplets across the bench as he waved to the barkeep.

“Working up to a storm,” muttered the stranger to Jesh. He passed the keep a gold coin, marked by an ornate gate on one side. Marv, the barman, eyed it closely before returning a beer.

Jesh turned to face the man. There was a tiredness in his eyes, like a weathering of the mind, despite his jovial air. He sipped his beer, before cringing.

“You serving me water, keep?”

The barman scowled, taking the mug and refilling it from a fresh casket. The man suckled the new pint, unfazed by the attempted con.

“Good day, friend?” Jesh asked. It wasn’t often that the bar got visitors, and rarer still that Jesh was in a mood to talk.

The man hummed in agreement. “Aye, and better now. Feel like a weight’s off my shoulders.”

Jesh turned at the shouting to his left.

“Come on Marv, I paid my tab yesterday!” a regular was complaining.

“If you don’t got the coin, you don’t get no beer,” growled Marv, darkly.

Jesh turned back to the newcomer with an apologetic shrug, and noticed the ring on the latter’s finger. A simple wooden band with a polished iron head, probably worthless but clearly ancient. A signet ring was a strange sight in a place like this. Important folks usually ate elsewhere.

They sat for a few moments, a silence hanging between them.

“I used to live near the northern coast,” the traveller started, sensing the need for an explanation. “I had the good fortune to inherit a wealthy estate.”

Jesh raised his eyebrows. Now he was eyeing the man’s stained cloak and ragged gear. The stranger shifted in his seat.

“I don’t fully understand how I got here either. I keep turning it over - and it comes back to the trader. Bigwig that used to do business with my father, very rich man, once upon a time.



About a year back he turns up at our manor looking just like I do now. In rags.”

Without turning his head away, Jesh raised his hand for an ale, sensing his was empty. *The keep held out his hand. Only then did Jesh turn - Marv never made him pay before the end of the night. But he was too invested in the newcomer’s story to argue. He paid, and bid the man continue.

“The merchant gave me a coin - just one - in exchange for a night’s stay. A simple request. But that coin... It sounds foolish, but somehow it called to me. I hardly noticed as the trader left the next morning, though now I think back, he seemed so happy and free, glad to be gone.”

The man sighed deeply at this point, and a tremor entered his voice.

“From that point on, I became... Someone else.” Jesh saw the stranger’s knuckles turn white. “The fear gripped me - the fear of losing anything. The estates were mine, and nothing was going to take them from me. I grew ruthless, and my business prospered. I would sit long nights counting great stacks of gold. And the people starved because I would let nothing leave my coffers. But I did not care.”

The man took a slow, sickly swig of ale, his eyes shut grimly.

“I pushed up prices, cheated my partners. It was only right they should pay a premium, I thought.*I needed the gold more than they did. It wasn’t long before there was no one left to trade with. The final straw came when...” His voice trembled. “When I disinherited my son. The mere thought of anyone taking what was rightfully mine, even after my death, it made me sick. I lost everything, as quickly as I had gained it. They rose up against me, but in my madness...I struck down my son.”

The man hid his eyes, and Jesh knew better than to prod any further. Eventually, the traveller raised his head and sculled the last of his beer, standing as he did so. He straightened his coat, moving to leave.

“What happened to the coin?” Jesh asked. The man stood, framed in the doorway against the hissing rain.

“I just paid for that drink with it,” he confessed. “I’m flat broke.”

They both looked at the barman in the shadows among the barrels, face like stone, eyeing his customers suspiciously, while his fingers worked counting coin faster than I’d ever seen. The stranger gave one last sigh of relief, and shut the door behind him.

—From ‘True Tales from My Time in Sonnstahl’
by Hilaire Cellob





MISER OF SUGULAG

1tar 36th (cont.)

"We will ride to war!" declared the Patrician, booming through the corridors.

"An excellent decision, father," cried Prince Damien, striding after him. "I will lead our army to a great victory! It is about time you showed the same faith in me as you always had in dear departed Nikos."

I hurried to keep up. "My lord, you must reconsider. Just this morning, you were urging caution in this—"

"The time for caution ended when the villains of Civissina sent more daemons into my home! Once we take the city, we will root them out once and for all!"

"I do not think anyone in Civissina is responsible for these attacks," I said. "I believe it is a set-up. In fact, I do not think your son was killed by a daemon at all."

"What?!" cried Damien and the Patrician simultaneously, finally stopping in their tracks. We had just emerged into the barracks and training grounds, where troops were formed up ready for inspection. I considered the two expectant faces turned to me.

"It was a daemon of Gluttony that rampaged through your palace and lands at the time of Prince Nikos' death. And yet we found his body with nothing but a few slashes across the chest. Such a daemon would never leave its victim unconsumed — the guards and peasants it claimed vanished completely. It is true the body had traces of chromium, but that is easy enough to find and plant for anyone with a passing knowledge of daemon-kind. My lord, I believe the daemon was a cover. Your son was assassinated by a mortal agent."

There was a pause as father and son both boiled with rage. Finally the Patrician spluttered his response.

"If Civissina has sent assassins against me, that is all the more reason for war!"

He would not listen to further entreaties. I was dismissed from service.





ЦККЦММММ'18

Acrober 1st

I breathed deeply of the warm summer air when I returned to the rolling hills of Oenolyus Monastery, so familiar after all these years, and to the very chamber where I had first been set upon this frustrated mission.

"I have failed you once again," I said, bowing my head. "I have failed the Order. After everything you have done for me. Grant me penance, so that I may atone."

"Come here, child," said Father Miceli. I thought he would have me kneel, but instead he embraced me. I was surprised at the warmth and comfort of his big arms around me, berating myself for the hopeless wave of gratitude and child-like tranquility they brought. He held my shoulders and looked me in the eye.

"When we found you, daemons had taken everything from you. In your long years of training, I have watched as you turned yourself into a fearless warrior who could fight back. You work now to preserve the integrity of our world, but I fear we forgot to teach you to preserve something more important still: the little girl. What value is the ability to slay daemons if you have lost the innocence they strive to take from you? The time for penance is over. Those were rituals to make the girl a woman. Now you must find a way to make the woman a whole person again. Only you can walk that path. Tell me again the oath you took."

I stared at him, and fought to keep my voice steady.

"I am a Keeper of the Veil," I said, solemnly. "I am a guardian of Mother Cosmos. I keep her defenses so that the Father may not invade her sanctity. I will have no god, no ruler but she. I will resist his incursions wherever they are found. For the eternal purity of the Mortal Realm, I shall not rest."

"Such noble sentiments," he sighed. "But I've always felt the oath doesn't leave enough space for simple joy. Purity and sanctity are all very well, but they're not much good if you're miserable the whole time, are they now?"

I couldn't help but smile at his humble wisdom. I slept deeply that night in my old cell, but I was awoken before dawn by the sound of screams.

I joined several acolytes running down the corridor and into the main courtyard. Shivering in the cold night air, we tried to work out what was wrong. The space was too large for our torches to make any difference to the suffocating darkness.

Suddenly another scream broke the night, and there was a great crashing sound from the inner chambers. Rushing towards the building, we saw part of the roof collapse, and then a portion of the stars vanished as something huge reared up from the wreckage. There was an awful slurping, sucking sound, a terrible stench of decay, and a moaning that shook the earth.





"It's a Miser!" cried someone. "The Collector is upon us!"

"Father!" I gasped. I ran at the beast, which was already heaving itself towards us - and away from Miceli's quarters. Its stupendous bulk had been poisoned by obsessive greed into something pestilent, cozing and utterly repugnant.

I ignored shouts from the more experienced warriors to fall back, but had enough wit to realise that any assault from me would be useless against that odious wall of flesh and pus that could absorb a direct hit from a catapult without blinking. Instead, I leapt over broken beams and masonry, vaulting over the creature's very summit before it could reach me with its flabby, grasping hands. In the rarefied monastery air - intentionally kept free of as much ambient magic as possible - the Miser had little access to the sustenance it required for activity, and it was lethargic. As I'd hoped, it ignored me and followed the others out into the fields, where they would keep it at bay until it used up the last local magic and returned back across the Veil.

I went directly to where Miceli's room had been. I was too late. My heart stopped dead. The shouts of my brothers and sisters, the convulsive groaning of the Miser - all that faded to nothing as I stared at the crumpled, broken remains of my mentor and guardian. Crushed under the monster's weight like a beetle. I was paralysed, just as on that rainy night in Istar all those years ago.

A daemon has claimed he who was dearest to me once again. But a beast as powerful as Sugulag's Miser does not appear in the Mortal Realm by chance. I cannot help but feel it was sent for me. Father Miceli's death is my fault. I have no choice now but to find whatever wretch is responsible and exact my furious vengeance.

Miser of Sugulag

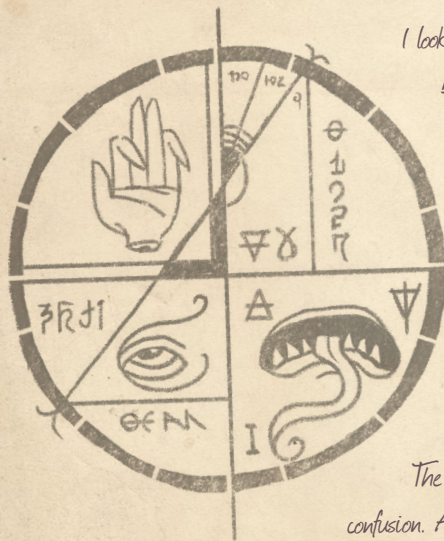
Bloated brigands sent by Sugulag the collector, these rotund brutes have been so twisted by their pathological contemplation of wealth that they appear as huge, fat and sickly, their very flesh rotting and falling from their forms as they lumber with great strides in pursuit of fresh riches, making sure to inflict as much pain as possible along the way. Slow and cumbersome when they are not hunting, their massive excess flesh makes them extremely hard to wound - they appear to not even feel the blows of their enemies. The best advice is to tackle these daemons from behind very thick, very high walls as far away as possible.

