

## Chapter 12 – The Wheel Everturning

“-. September 18, Year 580 of the King’s Calendar .-“

If not for the recent spot of bother, and the fact that we had to live in a tent for three weeks while Master Zidar’s crew fixed our house, the past few months would have been the most rewarding time of my life. I was making the best of my craft, I was seeing fair success in my business affairs, and I was finally learning arcane magic.

My brief talk with the Council of Six had set off the motherlode of all political crises in Dalaran, but no red she-dragon had made an appearance yet, and Antonidas had not been recalled either. Neither had he chosen to leave, or even set a deadline for his stay with us. Naturally, I was making the best of both those facts.

At the same time, I had *also* overcome my bottleneck in alchemy. More precisely, Granodior had done it for me. Having a part of him grafted to my spirit allowed me to use *his* frame of reference during all my rituals and experiments. It wasn’t even a crutch, technically, this was literally a requirement for the higher levels of the art. I just had the ‘high’ honor of being the only practitioner in history so inept in the field that I actually needed the intercession of elementals as early as the entry-level stuff. Narett gave me no end of tough time for it.

I’d be more annoyed if I didn’t derive all the amusement I could ever want from his frustration, over me not running into the same problems with arcane magic. He never lowered himself to the point where he *competed* with Antonidas for my time, but I was sure he’d have stayed around a lot more if he didn’t have his own affairs to mind back in the city. Also, he never made it a secret that he wished I’d stay away from arcane magic entirely.

I understood why, on a professional level. When Malfurion said arcane magic was inherently chaotic, he was not, in fact, talking out of his ass. *Alchemy* was the art of leveraging the inherent order of things for utility and self-attainment, whereas arcane magic relied on its *disruption* to force things to happen *against* natural order. On that basis, arcane magic may or may not attract demons by itself, but any weak points it leaves in the Arcane certainly will. It only makes sense for an attacking force to concentrate in the spot of least resistance after all. That was why the War of the Ancients had revolved around the Well of Eternity.

My reservations weren't enough to stop me from learning it, though. Also, they were somewhat undermined by Narett's continued refusal to explain to me his more laser-guided antagonism towards Dalaran. Not mages in general, but those of Dalaran specifically. When I pressed him on the topic, he was as concise as he was vague.

"The proud in those high and mighty spires will do anything to recreate the feat that won the troll wars, and Titans help us if they do. I should hope you, at least, have more wisdom than them. But with how well you've taken to that mage's teachings, I am now reduced to hoping you won't rediscover it *for* them."

If Narett was right about anything, it was how well I absorbed Antonidas' instructions.

I had discovered that being able to perceive Arcane patterns let me practically copy spells just by watching them a few times. I still needed to adjust the weaves relative to *me*, as the Self was a major reference point during casting, and mathematics were always different when you changed a quantity, something particularly important for sacred geometry. Also, things would get much harder once I was faced with just those spells that needed me to manipulate the Arcane on scales greater than my spirit could cover by itself, at which point calculus got involved. Assuming it didn't grow indefinitely thanks to how I cultivated it with the Light. Regardless, I could learn arcane spells in a tenth of the normal time, even if just by rote memorisation and repetitive practice.

For now.

It was a supremely useful side-benefit of my ability to Reveal everything with the Light, including the Arcane itself. But it was not unique.

Being able to use mage sight well enough to perceive arcane weaves and matrices, especially as they were cast by others, was one of two major prerequisites for any human to become better than average as a wizard, never mind an Archmage. The other was being able to understand, process and apply what you discerned. Not just because of the usefulness during instruction and duels, and certainly not because the other races were inherently more powerful – if anything, it was the opposite. The real reason was that a human just doesn't live long enough to advance their arcane mastery sufficiently, without this shortcut.

I myself was still having trouble twisting the Arcane into the patterns I wanted. It was like learning how to walk and handle things all over again. I was getting there though. It was like

using different legs and hands, figuratively speaking, but thankfully not for the first time because they were the same legs and hands I'd been using to wield the Light.

And oh, the *ideas*. The Light Reveals, which meant I could actually use it to divine what a new weave would do without actually casting it. I had a feeling I would be improvising a lot on the fly, once I practiced enough. I was leaving that for when I improved my ability to visualize in three dimensions, though, never mind four.

