

Guardians of Essence
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It began at the Battle of Essence, really, although that would not become obvious until many years later. That battle was a pivotal victory over a nightmare from the plane of Water, and in many ways, was the lynchpin around which the entirety of the plane hinged. After the proud citizens of Essence brought low the Mad Marid, the war was won; the rest of the conflicts were mop-ups, tidying the house after removing the pests.

Well, perhaps not all of the conflicts – it would be a disservice to those who list friends, loved ones, or lives on the black fields of Acheron to say that they contributed nothing more than housekeeping. I don't mean to say that their contributions were trivial or made in vain; I only mean to say that it was the Battle of Essence that showed people the plane over that monsters from other worlds were enemies like any others, enemies that could be defeated with sharpened steel, the rapid staccato of spells raining out into the fresh air, and stalwart courage.

Before that battle, the truly powerful denizens of the other worlds were an unknown, vast and incomprehensible in power and scope. Sages theorized, and warriors boasted, but no one knew what to expect from the other planes. The Midnight Thorns, perhaps, had uncommon knowledge – certainly, their actions in Acheron implied that they'd known exactly where to strike and how. For the great majority of men and women trying to do no more than carry on with their business, every small water elemental or minor undead was a constant reminder that, one day, the portals might open and the world end. Afterwards...well, there are many forks in that road, and we need only concern ourselves with the one important to us.

After the Battle of Essence, the bulk of the army marched to the Black Gate for the final campaign on Acheron. Those that chose to remain behind, mostly House Alastronia with an occasional Keary among them, had little to do. With the Marid defeated and Essence secured from the ravages of war, there was scant use for warriors. Even brigands and thieves seemed to be on holiday, and with no opponents to battle, the remaining warriors passed their time talking among themselves, reliving old victories, and dreaming of a brighter future.

Keary didn't see a brighter future – maybe it's the dark eyes, but they always find the worst possible way of looking at things. What Keary saw was a plane ruled by complacency, instead of fear. Where men and women had once cowered before the unknown might of the monsters from other worlds, they would now frolic securely in the knowledge that we could handle anything that came through the portals. Keary, ever the most cautious of the Sidhe, saw nothing good coming of ignorant security, and already they looked forward to the next battle, when the Dao or the Wardens poured forth and made war on the world.

Along with being overly cautious in the eyes of the people, House Keary also has a knack for finding the sneaky, subtle ways to power that often elude the more militarily-minded of their brethren. If Keary were to launch an attack on another world, they would not have done so as foolishly as Marid had – they would send spies, inconspicuous but with very sharp eyes, to learn all they could about their target.

That gave the entire garrison something to think about. Marid had counted on sheer magical

power and numbers to drown the world. If he had instead waited, scouted, and attacked with precision and intent, the Battle of Essence would never have happened. It would have been the Drowning of Essence, followed quickly by the drowning of the plane, and then a battle between Marid's forces and the Deathlords. Not that anyone would have cared about the victor; by the time such a thing came to pass, all of the world would have been beyond caring, slumbering in eternal rest.

That garrison took it upon themselves to keep the sharpest of eyes on the portals of the world; history does not record who originated the idea. Whoever it was died never knowing how much of a difference his work made; because of his ideas and his principles, disaster has been averted time and time again. He might, however, have set the tone for all of us; the nature of our work is such that, when performed correctly, is totally unnoticed.

The Rules

When I say "the nature of our work", what I mean is that we keep a weather eye on all the portals known to exist, and investigate new ones as quickly as we learn of them. It's impossible for us to be in so many places at one time, though, and so we also keep a sharp, suspicious eye on outworlders that happen to show up on the Prime. This is our home, and historically, outworlders have not been good for it.

Contrary to the lofty goals of some of the other Orders, a good bit of our work is directly aimed at helping the common man get through his day. A raging Fire Elemental can destroy farm and farmer alike with total impunity, and some seem to take joy in doing so... right up until they realize we're standing right behind them. We're here to protect the world and its citizens from the depredations of outworlders, and we take that work very seriously at a very personal level. Kingdoms, major cities, strongholds – all of these places can mount defenses for themselves. Farmers very often cannot, and it's a sad truth that many kings don't care to sacrifice blooded warriors to defend farmers.

We care. We care to do exactly that, no matter how many of us it takes. If a Salamander gets through a portal and kills a hundred of us, the hundred-and-first will still rise to the challenge. Not that it happens often. The plane itself supports our cause, and it's a rare outworlder than can stand and fight with the best of us even individually.