HOARDERS

Acrober 4th

I was tracked for days by minions of Sugulag: bloated, pustulent creatures that slithered and squirmed with inexorable tenacity. There were no more giant Misers, but the smaller hoarders were no less repellant and deadly. My pistols were all but useless against them, and while I was able to avoid or distract the majority, more wriggled through the Veil. Someone had set the forces of Greed against me, and they were coming to collect my soul.

If they wanted me gone, it was because I had been on the right path, back in Zalos. I knew that I had no option but to continue my investigation until I had found the true killer – indeed, I thirsted for revenge. With the hoarders ever at my back, I went north, to Civissina, where I was certain the Zalosi army would be encamped. When I reached the city, I could see my assumptions were correct. The standards of Zalos surrounded the city walls. A great siege was already underway, and the two sides had begun a fierce exchange of firearms. The attacking forces were already swarming up the walls on ladders, and seemed to have the advantage.



I looked closer at the walls. To my surprise, the Doge's standards had been removed from the gate, replaced by crudely daubed triangles.

Realising that the revolution had already seized the city, I saw a way to buy myself some time. I hid my black cloak and stole a tunic from a fallen Zalosi man-at-arms. I mingled among the ranks waiting to join the assault, and soon enough, I heard the screaming I had expected from the rear of our position. The hoarders had come for me, and now they were attacking the soldiers in the way.

The sudden appearance of daemons threw the Zalosi army into confusion. As the tide of battle turned, I pushed forward towards the walls while my retreating "comrades" streamed back past me. Unfortunately, my luck was running out. The men were rapidly fleeing from the daemons, and a kind of path formed in the ranks, along which I could see the hoarders coming, their flesh shivering with the anticipation of my demise. I was pinned against the gates themselves, which were locked and barred.

Just then, I felt a powerful force above. I looked up, and there on the wall I saw the elderly sorceress I had met in the catacombs. She looked into my eyes. I did not know if she was still possessed, but she was performing dark magics with amazing confidence and skill.



At the touch of her spells, the daemons halted. They began to shake and spasm, and finally they became enraged, flinging themselves on the nearest victims as if they were loyal to Vanadra, not Sugulag. The Zalosi screams redoubled.

The gates opened with the sound of heavy bolts being drawn back, and I was seized by the defenders and pulled through. The last thing I saw before they closed again was a momentary glimpse of a dark figure. It stood at the back of the Zalosi army, arms raised to the heavens. At his sign, the daemons stopped again, seemingly paralysed, and then their entire bodies oozed and vanished into the soil below, like sails in a dying wind.

Hoarders

These large daemons of Sugulag slime and writhe their way over the ground, gathering up everything of value as they go. Repulsive beasts that defy categorisation, some resemble grotesque toads, insects, serpents or simply globules of slimy flesh - others are more fluid and mutating, pulling themselves like putty stretched in the hands of a restless child. Though they may not appear threatening from a distance, they are relentless, driven ever onwards by compulsive avarice, only growing stronger and more desperate the longer they fight. Up close, they are truly hideous, quickly smothering or strangling their victims before stripping them of their possessions. They can provide great powers to a generous supplicant, but have also been known to hold mortals in thrall, compelling them to bring offerings of ever greater wealth. Use fire.





WRATH

One summer while I was with the Vanhu, I travelled with officials sent by King Nyatsimba to a distant village to take a census. It was the first attempt at organising the tribute system into an accountable form of taxation, back in the early days of the new kingdom. The villagers were resistant to being counted, and their witch doctor encouraged them to mock and jeer at us. He was clearly a spiteful fellow, used to being the head man and displeased by his tribe's recent allegiance to the King.

The King's representatives were led by a distinguished older woman. She was an imbondi, which is a type of bard or preacher, a keeper of historical records and oral storytelling. I had heard her recite the sacred list of ancestors at official rituals. She told her companions, including myself, to wait outside the village, until the locals were ready to see us. I was amazed at her calm and confidence, and I asked how she kept herself so peaceful. Didn't she want to rage at her treatment by the witch doctor and the villagers? Didn't she want to see them punished? In response, she told me the following tale:

Long ago, there lived a lion who was never happy with the way things were. He used to complain about everything in his life, and he could always find someone to blame. One day, he was walking

through the savannah when he met a cockerel with red eyes and a red crest.

"You seem sad," said the cockerel. "What seems to be the problem?"

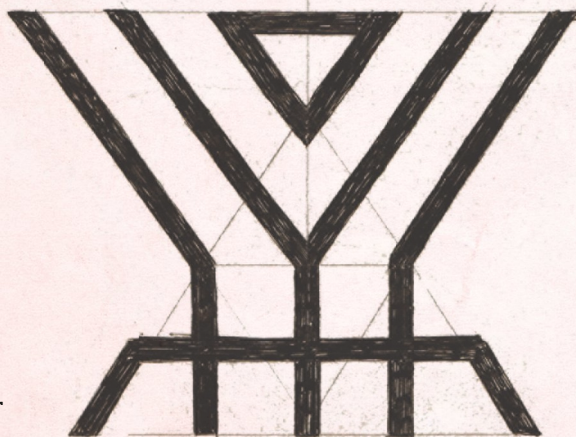
"Nothing is as it should be," said the lion. "I love to eat fruit from the trees, but the monkey who fetches it for me has not been bringing me enough to sate my

hunger. I want to have more children, but the golden phoenix has not granted me birth of any offspring for many months, and I have only one cub. I want to have friends to hunt and play with, but just a handful of hyenas come to laugh with me. I should have more than this."

"You are right, great lion," said the cockerel with the red eyes. "You deserve more. I can grant you the power of the red goddess, and she will give you what you want. Or, if she does not, then she will give you the power to punish those who are keeping good things from you. Does this sound pleasing to you?"

"Yes. Tell me what to do," said the lion.

"You must kill me and cut out my heart. Take it to the mountain top and place it on your tongue. For seven days you must sit and focus on your anger. Then the red goddess will show you what to do."





VANADRA'S SCOURGE

It was during the third month plying my trade across the Sultanate of Qassar, when my erstwhile companion and translator Raashid and I were quenching our thirst at an inn in the town of Halban. Among the patrons of this small establishment were several soldiers; we'd noticed patrols along the road and knew the army was camped nearby. Everyone seemed on edge.

"Dark powers are abroad," Raashid explained.

"Where? In Vetia?"

"I mean, they roam the lands. The people say that a creature has been seen across the desert sands. Nomad camps found deserted or burned. A dark name is whispered."

"What name?"

Raashid glanced around the room and leaned closer.

"Shayteen," he whispered. "A daemon of rage."

"Ah. Like a djinn?" I said, referring to the supernal beings known to dwell wherever the Alihat trinity was worshipped. Their magic had even been harnessed by the Qassari army.

"Similar, but much more fearful," said Raashid. "The djinn are born of the desert's fire. The shayteen is born of the smoke. The djinn serve the Three Goddesses, glory be upon them. The shayteen serves only one goddess. The Adversary."

My eyes widened, but something in his tone prevented me from asking further questions.

Days later, after trying once more to find an audience in the souks of Halban's labyrinthine medina, I was approached by a young woman with an anxious expression.

"She wants you to follow her. She is afraid," Raashid translated. I nodded. This smelled like a good story.

She took us through the maze of narrow alleys to a warehouse. Behind heaps of jumbled exotic merchandise, there was a trapdoor in the dirt, hidden beneath a rug. The woman would go no further, but pointed fearfully at the symbol. A series of crude lines depicting a face full of anger.

A staircase led to a small, windowless basement. I carried a lamp, the flame dancing across red, soot-stained walls. There was a heavy smell of sulphur and charcoal. Dark red cloaks were folded on a bench, opposite a table arranged as an altar. The object of worship was all too clear.

"A cult of Vanadra," I whispered. "Why was this brought to me?"

Raashid looked truly terrified, but he kept his composure.

"You're a foreigner. If she reports it, she could be suspected or even arrested."

"So I should inform the army?"





"Not the army. They would only persecute the townsfolk, guilty or not. We should bring this to the temple. The imams will know what to do."

The mysterious woman had already left as we emerged. We hurried to the grand temple, an imposing shape against the sunset. Raashid bade me remove my shoes before entering. The space inside was amazingly serene and peaceful. I admired the intricate beauty of the decoration while Raashid spoke in an urgent tone to a cleric.

We were ushered into an office with three desks. Behind each sat a bearded man in white robes. The central imam smiled warmly.

"Please, what have you come to tell me, Vetian? You may speak your own language. I have dealt with enough crusaders to understand you."

I told them briefly what we had found, though I admit I may have added more literary flare than was required. The expressions of the three priests hardened.

"This is very serious news," said the talkative one. "We will investigate at once. We are very grateful for the report - please be assured that this evil will be stamped out immediately."

He smiled, eerily, and somehow his words were not as comforting as they were intended. Raashid and I left, returning towards the inn for the night. We never made it. As we turned into an empty street there was the smell of smoke. Deep chanting could be heard from unseen sources.

"Shayteen..." I heard Raashid breathe, his face white. And then he was sprinting away down an alley. Before I could follow, something struck me in the back.

When I woke up, my body seemed to be on fire. Unsteadily, I realised this was because I was lying on the burning sand of the desert, under a high sun. There was still smoke in my nostrils, and the overwhelming smell of brimstone.

"Ah. I am pleased you have woken. You forced us to hasten our plans - it is only fitting you see this yourself."

I recognised the voice before my bleary eyes could blink away the sand. It was the well-spoken imam. He and his two colleagues now wore crimson robes, vivid against the harsh yellow sea that stretched all around us. In the far distance I thought I could see the walls of Halban. But more immediately concerning was the terror in the eyes of the young woman who was tied to the makeshift altar. I recognised her as the one who had shown us the cultists' meeting place. If only we had known that the very priests of the town, the spiritual leaders themselves, had been corrupted.