For now, I was content to use maintenance and convenience cantrips. Not having to take baths or stop to clean myself up after an experiment or hard labour saved a lot on time, and the Light made sure I always ate and digested things optimally and had as much energy as ever. Conjuring food wasn't ideal, but it was definitely helping me get closer to being able to just summon nutrients into my bowels if necessary. The Light could sustain me fine for a long time, but it was always good to have contingencies. Drinking my various herbal and alchemical successes was also giving me effects to memorise and replicate.

In *theory*, I should be able to manifest *new* weaves from the Light instead of twisting the Arcane to form them, thus casting Arcane-like spells without the weakening side effect on the fabric of reality. Or reproducing potion effects. The Light is the power of creation, so theoretically I should be able to just *make* the end result manifest. I'd made brains from walnuts by complete accident, surely I could get better results if I actually tried? I didn't *technically* need to test the weaves after all, the Light would let me know if something was a terrible idea. Any day now I might just make the breakthrough. Then I could start experimenting with systemic refinement and enhancement.

*Probably not soon though.*

Not without a good and thorough course in the established empowerment spells, especially the ones affecting the intellect. Antonidas was being very careful and thorough in coaching me on those. Which was good. As glad as I was that all the bad times hadn't ruined my passion for learning and improving, I also wasn't in any rush. I was plenty powerful already.

Also, I had a dragon.

*I should probably revisit druidism properly too, though, at some point.*

Even if I didn't learn it conventionally, exposure training was a thing. Could I find someone to cast Mark of the Wild on me a few times, maybe? A portal to Kul Tiras one day? Drustvar?

Experiencing the spell enough times should let me replicate it, I was already touching Nature every time I lightforged a plant. Or the Emerald Dream, if there even was a difference. Even if I fail to learn it myself, I should be able to reproduce the effects with the arcane or the Light like the others, I was sure. Or some of them. And then add the original Mark of the Wild itself on top of everything else, maybe.

*Buff stacking, the tool of any competent adventurer.*

Granted, I wasn't an adventurer – still? Yet, maybe? – but I was increasingly learning that the skill set required to live the life I'd chosen was every bit as eclectic.

Right now I was testing a supersensory spell. I had the perfect spot too. Granodior had been kind enough to grow me a nice perch – practically grew the entire *cliff* out – from which I could see everything down below in the valley. Emerentius had also used his own geomancy and fire to make me a paved path and terrace. There were polished marble steps, a footway of the same, some plots of earth for flowers, a fountain, even some expertly carved marble benches and a table. Plus a huge statue of me that appeared overnight, wielding a staff and sword and wearing a magnificent cape, but we don't talk about that.

The tip of the terrace stuck out deep above the valley itself, so far inward that most of the mountainside was actually behind me. I could see all the way down and up from the ever-growing pilgrim encampment. I was sitting at the tip of that terrace right now, with my legs dangling over the edge. It was how I tended to spend most of my downtime now, little though I needed these days.

I still had to focus on enhancing individual senses at a time, but I was getting comfortable enough with auditory enhancements that I expected to be able to pair them with a second enhancement soon. Sight, I decided, to let me hear *and* see everything happening down there. It wasn't anywhere near the scope and utility of shamanic farseeing, never mind its ability to go around obstacles, but amazing for an unaided feat.

The pilgrim camp was beginning to look vexingly like a village now, one steadily evolving from tents to proper buildings. Well-worn dirt tracks, fences, a main road with a stable, a forge, mother's herbalist hut away from home, and its garden where I'd been lightforging plants now and then, while keeping an eye on her. Mostly medicinal ones. And seasonings. They had a pronounced healing and invigorating effect with no drawbacks. A new wave of herbalism experimentation was going on, Narett had organised an entire area and group of people just for

that. I wasn't directly involved beyond altering the fundamental nature of flora itself, but I was getting a share of the returns. Ingredients, curatives, drugs, reagents.

*Tribute, it's all tribute, let's call it what it is.*

All told, the foot of our mountain couldn't *quite* be termed a new settlement yet, but it was a sizable enclave. Hell, they were even building a longhouse now. It would soon replace the huge pavilion currently serving as a tavern for the literal battalion of soldiers that Richard had moved over. The troops were camped around the place in neat tent rows. It was a small battalion, lest we really make the king believe we're amassing an attacking force right on his doorstep, but a battalion nonetheless.

Speaking of auditory enhancements, there was a spike in noise down there. Enough that I could make out specific words and voices even without the spell. Greetings and well wishes. Looking down, I saw Master Blacksmith Smid Keyton's horse-drawn wagon – and armed escort – passing the farthest border of the camp on the way here.

