

The State of the Empire

For the enlightenment of His Imperial Majesty, Emperor Praskinar Graith XXIII

From Delane Kemp, Speaker of the Silent Council

Your Most Gracious Imperial Majesty,

Earlier this year, you requested a full update regarding the status of those nations around us, both friend and foe. You'll recall our reminder that we provide such updates monthly, just as you'll recall your response to that statement.

While the Silent Council appreciates your proposal to refile our "boring" reports in a more, shall we say, biological location, we have instead worked hard to produce a brief summary of the world at large. Your request to "write plainly, or don't write at all" has been taken very much to heart.

We trust that this will be of more interest than our "dry-as-bones academic cow manure" that we have, in the past, provided the Imperial Throne.

The Ascondean Empire, The Shining Hope of the World

Your Imperial Majesty, we are pleased to report that the Ascondean Empire is enjoying an extended period of peace and stability. There have been no internal security matters of import over the last 20 years, other than localized protests whenever taxes are levied. Fortunately, this is rare and usually peaceful. The citizens (for the most part) are happy to complain loudly, but without violence.

There has been a slight rise in criminal activity along the major highways in the outer provinces. We have increased patrols along the roads and have instigated a bounty program for local militias, encouraging the provincial governments to take care of these matters. This has met with some measure of success. It's quite uncouth to have bandits running around the forests, though they tend to be opportunistic and badly organized. We take care to remove any external influences.

We've had reports of some cult activities in the Kala region. Some of the more "colorful" ones have merely been attracting rich and "enthusiastic" nobles to spend money freely. After all, someone's got to provide those orgies with wine and food. Now and again, we'll let one of the nobles know we've seen them there, which comes in useful later. Otherwise, there's nothing really to be concerned about. We'll quickly shut down anything that gets out of hand. Needless to say, Your Highness, we'd recommend against any visits to Kala, official or otherwise. It's best to avoid temptation altogether.

Cushulain

Our plans for Cushulain proceed accordingly. The recently improved transportation routes have resulted in a 2.5% increase in traffic on those roads. Improvement of roads and bridges throughout Cushulain, as part of our program to prepare that nation for assimilation, has been very successful. There have been some protests from the Independents, but our spies are quite satisfied that the protesters are harmless, if annoying. We are prepared to remove the leaders if necessary, but there may be some benefit to offering them roles in the interim provincial government. This worked well when Palantra joined the Empire during your predecessor's reign. Our good friend, Ashtel Mantery has been very helpful. He gave a wonderful speech last month in the Cushulain Parliament, waxing lyrically about trade tariffs and taxation, and how they no longer make sense between our nations. He got a minute of polite applause, which is the Cushulain equivalent of a standing ovation.

The main opposition is led by Petrick Faar, who I believe served with your nephew in the Fourteenth Legion. He's a good man, passionate about both the Empire and Cushulain. His argument, that both countries benefit from having distinct cultures, is a reasonable one. We can always point to the Enlightenment and prove that Imperial Provinces re-

ally do keep their identities. We'll make him Minister of Culture and let him protect Cushulain's identity.

We have some concerns about Cushulain's borders. They are very lax with their western boundaries, leaving most of that work to the detachments of the Fourteenth that they allow within their borders. We are also concerned that as the assimilation plans proceed, Nascency may try to take advantage and annex several settlements. There are a number of locations that are disputed. We suggest bolstering the Seventh with some elite detachments from the Fifteenth, as we get closer to the big day. We think having two legions on their border will ensure that the fanatics of Sansehl will play nice.

I think we're on track for a formal treaty within the next couple of years. It will take that long to get the military forces into place and to pin down the provincial laws. Also, we will need to prepare for the inevitable diplomatic backlash from the rest of the Marches. No one likes to see our Empire expand, for obvious reasons.

The Councils

Now we come to our grand and glorious government, the heart and soul of our democracy. The shining light at the heart of our wondrous Imperial ... well, enough of that. I believe you've not attended a Council meeting in at least six months, much to the chagrin of the Speakers.

