

Chapter 2 - The Steamy Truth

“-. April 13, Year 580 of the King’s Calendar .-“

I have figured out why the Light doesn’t automatically abandon fanatics – it sustains *commitment*.

Imagine you’re Sally Whitemane. At a young age you witness your family succumb to the horrific plague of undeath as you’re traveling through northern Lordaeron. You’re then forced to destroy both your parents and siblings when they rise as mindless Scourge minions, leaving you racked by guilt and rage. Ever since that day, you’ve found fulfilment and pleasure in only one thing: the cleansing and destruction of the undead. Fast forward a few years and you’ve gone from idealistic trauma victim to the proud bastion of Lordaeron’s priesthood, only for the undead to destroy Lordaeron wholesale because the Scourge somehow subverted the kingdom’s own prince into killing his father and destroying his own kingdom from within. You thus become the prime zealot in a cult that no longer trusts anyone not part of your Crusade, considering them plagued. Your leader is secretly replaced by a demon, but because your recruit pool is almost entirely made of traumatised young idealists like you started out as, you and he both keep having to pander to the most wide-spread beliefs among them no matter how much he hates it. You hold your former compatriots of the Argent Dawn in contempt for their toothless ways, but because the Brotherhood of Light is there as a buffer, you don’t cross the line into becoming a bigger evil than the one that created your extenuating circumstances. And because you bravely, self-sacrificingly and *deliberately* put yourself smack dab in the middle of the zombie lands where the Light is your most pressing *need*, there are very few living people actually around to question your actions and beliefs.

So even as the odd innocent man and woman are tortured and eventually killed at the hands of Grand Inquisitor Isillien, the number of lives you save and raise in the Light – which they *don’t* secretly hate like your demonic leader – definitively offsets your damage to creation. This good, in turn, is vastly outdone by the harm you prevented through purging the throngs of undead that would otherwise have gone on to kill more of the living than you and your crusaders and all your victims combined, magnitudes over. And at the end of the day, you’ve successfully and honestly followed through on your commitment to the Light that you made at the very beginning. Your beliefs are the same, your morals are the same, your faith is stronger than ever, you’re smack dab in the middle of the zombie lands where the Light is your most

pressing *need*, and you're objectively contributing a net positive to the Light's cause, even if just on the technicality that your fanaticism hasn't actually been challenged yet. Sure, you're flat wrong about how doomed the rest of the world is, but that doesn't make you evil, just crazy.

Long story short, the Light cares about feelings but has no concept of thoughtcrime and judges you only by actions on a scale of warm, fuzzy calculus. And honestly, I was fine with that. Sure, Whitemane wasn't anyone's first choice for the ability to bring people back from the dead, but the prior dozen choices were either dead or moping in a cottage at the edge of civilization. And the moment that changed, what happened? Sally and the rest of them were killed in their own fortress by a handful of mercenaries hired by the *other* guys backed by the Light, who managed to get more out of objectively *lesser* commitments by virtue of not being complete batshit crazy. At that point the only unresolved wrongs were individuals who deserved better, but literally all of them went in believing the Light will take care of that in the afterlife.

Which might not even be wrong. I was reluctant to consider Shadowlands canon for a variety of reasons *besides* not passing through anything resembling the like on the way over – they felt like a glimpse into a completely different setting, not to mention that older canon trumped newer canon in real life – but shamanism included séances and calling of ancestor spirits back from their resting places millennia later, and the Light could literally bring people back from the dead.

It cast a lot of light on Arthas's actions too, didn't it? He only lost the Light at the end of that first story, not mid-way through. Arthas still believed he was doing the right thing – he was still *committed* – but though the Light stayed with him though Stratholme and after, it abandoned him when he picked up Frostmourne. Though Arthas refused to acknowledge it at that point, his commitment had changed. Which he could have realized with a moment's introspection, honestly, the distinction between 'save the world from Mal'Ganis' and 'Kill Mal'Ganis' isn't *that* subtle. It gets especially unsubtle when you're suddenly indifferent to having just accidentally killed the person that mentored you for your entire childhood.

And that was the crux of it – the Light didn't back just any commitment, it had to be a commitment to some manner of regenerative or creationist purpose, whether preserving existing creation or creating something new and *sustainable* by the current creation. Preferably better. What qualified as better by the Light's standards was something I wasn't going to try and experimentally narrow down, I'd be at it forever and never get close to finishing because

of the sheer time involved in empirical research. But, see, the Light works *intuitively*, and everyone who ever got decent at using it did so through some manner of revelation, including myself. By that logic, meditation would be the ideal way to get better at it.

