

[b]Severeth Na'Halastrian, The Wanderer, Baernaloth of The Demented (2of13)[/b]

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Ware the darkened, forgotten doorway, the dusty unused portal that sits just off the path, forgotten and abandoned, for that is where the Stair rises, and that is where He waits.

Where the Stair touches is where He lurks and where he sows death and destruction in His wake like a dark mirror to the Stair that he travels. While the staircase reaches out and touches every place that has, is, and will be a place of life, creation, inspiration and beauty, I have witnessed what happens when the Wanderer graces them. I know because I was there when my city was brought to its knees by the fiend who approached us as a traveler from afar. Indeed he was in a way. He brought to our leaders and sages wonders and mysteries, marvels of magic and creation.

When the plague washed over our people and we turned upon each other in clashes of race and religion that had lain dormant for centuries, he was there to smile at his own creation that he delivered unto us. The Wanderer sparked hatreds and betrayals amongst our people, turning father against son and lovers against one another as he smiled and showed us the wonders he gave freely to our leaders.

But here I stand and leap to the end of my tale and perhaps confound you. I wish to warn you and keep you safe from the thing that took my people and left without nary a trace. If anything, it left but its echo in the stirrings of the ashes that dusted the city foundations and tarnished our souls as much as it did our hands still wet with blood as they were.

Let me start my tale at the beginning; for I watched it all, and I bore witness to what would transpire in those warm waning days of summer just as the seasons changed to herald what came next. Oh how things changed...

I was a temple scribe in the court of our Lady Seletshiir and her consort Lord Mahar, and I had served two years then in the service of the royals. The day it all began I had been tasked to prepare and press a number of pages of papyrus upon which my master, one of the master scribes of the temple, would be writing the words of the meeting between our Lady and ministers from the southern city of Lehariptep.

We had long been enemies, Lehariptep and our great city, but in recent years we had seen a cooling of tensions and perhaps peace would soon be marked. We and they had been exchanging letters and messengers and gifting the other with works of music and art, hoping that for the first time in centuries time that our two great trade cities would coexist.

I had been walking between several of the temple cellars, searching for a set of weights to press my paper, and more of the plant extracts that we pressed onto the drying sheets to preserve them. One of the other scribes had evidently moved them and so I was forced to search through several adjacent chambers to find where they had been placed.

As I searched one of the last chambers I saw something out of the corner of my eye. A sparkle of light like a glittering shimmer of sunlight through one of the crystalline wind chimes hung by the halls of the spell-singers in the western hills of the city. And then, as abruptly as it flicked in my eyes, it was gone as soon as I looked up to see where the strange apparition had come from. But, only seeing the gloom of the chamber I was turning over box by box, to find what I had come looking for, I thought nothing of it.

There were still two chambers left to search, but one of them was only used to store pottery for the twice-yearly festivals of renewal, and it was sealed until the time the holy vessels were needed once again. The only other chamber I had left to search was one that I had never been within, and as far as I knew, it was not currently used by those of us in the temple. It was off to the other side of me, abandoned and forgotten down an unlit hallway.

“Ah, there you are,” I said as I found the weights and oils neatly stacked together in a corner of the chamber. As I stooped down to gather together the supplies I needed I smelled something wafting into the chamber, something inexplicable like the ashes of a cedar mixed with myrrh, exotic and strange.

I stood there, perplexed for a moment, thinking my bumbling might have overturned a flask of incense or scented oil onto the floor, but no. That was when I felt watched and the hair on the back of my neck stood erect. I dropped the weight in my hand and turned around, wondering if my master had come to fetch me. I only now vaguely recall having heard a single footstep and seen the form of a shadowy figure standing in the doorway before it vanished. The fading scent in the air was not all I remember, for I can still see those luminous green eyes like polished emeralds mined in a pit of hell sparkling in the darkness from where he looked at me. But I thought nothing of it at the time, nor did it trouble me till I appeared at court the next day...

“May I present to her royal majesty, a visitor to the court and the temple, a traveler from afar. Severeth the Wanderer, a teller of tales and seeker of things from nation to nation,” The proclaimer of the court proudly bellowed, and that was when I saw him again as I sat there next to my master in the shadow of royalty.

He was tall and thin, lean from many days of walking it seemed, but he resembled us in many ways despite the strangeness of his given name of Severeth. He had long dark hair and bronze colored skin, much like ourselves, but his eyes were not dark, but rather a brilliant green like the depths of the deepest seas had hidden themselves away in his eye sockets.

“I am honored to stand in the presence of the Lady of this great city, for many tales of you and your people drew me here from afar on my travels. I come asking questions and wishing to learn of things here. I wish to learn of your people, your history, your tales of legends of old, and your religion. I wish to see your art, your music, the songs you sing at night, and in return I will share with you all the wonders of all the other places where I have been.”

His voice was clear and strong, the voice of a wise man or honored speaker used to the protocol of the court. Despite his strange accent he was wildly charismatic, and we all trusted him at his word. Despite the worn clothing he wore, a once white overcoat and robe that was mired with the dust of perhaps the western desert, he seemed more fit to stand amongst the company of sages, wizards, clerics, nobles and prophets. In hindsight his clothing mattered not, for he came to us dressed neither in rags nor in kingly robes, but swathed in a cloak of our fears, a sash of our weaknesses, and a robe of our buried hatreds.

The man spent the day regaling the court with stories of the lands he had visited, and the things and wonders he had seen. He claimed to have come to us from a land of great deserts, once fallow and lush, that had been his adopted land. He said that he wandered now after the fall of that place and that he was seeking others who might have escaped the devastation that had claimed its beauty.

