

## Chapter 13 – The Vagaries of the Holy and Just

“- October 14, Year 580 of the King’s Calendar .-“

In contrast to the world’s ever so grandiose problems that I had already found solutions for, my personal problems were proving to be much more stubborn. Chief among them my mother’s mental health. She had turned ‘pretend until it goes away’ and ‘fake it till you make it’ into something almost approaching an art form. ‘Almost’ being the key word there. It was like that thing that tries to be art but fails just sideways enough to slip into uncanny valley – you feel uneasy just from exposure. Then the memory of the exposure. Then both. Before, during and after. Every time. Every day.

It was a terrible approach to dealing with trauma, and I made no secret of my expert opinion on the matter as the only person in the room with any real claim to enlightenment.

Mom dared me to soulgaze her.

I’d have done it too, if I didn’t think it would break her spirit completely. Mid-way through the all too extended denial stage of traumatic miscarriage was not the best time to learn that the world was due an apocalypse at the claws of aliens and dragons and an infinite army of demons from beyond the stars. And zombies.

She didn’t know about any of that, but she did know – well, believed – that I was born in this world with a purpose much bigger than her and dad, never mind what I thought. She was only half-wrong too – if I didn’t tell them any of it before, I certainly I wouldn’t risk burdening her at such a critical time.

Mother used her ‘victory’ as further justification to act as if nothing had happened. Took my backing down as a perverse confirmation that I had bigger things to worry about than her.

She wasn’t more than half wrong about that either, exactly, my purpose in life was to change the future of the universe for the better. The same could, of course, be said of everyone, but I couldn’t pretend that the scale of my potential impact wasn’t vastly beyond most others. In fact, my scope

was so dramatic that the most important of people would – and did – undergo dramatic and life-altering changes in goals and behaviour, when confronted with it. When they were at their *best*. Richard was proof of it, and Narett was still politely deferring on being soulgazed for the same reason. So was Antonidas.

I'd still have pushed the matter with mother if I wasn't in a less than ideal place myself, emotionally. Having become a spirit medium, I was now actually conscious of how I interacted with others on a spiritual level. By extension, I had, in fact, gained some ability to sense emotions, instead of relying on 'just' my intuition. And the Light's revelation.

Granodior and Narett assured me I would learn to pick and choose who and what I conveyed and received. Unfortunately, that required exposure training. Like a newborn needs to acclimatise to the air, sound, cold and light before it can even think of paying anything specific attention. Or ignore it.

The alternative was I could withdraw into myself completely. Unfortunately, while that was very good for meditation, it only hindered me everywhere else. Having experienced expanded consciousness, I felt blind without it. Also, people felt uneasy when they had me in front of them but didn't get anything from me on that level. Everyone interacted spiritually, even if they weren't conscious of it.

The worst part? That I could 'see' through walls was well known in our household since before we even moved out of Strahnbrad. This drove mother to go about her 'pretend until it goes away' mental unhealth project even behind closed doors.

Long story short, the only way to prevent her silent distress from being even worse was for me to spend as much time away from the house as possible. And father, damn him, completely agreed with me on that, even if he disagreed as much as I did with mother's approach to 'self-care'.

You'd think they wanted me gone or something.

Yes, that was sarcasm.

Mercifully, the law of averages always has its way eventually, which is why the next major significance of nebulous nature came along with more solutions that problems, for once.

It definitely gave the opposite impression, though, at the start.

“My Lord,” Richard called as he found me up on my perch. Not the terrace above the enclave, but the patch of untouched nature atop the mountain ridge, vaguely above my dragon’s lair. I’d gone there to completely draw away from the world. I’d pulled inward to get a break, so I hadn’t sensed him coming up. I still knew through the Light that the significant development of nebulous nature was very near, but I hadn’t needed to look deeper this once. “You have some... visitors you will want to meet in person. At once, I think.”

“Of course I do.” I couldn’t go more than two days without some grand drama demanding my presence. Worse, today seemed to be one of those occasions when the drama didn’t even do me the courtesy of happening when I was still down below, lightforging plant life in the herb plot. “What is it this time, did the Order of Assassins implode again? More deserters? The new court sorceress dropped in for a curse, perhaps, or does the king still not have one? Light forbid you tell me it’s a tax auditor.”

“None of those, Lord Wayland.”

... This was the first time Richard didn’t call me Ferdinand.

“They’re... wandering priests, so called. From somewhat further up North than we usually get around here.”

I came out of my deliberately inward-looking meditation and turned to behold Richard, and the three men that had followed him up to my high perch.

The newcomers were familiar. Dressed down so that nobody recognized them, but I knew them.

“Lord Wayland,” Richard stepped aside, glancing at me apologetically but nonetheless certain that leading these three up without checking with me first was the right call. “These are Lonso, Alyn and Thure.”

It was... shockingly reassuring to be reminded so soundly that I now lived in a world without ubiquitous spying, cameras and microphones. One where a dusty robe and a shortened name was enough to pass yourself off as a different person. “... I suppose I should be glad this is the best the Church of the Holy Light can muster in terms of subterfuge. I’ll take it to mean I don’t need to worry about some secret order of insidious inquisitors bursting out of the ground at midnight to torture and catechize.”

“Is that something I should devise?” asked ‘Lonso’ in that reassuringly pleasant manner you couldn’t forget. “Create my own Inquisition?”

“Seeing as such orders and their methods have echoed throughout the universe so loudly as to create an entire race of fell demons by that name, I’m going to advise a hard ‘no’.”

“Thank the Light, finally a straight answer,” ‘Lonso’ said as he reached up to pull down his hood. “It has been a while since I could be sure of anything coming out of this land. All the envoys and ambassadors talk in double words and deflections, even for the tritest trifles. The people haven’t been much different either, here, more so since when I last came by, barely over a year ago. It has made it rather impossible to get a clear picture of anything, these days. Except the one thing, of course.” The short, stocky, bearded man looked at me squarely. “The closer we got to the capital, the more people seem absolutely sure you’re some manner of divine prophet.”

