

Being an account of the spiritual beliefs and practices of the hylje, mysterious cousins of the Suaq, compiled from testimonies and experiences received from and by those who went amongst them from the Assembly of Pride in 385YF

we will never forget, I think, what we have seen and heard, here by the shores of the lake. There are strange things in this world. I see that now. It is so much bigger, and wider than I had ever imagined: like the lake, it contains strange depths.

When we went amongst the hylje, led by Eska Crowspeaker, we thought it would be easy enough. They were cousins to the Suaq, after all: thinking, free beings, declared as such by treaty and Synod and law. Many of us had seen them fight, benefited from their protection, and were eager to learn of their ways - and bring them our way. Could they, too, not become followers of Virtue? But the first step was to learn of them.

We met first with Koskinen, our contact in the hylje and an individual familiar to many amongst us. He was somewhat surprised to see so many unfamiliar priests, as many Pride priests across the Empire had answered Eska's call. In particular he was fascinated by the unfamiliar dress of the Freeborn and Urizeni representatives in our number - the clothing of these nations being particularly unlike anything ever seen in the frozen north.

In discussions with Koskinen and his warband, talk turned to religion. In our number, someone brought up that they had been sent by the Pride Assembly - Koskinen asked what this was. We began to explain the Synod to him, and he clearly tried to listen but was a little bored. When someone began to explain Pride to him, however, he smiled and nodded and explained that on that basis the hylje were certainly a proud people. He explained that to be hylje is to walk a narrow path, and to live the life of a cousin of the Suaq with one's whole heart. There is a way to be a hylje, that every hylje knows and understands: and understands that to turn from it is as death.

He explained that the life of the hylje is inherently seasonal: like the tides which hold dominion over the seas and the larger lakes, their numbers and their holdings ebb and flow, in a way that every hylje seems to have some inherent understanding of. They have, it seems, festivals of a kind: events that mark the equinoxes and the solstices, for instance, and the new moon and the old moon. At these festivals - "waystones of time" - hylje undergo transitional events: new leaders are crowned, old leaders take advisory positions, children become adults, newborns become as children. It was difficult to understand the sense in which he meant this, or what precisely these acknowledgements of transitions looked like: he was reluctant to be drawn into too much detail on the subject. He was clear, however, that to forego these ceremonial markings of time would inevitably lead to a hylje straying from the path, and towards a doomed fate.

we asked, curious, exactly he meant. At this, Koskinen's face darkened. He explained that to do this would be "as death", and that anyone who did so was "choosing to walk amongst the bloodthirsty ones". This seemed a clear reference to the strange erstwhile allies of the hylje who dwell in the Gullet, those that are sometimes called the akhlut, who like the hylje can transform but transform not into seals but orca: black and white predatory whale-like beings.

we inquired further as to what he meant. It seems that he believes - that all hylje believe - that to walk aside from the ways of the hylje and to deviate from the way of life that their mother Sermersuaq taught them so long ago, is to condemn yourself to a terrible fate: "your skin will fray, and tear, and unwind, and become as unto sharpness and pain". This caused some interest in the wintermarkers of our party, close as it seemed in concept to the skein in which they believe. And indeed, while "skin" here seems quite literal - the sealskins that all hylje wear, that are somehow totemically linked to their seal-forms and their very nature as hylje - it does seem that in those skins is woven some anticipation of their own destiny: they have agency, and their fates are not written for them, but

they do possess an inherent sense of the narrative and rhythm of their lives and the lives of others - he explained that his grandmother had had premonitions of the hour of her passing from age's toll many weeks before it had finally come.

So it was that conversation turned to death. What do the hylje believe happens on death? We expected some belief in reincarnation, perhaps - for it is easy to think of them as, essentially, strange humans. But this was not what was explained.