Still, we're Guardians, not bloodthirsty lunatics. We didn't understand, at first, that some outworlders fall into portals on their homeworlds and wake up on the Prime bewildered, disoriented, and confused. Those outworlders aren't our enemies; every example we've ever seen of such wants nothing more than to return home to friends and family, and we accommodate them as best we can. We treat them as we would wish to be treated, were we to fall through a portal and find ourselves somewhere unfriendly.

With rare exceptions, we also don't take the fight to the other worlds. It would incredibly hypocritical of us to insist that no one come here and then turn around and start moving in someone else's world. The exceptions get a little gray, and they're probably something best explained by example.

There's a world not far from this one, an alternate Prime that leans closer to the plane of Air than our own world does. People from that place are easy to spot as outworlders; they're translucent to the eye and physically unimposing. We found out about that world from one of the people I mentioned

earlier; he'd fallen through a portal and was actually crying and terrified when a squad of six of us approached him with weapons at the ready. We all felt pretty bad for the guy when we realized what he'd been through – waking up in a strange world is bad enough, but waking up there only to learn that you're about to die without ever seeing home again is much, much worse. Accordingly, we escorted him back to Essence and asked House Morgane to see if they could find him a road home.

They did – I don't think there's anything about the worlds that House Morgane can't find if they look hard enough, and even though they're a bunch of cynical, mirror-gazing bastards who mostly only care about how much magic they can get, this guy got to them. He really was a sad sight. Anyway – we got a map to a portal for the poor guy, and escorted him to the portal. It would reflect poorly on us and on our hospitality if we'd turned him loose with a map. I don't think the guy would have made it a hundred yards into the woods without getting eaten by something horrifying he'd never seen before, like a bear.

His attitude changed at the portal. He didn't stop crying, but now he was crying out of joy, rather than despair, and promised us all that he'd return our kindness if we ever found ourselves on his world. We thanked him, but we didn't really think much of it – the Guardians of Essence stay pretty close to home, for the most part, and this was the first we'd ever heard of this world. We didn't think it was very likely that we'd ever need to visit it, but it's the thought that counts, right?

A couple of months after we'd escorted our erstwhile companion back to his home, we found another one right at the same portal. Bigger guy, probably a warrior in his world, but no physical match for our squad. He didn't cry; he raised his weapon in a salute, crouched into a fighting stance, and prepared himself to go out like a man. That left us scratching our heads, but we worked out an understanding, and gave him an escort to the portal home.

It was less than a week before *another* Air/Prime person showed up at that exact same portal, and now it was starting to make us a little angry. We were all set to haul this one in for interrogation – to borrow an old phrase, "*Once is happenstance. Twice is coincidence. Three times is enemy action.*" If that other world was just sending people over to assess our strength, that needed to be brought up with our leaders, and with the other heads of state in the world. That kind of action is a prelude to war.

That was our intention, right up until we saw the next victim. A fifteen-year-old girl. Sobbing, but not incapacitated, and just chanting "I'm sorry" into the night air. When we found her, she saw the weapons and the painful glow of our casters, and to her credit, she didn't run or try to plead with us. All she said was "Are you going to kill me now? I'm sorry I stole, and I know I have to be punished."

Are we going to kill her? Of course not – this is exactly the kind of person on our world that we try like hell to keep from dying. Where were her own guardians? Where were the warriors that were supposed to carry the shield for those that could not carry it themselves? And what kind of monster proposes to execute a fifteen year old girl for stealing? (Don't start me on deep elves, either).

So we did bring her back to Essence, and we did interrogate her, but we did so in very comfortable, pleasant surroundings, and made her stay with us as happy as possible. We did have to break her of the habit of kneeling and presenting her neck for beheading whenever she saw us get angry, and we had to break it fast, because what she said made us angry frequently.

Her story was a long one, but there are only a few relevant points, from where we stood. Her King had recently discovered the portal that led into the woods outside Essence, and was having himself a jolly time using it to exile people that he found offensive for whatever reason. What happened to her

Guardians? They walked her out into a forest, opened a portal, and tossed her into it. It's offensive in so many different ways that it's impossible to prioritize; Guardians being deployed to effectively murder the very people they protect, some King somewhere else using our home – *our home* – as some kind of cosmic trash bin, a convenient place to toss inconvenient people?