Don’t I know it. “Archbishop Alonsus Faol.” I didn’t even pretend to make assumptions about why he was here. Or his attendants. “Ser Uther. Clerist Turalyon. Greetings.”

“To you as well.”

“... Lonso, Alyn and Thure, did those names really fool anyone?”

“Probably not, but who can tell when someone is playing the fool in this land?” Sir Uther said gruffly from behind their short leader, proceeding to pull his robe off over his head as if it was a personal offense. The armor beneath was the same as last year, but clearly not as well kept. Likely on purpose to further sell their ‘disguise.’ How much did it pain the former knight, to treat his kit so poorly? “I still say the last handful only pretended not to recognize us because they didn’t want the trouble.”

“And Light willing, it all worked out just fine as always,” the Archbishop reassured the other man.

“I hope that’s true,” Uther harrumphed. “But I still think that ranger was on to us.”

*Ah, so it was the ‘ranger’.*

“Peace,” Turalyon urged. “He was long enough ago that we’d have been waylaid by some manner of armed force at this point if he chose to report us. Be at ease that he chose silence instead of selling us to any malcontents.”

“Or the ‘malcontents’ are just setting up a different play,” Uther huffed, but subsided.

*Jorach Ravenholdt is going well out of his way to not make me regret giving him back his autonomy, isn't he?* Fair was fair, I won't blow his cover. “A divine prophet,” I slowly tasted the words. Each time they felt a tiny bit less ill fitting. “Is that all they're saying about me?”

“Certainly not,” Alonsus Faol gave me a deep stare. “But I'll wait to discuss that – and more – until we have four walls and a roof around us.”

How very reserved compared to the first time. I stood up. “Will you be accepting guest right, or are you here purely on business?” Just the three of them, despite the danger to *the* most famous man in the world. Traveling in secret. Not known to even the country's king.

The Archbishop, alarmingly, actually hesitated at my question. Briefly, but it was there. “I will be glad for Guest Right, but only because I trust your ability and willingness to abide by it and discuss business matters both.” The man gave me a look that was at once trusting and pointed, and I knew, with my various developments in terms of awareness and empathy, that the nature of what he going to say next had been planned in advance. “Especially if I get it from your father.”

So it was like that. “Come with me, then, and he'll be right with you.”

I had to pause before setting off, when I felt the feeling of relief from the Archbishop, and the raw surprise from the knight. Uther was... very surprised at my easy compliance. I could tell now that he had been on guard for me reacting poorly at the possible slight. He hadn't expected me to comply so easily, and he especially didn't expect me not to feel insulted at being indirectly told I wasn't fit to grant guest right myself. Uther, it seemed, was surprised that I still allowed myself to be treated as having an inferior status to anyone, even if that ‘anyone’ was my father, the household's master.

Fair was fair here too, I was a walking insurrection, I owned the entire mountain, and I had one of Alterac's dukes serving me above and beyond even the king. Also, I had a dragon.

Dad still owned the house though, so that was that.

Speaking of my father, he reacted just about the way one might expect at suddenly having the Archbishop of the Church of the Holy Light on his doorstep. Fortunately, the latter was quite practiced at managing the startled and distressed. Mother was also shocked, but actually felt

*hopeful* to my six sense after that, for the first time in months. More so as the evening wore on, even as her spirit felt heavier too. Bread and wine was given, wash basins were provided, and soon we were all ensconced in the dining room, enjoying a small feast from our best stores, which had grown fine and abundant indeed.

Narett wasn't in residence, and Emerentius was off doing a very pointed flyover of the border with Strom, so it was just Richard and Antonidas joining the rest of us at the table. That gave us enough people to fill the silence. That said, a proper host didn't ask anything of guests until they were eased of hunger and weariness, which included not discussing any of the grim questions and news at the table. The conversation stayed instead on light topics, with only the occasional dip into the matters of family, friends, and what news and pursuits we each had that didn't skirt the issues of sedition, treason and tyranny.

Eventually, though, we retired to the den to sit around the fireplace. Mother excused herself to prepare rooms and draw our guests some hot baths, but father stayed as was proper. Then, the Archbishop finally revealed that he was leading a large ceremonial procession to Stormwind for Winterveil, in a bid to revive ties with the far-flung legacy kingdom of Arathor. But he'd taken a detour to come over for a visit first, ahead of the docking date. Secretly.

Since he stopped there, I asked if he'd received my packages, only to find out neither of them had reached their destination. Not the rune primer I'd sent by courier last year, and not the more recent one with the staves either. Antonidas was kind enough to make copies of both notebooks now, which the three clerics were quite appreciative of. Turalyon even began to study them on the spot. But that still left me wondering about the hedge knights I'd hired as couriers. Worried too. The first one in particular was a Strahnbrad native and I'd never heard back from him. I'd need to look him up, or his family to see if he at least made it back.

"I will send a transmission back to Capital," the archbishop promised without me having to ask. "We should at least be able to find out if they made it past the border. It's not impossible the failure was on our end."

"No, just very improbable," Richard grunted, scowling. "It was probably confiscated by customs, but that doesn't account for the man not coming back to let you know." Richard caught my eye, and I shrugged. I'd certainly ask Jorach, but what were the odds he knew every contract ever taken

on every random go-between? It was supremely unlikely, and I didn't care to speculate on what records existed or survived even before the shadow war among the murderous spies that had only just simmered down.

Assuming he hadn't been killed by bandits or 'bandits,' which was far more likely.

"Perhaps he was merely unreliable?" Antonidas ventured. "Or unlucky. It's not impossible his bones lie in some yeti's lair."

Then again, I had new means now. The little steamers wouldn't be able to stretch nearly far enough from all the way over here, even if they weren't still sulking in the cauldron. Every day I got closer to wanting to reignite the Aura half of Aura of Vigor just to see what happened, but for now I was still inclined to keep building my inner strength instead, while waiting for them to get over it on their own. 'It' being their shame at the realization that they'd been behaving like parasites. Never mind my opinion on the matter.

The little critters weren't shy of taking cues from Mother at her worst, when it fuelled their existing bias. Very like human grandchildren on their part.

