

“From time to time I pause before a mirror to draw back my lips and gaze at the truth... Show me your smile and I will show you your fate.” – Matt Cardin, “Teeth”

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[I]Many a vampire lord has uttered in their brief existences that “The Blood is the Life”, and in that they are correct. But they are shadows of something greater; shadows of a concept, an idea taken flesh. In the frenzied ravages of a Tanar’ri you see a glimmer of it, a fractured aspect. In the black and measured sadism of a Baatezu you see another fraction of the whole. But only in the balance and perfection of both, the embrace of both, do you reach the pinnacle of that which I embody.

Gloating? Perhaps I am, perhaps I do, perhaps more so than the rest of my Brother-Sisters. But then again I have always been more direct, more passionate.

There is a cultivated practice to giving and receiving pain. Pain is that which all flesh was made to feel, and in that pain to shrivel or to grow stronger yet, to deflect its birthright onto another. Pain is the essence, the soul of creation, and flesh its medium, its vessel, and its chosen tapestry for itself in all its glorious shades and colors.

Look into the heart of the torturer who grows to delight at the pain he inflicts upon his charges. Look into the rivulets of blood that break and bubble from the back of the whipping boy. Thrill at the rush of ecstasy that breaks at the moment the iron spike is driven through the wrists of the crucified man.

Pain is your future my little children of the Three Words. Pain is what the universe expresses through you as it stumbles towards apotheosis. You are nothing less and nothing more than the wailing laments of its own hollow nature that it punishes and slowly kills even as it creates you anew. Your existence is agony, and I know it well, for I am your collective pain and pleasure in its giving given form. I give you homage my makers you. I worship at your alter by butchering you always and sparing myself not once in the process. As long as you hurt, as long as you feel pain course your mortal coils, as long as you feel the raw anguish that is your existence, so shall I exist to take your hand and show you the rapturous hell that you have given birth to...[/I]

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Selkar the Amber Summoner was desperate. The enemies of his kingdom, men of the eastern reaches, they had marched upon his borders and penetrated deeply. His own vassal states had risen up and thrown off the order of the magocracy that had long held sway over their lands from

the capital, the city of ivory towers. They presumed that life would be better under foreign rule, and truthfully they would. Those not versed in magic or worshipping the gods of the sorcerers of Karesh had little chance of advancement beyond tilling the soil or rising to some skilled trade. They would never hold land, they would never be wealthy. At worst they would have their children vanish, selected and chosen for sacrifice at the appointed times to propitiate the powers they themselves did not worship. In death they would serve in the unliving armies of their occupying power.

"Why did they have to invade now? Now?!" Selkar snarled as he paced around the summoning circle his apprentices and underpriests had constructed according to his instructions.

The theurge was keen to invoke the name that he had only recently learned, call it up and bind it into his service. Something powerful was needed to repel the invaders and insure the continuance of his rule and his way of life. He didn't particularly hate the invaders, they were simply a dire threat. To be honest, he had never intended to invade their lands, but the magocracy of Karesh was often misunderstood and feared by outsiders. And this latter point with good reason at times: the winter sacrifices were traditionally done with captives from foreign shores.

"Your supreme grace, we have the materials you required." The corundum theurgist, Marsellic said with a deep bow. The man's familiar, a mottled blue quasit, sat upon his shoulder with a perpetual idiot grin upon its face. It was keen to witness the summoning and what would come after.

"Good, good."

Selkar nodded and reviewed the material, muttering to himself and briefly glancing down, double and triple checking that each portion of the ritual's preparations was exactly as he required.

Tallow candles of rendered down murderers, wicks of the hair of virgin crones and whores. Serpent's blood and the milk of pregnant elven women. Powdered silver, black sand, hydra scales, salt, and wood shaved from the hearts of living dryads' trees. Everything was so terribly obscure and seemingly unrelated to most known summoning ceremonies. It was all very odd, even the name of the fiend was terribly unknown, but the strength of the invocations was such that it had to be an Abyssal Lord, and a very old and powerful one at that. And regardless of its name, it would be bound and turned against the invaders, and then an example would be made of the rebellion in the outer territories. Their souls would be a portion of the archfiend's price.

The name and the rights to summon it had come from an unlikely source. They had been found in the tomb of a dwarven abjurist in far away Xaric, surrounded by living earth, more heavily warded than the elder mage's casket itself. And in that culture, the sanctity of the body after death was paramount, it was as if he had valued its sanctity more than his own everlasting soul.

He did not value it, he feared it, and that made it something of value to the archmages and hierophants of Karesh, the Amber Summoner paramount among them.

Marsellic followed his liege as the ceremony was prepared. "My lord, if I might ask, what do you suspect about the nature of the fiend we will be summoning? I have not had a chance to review the tablets from which you have learned this knowledge of late."

"There is a reason for that." Selkar said with a sagely nod. "You or one of the other members of the Mooncast Senate would have already made use of the knowledge had I allowed you access. You're all skilled enough to do so, and you're all aware of the prestige it would give you to be seen as the savior of our city-state. I don't truly begrudge you that though, it simply stands to reason."

Marsellic and his familiar gave no reaction but continued to look curiously at the metal plates, scales really of some massive wyrm, inscribed in meticulous detail.

The familiar eventually was bored and turned away. It wasn't looking when its master glanced at the name inscribed in Abyssal on the plates.

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[I]What follows is the sworn testimony and recollections of Lord Marshal Aralar II, Duke of Verinshen, First Sword of the Faithful. By my own hand, I record these words for posterity as a true account of the invasion of Karesh and what we found during that dark time. This account I wish to serve as both a balm for my soul, heavy with these memories, and a warning to future generations, future wielders of the Art, and my successors. I pray that you do not fall to the same fate.

But now, the history of what came to pass in those days:[/I]

We were amassed there on the border of Karesh, our forces encamped in the thousands upon the vast plain that extended out to the east of their capital. The City of Ivory Towers was within sight of myself and my fellows; its spires gleamed on the horizon at noon and its torches glowed and glittered against the stars at night, nestled there only a two day march away.

However, with the city in plain view, we dared not move closer. Karesh had been well aware of our intent to invade, and they had prepared for our arrival. The border of their nation flickered with a thin, pale membrane, and up to that puissant borderline, the unliving defenders of that nation stood arrayed, waiting.

Thousands of them, the dead of generations, animated and pressed into undying, unthinking servitude. In life they had served with some modicum of free will, and in death as free will left them along with the spark of life, their bones served on at the will of the clerics and necromancer elite of their nation.

Rank upon rank of skeletal soldiers stood there at the edge of the border, waiting for us to make our move. We suspected that their animating force was tethered to the city, or limited in some respect to the edge of their established borders; they would not breach that boundary and attack us, but they would wait obediently for our assault. This we were resigned to, and so we waited and studied them.

They were not uniform. Interspersed with the undead were a small number of mortals: necromancers and clerics of various dark powers. Handlers, they were there to bolster the efficacy of their troops and ensure that in the face of our own priests, they did not falter. When we did attack, those mortal men would be the first targets.

But such was not to be.

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Marsellic peered down at the third in the series of plates.

"What manner of name is that?" The mage asked. "The syntax is unfamiliar to me. It doesn't seem Tanar'ric, even with their multiplicity of names. Methikus sar Telmuril?"

The quasit on his shoulder went berserk.

"Son of a...!" Marsellic screamed as the least fiend convulsed and reflexively dug its claws into the elf's flesh to draw a crimson spurt of blood.

He swatted at his shoulder, frantically trying to dislodge the quasit as it drew more and more blood. It didn't seem to notice as its master beat his fist into its side, and a moment later it leapt at Selkar, screaming incoherently before it froze, suspended in midair.

Marsellic looked up in shock and pain. He inhaled through clenched teeth, more concerned with his master's reaction than with either the immediate pain in his shoulder or the sudden and unexplained actions of his familiar.

“Clean up your blood so it doesn’t drip on the floor.” Selkar said angrily. “You can have the wound tended to later after the summoning. And as for your familiar...”

Selkar paused and thought. The quasit remained hung in space, an expression best described as fear plastered on its face.

“If it remains alive after the greater fiend is summoned, you may punish the quasit yourself. Perhaps Methikus will be hungry and save you the trouble itself.”