Wrong. That girl's still living in Essence, studying with House Morgane and advancing their collective knowledge of Wind magic and how it works with the usual magic of the prime. There was no way in hell we were sending her back across that portal – her Guardians might be total failures, but we were not following in their footsteps. This time, we weren't even following in our own. We went back to the return portal straightaway, in as large a contingent as we could field at the time – maybe two thousand of us, armed to the teeth and geared for war. We didn't really think that warriors who needed to outnumber a crying girl six-to-one were any real threat to us, but we had a point to make, and shockingly excessive force adds excellent emphasis to even the weakest of points.

We weren't wrong. The proximity of that world to Air made things lighter, including the people, and there wasn't one that could stand up against Prime-grown muscle. Their magic was serious, but so was ours, and we made it to the castle (although I still argue that "lair" would have been a better word) of King Tiredoflife without serious opposition. Our discussion with him was brief; it involved him yelling "Guards" a lot (funny, given that his Guardians were already proven failures at guarding their charges), and then being Obliterated right out of existence. Some people just won't listen; all we wanted him to do was seal that portal, but his own sense of greatness wouldn't let him take really sound advice from experts. His successor was much more amiable to our point of view... although I wonder sometimes if his amiability had anything to do with the forty Obliteration sets we kept in plain sight while we were negotiating.

Mostly, we keep a watch on our world. We only take the fight to other worlds if it looks like doing so is the only way to forestall larger problems from ending up here. That's largely a philosophical choice, since we don't feel that we necessarily have a right to walk into someone else's house and cause trouble anymore than they have a right to walk into ours. There's also a practical consideration, though – some of our best skills don't work right on other worlds.

Something else we really hate: Collaborators. There are some outworlders who have learned the hard way that coming here themselves is a terrible idea, and that sending forces through the portals isn't a lot better. Those enterprising types have hit on the idea of bribing or threatening citizens of the Prime towards doing their ugly work for them. We have a word for people who accept such bribes or fold before such threats: *Traitors*.

That's treason on a grander scale than almost any other. Betraying your lord is one thing. Betraying your kingdom is another. Betraying your entire world and all the people in it, just for the sake of some shiny coins or weird magic items is about the worst thing you can do. The outworld monsters we at least understand, even while we hate them – we have something they want, and they're willing to fight to get it. The traitors, we don't understand at all, and we have no mercy or sympathy for them. If you sell out your plane for the sake of being a Duke when your master succeeds in his invasion, you're in for at least two ugly surprises. You'll never be a Duke because your master will never succeed, and what you will be in is a world of shit when we finally put the pieces together and nail you as a traitor.

On the downside, that tactic is as effective as the outworlders might like. We don't have any special way of determining that any given individual is a traitor, any more than lords and kings know

when their people are selling them out. Even when we find them, our skills are not well-suited to managing such people; we're here to fight for the citizens of the Prime, not to kill them, and as a consequence, we have to resort to our more mundane combat skills.

What we don't have to do is put up with this; if you're an outworld monster who's playing this game, we'll eventually get your name and location out of one of your traitors, and when we do, we'll take whatever measures are necessary to put a permanent end to your influence here. Many have tested us on this point, over the years, and so far, there are no survivors of the attempt. Ask the previous Darkness how things turned out for him and his Annukai traitors.

In the beginning, when we first started out, we had a very clear, black-and-white line drawn. If you're not from here, then you either need to be killed or sent back home peacefully, depending on how you acted on the Prime. As the years went by, things got a little more grey (as things have a way of doing), and we're not exactly the same now as our predecessors were right after the war at the end of the 3rd age.

The Present

In the intervening years, we've seen a third category emerge, one that's neither conqueror nor victim. With so many mages, so many merchants, and so many portals on the Prime, it was (in hindsight, anyway) inevitable that eventually someone would start opening extraplanar trade routes. There's also a growing tourist trade, for outworlders that just want a look around, and maybe a vacation from home. We had to add a third category for outworlders that had legitimate business on the Prime, although it'd be a lie to say that the Guardians really liked it.

So. We started issuing visas; essentially, a document outlining that a given outworlder has legitimate business here, and a length of time he's allowed to remain before action will be taken to remove him. Also, any outworlder that's in the company of a Guardian of Essence is automatically considered acceptable – that Guardian wouldn't be there if he weren't. They'd either be walking towards an exit portal, or else one of them would be dead.

Merchant visas generally last between a day and a month. Tourist visas, as much as they make our collective skin crawl, are rarely granted for more than two weeks. Personal visas, given to those outworlders who have family or very close friends on the Prime, occasionally last indefinitely – they've got an emotional tie here, and that makes it less like that they'll be running around the world causing trouble for the people here.