Could I maybe use... whatever the equivalent of far sight was for earth spirits? Granodior had given me that flash of a vision when I asked about the steam elementals, and I occasionally used it to get an overview of things down in the enclave. Could he do the same for other things and people? Even if he wasn't personally familiar with them, he should be able to use *my* frame of reference to find them. Or check that they were somewhere or other, if their spirits touched the ground at any point. I knew where one courier lived, I'd even been there.

Spying on people in their own homes was a slippery slope I wanted nothing to do with, never mind what it might do to my ability to consistently defend home and hearth. Mine and others. Via the Light at least. The Light works intuitively, so if I no longer considered private property to be inherently, *intuitively* sacred, my ability to ward places like my and Orsur's home would suffer, wouldn't it? I certainly wouldn't be able to do it spontaneously anymore, by just walking around a place and thinking about the Havamal really hard.

I would still find a way, there was always a way, but not without exhaustive rune work and time-consuming effort, and certainly not with such broad parameters as 'safeguard this home and its

denizens against everyone the owner might consider undesirable on any given day, but not against his conscious choice or otherwise to his own detriment as understood by himself and also common sense just in case'. Which did, indeed, potentially include *myself* if the owner and I were to have a falling out.

If I fell to the point where the letter of the spell was all I could muster, I may as well just switch entirely to arcane magic. Whose warding disciplines, incidentally, I didn't know my way around yet. They were not a priority in Antonidas' lessons, at my own request, since I had the Light-based variety well enough mastered for things like that.

Perhaps... Maybe check to see if someone was taking a walk down the public street closest to their house? It wasn't perfect, but it was within the rights of anyone capable of walking down that same street.

"No," I dimly heard my dad murmuring, right as the Spirit of Alterac decided to do me the kindness I'd just conceived of without waiting to be asked. "Don't interrupt him. He's got his 'I'm changing the world and don't think I won't' scowl on."

I shook my head clear and straightened from my slouch, noticing that Richard had a hand raised for silence as well. "He's gone. The first courier, I mean, from last year." The specifics of Granodior's vision settled and I had to amend. "Well, unaccounted for at least. He hasn't set foot anywhere near his home in months." I paused when Granodior finished supplying me what qualified as short-term memory for an entity that lived forever and whose body was the literal country. Or a huge chunk of it anyway. "At least not since July." In other words, since the day that Granodior woke up.

"Definitely the border guards," Richard decided. "Then after they intercepted the package, the delivery man would have vanished mysteriously to make it look like the work of bandits or wild animals. I wouldn't be shocked if they did it on the Lordaeron side of the border too."

The three 'pilgrims' exchanged looks, but they didn't comment on the casual evil we were attributing to Alterac's monarchy.

Instead, the Archbishop levied me with a most intense gaze. "You did not use the Light to divine that. I would have known."



“No, I didn’t.”

I waited for the others to give up on waiting for an explanation I wasn’t going to give them. Other than Narett, who figured it out on his own from how ‘vast’ I felt for a little while there, when alchemy began giving me results other than complete failure, the only one who knew about Granodior was the dragon. Well, other than Odyn and the Valkyries and whoever else they shared it with, if anyone. Let everyone assume it was the steam elementals, or whatever else. Antonidas surely suspected something, but he hadn’t brought it up so neither would I. He’d been much more concerned with geriatric molluscs and void entities.

At Granodior’s own request, I was not advertising his existence. “Why have you come here, Archbishop?”

“The Alteraci diplomats in Lordaeron decry you as a heretic.” That was news to me, but not at all surprising. “The people *here* believe you are a genuine prophet so exalted that the Light blessed you with the eternal service of a giant fire-breathing dragon.”

“Emerentius, yes. The Light didn’t give him to me, I used it to free him from the forces of evil. He’s not around right now, but he should return at some point tonight. I’ll be happy to introduce you tomorrow morning.”

Alonsus Faol, Light bless him, gaped. Not as widely or for as long a time as Uther, or even Turalyon, but he still did it. “Not just a wild rumor then,” he coughed, rushing to recompose himself. “But if *that* flight of fancy is true, then how much of the rest...?” The bearded man levied me with a look more intense than anyone had ever given me, save the very dragon we’d just discussed. “The people here also swear that you can and have brought back the dead.”

“Only the very recently dead, just the once,” I admitted, because that was nowhere near secret either. “And all the real work was done by a Valkyrie.”

“... Yes, a great angel born forth on feathered wings, sent down from heaven by a patron no scripture ever names, even all the apocryphal ones.”

“Tyr fell in battle before he could pass down anything to our vrykul ancestors, and all the scriptures were written much time after by Lordain’s people, or later still. I happened upon other sources,

and they have since been verified. I have some reading material for that as well, if you wish. Incidentally, if a raven starts stalking you, talk to it because it might just start talking back.”

“Young man, I expect better than glibness from the one I so enjoyed talking the evening away with last time.”

*Everyone expects better.* “Your holiness, I sympathise with the idea of a probing interview, but it really is unnecessary. You came here at great personal expense and danger, in secrecy not shared with even the king of the nation, just to talk to me. You can get right to the heart of the matter and I will return the favor with all due respect and lack of pretense.”

Alonsus Faol sat back. He looked at me. Everyone looked at him. And me too. And back. I wondered if he was weighing the good and bad of sending his bodyguard away to talk to me in private, and if he wanted or expected me to do the same with everyone on my side of the room. I couldn’t tell what he was thinking or feeling, even with my new spiritual awareness. The Light in him was so bright that it eclipsed everything else.

“Alright,” the man finally decided. “Then I will ask upfront – are you aiming to found a new church?”

“No.”

The archbishop sagged.

In *disappointment* and *fear*. I still couldn’t feel them, but they were drawn plainly on his face, “Then I fervently hope you have some truly extenuating circumstances to present to me, because the only other explanation for the full sum of your actions is that you are arranging the ugliest and bloodiest war in the history of humanity.”

“That is too far!” Richard erupted, standing up suddenly.

Uther did the same, a stern warning in his veteran eyes. “Your Grace, let us keep our calm.”