He asked us later about our legends and stories of the times of old, seeming keen on our tales of the giants of the eastern mountains. It was later when the man paused in his tellings to retire for the evening that I remember him saying certain things when I followed him to lead him to his chamber since my master had questions of him for me to ask. What he said to himself meant nothing then, only the musings of a wise and traveled scholar who had seen the mysteries of the world, but now I know it was all a foreshadowing of what would come to us.

“Perhaps, perhaps... no... but it is still worth examination to see if they know more. So many things to show them, so many things to gift them with, so much they can do with it all.”

As I left him at his chambers, I remember passing a number of the nobles of the court on my way down to my own residence in the temple. Many of those I saw had been there to listen to the wanderer, and all of them had furtive looks as if they did not wish to be seen sneaking up to take counsel with the stranger from whatever far away lands he hailed from.

That night my head was filled with strange dreams of walking endlessly upon a staircase that spiraled among the stars, with each of the stars a shining doorway to a world with people and places and history and songs. And I remember being with the one I walked with and turned by

him to look at the doorways. I watched those that we had passed erupt in flames like shooting stars, and then I watched them dim and flicker and die, their light snuffed out in our passing. I remember trying to look up at my guide, but a force kept me from doing so.

I woke up cold and tired like I had spent the evening walking for many miles. Perhaps I did. But tired or not, my duty to my temple and the court was paramount and so I washed, dressed and walked down to the court to sit next to my master for another day.

Severeth was once again present at court, and he listened for a time to the others who had come to visit till the queen herself and her assembled sorcerers from their towers in the western walls of the city clamored and called out to him to share more of his tales with them once again. Severeth smiled and humored them.

To the sorcerers he spoke at length in meetings with them in private audience. He was said to have worked great displays and feats of magic to them, and all of them left those demonstrations and lectures with looks of awe on their faces and words flying from their lips to each other and to their familiars.

I remember taking note then that the bound imp of one of the foreign sorcerers visiting the court seemed unusually calm. He had always been a fickle and mischievous spirit, prone to tricks and petty sins and outbursts at inopportune times; but not that day, not at all. I remember seeing that imp shivering in the presence of the wanderer, and later that evening the palace guards went searching the court and the temple since his master had reported him missing. They never found the imp. Officially it was decided that he must have escaped his bindings and tethers to the aged conjurer, and the matter was ignored when his master fell ill with sickness that very same evening and returned to recover in his tower across the city. From those same towers the plague would spread two days later.

That night again the line of nobles waiting to speak with Severeth was long, and this time there were merchants from the city as well numbered among those seeking his wisdom. Many of them I had seen the night before, and those who had returned seemed even more eager to listen again.

I do not think I dreamed in detail that evening, but rather I awoke in the wee hours of the morning before the moon had fallen and before the light of the morning star had graced the horizon. Whatever dreams I had were wiped from my memory when I awoke to look out of my window at the darkness over the sparkling lights of the city. But lingering from whatever dream I had dreamt were the words, in the voice of Severeth, "Watch and learn of this."

Looking out upon the slumbering city, I watched a glimmer of light, a sparkling globe of purest white rise high into the sky like a fallen star remembering its duty to light the tapestry of night and flying up to resettle its nocturnal perch. But then the light was swallowed by a shadow that flitted across the sky in pursuit of it like a great winged serpent of darkness. Whatever it was that

rose in pursuit seemed to swallow it like the old legends said of a dragon that would rise to swallow the sun to burn itself of the taste of the blood of the gods when the world lay dying. I fell back into the clutches of sleep before I would have seen that shadow, and a flicker of lidded emerald, cross the sky again to land somewhere in the towers of the temple.

The temple was a flurry of activity that next day and my tasks were triple or more their usual as word reached the priests of the temple that Severeth would be visiting the high priest of our faith there in the holy of holies of the temple, there to speak with him on matters of faith and the soul. My master allowed me entry to the second sanctum that day and I listened as Severeth and the priests spoke at length on matters of holy doctrine, blessings, sin, redemption and damnation. Severeth's wisdom amazed even the high priests, though I found it strange that his holiness Dureth the 2nd ranking priest of the temple was strangely quiet for all the while. He seemed worried and distraught with something that he would not speak of. I never noticed then that his familiar, a blessing from our gods, a blessed being of light from the seven mountains of Celestia, was absent that day from its place beside Dureth.

As I slept that night I had visions of stairs wrapped in moonlight and of a pursuit of things of forgotten beauty. Nameless and faceless, they were beings who had sought to rid the world of darkness and so had lit existence with a fire so bright that it had burned too many in the process. Whatever they were, the darkness had risen against them and hunted them eternally. Before I awoke from the dream, the same force that had prevented me from turning to look at it two nights before turned me around from where I looked at the moonlit stairs. That force that walked beside me on the stairs then grabbed me by the shoulders and held me before it. I awoke screaming and remembered no details of what I saw.

The wanderer was absent the next day, and the nobles of the court were unhappy and distraught till word arrived that Severeth had gone out among the common people of the city. They said that he had gone into the streets and markets and bazaars to listen to the wise men, storytellers, and bards that he might find. The nobles went out to find him, and even the queen sent persons to find him and bring him back so that she too might personally take his counsel. Tales of sickness in the western wards of the city were ignored.

I heard later that he had gone about giving words of wisdom and asking the people about their legends, their gods, their folktales of the city and the land, always curious about their past. He seemed happy that night when he returned with the guards sent by our Lady to find and summon him. That evening he asked me to send away the nobles and merchants and priests who came to see him, and he gave me no reason why save for his ever pleased smile that graced his face.