So. Commitment.

I wasn't naturally given to meditation, I had too much going on in my head at any given time. I could do it, and I did every once in a blue moon after a long week's work finally paid dividends. When I was high on life and finally content to lay down, I could look at the sky for hours and just drift.

But I found I did better with the common sense approach to solving problems – think about it really hard until your brain starts going in circles, then stop caring about it and be surprised a day or two later when the perfect brainwave drops on you out of nowhere, after you've long since moved on to something else.

Now imagine you're me, a materials engineer that reincarnated in a fantasy world where the tech level is not only pre-industrial, but also lacking all the anachronisms that would completely break common sense once humans, dwarves, gnomes, elves, draenei and demons are all forced to commingle within the span of a single generation. Naturally, my first instinct was to introduce the standard uplift package. I may not have any of the means to resume my vocation from one death and lifetime ago, but circumstances were such that I needed to prioritise the more practical tools to make better tools anyway.

Now picture all that while hooked up to a perpetual motion engine that could keep you working at the top of your potential. When the priests said the Light bolstered your will, they seriously undersold it.

Sleep exactly as much as you need to, eat exactly as much as you need to, achieve peak physical potential without dedicated exercise *in one month*, maximised cognitive function, optimal learning rate, unbreakable focus, unlimited attention span, unlimited mental endurance so that you could cope with any amount of pressure no matter how weary, sad, depressed or bored out of your mind. I had, quite literally, succeeded at everything I set out for and never failed to overcome any amount of stress.

It was also the only reason I didn't go postal after the very first gunpowder bag I put up for auction on my very first trip to Alterac City prompted certain nobles that shall not be mentioned to try and turn my story into that of the Wayland from back on Earth. Apparently, I was wrong

to think the dwarves had already invented it. Or, if they did, they weren't sharing. Good news, 'never anger the white mage' came in full effect and 'mad skills' did not measure up to literal divine power in the real world, so I got away without severed hamstrings. Better news, word quickly spread that malice aforethought against me and mine resulted in life-ruining curses and condemnations, some of which could last for months without signs of stopping because game balance is not a thing in real life. Bad news, my parents and I were 'secretly' blacklisted from the Auction House on the sly, so that I could put up whatever I wanted but nobody saw it. Worse news, those we talked to directly got 'visitations' at odd hours – or their kids did – and the tradesmen and caravans who dealt with us in spite of all that – half of them from Stromgarde – began suffering stalkers, grifts, intimidation, extortion, robberies, burglaries and bandit attacks. All for the high crime of my would-be kidnappers suffering a case of divine retribution that drove all hitmen thereafter to refuse hits on a child saint.

Then, just as we started burning through our savings and I was about ready to start my 'adventuring' early, certain nobles that shall not be mentioned were condemned to death by hanging in the city square. All our problems 'mysteriously' vanished within a tenday without me having to do anything.

I naturally assumed Church involvement and gave my first ever religious tithes in both my lives. The clerics denied it, though, which rang alarm bells. More alarm bells followed when I couldn't find out for sure if the nobles who hung were the ones hounding us, or if they were just the ones King Perenolde felt most secure getting rid of in order to put the rest back in line. Assuming he hadn't been after me himself, which would be most in theme with the myth of Wayland the Smith.

Even if not the king himself, it could easily be someone in his confidence considering how high up the culprits would need to have been. I had used a pseudonym for obvious reasons, and while that was never going to be full proof because the auction house staff themselves still had to know who 'Ferdie Gasi' really was, that didn't mean that tracking people through the auction house was *easy*. The security was actually very high and the nobility were invested in this continuing to be the case because they used the auction house too, some of the products were very valuable and high profile. Furthermore, the staff was actually really hard to bribe by simple virtue of having by far the biggest cut from all operations. Not a few auctioneers had gathered enough money to buy their own titles and land over the centuries since the Empire of

Arathor first deployed the idea. Furthermore, the mages of Dalaran handled the magical side of security as they did in all other kingdoms, and they were a very powerful neutral factor.

Now, enlightenment may preclude paranoia as easily as any other mental traps, but that didn't mean that having my problems solved by a mysterious third party didn't warrant a healthy amount of caution. Of course, since I had clearly been showing the wrong kind of caution before, I decided to remedy that situation before my mysterious allies and/or enemies got around to round two.

