

Dear Tarquinius,

I was delighted to receive your letter and had hoped to meet you in person, but the latest re-commitment of your new Empress to the Empire's policy of conquest and the tenor of the rhetoric that exists around dissent: bluntly it no longer felt Vigilant to reside in this land as a foreign heretic. Perhaps I exercised an abundance of caution, but I wanted to step aside from being a source of needless conflict.

I am not sure about the stories you tell of escaping the labyrinth. To be clear, in general Axos do not believe that there is anything beyond the labyrinth, but certain souls, strong in will and virtue, can retain something of their nature, or be liberated back into the world and away from the Creator's torture chamber. However, I am personally convinced that miracles – that is, power outside the habitual or natural and that derives from the inner puissance of the soul – are possible, and I am certain that they can derive from “false” spiritual powers just the same as your Imperial virtues.

In general I think the work of your doctrinal council seems very fine. Your doctrine of enlightenment is very powerful, and I will freely admit that I felt ashamed of my own people's neglect of the spiritual wellbeing of non-humans, fellow adversaries of the hated Creator. I find nothing to disagree with in that doctrine in particular. Obviously the doctrine of the Creator is incompatible with my views!

The Doctrine of Seven is flawed and in my view incorrect. It is not incorrect necessarily because it exalts seven spiritual forces above others – I myself advocate for a way of life lived in the name of Wisdom, Vigilance, and Understanding (what you would call Peace) above all. It is the obsession with the passage into rebirth, key to the sepulchral nature of the Way, that I think you err on most. The truth is this: there are many spiritual forces that can aid humanity – I should really say living beings, I suppose, but I know not all orcs see the virtues as important to them, and they have access to spiritual powers beyond my understanding – in their struggle against the world – that is, against the Creator. The inherent unifying factor of those forces to which a human may become Dedicated – I am a phenomenologist in my outlook, and like to refer to these elementary questions of “what is possible” – is that they reject passivity and despair, and embrace will and action. The unifying heart of them all is the will to live.

It probably is true that the truly Wise have an advantage when guarding their natures against the grinding tortures of the world of the dead, but so too the truly Mateful and those who embrace true Understanding; and we would both reject the second of these, accept the first, and differ on the last, I think. My view is that the question of “what world do we want to create” is distinct from “what will give us the power and will to create it”. Deciding the set of spiritual powers that you will exalt is an exercise in the former – not the latter.

I hope my answer enlightens: even if you may not agree with it, I hope it lights your way towards realising your own truth, and I appreciate your questioning as a true expression of Wisdom. I recognise your name I think – you used to be the Imperial Ambassador to Axos, until the nasty business in recent times? Well, I can't say I will be raising your name at dinner parties, but I personally enjoyed your letter and appreciated its words. Know that I think very highly of Fintan, your successor: he is a true icon of his profession.

In Wisdom, Vigilance, and Understanding,

Theodosia



Dear Fintan,

I regret that I could not say a final goodbye, but in light of the events that transpired, and your Empress's embrace of the recent events in the Barrrens and of a redoubling on the Imperial policy of conquest and hegemony, it did not seem Vigilant to tarry. I am sure we will meet again one day.

I too am in shock. In the moment you handed over the shield I recall a feeling of warmth and spreading light emanating from your hands. I thought to myself that you were a true icon of your profession, the very model of what an ambassador should be, and the warmth seemed to rise within me and flow between us, two souls caught in a numinous moment of fulfilment. My soul, however, remained unmarked after the experience. I am now in fact under a vigilance anointing – the Preparations – and a corresponding dedication, and I am carrying, along with Sacrifice, a robe that I have hallowed with a similar hallowing to Bawnwatch: I found myself missing it, after all this time. Sacrifice grows more and more familiar with every moment, however.

I do not understand what we experienced. I think, to be blunt, it was a miracle: but what does that mean? Like a string, taut, for a moment you were vibrating under some fundamental frequency, a light which is a song which is that from which the auras flow? I do not know – nobody knows and I am an experienced theologian. I thought I had seen it all – but virtue, of course, is in action, and certainly you acted.