Richard glanced at Uther and dismissed him in the same move. Not as a threat, but as a danger. However offended he was on my behalf, Richard didn’t expect any of them to break guest right. “You claim to expect better of your hosts, but do not give half the same courtesy. I will say that *I* expected much better from the paragon of my faith.”

“Am I really?” Alonsus asked grimly, not rising or tensing even as some heavy woe came upon him. “Your Paragon, truly? You will make such a claim here, now, oh Duke?”

In other words, how could he claim that when he obviously followed *me* first and foremost?

“You assume a conflict of loyalties where there is none,” Richard scoffed. “You claim you talked to the people, will you claim that the farce in the throne room somehow did not reach your ears amidst all that?”

“I will not, but as wielders of the Light we are expected to act according to the highest purpose, not react on impulse to given offense.”

“Impulse – offense!” Duke Lionheart snarled, even as Uther tensed.

But Richard then closed his eyes, took a deep breath and released it slowly. “Oh. Oh, I see. Never mind then, my apologies for my outburst. It seems I have nothing to be upset about after all.” Richard then, to Uther’s complete befuddlement, sat back down in his chair and waited expectantly for our talk to resume.

“... That did not go like I expected,” Uther muttered, sitting back down as well.

“Don’t worry about it,” I told the man. “You just lack context, that’s all.”

“I truly hope that’s not all it is,” Alonsus said in a voice thick with dread and dismay. “The nearer I came to this place, the more I’ve felt like the future is set to drown in blood and hellfire. I want to believe the best of you, Wayland, I really do. I even did, up until I heard about you unleashing the secret of dwarven black powder. What were you thinking? What you did, unveiling the secret so brazenly, it has all nations rushing to make it now, in ever greater and greater quantities, all the while thinking up louder and uglier weapons. Even Lordaeron, home of the Holy and Just, is recruiting every alchemist it can find to verify and apply the recipe you tossed out like wolf bait, just so it won’t be left behind. What drove you to such madness? I do not want to believe it was just pettiness towards an even pettier king.”

Sitting there, under the pleading gaze of that man and the judgmental stares of two strangers, Richard’s quiet confidence in me was more than outweighed by Antonidas’ blank-faced neutrality. And my father’s sudden and distressed *indecision* about what to believe, even if it only lasted a moment. Perhaps I should have felt misjudged and cornered.

I didn't. I sensed a fulcrum in the Light, and for once it was unneeded, even though I still appreciated it.

The archbishop hadn't asked for a private word, never mind for me to meet him alone while he got to keep his companions. Alonsus Faol had come already resolved to not do anything to me, no matter what turns our conversation took. Moreso, his assessment of my actions was entirely correct. The only thing he got wrong was the nuance. I wasn't out to *start* the ugliest and bloodiest war in the history of humanity.

I was *preparing* for it. "I'm willing to submit to the Rite of Judgment Unmerciful right now, if it helps."

Alonsus Faol froze.

A frightful silence followed then, deep and... resentful.

I discreetly sought the source of the intruding feeling and did not find it in any of the people present. Aiming my attention outwards, I failed to find any observers or loiterers. Since Antonidas had also long since warded the house against scrying, on top of my own workings towards the same – which had been tested and improved until he himself couldn't breach the defenses anymore – I could probably rule that out as well. What did that leave?

What *is* that?

The answer, surprisingly, came from Granodior.

~ Reverse Echo, Spite for Lost Chance for Malice Aforethought, Foretelling of Woe ~

Back on the day of my past life awakening, I'd idly mused that meeting Alonsus Faol, Uther the Lightbringer and Turalyon in the same day, was an atemporal echo from whatever I would end up doing in the future. A ripple of synchronicity backwards in time. Now, Granodior was telling me I was experiencing the... evil version of that. Based on his *own* experience from far back, when Fahrhad subdued him. The feeling had been just as cloying and alien then too.

Knowing what we both knew, we could... *probably* speculate that it had been an echo of the mollusks' anger over Fahrhad fooling them into sparing the spirit. Whenever they finally realized it. Or will. Which, for here and now, meant... oh no.

*Who will feel extremely angry at this in the future, that will impact said future to the extent that I can feel an echo here, now?*

And for that matter...

*Who did I just set up to become the target of old gods or demons or orcs or what have you?*

“Do you mean the words you just uttered?”

*Did I just doom this man to suffering and death?* “Yes.”

“Please repeat that,” the archbishop requested, slowly getting up from his chair even as I and everyone else did the same. “I want to make sure there is absolutely no confusion here.”

“Yes, I am completely serious.”

For the first time, the Rite of Judgment Unmerciful descended upon me *not* at my own bidding.

I felt a sting inside my head, but I was still ready to catch the other man if he staggered.

He didn't. He didn't sway, didn't flinch, didn't even twitch.

Alonsus Faol just stood there, looking up at me in abject confusion. “Nothing,” he breathed in total disbelief. “There is... nothing? The Light found fault with nothing. How can there be nothing?”

I sighed. “There was quite a bit actually. I skipped what could otherwise have been an amiable and insightful group talk, just now. I misjudged your intentions. You hadn't been stalling or beating around any bush, you'd hoped to re-establish the rapport of before.” For himself and also Uther and Turalyon. He'd come in still hoping and assuming the best of me. Between the two of us, it had been Alonsus Faol who went more out of his way for my benefit, rather than the reverse. And not just out of respect for our host, my father. “Insofar as respecting guest right, I am the one who fell behind.”

“Don't dazzle me with technicalities,” the archbishop grunted, still with that raw confusion. “How can there be nothing? The Rite judged me no less thoroughly than you, and all I understood was that my misgivings were all true also! Your discovery – the blasting powder – what you've unleashed upon the world, thousands of people, *tens* of thousands – more! – are going to die choking and *screaming* if things keep proceeding as they have, I...” The man drew away and fell back into his chair. When he spoke again, his voice was blank. “I do not understand.”

Richard tried and failed not to look vindicated. Everyone else looked between me and the high priest with varying degrees of confusion.