But when I turned away the last of the seekers of Severeth's wisdom I watched as the Lady Seletshiir approached his chambers along with a number of her guards. She entered and her guards instructed me that I had seen none of what I did just then. By her choice of clothing

when I saw her enter the wanderer's chambers, counsel was what she sought only by the most broad of terms.

My dreams that night were full of falling stars in an evening sky with the sound of flickering flames drawing close and the moans of a woman's ecstasy. In truth that part of my dream was not dream, the sounds and echoes reaching my sleeping ears from high above from the open window of Severeth's balcony.

The temple was a blur of activity the next day, all of our rush and prayers the result of a series of edicts handed down by the high priest himself. Ever since his meeting with the wanderer he had seemed a different man, and he was now emboldened again the followers of the other religion in the southern wards of our city, the migrant people from Lahariptep. With the new edicts came punishments for sins and taxes against those who did not worship properly, enough, or did not worship our gods at all. Religious strife and discontent followed on the heels of the criers' words as they spread the law about the city. The spreading sickness in the western wards was now blamed upon the sinners and worshippers of false gods and those from afar would poison the water of the righteous.

All at once our peace with Lahariptep vanished amid the persecution of its people in our lands, and violence and short tempers began to rule the day and boil over after nightfall.

That night I did not sleep, but stayed in my chambers praying as I watched the riots upon the city streets and watched the southern ward of the city smolder like a powder-keg and watched those from the west fleeing the spreading plague, spreading it further themselves. That night too I heard the sounds of debauchery from high above, and all too clearly did I recognize the voice of our Lady. Their adulterous couplings would last till dawn, and shortly afterwards the southern wards would erupt in flame both in metaphor and in actuality. But it all happened for a different reason than I had expected.

In the early morning, the husband of our Lady had been found dead in the palace fountain, stabbed a dozen times in his chest, neck and face. When the guards found his corpse, his blood had been smeared across the flagstones of the courtyard in a curse against our kingdom in the language of our rival city to the south.

I remember clearly the knowing smile on Severeth's face as Lady Selethshiir declared war upon our southern enemy, and I remember how her eyes seemed dead and hollow inside when she made that declaration. I remembered her furtive glances back to the wanderer that morning at the court, and how she seemed like her soul had been ripped away to leave behind only a mortal shell devoid of morality and spirit. She was alive but dead inside of all that mattered.

Perhaps it was a trick of my eyes, but I would have sworn that I saw a tiny crimson smear upon her waistcoat and another upon the underside of her wrist. I can only wonder if she had done

what she did in the dim hours of morning of her own volition, or at the Severeth's telling. I left the court then and returned to my chamber and wept for my queen, my city, and myself.

The next day went quickly and the Wanderer stayed at court, but never slept, going out to the people to listen and whisper and teach and instruct and regal, and always with our Lady following or latched upon his arm. The late hours of the night would see flames erupt in our hearts that would spread out to the city. Nobles killed nobles to raise their status in court, and the temple raised swords against those not of our faith or those we deemed sinners and unfit for life.

I was only a scribe; I could do nothing but watch as madness fell upon the city as I watched the southern ward burn from my open window. Perhaps the gods spoke to me, or perhaps He did to goad me into action, but I went seeking the man who I knew to be responsible for the evil that had fallen into our midst.

Alone I went to his chambers and found them open and him gone. Our Lady lay wide eyed and ecstatic in his bed, staring at something only she could see, and in her nakedness she dismissed my pleas. All I could say to her as I reached for the pillow was, "My Lady, forgive me."

I don't think she was there; whatever was good in her was gone and left was the insensate whore that I smothered there that night while the city burned. She was already gone, and had she seen before what He had made of her, I feel justified that she would have approved of my sin before I went hunting after the wellspring of the evil that had killed her spirit before I had snuffed out her breath.

I found him atop the highest tower of the temple, laughing and smiling in joy as the flames leapt from sorcerer's tower and temple minaret to hovel and palace alike. Those flames that he had sparked in our hearts and set smoldering in our souls, igniting our actions to the present inferno. He looked at me and smiled. I had seen that smile before, seen it in my dreams when he picked me up from the Stair and turned me to look into those gleaming emerald eyes

Gone was the tall and charismatic stranger, the wanderer from strange lands. Standing in his place and towering over me was a thing of nightmare taken flesh. The -thing- that was Severeth looked down at me with ivory fangs glinting with reflected flames, a gray and wasted body pale in the darkness, and diseased and tattered wings hung behind him like a draconic patterned cloak of darkness torn by wind and storm.

"A thing of beauty, is it not?" The Wanderer said in a whisper as he took me by the shoulder and turned me then to look at the death of my people. He leered down at me with his goat-like visage and twin sets of horns, the same as the blasphemy from my dreams. "The final spark of what is called beautiful before its makers burn it down while calling themselves right, and pure, and righteous." It continued, "And you will watch my child and you will learn this all as a lesson of what I will do to everything they have touched and graced with

their presence. I will find them and I will shower the planes with the blood of their creations till the day I repeat the same with their own golden and bitter veins in my hands.”

“Why do you show me this? Why?...” I said, weeping at the sight of the flames and the sounds of the screams all around us.

“Because you will follow me and you will search the stair for them just as I do. Because I give you life and hope wrapped in misery and pain. Find them and I will spare you the agony of the years and let you die...” Severeth said with a gleaming smile on jaundiced lips. “They cannot hide and they cannot run. They can only forestall the inevitable you see. Time is all they have. And so long as they do, so shall you. Do as thou wilt my child...”

