

Centuries ago, a group of people who didn't know anything about you decided what rules you had to follow and the way that you had to live your life. They didn't know your family, your circumstances, they couldn't know anything about the world you live in, but they decided that something gave them the right to make decisions on your behalf.

You know who does that? Parents. Parents make decisions for children. We do it because our children are young, they haven't seen the world and they haven't learned how to survive in it. We make decisions for our kids out of love and a desire to care for them. But you know what happens with children? They grow up. The chick flies the nest, the child learns to live their own life in their own way. But the ones who made the rules don't allow that. They never let you grow up.

People who claim power over you treat you like a child. And if that pisses you off the same way it pisses me off, then congratulations, you've got a little spark of Freedom in your heart. Take care not to lose it, because the people who benefit from your subservience will do almost anything to take it from you.

These pages will tell you about the Freedom that sits in your soul, that Liao helps you to find, and that the Synod seeks to stamp out. These are the words we seek to live by and the auras that bolster us in our fight against tyranny. This is the eighth Virtue, because we never gave up on the Way, only on the Synod. The founders of the Way were once rebels against an unjust authority, but it seems that their biggest objection was that they didn't get to wear the boots that stamped on those beneath them. This is our claim to the legacy of those long-dead rebels.

## Advice From My Mother

Nobody in the world has taught me more about Freedom than my mother. It's a joke in Montane that nothing turns you from the path of Freedom faster than having to look after a child, but she somehow managed to walk the fine line between giving me the space to learn my own lessons and letting me wander blindly into danger. Everything I am, I owe to her. May your passage be swift, Mum.

The greatest lesson that I learned from her was the lesson of choice. Every second you are making choices, even the insignificant ones that you barely notice even as you're making them. Choice is like air, my mother taught me. You don't think about it until it gets taken away. Choice is the ultimate expression of Freedom. Maybe it's something as small as whether to eat baked potato or lentil stew tonight. Maybe it's something as big as who to marry. Sometimes the consequences of the choice matter more than anything, sometimes they don't matter at all. But at the heart of everything is the choice.

The second lesson got taught to me when I informed her that I had chosen to force my little brother to hand over all his toys, and that nobody could stop me. It would have been easy to tan my hide, and I don't doubt that she was tempted, but instead she explained to me that choice for just one person is no choice at all. If my choice took away the Freedom of others to choose then I had chosen wrong. It took a few goes for me to get it, I was a little shit when I was young, but through love and patience she got it through my thick skull. Freedom is like Prosperity, it is at its truest

when it is shared. This is why we free slaves and cast down tyrants. This is why I'm writing this right now.

That lesson led easily to the third lesson: that Freedom and safety go hand in hand. Nature is not kind, and cares nothing for your choices. A bad harvest will leave you free to starve to death, a storm that tears down your house will leave you free to freeze. Tyrants exploit this fact. The Boyars of Varushka are quick to tell their people how dangerous the wolves are and how the only path to safety is through subjugation to the will of a despot. It is a tempting lie, but a lie nonetheless. If everyone works together to see that food is preserved for hard times then everyone will be free to eat together when hard times come. If everyone pitches in to build stronger houses then everyone will be free to sleep safely in their beds. Preserving Freedom takes work and partnership with those we are Loyal to, but if we put in the work then we can live better lives than any who cower under the boot of an overlord.

My mother taught me a thousand lessons, but these three speak to me most strongly. Choose, give others the power to make their own choices, and work together to ensure that the world cannot take that choice away from you. My mother lived those lessons to the very end. Days before her death she sat for hours watching our neighbours' children so they could choose how to spend their day rather than constantly chasing after their kids. She was a good woman, and somewhere in my heart I know that she's not got many incarnations left before she ascends. I hope her words can help you as much as they have helped me.

## We Always Fight About Auras

Never trust a Urizeni, because they will take the simplest thing and explain it until you realise how complicated it is. All it took was one Lucidian and everyone was suddenly debating whether or not using Liao on people was getting in the way of their free will. It wasn't always relevant, we haven't always had Liao to bother using, but I for one reckon that any tool in the fight against tyranny is worth using. Here are the ones we've got.

### Consecration

In the worst days under the Druj, a place Consecrated to Freedom could save you from absolute despair. It felt a little different for everyone, like Consecrations do, but the words everyone could basically agree on were that we felt a profound sense that we could only reach our true potential if we were absolutely free, that this was our fundamental right. Some poet out of Sarvos called it 'All That Impedes' once, which I think has a nice ring to it. When all hope seems lost, when your mission seems pointless, when it feels like your work is impossible and maybe you should just give in and accept the small tyrannies of life, this gives you back your drive. It reminds you that freedom is not true unless it is absolute, and that it can only be absolute if it is universal. So long as one person rests under tyranny, none of us are truly free.