“There was always a guarantee of war between Alterac and Strom,” the Archbishop murmured, almost entirely to himself now. “But now it is looking as though *all* nations of man will become embroiled during our time, in the greatest bloodbath that ever was. You have set mankind on the path to a war that will end all wars, one way or another, and yet the Light sees fit to deem it...”

“... Just?” Richard dared.

“... No,” the archbishop replied at length. “Not just... Not just in the least, but... good and right.” The man hesitated. “Necessary.”

I could only hope that meant that ‘the war to end all wars’ would be against aliens and demons instead of each other, and that it would actually live up to its name here, instead of setting up an even bigger and worse one to follow in ten or twenty years.

The silence stretched on, and no one seemed to want or know how to break it. After a while, Richard looked at me with something like cautious expectation. *Soulgaze him*, his gaze told me. Asked. Asked why not.

I was considering it. Considered making the offer at least. There was no way in hell I was inflicting it on any of these men without informed consent.

Before I could decide one way or another, my father beat me to it. “Your Holiness.”

Alonsus Faol gave a start, then a look of apology. “Forgive me, good man, I was... adrift.”

Dad gave me a quelling look that was entirely unnecessary, but I couldn’t hold it against him, considering things. “Would it be presumptuous of me to think we’ve all had enough for one evening?”

“... I would be grateful for a respite to contemplate matters.”

“Please follow me then, a hot bath should calm everything down and your rooms should be ready for you.”

Perhaps it really was enough for one evening. The whole thing felt... unfinished, but since the only wrong call in that whole talk had been my own, I could live with the consequences for a night.

So that's what I did.

Alonsus Faol had more than regained his composure by morning, but he didn't go out of his way to resume the discussion of the prior evening, for which I was glad. It gave me some time to do what had become my usual sit-down on the terrace.

I'd spent much of the night in Reflection, but the source of the echo of malice of the prior eve hadn't become any clearer to me during the night, even after coming up with my most creative parameters during Light meditation.

The rest of what I pondered turned out even worse. *Very informative*, but the tidings were most ill on the whole. No matter how I turned the idea of just telling the Archbishop about, well, anything, I got very loud and glaring warnings that I'd be inviting disaster just by mentioning the orcs aloud in his presence, never mind more critical factors.

It was enough to make me worry that I'd made a huge mistake telling Emerentius about Rheastraza's future, if just mentioning future events aloud was so risky. I was at my worst then, it was very possible I might have missed a warning.

Thankfully, Reflection on that particular matter didn't indicate I had anything to worry about on that front. Of course, that just meant Alonsus Faol came with altogether new caveats.

Given his upcoming itinerary, it was easy to guess that he'll run into a certain someone that... might not necessarily be a danger *now*, but would very likely become extremely so if he divined anything I told the archbishop. Through whatever means, of which this world had many.

I was regretting the lack of proper telepathy. Mind magic was another non-priority in my Arcane studies, which had barely begun as it was. Worse, it wasn't really much of an option regardless. Antonidas himself could only speak in words mind to mind, and he couldn't grant that the ability to other people. For now anyway. According to him, Dalaran regulated invasive mind magics most tightly, at least for the purpose of delving people still alive. Considering that arcane magic worked by disrupting natural order – in this case the other guy's brain – I had to approve of the caution. Still, it was unfortunate to find out that true telepathy was the realm of demons and warlocks. For now.

But then... that would only lead to the same problem by a different path, wouldn't it? A man as righteous and brave as Alonsus Faol would probably confront the relevant unworthies outright, wouldn't he? Even if it killed him. Deathwing was probably still hibernating, otherwise I can't imagine he wouldn't have descended on this place to avenge himself on me and mine for the insult that Emerentius represented. That left Medivh.

Alonsus Faol was going to be in the same room as Sargerass.

Arguably, that went without saying, Medivh was the closest friend of King Llane Wrynn, after Anduin Lothar. Of course they were going to meet.

The risks I was being warned away from indicated a bit more than superficial interaction though.

Medivh was one of very few I was sure **did** have true telepathic powers, though the Light should be too bright in Faol for him to get anything. Alas, as I'd experienced for myself, there were ways to weaken and drain it.

*Medivh should have just begun his 'hold banquets and feasts to relieve the boredom' phase of his life, will he invite the archbishop and company? Does he dose the food with truth potions? Something else?*

I wasn't sure how powerful Alonsus Faol was, but I was sure it was not enough to survive that monster, especially at this early stage before he approved the more militant applications of Light magic. The Light agreed with me.

I spent the rest of the night trying to come up with some manner of equalizer or workaround using staves of protection. Good news, I didn't get any notion that even Sargerass could nullify all of them. Not discreetly, anyway, and not without the bearer dying from the strain in the case of my more creative ideas, which themselves still needed work.

Unfortunately, even if I did somehow convince Alonsus Faol to let me brand him six ways to Sunday – without me being able to speak a word of why – it would invite enemy *attention*, towards the archbishop and me both. There were staves to hide things, and even staves to make you forget that you hid things, but a notice-me-not field would just make it impossible for the most public figure on the planet to do his job, even if it somehow did work against the 'Guardian'. Never mind



who else would be present, like King Llane Wrynn and Anduin Lothar. Also, sufficiently strong willpower could no doubt overcome it.

More targeted solutions were *theoretically* possible, but they required a more personal touch. Like how the Dragon Soul would need one of Deathwing's scales to make vulnerable to destruction.

*Guess I'm keeping my mouth shut, I thought morosely. Maybe the man will study the staves on the journey over and apply his own protections. He'll be at sea for a good bit of it, right?*

If nothing else, I would make sure he knew the true divine shield before he left, if he didn't already.

I was on the perch over the valley when the archbishop finally sought me out, and he didn't speak even then, for a while. I practiced dual sensory augmentation while he got his thoughts in order.

"I would like to meet this dragon."

"Alright." I rose and stretched while waiting for my hearing and sight to return to normal. "Will Turalyon and Uther be joining us?"

"Not for now."

"Then I won't get anyone on my end either. Follow me."