As I looked into her desperate eyes, the leading imam stabbed her in the heart with a crescent-shaped dagger. The three of them were chanting something terrible in their native tongue, their voices rising in intensity and anger. I almost passed out again as my stomach lurched from the sudden accretion of magic in the vicinity. Sickened and horrified, I watched as the woman's body, as well as jars of substances arranged around the altar, were dissolved by a vigorous magical maelstrom. Smoke and sand whirled into a miniature hurricane, within which something vast and red began to glow. I glimpsed horns, cloven hooves and huge black wings. I wanted to run, but my eyes were fixed, my face burning with the ferocity of the desert's wrath incarnate.



Before I could see the full form of the brute, I felt rough hands drag me onto another surface. I realised I was to be the next sacrifice. Behind me I heard snorting and stamping of something bestial and impatient. There was the sense of vast power barely contained. A hound desperate to be loosed on the hunt.

“Our glorious Scourge needs a weapon. Take comfort knowing your death summoned the living scimitars used to cleave this Realm in twain.”

I saw the knife raised above me, the sun’s blinding reflection turning the world white. Then I heard a grunt. Blinking, I saw the length of an arrow protruding from the imam’s chest. Out across the desert, a battalion of horse archers was advancing with the banners of the Sultan.

The other priests were already running. I stared, awestruck, as something huge and scarlet blotted out the sun, rising through the air on great wing beats. It landed in the thick of the fray. Squinting, I saw the Qassari soldiers assault the beast, but the more blows they landed the more viciously they were devastated, as it issued an incredible roar that split my ears even at the great distance between us. Horses and humans flew like broken dolls from its tremendous fists. I do not know how the fight concluded - my mind filled with the sound of approaching hooves and I looked up as a rider hefted me onto his mount.

“Raashid,” I said, before losing consciousness. “You came back for me. You saved me from the shayteen.”

—From the Diary of Samuel le Pepin, professional pilgrim and storyteller



Vanadra's Scourge

Towering icons of simmering rage and bestial fury, Vanadra's Scourges survey the world as the reaper observes his crop. Often described as belligerent mountains of corded muscles, they effortlessly glide across the battlefields on leathery wings. Though equipped with horn and talon, they prefer to mould lesser creatures of the Immortal Realm into shapes resembling weapons of the mortals - some of these horrifying objects have eyes, mouths and appendages, and can bellow as fiercely as their masters. A greater Wrath daemon's appetite for destruction is unimaginably vast and potent, and only increases the more it is beset by enemies. Some will spend hours hacking apart the victim's corpse, others wish only to move on to the next. A Scourge must be placated by bloodshed before a conjurer can hope to reason with it.



BRAZEN BEASTS

Acrober 6th

Father Miceli is gone. It has taken all I have just to write those words again. Every day the pain of missing him grows sharper and more debilitating, but with it grows my determination to find the one who took him.

I recall a sermon he gave, when I was still new in his service. It was the story of how he lost his partner and closest friend on a mission in Taphria. A local sorcerer unleashed a stampede of brazen beasts - unstoppable, lumbering machines fuelled by Hellfire. Miceli said that it was only after they slew his comrade that he found the strength to defeat the sorcerer in revenge. His lesson was that the sins on which the Dark Gods prey, even Wrath, can be weapons in the hands of the righteous.

That sermon has long played on my mind. I too have known the pain of loss at the hands of Vanadra, and have felt her hot fury in my veins. I feel it now when I think of Miceli, and of my mother, whose final words still ring in my ears, telling me to be brave. I must not fail her now.

I am a guest of the Equilateral Revolution, as it now calls itself, encamped in the former palace of the Doge. They rescued me from the hoarders, but I do not know if I should lend them my own support. I must admit, this is a city that has not seen rebellion since the time of Bettini in Pontefreddo, yet it seems to be managing the upheaval admirably. Casualties were minimal during the uprising, and an extraordinary number of the injured have made full recoveries. The citizens have formed an efficient and unified interim government that is fairly distributing resources and coordinating the defence against Zalos - for the siege continues.

And everywhere there are daemons. Many are true manifestations, summoned by the ritual execution of criminals and saboteurs, including a mighty warbeast of Vanadra lured by the sacrifice of the Doge himself. Perhaps it is the same manner of devil encountered all those years ago by Miceli. Evil-looking smoke rises from its crimson plates of armour, like steam from the hide of a prehistoric behemoth, its hooves stamping with poorly contained Wrath.

There is not enough magic to sustain all these creatures at once, so they fling themselves at the enemy troops until they are slain. Others have taken bodily possession of the townsfolk, who welcome them for their talents and knowledge.

One of the possessed is the woman in white, the sorcerer who saved me from the daemons of Greed and who I last encountered in the catacombs. She came to my chambers this evening, and the daemon of Cibaresh within her spoke to me.



"You see now how little you really know, do you not?" she said.

"I am not ashamed to thank you for aiding me," I replied.

"I am pleased to hear it. Perhaps we will see that gratitude turn to action."

"I am not a soldier of Civissina, and I am not in your debt." We locked eyes for several moments. "But it is true that we have a common enemy."

"Indeed," she smiled. "How curious that my spies tell me the Patrician believes we killed his son, and that you were the very agent sent to find the killer."

"I told him you are not the culprits. He would not listen to reason."

"I see. Do you think he would listen to evidence?"

"What do you mean?"

The woman sighed, and her liquid gold eyes seemed tired. "We are besieged. We cannot continue to bring aid from the Immortal Realm forever. Our supplies will not last the month. The lives of all the citizens here are at stake. Our only hope is that Zalos calls off its attack."

"You want me to convince the Patrician you are not his enemy."

"I want you to finish your mission, Keeper. And I believe you want it too."

Brazen Beasts

The slaves of Vanadra, the Adversary, are always furious. The mortal world enrages them. They materialise in the shape of giant, stampeding engines of war, not dissimilar to earthly karkadan, but driven by dark energies and hellish machinery. These avatars of bloodshed are so single-minded in their pursuit of murder that it is hard to tell whether they are beast or machine, although of course to a daemon there is little difference. They encourage smaller imps of Wrath to accompany them into the fray, only enhancing the devastation of their charges. But make no mistake - it is the beast that is master. Whether it is "in control" is another matter.



Summon a Greed daemon, you'll be drowning in gold - literally. Envy daemon will make you stronger than your neighbour, but only cos you've both lost everything to your *other* neighbour. Classic daemon school of bargaining."

"Surely there must be a way. If we're careful..."

"I know what I'd do. I'd summon a Sloth daemon. Tell me, how do you feel right now?"

"Feel? Excited, I suppose, since I finally found you-"

"No, I mean your body. What is it telling you?"

"I'm a little peckish. And glad to be off my feet."

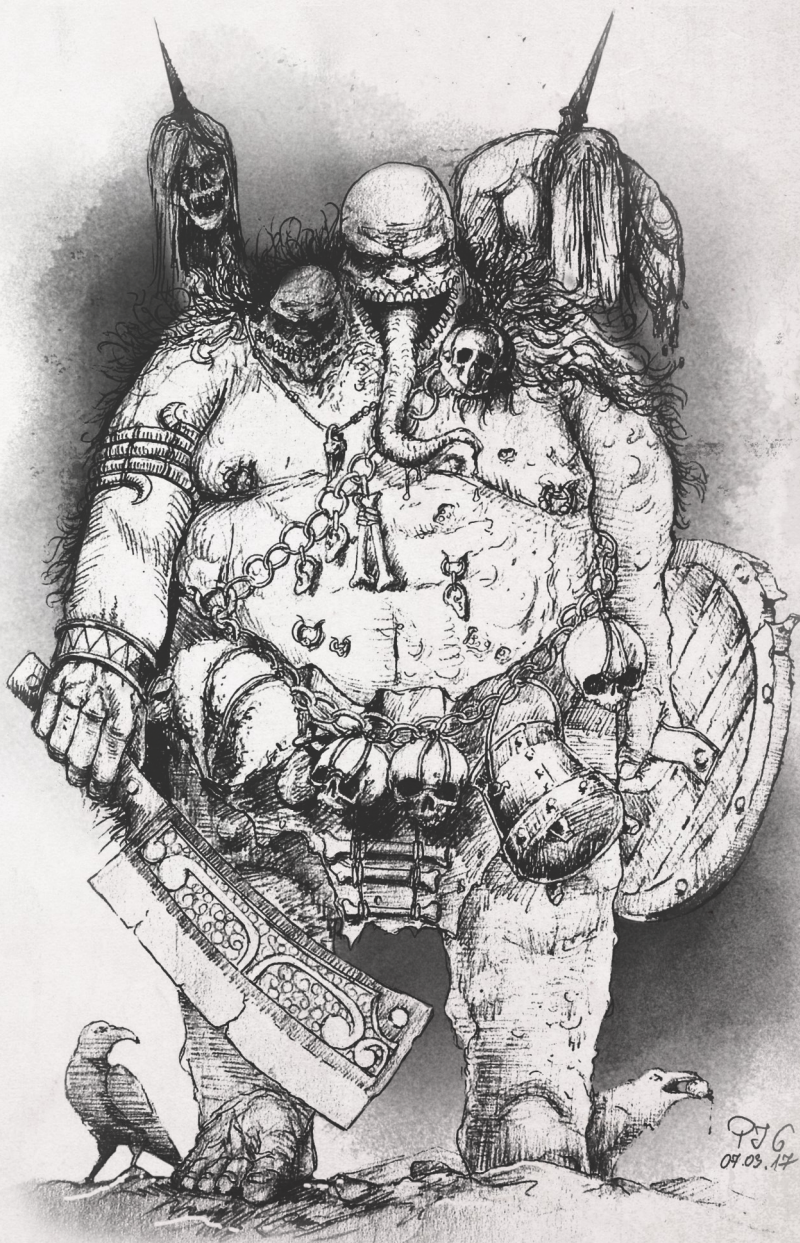
"There you go - you're tired. We all are. Every day, it's just one weary slog after another - am I right? Now, your basic Sloth daemon is going to grant you knowledge and then sap your desire to use it for anything. But to me that's a pretty positive outcome, considering what happens to most people who haggle with daemons. I always thought the Nukuja lot were the happiest cultists out there, when it comes to pure contentment. They know what they want, and what they want is nothing. The power of not caring - now that's a power really worth having. That's a power with style. I swear, all the other gods secretly admire Nukuja. She's got a good gig, just sitting back and watching everyone else fret. My kind of gal. And you know the best bit?"

