

## Chapter 11 – The Council of Incidentals

“- July 20, Year 580 of the King’s Calendar .-“

On the first day, I lay blind, deaf and witless as I suffered the incorporeal equivalent of complete muscle failure.

On the second day, my spirit began moving again just enough for my mental burnout to catch up with me too, so I could barely process short-term memory, never mind anything long-term.

On the third day, the first pilgrims showed up.

It only went sideways from there.

I didn’t find out about any of it until I was finally able to get out of bed on day seven. My father adamantly refused to let anyone put any sort of pressure on me, which was sweet. Bittersweet. It took me days for my senses to return, and more still for my mind to properly reassert itself. Seven days of my father bravely forcing himself not to cry at seeing my mind still broken every time he came in with food. All of which escaped me the entire time, like everything else.

Because it wasn’t *actually* being blind and deaf. Apparently, when you don’t have willpower for even the measliest short-term cognitive processes, it’s as good as being blind and deaf because you don’t *process* any sensory input, never mind store anything. It was like dissociation, but worse. I gave the term ‘witless’ an entirely new meaning and then some.

Dad did cry when I finally persuaded him I wasn’t going demented before him, hugging me for an hour while he wept with relief next to me in bed. Relief mixed with shame at his own weakness, and resentment over how nobody I went literally out of my mind to save even deserved it.

Which was fair, but that’s why mercy and justice aren’t the same thing.

“None of’em know how to find their own asses, why fucking bother?” Dad sniffled as he blew his nose.

I pretended not to see that the handkerchief was hard as crust, was he crying so often when no one could see him, or was he sick? My spirit slumped uselessly when I tried to tug on the Light,

a pain without pain, a weariness like when you try to clench a fist but your hand muscles are completely dead. *Right maybe wait a bit before I try psychometry.* Or anything else.

“The wizard needed you to spell out how to do his job, the Duke came when everything was all over – fat load of good he was – the assassin acts like he’s not worried about anything despite everything he’s done, and when it’s not trying to murder the wrong people again, that fucking damn new pet dragon of yours is *useless*.”

*I had talks with people?* “I’m going to need you to lay out everything in detail, because I don’t remember a thing.” I might not want to entirely trust what I remembered from before all this either. Not when I’d already been so out of it that I couldn’t even do basic multiplication. A hundred hundred deaths means *ten* thousand deaths, not just one.

Dad cursed everyone involved to high hells – repeatedly – but otherwise summed up things as well as he could.

On the first day, Antonidas had played warden for both the assassin and the dragon while helping to put out the fires with unrestrained applications of elementalism. On the second day, Richard finally got here, and after a tense standoff with the dragon – who’d swept down thinking to protect *me* from his party until Richard brought out the Light – took over security of the farm and the prisoners. This freed Antonidas to take his leave to retrieve *his* prisoner that he’d been escorting to Alterac City. He’d had to leave him behind with a couple of soldiers while he flew ahead to investigate the terrible ruckus we were making.

That prisoner was Howard, our farmhand. Who had been the bronze dragon Kairozdormu in disguise all this time. Something which Antonidas *hadn’t* realized until his talk with me, which raised the question of what else had called for his arrest.

“Bloody wizard damn right *should* feel like an imbecile,” Dad grouched as he told me what Antonidas had muttered about himself after he only made that connection during his talk with me. Apparently. “How does he think I feel about it? A bloody time dragon older than this country and I had him shovelling dung.”

“That must’ve been some talk.” Especially since I’d only just made that connection myself. “Did I just imagine it, or was the bronze dragon really watching from the ridge while I was Lightforging the black one?”

“Is that the word?” Dad muttered. “No, he was definitely there. Watched the whole thing and didn’t do shit to help while you were taking the tarnish off the other lizard. Sat on the ridge the whole time and then just flew off, the cunt, good fucking riddance.”

*Maybe not so good.* “Do we know what happened with Howard since? Why was he even arrested? Do we know why he *let* himself be arrested, how did Antonidas even find him? Twice, apparently?”

“I’m sure the wizard must know, but I didn’t ask, m’sorry, son, I got – I didn’t have it in me to care, I guess it’s another thing I’ve bolloxed up.”

“No, it’s alright.” I wrestled with the complete lack of will to get out of bed. I lost. “How’s mother?”