Emerentius moped less than he used to, but he still brooded in his underground lair a lot of the time when I didn't have him doing something. This was in spite of how much he enjoyed sunning himself. He had this persistent problem with wanting to curl up under a rock and die of shame.

Literally.

When we finally reached the dragon, Emerentius uncurled from where he was sleeping, pinned me with his big eye as he always did to reassure himself that I was still there to expect him not to waste his life anymore, before finally addressing my guest. "Ah. You. The leader of the brave and just, who is good and valorous in truth, even though you don't know."

Visibly taken aback, Alonsus Faol nonetheless mastered himself well. "I don't know what, precisely?"

*That alien barbarians are going to invade Azeroth just to soften it for the infinite army of demons from beyond the stars that's coming to destroy the world.*

The dragon looked to me and back at the man. “That is not for me to say.”

Alonsus paused, but decided not to press. He instead proceeded to ask questions of the dragon, some simple, some not, some private, some rebuffed with varying levels of firmness. I whiled away the time communing with Granodior and double checking what we’d found about that one courier. Still no trace of his spiritual aura anywhere around his home.

Didn’t speak about any coercion his family he may or may not be under either, friendly or otherwise.

“Wayland,” the archbishop finally addressed me again, though he hesitated to face me now. “Your writings. They don’t cover all you’ve come up with, do they?”

“Only the basics of healing and defensive applications,” I admitted. “We’ve already confirmed that the Light isn’t the only mystical force that can power and use the symbols. But we don’t know enough to tell how different mystical paradigms will change outcomes, yet. It’s possible to extrapolate other uses, but whoever stole those books will have to do that without help from me.”

“... And yet something drove you to abandon that prudence?” The man asked, half to himself. “What you did in the throne room... What could make it the *right* decision? What do you know that we don’t? What could be so – so terrible as to forgive – offset... no, it’s even worse, isn’t it? Somehow, I don’t know how or why, you felt it necessary to change the face of war forever.” The man’s words went so much quieter then. “And the Light... didn’t highlight any argument to the contrary.”

Seems I wasn’t the only one who spent much of the night immersed in the Light to seek Revelation.

“Wayland,” Alonsus eventually broke the silence again. “There is one more thing the people claim about you.”

Just one? “What’s that?”

“They say you only need to gaze into a man’s eyes to know his deepest nature.” He eyed me sideways. “They say you can do the inverse of that just as easily.”

“It’s not *easy*,” I replied. “It’s truthful and straightforward, but there’s nothing easy about it. And I don’t get to choose, it’s always both ways.”

“But you can do it,” Alonsus concluded. “If you were to do it with me, would it enable me to understand?”

*We don't have to*, I wanted to say, but didn't risk. “This is a fairly large leap from wanting to take things slow and steady yesterday.”

“Words are ripples in the wind, they are as empty as they are easy to divine by the base and nefarious.”

*I'm not the only one who spent the night Reflecting over how good an idea it would be to discuss matters. In words.*

It didn't matter how secure our home was from divination if the person I shared secret plans with left its protection. Looked like my plans for the King and his cronies weren't the only ones I'd keep my silence on. “The more people know something, the likelier it is that someone is going to dream up the same information just from being part of the zeitgeist.” I looked at the other man seriously. “Or, as a completely random example, get a sudden feeling that their disguise has just been blown.”

Not to mention, some people were prone to muttering, like our farmhands. And Dad. Also, though the steamers and Granodior were now exceptions, the elements, on average, were not our friends. Especially in a land without an entrenched shamanic tradition. Who knows who binds spirits of air and makes them bring gossip from far-off places? Maybe not Deathwing, but I wouldn't bet against Dalaran or its renegades.

Never mind Medivh.

And what about the Emerald Dream? Dreamwalking was a thing too, and I knew for a fact that the green dragonflight wasn't in full control there anymore.

“I don't imagine you have much proof for any of... whatever it is,” the archbishop said with a casualness that all three of us could tell was completely forced. “Or you wouldn't be acting so circumspect.”

“Not the sort that would pass muster with lords and kings.”

“But it does with dragons?”

I said nothing, because I didn't know how to reply. All the while, Emerentius beheld us silently.

"Well then." The Archbishop of the Church of the Holy Light turned and met my eyes squarely.

"It's a good thing I am none of those things, now isn't it?"

The people of this world really were something else. "Are you absolutely sure?"

"Do it before I change my mind," Alonsus demanded, the grimaced. "Please."

I considered the man, weighing matters of orcs, dragons, undead monsters, and his upcoming itinerary down south among lords, kings, commoners, and body-snatching demonic titans possessing a misbegotten son.

I concluded that I couldn't decide what I should tell him and what not. I couldn't even decide if I *should* pick and choose. Not just generally, but with this man specifically. The problems on my old Earth always got out of control because the good people with any amount of power were never informed *enough*. Also, strategy and a top-down chain of command were always the way to go when you're already at war, but when you're still at peace...

Well, if you want to make the best of peace, the better bet is always decentralization. Not of power, necessarily, but of executive authority.

Clarity finally dawned on me then. It wasn't secrecy that was more important than anything here, this man was. The brightest future – as *I* aspired to it – needed him to be around for some time still, alive and free. More than it needed Sargerus exposed. Which, having thought long on it, would probably lead to the very war Alonsus was afraid of. Medivh's attention was aimed outwards right now, at other worlds. If Sargerus was exposed, what were the odds he'd take a new disguise and start poisoning wells more actively here, at home? Unacceptable, that's what.

*When every possible outcome is a bad one, chaos theory becomes your only friend.*

Ultimately, I decided not to decide for him at all.

I met the eyes of Alonsus Faol and let his Light guide the Soul gaze every bit as much as my own.

I beheld the world lit bright and hale by a good and just man.

The Soul gaze ended to the ever-distant promise of vast malignance roaring in outrage far into the future. Several times over.

“Light preserve us...” Alonsus breathed out, shaken and pale. “We will never again have peace in our time, will we?”

He didn’t tell me what he got from the experience, and I didn’t ask.