And so it was that the Light got practice at sustaining a completely different sort of commitment. Which is to say, since quality over quantity had clearly backfired, I went with quantity over quality instead. Playing the auction house wasn't nearly as complicated as playing stocks back on Earth, even if it was just as mind-numbingly dull after a while. But it was necessary in order to make the money needed to produce all the good stuff I then put up for auction myself. Better inks, better paints, stronger glues, new alloys, terran cements, roman concrete, strengthened glass that was also clearer than any other in the whole world, porcelains, ceramics, insulators, soaps, paints, alloys, everything else that could be made better by modern materials science on a cobblers dime, you name it. I created proofs of concept one after another over the course of five months, auctioning out promissory notes for the production process in exchange for business partnerships.

They each paid little to begin with, new products and technologies were always risky investments and I was a mere cobbler's son with no background or master's backing.

But there were a *lot* of them.

And when all else failed, the Light was the best character witness for even the most crooked merchant, even without the blessings and healing I bestowed. It wasn't ransom no matter what anyone said, I helped both the bad and rare good ones who turned me down, as I did the various random people whose plights crossed my path. The sticking point, though, was I only did it when there was a real enough *need*. The Light was really good at knowing these things. Ironically, though, my 'mercenary approach to miracle working' appealed to the guilds and merchants more than the Church did. Must be all the preaching about charity and self-sacrifice. I groused about it to my local preacher when he made the yearly house blessing, whereupon I learned that the local Church had actually believed the worst of me too, these people, honestly.

The end result was a cobbler's family from the Strahnbrad slums now living the high life on a moderately large farm down on the Headland, on a property newly built from the ground up to my specifications, and with stable income high enough to afford four different fields, all our own livestock, three farmhands, sending village urchins to gather herbs twice a week for mother, and all the materials I could ever need for the things I came up with in my very own workshop.

Not counting the coin we were setting aside for the next rainy day.

This is my life now.

“No no *no*, you get out of here right this instant, you've already commandeered my first steam engine you're not getting my second – wait, that's not the steam engine, that's the furnace – get out of the fire right now you stupid puff of vapour!” Mind Control before it's too late! “Are you trying to kill yourself – what am I saying, of course you are, you're a bloody know-nothing dumbass, I bet you're not even sentient you little shit, shoo, shoo, go back to your siblings before I decide to stoop feeding that fire too, firewood costs money – and here's morons two and three, Light, why do I even bother?” Mind Control – nope, these were the dumb ones, okay, Blessing of Sagacity that *somehow* works on animate steam and gives enough of a mind to *then* use Mind Control, it was still hit and miss but – no, no, it was definitely a miss this time because of course it was.

I grabbed my very long-corded electric fan – waterwheels, man – and used it to blow the idiotic things back to the relative safety of the boiling cauldron outside. “That's right, you better hover off you little monsters – wait, one, two, five, eight, shit! Ma! One of them's escaped again, check the kitchen quick, if it tips the pot over again I swear to hell I'll – say what? It's lounging *on* the stew? Well... I guess that's fine? No I don't know for sure, I'm not a bloody shaman!” *Yet*, because at this rate I'll have to become one just to understand what the hell is going on, what even is my life? “What do you mean ‘will it turn into a broth elemental’? Are you nuts, woman, don't tempt fate like – yes I know they're mostly harmless, I literally made them!” These people, I swear. “The hell you mean ‘why do I feel so strongly about this’, you're the one who insisted I ‘take responsibility for the poor dears’! Oh very funny, Ma, bloody comedian you are, why don't you add it to Pa's will while you're at it, his jokes are almost as dead as yours.”

My father, of course, merely continued dying from laughter in his hammock at the other end of the orchard.

With parents like these it's no wonder people marry off the moment they turn sixteen.

Standing in the door, I looked upon the fruits of my labours and pinched the bridge of my nose as my exasperation underwent that atavistic leap backwards that felt far too familiar these days. My once lively furnace barely smouldered, the coal inside and out was all drenched, my tools were scattered all over the place again, my homemade power cords were tangled into the strangest configuration ever. Worst of all, the steam engine parts I'd painstakingly oiled had been blasted clean by the sentient steam baths. Bad enough I'd somehow created steam elementals with the simplest and most un-mysterious contraption imaginable – whose design I'd imported from Earth with not the slightest alteration *specifically* to be sure nothing weird would happen – but I'd done one better and created a bunch of *stupid* ones. “What did I do to deserve this?”