For summoned creatures, those brought to the Prime by the actions of a resident, the case is a touch different. We hold the summoners responsible for the actions of their charges. Don't summon anything here unless you really trust it or you can exert perfect control over it. If you whistle up a Fire Elemental and it goes tearing off across the plane leaving a fiery trail of destruction in its wake, we'll be having a chat with you after we put down the immediate threat.

Also, while it was very rare in the past, as more scholars open more portals and deal with more outworlders, it's becoming increasingly common that some outworlder will decide that the Prime is much nicer than whatever hell they come from is, and they'll want to move here on a permanent basis. We hated this, passionately, for a very long time, and only barely tolerated it at the express orders of High King Donovan. We still don't like it, but there are some outworlders that have managed to live

here without causing any problems, some rarer examples that have had a noticeably beneficial effect on our world, and some rare few that have stood right there with us repelling threats from other worlds. We've even got one, an ex-Warden, who decided that saving a world *for* its people was much nicer than saving a world *from* its people; he is, at present, the only outworlder Guardian of Essence, and he's doing a damn fine job.

So, if an outworlder wants to move here permanently, we'll tentatively allow it, and sometimes even help the guy set up shop – he's much less likely to cause trouble if he's got a house, three squares, and maybe a family to defend. For the first five years, he's here on a "trial-basis visa" – meaning that he doesn't have to produce a special reason for being on the Prime, but that we can send him back home at the first hint of trouble. There's no trial, no hearings, and no process of law – any Guardian who senses trouble can send a trial-basis visa back home, without complication from the rest of us.

After five years of not causing trouble, or sometimes after only three years of being a healthy, positive influence on the Prime, we'll take back the trial visa and Mark the new resident. Once an outworlder has our Mark on him, we consider him a resident of the Prime, as much as anyone born here, and we'll be the first in harm's way if something threatens him from off world. Even if that thing happens to be residents of his former world – we don't like to get caught up in extraplanar wars between worlds that aren't ours, but we're not about to tolerate such a war spilling over into our house, regardless of who's involved. A criminal, even a mass murderer, from another world who shows up here and manages to get Marked is as safe from offworld persecution as we can make him. It happens more often than you might think, and we've had a lot of run-ins with Knights and such from offworld that have traced their quarry here. Most of them threaten war if we refuse to turn over their prisoner. Are we willing to go to extraplanar war over a convicted criminal?

Go ask the Shattered Chains if they're willing to go to war over a single escaped slave. Go ask the Verdant Protectors if they're willing to go to war over a single tree cut down before its time. In all three cases, we're not going to war over a criminal, or a slave, or a tree. We're going to war over a principle; the Shattered Chains hold that freedom is worth fighting and dying for. The Protectors hold that the forests are worth fighting and dying for. We hold that the Prime should be safe from outworlders, and if a thousand of us die over that principle, the survivors will toast them as heroes.

That's what we've been doing in recent years, sorting out the good from the bad, helping the one and getting rid of the other, with as much efficiency and precision as possible. We've been doing a great but largely unsung job for over a thousand years (notice how no omnipotent uberbeings have tried to conquer the plane? You're welcome.) We've been refining our skills and keeping our portal maps updated and current, and we would have been happy to do so forever. Then, some ugly things happened.

The Undead

Given our chosen mission of keeping the Prime safe from dangerous outworlders, you might expect that we wouldn't like creatures of Decay running around tormenting citizens of the Prime. You'd be right, too, but the situation's more complicated than that. If the only undead that existed were refugees from Acheron, this would be easy for us – kill or Banish on sight. Sadly, that's not the case. It's a fairly trivial task for formal magic to transform a formerly-sensible human being into a vicious undead,

and that guy has every bit as much right to stay in his home as we do. We're not here to punish people for poor taste in transformative magic.

We're also not here to oppose Prime necromancers or the servants they raise. There are a lot of other organizations dedicated to ending the undead threat, and while they're entitled to do so, that's not our war. We draw the line at necromancers summoning in undead from Acheron, or from wherever else undead might be, but so long as the undead and necromancers and servants are natives of the prime, they're safe enough from us.

Undead from other places are a vastly different story. There are penalties, harsh ones, for servants of Acheron found running around the Prime. Undead from other worlds are generally put to the sword or banished, unless they can come with some really damn good reason for us to leave them alone. We don't like the undead, and while we can't pursue an extermination campaign for a variety of reasons, we can certainly vent that frustration on outworlders.