I awoke in the bitter chill of the evening, watching the dying flames of the ruins of my city and he was gone. I stumbled and walked in a daze among the bodies of those dead of plague or violence or flame and found not another save myself. I do not know why he spared me, if indeed he did for I never saw him again. But the rubble of the palace had a single intact corridor, that unused and forgotten cellar from which he had come. I watched the door for days, fearful he would return, or perhaps to guard the door to prevent others from following him. But the others came and placed the mark of damnation and plague upon the ruined gates and they would have killed me in an instant had I left the rubble.

And here I stand now amid the ashes of another dead city and another vanished people; the last one of another people in another place long gone and forgotten now. I stand amid the wake of his passing, gazing out upon his great and terrible works, this time and always one step behind him.

But I will not rest till I find him again, the one who danced at our destruction and gave us the tools with which we ruined ourselves and all we had built up and fostered. His creations were the tools of our ever-willing obliteration. He walks the Stair from doorway to doorway, looking for something, always looking for someone that walks the stairs or did once so very long ago. He searches for something that eludes him always, and not finding it, he destroys all in his wake as a mockery of the Stair that fosters his search and carries him upon his journey.

So I do all I can do, I go in search of him to find him and hunt him down and prevent him from doing elsewhere what he did to us, following in his footsteps, always a footstep behind, giving my story and my warning to every landing of the stair that I find yet untouched by his shadow. And I worry. I worry that until I find him, or those he seeks, or he does first, that I will not and cannot die. The centuries have grown long and cold now, as cold as the ashes of my dead city and my heart alike, for he took all of the love and beauty from my life in his wake. Know my tale and know that I fear that he would do the same to all of creation...

Fear the door that leads to the Stair my son, for that is where He walks. Abhor and bar the unused stoop that leads from a place of life, creation, and beauty. Abhor it my son, for that is

where He waits, lurking always, and looking, looking for someone or something along each of the infinite landings of the Stair Eternal.

[b]Details and Abilities:[/b]

The Wanderer is one of the few members of The Demented that strays beyond the bounds of the lower planes. In fact, The Wanderer has apparently been absent from its native plane for eons, wandering the Infinite Staircase, ever searching for something or someone. Travelers on the stair have given erratic reports over the past millennia of seeing the Baern traveling, always in its natural form, and always looking and watching at each of the landings it approaches. These same travelers have claimed that on occasion it seemed to stop and glance around into the void surrounding the stair, pausing to listen with fervor at something just out of the range of their own hearing. But, whatever it seemed to cue into, it quickly continued its ascent of the stair.

Those who have encountered the Wanderer on the Infinite Staircase, primarily members of the Planewalkers Guild (among whom this being is nearly a legend), have found that it is nearly oblivious to any fellow travelers upon the staircase, being utterly unconcerned with them unless they obstruct its travel. Those who do obstruct the Baern die, almost instantly by magic of ferocious potency, or their fates are cast to the wind when the Gloom Father hurls them from the stair to whatever they find in the void beyond. It is not to be trifled with, as the dead and vanished would attest to, but it is otherwise apathetic to those who do not interfere with whatever mad quest the elder fiend is driven by.

The Planewalker's Guild also reports that on a very few occasions the Wanderer will speak to those who encounter it and purposefully walk alongside it without obstructing it. After a period of silence the Baern may begin talking to them, asking them questions, and perhaps answering any they have of it; always within reason for the latter. From these few instances the Guild has reported a number of things:

- 1) The Wanderer is indeed a member of The Demented, proudly attesting to this status if questioned about it. "One of Thirteen" in its words, "The Prodigal Fiend" other times, and "A simple traveler upon the broken backs of dreamers and doers and makers."
- 2) The Wanderer's name is Severeth Na'Halastrian
- 3) The Wanderer lives in a state of willing exile from the lower planes, hunting down, in its words, "...the last children of Mithardir; the self-righteous to whom Prometheus of the Titans would emulate in later years, and who would suffer a far lesser fate than they. No crime of passion goes without reward, but your definition of reward is unlikely to match that of I and ours..."
- 4) The Wanderer seems convinced that those he seeks are either still alive themselves, or dead and their knowledge and secrets passed onto other creations of theirs who themselves yet

live, hidden away upon the last world their makers touched from the summit of the Stair, if it exists.

5) The Wanderer will pause and smile before departing the Stair for a prime world, stopping only at some and not at others, evidently choosing at random, or knowing something about the other side and the possibility that his prey had touched that world. Before entering the prime material the Wanderer will assume some random mortal guide, never appearing exactly the same in physical appearance twice, but always appearing as a comely male or female who has long traveled and worn the burdens of the road.

6) The Wanderer will not answer the question of if the Stair itself was built or found by those he seeks. One who asked this question was crippled for the asking, and another was hurled from the stair and only later found and healed of his injuries. This question seems to strike a nerve, though for what reason is dark.

One thing is certain though, that wherever the Wanderer stops and visits, hoping to find his eternal quarry, those he finds are decimated by plague, civil war, or religious genocides never before seen on their world. Peaceful cities devolve into fractionalized city-states torn apart by religious or racial strife, political conflicts among their noble houses, or exterminated in plagues that spare none of them.

It is said though, that one person is chosen each time to witness the horror of his passing and to carry the tale to the lips of all others he may see till the end of his days. One of these people claims to have lived a dozen lifetimes, cursed by the one who destroyed his people to follow in his footsteps, letting death be not a barrier to his spread of the story.