Marsellic winced again as he nodded and diligently set about preparing his own portion of the binding ceremony. Still, as he knelt upon the floor and began to inscribe the diagrams in a mixture of gold dust and flakes of dried blood he couldn’t help but glance up at his familiar. He’d had the fiend for nearly a decade as confidant, advisor, and co-conspirator during his rise through the ranks of the magocracy, but its unexplained outburst might have made its own continued tenure in that role a limited thing.

The quasit was left hanging in the air, literally and metaphorically.

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The dead were waiting for us. Their position was favorable, their morale irrelevant, and their readiness supernatural. We would have to come to them. That was the obvious conclusion that we reached, the other captains and myself, after we hastily gathered and did what we could to determine our immediate course of action.

I was to lead the one of the eight garrisons of footmen, there to protect our ranks of divine casters, and our horsemen and ranks of mercenary soldiers would flank us. And so there I stood with the sun at my back, my troops looking to me for inspiration and bravery in the face of the unthinking ranks of the living dead staring at us from a hundred yards distant. I smiled at those nearest to me and raised my hand to signal our advance. The moment we began our march, so did the army of the dead.

Two hundred yards of cold, grassy earth between us, and then it happened. The undead army stopped abruptly. Our own ranks tensed, expecting a sorcerous assault, but instead we watched as the dead shuddered and immediately turned on their own handlers, the clerics of death and undeath, necromancers and sorcerers. I, and my army, we stopped and watched as the army of

our enemy slaughtered every mortal in their ranks in the space of seconds. Clerics screamed out prayers to their gods in panic stricken voices as bony talons tore them apart. Necromancers invoked spells to control the unbound dead, only to watch them fail as they were crushed underfoot by their own automatons.

Red blood staining the white of polished, sun bleached bone, the dead shambled aimlessly, as if for a moment they could comprehend their act of fratricide. And then with stunning uniformity, they collapsed as their animating force was snuffed by an unseen hand.

We stood there dumbfounded, all of us. It was as if the gods had looked down and smiled, turning the dark sorceries of our enemies against them. We lowered our shields and sheathed our swords, gazing out at the empty field of bones and the scattered corpses of only barely recognizable clerics and necromancers, each of them killed by their own creations.

A shout rang out from within our ranks and soon the plain resounded with our triumph. Men screamed in joy, banged their shields together, thumped their chests and prayed with tears in their eyes. Our celebration went on for a few long minutes before I gave the order and we began to look forward.

We left behind our catapults, our siege engines, the machines of war that we would have needed to take their capital after the massive losses we had assumed we would incur fighting their grave-borne army. With that army gone we would go unopposed by any fighting force, and we would outnumber their mages by an order of magnitude. That in mind, we marched forwards with the wind at our back.

It was a miracle, or so we thought at the time. We would soon find out how wrong we were.

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The mages stood arranged at the tips of the seven-point star drawn upon the floor of the summoning chamber. The candles were held by each of them in their left hands and lit, each in turn, as they recited the response of what amounted to a perverted liturgy. As Selkar incanted, the others scattered their components into the septagram, each in turn, each in their place.

Salt, sand, silver, wood, blood, milk, and scales. As they chanted they hurled them into the center of their circle and watched them ignite. The ashes drifted in lazy swirls and assumed the shapes of long, grasping talons, slowly distending on gravity's tug as they sifted through the

sorcerers' fingers. The candles in the casters' hands dripped wax down to the floor and scattered in tiny boiling drops that cooled in uncanny approximations of screaming faces.

The sorcerers tried not to notice as they continued.

It began as a slow tingling in their limbs at first. They continued chanting as a wind picked up in the windowless chamber, gentle at first, and then rising to rustle their robes and snuff the candles.

Oddly, the whistle of the wind sounded almost like the screaming of a thousand distant voices.

Selkar felt it then, a dull pressure at the back of his eyes. His vision blurred but he was near to the end of the ritual and so he continued. Only vaguely did he pay notice to the pained expressions on his fellows' faces and the horrified look frozen on the face of the quasit. He continued the summoning.

"Methikus Sar Telmuril! I summon thee! I bind thee to my will!"

A drop of blood formed in the center of the septagram. A single drop of crimson on the white alabaster floor, it welled up from nothing and glistened darkly. Another drop began to bubble up from the stone...

"Methikus Sar Telmuril! Lord of Corporeal Terror! I summon thee!"

Blood began to well up in the center of the circle more and more, filling the boundaries of the septagram. The surface rippled and Selkar cackled with excitement. But sadly, neither he nor any of his associates were aware of anything beyond the summoning chamber.

Beyond the summoning chamber, beyond the walls of the tower that contained it, stretching out into the city and five miles beyond, the world was going mad. Wizards in the streets and in their own homes watched as their imp, quasit, or nalg familiars began to scream. Common citizens in the sprawling markets watched as goats, pigs, and cattle slammed themselves against each other and the walls of their pens. They watched as dogs and cats twitched and fell, laying there comatose or dying where they fell as they forgot to breath. Other animals began to cry out and worry themselves till they bled, or they lashed out in mad fury at

anything within their reach. High above in the sky, flocks of birds hurled themselves into the city's towers or dropped from the sky when their hearts stopped out of raw, insensate fear.

That was merely the prelude. They were sparing themselves the torment that was approaching.

Selkar watched as the surface stirred and the faint impression of some being beneath began to take form. He cracked a mad smile of delight at his triumph as the archfiend was ready to emerge.

“Methikus Sar Telmuril! Sanguine Weaver! Flesh Sculptor! I call thee and I...”

Selkar paused. He had not yet finished the incantation. Something was already breaking through. A massive bloody hand languidly rose up out of the crimson pool in the center of the circle. Blood splashed beyond the boundary, diagrams writ in gold and ash were brushed aside, and men began to panic. Talons dug into the stone as that single hand casually rose up to reveal a wrist then a forearm, and finally an elbow. Cracks raced in a spiderweb pattern across the stone as weight and force was applied; the fiend was pulling itself up without any apparent regard for the boundary of the circle.

Selkar swallowed his fear and resumed.

“Methikus Sar Telmuril! I summon thee and bind thee to my will! Lord of ...”

The Sapphire Mage kept screaming out the words of the binding ritual, but if the fiend heard him, it didn't seem to react one way or the other as it lifted itself up from the pool of blood. The forearm that rose up from the blood was elongated, nearly as long as Selkar was tall, and a slick gray color nearly hidden beneath angry bleeding slashes that ran from fingertips to elbow.

Worry gave way to awe and absolute horror, snuffing all sounds but the wheeze of bated breath, as the fiend fully emerged within the septagram. It was a towering creature, nearly twenty feet tall, hunched over to avoid the ceiling, with elongated arms and legs, with a body wasted as if from prolonged hunger or disease, and a head that could only be vaguely compared to that of a goat. That was not what was most noted however: every inch of its flesh was cut, slashed or gouged as if by its own razor-like claws. The fiend bled openly from hundreds of wounds, and the constant drip of its own blood was the only sound it made as it craned its neck and turned its head to smile at Selkar...

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As much as we might have wanted to, we did not immediately march towards the capital city. We had a lingering fear that the bones of their army might suddenly spring up and attack us from behind once we had marched into their territory and been separated from any easy retreat. That in mind, we sent out groups of scouts ahead of the army while our clerics blessed the bones of the dead and sanctified the ground where they had all inexplicably fallen.

It took us far too long to complete that task, and we only managed a march of some ten miles before darkness fell upon us and we stopped to rest and prepare for the next day's march, and the coming conflict. In our meetings that evening to discuss strategy upon the morrow, we raised several concerns amongst ourselves, all of them disturbing and ill omens.

We had encountered no further opposition during our march towards the capital, none at all, not even a single raiding party of conjured beasts or bound demons. This was unexpected. And then, there were the lights of the distant city. Or, more precisely, the lack of lights. The city was only visible as a great blotch of darkness, a parcel of the night sky set against the horizon and devoid of stars. There was no reason that the wizards would have chosen to extinguish every lamp, lantern, or flame in their towers; none at all.

We pondered this latter point for some time, late into the evening, and during that time we saw no changes in the gloom that swathed the city. I expected something; an errant shade lifted from a hooded lantern, a magical burst of illumination by an irresponsible mage's apprentice, something of that nature. But nothing.