The Light, as usual, had nothing to say.

Oh who am I kidding, I know precisely what I did. When my perfectly mundane steam engine decided it wanted a side job as broodmother of the Fire and Water mongrel variety, what did I do? Did I choose *against* going to the absurd lengths of keeping an ever boiling cauldron of water constantly fed? Just so the baby *steam elementals* didn't go extinct on the same day they randomly spewed out of the blueprint-perfect steam engine that somehow became a magic item despite me still knowing jack and shit about the Arcane? Of course not! Being the bleeding heart that I am, I just couldn't let them die – which the first dozen did because I, being a *sane* scientist, immediately shut off my steam engine when it decided to be a life-giving magical artefact out of nowhere. Which is how I found out that the little fogies needed more steam like babies needed their mother's milk. I wouldn't have bothered but they were just so adorable, don't you know. Like a fluffle of rabbits hopping and nibbling cutely around your feet just so you didn't recognise them for brood of Caerbannog until it's too late. I used to wonder why the elementals would succumb to the domination of the old molluscs of yore, but now I understood: they were already devils! From birth!

“Fuck it, I'll clean it up tomorrow.” The rest of the afternoon was a wash anyway. “Right then,” I sighed resignedly. “May as well log the day.”

“-. .-“

It took a while for me to reach my stationery and journals. That's the price I have to pay for leaving all my notes strewn about the *first* time random steam puffs emerged ex nihilo to upend all my inkpots and soak every last paper that wasn't buried deep at the bottom of a drawer.

Preferably the bottom-most drawer of a very big desk. One ideally located in a different room. More than just a single wall away to be doubly sure.

In practical terms, this meant that I had one very tightly-bound pocket book on me for taking notes during the day (with custom laminated covers because I'd also invented plastics, may the spirits forgive me for however long it takes this world to also turn it into a paradise for twenty-five billion crabs), but all my actual journals and documents were in my study over in the house proper. If not for the improved recall from the Light's tune-up, I'd miss and forget at least half of all my ideas all the time.

I stopped to check on dad on the way in, as I did twice a week despite that I hadn't needed to for almost two months. "Time for your tests, old man."

Dad scowled. "Must we? We've not even had dinner yet!" But he let me help him out of the hammock and stomped over to the lounge chair on the porch, grouching the whole way. "To think I'd be poked and prodded like this, are you ever going to stop? I'm fine, for Tyr's sake! Why can't you just trust that the Light knows what it's doing, like everyone else? Oh, to think you don't even know how to be a *saint* properly, my own son!"

"Yeah yeah, now hold out your arm."

Dad held out his arm. "Not gonna make me strip for your pleasure today?"

"I'm sure your form-fitting button-up will accommodate the stethoscope just fine," I said while putting on the arm cuff. "Don't think I missed how all your shirts are one size smaller now, I know what you've been having mom do, you were literally strutting through town the other day."

Dad scowled. It utterly failed to distract from his reddening cheeks. "Just for that I'm cutting your allowance."

"I'm sure the big fat zero will be glad to be as lean as you." My short-lived allowance had dried up well before I became the primary breadwinner.

"Light, I'm cursed to suffer the only smart-mouthed saint in the history of the world, what did I do to deserve this?"

"Sex with mother."

Dad's spluttering was loud and outraged and completely ruined the reliability of his blood pressure test, but for the first time in a while I was willing to let it go. No small thing for me. Domar Hywel was the decidedly December half of my parents' May-December arrangement, he'd been thirty-five when mom had me at *seventeen*. The damage to mom's womb from her repeated miscarriages after having me had been relatively easy to deal with, it basically boiled down to a weak cervix (the things you learn reading fan works, honestly). But dad had been an absolute mess of prematurely aged medieval commoner from the seedier parts of large town Arathor. Arthritis, rheumatism, weakened bones, poor hearing, poor eyesight because of cataracts that were steadily ruining his ability to make an income, diabetes despite us barely affording sugar, back pain, neck pains, breathing problems, emerging heart problems, the only issue he *didn't* have yet was dementia. Which meant he got to be fully aware of his body failing him and stewing in self-loathing over his encroaching failure to provide for mother and I.