The Baern was asked about the truth of this by one member of the Planewalker's Guild, and actually stopped to answer him. In the man's now fevered ramblings, locked away in Sigil's Gatehouse in the Irretrievably Insane wing, he claimed that the Baern said that every breath and lament of those single persons spared would carry itself upon the winds and reach the ears and hearts of those he hunted. He said that the dreams of death, hatred and destruction would fly from their nightmares to plague the minds of those elders of Pelion who could escape, but not forever, all of it a foretaste of what was to come for them. To see their works crumble to dust and their memories defiled, The Wanderer has devoted itself to being a dark mirror of them in many ways, giving inspiration and great works, but always to those who had not the wisdom to halt their own self-destruction of what they already had.

In this last method of operation, the Wanderer has some similarities to both The Architect and the Blind-Clockmaker, but the latter pair are significantly more powerful and influential amongst the 13, and only rarely have direct interaction with mortals, their goals and aims being set on less defined things, or things largely unknown to the rest of the planes at large. Still, the set of three does ring a chord among sages, scholar

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Where the Stair touches is where He lurks and where he sows death and destruction in His wake like a dark mirror to the Stair that he travels. While the staircase reaches out and touches every place that has, is, and will be a place of life, creation, inspiration and beauty, I have witnessed what happens when the Wanderer graces them. I know because I was there when my city was brought to its knees by the fiend who approached us as a traveler from afar. Indeed he was in a way. He brought to our leaders and sages wonders and mysteries, marvels of magic and creation.

When the plague washed over our people and we turned upon each other in clashes of race and religion that had lain dormant for centuries, he was there to smile at his own creation that he delivered unto us. The Wanderer sparked hatreds and betrayals amongst our people, turning father against son and lovers against one another as he smiled and showed us the wonders he gave freely to our leaders.

But here I stand and leap to the end of my tale and perhaps confound you. I wish to warn you and keep you safe from the thing that took my people and left without nary a trace. If anything, it left but its echo in the stirrings of the ashes that dusted the city foundations and tarnished our souls as much as it did our hands still wet with blood as they were.

Let me start my tale at the beginning; for I watched it all, and I bore witness to what would transpire in those warm waning days of summer just as the seasons changed to herald what came next. Oh how things changed...

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As I searched one of the last chambers I saw something out of the corner of my eye. A sparkle of light like a glittering shimmer of sunlight through one of the crystalline wind chimes hung by the halls of the spell-singers in the western hills of the city. And then, as abruptly as it flicked in my eyes, it was gone as soon as I looked up to see where the strange apparition had come from. But, only seeing the gloom of the chamber I was turning over box by box, to find what I had come looking for, I thought nothing of it.

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"Ah, there you are," I said as I found the weights and oils neatly stacked together in a corner of the chamber. As I stooped down to gather together the supplies I needed I smelled something wafting into the chamber, something inexplicable like the ashes of a cedar mixed with myrrh, exotic and strange.

I stood there, perplexed for a moment, thinking my bumbling might have overturned a flask of incense or scented oil onto the floor, but no. That was when I felt watched and the hair on the back of my neck stood erect. I dropped the weight in my hand and turned around, wondering if my master had come to fetch me. I only now vaguely recall having heard a single footstep and seen the form of a shadowy figure standing in the doorway before it vanished. The fading scent in the air was not all I remember, for I can still see those luminous green eyes like polished emeralds mined in a pit of hell sparkling in the darkness from where he looked at me. But I thought nothing of it at the time, nor did it trouble me till I appeared at court the next day...

"May I present to her royal majesty, a visitor to the court and the temple, a traveler from afar. Severeth the Wanderer, a teller of tales and seeker of things from nation to nation," The proclaimer of the court proudly bellowed, and that was when I saw him again as I sat there next to my master in the shadow of royalty.

He was tall and thin, lean from many days of walking it seemed, but he resembled us in many ways despite the strangeness of his given name of Severeth. He had long dark hair and bronze colored skin, much like ourselves, but his eyes were not dark, but rather a brilliant green like the depths of the deepest seas had hidden themselves away in his eye sockets.

"I am honored to stand in the presence of the Lady of this great city, for many tales of you and your people drew me here from afar on my travels. I come asking questions and wishing to learn of things here. I wish to learn of your people, your history, your tales of legends of old, and your religion. I wish to see your art, your music, the songs you sing at night, and in return I will share with you all the wonders of all the other places where I have been."

His voice was clear and strong, the voice of a wise man or honored speaker used to the protocol of the court. Despite his strange accent he was wildly charismatic, and we all trusted him at his word. Despite the worn clothing he wore, a once white overcoat and robe that was mired with the dust of perhaps the western desert, he seemed more fit to stand amongst the company of sages, wizards, clerics, nobles and prophets. In hindsight his clothing mattered not, for he came to us dressed neither in rags nor in kingly robes, but swathed in a cloak of our fears, a sash of our weaknesses, and a robe of our buried hatreds.

The man spent the day regaling the court with stories of the lands he had visited, and the things and wonders he had seen. He claimed to have come to us from a land of great deserts, once fallow and lush, that had been his adopted land. He said that he wandered now after the fall of that place and that he was seeking others who might have escaped the devastation that had claimed its beauty.

He asked us later about our legends and stories of the times of old, seeming keen on our tales of the giants of the eastern mountains. It was later when the man paused in his tellings to retire for the evening that I remember him saying certain things when I followed him to lead him to his chamber since my master had questions of him for me to ask. What he said to himself meant nothing then, only the musings of a wise and traveled scholar who had seen the mysteries of the world, but now I know it was all a foreshadowing of what would come to us.

"Perhaps, perhaps... no... but it is still worth examination to see if they know more. So many things to show them, so many things to gift them with, so much they can do with it all."

As I left him at his chambers, I remember passing a number of the nobles of the court on my way down to my own residence in the temple. Many of those I saw had been there to listen to the wanderer, and all of them had furtive looks as if they did not wish to be seen sneaking up to take counsel with the stranger from whatever far away lands he hailed from.