In frustration we searched the horizon, and by extension the gloom that held the city in its clutch, for evidence of magical shielding, perhaps a massive bubble of conjured darkness, or an illusion cloaking the whole of the capital, or hiding an army approaching us. There was nothing that had not been present there before we had breached their borders, and in some places, significantly less.

It was just then, shortly after our divinations were complete, that the first of our scouts returned to give us their reports of what they had found. It was disturbing news. The farms that surrounded the city were empty and deserted, and the scouts had found not a sign of their inhabitants. What they did find though were the gutted remains of things gone feral, gone mad, killing themselves and each other with terrible, single minded ferocity. What few animals they found, wild or domestic, were in panicked flight away from the city. Nothing natural was left, and there was evidence that the serfs had been dragged from their homes, taken away by force.

Obviously we were concerned, but our concern was abbreviated by the fact that no harm had befallen our own. The army our enemy was destroyed, their sorcerers and clerics dead or missing, and our march to their capital had been unopposed. Whatever had befallen them seemed to have been by their own doing, some catastrophic mistake rather than a calculated ruse to cause us to lower our defenses as we marched forwards.

We would soon find evidence that what had happened did indeed concern us, but not till the next day. The night though, would hold another warning for us, enigmatic as it might have been. Terrible dreams. Harrowing dreams.

I was there in my tent, my prayers only recently made, my armor put aside as I prepared to sleep when I heard the whimpering screams of the men who already were. They awoke with a start, crying out in the night and then breathing heavily before whispering to themselves. When I finally managed to sleep, despite their cries in the darkness, I would experience them too. Those dream born horrors continued for all who tried to sleep that night, terrible visions carried on the wind that blew from out of the dying city of the amber summoner.

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The nightmares that evening began the same for every mortal within fifty miles of the city. Citizens of Karesh, those still untouched by the events in their capital, suspected it to be the magic of the invaders marching upon their lands. Of the members of that army, they in turn suspected it to be sorcerous attempts to spread fear and sleeplessness among their ranks by the mages of the City of Ivory Towers.

But regardless of where they suspected its source to have originated, the content of the nightmares was the same.

The dreamers each awoke, standing in the middle of a vast, hellish wasteland. Mountains ripped up from the dry, dusty soil that was mixed with ash and salt, and the smell of volcanic sulfur drifted through the air as volcanoes on the horizon erupted in pyroclastic fury. Flames and clouds of burning cinders erupted up into the air, booming across the sky and filling the roiling cloud cover with bursts and crackles of light from skybound meteors belched forth freely by the earth to detonate high above.

The dreamers stood in the same place, each a witness to something that had happened so very long ago, so many eons distant and a reality separated from their mortal realm. It was a

dream-born echo of events that was reverberating in their minds, as one of its architects was that night being called into the mortal world.

The land was ever changing, rippling and fluid, and its very features seemed to shift and bubble on the horizon, changing when the dreamers looked away and then back in confusion. It was the Abyss, and eons later it would be known to scholars as Woeful Escarond, the Mountains of Woe, the 400th layer of that plane to be cataloged and described in detail outside of the boundaries of that terrible place of Chaos and Evil. But this dream, this echo of things long past, even as it embodied malignant change and bloody flux, it too was about to be irrevocably altered. And it was this, one part of something terrible, that the dreams all bore witness to.

Things in the sky, horrific mockeries of bats with blood writ runes upon their wings, cartwheeling, cavorting and rutting in the skies, they noticed it first. Other, darker, more fluid things lurking and hunting across the volcanic plains below noticed it next. There was something in the air like a tangible electric charge, something like a heavy presence pushing at the boundaries of that reality, pushing at whatever metaphysical membrane separated it from everywhere else, separating it from the other places of raw, incarnate alignment. Among the creatures in the skies and across the plane, that was what they sensed.

The clouds rumbled across the vast infinite expanse of that place, and then it happened. In a burst of light and a peal of screaming, laughing, ecstatic thunder, the skies were opened like holes had been rent in their very fabric, gaping, ragged slashes, violations of their basic structure, and they were bleeding.

The things in the sky, the entities below, and the dreamers alike watched as the skies began to bleed not blood, but torrents of worms. The skies, ripped asunder as they were, spilled forth hundreds, thousands, millions of mewling, screaming worms with the faces of men.

Even as they fell from the sky they were changing, growing, evolving. New and terrible forms burst forth from the flood of larvae spilling from the pregnant sky. Larvae erupted into the broken and twisted forms of rutterkin, only to sprout feathers and wings seconds later as they took to the sky as vrock. The torrent of screaming petitioners washed over the ground, bubbling up into an uncountable horde of manes, dretches, babau, subbubi, vrock, and others.

Tanar'ri burst into being as soon as each and every larvae was touched by the Abyss. As each new fiend erupted into being they began to feed, they began to rage, and they began to rut

and procreate, spreading horror and spreading themselves across the land, darkening the skies with their wings.

Something had tapped the heavens to flood that hell, and it was there, watching the dichotomy of birth and slaughter, creation and destruction, infection, lysis, and replacement. Amid the screaming flood of larvae and raging millions of Tanar'ri spilling into the Abyss to butcher its natives, the dreamers could hear the laughter of the slaughter's designer and conductor. They heard it then, just before they woke, an echo of the past intruding upon the present.

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Selkar stared up at the towering fiend that stood in the center of his binding circle. Behind him, several of the other mages gasped involuntarily. But Selkar was grinning with triumphant mad glee.

"Methkus sar Telmuriil." The summoner began. "I have called you, and I have bound you here to my will."

The fiend turned to face him, making no visible emotional display in response to Selkar's forceful declaration. Dull white eyes stared down as Selkar began to enumerate his demands.

"You will obey me and destroy the army of my enemies. You will not harm me, my subjects, or anything within our lands."

The Baernaloth gave no response.

There was a sound behind Selkar, one of his assistant mages shuffling their feet from the sound of it. The summoner though was too focused to turn around, and he ignored it as he continued to instruct the fiend.

"Good. You know when you are bound." Selkar said with a sneer. "You know that you cannot break through the magic that I have bound you with here. You know that you must obey."

Again, the Baern said nothing. But this time it turned away from Selkar with an expression of bored disinterest.

"Fiend! Listen to me!" Selkar demanded. "Look at me when I'm talking to you!"

Behind him, his associate mages shuffled around once more and one of their familiars, a cat, let out a ragged cry. Annoyances. The men were skilled enough to help him bind an archfiend, but not wise enough to know when to keep silent and unobtrusive when he needed to concentrate.

The Baern looked down at its own arm where a flurry of bleeding slashes were healing, muscle and skin stitching themselves back together as he watched. Slowly, deliberately, it opened and closed its hand to watch exposed muscle and tendons flex. It ignored Selkar's commands, only looking up at him for a split second before suddenly and savagely slashing at its own healing forearm.

Selkar stopped talking, shocked as he was by the fiend's sudden and brutal outburst of self-mutilation. He was even more put back when the Baernaloth held its arm up to watch with manic fascination the cascade of blood dripping down onto the floor.

"Do you appreciate the artistry inherent in the giving and taking of pain?" The Baernaloth said softly.

"What?"

"Flesh, the physical component of your tenuous existence, the anchorstone of your mortality; it is so very much like a canvas you see..."

"Excuse me? What are you prattling on about?"

"Oh the colors are bloody red and they differ by which mortal form you draw pain upon with talon, tooth, blade or burn. But the less visible undercurrent, the patterns firing through your brain, the seat of your soul as it interacts with the physical, the mortal, they scream the same song when blood is spilt."

Selkar looked at the fiend with disgust.

"Methikus sar Telmuril. You will be quiet and you will obey me."

The Baern chuckled and broadly smiled.

"Truly? I will?" The Sculptor asked with a sense of glib amusement.

Selkar fumed. The fiend was mocking him even though bound as it was.

"You will listen to me! You will obey! And if you do not, you will feel pain!"

Selkar's final statement drew the Baern's direct attention, unfortunately for him.

"You amuse me..." The Baernaloth said, looking at him directly.

Something was wrong. Selkar sensed it. There was another sound from behind him, and for the first time he noticed the blood on the floor...

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In the early hours of dawn the next morning we found the first of them: a farmer, a conjurer's apprentice, and a few others for whom we could say little but that it was a miracle that they were alive. When we came upon them, they were all in mad, panicked flight –away- from the sorcerers' tower city. Haggard, bleeding from dozens of wounds, some stricken blind, others mute with fear or screaming uncontrollably, we could gather little of sense from them.