Dad put his handkerchief away and his hands on his knees where he sat next to me. “The Duke healed her best he could, but I’m starting to think he shouldn’t have. She only used her quick recovery to start working herself to distraction.” He gripped his pant legs. “I buried your – the – I buried them. The wizard offered to put them in stasis, some sort of crystal spell while we waited for – I didn’t – I said no.” He didn’t meet my eyes. “You were dealing with enough as is.”

I sighed and rubbed his back.

Dad sagged, then flinched away from me in self-disgust. He got up and made for the door. “I’ll collect the who’s who. Take your time.”

I didn’t get a chance to reply before the door closed after him.

*Reality intrudes when it wants.*

~ Forbearance, Confidence, Concern ~

Granodior had been waiting for me to regain myself as well, confident I would but concerned all the same. *How are you? Is the cleansing going well? Do you need me to do anything?*

~ Determination, Confidence, Fortitude ~

It was going well, but there was a lot to be done still, and it would take some time in human terms so I’d better not worry about it and focus on myself for a change. Mostly what I expected really, except for one thing. *You prioritised the surface soil. Just for us. Thank you.*

~ You Prioritised Me, Commitment Trumps Want, Largesse is only Natural ~

I didn't go into that fight planning to do him any favors, but he didn't care because I committed to it anyway, and immediately did my part and then some. Quite appropriately, spirits followed the spirit of pacts, not the letter. Speaking of spirits though. *Where are the little steam heads, do you know?*

~ Pique, Understanding, Sympathy ~

I saw a brief vision of the nine little ones sulking in the ever-steaming cauldron. Granodior was annoyed with them, but understanding of... whatever it was they were upset over that *didn't* immediately go away when they felt me recover. I'd have expected them to swarm me by now, but they were staying put. Then again, I could barely get myself going, never mind the Aura of Vigor.

The ever-burning cauldron had a mageflame now, instead of coal and firewood.

Also, Granodior had been bizarrely dissembling just now, while conveying the vision. The feelings he added to it weren't his *strongest* feelings. He was hiding something from me. Deliberately.

*Do you want me to ask?*

~ No ~

Well.

That was blunt.

Finally, I managed to rise from my bed. When no dizzy spell came over me, I walked out of the room to find Bart wringing his hands. "Your Worship – I mean Young Master! (The Master warned me not to slip too, shit) I'm to escort you downstairs at your leisure."

"... Good recovery." I said flatly. "For my father's sake, I'll allow you to treat me like the lackwit I've been these past few days. You can walk next to me while I prop myself on your shoulder. This once. Now let's get this over with."

"Right you are, milord!"

*Was I ennobled when I wasn't looking?*

The 'who's who' were waiting in the living room. Other than my father, there was Richard there, Antonidas, Jorach Ravenholdt – in manacles *and* glowing arcane force bindings on his ankles and wrists – as well as Narett for some reason, my incidental business adjacent and

teacher in Alchemy. He and the wizard were glaring at each other. I'd interrupted some manner of standoff. No dragon though.

"My Lord." "Young Sir." "Your Worship." "Young One."

I didn't reply. I was looking through the window. At some point, our front lawn had been completely overtaken by a massive pavilion, and there was a literal war tent beyond that.

My father dismissed Bart and led me to the chair at the head of the table, where there was a late breakfast and steaming cup of tea waiting for me. I looked around for mother, but she didn't materialize. A meaningful glance to father got me a sad shake of his head. None of this was fine.

I ignored the food and the proffered seat. "Duke Angevin, could you come over here please?"

The Duke quietly did so.

I grabbed the back of his head and pulled him until our foreheads touched. "Richard. Hire a teleport wizard."

The man slumped in relief, what did he think I was going to say? Do? "Yes. Yes of course, I've already talked about it with the Dalaran representative. Magus Antonidas has been helping me and my men go to and back from my keep in the meanwhile."

*I have a Dalaran 'representative,' what even is my status right now?*

I let him go and leaned with my hands on the table while he withdrew. If I sat down, I might not muster the willpower to get back up for another day. "I'll go over the precise damages later, but do we still have our map at least?"

Antonidas cleared his throat. "If I may?"

"Go ahead."

With a short spell, there was suddenly a perfect bird's eye view of our property and the surrounding lands, moving in real time.