*My word, it's **still** business as usual, I still have trouble believing it.*

Ever since I took his master assassin and let it be known far and wide that I had a huge fuck-you dragon, Aiden Perenolde had refrained from anything more that could be construed as a direct move against me or my interests. I was given to understand that the town criers had been hard at work 'clarifying' the 'misunderstanding' for a couple of weeks there. Those were clearly blatant lies while the king rethought his approach, but malicious compliance was popular among dissidents for good reason. Case in point, my new guild mates had – thus far – been spared collateral retaliation.

Of course, the fact that I even had these guild mates was a miracle unto itself. That my new associates hadn't immediately ripped our guild charter to shreds and disavowed me after that disaster of an 'audience' was still the source of everlasting amazement. Orsur had even told me, rather fatalistically when he dropped by a month ago, that with their association well and truly exposed even before that mess, it wasn't like they weren't on the king's black list already.

"We're sure the King will gather up nerve and yes-men to try something again, eventually," Lady Blackthron later confirmed when she dropped by on a 'detour' of her own, two weeks after Orsur's own visit. "But none of us believe the king won't have us killed anyway, after he proved willing to do more and worse to the nobles. At this point it's all down to how much we

can secure for our heirs, before the order comes. Unless, of course, serendipity decides to solve the matter before then.”

She'd given me a meaningful look with those last words. Not accusing, not even demanding, but expectant. Like me saving the day was to be expected.

*The humans of Azeroth are a cut above the rest, even the more cutthroat ones.*

It was a warming show of faith, in a time when everyone but me was under surveillance, and our customers were seeing passive-aggressive trouble as well, despite the official stance that we were fine to do business with. Sure, it wasn't *all* bad, the new guild technologies and services were incredibly popular with all strata of society. Also, my reputation – and dragon – was more than enough to shut down any notion of hostile takeover. Especially with a *duke* shamelessly swearing himself as my underling. Not in public, but it was implied.

Unfortunately, all of this on top of the disaster at court, and everything that resulted from it, had the increasingly paranoid king certain we were planning to depose him. And while he was refraining from direct action against us, the indirect ways had returned with a vengeance.

Anyone who'd commissioned our new plumbing and electricity, in particular, had started to find themselves higher on the priority lists for financial audits, supply requisitions, *troop* requisitions, and even getting outright drafted into the army in the case of anyone below noble rank. Particularly the common workers, all *except* those directly employed by us.

Because yes, border incidents had worsened as well, to the point where one seemed to happen every other week at this point. Instigated by *our* side, however it was done when General Hath was definitively not the type to engage in false flags. I'd never met him, but everyone who had – including Richard – agreed on that much.

It was plain to see *why* it was going on though. In this time when King Perenolde lacked the popular support – or even a *casus belli* – to declare war himself, 'border incidents' were a transparent attempt to force Strom to do it instead. The moral high ground from not being the aggressors would be priceless to the Alterac Crown right now, I imagined.

*Perenolde isn't preparing for a mere border war, he wants total war.*

Gunpowder. Perenolde surely saw it as me giving his rival the opportunity to destroy and subsume this country once and for all. He believed Trollbane planned to do just that because

that's what *he* would do in his place. So he decided his only option is for Alterac to do that to Strom *first*.

*Projection, all over again.*

Alas for him, King Liam Trollbane was obstinately refusing to take the bait. Likely because he wanted to have a good stockpile of gunpowder first, now that the recipe had surely reached his country.

That, too, was a mistake – while Alterac did have the head start on gunpowder, it still hadn't finished *weaponizing* it. Strom would do best to attack now before our side finished making the bombs and cannons, or whatever else they came up with without me or a dwarf giving them ideas.

Further, unlike Alterac, Strom actually *did* have a valid casus belli. Per Richard's most recent report from the border, General Hath's most recent armed exercise had devolved into a skirmish against a force led by Prince Thoras Trollbane himself. A nearly bloodless one, or we would be in open war regardless of what else. But one of the more stubborn rumors since – on *both* sides of the border – was that the prince had also gone missing in the aftermath.

All told, it *was* bizarre that King Liam hadn't done anything in the time since. Especially with time running out. Once the snows began, nobody would be marching anywhere.

But there had been a steadily growing feeling of significance ever since that happened, so I was withholding judgment. The disturbance in the Light was only comparable to the one I'd felt leading up to the ambush on Richard's retinue.

On the whole, I had precisely zero complaints about being given all the time I need to prepare *my* solution to this mess.