That night my head was filled with strange dreams of walking endlessly upon a staircase that spiraled among the stars, with each of the stars a shining doorway to a world with people and places and history and songs. And I remember being with the one I walked with and turned by him to look at the doorways. I watched those that we had passed erupt in flames like shooting stars, and then I watched them dim and flicker and die, their light snuffed out in our passing. I remember trying to look up at my guide, but a force kept me from doing so.

I woke up cold and tired like I had spent the evening walking for many miles. Perhaps I did. But tired or not, my duty to my temple and the court was paramount and so I washed, dressed and walked down to the court to sit next to my master for another day.

Severeth was once again present at court, and he listened for a time to the others who had come to visit till the queen herself and her assembled sorcerers from their towers in the western walls of the city clamored and called out to him to share more of his tales with them once again. Severeth smiled and humored them.

To the sorcerers he spoke at length in meetings with them in private audience. He was said to have worked great displays and feats of magic to them, and all of them left those demonstrations and lectures with looks of awe on their faces and words flying from their lips to each other and to their familiars.

I remember taking note then that the bound imp of one of the foreign sorcerers visiting the court seemed unusually calm. He had always been a fickle and mischievous spirit, prone to tricks and petty sins and outbursts at inopportune times; but not that day, not at all. I remember seeing that imp shivering in the presence of the wanderer, and later that evening the palace guards went searching the court and the temple since his master had reported him missing. They never found the imp. Officially it was decided that he must have escaped his bindings and tethers to the aged conjurer, and the matter was ignored when his master fell ill with sickness that very same evening and returned to recover in his tower across the city. From those same towers the plague would spread two days later.

That night again the line of nobles waiting to speak with Severeth was long, and this time there were merchants from the city as well numbered among those seeking his wisdom. Many of them I had seen the night before, and those who had returned seemed even more eager to listen again.

I do not think I dreamed in detail that evening, but rather I awoke in the wee hours of the morning before the moon had fallen and before the light of the morning star had graced the horizon. Whatever dreams I had were wiped from my memory when I awoke to look out of my window at the darkness over the sparkling lights of the city. But lingering from whatever dream I had dreamt were the words, in the voice of Severeth, "Watch and learn of this."

Looking out upon the slumbering city, I watched a glimmer of light, a sparkling globe of purest white rise high into the sky like a fallen star remembering its duty to light the tapestry of night and flying up to resettle its nocturnal perch. But then the light was swallowed by a shadow that flitted across the sky in pursuit of it like a great winged serpent of darkness. Whatever it was that rose in pursuit seemed to swallow it like the old legends said of a dragon that would rise to swallow the sun to burn itself of the taste of the blood of the gods when the world lay dying. I fell back into the clutches of sleep before I would have seen that shadow, and a flicker of lidded emerald, cross the sky again to land somewhere in the towers of the temple.

The temple was a flurry of activity that next day and my tasks were triple or more their usual as word reached the priests of the temple that Severeth would be visiting the high priest of our faith there in the holy of holies of the temple, there to speak with him on matters of faith and the soul. My master allowed me entry to the second sanctum that day and I listened as Severeth and the priests spoke at length on matters of holy doctrine, blessings, sin, redemption and damnation. Severeth's wisdom amazed even the high priests, though I found it strange that his holiness Dureth the 2nd ranking priest of the temple was strangely quiet for all the while. He seemed worried and distraught with something that he would not speak of. I never noticed then that his familiar, a blessing from our gods, a blessed being of light from the seven mountains of Celestia, was absent that day from its place beside Dureth.

As I slept that night I had visions of stairs wrapped in moonlight and of a pursuit of things of forgotten beauty. Nameless and faceless, they were beings who had sought to rid the world of darkness and so had lit existence with a fire so bright that it had burned too many in the process. Whatever they were, the darkness had risen against them and hunted them eternally. Before I awoke from the dream, the same force that had prevented me from turning to look at it two nights before turned me around from where I looked at the moonlit stairs. That force that walked beside me on the stairs then grabbed me by the shoulders and held me before it. I awoke screaming and remembered no details of what I saw.

The wanderer was absent the next day, and the nobles of the court were unhappy and distraught till word arrived that Severeth had gone out among the common people of the city. They said that he had gone into the streets and markets and bazaars to listen to the wise men, storytellers, and bards that he might find. The nobles went out to find him, and even the queen sent persons to find him and bring him back so that she too might personally take his counsel. Tales of sickness in the western wards of the city were ignored.

I heard later that he had gone about giving words of wisdom and asking the people about their legends, their gods, their folktales of the city and the land, always curious about their past. He seemed happy that night when he returned with the guards sent by our Lady to find and summon him. That evening he asked me to send away the nobles and merchants and priests who came to see him, and he gave me no reason why save for his ever pleased smile that graced his face.

But when I turned away the last of the seekers of Severeth's wisdom I watched as the Lady Seletshiir approached his chambers along with a number of her guards. She entered and her guards instructed me that I had seen none of what I did just then. By her choice of clothing when I saw her enter the wanderer's chambers, counsel was what she sought only by the most broad of terms.

My dreams that night were full of falling stars in an evening sky with the sound of flickering flames drawing close and the moans of a woman's ecstasy. In truth that part of my dream was

not dream, the sounds and echoes reaching my sleeping ears from high above from the open window of Severeth's balcony.

