

*Sea-folk and snow-folk all speak and breathe and walk. Why receive they differently the soul's enduring mark?*

Sofonisba Amilcara of the City Below,

I received your letter from the hand of a Navarr as I made to cast-off for the season. It has given me much to think on as I engage in King Rhianos' grand pursuit.

You speak of the Synod, and my mind is drawn to the recently-abolished Doctrine of Human Destiny. The early Synod made it an article of faith that the Way was a matter for humans and humans alone. Our modern Synod has repudiated this, stating that Virtue exalts orcs and humans alike. They recognised, following historical research, that the Doctrine of Human Destiny was a political choice imposed for political reasons.

Why should that be all there is to it?

The Doctrines of the Faith as they are now say nothing as to the spiritual nature of those who are neither orc nor human. The theological basis of Human Destiny was, as I understand it, the fact that liao in any form has no effect whatsoever on an orc. We know that some potions affect orcs and humans differently; we accept that a human soul reincarnates and an orc soul does not; why, then, do you understand that the Way and its Virtues will affect those other species we have recognised as people in the same way?

I make no claim to be a priest. Yet I understand from my readings of the Doctrines that we accept that orc souls and human souls are not the same. From this, I draw out: I would *expect* the souls of our aquatic cousins are not the same. The Synod's investigation is establishing the ways in which that is so. Those saltborn who were subjected to the auras: did they behave in ways commensurate with the Virtues? The research records are unclear, but they do not rule out this possibility. That the *akblut* attacked our visiting priests is neither here nor there. The Lasambrians are stout adherents of Virtue, which they pursue to our destruction.

The *hylje* say that they are irrevocably changed by exposure to these auras. I do not doubt it. They are humans and they are seals; that is to say, they are a mutable people, far more so than you or I - and while I remain Kuura Tuomisbarn I am in little sense the same Kuura Tuomisbarn I was before I became a Magistrate, and even less so the same Kuura Tuomisbarn who once grew summer vegetables and foraged for cloudberry, far from the sea. When I am subjected to auras, I *change*.

As to your specific points:

- On the Lucidians: what about the behaviour of the affected makes you think the auras were inimical to their *souls*?
- On worthiness: what would it even mean to be *worthy* of the Way?
- On medicine: liao sickens an orc. Is it medicine?

I spoke with a number of people from different nations about Truth. Your analogy is like that given to me by Halkyon of Sojourn's Heart, who likened Truth to a mountain - no matter where one stands, one cannot see

the entire thing. Worse – one cannot see the mountain if one does not stand in a place from which to see it, which is to say one always has a *perspective*. I fear the Mountain Unknowable; like you, I find it paralysing in its vastness, its inapproachability.

I do not believe that Halkyon was wrong about the Mountain Unknowable. It is said, of course, of the Mountain: things are not easy.

It is said, also, of the Wanderer: things are not what they seem. I have, in the course of my journey, entered into the Sea of Stars, for only the second time in my life. That crimson star shone brightest off the bow, and I considered: the way to know the mountain is not to look at the mountain at all. When you enter a strange harbour, you do not seek a pilot from the islands, who sees the port on the horizon each day - you seek a guide who lives and breathes the very waterways on which you wish to sail. It is those who inhabit the mountain who know its every fold. To find Truth, to understand Truth, then looking will not be enough; indeed, it will not be relevant at all. I must live in Truth or else be forever cursed with Perspective.

It is for this reason I will be speaking to Mattias i Guerra at the forthcoming summit. The Freeborn live Truth as fish live Water. I do not know yet if I will commit to this inflection - it is said that the life of a triton on the Coast is a difficult one - but I know I must find out more.

It is towards your last thought that all mine proceed, which is to say: are you your lineage, or is it a part of you? I can only answer to this: yes. When I act, I do so as Kuura Tuomisbarn, who is a merrow, who is affected by any auras and any emotions and any events that have taken place. I am the person I am at the time that you are asking, and that person bears a close resemblance to all others who are me. Had you some way to make me a briar - not just to masquerade me but to take away all the influence of Day and infuse me instead with Spring - I would not be the same. I would still recognise myself. Many of my behaviours would be similar. Others would still say: yes - that is Kuura Tuomisbarn. But I would, also, be meaningfully and really different. You are yourself, which is to say you are a changeling, a bravo, and you have recently changed yourself in that you are *of the City Below*. These all make you who you are. Live upon the Mountain in order to know it.

Forgive my descent into esotericism. The season has been strange indeed.

*Kuura Tuomisbarn*