“- October 16, Year 580 of the King’s Calendar .-“

The clerics stayed for another two days, during which time we exchanged notes and teachings on everything we could without touching on matters of potential sedition. Uther trained Richard in combat, having proven considerably ahead in skill. Alonsus achieved the true Divine Shield before anyone else, something neither Richard nor Emerentius had managed yet. And Turalyon figured out my diagnostic ability, even though most of his time was given to reading and writing down everything I – and through me Geirrvif the valkyrie – knew about the lore of Tyr, Odyn, Helya, Loken and the other Titans.

They were *not* mere constructs, it turned out. As Geirrvif explained it, the bodies were constructs, but they were also just vessels for their cosmic selves, same as our bodies were for our souls and spirits. The Titan-Keepers were themselves Titans, just not of the hatched-from-a-world-egg variety.

Odyn and Tyr in particular were divine twins, their souls born of the spiritual joining between Aman’Thul and Eonar, long ago.

Then something happened that put me firmly in the Archbishop’s debt – Alonsus Faol got through to mother.

I always had a poor opinion of confession, the churches of Earth only used it as espionage and their vows of confidentiality weren’t worth the blood they trampled. Also, some churches had you kneel at the priest’s feet to spill all your secrets, which was one humiliation too many to bear. But there was a reason therapy and counselling became such a big thing despite the biggest names in the field being complete scams.

I wasn’t there when it happened, and I deliberately went as far from the house as possible when mother led the Archbishop to a different room to confess her ‘sin.’ But when she finally stopped

repressing... I felt the flood of tears from two hundred yards away. The emotional spillover lasted for over an hour. It was like a great block of rot was dislodged from our life, to be carried away and dissolve in the ether.

That evening, the Archbishop held a belated funeral service for my unborn brothers, which everyone in the family including mother attended. She stayed engulfed in father's arms, weeping quietly but feeling lighter than she had in months.

I experienced a bone-deep, bittersweet relief.

*Some weaknesses you just don't show your children.*

On the morning of our guests' departure, father's eyes were almost as misty as mother's when they came with me to see our guests off. Mother had a shepherd's pie packed for the road, and father gave the three each a pair of boots. They were the best he'd ever made, and he only managed it because he badgered Antonidas and I to magically sustain him and his deftness of hands all through the night. The man would surely crash into bed the moment we were gone.

On the way down, I asked to walk with the Archbishop alone and passed him a scroll with *my* parting gift.

The man wasted no time reading it, and he became more and more astonished with each word. Astonished and near petrified at what he had just learned. The world seemed to hold its breath.

"Telomeres are just one part of a dozen when it comes to ageing," I murmured. These words, at least, came with no blaring warnings. "They won't solve everything, degenerative illnesses are mostly unrelated, and we've many symbiotic life forms living within us. If they die, so will we, no matter how youthful we may otherwise be. But they are not beyond the Light's reach, and even then... you should at least be able to get a good chunk of extra lifespan. In your prime."

Alonsus Faol wasn't exactly old, but he was getting there, and the fact that only the mages of Dalaran enjoyed an extended lifespan right now rather offended my sensibilities.

"Wayland," Alonsus murmured, so astounded that he couldn't lift his eyes from the paper. "If you believe there is some manner of debt to repay between us, I think you've severely unbalanced the scales in the other direction."

“Actually, this is sort of my backup gift. Turalyon ruined the other one. If the church manages to disseminate the capability to cure chronic diseases, it might well free up 80% of your time, but I was hoping you’d say that.”

“I suppose that’s also true – wait, what did you say?”

“Follow me. See the man over there? Don’t look at him directly if you can.”

Learning that Prince Thoras Trollbane of Strom happened to be in residence down in the enclave put quite the interesting expression on Alonsus Faol’s most holy visage. Learning that the man had been there for a month but was waiting for *me* to approach him as if I owed him something, never mind ‘proof of my prophetic abilities’, well...

I wasn’t present for that talk either, but only because I didn’t want to make a liar of myself. I’d told Richard we wouldn’t treat with those two unless they came forward without pretenses, and I kept my word.

In a not entirely surprising show of competence, Yernim Melton – the caretaker of the Trollbane family artefacts, at least when he wasn’t forced to go by an anagram while babysitting princes on their ill-advised adventures behind enemy lines – managed to find a way past not just the Archbishop but also Uther, Turalyon and Richard to find me. He apologized on the prince’s behalf and assured me that they had lacked all malice. I believed him, but that didn’t mean I was going to forgive without amends first.

Infiltrating an enemy kingdom was their right, but they’d spent the entire past month infiltrating *my* land under false pretenses, even though they’d ostensibly come here seeking me as an ally. Weltom was rapidly rising to something like a quartermaster even. It spoke well of his competence, but poorly of the rest.

Thoras Trollbane couldn’t stop glaring at me after he was drafted to play armed escort to the three, an hour later. It was the most angry and sullen emotional display I’d ever induced in anyone, but I pretended not to notice as easily as I pretended not to know who he was all those weeks.

“I’ll make sure he’s well recognized, once back in Lordaeron,” Alonsus promised me. “If everyone knows he’s there, there will be one less reason for Alterac and Strom to go to war.”

“This year.”

“Yes,” his Holiness reluctantly agreed with me. “This year.”

I thought that was the end, but the archbishop lingered. I waited. The more time passed, the more I could feel the various onlookers wonder who these three were, to earn my personal hospitality and send-off.

“I will not ask what plans you have for the near future,” Alonsus finally said.

“I appreciate that.”

“That said, as proof that the Church is not deaf to the entreaties of certain Alteraci honourables, it would behove for a cleric to come here and... assess whether the cries of heresy have any substance.”

I became suddenly conscious of the fact that Uther and Turalyon had been particularly quiet and solemn all morning. What was more, though Uther had taken to Richard like a mentor, he was conflicted over the latter’s crisis of loyalties. The dynamic was complicated further when, to all of our surprise, the Light proved stronger in Richard than Uther, despite the latter having come into it almost a year earlier, when he finally accepted the archbishop’s mentorship.

