

Unto his Eminence, Tewdar the Bishop-Prince of Brezha does Gaius Calderis Isigis send greetings and requests that these words be presented to the members of the Diet of Tionna for consideration.

It has been nigh upon a year since I returned to this world from what has been called "The Grim Prison." In my first life (for I am certain that I died and was buried) I was many things: A father, a lover, a statesman, a scholar, and a wizard. I know that your faith marks the craft that I practice to be dangerous, and the practitioners of such to be in need of proper training and supervision lest malady befall the world. It may surprise you to know that, by and large we are in agreement on this point- My time in this modern era has shown me that many who delve the arcane arts are at best ill-prepared and poorly trained, and at worst ham-fisted dabblers in matters of dire consequence. I assign the blame for this to the fall of the great city-state of Ton Isig- when that light was snuffed out of this world, the very center of magical culture and learning was lost. And the men who were left, by and large were children in the weaponmaker's shop- grasping at his handy work, thinking it makes them mighty, but in reality it just made them dangerous to themselves and others. I share this with you in the hopes that it will abate some of the disdain the adherents of your faith might have for the opinions of a wizard. I also share these words with you because the principles that guided not only my life, but also my entire culture laid great importance on the sharing of knowledge so that the world not fall to ignorant darkness. So ingrained is this in my mind that the last thing I clearly remember from the time before my death was struggling

to preserve the legacy of my people's knowledge for future generations against the actions of the Most Foul and his dark servants. Thus I shall tell you all that I know about both the Celestial Chorus and what are now being called "The Returned" or "the Hallowed Dead".

Regarding the Celestial Chorus- The people of Ton Isiq knew of the Celestial Chorus even before they took mortal form during the Great War Against the Shadow. We had a means of contacting them in the realm to which they are native, a realm which is just as real as our own (and in a fashion could be thought to overlap our realm) but is imperceptible without powerful magics on one or both sides of the divide. We were warned of the dangers of The Shadow, who, it is said, was the greatest servant of the being which created both our realm and theirs, whom they call "The Light of Heaven", but he rebelled against his creator, seeing to destroy that which had received favor. The being called "The Most Foul" is said to have been empowered by this fallen servant, and it is hypothesized that he acted as a vessel for some portion of The Shadow's essence. (Even if this is not the case, he certainly worked to achieve the same ends.) Members of the Chorus are, for all intents and purposes immortal in their home realm. Despite this they have spent the entirety of their existence fighting against The Shadow in massive battles. Should one be "killed", he merely returns to his home realm and convalesces for some time. That said, each member of the chorus has the ability to take mortal form. They do not do this lightly, for the choice to become mortal is, for all intents and purposes, irrevocable. You read that correctly- they voluntarily chose to sacrifice

their immortality permanently in order to render aid to the denizens of our realm. During the Great war, a large number of these beings of light did just that, and as I understand it their aid was one of the factors allowing for the defeat of the Most Foul.

Now again, in this modern time, more members of the chorus have given up the gift of immortality to stand alongside mortals and render aid in the time of troubles which surely must be on the horizon. These beings, when in mortal form appear much as humans, excepting that each one of their faces bear a message, written in one of the myriad languages that have existed, or will exist. These messages tend to change over time, but the few ones that have been translated seem to speak to matters of creation, love, light and the like. It is important to note that the other principle difference between a descended Celestial and a human is that they have the ability to touch, however softly, the essence of creation, and channel it toward their purpose in the form of magic. This magic is unlike that of ritualism, for it requires no bones, or scrolls or even foci. It is also unlike alchemy, in that it deals with the realms of energy, rather than the forms of matter. it is a facet of their very nature. Not all of them manifest the ability to use these ties offensively, but each and every one of them has a bond to one (or rarely two) realms.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not point out the fact that, as mortal beings, and beings possessed of Free will, it is possible that a member of the chorus can be turned away from service to the Light. There were stories during the great war of turncoat Celestials, who aided the Most foul, using their innate magics and abilities for woeful purposes. The existence of such traitors

seems to invoke great shame and ire in most all Celestials, and they will typically go out of their way to destroy such an abomination. I include this only for the sake of completeness and to point out that while the vast majority are stalwart agents for good, the mere fact that one is a Celestial does not guarantee that one is a good person.

Regarding "the returned," also called "The Hallowed Dead": The return of the heroes of old from behind the grave had never been heard of during the time before my death, and if the people that I have interacted with since my return are knowledgeable and trustworthy, I must conclude that such was also unheard of in the time after my death. I would like to tell you that as one of these people I know how we came to be. I cannot. I can, however, share with you all that I can remember, even though my memory does suffer some gaps here and there. I remember distinctly the twilight of the fall of Tou Tsig. I remember the courier telling me that my last child had been killed in battle, and wanting vengeance. I was prepared to exhaust every fiber of my being snuffing out as many lives of the enemy as possible. I also remember the Primus of my Cabal* calling upon my oath of service to stay my hand, and giving me the task of preserving the most important knowledge and deepest secrets for those who would come after, in the hopes that something of us would remain, that our great work would not have been in vain, and that future peoples would live better lives because of our sacrifice. I remember fleeing the city on the eve of battle, seeking refuge in the wilderness, hiding from enemy scouts as I began penning a great codex to preserve our knowledge. That is the last thing I truly remember about my