I'd had to get *very* creative with when and how I drew on the Holy Light for him. No small task when even the blessings I *did* recall from my past life had to be created from first principles. And that's without getting in to the physical side of things. Human biological systems were no joke, neuroplasticity and telomere decay less so, especially when anatomy was not my specialty. Even then, it still felt like I was negotiating and even teaching the Light at times. Holistic treatments were all well and good for draining fifty years' worth of gunk from every last one of dad's cells, but not exactly ideal for reconstructing half his pancreas and do cataract rehab surgery. Twice. Also, the Light responds to will intuitively, which means interference from the patient's own will and self-concept, especially when his concept of 'health' differs from the doctor's.

I had much cause to be grateful to the Archbishop for indulging all my questions back then. The whole seals, symbols, songs and recitations thing that priests had going on? Not pointless pageantry. You could learn to instantly silent-cast whatever you wanted on yourself, but to affect other people? Good luck with anything that isn't 'throw glowy stuff at the problem and see what happens'. You needed some way to make sure the Light knew to do what *you* wanted done and *keep* doing it, instead of the recipient whose soul and will always had the closer, stronger claim and authority. It explained why random Light exposure could lead to spontaneous revelation in the predisposed, but wouldn't do anything about Garona's mind control or maladaptive core beliefs like Deathwing's nihilistic lunacy, at least unless knowingly and *specifically* targeted. It was an unfortunate revelation, but at least now I knew what it would take to start doing something about all the tentacle brainwashing.

As I unfastened the arm cuff and switched to the stethoscope, I wondered at my spasmodic fortune and whether the lack of conventional training in the Light had been a hindrance or a help. I certainly made more progress there than with what was *supposed* to be my most solid and reliable skill.

“Okay dad, lie down now.”

“You may as well have left me in the hammock.” But dad did as I asked and bore through my stethoscope and percussive examination with well-worn patience. “One of these days I’ll kick you in the face.”

“Entirely accidentally, I’m sure. 𐍆𐍆𐍂𐍅𐍂𐍅𐍂 𐍀𐍂𐍄𐍂𐍅𐍂𐍅𐍂 𐍆𐍂𐍅𐍂𐍅𐍂𐍅𐍂 𐍂𐍅𐍂𐍅𐍂𐍅𐍂.”

Father’s body shimmered alight, but what I experienced went well beyond the mere sight of gold. Of every application of the Light I’d come up with, the diagnosis spell may just be my best work. My attempts to create a tricorder spell had flopped. I *assume* that despite all the robots in Azeroth’s founding myth, the Light didn’t naturally operate on ultimately Arcane principles. That didn’t mean it couldn’t do what I *needed*, though. The incantation roughly translated to “reveal unwellness to my senses.” Doctors diagnosed symptoms through sight, touch, hearing, even smell and taste given the right samples. Animals had a foundation in this for even longer, some knowing disease by smell and all of them subconsciously accounting for physical abnormalities when looking for a mate. My spell *didn’t* replicate that, anymore, after my first few attempts flooded all my senses at once with foreign impressions. It had been extremely nauseating, and not just because of the sensory overload, I felt and smelled and tasted *everything*. I quickly developed both feedback control and an iron stomach, but my ultimate goal had been psychometry. And, once I figured out how to use those natural reference points as mere *guidelines* for the Light’s natural propensity towards *revelation*, I got it.

Needless to say, I was very glad I’d taken a gander at the Old Norse runes that one time, in my previous life. They were still just a writing system at the end of the day, but using the Light itself for ‘ink’ made for some elaborate effects, I’d found. To a *much* greater extent than could be achieved with the grand total of *three* runes that survived here from the time of Tyr to the present. All of which were already in the Terran rune poems. Turns out there’s a reason why Earth’s myth and folklore said the runes were *discovered* and not made.

It was a damned tragedy that almost nothing of the mystical scripts of ancient days had made it down to humanity. The Church didn’t really have any written history to explain why the

people from Tyr's time didn't pass down any sort of written word, but the Archbishop assumed a lack of literacy, and I tended to agree. The vrykul that fled with their 'ugly, misshapen spawn' probably didn't know enough to pass down themselves. I don't think theirs was exactly a universally literate society, and spellcasting scripts would have been hoarded in any case. Presumably this was why rune-based magic only came into play after the Wrathgate in the games – the Northrend vrykul hadn't woken up before then. Also explained why personal symbols like 'seal of Uther' and 'rune of Tyr' were such a big deal too – when lacking the appropriate knowledge and tools, you did your best with whatever your predecessors left behind, in this case personal sigils that the Light will maybe, hopefully associate enough with its favoured agents to call up an echo of their feats. When your situation was similar enough. And your need was great enough.