I cannot tell you what this all means. I am sure you will come to your own conclusions. You know my views on your Way and its correctness, but I know that voices of dissent can be dangerous to hegemonies of power – indeed, I fear I will come to know this all too well in Axos. But I think you should reflect on your experience, and allow your open heart to guide your understanding of its meaning – and turn that meaning into whatever action you deem is appropriate.

I intend to begin to advocate strongly for a united Axos, but also for a different approach to our neighbours. Bluntly, whether the Druj become resurgent, or you yourselves end up on our borders, we must contend with hostile powers beyond our own, and I believe my people must begin to set aside their arrogance and hidebound ways if we are to walk into the future. I hope to demonstrate, too, to you (collectively) as well, that there are ways beyond conquest and the sword.

I am familiar with the Surcease of Sorrow: I know people who have used it, and indeed I think it may originate from Axos, though to be sure of that you would have to ask... probably someone from Maykop? Performing it is an inherently sorrowful experience. As such, I think this would be an appropriate use of the Hallowing of the Martyr, if you still retain the capacity to perform it. Otherwise, I suppose – there is a Hallowing that the Empire calls the Hallowing of the Stormcrow? If you want to choose from amongst your seven, choose that.

Whether we meet again or not, we will always be linked by the actions and choices you made and the bond of destiny you forged. I think you are exceptionally talented at what you do, and a very brave person besides. I hope that Ravadi would be proud of you.

In Wisdom, Vigilance, and Understanding,

Theodasia



Dear Skywise Gralka,

A short note. I look forward to seeing you at the coming Equinox. I will be accompanied by Marko, a skilled adept and Prijatel Jan - the prijateli are our mage-diplomats, whose function I suppose is a little like your own. I assume the Turning Mirror will send its own representative to facilitate our meeting. I look forward to meeting you and the others that you bring. My plan is that Marko will lead us in a session of spiritual meditation, in which he is quite expert. As part of this, there will be a chance to inhale the scent of zaboravi: used unwisely it can be harmful, but Marko will guide you all in using it safely. After that, I hope that we might have a conversation about spiritual matters and, hopefully, our Urizen guests can share something of their philosophy of the Net of the Heavens: I would be very interested in their views - though of course I will also be interested in your own thoughts and views, as well as those of Redhand Ikis, who I hope also to see. I intend to share with you in turn something of Tsark's spiritual understanding of the world, in the hope that we can move forward knowing something more of each other.

I will not be able to discuss any diplomatic business, and would ask that any of that business goes via the consul as is usual. We are meeting to discuss the things that matter.

In understanding,

Sage Kristoph



Hi Vossk!

My name's Vincent. I'm Melissa's new secretary (the old guy got, uh, let's say fired). I handle her letters so forth, but she has seen your message personally. Don't worry!

She enjoyed your letter and is really pleased to hear of your success: it reflects well on her and her guidance, don't you think? Happy to give you answers to your questions, though not necessarily in order.

First: don't trade this address! The rest of the Web can have it but not outside that. But what you should do is trade access - it's totally OK for you or others in the Web to write on behalf of third parties! (Indeed, frankly we expect it!)

Third: yes, Jarm's claim is valid and proper: Melissa is certain they have the right to do this, and that Prospero has given his endorsement (or at the very least, his endorsement of the use of the favour - the use itself is, of course, Jarm's choice!)

Second: we may well be able to do this for you, and Melissa would be content to broker such a meeting - but, of course, successfully brokering a meeting would definitely be the sort of favour that she would see paid back in kind! However, you're good for it, it sounds like, so no issues there.

However, the Grendel have a number of territories (though I hear less than they did!) - and the politics in each are quite different. So what I would ask you to do is to name the territory whose politics you are most interested in, and we'll see what we can do to put you in touch and set up a meeting with one or more key individuals who are friends of Melissa too. Of course, equivalents to your own self are not going to be the Salt Lords themselves: but there definitely are Grendel who understand the value of favours and relationships.

Melissa wanted me to add to the end here that she wishes everyone else well and has fond thoughts of your time together.

Right - letter done! I should probably tell the spider-scribe to stop writing this bit, actually. Uh, hang on. Stop!

Vincent