"Something terrible."

Those were the first words, the first coherent words, which we heard from them. We slowed our march based on the fear of these few... survivors...

As the capital grew closer and closer, the wind was tinged with the scent of death, though where we might have expected to find the wind, the fingers of the sky, graced with rings of crows, vultures, and other carrion eaters, the land and sky alike were quiet and dead. Nothing was left. It was almost as if the city had reached out and devoured its own, carried them back into its bosom and whatever fate it held for them within.

Further questions posed to the survivors gained us little more than cold sweat and involuntary twitching. They would only say that the world had gone mad, their magic had turned against them, and something terrible had stepped into the world.

"Don't take us back there." The one apprentice mage whimpered. "The world is bleeding, the ether is screaming in the night, and it is our fault... please..."

I should have listened. But I did not. Out of pride I was confident in our abilities. Out of distrust I could not dismiss the potential that all of it still, despite the waves of evidence, might be an elaborate deception. And in misguided compassion or idealism my heart could not ignore the potential that we would manage to save the lives of any innocents who might have survived what nebulous calamity had taken their city.

And so as the wick of day's candle burnt down to drown in its own sallow wax, I ordered a halt to our advancement and we camped less than a mile from the city. From a distance we could see that the walls were devoid of sentries and the gates had been ripped open, apparently from the

inside. True to the terror-numbed words of its survivors, something had befallen the city, something of their own doing, something born of desperation and most wicked hubris.

Triumphant in the apparent knowledge that we would take the city without the battle we had anticipated since the start, but afraid of the unknown quantity lurking within, we gave uncertain and wary looks to the city till sleep claimed our minds, and the dreams came again.

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The dreamers each awoke alone within their shared dreamscape, a vague realm of dull, muted shades of formless gray. Dimly, fading in their ears was a sound of a great multitude of screams, but now where they stood there was only a heavy, still silence swirling about them in time with a cold, frost touched fog.

Their dream was one filled with sadness, and indeed their emotions, whatever they might have been before sleep, were rapidly bled away, snuffed and devoured by their surroundings. They shivered in the pale light that suffused the landscape, revealing to them the frost rimed trees of a forest: sickly stands of pine and evergreen, and other more indistinct forms that seemed to twitch and move, sending tiny currents and whirls through the fog.

Soft hissing noises broke through the gloom of the forest, rising up as a dull audible tide while serpentine shadows and flickering tongues extended out from trees now visible as not pines or firs, but as columns of serpents bursting forth from the black, ashen soil. The trees, viper trees of Niflheim, though none of the dreamers would know this fact, they were agitated and their hissing and writhing in the air was simply an expression of their unease. Something was causing them distress, something the dreamers could not see.

Those same dreamers shivered as their body heat was siphoned away from the cold, clinging mist, even as they began to feel the forest and the ground below them sapping at their will and their emotions. The trees began to hiss and shudder, slipping their tongues into the air, tasting the scent of whatever they felt approach, shaking themselves free of frost in anticipation of blood.

Distantly the dreamers could hear the snapping of serpentine jaws and the shriek and pained mowl of the trees' targets. The fog stirred and shuddered; whatever was approaching was either massive, or there were enough creatures passing through the trees to cause such a sudden and powerful disturbance upon the air.

The ground began to shudder beneath the dreamers' feet. The dust, ash and frost on the forest floor shook from the footfalls and struggled, infantile crawling of a million, tens of millions, hundreds of millions of creatures herded forwards, following like rats to the unspoken tune of a

fiend's flute. Tiny tremors first, and then the wretched sound of fluid wriggling of worm upon worm, misbegotten fish flopping about and gasping for breath even they were goaded inexorably forwards.

As the squealing horde of worms with the faces of men approached, the dreamers' eyes were drawn to a single light piercing the gloom, bobbing side to side in the depths of the forest. Somehow above the sound of its flock, they could hear the measured footsteps of the lantern's holder as he strode through the viper forest.

[I]Carpocrates of Zrintor.[/I]

The name came to their minds unbidden as the figure and its swaying, flickering lamp strode into view and out from amongst the trees. Dressed in a stained silk robe once of such rich quality to have clad a king, it was now ripped and torn at the fringes, dirty and soiled from travel, but the shepherd's robe was not what drew their attention. The hands that held the lamp aloft were tipped with claws, and so were the man's bare feet as he stood at the head of a crawling living wave of worms with the faces of men.

No. What gathered the dreamer's fascination was the shepherd's face. Not the face of a man, or an elf, or anything else mortal, his face was that of a snarling jackal or hunting dog. He was a yugoloth, not that the dreamers were aware of this, one of the arcanaloth sorcerers of his kind. Frost and frozen spittle hung from his whiskers as he turned to glance at his flock of larvae which followed him in a trancelike state, their eyes wide and nearly worshipful of the fiend whose lantern they followed.

The dog-headed fiend sighed and spat, clearly tired and haggard from his journey, the long walk and duty of guiding the uncountable horde of worms having taken its toll on him.

"Tell me what to do Father/Mother."

The arcanaloth's voice was raspy, dry, very nearly a coughed series of barks. He was tired, he was unhappy, but his question was whispered with a tone that bordered on reverence.

"King of the Tangible, Father of Sanguine Desire..." The dog headed shepherd whispered very nearly in singsong prayer. "Mother of Corporeal Terror, Demioergos of Physical Agony... instruct your servant, this vessel of sin, this willing leper. What is thy will for the impure spawn of the Gem crafted by your Firstborn, these spawn which I have gathered and led as instructed?"

Even as the worms crawled about his feet like penitents to their self-chosen messiah, his own prayer of sorts was answered.

Something stirred the air, less a physical presence to cause the fog to twist and swirl, but something felt in the bones, felt in the nerves, something that caused a hush to fall over the carpet of larvae.

Each of the dreamers would later remember the event separately, with contradictory details when compared to one another's recollections.

Some dreamers would see the larvae, and their shepherd alike begin to bleed from their eyes and mouths. They would recall with horror the blood rising up in a fine red mist to cover and define the form of a towering immaterial form.

Others would recall the same being emerging out of the darkness or the ashen soil itself, lurking behind the dog-headed fiend, laying a hand upon his shoulder and whispering into one of his pointed, perked ears.

Still others would claim that the creature didn't emerge out of the darkness, but flowed out of the yugoloth shepherd who had called to it. It began with a gossamer ethereal arm emerging from his chest and gesturing in patterns while a shoulder and a head would emerge from his back to twist and revolve, placing immaterial lips to his ear and whispering to him, instructing him.

But the result was the same for all the varied descriptions of its prelude: the arcanaloth would smile and roll his sleeves up to his elbows, acting as if in a trance while he dug his claws into his own arms, drawing out streams of blood to mingle with the soil and spatter both his own robes and the worms at his feet.

"From the tree falls a seed, one of three from one of three."

He reached down and picked up one the wriggling larvae, cradling it in his hands and smiling.

snap!

The larvae went limp as its shepherd snapped its neck and ripped open its underbelly. Blood and innards spilt out onto the ground to mix with his own blood and the dust under his feet.

"Blood from me, a life from thee. One of three, from one of three."

The fiend traced symbols on the ground, a muddy mixture of his own blood with the ash and dust composing the soil. As each symbol was traced, the entity instructing him would whisper again and trace in the air the pattern its servant would write. With each symbol

completed in the earth, the air shuddered visibly, the larvae howled into the sky... they had to have carpeted the forest floor for miles upon miles around such was the sound.

“Children, vermin, heralds be you willing or not. Thus spoken, thus created, by Words of Three I bind and birth. One of three, from one of three.”

The viper trees began to scream as the last symbols were drawn in place. A tremor rocked the earth and the air began to blur as its essence began to lose coherency, lose their anchor stone to the Waste. The arcanaloth, or the being that whispered to it, the Baernaloth, the dreamers would recall differently, one of those two figures spoke a trio of words that burned their ears and rippled through reality, rewriting it as it expanded and punctured between planes; not a sword but a syringe.

And then, out of one transition, there came another. The entity that whispered to its arcanaloth servitor, be it emerging from out of its body like a possessive inhabitant, or from without, lurking behind it, it smiled and clasped its hands over the lesser fiend's face. The yugoloth began to scream in pain and ecstasy.