And then there were bindrunes, where you merged two or more runes to form a new symbol. Something *not* given to bizarre or catastrophic failure like I generally understood was the case with research done by arcanists. I had a *lot* of ideas for that.

Just as soon as I figured out enchanting.

Considering that all attempts to get a sitdown with a mage have amounted to a big fat 'zero progress' despite me offering to pay the best rate for a consultation, I wasn't very optimistic about that particular timeline.

"Daydreaming again, son?"

"Apparently." I shook my head to clear it of the afterimages of cellular molecules. As always, Dad wasn't as enthused as I was about being my practice dummy while I lost track of time being my own electron microscope, but he reaped most of the benefits so I had no regrets. "Rejoice, dad, I think we can stretch things out so you only need to be poked and prodded once a month from now on."

"Damn, son, you've been a saint for nigh on two years and it's only now you start working miracles, what took you so long?"

Breadwinning in your stead, but a dutiful man's pride wasn't anyone else's to trample, least of all his own child. "Just be glad you aren't a walking sack of sickness anymore. Feel free to congratulate me on my good work."

“Congratulations,” Dad grunted as I helped him up. “I’ll make sure to mention it to Tyr himself when I see him in heaven.”

For a given meaning of heaven anyway. “He’s not there, I’m pretty sure. Yet, anyway.”

Dad gave me a funny look, but I got up and left before he could ask. While he might never get used to me spouting strange things at odd times, he was very well used to pretending it never happened. Later.

Finally in my study – the part of the basement *not* underneath any of the other construction, just in case – I turned on the lights, basked in the feeling of triumph I still got every time I did that, and sat down at my desk to chronicle the day because the only difference between science and screwing around is writing it down.

“April 13, Year 580 of the King’s Calendar,” I said in English as I wrote, because I needed the practice. Also, rogues went around spying and stealing everything off people while invisible through totally-not-shadow-magic. It was probably still useless, I expect that divination magic made it much easier to translate things in this world, language barriers certainly didn’t seem to exist outside game chat for any practical purposes. Still, a completely foreign language should be a better obstacle than any mere cypher. Back on Earth I’d been following a story where some Irish overachiever had undergone something similar to me, but wound up in some Japanese manga about ninjas instead. Unfortunately, much as I’d like to do like him and write things in six different languages and two or three alphabets, I only knew English and German. The thought of combining those made me break out in hives. Also, I couldn’t see anyone entirely sane taking notes in triplicate, never mind enjoying it *and* translating into however many additional copies and mixed scripts that guy used just to fuck with people. It had to be some sort of autism.

How he found the time was also a mystery to me. All *my* spare time these days was wasted on corralling freak accidents of nature instead of doing science or, oh, learning literally any other profession seeing as I was ahead of every smith and engineer in Alterac City already. Not that I’d get far very when I had to start those from first principles too.

Profession trainers ready to dispense their grandest secrets for a pittance weren’t a thing in this world, it turns out. Yet, anyway. The Church provided basic schooling on its own dime to everyone in the human kingdoms, but for anything beyond letters, arithmetic, and basic history, it was either the army, a full apprenticeship, or very big favours with the right people. The

Church or a noble patron could pull strings, but eventually you still arrived at a guild that needed to be both able *and* willing to spare their specialist's time to teach random nobodies. Unlike back on Earth, this wasn't even the guilds' fault and I was getting side-tracked again, as usual.

Then again, this train of thought might deserve its own entry.

I pulled over my other log book, the one where I collected my bursts of insight on the world I now lived in. "The economic system used by the Legacy Kingdoms was inherited wholesale from the Empire of Arathor. It imposes an upper limit on the number of members in a guild, variable based on multiple factors like population and number of tradesmen in the area during the latest census. It also encourages business models based around return on capital investment, but forbids usury on pain of severed limbs. This effectively makes sure that no monopolies can ever form and that the market always has a healthy level of competition with a minimum of malicious embargos or swindling, but otherwise allows people to act in their own best interest." That was just scratching the surface of how clever the Empire had been about literally everything. Too bad it didn't incentivise the dissemination of marketable *skills* any more than usual. Right now, neither the demand nor the need for open professional trainers existed. Never mind class trainers, ask about that and people will look at you like you're speaking fish. The world hadn't lost a vast swath of its best hands and minds through three existential world wars, nor was there a perpetually looming apocalypse around to demand that knowledge and skill be disseminated as widely and quickly as possible lest civilization entirely collapse and regress to the stone age. It wasn't even an exaggeration, that was literally what happened to the trolls.