## Dedication and Dreams

Sometimes you need some clarity, and dreams can give you that clarity. Call on the dreams of Freedom and you will see in your sleeping mind those things that threaten you, that seek to dominate and control both you and those you care about. I've seen people wake from these dreams full of unutterable rage at those who would impose on their liberty. I've also seen the hopeless awake full of renewed vigour and the desire to engage with the conflict once again, as new avenues of resistance open up to them in their visions. Freedom and Courage are kissing cousins in that way.

I remember once feeling like life was weighing down on me, that there were things that I could not face and could not name, and going to a priest to ask for a dream. I expected to awake having seen some new way to resist the Druj, some part of their tyranny that was affecting me deeply, but instead I awoke filled with the absolute knowledge that the expectations of my friends and family had been weighing on me almost more than the Orcs who sought to end my life. I had been cast in the role of leader, protector, provider, had more and more responsibility heaped on me, and all without once asking my permission. We had some hard conversations after that. Voices were raised and tears were shed, but in the end we found a new way forward. It didn't just help me either, as some of my fellows had begun to resent my increasing influence. By seeing the way that tyranny had crept up on us, we were able to cast it out and find a new, more equal way of living. It felt good, and we live better for it to this day.

## Anointings

Personal auras can be two-edged swords. Many have learned this the hard way. But sometimes you just need the strength to stand your ground and fight, and these can give you that.

One such aura is often called The Hammer of Freedom. Under its influence you feel compelled to tear down all those who constrain Freedom, that there is no price too high for liberty. More than one warrior going off on a likely suicide mission has had their spirit bolstered by this aura, and it has led to some astonishing acts of heroism in assassinating the Druj overlords who sought to destroy us. It's easy to see the usefulness of this in times of war, but it can be all the more urgent in times of peace when tyrants come in a pleasing guise. The ability of the oppressor to hide behind 'good manners' or 'social convention' can be every bit as effective as an army of bodyguards.

The same problems can be confronted by the use of The Proof of Freedom. While using it you feel empowered to bring about the change you swore to achieve when anointed. The restrictions of law or social convention feel like barriers to be overcome. When it comes to Freedom, stagnation can be as bad as death. Far too often tyranny is accepted because it is familiar and because challenging it would upset people. Bollocks to that. Until the last tyrant is dead, we must always be fighting for change. Summon up your will and force a better world to exist.

The Cry of Freedom is perhaps the safest of the anointings. Under its influence you feel an urge to denounce laws and social conventions which

limit freedom. You feel buoyed with confidence when you speak out in this manner. Of course, none of these are truly safe as carrying any of them runs the risk of bringing the wrath of the authorities down on your head, but many tyrants have ignored the voices of those they see as beneath them until it's too late. I've also used this to good effect when dealing with problems within the community. None of us are immune to the urge to control the people around us, and challenging our friends and loved ones can be hard. Sometimes you just need a bit of courage to remind people about their principles.

But what do you do with those who do not want to be saved? The Demands of Freedom can be a big help. When using it you feel a desire to save others from their complacency. Those who do not resist tyranny are complicit in it. Tyrants are always keen to split the oppressed into groups, so that one will think themselves better than another and fight to preserve that. But the life of a comfortable slave is still slavery, and for every boot-licking toady who desperately tries to preserve a shred of comfort under an unjust system there are a hundred others who suffer. Some people are too far gone, and will throw themselves onto your blades to protect masters who wouldn't piss on them if they were on fire, but they are few in number. Speak up and save who you can. Freedom is a precious thing, and is all the more precious when it is shared.

## Hallowings

I tend to use these a lot more than personal auras. A Hallowed item can be shared, passed from person to person as the moment requires. It can also be more readily hidden or discarded if the authorities should happen to come calling.

### The Hallowing of the Wayfarer

This aura empowers the bearer to undermine figures of authority, especially those who abuse their power. Just as the early evangelists of the Way of Virtue sought to draw attention to the corruption of the Patricians, so we carry on their legacy. This is the duty of all followers of the Way, and this Hallowing gives that strength readily.

### The Hallowing of Riqueza

This aura empowers the bearer to chastise the hidebound who are enslaved by their traditions. How much would the world have lost if we stayed stuck in the same ways that we had followed for centuries? This is an interesting one, what counts as being enslaved by tradition can vary from person to person, but as with all auras the conscience of the individual still reigns supreme. I think Riqueza would have appreciated that.

### The Hallowing of the Sutannir

This aura empowers the bearer to encourage others to follow their own hearts and ignore the commands of others. This reminds us all that nobody can tell you how to be Virtuous, you must live it every second.



Sometimes I hear of demagogues in other lands directing others in the name of 'Freedom'. I wonder how they would fare if their followers were to get their hands on something hallowed with this.