But that leaves us with a brand new problem. How do we tell them apart? An Acheron-born lich looks exactly like a Prime-born lich to us (and probably to everyone else, too, although we've never sat down and asked a Prime-born lich if he could spot a difference). We wouldn't want to attack the Prime-born, and couldn't resist attacking the Acheron-born, but how do we sort them out?

The early answer was Banish. Launch it; if it works, or draws defenses, then we know we have a bad guy in front of us. If it fails, we know we don't, and although we're in the embarrassing position of explaining why we were launching combat effects at some guy who just happened to have a good transform, we're not in the position of murdering one of the people we're supposed to be guarding. Banishes are cherished weapons, and having to use a potential lifesaver as a detection tool made us all a little sad. It happened, not often but often enough, that one of us would drop a Banish on a good guy, and then lose a fight to a real outworlder for want of Banish. Unacceptable.

Mercifully, though, the Prime provides, and it was not long before we learned to spot the differences. They're very subtle, and looking for them takes some practice, but with some practice, you can spot the faint ring of black around the outworlders. Our mages have a theory that the black ring is a sort of dissonant aura, produced by the conflict inherent in a Decay creature walking on the Prime. There's another theory out there that says the ring isn't really there – it's just the Prime itself highlighting our targets for us. Mostly, we don't care about the why's and how's of it – we can sort out targets, and that's enough.

We still can't tell a natively conjured fire elemental from a Fire refugee, but nothing else holds the raw threat that the undead do. Nothing else is as prevalent on the Prime, either; sure, there's the odd elemental that ends up turning himself into a Stone Elemental, but for every one of those, there are a hundred that turned themselves into undead.

So, now that we've established how we handle the undead, let's get back to that damned planar overlap, and how we're handling it.

Guardians of the Black Tower

While we were scratching our heads and getting pissed off about Acheron moving right into our house, High King Donovan was trading mail with a Deathlord. He's been doing that, off and on, for a long, long time, and while we don't like it (we remember the Reality War, even if the High King doesn't),

he's the King, and whether we like it or not is a matter of indifference to His Majesty.

We hadn't considered that a Deathlord might be as unhappy as we were to find his desert overlapping the Prime. We figured he'd be excited by the chance to launch another bid for domination of the Prime, and without the Black Gate as a chokepoint, he might very well succeed this time. We haven't forgotten how much raw volume the Lords of Acheron can generate, and we certainly haven't forgotten how they multiply force on a field – every fight they win makes it that much easier to win the next, as the dead are raised and pressed into service.

The last time heroes of the Prime invaded Acheron, it didn't end so well for the Deathlords. They negotiated for peace when it became clear that we were going to wipe them out completely. We'd thought that was like tying a string around a tiger's foot to keep him from biting you, and everyone knew it was only a matter of time before they rallied their forces and tried again. It hasn't happened, not in thousands of years, but Deathlords can afford patience. They could wait another five thousand years, long enough for everyone who remembered the original war to die off, and attack again, this time against a freshly ignorant populace.

But we apparently did have some real impact on the Deathlords. On one of them, at least. After his keep came under siege, he apparently decided that he'd be much happier as the lone Deathlord on Acheron than he would be trying to maintain forces in two planes. He's spent the entire intervening time building forces to go kill off his rivals, and that sounds great to us. Maybe one of them will set off a doomsday weapon and kill them all.

And that's why he was upset to find his desert opening up into a forest. The Deathlords are powerful almost the point of omnipotence, but even they can't account for the actions of every creature in their domains at all times. Zilicus feared that it was only a matter of time before such a creature killed a citizen of the Prime, and wisely knew exactly how we'd react to that. Poorly. At the best, he'd lose resources and time trying to hold off a small band of exterminators; at the worst, he'd have the combined armies of the Prime knocking on his door again. Neither of those things helps him put down the other Deathlords. Both of them, and all the possibilities in between, are actively detrimental to his goals, and so he set about solving the same problem we were trying to solve: How do you keep citizens of the Prime safe when they could fall into Acheron without warning?

We couldn't do it. The border is too wide and too fluid. Zilicus couldn't do it either, not without either sacrificing forces to watch the whole desert or extending his reach into the Prime (which is certainly out of the question). He did work out the solution, though, and no matter how much we hated it, we couldn't help but be flattered by it.