Opportunity had come belatedly, but I wasn't going to let it slip. "I'm going to talk to you about arcane instruction after this, just so you know. Please don't go anywhere."

"Very well."

Just like that? Again? "Alright, people, catch me up on what I missed."

The answer was ‘not much besides what I’d deduced,’ but only because no one involved could escalate beyond a murder dragon, the Master of Assassins had proven more cooperative than a beehive, and Duke Richard Angevin had managed – with wizard help – to bring just enough soldiers to stay *barely* ahead of the complications created by the *over a hundred pilgrims* currently camped at the foot of the valley. With at least half a dozen more arriving each day. A number that was steadily rising and had only been prevented from camping at our literal doorstep thanks to the soldiers aforementioned.

Our fences and gate were all gone because of the flames and the lava.

“You’d think the roars and smoke would have warned them away, but many have come regardless, curious of the bright spectacle in the sky.” I had a *duke* reporting to me like I was his liege lord, Richard had completely meant it about becoming my disciple, hadn’t he? “Some had real need for healing. I’ve done all I could for them in your absence, but I’ve had no more success at curing true sickness than the clergy. As for the remaining few... They think you can bring their loved ones back from the grave.”

The silence that followed was only less breathless than the *additional* silence upon me not immediately dismissing the notion.

“Can you?” Antonidas dared when no one else would.

“If the future had a big enough need for it, I could probably figure out something.” The Light could power and restore anything, the Arcane could conjure and move anything, Uther haunted his grave for years, and managing the souls of the departed was half the point of shamanism. Even if I – or someone else – didn’t figure out how to combine all that, there was a Titan whose entire life revolved around making spare bodies for people.

None of his ravens were in sight at the moment, but there was one simple fact bolstering my confidence – Geirrvif the Valkyrie was standing sentry on the roof right now. “There is no such need, though, so for the foreseeable future we’ll remain limited to the very recently fallen, and even then only *if* an angel also happens to be hovering nearby.” No reaction from the valkyrie, I suppose I should appreciate that she respected privacy. Even if it was probably out of courtesy to me, instead of the norm. “Richard.”

“Yes?”

“Is there danger of rioting if I don’t give the answer they want?”

“I don’t think so. They’ve not behaved like a mob. Even if they did, my soldiers can contain them, at least in their current numbers.”

“Then I’ll be going over there to disappoint everyone personally. Later.” I ignored Father’s worry and looked to Antonidas next. “Magus d’Ambrosio. Please believe me that I mean absolutely no disrespect by asking: why are you still here?”

Antonidas grimaced. “I requested my stay in Alterac be extended while I seek amends for my part in the attack on your home.”

What did he just say?

“Your part in *what?*” Richard exploded.

“Had I not come after your... farmhand when I did, he might have lingered and been here to repel the attack.”

Richard subsided, though he still glared at the mage suspiciously, their collaboration must have been fraught with more tension than previously implied, so far. I scratched my cheek, reminding myself not to jump to conclusions. “Yes, alright. Dare I ask why you were after him in the first place?”

Antonidas hesitated. “There is no easy way to say this – all signs point to him being the mastermind behind the purge of the nobility.”

For a moment, I seriously wondered if this was all a dream. “Excuse me?”

Antonidas repeating it didn’t make it sound any less insane.

“Explain. Please. At length.”

Antonidas did more than explain. He detailed his entire investigation item by item with no embellishment or artifice.

By the end, Richard looked fit to march into the royal palace and strangle the dragon-man on the torture table. “That cur! I’ll kill him, I’ll wring his scaly neck I will, you’re saying he caused it all?! All those people – my whole family, they – because – because what? Why? What the hell was he after? Bloody dragons, how many of them have their nose in our business?”

*At least one more than you know about.* “Somehow, I doubt that getting everyone off my case was the only goal.” I’d never imagined this as the answer to why all my problems went away with the hangings. I’d sooner have expected the Archbishop to have done something. Also...

the Kairozdormu I knew of had an issue with overestimating the reliability of other people in his plans – it was what killed him. But the plans themselves and, most importantly, *his* own part in them were very carefully arranged and seen through. Successfully. “Richard, I’m sorry your family got caught up in it.”

Richard slammed his fist into the table. “You will *not* take blame for the actions of that thing!”

“I’m not. I can be sorry just fine without it.”

The man faltered, but his glare returned and pinned Antonidas again. “Fine then. Wizard, what do *you* think of this madness?”