*I'm only surprised people don't nag me about it more.*

Perhaps that was set to change too, though, now that Smid Keyton was here. Yes, it was for actual business we'd discussed on and off since our guild's founding, in letters and missives. But I was sure this would do nothing to stop him from asking what I planned to do about everything.

Unfortunately, what I planned to do wasn't something I was going to share, regardless of how polite and reliable the company. Operational security in this case meant that nobody could

know until after it happened. Even speaking a word aloud might ruin it. The Light even agreed with me.

How will he react to that, I wonder?

*Come to think of it, isn't there something I should very well be reacting to right now?*

Frowning, I decided to skip straight ahead to dual-sense enhancement and enhanced my sight. Then, with both hearing and sight taken beyond the farthest natural limits, I spied the events happening down below. It was disorienting, but my cognitive adaptability was quite fair these days.

My hunch was correct – Master Keyton's guards weren't *all* from Richard's army. All of the duke's men were accounted for, but the escort had grown beyond them. By over a third. There were more dependents than there should have been too.

The explanation that came quickest to my mind was that some soldiers had coerced their way into the guard force, maybe as a way for the king to gain some *official* representation in this new holy site. But then I saw the face of the man looking up. Searching for me with weary hopeful eyes after I was pointed out to him by one of the locals.

I recognized him. It was the one guard that had tried to block my path after I resurrected Orsur in the plaza. The man who'd then stepped out of my way and dropped to his knees to *pray* as I passed by.

Not for the first time, I wished the steam elementals weren't still sulking in the cauldron. I could really use them for a long-distance soulgaze on the man down below. Instead, Richard or I was going to have to get close and personal, if I wanted to assure myself of his intentions.

*Well isn't this the motherlode of all powder kegs?*

There were three scenarios I could see that could have driven these men to come here, and none of them were happy ones. One, the king had sent them here deliberately to see if *I* would escalate. Two, they had been let go from the military – or worse, the *Crownsguard* – and come here, either for the coin of honest work or seeking sanctuary. And three, they had *not* been let go from the force, meaning they had effectively *deserted* in order to come here, in which case they were definitely seeking sanctuary. There wasn't a concept of constituted police on Azeroth, it was all soldiers like in the Roman Empire.



Seeing as there was at least *one* of the newcomers who had his family with him, I was strongly leaning towards option three.

*I live not even two days away from the capital, my presence here must feel like a gun held to the back of the king's head.*

I rose and turned for home.

Time to play host.

“-. September 25, Year 580 of the King's Calendar .-“

I watched as the master blacksmith reverently finished affixing the hilt to the new sword we had made, out of a steel alloy that should have been impossible on this planet. At least with the current level of technology. S-type steels required the inclusion of not just manganese, but also a bunch of other elements, especially silicon in very particular proportions. The former was fairly straightforward. The latter was practically impossible at the current level of metallurgy on Azeroth. Even for the dwarves, I was pretty sure.

Ferrosilicon was extremely common, you could get it from *scrap metal*, but you needed silicon added in its pure form to create the microstructures key to resisting deformation after tempering, and pure silicon was impossible to extract with the means available in the known world.

Don't even get me started on molybdenum, people still couldn't tell it apart from lead here. It wasn't their fault, but it was still a hurdle we had to overcome.

Fortunately, when you could manipulate matter on a subatomic level *and* were soul-bound to an earth spirit capable of doing the same for anything from a molecule to industrial capacities, most technological limitations became academic.

“Well, Antonidas?” I finished folding the paper airplane. “What's the verdict?”

The mage looked up from where he'd been carefully inspecting the sword with mage sight. “Magic charge remains zero.”

Which meant that all its enchanting potential was still free. “Excellent.” I tossed the airplane out the door, bespelled to seek out Richard wherever he was. Arcane magic was useful like that, especially when the caster had auxiliary means of devising guidance parameters.

I grabbed the sword and exited the workshop, whiling away the time doing random swings and testing the sword’s balance while the other two watched.

When Richard finally arrived, I held out the weapon to him. “Come inside.” I led him back into my workshop and waited until the other two were also there, for effect. “Now, Richard. Please use that sword to strike this anvil as hard as you can.”

“WHAT?! NO!” Keyton balked. “You can’t do that!”

I looked at the man and raised an eyebrow.

“I-I mean, surely, Young Master, we needn’t go that far, that is an impossible standard for any weap-!”

