

Report on the Hand of Glory

Prepared for the Council of Nine by Ruth of Basilisk's Reach

This report has been prepared for the eyes of the Council of Nine, as requested during the Winter Solstice 380YE by Oberon Caeli Rezia di Tassato. The Silent Bell were instructed to investigate the activities of the Hand of Glory. We have now done so, and can present our findings here.

Firstly and urgently, recent events have somewhat overtaken our investigation, and prompt action may be needed. At the time of writing, we know that the bulk of the Hand of Glory inner circle had earlier gathered at a ruined Spire in Ankra, Spiral, called the Spire of Bells and Flags, an area now overrun by Grendel during their intense assault this season. What reports our agents have been able to gather indicate that the Hand of Glory present have been either butchered or captured and enslaved. We predict this will put a halt to the Hand as a meaningful conspiracy, but there remains a significant loose end. As per the Hand's primary goal, detailed below, our agents believe the inner circle had gathered at the Spire of Bells and Flags due to having located a key relic of the Emperor Nicovar. While the Grendel attacked before the conspirators were able to do anything with it, we have not been able to account for the relic's location. Either the Grendel have looted it, or it remains at large, and might yet be acquired and used by any Hand survivors for their intended purpose.

To summarise, the Hand of Glory intend to try and resurrect Nicovar via the ritual magic known as *Whispers Through The Black Gate* and a relic that would serve as a focus for his spirit. While Silent Bell inquiries have indicated that such a resurrection would surely be impossible – at most, we expect the focus would allow the ritual to work normally rather than bringing Nicovar back into flesh and blood existence – it seems unwise to leave something so significant lost or in the hands of the Grendel.

As such, we recommend to the Council of Nine that they take prompt action to secure this Nicovarian object and remove it from the grasp of either the sea orcs or any surviving conspirators. Civil Service prognosticators have estimated there will be a conjunction of the Sentinel Gate opening to that area on the Friday of the Spring Equinox, which may allow a direct intervention into the matter before the Grendel raiders depart with their spoils.

Summary of the Hand of Glory and their Purpose

In short, the Hand of Glory appear to be a conspiracy founded upon a delusional notion – that Nicovar himself might be resurrected and returned to life to lead the Empire once more. It is not clear why the conspirators believe this is possible, though we have advanced some theories on the matter. However, let me be clear – the Hand of Glory may seem to be fools pursuing the inconceivable, but their fundamental aim involves overthrowing the Throne. They are dangerous revolutionaries pursuing a destructive path. These are not simply harmless fantasists.

The Hand of Glory formed under the guidance of several of Nicovar's secret police after his death. The inner circle membership has largely been restricted to Urizen, but the wider net of pawns and agents that the Hand has assembled have spread across many nations. It continues to be a vexing notion to us that Urizen folk are at the heart of this – for a nation so known for its rationality and logic, why has the Hand managed to form an (albeit very small) sustainable membership across the decades? The conspiracy's fundamental goals would be laughed out of Conclave as an absurdity, which has left some of us investigating their activities with the worry that we must be missing some piece of the puzzle that the Hand possesses.

Hand of Glory Activities

By the time the Silent Bell received instruction from the Council of Nine to investigate the Hand, a number of agents and informants had already assembled significant amounts of information – those of us watching vigilantly for threats to the Empire have been observing the conspiracy for some time. Whatever fieldcraft the organisation may have inherited from the Urizeni secret police that notionally founded it has long since been lost; the membership is largely made up of scholars, seers and archaeologists who possess a clumsy understanding of matters of intrigue and subterfuge at best. Some amongst their number are more cunning – and some are willing to murder to keep their secrets or remove pawns who are no longer dancing to their tune.

The Hand's inner circle of elders direct a web of their own contacts and informants, often termed the 'Lambent', who are rarely fully inducted into the Hand's mysteries. Rather these are the inquisitive, the gullible or the desperate for a purpose, lured in by Hand agents' promises of knowledge, hidden meaning and accomplishment. The Hand uses these informants to search for and secure objects relating to Nicovar. A number of 'collectors' and mercantile agents who have purchased Nicovarian paraphernalia in the past are actually Hand pawns, hard at work gathering whatever scraps of the dead Emperor's life that they can get their hands on.