Most significant of all, Uther’s reservations about Richard’s loyalties had now vanished practically overnight.

Like a Revelation.

I looked at Uther, then at Turalyon, then back at the archbishop. “You figured out the Soulgaze, didn’t you?”

This time, it was the Archbishop who didn’t need to say anything.

“What if I say no?” If even this man tried to put a leash on me-

“Out of respect, I am leaving the decision to you.”

That was no small thing, was it? “When are you coming back from Stormwind?”

“After New Year’s Festivities.”

“Then if you happen to pass by his way again, I’ll be ready to give an answer then.” I looked at him seriously. “And my confession.”



Faol went still. “I dread to think what you will do in the meantime.”

I didn’t say anything.

“Let me amend – I dearly *hope* you will not do anything rash in the meanwhile. King Perenolde is preparing a very special event this Winterveil, and in fact I was very strongly entreated to attend myself. I declined, due to prior engagements, but the Grand Cathedral has nonetheless sent an official envoy to preside over the king’s impending engagement.”

*Oh, I’ll do something and it won’t be rash.* Though the rest of that was news to me. “King Aiden is getting engaged?” Finally? “To who?”

“I believe he has invited a number of prospective ladies from several nations, from whom he plans to choose one on New Year’s night.”

So an engagement party *and* power play. That sounded more like him. “Any from Lordaeron?”

His holiness very pointedly took time to consider whether giving me further answers would do more harm than good. “There are two I know of.”

“Is any of them named Prestor?”

“... I will not ask how you know that.”

I sensed... not a disturbance in the Light, but the certainty that there would be one, if I pushed that line of questioning any further. “Who’s the other one?”

“Actually, I believe I will stop here. You clearly have your own means of finding information, if you truly must meddle in the affairs of royalty.”

*I’ll do more than meddle.* “What if the affairs of royalty meddle with me?” I thought of tyranny, death and deserters. “What if I’m dealing with the consequences of that right now?”

“What do you mean?”

I explained to him the ‘little’ issue of the crownsguard deserters.

Alonsus Faol all but demanded to meet them, which I had no issue complying with. I caught the attention of one of Richard’s soldiers and had him lead us to where the group currently was. For

all that I'd gone out of my way to affirm their right to be there, they were still shunned by everyone else. Quietly, but consistently.

The more I explained their plight, the darker Faol's face grew. When we reached the tent, he spared no time asking them questions and more questions and then, to my astonishment, he proceeded to soulgaze every last one of them too, right there on the spot. By the end, his face was so thunderous that he all but stomped back outside, heedless of the tearful reverence in the faces of the men who now knew exactly who was among them.

"That," Alonsus Fol pointed harshly at the tent. "Is a disgrace."

Yes it was.

"What kind of nation is Aiden Perenolde even running here?" Alonsus seethed, pacing angrily back and forth. "This. Is. Unacceptable."

Not for the first time, I was gratifyingly amazed by the fact it was true. The archbishop wasn't being naïve or idealistic, he was being completely truthful. This all really *was* unacceptable by humanity's standards, on this world.

It was why I was willing to go out of my way for this place to begin with.

"I'm taking them with me," Alonsus declared, daring me to object. "I trust that won't be a problem?"

To Lordaeron, or all the way to Stormwind? I decided it didn't matter. Good or bad, easy or hard, it was the future these men had earned through their moral weakness. "I'll get some supplies and a couple of wagons ready for the families."

"Even their *families* are—? Unbelievable."

Somehow, my failure to come up with salvation for the poor men on my own, so that they instead had to be saved by outside serendipity, only made people more convinced I was blessed and favored by higher powers. The thanks and tears were even worse this time than when I gave them sanctuary.

The Archbishop and company left on the morning of October 16, Year 580 of the King's Calendar, taking all but one of my problems with him.

Maybe it was how raw and grateful the whole thing left me by the end, but I ended up changing my mind about Alonsus' oblique request. For Richard's sake, I asked Uther to stay. I made it clear to the man too, that my friend was my one and only reason.

"One might wonder why you would not want me around," Uther said, though the joke fell flat. "Unless you plan to do something you know I won't approve of."

"For better or worse, I am in mortal conflict with the king."

Uther froze.

"This cannot be redressed because *he* made the choice not to." I turned to coolly meet the man's eyes. "I won't let it come to war, but that is the best I can promise. Will that be a problem?"

Uther hesitated, but when he replied he was just as sure of his words as I was. "Quite possibly, but it will not be up to me to judge."

"On that, at least, we agree."

"... It is still a most lofty promise, I hope you realize." Uther beheld me seriously. "Can you really keep it?"

"Yes." I turned to lead the way back home. "Yes, I dare say I can."

"Do you need to? You're secure enough now, especially with that... dragon of yours. If even that isn't enough, why not just leave? Any country will be glad to take you."

"For the same reason you didn't seek your fortunes out of Lordaeron."

"Don't try to sell me bridges, that's completely different and you know it."

"How do you feel about a soulgaze?"

For a while, the only sound came from our footsteps.

Finally, though, Uther had his answer. "Teach me how and I'll do it myself."

Well, I suppose I couldn't fault his caution, and I especially wasn't going to look down on someone prioritising their autonomy and sanctity of self.

Uther wasn't quite finished though. "Have you ever considered that you're not even a man full grown and perhaps shouldn't be taking any further grand burdens upon yourself?"

"I may be young now, but by the time real evil comes I'll be in my prime."

Uther didn't have a ready reply for that.

*How appropriate that it doesn't feel like a victory.*

Fortunately, it didn't feel like loss either. Despite everything that was coming.

Alonsus Faol and Medivh would soon be in the same room together, Aiden Perenolde might be aiming to tangle mankind in the sort of web of alliances that caused the first world war, and I was getting the eerie feeling that I already knew why Narett held the mages of Dalaran in contempt.

But my mother was healing, Thoras Trollbane was out of my hair, alchemy was finally working properly, even the deserters were out of my misery, and Antonidas had finally found me that damned fish.

Cry me a river, Sargeris, the universe is unfolding exactly as it should.