Zilicus proposed the formation of his own Guardians. They'd be charged with keeping an eye on the desert and escorting citizens back to the Prime. We'd long since been charged with sending extraplanar creatures back home, and where those things overlapped, we had our solution. Zilicus's Guardians would assume responsibility for the desert and provide safe passage through it. We'd assume responsibility for the forest and escort such servants of his as might need aid back to the desert. With that arrangement in place, everyone gets where they're going, in as much as safety as anyone can expect anywhere.

In another political play of uncommon wisdom, the Guardians of the Black Tower were trained by one of our very own, and one of the best of us. In the intervening time, they've all learned to treat us like visiting royalty whenever we cross paths. We know it's a political play, trying to gain our trust and

our respect, but even knowing that, it's still working. In most cases, we actually do like those guys, and there have been times where a mixed group would sit around a campfire near the line and trade war stories. Their open respect even makes it hard to be jealous of their equipment – Zilicus takes his Guardians seriously, and the least of them are equipped with magic weapons suited to their task. Their leaders are so drenched in magic items that we wonder how they manage to move around under the weight of it all.

It'd be awfully nice if High King Donovan took us as seriously as Zilicus takes his troops. We can occasionally requisition the loan of a specific weapon, but it has to be returned, and all we hear about are resource constraints and how there hasn't been a serious threat to the prime in thousands of years, and a bunch of other noise that translates into "It's more important for me to have another marble fortress than it is for you to have the tools to do your job."

Still, for all the whining we do about our constantly substandard equipment, it's also true that our skills are up to the task, and whenever the planes present a threat our skills can't manage, it's rarely more than a year before the Prime equips us to handle the threat.

The Future

No one knows. With the recent treaties with Zilicus and Acheron, we're not terribly worried about an assault from that direction, but we don't know a lot about the third plane overlapping us. We're also not sure how this happened in the first place, and it's a constant worry that it'll happen again, somewhere else. It might even happen with Acheron again, and something like Necropolis backed by the power and greed of a less-friendly Deathlord is something none of us want.

We considered investigating it, trying to figure out what happened and what was going to happen next, but decided against it. Our skills and philosophy aren't well suited to prying details out of unfriendly worlds, and there'd be that many fewer of us to guard the Prime while we were out looking. Besides that, it's a guarantee the Midnight Thorns are already unraveling it, and we'll pay whatever exorbitant price they care to know for the answers once they have them.

In the meantime, we're working with our new colleagues from Acheron (and it still feels awfully strange to say that), and that's raised an interesting possibility. While it was just us, doing our best to keep our world safe from outworlders, it was easy to keep quiet and easy to overlook – our work isn't ever noticed until it fails. Now, with the Guardians of the Black Tower starting to develop odd new skills of their own (their Deconstruct skill has to be seen to be believed – it's astonishing what they can do to undead that make them sad), we're all starting to wonder if the other worlds will start developing their own Guardians. We're all for it; that'd mean all the portals were guarded on both sides, and make it much less likely that any critter from any world could mount a successful invasion of another world.

If we find out something like that is going on, that'd be worth a trip to that world, purely in diplomatic interests. Sharing guardianship of the portals is great; sharing information between a sort of worlds-wide coalition of portal guardians would make us all vastly stronger than any of us would be individually. It'd also give us a ready way to handle things like that Air/Prime kingdom that used our home as a dumping ground for "criminals" – we could share forces to put down threats before they ever made it to the portals.

It's an exciting idea, but it's a sad truth that none of us are really skilled in diplomacy. Sitting

around in dining halls cutting deals and feasting feels wrong; we should be out saving people, not sitting around yakking about saving people. So, if you happen to find yourself in the company of skilled negotiators, drop them the idea; we'll be happy to help if someone smart will tell us what to do.

The Bad News

The Guardians of Essence operate under the following restrictions. These aren't as strict as some other Orders, and minor transgressions are often punished by nothing more than a stern talking-to. Only serious offenses or deliberate anti-Order actions will result in removal from the Order or loss of Order abilities.

1. Guardians of Essence are obligated to protect citizens of the prime from outworlders. Even when success looks highly unlikely, they're obligated to act as rapidly and skillfully as possible.
2. When they encounter outworlders who are not Marked, but also not actively causing trouble, Guardians are to challenge them for a visa. Outworlders who cannot produce a visa may be deported, or may apply for a visa, at the Guardian's discretion.
3. Guardians of Essence must work to protect the Prime itself – if this entails going offworld to stop a threat at its source, dress warmly and bring your own food.