The Lambent operate in a cell structure – a true Hand of Glory member will initiate a cell-leader and instruct them to find other suitable members to bring into the fold or tap for aid. The Hand uses an unusual form of arcane mark to indicate its membership, via a ritual they call the *Rite of the Luminous Key*. We are not sure whether it physically brands a rune of Hirmok, the Tyrant's Rune, onto the recipient's flesh or whether it simply places a mark of the rune that can be found via the common spell of magical detection – we have encountered both of these marks on pawns of the Hand. It is

possible there are actually two rites at work, but the whys and wherefores of this remain unclear to us. Initiation involves drawing a triangle around this mark and swearing a threefold declaration of loyalty. We must emphasise this – the inductee swears a binding oath of loyalty to the Hand along with a magical branding. Even those duped as to the Hand's purpose cannot be trusted – they are the sort of people who will willingly undertake such an action, either heedless of the consequences, or embracing of them. The loyalty to the Empire and the Throne of such a person is questionable *at best* – and this cell structure of sworn agents has reached as far as Anvil itself, which we shall detail at the end of this report.

Theoretically, the next stage in the conspiracy's activities would be a modified invocation of *Whispers Through The Black Gate*, using a powerful enough relic of Nicovar's life to channel the Emperor back into existence. Until now, the Hand has never found a relic that satisfies their requirements – and even now that they have done so at the Spire of Bells and Flags, their goal is simply an impossibility.

However, the conspiracy has also been organising for what would be the final stage of its purpose, which has become clear during our more in-depth investigations over the past season – the overthrow of the Throne and replacement with the reborn Nicovar. It seems the conspirators retain enough rationality to understand that the Empire likely would not embrace a returned Nicovar just on their say-so, and conflict would be required. Over the years, the Hand has added a number of reputed murderers-for-hire and other troublemakers to their contacts. We don't know the details of exactly how they would carry it out, but we assess the most likely intent is some sort of decapitation strike, the killing of the holder of the Throne and key close allies to open the way for Nicovar to assert command in the following tumult. The conspiracy's ability to pull this off is doubtful, let alone for their plan to fully work, but the recent ascension of Empress Lisabetta to the Throne seems to have further stirred their efforts.

With the destruction of the bulk of the Hand by the blades of the Grendel, we judge their threat to essentially be neutralised. Any rogue survivors may still be a danger, but nothing on the sort of scale that the Hand originally intended.

Hand of Glory Resources

The Hand draws on the mutual contributions of its inner circle's resources, as well as whatever it can gull out of its pawns and agents. This means the organisation is moderately well supplied with crystalline mana, possesses some small stocks of liao and coin, and has stockpiled a significant amount of what can best be described as Nicovar memorabilia. We have not been able to locate where they have been storing these items; our best guess is at a remote location in either Redoubt or Spiral. This is the one area where the Hand practised relatively resilient methods for keeping their secrets safe. With the destruction of the inner circle it is entirely possible that we will never know.

Origin of the Hand

If our reports are accurate, the Hand formed from an oath sworn by several of Nicovar's secret police at his tomb, shortly after his burial. They pledged to return their former Emperor to life once again to ascend to the Throne.

Again, the Silent Bell notes the seeming absurdity of the notion. Not only is their goal unachievable, but the motivation seems incomprehensible. These agents – practised, clever, masters of the art of intrigue, if what few records have survived are to be believed – would surely have no reason to want to return to life a man who caused such havoc and set Urizen spires against one another in the struggles that raged during the burning of the libraries. What possible drive could cause them to want his return?

One theory is that Nicovar was operating under information we no longer possess – it seems outlandish, but perhaps some sort of curse or Realm-blight was being propagated via the written word and spreading from library to library, and in fact the Emperor was mounting a heroic defence of his people. Another theory is that Nicovar was operating directly under patronage of an Eternal, and that these same secret police also served in whatever cult or conspiracy it was that was already in place.

Alternatively, an outside force may have precipitated the formation of the Hand of Glory during that meeting. If they were indeed meeting at Nicovar's tomb in Necropolis, perhaps an unquiet and malevolent spirit whispered madness into their ears? Perhaps the Hand itself was an Eternal's gambit, suborning previously loyal agents of vigilance into a mad, paranoid belief that only Nicovar could save the Empire?