mortal life. The next thing I remember is a sense of falling, as if hurled from a great spire into icy brackish water. As I opened my eyes, I saw the great column, and found myself in what is now being called "The Grim Prison". Let me assure you that such a name is insufficient to describe the place. I know of no tongue, spoken by firstborn, human, or celestial which could properly encapsulate the vileness of the place. The landscape is vast and essentially featureless, save the random boulder or twisted, decaying tree here and there. The ground is an endless mire of viscous stinking mud through which blood wells up as water does in swampland. The only structure of any note is a great pillar made of dark grey stone. It stretches as far as the eye can see in both directions and is covered with carved letters. I fell and landed face down in the stinking mud. A being cloaked in grey ropes, and carrying a wicked lash bound me to the pillar with a festering rope and began scourging me until I began to pull the rope as though I were an ox trying to move a stone. All around me, in front and behind were similarly situated people. Some showed great wounds, presumably from battle, some were bloated as if drowned, and others leaked blood from the fresh lash-marks given them by the guards. I would say that we toiled day and night, but there really was no concept of day or night- it is perpetually cloaked in twilight and there is a near-constant driving rain. We just toiled, endlessly pulling on a pillar that while moving, was so infinitely long that there was no way of determining if it had moved. Sometimes I would speak with those around me, but there was never any new knowledge gained, only rumors here and there passed down from further up the line. Sometimes a prisoner would try and undo the sticky fetid rope from around his body. It never worked, and if the guards noticed, they would seize the prisoner, and take him away.

They did the same for anyone who asked too many questions, or caused problems, or really just as it struck their fancy. Those who tried to escape were never seen again, but the others were returned after a time, most often bleeding. The lucky ones bled from obvious lashes. The unlucky ones bled from other places. The very unlucky ones didn't bleed at all, but afterwards were never the same. The Guards also seemed to have a boss of some sort, whom some called "The warden". The fact that he inspired fear in the guards led me to believe it was not a good idea to look at him directly, or really do anything to draw his ire. I only know that he was different as his voice sounded different. And he invoked a sense of dread and paranoia amongst us all.

There are some other pertinent observations about the Grim prison- Neither I, nor any prisoner I spoke with had ever seen, or even heard of a child being consigned to the prison. The youngest people seemed to be young adults, perhaps thirteen or fourteen years of age, though that was hard to tell, given differences in culture and the death wounds many sported. I saw at least one member of the firstborn race, but no celestials or homunculi, the latter does not surprise me as they lack a soul, and the Grim Prison seems to be a place to torment the soul, but the former was a shock. That said, at least one person who rose at the same time as me claims to have seen a Celestial bound to the pillar. I also previously mentioned the letter on the pillar- they were from a variety of languages, but those of the languages I knew seemed to be names. I can still remember three of them, which seems to be the normal condition for other "Returned" Occasionally new writing would appear on the column in a gout of flame.

The memories I have of the Grim Prison all blend together- absent a means of tracking time like sunrise or mealtime or the like, I cannot know how to encapsulate in language the apparent length of my torture. All that I know is at some point I closed my eyes while pulling the pillar and when I opened them I saw only darkness, and found myself surrounded in dirt and covered in a rotting shroud. I heard the tail end of a sentence, in a female voice. It said "Arise, the world needs you again" or some such. I'll admit that the combination of the radical shift in experience and the poor acoustics of dirt has somewhat muddled my recall of the specifics. Irrespective, I sat upright, and then crawled to my feet, shaking off the dust of the grave. I saw a terrible sight, something that I had hoped to never see again- shadows given live and form, and agents of the darkness trying to kill people. I looked back into my grave and found weapons and a stack of provisions. I also noticed other graves, some with waking people other with only an hand jutting upward. I rendered aid to those trying to escape the earth and then turned my attention to the evil that had been spat forth into what I now know as the town of Marath Suula.

(Even with the aid of those of us returning to the world of the living, the battle seemed lost. Luckily, at our darkest moment, I heard a great crack, saw a flash of light and heard the songs of the celestial chorus echoing across the field. The forces of darkness were no match for the combined efforts of the modern men, those returned from the grave and the descended host.)

As for what we "returned" and/or The Celestials mean with respect to the tenets of your faith I cannot say. Until I had returned to life, I had never even

heard of it. Since then I have read a little about it, and have seen the profound positive effect it can have on its adherents (as an example, Sister Evangeline is the most kind, humble and selfless person I have met in this era, and she is a credit to your faith) I only ask that you consider my words as you debate the spiritual matters at hand. Thank you for allowing my words, and thus my knowledge to be shared with the members of the Diet. I hope that you will find the knowledge useful and share it with others who need it as well.

May you know more tomorrow than you did today.

Gaius Calderis Isigis

* (For those interested in history and ancient political science, Ton Isig was ruled by a Magus who was advised by the foremost member of the cities nine most powerful Cabals, each of which numbered nine members. I personally was the Secundus (second in order of precedence) of the Cabal of the Scarlet Codex, one of the Nine great cabals, and the one responsible for the great public library of Ton Isig)

†I use the words "he" "him" and "His" in the classical neuter sense- I am unsure if the Warden even ~~HAD~~ a gender, let alone am I able to discern which he might have belonged to.