The temple was a blur of activity the next day, all of our rush and prayers the result of a series of edicts handed down by the high priest himself. Ever since his meeting with the wanderer he had seemed a different man, and he was now emboldened again the followers of the other religion in the southern wards of our city, the migrant people from Lahariptep. With the new edicts came punishments for sins and taxes against those who did not worship properly, enough, or did not worship our gods at all. Religious strife and discontent followed on the heels of the criers' words as they spread the law about the city. The spreading sickness in the western wards was now blamed upon the sinners and worshippers of false gods and those from afar would poison the water of the righteous.

All at once our peace with Lahariptep vanished amid the persecution of its people in our lands, and violence and short tempers began to rule the day and boil over after nightfall.

That night I did not sleep, but stayed in my chambers praying as I watched the riots upon the city streets and watched the southern ward of the city smolder like a powder-keg and watched those from the west fleeing the spreading plague, spreading it further themselves. That night too I heard the sounds of debauchery from high above, and all too clearly did I recognize the voice of our Lady. Their adulterous couplings would last till dawn, and shortly afterwards the southern wards would erupt in flame both in metaphor and in actuality. But it all happened for a different reason than I had expected.

In the early morning, the husband of our Lady had been found dead in the palace fountain, stabbed a dozen times in his chest, neck and face. When the guards found his corpse, his blood had been smeared across the flagstones of the courtyard in a curse against our kingdom in the language of our rival city to the south.

I remember clearly the knowing smile on Severeth's face as Lady Seletshiir declared war upon our southern enemy, and I remember how her eyes seemed dead and hollow inside when she made that declaration. I remembered her furtive glances back to the wanderer that morning at the court, and how she seemed like her soul had been ripped away to leave behind only a mortal shell devoid of morality and spirit. She was alive but dead inside of all that mattered.

Perhaps it was a trick of my eyes, but I would have sworn that I saw a tiny crimson smear upon her waistcoat and another upon the underside of her wrist. I can only wonder if she had done what she did in the dim hours of morning of her own volition, or at the Severeth's telling. I left the court then and returned to my chamber and wept for my queen, my city, and myself.

The next day went quickly and the Wanderer stayed at court, but never slept, going out to the people to listen and whisper and teach and instruct and regal, and always with our Lady

following or latched upon his arm. The late hours of the night would see flames erupt in our hearts that would spread out to the city. Nobles killed nobles to raise their status in court, and the temple raised swords against those not of our faith or those we deemed sinners and unfit for life.

I was only a scribe; I could do nothing but watch as madness fell upon the city as I watched the southern ward burn from my open window. Perhaps the gods spoke to me, or perhaps He did to goad me into action, but I went seeking the man who I knew to be responsible for the evil that had fallen into our midst.

Alone I went to his chambers and found them open and him gone. Our Lady lay wide eyed and ecstatic in his bed, staring at something only she could see, and in her nakedness she dismissed my pleas. All I could say to her as I reached for the pillow was, "My Lady, forgive me."

I don't think she was there; whatever was good in her was gone and left was the insensate whore that I smothered there that night while the city burned. She was already gone, and had she seen before what He had made of her, I feel justified that she would have approved of my sin before I went hunting after the wellspring of the evil that had killed her spirit before I had snuffed out her breath.

I found him atop the highest tower of the temple, laughing and smiling in joy as the flames leapt from sorcerer's tower and temple minaret to hovel and palace alike. Those flames that he had sparked in our hearts and set smoldering in our souls, igniting our actions to the present inferno. He looked at me and smiled. I had seen that smile before, seen it in my dreams when he picked me up from the Stair and turned me to look into those gleaming emerald eyes

Gone was the tall and charismatic stranger, the wanderer from strange lands. Standing in his place and towering over me was a thing of nightmare taken flesh. The -thing- that was Severeth looked down at me with ivory fangs glinting with reflected flames, a gray and wasted body pale in the darkness, and diseased and tattered wings hung behind him like a draconic patterned cloak of darkness torn by wind and storm.

"A thing of beauty, is it not?" The Wanderer said in a whisper as he took me by the shoulder and turned me then to look at the death of my people. He leered down at me with his goat-like visage and twin sets of horns, the same as the blasphemy from my dreams. "The final spark of what is called beautiful before its makers burn it down while calling themselves right, and pure, and righteous." It continued, "And you will watch my child and you will learn this all as a lesson of what I will do to everything they have touched and graced with their presence. I will find them and I will shower the planes with the blood of their creations till the day I repeat the same with their own golden and bitter veins in my hands."

"Why do you show me this? Why?..." I said, weeping at the sight of the flames and the sounds of the screams all around us.

“Because you will follow me and you will search the stair for them just as I do. Because I give you life and hope wrapped in misery and pain. Find them and I will spare you the agony of the years and let you die...” Severeth said with a gleaming smile on jaundiced lips. “They cannot hide and they cannot run. They can only forestall the inevitable you see. Time is all they have. And so long as they do, so shall you. Do as thou wilt my child...”

I awoke in the bitter chill of the evening, watching the dying flames of the ruins of my city and he was gone. I stumbled and walked in a daze among the bodies of those dead of plague or violence or flame and found not another save myself. I do not know why he spared me, if indeed he did for I never saw him again. But the rubble of the palace had a single intact corridor, that unused and forgotten cellar from which he had come. I watched the door for days, fearful he would return, or perhaps to guard the door to prevent others from following him. But the others came and placed the mark of damnation and plague upon the ruined gates and they would have killed me in an instant had I left the rubble.

And here I stand now amid the ashes of another dead city and another vanished people; the last one of another people in another place long gone and forgotten now. I stand amid the wake of his passing, gazing out upon his great and terrible works, this time and always one step behind him.