Regardless, the beliefs now followed by the Hand appear to be rambling, incoherent, and diluted from whatever zeal burned in that first meeting. The modern Hand of Glory adheres to a vague notion that Nicovar will somehow fix all that is wrong with the world, set all matters right and raise up the worthy to their just rewards – and, of course, every Hand member believes themselves to be amongst those worthy who have been denied what should be theirs.

As a side-note, one thing does stand out from the Hand of Glory's origins - the competence of the Urizeni secret police organisations that unfortunately spawned the conspiracy. Were we able to recover more knowledge of their craft, their methods and their secrets, it might prove beneficial to the Empire's future security against threats of the kind that the Hand of Glory represent.

Ritual Impossibility

Although our initial reaction to the intended goal of the Hand of Glory was to find it laughable, we have investigated further to see if there is any possibility at all that they might succeed in their goal. We have discussed the matter – circumspectly – with some of the finest magical minds in the Empire, and we are confident in saying that our initial response was accurate.

The Hand of Glory seem to believe that they can twist the magic of *Whispers Through The Black Gate* to bodily rebirth Nicovar. This is, bluntly, nonsense. The ritual simply doesn't do that. It conjures a shade, yes – and with the right relic, resonant with enough of Nicovar's life, we believe it would theoretically be possible to summon Nicovar's shade and question it. What *exactly* the ritual summons is a matter to ponder – what relation it has to the actual soul of the deceased, what knowledge it retains and the like. Whether such a thing would actually be the soul of the person torn from the Labyrinth, or a simulacrum born from their life and experiences, is perhaps something the Council of Nine should consider in reference to the use of this ritual on an ongoing basis in the Empire. However, there is no way to go from conjuring that shade to creating a living, breathing person. True resurrection remains impossible according to every magical practice we have been able to examine.

It is also unclear what, exactly, *Nicovar's spirit* might think of the whole affair, and whether he would indeed wish to be reborn in this fashion. There is no clear direct link between Nicovar's commands and the formation of the Hand, and so this entire charade is presumably being acted out without the Emperor himself having ever condoned it.

All that said, if the relic found by the Hand were sufficiently resonant to let them summon his spirit rather than some more dangerous spectre – which would be the usual result of such an unwise summoning across so great a gap of years – we would advise that such an object be taken into custody by the Council of Nine and, if it were to be used, it be done under vigilant safeguards. Such an opportunity could be a rare chance to learn more from the Emperor himself and add to our understanding of our past.

Hand of Glory agents in Anvil

According to our reports, there are a number of 'Lambent' agents at large in Anvil, many of whom have been serving the Hand of Glory for seasons, if not years. We are unsure as to how involved these agents are in the conspiracy, and we must be clear here – the names and details we will now give you are not ironclad condemnations of guilt. These may be unwitting pawns who do not truly know who they have been dealing with, or this might be misinformation from the Hand of Glory if they realised we were on their trail during their final weeks. Nonetheless, we suggest a thorough investigation into anyone who may have been compromised by the Hand. We reiterate that while their aims may seem laughable, we are talking about an organisation intent on the overthrow of the Throne and the installation of a magically-created being into that position of highest authority; and anyone confirmed to be an agent of the Hand will have sworn an oath of loyalty to that organisation, reinforced by the magic of the *Rite of the Luminous Key*.

The lax practices of the Hand mean that we have several individuals partially identified, one with a name. Edward Watcher, now Edward Novarion, who held the very post of Symposiarch so recently, is indicated to have been involved with the Hand for quite some time. If reports are to be believed, he may well even have spoken openly about his involvement. We also have reason to believe that two Urizen figures are involved in the conspiracy, one relatively significant within the organisation – and that indiscretions on their part rattled the Hand's faith in them over the last year or so. We have not been able to pin down who the senior figure is, but an intercepted communication witheringly refers to the junior figure of the two as a 'self-proclaimed research magician' and indicates that the Hand considers 'him' to be a liability to the organisation. We believe there is another significant figure to the cell in Highguard, apparently held in high esteem by the Hand, but have no further details on their identity beyond that. There is some indication that other pawns amongst the attending dignitaries also exist, but likely fewer than ten overall in the entire Anvil cell. Pressure on any individual member may reveal the other links in the chain.

Ultimately, once whatever vestige of the conspiracy that exists in Anvil is dealt with, we do not expect the Hand of Glory to return as a credible threat – but loose ends should be tied up.