The Council of Swords may be getting antsy. They've not had a serious war in years. Verelanar doesn't count. They're still embarrassed about that, even though it wasn't their fault. Accidents happen, the truth gets out, and so on. We may have to find them a new enemy soon, otherwise they may start paying attention to what their Prime Speaker is doing.

The Council of Servians are the meek unassuming bunch they've been for centuries. I can only imagine the fire and passion that filled their hearts when the Empire was born, but these days they are a shadow of their former selves. Still, the Silent Council recruits some of our best people from within the Servians. No one pays attention around the servants, after all, and tongues will wag.

I am more concerned about the Council of Magores. They have always been a pompous group, their arrogance only matched by their sense of self-satisfaction. Lately, however, I've heard rumors of some unpleasant magical experiments taking place within our own Capital. My people are investigating, of course, but the Magores tend to have ways of protecting their secrets, even from us. It's terribly annoying. I'll not trouble Your Highness with details at this time, but suffice to say you may notice some absentees at your next Sorcerer's Ball.

Immigration

Your Highness may find this aspect of our reporting to be something of a surprise. However, be assured that your predecessors insisted upon it.

While you may not personally find the Loranthians or rovers to be a concern, the Silent Council does have some interest in our "new friends," especially the rovers. We try to track and identify any Beguilers we can find. The Imperial Academy of Magic also attempts to track non-Academy mages. They are a subtle danger, Your Highness, but a valuable tool. We have several Beguilers on our payroll, of course. They are very useful. But an uncontrolled Beguiler is a threat to our security. In many ways, they are more dangerous than any Necromancer.

We still don't know much about where the rovers came from. The fact that they left in a hurry, and the rumors and stories about an "invasion" has always worried us. We've sent naval expeditions off in every direction, but they either find nothing or never return. Your predecessor was unconcerned about this situation. I assume you've already skipped this entire section.

The elves continue to be a more depressing problem. While the Empire has every sympathy for their unique cultural "situation," we cannot allow this itinerant race to cause havoc in their travels. The legions have standing orders to move any elven settlement they find, strongly encouraging the residents to "move along." While we would quite happily relocate them all to Penury, not every elf is eager to settle in the Witherlands. I can't blame them.

Our island folk friends are everywhere these days. They are popular as servants, since they really don't understand the concept of currency or fair pay. Having said that, their ongoing inability to understand the concept of personal

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belongings is something of a headache. As long as they are kept out of important places and not given responsibilities above their station, they are more or less harmless, despite the rumors of curses placed on anyone who wrong them.

In truth, only their magic users have the power to affect fate and health. Everyone has heard stories about the healing powers of the Listeners. These “priests” of the island folk’s faith do indeed have powerful abilities, but they are as capricious as any other Loranthian and their powers can harm as well as heal. It’s almost impossible to control these people, but we can coerce them from time to time. There are a few Listeners in the legions at the moment, and that’s working out very well.

Cair Dhurn

You’ll notice I’ve not included the dwarven kingdom in the section below. That’s because Cair Dhurn may as well be a province of the Empire. Despite my sour and cynical demeanor (so I’ve been told, I don’t see it) I am actually quite fond of our stubby cousins to the west. The work we’ve done together, merging Sorcery and Rune Writing, has made the Empire what it is today. I hear you laugh, Your Highness, in that mocking way, but please think about it. Our city walls stand high and tall, enhanced by the magic of the dwarves. Every road and bridge leading out of central Ascondea is the result of those joint magical efforts. The leaders of our legions carry swords that blaze brightly with magic that has been bound forever into the steel.