But I will not rest till I find him again, the one who danced at our destruction and gave us the tools with which we ruined ourselves and all we had built up and fostered. His creations were the tools of our ever-willing obliteration. He walks the Stair from doorway to doorway, looking for something, always looking for someone that walks the stairs or did once so very long ago. He searches for something that eludes him always, and not finding it, he destroys all in his wake as a mockery of the Stair that fosters his search and carries him upon his journey.

So I do all I can do, I go in search of him to find him and hunt him down and prevent him from doing elsewhere what he did to us, following in his footsteps, always a footstep behind, giving my story and my warning to every landing of the stair that I find yet untouched by his shadow. And I worry. I worry that until I find him, or those he seeks, or he does first, that I will not and cannot die. The centuries have grown long and cold now, as cold as the ashes of my dead city and my heart alike, for he took all of the love and beauty from my life in his wake. Know my tale and know that I fear that he would do the same to all of creation...

Fear the door that leads to the Stair my son, for that is where He walks. Abhor and bar the unused stoop that leads from a place of life, creation, and beauty. Abhor it my son, for that is where He waits, lurking always, and looking, looking for someone or something along each of the infinite landings of the Stair Eternal.

[b]Details and Abilities:[/b]

The Wanderer is one of the few members of The Demented that strays beyond the bounds of the lower planes. In fact, The Wanderer has apparently been absent from its native plane for eons, wandering the Infinite Staircase, ever searching for something or someone. Travelers on the stair have given erratic reports over the past millennia of seeing the Baern traveling, always in its natural form, and always looking and watching at each of the landings it approaches. These same travelers have claimed that on occasion it seemed to stop and glance around into the void surrounding the stair, pausing to listen with fervor at something just out of the range of their own hearing. But, whatever it seemed to cue into, it quickly continued its ascent of the stair.

Those who have encountered the Wanderer on the Infinite Staircase, primarily members of the Planewalkers Guild (among whom this being is nearly a legend), have found that it is nearly oblivious to any fellow travelers upon the staircase, being utterly unconcerned with them unless they obstruct its travel. Those who do obstruct the Baern die, almost instantly by magic of ferocious potency, or their fates are cast to the wind when the Gloom Father hurls them from the stair to whatever they find in the void beyond. It is not to be trifled with, as the dead and vanished would attest to, but it is otherwise apathetic to those who do not interfere with whatever mad quest the elder fiend is driven by.

The Planewalker's Guild also reports that on a very few occasions the Wanderer will speak to those who encounter it and purposefully walk alongside it without obstructing it. After a period of silence the Baern may begin talking to them, asking them questions, and perhaps answering any they have of it; always within reason for the latter. From these few instances the Guild has reported a number of things:

- 1) The Wanderer is indeed a member of The Demented, proudly attesting to this status if questioned about it. "One of Thirteen" in its words, "The Prodigal Fiend" other times, and "A simple traveler upon the broken backs of dreamers and doers and makers."
- 2) The Wanderer's name is Severeth Na'Halastrian
- 3) The Wanderer lives in a state of willing exile from the lower planes, hunting down, in its words, "...the last children of Mithardir; the self-righteous to whom Prometheus of the Titans would emulate in later years, and who would suffer a far lesser fate than they. No crime of passion goes without reward, but your definition of reward is unlikely to match that of I and ours..."
- 4) The Wanderer seems convinced that those he seeks are either still alive themselves, or dead and their knowledge and secrets passed onto other creations of theirs who themselves yet live, hidden away upon the last world their makers touched from the summit of the Stair, if it exists.
- 5) The Wanderer will pause and smile before departing the Stair for a prime world, stopping only at some and not at others, evidently choosing at random, or knowing something about the other side and the possibility that his prey had touched that world. Before entering the prime

material the Wanderer will assume some random mortal guide, never appearing exactly the same in physical appearance twice, but always appearing as a comely male or female who has long traveled and worn the burdens of the road.

6) The Wanderer will not answer the question of if the Stair itself was built or found by those he seeks. One who asked this question was crippled for the asking, and another was hurled from the stair and only later found and healed of his injuries. This question seems to strike a nerve, though for what reason is dark.

One thing is certain though, that wherever the Wanderer stops and visits, hoping to find his eternal quarry, those he finds are decimated by plague, civil war, or religious genocides never before seen on their world. Peaceful cities devolve into fractionalized city-states torn apart by religious or racial strife, political conflicts among their noble houses, or exterminated in plagues that spare none of them.

It is said though, that one person is chosen each time to witness the horror of his passing and to carry the tale to the lips of all others he may see till the end of his days. One of these people claims to have lived a dozen lifetimes, cursed by the one who destroyed his people to follow in his footsteps, letting death be not a barrier to his spread of the story.

The Baern was asked about the truth of this by one member of the Planewalker's Guild, and actually stopped to answer him. In the man's now fevered ramblings, locked away in Sigil's Gatehouse in the Irretrievably Insane wing, he claimed that the Baern said that every breath and lament of those single persons spared would carry itself upon the winds and reach the ears and hearts of those he hunted. He said that the dreams of death, hatred and destruction would fly from their nightmares to plague the minds of those elders of Pelion who could escape, but not forever, all of it a foretaste of what was to come for them. To see their works crumble to dust and their memories defiled, The Wanderer has devoted itself to being a dark mirror of them in many ways, giving inspiration and great works, but always to those who had not the wisdom to halt their own self-destruction of what they already had.

In this last method of operation, the Wanderer has some similarities to both The Architect and the Blind-Clockmaker, but the latter pair are significantly more powerful and influential amongst the 13, and only rarely have direct interaction with mortals, their goals and aims being set on less defined things, or things largely unknown to the rest of the planes at large. Still, the set of three does ring a chord among sages, scholar