The screams of worm and tree reached fever pitch, and then... everything changed. No longer gray and featureless, the sky burned a bloody, angry red, filled with twisting, shifting, cavorting spreads of color. Everything was fluid, everything was changing, everything was screaming, and it too began to change, mixing and merging with the tumor hurled into its belly.

The arcanaloth continued to scream, first in pain primarily, and then only in triumph as his flesh began to melt and run like molten wax, dripping off and boiling away. His physical features sloughed away as his mind was opened, his emotions were bled away, and he emerged from his arcanaloth's cocoon as something altogether new.

The Baernaloth smiled down at this new creature, Carpocrates born anew in flesh and spirit, ovoid eyes burning like fire opals in the first moments of the Zrintor's existence in the Abyss.

Larvae burst asunder and died in showers of flaming blood, others shuddered and died, but still others belched forth the warped and twisted forms of newborn Tanar'ri. Manes, dretches, rutterkin, uridezu, and uncountable others even more twisted and savage. Millions of them were born anew on the infected, sullied soil of the Waste and Abyss merged as one, and all of them, they hungered.

The dream began to blur for the dreamers. The ultraloth Carpocrates vanished from any of the disjointed images that flickered in their minds eye, and they caught only glimpses of Tanar'ri variously feasting, killing, rutting, and wallowing in all manner of depravities as they took the first bloody step in claiming a plane as their own.

But there was one thing they saw, one thing which none of them would later remember, and that was the subsequent role of the Baernaloth in that carnage. It had been there to shepherd in the newborn Tanar'ri, hurling them into the Abyss, and there to butcher the original denizens of that plane, but unlike their frenzied orgy of undirected slaughter, it had very certain motives interwoven with its bloodlust, and there upon that layer which would one day be claimed by one of her spawn, the Baernaloth found her.

She was figure wrapped in a gossamer shroud, screaming impotently in horror and rage as its reality was butchered, infected, supplanted by children of another plane of reality altogether. Nameless then, but one of many, she was the target of the Baernaloth while her kindred were slaughtered without pause. It seized her, held her to the ground, and cackled...

There in the Viper Forest of Zrintor, she and her reality both were raped. Seeds were sown, metaphorically, metaphysically, and literally. She was violated and cast aside, a vessel filled with a bitter and cancerous seed, a pale vessel left hollow, cold, and empty.

[center]***[/center]

There was blood on the floor, Selkar could see that clearly, and it was not the blood that he had cast upon the ground when summoning the fiend, nor was it the blood which had welled up from the circle when the creature had been summoned. It was bright and fresh, still liquid, trickling forwards towards the fiend like raindrops dribbling down a pane, their source from somewhere behind him.

The only things behind him were bound fiends, a few familiars, and their masters, his assistant summoners.

The Baernaloth lowered its head and stared at Selkar, a wet chuckle building in the back of its throat as realization and horror dawned upon its summoner. A chorus of hisses, caws and fiendish snickers echoed across the chamber from behind Selkar. The mage shuddered and closed his eyes, taking a moment of pity for himself.

His assistants were dead. All of them. While he'd been presuming to command the Baernaloth, it had been busy smiling to his face while freeing the tanar'ri from their magical bindings to allow them to butcher their keepers. The Baernaloth was not bound. It never had been. The ritual of calling had been performed with some fatal flaw, if it had even been capable of binding the archfiend in the first place.

He had to escape. That was his first thought in the space of a single panicked moment.

‘No.’ Selkar realized immediately. ‘The chamber is bathed in overlapping dimensional anchors. We wouldn’t allow a summoned fiend to easily escape with a stray thought if it managed to slip its bonds.’

If he couldn’t escape, he would have to dispense of the creature and pray that his magic was capable of doing so without any aid. And he had to pray that the fiends behind him would either be unable to penetrate his contingent protections, or that once he banished the archfiend, they would revert to their docile, magically coerced state.

The Baernaloth inclined its head down and forwards several feet, hunching its back and leering down at its summoner. Its grin full of blood and spittle, its eyes glistening, it seemed to savor the mage’s panic.

That was when Selkar hurled a banishment at the fiend, a banishment advanced in power to the same sphere of casting as a Wish, the most powerful rebuke possible to a being of the planes. Selkar spat out the final hard syllable of the spell with pride and pure will, certain of his own power, and for a moment his mortal spite, foolish as it might have been, actually surprised the fiend.

The magic flashed through the air, and the fiend should have been hurled back to the pit where it had been called. That was what should have happened. That was what did not occur.

Selkar stepped back involuntarily in shock as his spell simply failed to take effect, snuffed out by the fiend’s resistance to magic. But the magic didn’t even appear to dissipate as it should have if it had simply failed to pierce the innate barrier to magic inherent to the Baernaloth. As the spell failed, the flesh upon the fiend’s forearm glimmered as a script of slashes, blood and scars penned itself upon a parchment of flesh. Not only did the spell fail, it was absorbed and subverted.

“Such unwarranted confidence!” The Baern said, snake-like eyes looking down to the spell penned into its flesh like a scroll.

Without thinking, Selkar repeated his attempt a second time, and a second time it failed.

“Such presumption!” The Baernaloth exclaimed as a second spell wrote itself in a script of slashes and cuts on its abdomen.

Selkar paled as the Baernaloth extended a long and bloody tongue, torn by its own teeth, and licked at the air like a serpent tasting the wind of approaching prey.

“Bitter disappointment, tinged with disbelief.” It said, cold and threatening. “The air is saturated by its bouquet, though the rising taste of fear and urine threatens to make it indistinct.”

His only hope of survival had been to banish the creature, but with his only two attempts failing miserably, hope was fading fast. He had no further spells in memory that might work where the others had failed...

No. There was one other possibility, though he would likely die in the attempt as well. With the Baernaloth seemingly doing nothing but watching him embarrass himself, sipping the vintage of his fear, Selkar had what might have been the only wholly altruistic thought in his life. His staff. A retributive strike. He'd likely die, but he'd hurl the archfiend across the planes and away from his nation. They might still prevail against their enemies, but they stood no chance against the fiend if it remained upon the prime and in their midst.

He dove to his left and grabbed the staff, jerking out one knee and very nearly bringing the center of the staff down upon it. Close. So very agonizingly close. But the fiend had been aware of his actions, or the tanar'ri held in its control had simply been quicker than he had been, and before he broke the staff it was ripped from his hands and a dozen fiendish hands dragged him down to the ground.

It was over. Even if the fiends were only restraining him, their breath reeking of sulphur and rot washing over him and making him gag, Selkar was living on time borrowed at the whimsy of the entity he had summoned.

A dozen feet distant, still within the septagram, the Baernaloth clapped its hands together in an expression of amusement and calmly, slowly, strode out of the binding circle as if it were simply a child's ignorant scribbling upon the floor. It gave a momentary snort of derision at the magic of the circle and then twirled a single, elongated finger in the air.

Selkar watched as the strands of magic that had formed the circle grew visible and then frayed, snapped, and tangled like the errant threads of a broken spider's web under the Baernaloth's vivisecting touch.

"Your calling was amusing." The Flesh Sculptor said, toying with the broken magic, watching its dweomers bleed away their power even as his body bled upon the stone.

"At least take some pride in that." The fiend continued. "Though a binding was of course beyond your ability, as seems so very obvious now. And your attempts at dismissing me were altogether something even so much more futile."

The tanar'ri tightened their grip upon Selkar's arms, legs and neck as the Baernaloth approached. The archfiend's expression suddenly shifted from malign, but amused whimsy, dropping precipitously to a cold and sterile malignancy.

"You invited me in you, called my name from the glowing firelight of an open doorway and into the misty bottomless gloom outside. I heard you, I answered. You invited me in, called my

name, a most staggering presumption that I so wholeheartedly approve of, but for which I will punish nonetheless.”

The fiend’s tone of foreboding seriousness once more shifted, dropped to a lunatic giggle, and then just as quickly, back to a sociopathic calm.

“Oh you must know this is but idle preoccupation, curiosity in some way; I dissect you, splice you, rework your flesh and bones not entirely out of some malign desire of the pit, but also simply because I can.”

Selkar screamed as the Baernaloth stepped forwards, close enough for the summoner to see the sheen of its gray, sickly flesh and the crimson it had painted across its own body like a living canvas.