"What," I said, in horrified fascination.

"She's never tired. She always sleeps well. And that's a trick worth learning. Of course, the Sloth cults don't spread quick. But if you find one, talk to some of people who worship there - if you can get them to talk. Or open their eyes.

You'll see what I mean. Those are some real, hardcore believers. There's no question they'll outlast all the rest of us. And if you do end up summoning a Sloth daemon, you'll see their powers are no joke either. If they don't move a lot, ask yourself why. It's because they don't need to. They'll liquify your flesh with a blink. Good listeners, too, if you have something to get off your chest. Sure I can't get you to pledge your immortal soul before you leave?"

—From 'Memoirs of a Former Follower of the Dark Gods', by Sobolevsky Vladislavovich



SENTINEL OF NUKUJA

Acrober 8th

The possessed woman led me to tunnels that would allow me to leave the city. Before I left, she gave me a curious wooden box, telling me to use it if I was in trouble.

Once again, I found myself riding through the night towards Zalos. When I arrived in the town square, a crowd had already formed, though the sun had not yet risen. I soon learned they were waiting to witness the trial of the palace servants who had allegedly summoned the Maw that killed Prince Nikos.

There are few aspects of my work for which I am glad to be a woman: the art of disguise is one of them. Donning the peasant garb of the locals, I was able to enter the jailhouse where the condemned were being held. The guards did not think twice of my assertion that I was bringing their last meal in the basket I held, and showed me to the cells.

They were occupied by two older women, their faces wrinkled and stoic.

"I suppose they called you witches," I said, handing them the bread I had brought. "It's always easy to blame a woman."

They took my offering and began to eat, looking at me suspiciously.

"I'm here to find the real killer," I continued. "Someone in Zalos is playing with dark forces, and I need to know who."

"Were the real killers," mumbled one, chewing the bread as if it were poison.

"That's right. We are witches," said the other. I considered the situation. They were clearly protecting someone.

"I see. Then you won't mind telling me how you summoned a greater daemon of Gluttony."

They looked at each other. "We conducted a ritual. With brimstone," said one, cautiously.

"And you must have used newt tails and bat gizzards too," I said, keeping my face deadly serious.

"Y-yes," said the woman, nervous now. I sighed.





"Ladies. I have long experience hunting daemons and their sympathisers. You two wouldn't know a daemon if it dragged you across the Veil. I swear that no one will know I was ever here. If you can tell me anything about the circumstances of Prince Nikos' demise, it could help save many lives."

Minutes later, I was on my way to the palace. The women had revealed that Nikos and Damien, the Zalosi princes, had been arguing in the latter's quarters the night of the murder. It was not easy to leave my innocent informants to their fate. I offered to break them free of the prison, but they were committed to their own execution, for as I had guessed, their families had been threatened. I knew there was no time to set things right, but when this is over, I hope I can return for them in time.

Still disguised, I broke into the palace chambers the way I had once left - through the gaping hole in the wall made by the Maw, now covered with canvas. I hurried to Damien's room. The large, richly decorated space appeared completely innocent until I noticed the scuffs in the floor alongside a carpet that covered a trapdoor. As soon as I heaved the floorboards open, I was engulfed by a sick, dizzying sensation: the familiar feeling of a mortal body's reaction to an area of concentrated magic. I forced the fog from my mind and the nausea from my stomach, and lowered myself down the long ladder into the cellars below.

A single flickering torch lit the grimy stone vault. The space was not unlike that I had found beneath the house of Sybellicus. The apparatus of sorcerous practice and daemonological ritual was all around. I had to steel myself once more against the overpowering sense of a vast and dangerous magical presence. I realised it was emanating from a specific niche in the wall, where I could just discern an obsidian pedestal, atop which there lay an orb of utter blackness, like a small portal into some kind of void.

The torch flickered for a moment, and I glimpsed a figure in a dark corner of the room. I peered closer. I felt my throat close and gag as I realised that I was seeing my brother, Vakous, dead these long years. His youthful face stared at me with eyes of night, while thick, ruby gore flowed from the gash in his neck.

"Leonora," he groaned, but he was no longer my brother. He was Father Miceli, his body bent and broken, one weak hand outstretched towards me, pleading. His voice was laboured, painful. "The time for penance is over. Only you can walk the path."

I was falling. I was in the void. Visions, people, memories from my past swirled around me through the utter blackness. And there, at the centre, the thing that channelled the abyss itself. A tall thing, part man, part vulture, with a face like a great owl of death. Leaning on a carven staff, its body cocooned by ragged wings, it was perfectly still within the maelstrom: the very eye. And it gazed right at me.

"I will show you what you wish to see," it said, without moving its beak, in a voice that echoed through eternity. "From this prison, I observe all things."

I couldn't breathe. I couldn't move or speak. But a sight came before me, and I beheld the phantoms of the two princes, arguing. Nikos was crying that Damien had betrayed them, that he had let his obsession with his mistress consume him. She was in league with the dark powers, and now the Doge of Civissina knew it, and threatened to expose him.



Damien responded that Nikos lacked loyalty to his own kin. Soon the hot blood of the princes flew openly as they drew swords. Damien slew his brother with a great slash across the chest. He collapsed alongside the corpse, weeping. Then he looked up as a new presence entered the room. I could not see who it was, I but I knew her identity in my heart. She would cover the crime by loosing a great daemon, not the first she had summoned with her tremendous power, using those sentenced to execution in the palace cells as the ritual victims.

I awoke with a gasp.

"Ah, there you are. The Sentinel has released you, I see," said a human voice nearby. "I hope it showed you something marvellous."

I looked around. I was in a barn, or a large shed of some kind. The air was cold and I could see through the wooden planks that it was night. I could not know how much time I had lost to the daemon of Sloth contained within the orb.

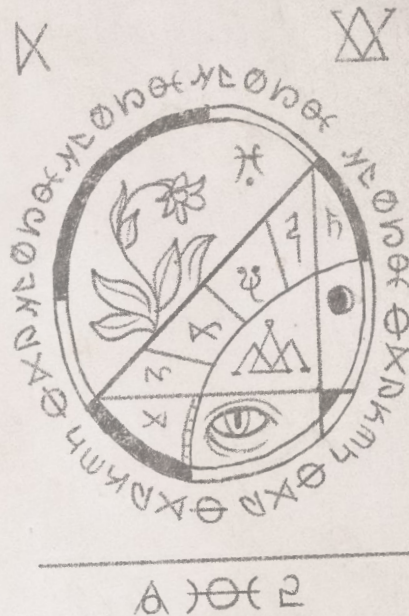
I had been captured, tied firmly, and bundled in a sitting position in a corner of this remote cabin. I could see my captor in the slats of shifting moonlight that penetrated the dark space.

"Sarki," I whispered. "I knew you were more than you seemed, ever since the Mageblight came for you."

"And yet you did nothing to stop me, because you knew you could not. Already I have ended the power of the Keepers of the Veil. Aha. Their demise will be titillating to observe. Ha. Aha."

I squinted at the strange snorts of laughter that escaped as she spoke. Sarki was the Patrician's attendant, but she had transformed. She wore now a flowing gray robe that I recognised from the Zalosi mage who had so comprehensively controlled the Greed daemons at the siege of Civissina. Her features were contorted with paroxysms of amusement and mania.

"Of course, I am disappointed that my Miser didn't end you personally, as it was meant to. But that is no matter. You will make a potent sacrifice to my masters. Sadly, however, that will have to wait. I have a city to offer to them first, hah. I hope you find these accommodations comfortable. Ha ha ha."



Sentinel of Nukuja

The daemon lords of Sloth prefer not to join their brothers in the thick of the fray. They are watchers. It is said their inky black eyes are windows on the abyss. Their gangly bodies and feathered wings drape themselves over tall stuffs, using as little energy as possible. Though powerful in form, they do not attack their enemies physically, but have dedicated their will to true mastery of magic and the Veil, raining down ruin and devastation with unparalleled spellcraft. Occasionally, one will take to the skies with a time-stopping screech to secure a better vantage, or simply rise and sail across the battle on platforms held aloft by willpower alone - or by lesser daemons. Sentinels can provide tremendous knowledge and insight, but even learned scholars have been found catatonic after an encounter.

HOPE HARVESTER

...That same year, the tribe of Iocundi in the province of Upper Varalia grew enraged at the tribute forced on them by Galenus, a first-rank centurion. Having first demanded hides of the Iocundi's cattle, Galenus had increased the tithe to include lands and finally slaves, at which decree the chiefs rose up and the garrison of three hundred Avrasi was cut to pieces.

Galenus, having taken refuge in flight, sent word that he was besieged in the forest by the massed forces of the Iocundi, and that he believed they were turning to Dark Powers to take their vengeance. Lucius Alypius, propraetor of Varalia Inferior, dispatched the legionary veterans, as well as picked auxiliary infantry and cavalry. Having found a ford in the river, the legionaries came upon the Iocundi in the rear, quickly dispersing them through the trees.