CLANG

Richard swung down with all his Light-assisted might and flinched in pain from the backlash of the strike being completely rebuffed, dropping the sword as he grabbed at his arm. “Unh – feels like my bones are shaking apart, damn.”

Keyton rushed to pick up the sword and mourn its fate, but then he gaped in wonder. “There’s no – it didn’t dent!”

*It better not have.* S5 steel was ten times stronger than blade steel and had the best impact toughness of its category. If it couldn’t take even *one* full blow without denting, it meant we hadn’t made it right. You could literally cut a car door without denting a blade made from this thing, back on Earth. Also, S5 weapons can bend but don’t set, they spring back to their proper shape immediately.

Richard and Antonidas crowded around the man and were soon expressing similar wonder. They were even more impressed when the edge, which *had* lost some of its cutting ability, proved just about as easy to sharpen as castle-forged steel.

I sat against my worktable with the satisfaction of a job well done. Not the greatest satisfaction I ever felt, it wasn’t like we were making maraging steel or anything like that. You needed

nickel and cobalt for those, especially for the higher grades, and that was later down on my testing schedule. But it was still an accomplishment.

*Speaking of accomplishments.*

I looked to my right, where the ugly lump from my personal metalworking project was sitting. The lump that had been beaten and beaten and beaten again and again until it refused to deform at all. Steel alloy, but with 13% manganese. Steel tended to lose hardness the more you worked it, but mangalloy did the opposite, becoming harder instead of brittle the more you tried to shape it. Even with Antonidas' best momentum- and impact-enhancing magic added to *my* greatest strength.

Any other alloy I'd have put back in the furnace to soften for further shaping, but not this one. There were several reasons.

For one, Aiden Perenolde had put an embargo on all oil-distilled fuels – the same as he had for gunpowder – while the Crown 'assures itself of their safety towards the people and the realm.' The most blatant of his indirect attacks yet, against me and mine. But one that *did* have a fair bit of support among the merchant class, and the many nobles who made a living from coal mines, being such a disruptive discovery.

For another, Azeroth still lacked industrial-grade foundries, so getting a strong enough flame would have been nigh impossible anyway, in a standard forge. Never mind keeping it constant. That was why we were using Antonidas' magic for that instead.

Most importantly, though, we didn't have a use for fire anyway, for this. Mangalloy couldn't be softened by annealing at all, once it hardened.

A yellow flame let you *forge* manganese steel to begin with, but not into anything fancy because it was tougher than carbon steel when heated. You *could* theoretically heat it until it was white hot, but that was more likely to make it crumble under hammer blows than take a desired shape. For all these reasons, mangalloy was considered unworkable even back on Earth, outside a few specific uses. Despite being many times stronger than S5, and even better than titanium, you couldn't shape it into tools or armor, never mind sharp edges.

Here, though, we had magic.

I called the lump into my palm. In terms of arcane magic, minor telekinesis was a training cantrip at best, but very convenient day-to-day. When the lump was in my grasp, I looked into it with sight beyond sight, and called on the Spirit of Alterac to do the same.

~ Compliance, Focus Minute, Query ~

*Make it a two-handed sword blade, double-edged, claymore configuration.* With my towering, still growing height – which I might, finally, have a way to get under control if my unorthodox commissions from Dalaran paid off – I'll be able to wield even the longest claymore like a long sword, even an arming sword if I wanted.

Granodior's will set itself upon the metal and slowly, *slowly* stretched and shaped it into the requested shape, tugging and tightening until it had a monomolecular edge. With *extreme* difficulty.

~ Shock, Affront, Grudging Respect ~

Even the ancient spirit of earth had only barely managed to turn mangalloy into something useful. Supermetals were no joke even to living primordial forces, it seemed.

~ Indignity, Outrage, Promise ~

Granodior insisted that that he only had trouble because he wasn't allowed to use any transmutation during the process. But since he could only exert this power outside himself because I let him work through *my* spirit – which I'd had to imbue into the sword itself during the entire process – and because all *his* freshly transmuted mangalloy lacked the acquired toughness from being worked on, I remained sceptical.

~ Offense, Wounded Pride, Determination ~

He insisted that he could figure out how to transmute the finished product, and he didn't need no human or fire elemental's help when he had the magma chambers deep below the ground for all his heat needs. Alas, since we'd been at this for weeks and he still hadn't produced a sample with comparable work hardness, there was just one reply I had for him.

*Good luck with that.*

The Spirit did not dignify that with a response.