“Sabotaging Alterac from within in preparation for the approaching war *was* my best guess, but then I found out he was a bronze dragon with a lateral view of time,” Antonidas shrugged helplessly. “I could not even begin to speculate now. We mages are taught early on never to try and guess what goes on in the heads of wyrms, especially bronze ones.”

“I’m surprised you could even catch him the second time,” Narett said. “Or did he wait around until you caught up?”

“As a matter of fact, he did.” That shouldn’t have been as surprising as it was. “Per the guards, he gave them the slip immediately after I left – I surmise this was when he took his true form for the battle – only for them to stumble upon him the next day, huddled under old deadwood near the battle site and ‘shivering’ in ‘fear’ of what he’d just ‘witnessed.’ I might have been fooled into thinking he was nothing but a human fool after all, if not for... everything else I’ve learned and experienced since.”

I wanted to say something, but I couldn’t find the words because holy shit, my farmhand engineered the nobility purge. *Before* he’d gotten Dad to hire him, at which point he lived the farmhand’s life like he was born to it. The man who’d plowed our fields, shovelled shit, fed the pigs and collected eggs every morning was the same person who’d manipulated warriors, nobles, mages, and the king himself into the bloodiest political bloodbath in human history.

*He used us for plausible deniability? As an alibi? Sanctuary?*

No, it couldn’t have been just that, could it? He could have masqueraded as literally anything and anyone else. He could only have been here for me, why? Just to watch? Kairozdormu was the last bronze dragon I could imagine doing anything resembling non-interference, and his



involvement in the fight proved it. Proved it every bit as much as him bailing after I failed to live up to whatever visions he'd seen of me.

What was he thinking? Was he acting alone? Or was the whole bronze dragonflight in on this? Most importantly, *why*? I thought back, but no matter how I tried, I couldn't think of him ever going anywhere or doing anything odd at any hours, even with my second sight.

"Alright," I finally said for lack of something better, pinching my nose. "I won't even try to figure out the thought process behind any of that. I'll wait until I can get an explanation straight from the source."

"You might have a lot of waiting ahead of you then," Antonidas said grimly. "He has surrendered himself to the King, openly confessed to everything, and explicitly told me the last time I was allowed in his presence that he will refuse to talk to you if you try to get in to see him."

*Now why ever would he do that?*

"I never should've hired him," Dad said from a chair near the wall, head in his hands and sounding sick. "I never should've hired him."

"Don't be silly, Father, I didn't suspect a thing either." Though it was telling that Howard made himself scarce just after I developed the Soul gaze.

Antonidas pretended not to see my father's moment of weakness. "The King has since barred all from the dungeon, save himself and his handpicked torturer. Even Dalaran has been denied. The issue of jurisdiction was already split before, but with regards to dragons there are standing treaties between the Kirin Tor and all human nations. Alas, the King no longer cares who he offends."

That was another thing, why the hell would the dragon submit to imprisonment, never mind torture? Especially now, when the whole ruse was exposed? The mortal disguise wasn't merely skin-deep in dragons, when they turned into elves and humans they *were* elves and humans, however immortal and tough (if at all). Torture would be as painful and *real* as for any other woman or man. Maybe even the maiming would be permanent, depending on how the shapeshifting worked. Dragons could and often preferred to make love and *procreate* as bipedal humanoids, that's how real it got.

“Let me guess,” Narett spoke up in the quiet, his words were shockingly snide from what I knew as a calm and self-contained sage and teacher. “The Kirin Tor have since decided to wait and see – as usual – until the dragon acts out again and they can swoop in from a stronger bargaining position. In the meantime, they will argue it’s precisely so it *doesn’t* act out in offense at perceived interference with his grand schemes again.”

“The Council’s reasoning has not been conveyed to me.” I got the feeling the wizard only responded at all because he didn’t want to offend me by proxy. Antonidas was certainly only looking in my direction. “My mentor, Krasus of the Council of Six, has extended an invitation to discuss it with him directly.”

“You have a transmission stone already primed, I assume?”

“He meant in person.” Did he now? “At a time and place of your choosing, though he urges haste for obvious reasons.”

I sensed a fulcrum in the Light. It was like a laser pointed at my eyes, for lack of a better word, but I’d suffered much worse. “... Was that before or after you asked for an extension on your stay?”