But the very next day, Galenus found the Iocundi regrouped upstream. Their attitude had changed significantly, and their army, though numerous, seemed strangely still and watchful. It was later reported by survivors that the barbarians had been inspired by the stories of Cacophrax in Gesia Minor, and had turned to the Goddess of Sloth for aid. For there among them came the pilentum gigans, a mighty construct devoted to malaise and despair. The legionaries were struck down by a living fog of hopelessness, and those that stood and fought were crushed beneath unstoppable wheels.

Galenus was forced back across the river, and the lands beyond were abandoned for many years. The Iocundi name, and that of their goddess, thus became famous in Varalia, and the consuls kept the losses a secret at home, not wishing to alarm the people in Avras.

—Explicitus, Annals (approx. 1,000 B.S.)



Time slowed and stretched as I entered the Circle of Nukuja, as though the air itself congealed. Lethargy settled upon me, like a chill in my bones, until I slumped under the weight of apathy. Even the Betrayer, so certain in his actions, appeared to hesitate and falter beneath that terrible burden.

Before us, the source of our listlessness would soon become apparent, as forms emerged from the gloom of that place. Trees of myriad shapes dotted the landscape, stunted things, their trunks and branches gnarled, knots and hollows giving the impression of faces drawn in anguish [...].



Turning, I was confronted by a [tree] which was larger and more menacing than anything else in the thicket. It loomed over the Betrayer and I both, unmoving, yet it had not been there moments before, I was certain. I would later come to know the Hope Harvester in the shapes it takes in our world. Always lumbering beings, yet to be near them is to risk life and limb, for it takes energy from its victims, then their lives.

Spurred into action, I dragged the Betrayer away from his reverie, and away from that mournful forest. As we drew near to leaving this place of indolence, we walked alongside a plain of burning sand, where desperate souls were driven to walk in endless circles, with no respite from the searing pain save to move continuously.

—Excerpts from “Part IV – A Forlorn Forest, The Betrayer Dreams” - from ‘Circling the Abyss’ by Nazario Calegari

Hope Harvester

These patient structures sent by Nukuja may look built for speed, but nothing could be further from the truth. They will certainly crush and maim anything that dares approach, but close-up carnage is not their greatest love. Naturally working alone, they often attach themselves to groups of daemons of other types, seeking to aid their destruction of the Mortal Realm by peppering its inhabitants with projectiles of pure magic, like invisible bullets. Its lethal barrage thus unleashed, the harvester proceeds to feed on the despair of survivors. Those who try to negotiate with these creatures frequently end by taking their own lives.

CLASSIFICATIONS OF THE LEGIONS

Throughout the long history of the secret art of summoning demons, many of the greatest mages and researchers have established symbolic correspondences and classifications of daemons to enforce their evocation techniques. For though each daemon has its own unique harmonies and resonance, an understanding of their various similarities and potential groupings could grant better results in ritual.

According to the Sagarikan master of the dark arts, Dasa Guptha, who wrote the famous *On the Conjuror's Secrets* ("Jaa-doo-gar Ke Rahasy"), daemons can firstly be divided in two kinds: those with their nature inextricably tied to a Dark God, and those with their nature being neutral. In addition, he claimed that a certain portion of the greater legions was able to switch its loyalty from one Dark God to another - usually the less powerful daemons. Whether these daemons are intentionally independent from the gods by exercise of their will, or they are too weak to be worthy of higher attention - or, perhaps, they are loyal to a more secret agenda of the Father - has been debated through the millennia.

The venerable Guptha's resulting eightfold classification matched each daemon to one or none of the gods, in turn affiliated with its icon, its colour, and with a day of the week on which it was supposedly best to summon (Pride on dies Primus,

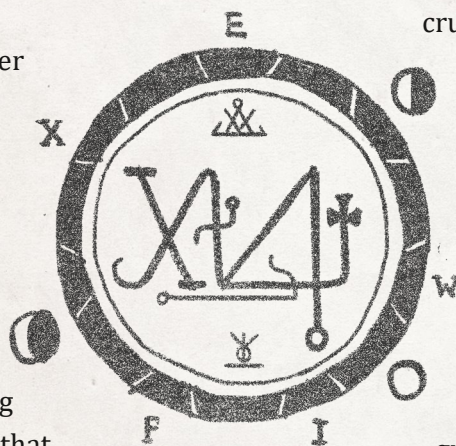
Greed on dies Atei etc.). This system is both among the most straightforward and dependable of the numerous such systems I have encountered.

—From 'On the work of the heretics and their daemonic masters', by Mikhail Psellus

Daemons can be divided according to their rank within the legion. The higher the rank, the crueller the sacrifice required. The greatest hordes are commanded by Dukes, which are the most powerful sons of the seven flowers of Chaos. Only the most experienced conjurers can attempt to look for answers from them, for they are dangerous even for an entire conclave of masters. They can grant enormous powers and deep knowledge, but the price to be paid is often unthinkable.

Next are the Legates, patrons of the passions of the mortals; it is said they can grant love, hate, authority and whatever kind of emotion if properly mollified by fulfilment of the favours they ask.

Then come the Centurions, that have infinite power over matter. According to tradition, they can turn lead into gold, water into wine, rock into living flora, and they can even teach such powers to the conjurer if sufficiently pleased with the pain and fear of a proper victim.



Lastly come the Soldiers, the infinite multitude of common daemons with countless shapes and unspeakable voices. Do not underestimate their power, for even a lesser daemon is far stronger than the will of an unpracticed magician. While they do not generally grant specific magical powers, nonetheless they are the key to access the superior spheres of the Legions.

—From 'The Book of the Infinite Legions',
by Georges Sybellicus

The seven flowers of Chaos correspond to seven underground doors that are opened to access the Yurt of Darkness, where their Father speaks. Seven are the true hours of the night, and during each a Door can be reached, and there access to the daemons of that level can be found. From each door a specific kind of demon will enter the world.

—Zengmya, of the ogre Sky Mountain tribes,
as recorded by a prisoner

Each daemon enters our realm by joining with one of the twelve primal elements: Air, Water, Fire, Earth, Light, Darkness, Wood, Iron, Gold, Bone, Ichor and Crystal. Not only its shape but its spirit and nature is intrinsically linked with this guiding element. Interwoven and adjacent to this taxonomy can be observed a system of thirteen attributes and abilities, within which every daemon

body can be ordered: Humanoid, Bestial, Chimeric, Reptilian, Non-Skeletal (also called "Liquid"), Projective, Aquatic, Shapeshifting, Winged, Intangible, Super-limbed (also tentacled), Magically Proficient and Titanic. Within this twelve by thirteen matrix, a precise measure of every otherworldly form may be approximated.

—From 'The Art of Madness and Enlightenment',
by Sin Tsu Fu, (Tsuandinese outcast)

These wild spirits are called looking in specific directions, them being North, West, South, East, Upward, Downward and Inward. While the first four kinds of spirits are easier to call and control, those coming from the higher, lower and inner spheres of existence are also the most feared, and able to either kill or make mad the summoner with himself. They can appear with the strangest shapes, reading into the mind and seeing the most hidden fears and hopes of those calling for them.

—Tsula nu Ala, Taphrian magician, as recorded by
Equitan explorer Pierre Lestoneaux





DAEMONIC MAGIC

With my sincere thanks to the faculty, I seek to offer insight into a controversial and complex subject, and one that is rarely discussed in Vetia. Daemonology. [pause for noise to settle down] My question for today is simple: which paths of magic are practiced among the Legions, and why?

Some might ask: why are daemons, born of raw and primal magic, limited in their use of Immortal power in our own Realm? But think - we as beings of matter can hardly claim to be masters of all fields within this world. No more can daemons operate freely in the natural sphere.



Witchcraft

After the Battle of Hulgrad, survivors reported feelings of judgement and shame. They spoke of strange visions and of creatures that seemed to look deep within their souls. Yet at this very institution, Herr Doctor Machelberg has taught that only wayward women are able to practice witchcraft. A true wizard will tell you this is nonsense. Like all magic, it can be learned by any motivated mage with an affinity and the correct training, but it comes much more easily to a daemon. Where mortal witches might sense the thoughts and feelings of their victims, playing on their superstitions, a daemon focuses these same powers on one of the seven vices on which they so love to prey. I myself have felt the touch of a minion of Greed, and known its Evil Eye in my mind, forcing me to resist its visions of great wealth.



Thaumaturgy

While a daemon loses the unfettered freedom of the Immortal Realm when it enters our world, it does not entirely lose its umbilical connection to its masters. This has been demonstrated by Professor Anselus, whose experiments with the Keepers of the Veil showed that the energy lost by a true-slain daemon resonates briefly across all daemons of the same kind, wherever they may be. What this shows is that daemons remain at least partially connected across the Veil, and are able to draw directly on the power of the gods they serve. Any thaumaturge will recognise this as the ideal state for practising the "arts of the divine", as they call it. We know that the powers of Thaumaturgy manifest in different forms depending on the deities from which they draw. From my observations, the mages of the Dark Gods produce flames of rainbow hue, as well as particularly violent forms of madness.





HELLHOUNDS

Your Excellency,

Forgive me, for I write to tell you of my failure; the death of your son remains unanswered. Truthfully, the fact that I can write at all is nothing short of a miracle, though not one for which I am sure I am grateful.

It was mid-afternoon of the second day of the hunt by the time we had cornered our quarry, having pursued her deep into the Almere Forest. It was a hard slog through the undergrowth, but with the help of Kirmakh's hounds we closed the distance. The murdering whore had taken shelter in the remnants of a long-abandoned tower, whose decaying exterior belied the sturdy nature of the refuge. She must have heard the baying hounds, as we found the ancient door barred – still stout despite its age.

Our attempts to gain entry proved futile, for we had neither axes nor ram to break down the door. Eventually, after much hammering and cursing, the reeve bade his men stand down and surround the structure. Our mark's headlong flight must have left her without food or water. All we needed to do was wait, using the dogs to hunt our own dinner. While the others set up camp for the night, secure in the knowledge that there was only one way out of the tower, I enjoyed a thrilling twilight chase through the trees that managed to fetch a large boar. I silently thanked Kirmakh's flawless training of the bloodhounds, proceeding to prepare and roast the game.