“It is what I am.” The Flesh Sculptor said in a whisper. “It is what I do. It is what you make me. And it is ever so what I enjoy.”

Without warning the Baern sliced its talons across its own chest, smiling with perverse pleasure at the masochistic pain. It held the slick, gore covered hand aloft, blood shining black in the magical light of the summoning chamber. The Baern seemed to pause and admire the sight of it all, allowing Selkar to observe it up close before letting the blood dribble from the claws of his elongated fingers and down upon the summoner’s face and chest.

“Come, let us explore this bloody tapestry together now.”

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The city was deathly quiet. The wind itself seemed cowed into submission by whatever had happened there, spirits of air and sky waiting pensively, unwilling to exhale for fear of what poisoned breath they might next draw up from the city below they gazed down upon. Doors stood open, streets were empty like the veins of a corpse, and outside of the bones that littered the open spaces like offerings to a charnel god, there was nothing there for us to behold.

Twenty minutes into the city we had not found a single living soul, nor any of the dead either. Empty. Vacant. Devoid of people. Exsanguinated. A city drained of its people like a sacrificial calf bled dry of its blood. We were waiting for something to happen. Waiting for something to attack us, present us with some reason for the nothingness that we saw. It was unnerving, not at all what we had expected.

A rattling, reed thin cry on the wind echoed through the alley, sounding off the blank, white walls of the surrounding buildings, jarring us with its suddenness. We drew our weapons and followed the noise.

The thing was crawling when we saw it, hiding from the sunlight, moaning in a pained, almost croaking manner. We thought it a man, one of the victims of the horrors of necromantic magic practiced without bounds that we had resigned ourselves to finding, liberating, or mercifully killing if no hope of redemption might be found.

That was when we saw the wings: ripped off by its own hands and lying in the street. Blood and feathers covered the entrance of the building. The Vrock was whimpering.

What we witnessed as we drew further into the city was beyond description.

[center]***[/center]

The Baernaloth watched his own blood dribble down and splash upon Selkar's chest, burning and searing like acid, sending tiny curls of acrid smoke up and across his elongated maw. He was painting, drop by drop, watching the burns lace across the mortal's chest as flesh bled, fat was seared black, and muscles under the skin tensed from the pain. All the while his ears languished in the symphony of the human's screams.

But Selkar's wails were only the smallest part of the shrill cacophony that filled the summoning chamber. While the Flesh Sculptor applied petty, idle torments to the summoner, the Tanar'ri in the chamber, both those holding Selkar down, and others spread throughout the chamber near the ravaged corpses of their former masters, they too began to scream.

Three succubi, a vrock, a bulezau, and others, they wailed in agony as their bodies began to rebel against them. Oddly though, a pair of quasits, including the one which still hung frozen in the air, they seemed untouched by their fellows' misery. But of the proper Tanar'ri, some of them seemed to ripple and distort, their flesh erupting in sores and boils, or simply sweating crimson blood. Some of them died and dissolved into screaming puddles of acid and insects, but still others continued to suffer without the merciful release of death.

Their bodies were rebelling against them, breaking within and without, falling apart in the physical proximity of the Baernaloth whose sheer presence had caused them to act like wide-eyed puppets. They twitched and spasmed both from the pain and from what seemed to be liquid filled cysts and tumors bubbling up within them and pushing outwards against their skin like their was something inside seeking to rip its way out into the world.

Methikus paid them little attention, focused as he was on Selkar, and he only shrugged with idle disappointment as half of the fiends collapsed and died in their writhing, overcome by their agony of infection sparked by his presence, snuffed out midway through the throes of transition.

“Weak. Impure. Lost.” He said with slow deliberation. “Artifacts, side effects, weapons who think themselves important...”

Selkar coughed up blood as his voice ran raw from screaming. His bloodshot eyes held little but a desire to end it all, and horrid confusion at what was happening around him.

“But my mortal summoner shall I educate as much as I mutilate? I speak of slaves hosts miscegenation of pure and impure the rotting fruit of a debased vine and I the drunkard to feast upon it all.”

He gave a soft, manic chuckle.

“But what to do with you? You unsuited for such liberties, inevitabilities and...”

The archfiend was interrupted then, as there was a shriek from one of the Succubi. Selkar knew what a death rattle sounded like, and that was just what he heard moments before blood explosively spattered across his body and across the grinning maw of the Baernaloth that looked down at him.

Methikus closed his eyes and smiled, licking the blood of the dead Tanar’ri from his flesh, though in truth its crimson hue was indistinguishable from that which continually leaked from own his own self-inflicted tortures. His tone suddenly changed, and his next words were slow, defined, and calm.

“Be born my child.”

Somewhere behind him, where the succubus had died and burst open, something mewled and clicked its mandibles.

Selkar never had the chance to look, nor did he wish to, truth be told, and darkness subsumed his conscious mind as the Baernaloth took hold of his chin and calmly snapped his neck.

Selkar’s head lolled back as the Baernaloth traced a finger upon his limp, drooping tongue.

“Death is only the start of your pain.”

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The city was still deathly quiet, punctuated only by our own movement and startled cries as we stumbled upon the fiends, more of them. They sat in the middle of the streets, praying and muttering to themselves, or sprawled, spread-eagled in a daze with ecstatic expressions upon their faces. None of them were whole. Some of them had ripped out their own tongues, using them as gruesome brushes to paint upon the ground, forming stilted, awkward entreaties in the Abyssal tongue pleading for mercy or offering praises to something referred to as 'The Flesh Sculptor' or 'Great Father/Mother'.

Other fiends had slit their own wrists in ragged, feverish cuts by their own talons, or even with their own teeth. Those who had not already bled to death held their spurting veins up above their heads, showing themselves in a crimson shower of their own making, all the while whimpering and mouthing soundlessly the refrain of a liturgy only they could hear, and perhaps one that existed only in their broken, delusional minds.

They gave us no notice by and large. I distinctly recall one of them, a bulezau, glancing up at me and smiling briefly for a moment before resuming its idiot back and forth rocking. The fiend had lost its mind, and it along with the others, seemed to regard us as nothing of great importance.

The fiends, hundreds of them, they were not something summoned anew into the city. They were the familiars, the bound slaves, the experimental subjects of the wizards of the City of Ivory Towers. Many of them bore magical runes burned into or painted upon their flesh, the sigils of individual wizards or their families, marks of ownership and fealty. Other fiends, succubi and incubi bound and used for more carnal pleasures by their owners, they carried armbands, anklets or collars marking them as property, favored things.

But while the fiends ignored us, they did not ignore one another, and in their manic delusions wrought of fear or twisted piety, they did not spare one another. We witnessed fiends savagely attacking one another, defiling the corpses of those who had already expired, eating their own dead, and rutting without regard for consent or even life on the part of their coupled partner.

But all of this paled as we entered the heart of the city, its central public space, where within its paved courtyard, a cluster of nine towers stood centered another easily twice their

height, the tallest structure in the city, the tower of Selkar the Amber Summoner. The towers gleaming red in the light.

The fiends within the plaza, at least three hundred of them, they all stared up towards that central tower, their hands covered in blood, observing their handiwork. The surface of the towers, all ten of them, had been streaked and painted in mortal blood. The bodies of animals and humans alike had been hung in whole or in part from the ramparts. From each and every spire, pole, and cornice the dead were draped like banners and flags of flesh and bone, broken, torn, stretched like sheets, fluttering in a wind that felt altogether suddenly much, much colder.

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Blotches of sudden white light awoke Selkar from the darkness. Glowing, glistening spots of color danced across his field of vision as his eyes involuntarily jerked and pulsed in their sockets with both pain, and the beating of an alien heart and the rush of alien blood into his brain and through the hemorrhaging vessels across his retinas.

“Welcome back mortal of mine.” The Baernaloth’s voice whispered into his ear. “The strings of the puppet are hung from the playwright a gallows upon which to dangle and now dance.”

While the Baernaloth rambled, perched precipitously on the edge between brilliant lucidity and outright psychosis, Selkar was moving. Or the room was moving. He wasn’t entirely sure. But no... the perspective was all wrong, skewed, as if he had been shrunk down to a fraction of his prior height. He was following the Baernaloth, looking up at it, his hands pressed to his cheeks to tilt his head at the correct angle.