*I know you know you can use vibration or literally pummel the thing to harden it, why not just do that? Unless it's just a matter of pride.*

Alas, the Ancient Spirit did not rise to the bait.

*Damn, thwarted again.*

I'd hoped to finally get him worked up enough to slip some of whatever feelings or wants he was *still* keeping from me after all this time. Or at least enough to let me figure out if it would be a good or bad surprise, when whatever it was caught up with me. No luck though, even now. Ancient spirits the size of the landscape were very good at controlling what they showed you, even when soul-bound. Who knew?

I set the blade into an interim hilt, then I turned around and brought my sword down with all *my* Light-assisted might.

With a sharp, whistling shriek, the anvil split clean down the middle.

“My word!” “Impressive.” “Amazing!”

I ignored the awed exclamations in favour of inspecting the edge. Not a dent, and not the slightest scrape either, which the S5 sword *had* incurred a couple of, on the side. Also, when I dropped my handkerchief on the impact site, it split clean through. I'd cut an anvil and it hadn't blunted the edge at all.

“Antonidas, what do you think?”

The mage inspected my work with second sight, and told me what I had already confirmed with mine. “Even here, the magic charge is zero. Moreover, the enchanting potential of this dark iron is the greatest I've ever seen in any material.”

*Dark iron, really? Could it be?*

“You advance the craft and doom us who pursue it to despair in the same breath,” Keyton grunted. “What use are wonders if we cannot produce them in any real quantities?” Antonidas had been needed to keep the flame strong and *constant* enough for both the S5 and mangalloy. He'd not had an easy time of it either. “Is this truly all there is? Is castle-forged steel the pinnacle of what we can put to use, while everything above is the domain of magic and providence?”

“Until we can make the foundries I have in mind, I'm afraid so.” In other words, until King Perenolde's embargos 'expired,' we were stuck with the same coal and charcoal as everyone else. That *said*... “But that doesn't mean there aren't other things we can work on.” I gave my

new sword to Richard to play with, since he was the only one around with anything approaching a good enough height. “Come with me, master Keyton, let me tell you all about seric steelmaking.”

S-type steels and magalloy may be a bitch to produce, but I had no doubt that Damascus steel would console the poor man and then some. It didn't quite live up to the legend, but it was still a lot better than the stuff Azeroth had right now.

*The super sword's done, now for the knives and polearms. And a warhammer or two, while I'm at it. Maybe even a spiked mace. And a quarterstaff. A sceptre too, maybe? Definitely a full suit of armor. And spares for everything, in several types so I don't have to walk around in full plate all the time. And mail undershirts! Or scale if that proves too finicky. Plus more of everything for my family and friends of course. Hmm, this might take some brainstorming.*

Not the guns though. Those were non-negotiable.

I'd revisit the issue when we finally got around to abrasion-resistant steels, at least for the armor.

*A shame we haven't seen the same amount of progress with ceramics.*

Master Keyton did eventually ask me if I had plans, any plans at all, to deal with this whole mess with the king. He'd made sure to ask me that with Richard there, tossing what he thought was a discreet glance between me and him. Like everyone else in our guild, and in the pilgrim camp and half of Alterac City and who knew where else, the man expected a rebellion or civil war to be declared in my name. Any day now.

Unfortunately, what I planned to do was still something I hadn't shared with anyone, even Richard himself. It definitely wasn't something I was going to share with Keyton, or anyone else subject to surveillance. Which I did tell him.

Somehow, though, the man only looked reassured when he left.

*What do these people imagine I'm going to do, exactly?*

Whatever these people thought or believed, it couldn't be anywhere near as preposterous as what I was actually planning. Was that a good or bad thing?

“They probably don’t,” Richard told me after we were alone. “Think about the ‘what’ and ‘how,’ I mean. After a point you just don’t wonder about these things anymore, you just believe.”

*Like one believes in a higher power?* “Same as the guards then, you think?”

“I would say so.”

I had been entirely right to assume option three – the guards *were* all deserters. From the Crownsguard, which was the worst possible option. It made their situation very sensitive, more so than even the bad blood that existed between some of them and a number of the pilgrims already here, whom *some* of the former crownsmen had wronged over the years. *Mostly* on orders, but the leeway from that was always limited once the ones who gave the orders could no longer protect you. Assuming they didn’t make you their fall guy to begin with.

On the one hand, desertion was only less contemptible than betraying king and country to the enemy, both of which they’d technically done through this one act.