All hylje, he explained, come from the Great Sea. This is a body of... liquid, I suppose - that lies elsewhere, in a place beyond the world: that the world we know is to it as the land is to our mundane oceans. The Great Sea is the place from which hylje flow, and it is the place unto which their spirits flow on death. This seemed quite similar to the Labyrinth, in concept, but when we began to explain this he shook his head. He explained that - far from our conception of the Labyrinth - individual hylje spirits do not exist in the Great Sea. It simply is, it is of hylje, and all within in it are as one. One slightly mischievous Freeborn amongst our number asked of the akhlut. This was an impolitic comment, clearly, but after a little while our host admitted that the akhlut, too, flowed from the Great Sea, and that somehow their individual natures were not contained there. He took pains to explain, however, that the way of the akhlut was a dark and evil one: that they had twisted the way that the flow of spirit functioned, and that the natural way of things was for the stuff of the Great Sea to be as hylje. He off-handedly mentioned that the Great Sea was part of a wider location - it seems other things may flow from it, and that there was also a sky above, of which he knew and understood little. But for the hylje, it is the Great Sea that is their focus.

They do not believe, however, that the flow can be sped up by acting in a particular way - the very idea that virtue could do this seemed laughable to them. He said that the flow was simply the flow, and what they could do was, by living in an

appropriate hylje manner, direct it and siphon it when it entered the world, ensuring that it became shaped as the hylje and nothing else. It was here things became hard to follow, as it was clear he did not mean this metaphorically, that for him and all hylje this flow was a literal thing, but that it wasn't in any physical location that he could speak of: and yet all of them were aware of it in spirit. He explained also that to lose one's skin was to be cut off from the hylje-nature, and in this vulnerable state, the flow that made up one's existence could be corrupted into that of an akhlut, or other, stranger things. It was clear they regarded this as death, but unlike their natural, pre-ordained deaths, it did not let the flow re-enter the Great Sea but warped it, until such time as it found another end.

These conversations took place over several days, and by that time it was not simply Koskinen but others who had joined us: I am presenting them here in an abridged form. There were also amongst us several younger hylje, looking perhaps in their early twenties, unblooded warriors: they became quick and firm fast friends with Thom and Katie of the Marchers, a pair of twins from Mitwold who had travelled with us and were of a similar age.

At some point, the topic of auras was broached. We did not think this would be necessarily controversial. It was clear that hylje beliefs were an ill fit for the way, but the power of Virtue to move the Virtuous heart is well-known. One of our number set up a Consecrated space. When Koskinen walked into it, he began to act extremely strangely, struggling under the profound sense of greatness that the aura imparts. He moved himself quickly out of the space.

Confused as to what the problem had been, we talked to him. He explained that such auras were the reason his people lived mostly apart from humanity. By their very nature, he explained, they pull us from the path of the hylje - which we do walk with this thing you call pride, yes, but which we walk as our natural selves, wearing our skin. Under the influence of auras, he

explained, it is natural for hylje to behave in ways that are not hylje, and as such risk falling into the way of the akhlut "or other, stranger ways", the second time he had used this phrase.

we showed him a couple of Hallowed items we had with us and he - certainly brave - agreed to use them. It was clear that their effect on him was less dramatic but he clearly did not enjoy doing so, and put down the items swiftly enough. He said that these were less bad, but in other times, where conflict had existed between the hylje and humans, humans had "done this" to many items to stop them being stolen by hylje raiders: that to place an aura on something was almost, for them, akin to a warding.

This was disturbing: what did it mean that virtuous auras were anathema to his people? One of our number, one of the urizeni, set up a Chamber of Pallas, to see if it was only virtuous auras that caused this reaction. He found this similarly uncomfortable, but less so than he had the Consecration of Pride: he explained that the hylje are somewhat resistant to "that which is drawn from the Realms", in which they take little interest. But virtuous auras are something different - "they are of the world, and so the pressure they put on the flow is greater". (Incidentally: after asking, it seems hylje can make no use of liao, which is mainly for them a mild narcotic - not poisonous, in the way it is to orcs, but whatever it awakens in humans, it does little for them.) This raised the question of Anointings. It seemed clear that - while we had intended to offer them - they would not be wanted. Still, out of formality, we did ask - and indeed were strenuously refused.

Unfortunately, not all of our number were amongst us for this conversation. Many of the assembled priests had been amongst the people, and at around this time we realised we had not seen Thom, Katie, or their friends amongst the hylje for some time. At this time, this very priest can running through the woods, crying and screaming - pursued by their erstwhile friends.