What you might not know is that the dwarves are sitting atop some of the worst things you can imagine. They don’t talk about it much (perhaps out of a sense of pride or propriety), but there are ancient and primeval caves and tunnels beneath the mountains, cracks that lead into the very bones of the world. Dark terrible things dwell there, sometimes crawling up out of their pit. The dwarves protect us all, fighting an endless war against the untold evil beneath the world. Or so they say. Until I see one of these “deep horrors,” I’m not going to lose any sleep over it. Let the dwarves worry about their imaginary bogymen, as long as they keep digging ore and gold out of their mountains, they can stay friends with the Empire.

Cair Dhurn’s current High Theocrat is Kardard ac Uyln, who first came to power after his father died. Of shame, I suppose, given that the elder Uyln was the High Theocrat that let Valin Stoneson lead a fair number of dwarves out from under the mountains and south into the desert. I don’t know if Cair Dhurn will ever really get over that schism.

Neutral Nations

The Marches

The borderlands, aside from Cushulain, are relatively quiet. Verelanar is still a troubled region. The commanders of the Tenth Legion continue to protest their role, but honestly, do you want to be remembered as the Emperor who pulled the Tenth out of that place? We’d not be doing their people, or ours, any favors. For a start, we remain fairly certain that the Circle of Dust would take advantage of the situation. The graves of Verelanar would be empty within a month. The Silent Council faces difficulties in “research” within Verelanar. While Gravisk Carr was one of ours, we have very little influence in the affairs of the puppet council. That’s really more the military’s responsibility. The country does seem to be settling down, and it’s entirely possible that we could start to withdraw our Peacekeepers in the next couple of years. Even so, I believe we’ll always need to maintain some presence at the borders, if only to keep their neighbors out. It’s unfortunate that Verelanar occupies such a critical location. While we’d not really mind Jherlind and Kar’Danan fighting over the remains of this blighted nation, it could impact our peace and stability.

Speaking of Jherlind, we are at least back on speaking terms. Our ongoing investigations have yet to provide proof regarding who was actually responsible for the Blight. The good money is still on Kar’Danan, though we’ll probably never prove it. Either way, they have agreed to stop killing our diplomats. It appears, however, that wounding is still very much fair game. We’ve had a problem with one of their “goats” recently. He’s a particularly charismatic leader in a border village who has taken to killing mages in Ascondea. His raiders carry Kherahs etched with unique patterns and they aren’t shy about leaving them behind after a kill. We don’t want this to escalate into a more serious diplomatic issue.

Loslohin continues to be a stinking festering waste of space. I'd say "good space" but really, that swamp is disgraceful. They've taken to throwing things at us, across their "ditch." Sometimes they throw dead animals, other times they throw clay jars that break open and stink the place up so badly that no one can even come close to the spot for days at a time. I'm quite sure they're testing something. The black market in Brew Witch potions is still strong in the villages near the border, and we continue to purchase potions for the Academy to analyze. The best seller appears to be the concoctions of a Witch named Grasa Bok, which sounds like swamp gas.

The zealots of Nascency are as irritating as ever. Our treaty with that nation allows for free movement of civilians across the border, which keeps the Imperial followers of the Argent Path happy. But when the Walker sends missionaries into the Empire, they may as well be soldiers. They are always armed and they are always very vocal. There are a number of new churches in the border regions, thanks to our holy neighbors. Still, for the most part, the average Nascentite is peaceful and considerate.

The Saikin Wastes

The Great Desert would barely be of any interest to the Empire were it not for the presence of a few settlements that we trade with on an irregular basis. Between the mongrels in Algiz and the Desert Dwarves in Oukal, there's enough merchant traffic to require our attention. Much of their trade flows through Cynosure now, but we intend to change that. We continue to have little luck with Eoliane. Perhaps once the situation in Verelanar settles down, we can send the Tenth down there. It's a desolate place and might make a nice change from a muddy hell-hole filled with hateful natives.

I mentioned Oukal. They make very nice glass weapons there. The dwarves turn the purest glass I've ever seen into something as strong as steel. Very nice. I've ordered 200 glass daggers for the Silent Council to use. They might make a nice signature weapon for our agents in the field.