While it was the dogs' howling that rang in my ears as I fell asleep, it was their whimpers that woke me in the dead of night. Rousing ourselves from beds of leaves and dirt, we found the glade suffused with the stench of brimstone. Weapons were drawn, for Kirmakh's prize purebreds, so eager the night before, now cowered and whined at an unseen presence. A pair of shapes moved in the dark, circling us just beyond the firelight. The passage of these creatures made not a sound as they slid through the undergrowth, but low growls rumbled in the darkness, filling me with utter dread.

At some unspoken signal they leapt towards us – great canine brutes, covered in black fur, with jagged teeth protruding from elongated snouts and eyes that smouldered with unholy fire. In but a moment, they had crossed the distance between us, their snarling jaws closing on two of the reeve's men, seemingly fearless of the blades of their victims. Biting and tearing, they immediately overcame the hapless fieldhands, before turning to the rest of us. Kirmakh's dogs were yapping and jumping, frenzied with fear; one look from their hellish, blood-stained kin caused them to turn and flee into the trees. The rest of us followed suit. I stumbled madly in the direction I believed was homewards, branches whipping my face, my panicked, ragged breathing failing to drown out the gruesome cries of those behind me as they were caught, one by one.



Three of us made it to the ferry at Naumbrück, and we swam as far as we dared downstream in an effort to lose our scent. Yet when we emerged, exhausted, onto the riverbank, the awful beasts were waiting. One of my companions fainted on the spot from fear; the other was already being ripped apart as I flung myself back into the water, clinging desperately to a log, knowing I was followed the whole way. It wasn't until dawn broke and I came to the open fields of Marchschlag that I dared to hope I had escaped. Even now I cannot shake the feeling I am watched and pursued at every turn.

I understand if my failure precludes me from continuing any longer in your service. Please advise how you wish to proceed.

Your loyal servant,
Joel Aberbach

—Letter intercepted to Count von Becker
of Wechslau

Hellhounds

The first that many mortals hear of an approaching Legion is the indescribable howling of hounds. No natural wolf or dog are these, but horrid fiends of Hell with instincts honed over the eons to pure bloodlust. Released at the forefront of the oncoming throng, the beasts harry their enemies, putting the knowledge of ancient, primordial fear into the hearts of all who hear their awful baying - chilling the souls even of those who are unperturbed by other terrors.



LEMURES



Many cultures have confused the plague of daemons with the ever-present threat of the undead, and Lemures have only added to the confusion. The name is taken from the Avrasi concept of vengeful spirits of unburied corpses, also seen in the mythic draugr found in the Jotun Peaks. Such restless wights are not strictly daemons - unlike Lemures, supernals that manifest in a great variety of forms, often appearing as sickly or deceased mortals, confoundingly similar to reanimated ghouls and zombies with a grey or greenish hue. In other cases, they take bodies with no definition at all, becoming shapeshifting mutants of fleshy tumours that some have mistaken for lesser daemons of Greed.

In either case, their malleable forms are difficult to fatally wound and serve as embodiments of the inevitability of death in folklore across several continents. Their intentions remain impenetrable even after years of study. My experiments suggest the only way to ensure a Lemure is fully dead is to dissolve it in a large tub of water treated with limestone.





TITANSLAYER CHARIOT

For infernal reasons known only to itself, this living engine propels its soot-belching way into battle, seeking always the largest and most fearsome enemies. It thrives on the thrill of the charge, building up terrible fuels within its indecipherable construct - made of arcane metals and unnatural technologies - so that it can ram itself as hard as possible into its enormous prey, often dealing crippling blows. It draws militaristic smaller daemons who cling to its chassis and aid it in its mission of slaughter.

I have only encountered a daemon of this class once. It was when I was stationed with an Imperial expeditionary force on the Makhar steppe. The company had an engineer who had repurposed a steam tank as a large troop-carrying vehicle to protect the men on the open plain. It created an awful fog of smoke, which suddenly seemed to grow into a great, ground-hugging cloud, out of which hurtled the mighty titanslayer. After the noise and flames died down, there was nothing left of either it or our vehicle - except for the debris and a triumphant roaring growing more distant.



EIDOLONS

Acrober 8th (cont.)

Daemonic aid. I have always despised those that sought it. I called them weak, selfish, willing to bring horror into the Realm of Mother Cosmos without regard for consequences. Daemons can grant terrible powers, but the price is always too great.

Isn't it?

In Civissina I had seen daemons and people working together to create a world free from tyranny. Was it possible that the Mortal and Immortal Realms could sometimes want the same thing? Could it be that daemons are not the evil of our depictions, but rather an unaligned instrument of change, to be used by mortal agents for good or ill?

I was alone, bound by iron chains in a shed where no one would find me. I knew there was no alternative. My fingers felt for the item given to me in Civissina, which I'd stored in a hip pouch. It was a rich wooden box inscribed with the runes of the dark gods. I did not know exactly what it contained, but I knew it was my only hope to avoid the fate of becoming the next sacrifice to fuel the mad schemes of Cassia Sarki. I also knew that by using it, I was finally joining the ranks of the desperate many who have called for daemonic aid.



I managed to unlatch the lid, and immediately I sensed the release of the creature that had been trapped within. A mercurial shape arranged itself before my eyes. It floated mysteriously above the ground, a length of viscous, liquid substance, anathema to mortal physics, constantly flowing and changing. Limbs sprouted at unlikely points, each ending in a grey flame. I recognised the Dark Fire. This was an eidolon, one of the least understood forms that have been identified among the infinite daemonic multitude. They are said to be rarely found alone, as this one was.

For many moments it squelched and ebbed impassively before me, assessing me with eyeless judgement. Finally it reached out a rippling tentacle and I felt the jet of inky flames take me. I had heard of this trial by fire, but the stories could not prepare me for the horror. I felt my soul consumed in the white lava of a dying star.



I felt every element of my psychic being pulled apart by talons and shredded mercilessly for a millennium. I felt my brain shrivel to an ashen husk and fall lightly through my nostril to the dusty floor where it was devoured by an earthworm, and I was the worm, doomed to burrow dark tunnels from nowhere to nothing for eternity. The darkness gave way to a red light and the cold touch of rain on my shoulders as I stared at the burning remains of my childhood home. The flames mingled with the red hide of the thing that murdered my mother. They mingled with the blossoms of the bush in which I hid. And then they mingled with the whole world, until I floated, utterly alone, in an endless prison of red fire.

When I finally awoke, I was still alone.

I vomited bile, sick with exhaustion and hunger, overcome by the sanity-testing visions I had endured in quick succession. But the ropes that bound me had burned away. The eidolon must have believed the flames would end me, when in fact they had helped me greatly. I had survived the trial and had emerged with a new certainty: I would no longer countenance cooperation with daemons. The mystery had been solved. Now was the time for action. I pushed myself up and found an old iron crowbar in a corner of the shed. I stumbled into the woods beyond. I followed the trail of singed tree trunks until I found the errant eidolon that I had permitted to enter the Mother's beautiful Realm. And I bashed it with the metal bar until it stopped squirming.



Eidolon

Eschewing the rigid, nature-inspired shapes most daemons adopt in the mortal realm, these daemons attempt to stay as close as possible to the raw, fluid magic of the immortal. Their bodies are tangible but mercurial, shifting, made of viscous colours that seem to ooze and gurgle without any regard for gravity. Some say they have seen images of screaming faces within the plasma - what is sure is that this substance opens up regularly into orifices that disgorge magical flames. This "Dark Fire" seems to test the will of its victims, burning the unworthy in agony. Where they come in force, these creatures like to stay together in packs, focusing their energy through the most powerful in the group to inflict spells even more lethal than the flames.



SUCCUBI

Acrober 11th

I rode for Civissina like all the daemons of Hell were behind me - when in fact they were ahead.

I had abandoned my duties for too long. I had not seen what was in front of my eyes. I had risked the soul of an entire city for the sake of a few trifling favours.

Long before I reached the walls of Civissina, I saw it. Perhaps four feet tall and blue like a duck's egg. Spindly limbs connected to a pot-bellied torso, above which an elfen head grinned two rows of needles.

I ignored the succubus as it cackled at my determination. More of its brothers and sisters appeared along the road, each its own twisted variant on the same evil form - some with more than one head, others with strange fins or spines along their back. Their numbers grew until they were a great crowd clamouring like cats at the city gates. The Zalosi soldiers, meanwhile, had retreated to a more distant encampment, and I could see their sentries watching nervously.

I entered Civissina through the secret tunnels I'd been shown. The city was far from the encouraging enclave of cooperation it had been days previous. The bodies of victims from the summoning rituals rotted in the streets, the scent mingling with air thick with brimstone. The sounds of chanting, punctuated by the occasional scream, could be heard from many of the houses and temples. Fearful eyes watched me from the shadows, and strange shapes could be seen in the marketplace and colonnades where once the peaceful inhabitants had walked. Now that it was encircled by daemons, not men, the city walls had been abandoned, defences left unmanned.

I hurried to what had once been the Doge's palace. I found the old woman stricken on the floor of her chambers, blood flowing from dozens of deep slashes on her body. Succubi scattered from the room as I entered, chittering gleefully at their handiwork.

"No," I said, marching towards her. "I do not permit you to die. You cannot let the city destroy itself. There is work to be done."

Mouth flecked with blood, the woman grinned beneath her gilded eyeballs.

"But the destruction..." she breathed, with difficulty. "...it's so beautiful!"

"You are not mad, you showed me yourself. You seek an end to order, not mindless suffering! I did what you asked. I found the proof to show the Patrician. I can convince him to join us."



But she only smiled more broadly, and she looked past me to some vision beyond.

"The Patrician is already slain by one of his own. One who has seen what I can see, who will join us to bring the glittering glories of chaos to your Realm. Oh! It's so beautiful!"