Oh well.

I idly sent out a blast of searing Light. When no invisible interlopers cried out in shock, I returned to my first ledger.

"Steam elementals continue to survive, with minimal changes in behavioural complexity despite wild fluctuations in their perceivable size, density and presumably mass. Unclear if this is because simple water steam is insufficient nourishment, for lack of a better term, or if this is just part of their lifecycle. Experiments with exposure to more complex steams such as tea, milk or broth remain inconclusive. They also merge and divide at seeming random. Plans to contact the Wildhammer Dwarves about shaman assistance are still on hold due to the rudimentary state of mail." The pan-spatial mail system portrayed in the game was either waiting for the Alliance and/or Horde to form first, or was a convenient game mechanic that

never actually existed in real life. Right now, formal mail systems were internal to the big cities and some of the larger towns. For anything outside them, you needed to wait for a caravan or hire an expensive courier *if* they weren't already on a job for some noble or the king's taxman. You could get a hold of a freelance mercenary *somewhat* more easily, but then good luck trying to get anything past customs, never mind past *all* human territories into the lands of the dwarves with vague instructions to find a shaman willing to trek all the way back because some random human doesn't know technology from mysticism. Never mind the odds of the package arriving at its destination intact to begin with, or at all. I still hadn't heard back from the package I sent to the Archbishop with my rune primer, at the Cathedral of Light in Capital.

Fun fact, 'Capital City' came before the use of 'capital' for primary municipalities in Common. Everyone wanted their own 'Crowning Jewel' after Lordaeron proved that Dalaran wasn't a fluke.

I seriously need to crack arcane magic. I craved to be a wizard, I wanted portals even more, and I *needed* to figure out what the hell was causing my entirely mundane proto-industrial technology to create elemental spirits. Suspicion and speculation didn't cut it.

"Trial runs of the waterwheel-powered electrical generator remain comparatively innocuous. While measurement and control of voltage and amperage has proven more complicated than expected, the technology otherwise continues to exhibit no abnormalities." I speculated that it was the earth-based methods. Mystically speaking, lightning was the domain of air elementals, but what I was using was wholly of the earth – metals, magnets, rubber, plastics, even the motive force came from a stream instead of the wind. "No freak accidents anticipated for any of the electricity-derived projects on the timetable." I was really just waiting for my orders of glass bulbs and filaments to be delivered. That said... "Caution still advised for any eventual foray into tesla towers or radio-wave communications. However, for anything else I would tentatively rule the technology marketable."

Azeroth was seriously overdue on electric lights and arc welding. Also, batteries. I had a vague recollection of one or three in-game items with 'weld' in the name, but I think they only showed up in the fourth war and relied on blow torches. Of which I'd found no hints of anywhere either, so far. The gnomes probably had *something* if they could make robots, but not necessarily depending on the clockwork involved, and the in-game welding items I recalled were all from goblins. And mekagnomes, I suppose, but Ulduar was a bigger outside context problem than *I* was. Equally likely was that current technology relied on entirely mechanical nuts, bolts, hinges

and fastenings for their machines. It was a shame that dwarves and Gnomes didn't much travel outside Khaz Modan, I'd love to discuss technology with some of them a while. There's clearly *some* way to make steam technology work without huff and puff ex machinas out of nowhere. I don't even what to think what might happen if I actually put together my internal combustion engine.

"Requests to meet with the mages responsible for the magical aspects of auction security and banking conveyances continue to receive no reply." I was probably being stonewalled. Again. Because why wouldn't problems come home to roost on the regular? "Absent of progress on this front, my attempts to dissect the Earthen blueprints for inadvertent arcane principles have stalled."

I didn't want much, just to be pointed in the right direction. Hell, just a primer for their most basic symbology would be enough to get me going, I didn't want to make magic (yet), right now I just wanted to figure out how to *stop* it from happening where it shouldn't. I was even willing to pay good money for a null magic zone and I was perfectly willing to spend another year figuring the rest out from first principles on my own. But I first needed to *know* those first principles, and my attempts to use the Light to 'see' the Arcane have been inconclusive at best. Which is to say, sometimes I saw it (maybe), sometimes I didn't (maybe), and at all times I couldn't tell apart jack from shit. All the moping I'd done over this was the entire reason why mom decided to dust off her old and very basic herbalism skills. I wasn't desperate enough to try and figure out *vision quests* from first principles, but I was getting there almost as fast as mother was mastering her rediscovered passion for mind-expanding draughts.