### The Hallowing of Mikkal

This aura empowers the bearer to break the law to show its empty nature. I hate the name of this, if Mikkal did half the things that he is supposed to have done then he's a mass murderer and deserves to be nothing more than a lesson in what to avoid. Still, sometimes you need someone to walk past the 'private property' sign just to prove that it can't hurt you, and this aura gives you the strength to do just that.

### The Hallowing of Jannike

This aura empowers the bearer to disobey orders which they don't agree with. Few in the Empire remember Jannike, the general of the Green Shield who was first revoked and then assassinated by Nicovar for calling him out as a madman in military council. We remember her, and keep her in our hearts as a lesson in standing up in the face of unjust authority.

### The Hallowing of Ahraz

This aura empowers the bearer to risk everything in order to preserve liberty. We remember the Freeborn who gave that Freedom to everyone that he could. We know that he was one of us in his heart, whether he could admit it or not. The Empire refused to recognise him until after his

death, but we've known his truth in our hearts for generations. May your passage be swift, Ahraz. You deserved better.

### The Hallowing of Rahvin

This aura empowers the bearer to free the downtrodden from those who oppress them. This one has a few names – Thrace, the Reaver – but the urge remains the same. This is the one I use the most. When we smash the shackles of the enslaved, when we raise up the beaten and broken from their subjugation, this is the urge that drives us. Never forget.

## The Way Of Eight Virtues

My mother – yes, I'm talking about her again, shut up – loved to study history. I remember the day that she told me, so casually that I almost missed it, that the Way was a political construct. I asked her what she meant, and she said that the first Synod had negotiated about which were the true Virtues and which the false. That the Doctrines were haggled over and revised many times to appease the interests of those present. That the Imperial Way was no more 'true' than the Imperial Constitution. It was a hard thing to hear.

That revelation shook my faith. If the Virtues were simply selected like food from a menu then how could we trust that there was any real value to them? But in time my mother helped me to understand. Those Priests at the first Synod weren't liars, seeking to hoodwink the generations that followed them. Some of them were bad, some were good, most were just regular folk trying their best to make the right choices with what knowledge they had. We need not condemn them or discard everything they handed down to us. But we need to know that just as they were able to choose, so are we. The Priests at the first Synod made a choice to change the world, and we can choose to change it as well.

Some Imperials think that we Montanians follow only one Virtue. Nothing could be further from the truth. We carry the Imperial Seven in our hearts, just as you do. How do you think that we keep up our spirits when fighting the Druj if not through Courage? What binds us together in dark times if not Loyalty? What drives us to see a world made completely Free

if not Ambition? We do not reject out of hand the lessons of those who came before us, but we have the Wisdom to question why those lessons were taught in the first place.

The creation of the Imperial Way is inseparable from the creation of the Empire itself. The Virtues were chosen as true because they bound together those first eight nations. Loyalty brought the people together to make common cause across the old borders. Prosperity encouraged merchants to seek the greatest rewards for their work wherever they might be found rather than engaging in protectionist trade wars. Vigilance encouraged the people to turn their eyes outward to the threats of the Orcs who surrounded them. In the same way, the false Virtues were thrown out because there was no room for them. In an Empire of eight different cultures there was no room for the parochial suspicion of Hatred. In an Empire where there was one law and one militia there was no room for the blood feuds of Vengeance. And in an Empire that had to integrate power-hungry elites and greedy merchants there was no room for Freedom, which called on all people to stand as equals. We don't have to like their decision, but we can understand why they made it.

But this understanding leads us to the ultimate truth. The Way of Virtue is not a dry, bland description of how the world is, but a bold statement of how it ought to be. We choose the Virtues that help us to drive towards a better life for everyone, and damn those who tell us we can't. The first Synod chose to excise Freedom, but we have chosen to put it back in its rightful place. The Empire gets closer and closer to us with every passing

season. Ahraz legitimised the fight of the Orcs to emancipate themselves. Mere months ago we heard the news that the Doctrines themselves, the unshakable foundations of our faith, are being torn up and revised to better reflect the world we live in. Slaveholding nations are being sacked left and right, the cause of Freedom sweeps across the world.

Centuries ago, a group of people who didn't know anything about you decided what rules you had to follow and the way that you had to live your life. They chose to create a world where Freedom was Heresy and slavery was the natural lot of an entire thinking, feeling species. But those people are long dead, and their returned souls live in a different world. The Way teaches us to strive to do better every lifetime, to push closer and closer to the ultimate Freedom, Freedom from the Labyrinth itself. Well, now is the time to follow through on that lesson. Freedom is the right of all thinking beings. I know it, you know it, the Empire knows it.

Now stand up and fight for it.