I watched as the golden colour faded and her eyes became human once more. But they were unmoving, and unseeing.

I fled. For the third time I found myself returning in shame and defeat to Oenolycus. The monastery was being rebuilt after the attack, and the Keepers were even more hushed and concerned than usual. The elders did not blame me for my failures, saying that armies from Myra and Santa Regina were already on the way to purge the northern provinces of this infestation. But I knew they would come too late. Something would need to be done to save Civissina before they arrived - and I feared for Zalos too, if Sarki were to turn her energies in its direction. I knew I must ignore the counsel of patience. I was the only hope of ending this before all was lost. I retrieved the items I had come for, and returned again to the road, clad once more in the hood and cloak of a Keeper.



Succubi

These are lithe, nimble creatures that move with grace and swiftness rarely seen in the Mortal Realm. Almost coquettish, even when attacking, succubi can tear through hordes of foes with frightening ease. Rarely found in small numbers, on the battlefield they swarm about like overgrown sprites, picking their prey apart in a flurry of cuts and lacerations. It is often unclear how exactly these victims are chosen. Those unfortunate enough to have encountered succubi have commented that they seem to share private jokes at one's own expense, owing to their constant whispers, giggles and glances. Attempts at negotiation are usually abandoned in frustration.

IMPS

Imps are a particularly broad category of daemon that spans tiny homunculi all the way to man-sized elementals. Known by many names - from the maddening *biesi* of *Volskaya* to the man-eating *rakshasas* of *Sagarika* - they can be found most often as cackling, brightly coloured goblin-like creatures present in almost every sizable legion. Others are known to manifest in rawer, less tangible forms complete with tongues of living fire.

Most types of imp that I have categorised prefer to attack at range, firing deadly pyroclastic bolts from limbs or orifices. Some scholars hypothesise that it is not killing which these creatures love, but simply arson. My mentor, Professor Jergen, used to say that imps were the purest incarnation of the Immortal Realm's desire to burn our world to ash. The scorch marks they tend to leave within my binding circles testify to the truth of that suggestion.





VEIL SERPENTS



These predators of the netherworld come writhing through the air like the forgotten monsters of a deepsea realm. Taking a dizzying array of forms, part fish and part serpent, their movement makes no worldly sense, and yet still they come, floating and beating their inexorable way towards the prey that they crave: mortal flesh. They have no eyes nor other sensory organs to be discerned; they are simply drawn by a nameless hunger and an uncanny ability to locate new victims. They work in schools, channelling their otherworldly powers to soften up their quarry with spells that drain its strength and courage.

There are tales of veil serpents from distant Tsuandan, where they are called yaoguai, both worshipped and feared in local folklore. It is said that they achieve spiritual power by consuming holy men, and can sometimes be placated by offerings to the Dark Gods. Legends claim they can even provide aid to the worthy, and some theologians believe they are kindred spirits of the dragons - this is of course nonsense.



FURIES

You heard about the *Pride of Santa Regina*? I was on the ship what found her drifting. It's all true. Blood and corpses everywhere, rigging torn to shreds. Only one man left, hidden himself in a barrel of black powder. Wouldn't stop shaking. Said he was hunted by the armies of Hell. Said they were coming for him. Said there was nowhere to hide.

We gave him some grog and eventually got him to stop mewling. Told us this grand tale. Said he'd been in the jungles of the South. There'd been a company out of Aguadulce. They'd found a city with these big step-pyramids, out in the Wrathful Mountains. Said the savages there have a big posh kingdom or some nonsense - had so much gold they didn't even see the value.

They were heading back to their ships, all laden with treasure, when they'd found a small village. Just a bunch of huts, really. They stop for chow with the locals, all with feathers in their hair and strange marks on their bodies.

Our man doesn't like it. He and most of the crew want to move on, it feels off. But the captain is in high spirits about the loot, and he takes a fancy to a village girl. He tells the men to make camp. Next morning, they wake up and there's this terrible stench of rotten eggs. They find the girl smiling, all covered in blood, holding a knife, and the cap-

tain's nowhere to be found. The men draw their guns and shoot up the village. They kill a bunch, but most of the tribe run into the trees. There's nothing else to do. They still have the gold, so they take it and move on.

Well it gets to twilight and there's a scream from the back of the line. They turn to look, and one of the guys is on the ground, gurgling blood through the big hole in his neck. There's a swish through the trees - they think they see something big with wings - and a sound of mad laughing. Someone says it's a pteradon. Another says that's not a pteradon, that's a giant vampire bat. But our guy - he knows there's no bats or reptiles that cackle like that.

There's another scream - now another guy has been impaled on a branch half way up the side of a tree. A couple of men shoot blindly into the jungle, for all the good it does. Soon they're running for their lives. About half the company gets picked off all gruesomely, and still they can't see the flying things that keep attacking and retreating.

It gets so bad they're forced to drop the treasure. Finally they make it to the shore. They reach the *Pride of Santa Regina*.



They look back at the trees - no sign of the creatures.
They raise anchor sharpish and head for Arcalea.

He said the daemons came again the first night at sea. He's certain that the witch girl unleashed the fiends of Hell against them. Called them "furies", like from the myths - said they come to punish wrongdoers and they never give up the chase. Said they'd killed the whole crew. There was nothing to shoot at in the dark. Just the sound of wicked laughter all around. He'd hopped in a barrel and stayed there for days, half starved and reeking of piss.

We took him home on the Dawn Star, and some of the lads tried to ask where he'd dropped the gold. "West" is all he'd say. Kept turning his head in every direction. The third day aboard, a flock of gulls passes the ship. He picks up a cannonball and jumps over the taffrail before anyone can stop him. How's that for a story, eh?

—Overheard on the docks of Port Roig





THRESHING ENGINE

Acrober 12th

When I reached Civissina, a swarm of daemons had gathered around a large pyre before the gates. A stench of sulfuric decay infused the arena. In grey robes, Sarki paced before her gibbering audience clutching a curved knife already matted with the dried blood of yesterday's victims.

Prince Damien was tied to the pyre. His head drooped, bruised and bloodied.

"You loved him, once!" I cried, stepping forward among the screeching, cooing daemons. Always keen to promote conflict, they seemed more than willing to allow me to confront their mortal leader. Sarki looked up with a snarl; I could see there was very little of her former mind still intact. "You only summoned the Maw of Akaan to hide the evidence of his fratricide. You did it out of love! Can you not recall!?"

Vacantly, the sorceress looked from me to the shackled prince. There was no flicker of recognition. She began to scratch at her own body, restlessly, limbs twitching - a clear symptom of addiction to power. Her agitation grew frantic, desperate. I leapt forward and knocked the dagger from her hands with my own blade, just as she had raised it against the Prince. Howling, she turned a face of pure malice towards me, and the world blurred as I was struck head over heels by a sorcerous blast.

"You wish to fight me? Me?!" roared the mage, as I managed to pull myself, panting, to my feet. "I, who have been granted powers beyond your imagining! I who command the Legions!"

There were screams, far off. We both looked to the distance, where something was devastating a squad of Zalosi soldiers. I glimpsed a whirlwind of devastation, against which surely no mortal could stand - and it was approaching our position with uncanny speed. Sarki was cackling, more delighted than ever.

The assembled daemons parted, and there came a great engine of whirling blades, manned by more of the succubi. Despite the blur of many moving parts, the effect it produced was simple: everything in its path was churned to fragments.

The contraption of death sped towards me, and gnashing, baying creatures followed behind it, all at her command. I took a deep breath and faced the approaching doom, drawing an item from my cloak.

"The Orb of Al-Sahar is a most ingenious device," I mused, as I saw my enemy's expression change. "Its operation is utterly simple, and yet its construction almost impossible to fathom. It is said Al-Sahar completed just three in his lifetime, though this is the only one known to have survived. The Keepers have protected it for generations. I like to think it is a gift from our Mother. She tells us: 'Be brave - now and forever.'"

The churning blades were just yards away as the Orb activated. There was a moment of tremendous silence, and then a wrenching sensation, like the whole world twisting around a pivot in my hands.

When I looked again, we were alone on the field. The threshing engine was gone, along with all the denizens of the Immortal. Damien remained unconscious on the pole. And Sarki was staring around in stupefaction.



"You! ...You think I care about a few dozen daemons? I can summon an army in an instant! Even now, on the other side of that gate, they feast on the minds and souls of the living! You've lost, so-called daemon hunter! Our victory is inevitable!"

Once again I was on the receiving end of a magical attack. I had time to raise the shield of my cloak, woven with warding energies, but still I was knocked onto my back. The face of the sorceress loomed above me, darkening against the grey sky, and I cried out as her boot came down and crushed the priceless Orb of Al-Sahar to pieces. I summoned what courage I had left.

"Cassia Sarki, of Zalos," I began, my voice weak. "You are hereby judged an enemy of the Mortal Realm. You will—"

"Enough! I am the master of this Realm; my dominion of the Veil is at hand! Die!"

A rod of white fire appeared in her hands. Preparing to strike, she raised them high above her head, which wore a mask of pure madness.

"This Realm is under my protection, and you are master of nothing," I whispered. "Your sentence is death."

With a gentle click, I unlocked the pistol I kept primed on my right wrist. As it sprang forward, I pulled the trigger, and instantly Sarki fell dead, a ball through one eye.

Threshing Engine

Hurling across the field with unnatural speed, these daemonic contraptions can decimate enemy troops before they know what's hit them. Usually pulled by horrifically sleek, elongated bipeds, and crewed by smaller fiends, these hellish chariots have been seen in many forms - with more or fewer riders and steeds, and with a greater or lesser array of seething, flesh-rending blades. Others doubted me, but I have proven that the construct itself is a living daemon, and have spoken with one that possessed my assistant Hilda. Its disposition was... energetic. It kept trying to steal the kitchen knives.