Wait.

My pen froze above the page.

I turned to look up and to my right towards the kitchen where there were things unfolding that no amount of walls could hide from me.

I dropped the pen, surged out of my study and all but flew up the stairs and down the hall, only stopping when I reached the kitchen. Then I stood there in the door, staring at my mother. Or, rather, a certain part of her where the most vivid lightshow was taking place, streaks of might and maybe whorling together like protoplanetary discs before they merged and erupted, twin stars shining faintly with all the colours of possibility woven together from the threads of the past and the future. They weren't here yet, they wouldn't be for weeks, and it would be months

before the lights themselves became self-sustaining, but I could see their coming as clearly as I only ever saw the ripples of my future feats whenever I closed my eyes and looked inward.

“Wayland?”

My mother’s words snapped me back to awareness. Outside, the sun had almost disappeared behind the mountain face.

“Of course he’d hear *you*,” Dad grouched from behind me. “Son, you really need-“

“You’ve conceived.”

Mother’s ladle clattered to the floor.

“Twins,” I pronounced. “Fraternal.” Two distinct faces flashed behind my eyes, then faded before the shadows of helms and potential. “Boys.”

Mother placed her hands on her belly, open-mouthed.

Dad was more vocal. “What!? But she’s been taking tea!”

I blinked and turned to look at him.

He wasn’t looking at me though. “You’ve been taking tea, tell me you didn’t stop taking the tea!” Dad rushed past me to mother, stopping next to her with face white and wringing hands.

“Dammit, woman, if you can’t stomach the tea anymore, why didn’t you just say so!? I’d have done my part if it came down to it, the last one almost killed you!”

Oh.

I relaxed.

“Don’t you dare look so happy, boy, this is all your fault!” Dad *sarled* at me, before turning back to fret over mother. “Agnes, how-why-?”

“Unlike you, I do trust our son.” The quiet reply carried clearly despite the sound of the bubbling pot. Mother crouched to pick up the ladle and set about washing it in the kitchen sink.

“And if he says I’m fine now, I’m fine.”

“Agnes, that’s not-”

“Oh stop it, Domar, this is exactly why I didn’t tell you.” Mother huffed and stirred the soup one last time before pulling it off the stove burner. “I’m fine. I’d even be *happy* if you found it in yourself to be happy too. We’re going to have children again. Apparently.”

“Well don’t everyone cry out in joy at once,” I huffed, ambling over to put a hand on mother’s belly. “Don’t mind the old grump, kids, he just likes being dramatic.”

“DRAMATIC!?”

“The help are watching,” I sing-songed, acutely aware of the farmhands awkwardly hovering in the hallway.

Dad reddened, though to his credit you couldn’t tell if I’d embarrassed him or if he was just that riled up. “You knew about this!”

“Nope. Mom’s will is all her own, don’t you know.”

“Yes,” mom said dryly. “Don’t you know. Howard, please carry the pot to the dining room, my men are both indisposed.”

“I’ll show you indisposed,” Dad grumbled as our farmhand rushed to comply as fast as he could extricate himself from the situation. But by the time it took him and the others to vacate the premises, Dad’s glare finally thawed into something less thorny. Hesitant, even. “You said twins?”

“Unless one or both of them decide to duplicate in the next week or two, in which case it could be even more.”

“They can do that!?”

Common knowledge varied rather widely on Azeroth.

Because we’re such wonderful employers, Howard, Bart and Barney threw us a surprise baby shower just a week later. This, of course, meant my various business partners caught wind of it fast enough to join in because village urchins blab, especially when said business partners go out of their way to give them jobs on the days when mother doesn’t need them. Corporate espionage may not be the same everywhere, but this was still Alterac at the end of the day.

On the bright side, I got to meet a man called Narett. The Narett that may or may not end up in the Theramore city that didn’t exist yet. The Narett that looked almost exactly the same as he would look in a few decades. The *alchemist*.

Sure, he thought mother was the up-and-coming alchemist of the family, but blowing away his preconceptions was just good fun.

Not so good fun was that our very engaging and horribly portentous private conversation completely distracted me while everyone else embroiled my parents into a vastly premature talk about baby names.

They settled on Falric and Marwyn.

Synchronicity is a most wily mistress.