On the other hand, Richard had soulgazed all of them and found that not only were they all genuine in their repentance, but they’d only deserted because most of the royal favour and promotions were increasingly going to sick monsters now. Monsters who had very little hesitation in acting on their nature, both towards the people and them, their co-workers. Or subordinates, now.

On that last point, at least, everyone else also agreed. It was the same reason why the number of ‘pilgrims’ coming and literally *settling* at the foot of my mountain kept getting higher and higher every week.

*Yet again Aiden Perenolde is severely overreacting, but what else is new?*

I was immensely thankful that Richard had managed to buy the land. As conflicted as I was about my name being on the deed, it was better than the sheer nightmare of charters and ownership that would have erupted later, if we didn’t get ahead of the issue. Master Keyton had even assured me, just today before leaving, that the guild would start coming over more often too, to set up proper shop down in ‘Saint’s Tier.’

“Are the former crownsmen still moping over me ‘shunning’ them?” Which I hadn’t, I just had a lot of more important things to do than play usher all day. Obviously.

“Fit to cry, my lord.”

I looked seriously at my first disciple. “Up until now, most who came that weren’t driven by mere curiosity have had real healing needs and have supported themselves. If we start giving sanctuary, we’ll need to actually start supporting some of these people. And that will only invite more.”

“I know,” Richard met my eyes resolutely. “I’ve already sent word to Mercad for a supply train to be assembled.”

*What would my life be now, if I hadn’t been there for that ambush?* “Don’t be too generous,” I warned him. “And don’t make it a permanent arrangement. If people want to live under our protection so much, that doesn’t mean they can just leech off of other people’s hard work. They’ll have to earn their livelihood and happiness just like everyone else.”

“I understand.”

“Alright.” I sighed gustily. “I suppose I’ll be going down there this afternoon.” Before my ‘show of contempt’ towards the deserters got them run out. Or stoned to death. And everything else Richard had to *order* his men to take all reasonable measures against, which said everything I needed to know about how the ducal guard viewed their erstwhile peers. Not well, to say the least.

I took my sword back from Richard and gave a few warm-up swings. “Until then, go ahead and start teaching me how to actually use this thing.”

I trained with the sword. It went so and so.

Then I went down to ‘Saint’s Tier’ and met the men.

They were ashamed, but desperately hopeful. When I gave them sanctuary, they were just as desperately grateful. So grateful that the one guard I knew and the one who’d brought his family both fell to their knees and wept. If I’d worn a robe or a cloak, I had no doubt they would have clung to the hem and kissed it at my feet.

*Any society where men are so easily brought to their knees in tears is fundamentally broken.*

Alas, the wheel of time refuses to make a full turn without adding even further complications to my life. The day of Keyton’s departure was the same day when the major significance of nebulous nature finally found its way to ‘Saint’s Tier’ as well. In fact, it found its way to the tavern pavilion just as Richard and I were finishing our round of drinks. The round of drinks



we'd deliberately gone down there for, to make sure nothing too bad happened once the unfortunate deserters failed to mingle. Peacefully, anyway.

“What the devil is *he* doing back here?” Richard quietly fumed on seeing Jorach Ravenholdt come in. The Master of Assassins was in a virtually perfect disguise as a ranger, false face and everything, but it turned out you could very easily recognize someone you had soulgazed, just by intuition.

I was, admittedly, mildly surprised at his return as well. I'd long since interrogated him about all the passages and weak points of Alterac Keep. And the city. And the rest of the country. And every other scrap of relevant information he could think of. I'd made him write up a detailed breakdown of everything. I'd even had him follow through on his promise to help us devise ways to contain him and his, before I finally let him take his loyalists and go regain control of Ravenholdt Manor. If he was back now, in person but with no signs of duress, I could only assume things were stable there again.

Unlike Richard, though, I wasn't distracted from Ravenholdt's travel companions.

*The cosmic forces of schadenfreude really want a war, don't they?* I wryly took in the other two men. *Bet they didn't expect the Old Fowl of the Mountain to come down from his nest just to play secret bodyguard, though.*

“Richard,” I discreetly cast a sound muffling spell as I watched the wandering historian ‘Myrnie Wolmet’ from the corner of my eye. And his tall, burly, green-eyed redhead ‘bodyguard’ that was very boisterously embarking on a self-imposed mission to make merry friends with everyone on the wrong side of... what I was very sure would devolve into an epic bar brawl as soon as a drop of spittle landed on his impeccably groomed beard. “I do believe we're hosting foreign royalty.”