CLAWED FIENDS



Large, chittering creatures with a rudimentary exoskeleton, these freakish "fiends" are fast and terrifying. Unlike other daemons who seek to kill for its own sake, these centaur-scorpion monsters behave like a deadly mockery of puppies - friendly, excitable and desperate for attention, but also lethally dangerous. Finding any responsive mortal, they smother them with their perverse version of love, not realising their own strength or the sharpness of their claws. When their new friends stop moving, they look for newer ones.

Stories are told of Silexian elves in the south of Dathen who have managed to master these beasts, keeping them supplied with magical sustenance so that they can survive for long periods in the mortal realm and serve as battle mounts. My own experiments with fiends - and the scars on my shoulder blades - suggest this is little more than myth. But they have been known to grant knowledge to advanced conjurers, proving useful spies in the Immortal Realm.





HARBINGER

Acrober 25th

"How can I find the strength to carry on?" writes Sybellicus in the margin of his grimoire. "It is not just the temptation of power - I must resist nothing less than the inevitable. They will destroy everything."

The Civissina disaster did not end with Cassia Sarki. Prince Damien remains too ill to lead his people. After untying him from the sacrificial pole, I carried him to the Zalosi encampment and saw that he was cared for. The soldiers were terrified. Only a fraction of the army was still encamped, the rest having been lost to desertion. I called the remaining troops to Damien's tent and begged them to help me save those who still lived in Civissina, saying it was a chance to avenge the wrongs done to them by the sorceress. But I was met by grim faces.

"Please," I tried again. "I cannot lose any more. They have taken too much from me already."

Still there was silence. Finally a large, weather-beaten soldier stepped forward.

"No more daemons. It's too much," he said. And there were nods.

"Civissina isn't our problem," said another. "We want to go home."

There was nothing I could do. I watched as they began to pack up what was left of the camp. Grudgingly, I returned to the tunnel entrance to Civissina. In the darkness I thought I saw blurred creatures, unnaturally fast, and heard chittering all around. Once I emerged into the city it was no better. The eyes of the people were tormented, pulled by some powerful force, compelled to harm themselves and others. The cobbles were wet with blood. None listened to my entreaties. They were lost in private prayer. Daemons prowled every which way, killing sometimes for fun, sometimes encouraging the humans in their dark, miserable pursuits.

"It is a vision of things to come," came a voice by my side as I watched the scene from the battlements. There before me was a warrior, clad in armour of dark feathers; a tall and battle-hardened form. He turned his black-scarred face towards me. "This is the Hell on Earth that was promised. It is coming."

And there in his hands grew a length of burnished bronze, and from its top a bleak and ragged banner blew, and on the sackcloth was inscribed a single chalky symbol of the Infinite.

I heard afterwards that when the armies of Santa Regina and Myra arrived, there was nothing for them to save. The whole city was burned in purification. But I remember none of it, for I was lost then in the great banner that rippled in the evening breeze, cascading across the sky until it blocked out the sunset, blocked all the light of this world and filled my mind with the void.



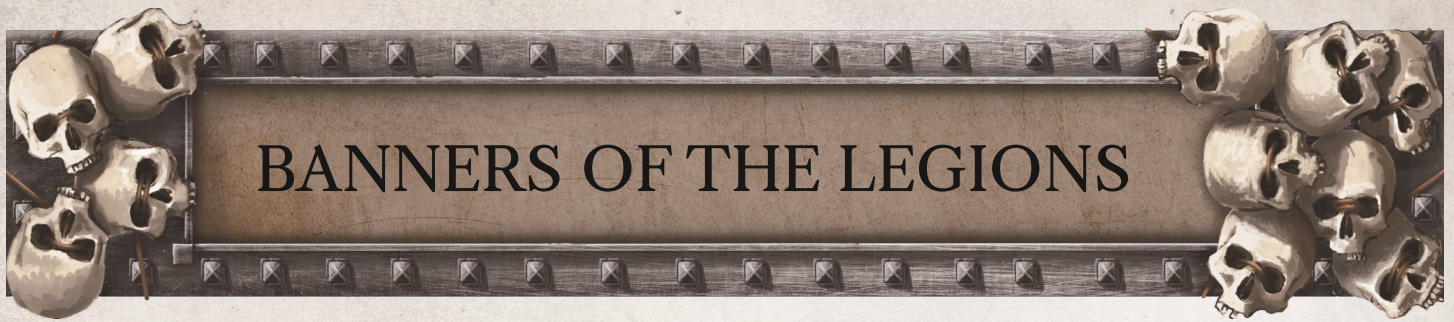
When I awoke, days later, I had been healed by the skill of the Keepers. I knew there was still work to be done. Sarki had acquired far too much power too quickly - it was beyond the skill of any mortal mage. No one could unleash so many daemons in so short a time. She was clearly being fuelled by someone, or something. Tomorrow I embark on a quest to find the true villain.

I have nothing left to lose.



Harbinger of Father Chaos

Certain daemons are thought to serve the highest principle of entropy: the cosmic being we call Father Chaos. These Harbingers have refused to be swept under the dominion of any Dark God and can appear solitary and mysterious even in the midst of a raging legion of freakish shapes. Not as powerful as those who have been lavished the blessings of a god, they are nevertheless formidable warriors and potent mages, taking an array of forms across the daemonic spectrum and often electing to master lesser daemons as mounts. They always prominently display the Father's sigil, acting as a guiding beacon for their kin, not unlike a King's bannerman. Ever enigmatic, there is no record of any mage achieving a successful bargain with a Harbinger.



The legions of the Dark Gods descend upon our realm like a tempest. Their larger hordes can rarely be sustained for long on the comparatively scant magical resources of this world, and yet their coming is remembered for generations. Tales are told of the most powerful and devastating daemons to stalk the mortal lands, standing out by their spectacular deeds or by sheer force of will from the infinite cauldron of the daemonic throng.

Drawing on my decades of research and interviews, I will here describe several of the most notable daemons through history, and the coalitions they assembled. Since the essence of such monsters escapes back across the Veil when

their physical forms are destroyed, these recognisable individuals may return several times over the arc of the ages, acquiring many names and titles and building up fearsome renown.

Lesser daemons derive much of their identity from the more powerful creatures they are compelled to follow, and these notable Dukes of Hell have been particularly effective in crafting potent symbols and iconography to shape the forms and natures of the legions they command. In such a way can they impose their dominion over the chattering maelstrom of daemonkind.

—Captain Urs Bödeker, Iron Legions of Myra



CACOPHRAX THE ENTROPIC

Cacophrax was a greater daemon of Sloth that decimated the Avrasi empire in ancient times. Half griffon and half alligator, it was said to be the size of a barn and yet it could float effortlessly over battlefields, dissolving people and buildings simply by looking at them. Cacophrax led a cross-pantheon coalition of daemons who all took abyssal black colouring, and their symbol was a spiral. The Avrasi historian Ptolemus has argued that Cacophrax was responsible for the famous and very mysterious disappearance of the Legio IX Destrana, and the loss of its eagles.



SCAROK THE MAGNANIMOUS

A titan of Envy, Scarok's regular form is that of a drake, with scales that shimmer like a kaleidoscope. Her maw is ever curled in a knowing smirk, and she arrives attended by myriad reptilian forms that shimmer and scurry in her aura of self-adulation. She avoids open confrontation unless she is defied; instead, she seeks to corrupt the minds of the wealthy and powerful, visiting kings and merchants in secret, tempting them to look towards their neighbours with jealousy. It is said she watches the ensuing battles from above, cackling at the bloodshed. Her symbol of a forked tongue provokes both awe and fear among the dread elves, for she has come often to Silexia, but she is also known in Vetia ever since the Wars of Spite (355 to 378 A.S.).



AKKA ZONO THE PUPPETMASTER

Akka Zono has most recently appeared in Sagarika, but there are many legends also from Qassar and the Kogh-inan. Sometimes called the Sultan of Lust, it has a goat's head surrounded by many arms. While the devout have often described Akka Zono as the cause of evil thoughts and carnal desires, according to my sources its true function is not to create lust but to satisfy it, by manipulating the objects of affection into agreeing to the depraved proclivities of the naturally lustful. Many noble leaders have fallen to its wicked forms of persuasion and methods of control. Those who resist successfully often find themselves confronted by cohorts of deformed abominations, resembling overlarge children or animals with human faces, bearing Akka Zono's banners marked by a vertically bisected circle.









EPILOGUE



The Journal of Gregor Koskos, Keeper of the Veil

Acrober 28th

Sister Dimitriou has always been a lone wolf, so I was pleased she accepted my offer to accompany her on her latest mission. Before his death, Father Miceli begged me to look after her, a task made almost impossible by her refusal to tell anyone what she was doing or where. This time, I will be by her side. We have all been worrying. Leonora has barely slept or eaten since Civissina fell, and her right hand is a sickly grey colour from use of the Orb of Al-Sahar. She must not be allowed to continue on her path of self-destruction.

Our first stop was Zalos, where Leonora lead me to the hidden basement in which Sarki practised her evil arts. The obsidian ball containing the Sentinel of Nukuja was still on its pedestal. Leonora took it in her hands and entered a kind of trance. I watched over her for thirteen hours, meanwhile overseeing the destruction of the workshop's other artefacts. When she awoke, she flung the black orb on the flagstones, where it smashed, and I felt a powerful presence vanish back across the Veil.

"North," she said, darkly.

We began a trek into the White Mountains, leaving the horses with a dwarf trader when the way became too steep. Our cloaks are magically infused to protect us from spells, but they did little against the chill of the great Sonnstahl Pass. Finally, leading me to the summit of an isolated crag, Leonora stopped.

"This is where she came," she whispered.

There was a temple there, although it hardly deserved such a name. It was a crude stone hovel, long abandoned, with a symbol over the lintel I did not recognise.

We searched thoroughly all around, but could find no further clues. Nevertheless, it was growing





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