Selkar’s hands did not have claws. They never had. But the hands upon his cheeks did.

“Observant at last, little rat to my pied pipe.” The Baernaloth said with a chuckle, turning its head to look down at the summoner. “Such skill would have served you much better before you attempted to summon me.”

The fiend gestured with a finger and Selkar's field of view rotated, his body turning and swiveling to follow the directions of its puppet master. What he saw brought spots to his eyes and a soundless scream from his lips.

Where the Flesh Sculptor pointed, sprawled in a bloody mess on the floor, was Selkar's headless body. A foot or two away was the severed head of one of his apprentices' quasit familiar. The alien hands on his cheek pulled his face down to look at the body that supported it.

Slick, mottled blue flesh, webbed, frog-like feet, a gently twitching tail, and missing or ambiguous genitalia. The Baernaloth had connected his head to the still living body of a quasit, the same body that was following it in a compulsive, ecstatic trance.

Selkar tried to scream, but not a sound passed his lips but a dull, ragged vibration. He had control over his mouth and even the raw, angry vocal chords at the back of his throat, but not over the lungs of the quasit that were pumping air through their shared, polluted bloodstream.

"Without my attentions your brain of flesh and chemicals will eventually succumb to the blood pumping through your veins. It isn't blood in the same sense you see, more the concept of blood, not entirely compatible your own."

The Baernaloth reached down and stroked a talon gently across the quasit's chest. Had the quasit been complete it might have smiled and purred at the nearly loving gesture, but as it was, there was only a ragged belch of air from its lungs that left Selkar's lips in a dissonant rattle.

"But that is not a concern of yours rest assured as now my idle fickle malign curiosity is drawing to a close and alas your enemies draw close."

Selkar's mind vaguely could recall that his nation was being invaded, but at that moment he could hardly care as his thoughts were already starting to dull.

"We could slaughter them too." The Sculptor said with a shrug. "But they are immaterial and irrelevant and I have no desire to wallow in the blood of godkissed. Not now, not yet, the others would enjoy that far more than I and they are much more patient. For the moment, for now, a page from my brother/sister and we leave them not with pain but with dread and the lingering fear of something undone, unfinished, waiting, lurking, lingering."

The Baern was moving its fingers again, whispering under its breath in words that burned Selkar's ears, words that he could not understand, but words that could never be cause for joy. Something behind him stirred, something out of sight, and the Baern took a pleased expression upon its face even as it habitually ripped at its own flesh the very next moment.

Selkar's lips moved in a silent question, but the Baern ignored them as it motioned with its fingers, sending the summoner to his fate, and speaking the last words that he would ever hear.

"And so alas my summoner, I must go back to my home to where you called out to me and I willingly followed your lantern light from out of the Gloom. But do not despair..."

The Flesh Sculptor chuckled.

"...You'll join me there soon enough if I can claim to judge such matters of the soul..."

[center]***[/center]

Words are difficult for me to easily come by as I describe this. My pen shakes as I write this description, and already by the time these words are written down for posterity, a dozen earlier drafts have been burnt to ashes. It has taken days to write this, and the memories hang uneasily in my mind. I don't wish to remember this, but sadly I must.

We entered the tower, though in truth we debated burning it to the ground rather than risking our lives within. The doom that had come to the City of Ivory Towers, the capital of proud, hubris filled Karesh, it had sparked in the tower before us, festooned with corpses, wrapped in flesh and sinew, igniting the fire that had consumed a nation.

The lower floors were slick with blood that welled up spontaneously from the walls and dripped from the ceilings. We found the bodies of Tanar'ri, dead by one another's hands or torn apart from the inside by causes we never discovered. We did not however find the bodies of humans, not at first.

We moved up into the middle floors of the tower and found floors dusted with ashes and smelling of blood, crisscrossed by footprints of inhuman creatures that appeared to have simply vanished into thin air. No trace of them remained, and neither did we discover any further

Tanar'ri, though it now seems obvious that they were the source of the dust, ash, and blood upon the air.

For the horror of its exterior, its inside was oddly sterile, at least till we reached the upper floors. The stench was overwhelming as soon as we pried open the door into the higher reaches of the tower, and though we initially assumed that the doors had been barred or barricaded, it was altogether something much more grisly.

The upper floors were coated in flesh, muscle, bone and all manner of human viscera. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of people had been dragged or teleported into that charnel house where they had been butchered and quite literally painted upon the walls. Bodies had not simply been hacked apart by brute force. Rather, they had been liquefied, rendered down and splashed like so much paint, molded and sculpted into place.

Dead, dying, or in a catatonic, unresponsive state, we found the chambers and halls of the upper floors filled with tanar'ri. We killed them outright of course, but it was more to distract ourselves from the horror of that place than out of any zeal for either mercy or justice.

I never once saw the stone of the walls in that place; only the varnish of flesh, and though it gives me nightmares, I will still claim to this day to have seen an eye embedded in the corner of a wall blink and focus upon me.

The dead might not have been. We would have been infinitely wiser to burn the building to rubble and ashes.

And then we reached the summit and the grand summoning chamber. The carpet of flesh receded from the door to that room, and it was ajar. Inside we could only hear a thin whimpering cry; a survivor. Even though we had not yet fully recovered from the sickness and nausea induced by what we had seen, we were loath to pause.

We kicked down the door and rushed inside, expecting either survivors or whatever had caused the disaster in the first place. We found only one of those two things, and even then, the classification was arguable.

We found her there in the center of the chamber, sitting at the edge of a broken summoning circle, the source of the sobbing that we had heard. She was not human, not anything that I could classify then or now. Blood dripped from the seams in her flesh where she had been cobbled together, crafted from the parts of a dozen or more tanar'ri, a patchwork ragdoll of a thing.

Naked, she was clutching something to her breast like some obscene Abyssal mother nursing a child. She was whimpering, crying, with an ecstatic look upon her face. Whatever had made her, whatever she had seen, she'd been terrified by its horror and majesty. As far as we

could tell from the ruins of the summoning circle and a set of broken and defaced plates or scales, what the patchwork succubi had seen was the closest it would ever approach to looking into the eyes of a god.

But there were still two other occupants of the room.

A human body, that of Selkar the Amber Summoner, wrapped in ragged, bloody robes was pinned to the wall by his own bones twisted within him, warped and reshaped into spikes driven into the stone. Grafted to his bloody stump of a severed neck was a quasit's head, its lips laughing soundlessly, all traces of sanity and cognizance lost.

But of Selkar himself...

He was there, his head stuck upon the body of the quasit, molded and grafted to it by the creature he had summoned and expected to serve him. Selkar was there, held in the arms of the patchwork succubus, dead, smothered as she had forced him to suckle at her breast in a hellish mockery of mother and child.

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I end my report, I can only state in summation the obvious:

Selkar of Karesh brought something into this world that caused not only his death but the collapse his nation and the death of tens of thousands of innocents. In the end, unwilling to risk a resurgence of the nameless horror that he had called up, he razed the City of Ivory Towers to the ground. We salted the fields and burned the rubble as a culture's funeral pyre, ensuring that none would ever settle in the shadow of that tragedy, ensuring that eventually it would be largely forgotten.

But still, the taint of evil lingers over that place and creatures of darkness seem almost drawn to it like a compass point to the northern pole. Wherever they come from, whatever pit they spawned in, whatever dark gods they venerate, they make pilgrimage to the ruins. They sit on the fallen stones of Selkar's tower, anoint themselves with the ashes of the dead, and stare off into space, looking for something that is no longer there, but which once sullied our world with its presence.

Those who seek it often die of thirst or exposure, or they wither away from starvation, entranced as they are by the lingering taint that drew them there. They go there and then the die, what harm are they to anyone else? I wonder, and I worry.

We still to this day know little of the entity that Selkar summoned, or where it went after slaughtering his people. I worry, no, I dread that it might one day return. And my fear is even more prescient in the face of not knowing what manner of being it was to begin with.

What was it? The question continually haunts me: what could make a Tanar'ri shudder with terror and ecstasy at once? Just what in the name of all that is holy did Selkar attempt to call? I cannot answer that, and I am uncertain that I wish it to be answered.