“What?” the duke hissed, barely managing not to draw the newcomers' attention. “Who – no. No, no, *no*, surely it can't be...”

I left coins on the table and led Richard out the back entrance of the pavilion. Most casually.

“Your *Worship*,” Richard growled, spitting out my most bothersomely widespread title. The title he only used in extremely rare cases. Specifically, those extremely rare cases where he wondered if his entire life might not be a fever dream after all. “Please tell me you were joking and that *wasn't* Prince Thoras Trollbane back there.”

“You want a saint to lie?”

“Dammit!”

My sentiments exactly. “Don’t soulgaze them for now.”

“Oh, I have a whole list of things I really shouldn’t want to be doing right now!” Richard growled. “Why are they here? No, what is Ravenholdt *thinking* bringing them all the way here, the capital is two days away! How did no one recognize them?!”

I, of course, completely ignored my disciple’s outburst with all the magnanimity inherent to the most despicable of cult leaders such as myself. “His beard had traces of oil and hair chalk.” A rowdy tavern was not the best place to practice super hearing, but eminently lucrative for sight and *smell*.

“That – he was in disguise too. Of course. But then why take it off on the last stretch? Without ditching their guide too, Ravenholdt must have insinuated himself deep into their confidence, damn him and his forked tongue. But still! Whatever he told them of you or this place, it’s still extremely dangerous. We are literally on the king’s doorstep, we have people here that were *Crownsguard* until three days ago, this is madness!”

“Or boldness.” Certainly not courage. I considered what I knew of the happenings abroad. “A warrior prince just a few months shy of his scheduled wedding, going on one last heroic adventure that may or may not have been approved by his King-Father, because he hasn’t lived long enough to have his enthusiasm smothered by responsibility.”

“Well it certainly can’t be experience,” Richard grunted. “He can’t have suffered any true hard knocks or he wouldn’t be pulling a stunt like this.”

“True. Still though... Averting almost certain war would seem like the most noble of justifications to such a man, I imagine.” I gave my Paladin a pointed look. “Especially if the only way you can conceive to avert it is winning it all by yourself.”

Emotions played on Richard’s face, then settled on resignation. Begrudging and self-conscious, *embarrassed* resignation. “Curses.”

Truly, my first disciple had the most excellent self-awareness.

Still not the best insight into others, though, or he’d have realized I was throwing shade at myself more than him, in this one case.

Finally, Richard set aside the issue of how much he had in common with our newest royal guest and looked at me worriedly. “What do we do?”

“His handler seems fairly competent, and the man himself seems well on his way to making fast friends with at least three of your officers. Just let them know to watch that he doesn’t get drugged and carried off in the night. Or go off hunting in the woods by himself. I’ll talk to Jorach about the same, I assume he’s had at least one of his own men trailing their hapless trio. If they approach us without false pretenses, we’ll treat with them. If they don’t, we won’t.”

“Just like that?”

“Yes. Now come, precious paladin mine, let’s bless some babies!”

Yes, people had started bringing me their newborn children for benediction as well. I’d not gotten around to asking a cleric if they did anything specific during Lustration, beyond the obvious burst of Holy Light to make sure the infant was as healthy as possible. I made sure to always tell the parents that I *wasn’t* a substitute for the Church, but ultimately chose not to discourage them. Stable long-term investments were the best investments after all, even when nobody else knew about them. Especially then, in this instance.

The Aegishjalmur was too taxing on the spirit to brand on a newborn, but it wasn’t the only useful stave I knew.

Granted, my stave against hostile magic probably won’t do much either, without them cultivating some manner of mystic abilities of their own. Like every other ward in this world, it needed to charge up somehow. Also, again, no telling what variance in effect might result from different mystical paradigms. Still, there wasn’t a single human spirit that didn’t have at least *some* amount of power. By the time they were old enough to be useful targets to mages and warlocks, the stave should have collected enough power for the occasional one-off.

As I was handing the last child back to their parents, I spotted the Prince of Strom watching me from the back of the gathered crowd. He looked unreasonably pleased with himself, despite his freshly bruised black-eye. I didn’t give him the slightest sign of acknowledgment. If he wanted something, he’d have to come forward.

*I’ll be waiting a while, won’t I?*

If he ever got word of *this*, Aiden Perenolde would no longer be overreacting. At all.

But there really was no reason to dwell on any of this anymore.

I *am* going to solve all the realm's problems.

Thoroughly and permanently.

Just as soon as Antonidas finds me that damned fish.