I want to stress that they had not changed their form. They appeared to us much as they had earlier. But they acted differently - an energy filled them, not a wholly unfamiliar one: Pride, unalloyed, raw. They were castigating Thom for giving them some insult and were harrying him half to death, Katie fighting them off as they fled together. At the sight of them, however, the other hylje drew their weapons. "Akhlut!", Koskinen shouted, and Thom's friends were cut down, bleeding on the ground. We screamed at them, asked them what they were doing, why they attacked their own, even as we ran to ensure that Thom and Katie were alright - but none of the hylje could recognise those that were on the floor, and indeed no recognition burned in their own eyes. Insighting them revealed anointings of pride on them - but unusually, they were durable, more solid than that produced by an ordinary priestly anointing, more like those spontaneous auras that form under poorly-understood and miraculous conditions.

We removed the anointings, and suddenly all the other hylje could see them as hylje again, and began to treat their wounds. Koskinen only now began to realise what had happened, and sat down, in shock and sorrow. We told him that it was alright - that we had removed the anointings.

"No. It is too late. You have killed them." He shook his head. "Whatever was there before, it is gone. They are new people now, changed beyond recognition by what was done to them. They will not know the face of their parents, nor their parents them. I do not know their faces, even - they look, perhaps, like those that were here before, but to our sight they are as different as brackish water to clear. You have killed those that were before, and brought us back orphans."

Indeed, as the wounded hylje were treated, it was clear that they did not know us, nor any of the others. Whatever the experience of being briefly anointed had done, it had rendered their histories a blank. The hylje looked with suspicion and anger towards Thom, but Koskinen raised a hand.

"You knew not what you did, and I will not have the friendship between our people damaged from ignorance. I will let the rest of you stay, but this one must leave, and never return to the land of the hylje. Such is the fate of murderers." It was clear that a harsher justice could be meted out, but Koskinen commanded enough respect and power to stay the hands of those amongst his people who wished to see blood spilled: and it is the way of the hylje to respect their leaders. I suddenly realised some of the things he had been telling us - that to act out now and cut us down despite his orders, which clearly some of them wished to do, would be akin to choosing to walk the path of the akhlut. Thank the Paragons, they resisted the urge - but at this time Thom left our number and began the long trek back to human settlements. He made it back, I am told, though the journey was a perilous one alone.

Katie stayed with us, and explained what had happened. She said that they had been running in the woods with their new friends, talking openly of virtue and explaining virtue and the way and anointings: and then, indeed, Thom had offered to perform Pride anointings and their hylje friends, lacking Koskinen's caution, agreed. It was then they they had been seized by a strange aggression, the auras having a powerful but, frankly, sinister hold over them, and they had ceased to recognise Thom or Katie, who suddenly became powerfully aware that they were in unfamiliar lands with people who were, perhaps, not as human in their nature as they had appeared. So they had fled, as we had seen, and events had transpired as described.

That night was the last night we spent amongst the hylje on this trip, the so-called death and imperfect rebirth of the anointed hylje a strange and disturbing experience that had cast a pall over what had come before. There was much to consider about what they had told us. Their beliefs were not compatible with the way - indeed, were barely compatible with anything we understand about the world. Their response to auras was disturbing, and two Highborn amongst our number began to mutter that creatures inherently antithetical to

virtues could not be friends. And while they seemed interested enough in some of the principles of the Virtues, at least, they clearly were of less interest than following the embodied way of the hylje and their traditions. It seems we cannot bring them to the way.

The next day, we bid goodbye to Koskinen, who was in a strange mood. It was clear things were calmer than the day before, anger given way to a melancholic sorrow. He spoke of his hopes that the close relationship between the hylje and their cousins could continue, and that these events had caused no damage that would not heal in time. But he asked that no more priests be sent amongst them to talk of religion - that they would surely not respond well to such approaches. "We may fish together, and enjoy the waters together, and share our traditions. But we remain apart from you - in these matters, and all matters of the spirit. This is the way of things. Sermersuaq said this, when she birthed us. It is said that the Suaq, those who cast aside their skins and walked to land, were those that could not bear the hylje way. There is no shame in it - but we are apart."

This was one of the last things he said to us, before he and the assembled hylje, on his signal, began to walk into the water. We saw them cast their skins about their shoulders, and then the water was full of the heads of seals, bobbing in the water. One looked back - and then, as one, they dived into the dark waters of the lake, leaving nothing behind but the wind rolling over the still waters.