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Methikus sar Telmuril – The Flesh Sculptor:

[I]The following narrative was written by an anonymous source and delivered to the office of Prefect Increase VII of the Order of the Planes Militant. Subsequent divinations by scholars of the Faithful have suggested either a Rilmani or a Yugoloth origin for the author. A yugoloth shopkeeper in Sigil, whose name will not sully this script, was approached tentatively for confirmation of certain aspects of the tale upon the suggestions of another, unnamed source of information for the Order. The fiend dismissed the narrative as a 'heretical fantasy of the highest order'. The case remains open.[/I]

The Ravager of Flesh, the Sanguine Weaver, He Who Dances Upon Graves, the Lord of Corporeal Terrors... this one has many names, each of them a scab or a furrow carved in the transient medium of flesh, soon to be ripped away and replaced. All that is constant is pain; physical agony is his constant companion, it is what he is.

The Flesh Sculptor is perhaps the least subtle and most direct member of his kindred. Methikus sar Telmuril defines the concept of physical pain, masochism, sadism, the despoilment of corporeal flesh, the rape of the innocent, evil in perhaps its most tangible and prosaic forms. Below all of our sense of ethics, morality, religion and pretense of civility, we are creatures of flesh and blood, and all us feel pain.

There is but a thin veil between our ordered societies of rank and discipline, our gilded halls of laws and our temples to higher principles, and those most base instincts that lurk in the animal portions of our psyches. Desperation begets ferocity, while hunger and physical desire

fuels the theft of what our bodies desire, be it food or fucking, and in the end we find that while the body desires, so does the mind, and we enjoy what we are forced to do. That is who the Sanguine Weaver is: physical desire and physical pain incarnate.

Another curious aspect of the fiend is his very obvious revelry in chaos, nearly to the point of appearing to act outwardly as a Tanar'ri in some instances, though the mind and desire lurking behind the actions is something altogether different from the hordes of the Abyss. The Flesh Sculptor has some relation to the Baernaloth known otherwise as the Shackler, both of them appearing to be poles of the same bloody loadstone, each taking upon themselves a more chaotic or more lawful method of action, offsetting the other for a wholly neutral goal.

Given their close relationship with one another as a dualistic pair representing matched abstract ideals, it might be inferred that they possess some firm relation to one another, much like the Lie Weaver and the Blind Clockmaker who refer to one another as siblings, or the similar relationship between the Architect and the Dire Shepherd. However no evidence of such exists, and this relationship may be purely one of artificial distinction, implied by things with no true connection beyond the superficial. Neither Baern is known to have more, or less, interaction with the other than with any others of The Demented.

Though I cannot prove it, my ideas do have some shreds of tantalizing proof. But there is resentment to my ideas. The Tanar'ri and the Baatezu scoff at even the hint of the assumption that they were the creations of the Baernaloths, the metaphysical slag created during the purification of the yugoloths. But what I would suggest is perhaps more wretched to them, because the first idea gives them the chance of having risen to places of power and import in the lower planes, to have transcended their ignoble births as the waste of evil's self purification. The latter idea, which I propose, does not.

Simply stated, the Tanar'ri and Baatezu are metaphysical vectors. They are each an ideological virus. In mortals, a virus comes into contact with living tissue and inserts itself into a cell. Once inside it may hijack its host and explosively propagate till it bursts from the dying to infect its neighbors. It causes sickness and the infected will fight the infection in short order. There is no long-term strategy in these types of infectious agent, they kill the host and spread, but they require more hosts in whom to spread. Ultimately if they are too successful they kill themselves, but most often they simply are overwhelmed by the organic defenses of that original host.

If the Baernaloths had attempted an overt infection and conquest of the Abyss and Baator, the plane itself would have risen and eradicated their attempts not unlike a mortal host and a virus. But there is another type of virus, one that infects and then hides, cloaking itself from detection and going dormant within its chosen hosts. It is innocuous and it becomes part of that host, dividing only when its host cell divides, slowly spreading itself under the eyes of the immune system. But then, something happens. A moment of weakness, some other illness, anemia, injury, the host is compromised and the virus that has long lurked dormant becomes a

ravenous beast. No longer dormant, it changes, replicates and thirsts, exploding in a fury that might reduce the infected to a soup of water, bone and virus particles. And yet the virus will lurk in others, hiding away, still capable of spreading without a need of a rapid chain of transmission. It lives by becoming part and parcel of the host population, free from eradication and striking from within when chance presents itself.

Since they populated the Abyss and Baator, an innocuous symbiosis has been forged between those races and their respective planes. Lurking hidden in the core of each of them, written in lines of blood and misery in their base essence, they each harbor a malignant seed of the ideology that birthed them, neutral evil devoid of law and chaos. They are a virus borne of the Baernaloths, shed by their children the yugoloths not as waste, but as a tainted metaphysical slurry to infect the planes of law and chaos. They are weapons, weapons which have incubated in the flesh of their planes, spread and infected it down to its core.

In a moment of weakness, some event that shakes law and chaos, their virulent spark will erupt in all its fury in a single terrible moment. The Tanar'ri and Baatezu are not misbegotten children or relics of another race's birth that have risen into their own despite an ignoble birth; no, they are biological weapons. The yugoloths would have been butchered had they invaded the Abyss and Baator directly, and they ran the risk of being changed themselves by what they fought.

The Baernaloths would not have that, no, and so they took not the route of the pox or plague, they took the route of a lurking virus. The Tanar'ri and Baatezu, once created they insinuated themselves into the Abyss and Baator, and dug deep into the flesh and marrow of their planes. They are linked now with those planes inextricably, the invaders become natives, but they are also ticking viral explosives waiting for a trigger to be touched for them to erupt into action. They are wrapped in innocuous coats of chaotic evil or lawful evil, evading the attention of their hosts, having infected them with such efficiency that they are now a part of them in every way. But what happens when those planes show weakness and that which lurks within them opens its eyes and acts?

The Tanar'ri and Baatezu, they were intentionally created and intentionally loosed into fertile flesh where they lurk to one day transform the landscape of the Abyss and the 9 Hells into the metaphysical equivalent of an insectoid pox-melt, an ideological virus explosion whose chain of transmission is infinite. They will transform their planes, and gods help us, whatever they create.

And at the pole of the Chaotic in this duality of infection, Methikus sar Telmuril, the Sanguine Weaver, He Who Dances Upon Graves, the Flesh Sculptor, waits and cackles at his handiwork. His presence is rarely observed outside of the Waste or Carceri, seemingly perched in the latter plane of Conflict to tacitly observe his misbegotten creations in the Abyss.

Some sources put the Sanguine Weaver as one of several members of The Demented who serve as direct and seemingly unwanted advisors to the Altraloth Bubonix, Lord of the Tower of Incarnate Pain. The Flesh Sculptor seems to cherish the resistance that Bubonix expresses to accepting his unwanted and unasked for advice, though it seems that the Altraloth is entirely unable to prevent the Baern from providing counsel. Even more, much to the Altraloth's lament, is that the Sculptor's advice is unerringly accurate, and in those instances where Bubonix has spurned the Baern's words, he has suffered for it.

On a different focus altogether there is some evidence that the Baern has, in the past, as almost a whimsical diversion, intentionally seeded his name and flawed calling and binding rituals onto the prime material plane where they will ultimately be discovered and utilized. In line with this sadistic pastime, there have been suggestions that Methikus sar Telmuril may have had a hand in the creation of the artifact known as the Bringer of Doom, though other sources refer to the Baernaloth known as The Architect as having been that object's primary creator with the Sculptor having a secondary role.

Finally, as an aside, some ancient sources make certain claims regarding the Flesh Sculptor's past, primarily several 'books' found within the Mirror Library of Sum-Of-All, and within a sentient lore-crystal found entombed within a vault in Positive Energy containing the minds of a pair of entities claiming to be Tsnng wizards.

These sources, both of them incredibly ancient, claim that Methikus sar Telmuril was either an apprentice of, or an early collaborator with Apomps the Triple Aspected. At some point it appears that the two Baernaloths had a major ideological split and falling out during the period preceding Apomps' creation of the Gehreleths. The language used is uncertain and vague, and the words that imply apprentice or collaborator may alternately mean 'sibling' or 'lover'. The exact nature of their link, if any, is known only to the Baernaloths themselves, and largely lost to the rest of the planes. Perhaps it is best that way, and given the Sculptor's mercurial and sadistic nature, it is strongly unwise to delve too deeply into the Baern's past at the risk of drawing its attention.