Zamai

You've never been there, Your Highness, but you've mentioned it once or twice in your "I'd like to go to ..." speeches to your advisers. Yes, we know about your desire to tour the Empire, but I would encourage you to stay away from the Floating City. It moves around, you know. Sometimes it's merely a league off the coast, other times it's hundreds of miles away. It's only close when it suits the rovers, especially when they exile their criminals. Guess where they end up? As a black market trading hub, it's second only to Cynosure. The rovers police themselves adequately, I suppose, but no decent Ascondean has any business there.

Threats

The Warlands

The blood-soaked western part of the continent continues to be a source of some concern, especially with our plans for Cushulain. Borders tend to get ignored during a hand-over in power, and we don't want that to happen. We're confident that the Fourteenth can handle it, once they have free reign to move through the newest Ascondean province.

The major players in the Warlands right now tend to be involved in raiding caravans and merchants. Warlord Khees has been especially voracious, regularly attacking merchants from Cair Dhurn. He and his warband have a taste for dwarven ale, it seems. Once they all sober up, we'll have a large army close to the Primeas. The dwarves are already worried. Warlord Koruk, based in the hills southwest of Cynosure, was recently killed by the leader of a rival warband. Sarik was taking revenge for the destruction of one of Koruk's villages. This will turn out to be a good thing, since we had been actively keeping the tribes uniting. This will never happen now. That said, Sarik is ambitious and brutal. We'll keep an eye on him.

Cynosure

Cynosure is as it ever was. We have our eyes and ears open, as always. Ever since that mercenary ruffian threw

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Gal'Rood off the tower, things have been relatively quiet. He's a better leader and has the trust of his people, but he's no friend to the Empire. Still, he's not had our people rounded up and executed, so he knows enough to let the game be played. Best left alone, we think. We need to concentrate on keeping the Warlands nice and unorganized.

The Oruskan Wilderness

As you may know, we have a number of goblin merchants on our payroll. They are reliable enough, though we can't ever really fully trust a particular individual. It's much the same in the Warlands, of course.

The goblins travel throughout the Oruskan Wilderness, trading freely with orcs, kobolds, mongrels and humans through the Northlands. According to the most recent reports, there seems to be something of a resurgence in the Baranthum cults throughout the orc tribes in the northwest. Ten separate villages have been building (or rebuilding) underground shrines to their dead god, which keeps them busy. The peace is temporary. As has happened before, once the tribes have completed their work, they will mobilize and attack the other tribes to remove the "rival temples." Such a charming religion. As long as it keeps them fighting each other, we don't have to worry about another Blackwing Invasion. Nor do we have to worry about sending a "representative" of the Empire to remove up-and-coming leaders. Not this year, at least.

Interestingly, the one name that keeps coming up is "Muzgi," an orc who seems to be smarter than most. He is apparently making efforts to trade peacefully with goblins and mongrels alike, offering bodyguard services. Muzgi's organization is small and seems more interested in making a profit than building an invasion force. We'll keep an eye on him.

Summary

I'm certain that you didn't even open this report, let alone read it. If you have, you probably just skipped to this part. Your Imperial Highness is a busy man, of course. So many courtly balls, so little time. You have our sympathy. I'll try to sum everything up as briefly as possible, so you can get back to your noble work of supporting the Shining City's more upscale courtesans.

The Empire is in good hands. The Silent Council has kept things running smoothly, more or less, for centuries. The Swords, Magores and Servians play a part, of course, but given the distinct lack of anything like a war or other external threat, they have very little to do, other than administer your Empire. All in all, you have inherited an Empire at peace, with herself and the majority of her neighbors.

Everything is under control.



Post Script

I quite nearly forgot. It's probably nothing, but our reports seem to suggest that there are an unusual number of gnomes traveling throughout the Empire at the moment. More than usual, I'd have to say. If I didn't know any better, I'd say they were "mobilizing" in an organized fashion, placing themselves in strategic locations. Quite odd. Probably meaningless, of course.