The mage’s eyes sharpened but he replied regardless. “Before.”

“If you hadn’t made the request to make amends, do you believe the assignment would have been given you regardless?”

“If not me then to another.”

“You’re not sure you’d have been their first choice?”

“Not entirely, no.” He hesitated, but only briefly. “My investigation into the purge was done with their full knowledge or approval, but not the one into your employee.”

That was a surprise, but it didn’t *not* fit with the rest. “So, I almost had literally anyone but you in my home right now?” No by your leave, no nothing.

The man grimaced, hiding the humiliation he felt just a little too later. “I suppose I deserved that.”

He’d taken it wrong but that was fine, I could work with that too. “You misunderstand, I don’t mind that it’s you at all. I’ve been trying to get one of you mages to come down for a talk for months, but I never presumed to aim as high as the future head of the Council of Six.”

Antonidas blinked at me with that same incomprehension I'd only ever seen on Richard when I first called him by his future epithet.

*Also* like Richard, the future leader of the Kirin Tor was only lacking in context. Fortunately, I'd soon give it to him and then some. "Tell Archmage Krasus I only agree to a talk if the entire Council of Six is there for it." Antonidas was visibly surprised, but not visibly offended. "With respect to them, it can be over transmission stone instead – in fact, I'd much prefer it – but anything I'm willing to talk about without all of them present can go through you just fine."

Antonidas didn't seem to know if that was more alarming or flattering. Still no sign that he took what I said as an insult though. "I will relay your conditions."

It made me wonder about whatever impression I made on him. I suppose torturing an irredeemable enemy of all existence into holy enlightenment goes a long way with some people. And resurrection too, I suppose.

And on that note... "What of Verration?"

The glances that were exchanged were as complicated as they were varied. Eventually, Richard answered. "I got the impression he could have unleashed considerable... viciousness in your defence during our brief standoff. He has secluded himself ever since, however."

Dad hauled himself from his chair with a grunt. "What he means is the wrym's dug a hole under the ridge where we *used* to graze our cows and our sheep – they all died to the smoke, did I mention that? He hasn't come out. Even when your mother completely lost her mind the other day and went poking him – literally – asking if he was going to join us for dinner. He didn't react at all."

*Suicidal behaviour, shit.* Maybe it wasn't though? Maybe she just trusted my results as always? The Light had nothing to say either way, which helped precisely not at all.

I turned to the bound man who'd been calmly standing and waiting inside a sight and sound-blurring bubble all that time. At my glance, Antonidas dropped both spells.

"Jorach Ravenholdt."

The Lord of Ravenholdt Manor shook himself out of whatever trance he'd put himself in, gave the gathering a brief intent gaze, then looked at me with that same dignity from seven nights ago. "Most High Holiness."

“That’s the Archbishop’s style of address.”

“I’ve never used it for him and I never will.”

“I will play no word games with you. Talk plainly or not at all.”

“The Old Fowl of the Mountain affords no one styles or titles, save one.”

Fowl was a much more charged term here than on Earth. ‘Domesticated’ bird was certainly *not* its meaning. “You just afforded one to me.”

“Yes.”

“What about the king?”

The man looked at me squarely. “He has broken his vow as a ruler.”

No shit. “Which part?”

“I pledge to ask no service of you that might bring you into dishonor.”

If more people held their masters accountable to their own oaths, it would be a much different world. So would Earth. On the other hand, that pledge was subject to very wide interpretation, which was why few ever took it seriously as a cause for revolt. “You know, the man who originally invented your approach to things used it to subvert, displace, control and intimidate an empire. Eventually, even kings and the Emperor himself didn’t dare try to root him out, for fear that their own groom of the stool would stab them in their bed.” That was the history back on Earth, at least. How he reacted would tell me how Azeroth compares. “Am I truly supposed to believe you assassins answer to any master but yourselves?”

“It is as you say, we served no master but the Master of Assassins, once.” That being him. “Then the Fowl War happened, and we suffered first-hand the consequences of depriving humanity of all those with will and aspirations beyond our own.”

On Earth, the religious sect created by Hassan I Sabbah murdered, displaced or intimidated practically everyone of import in the Muslim lands until even Saladin backed down before them. Then the Mongols invaded and there were conspicuously no great generals or statesmen around to organize a proper defense. No historians ever seemed inclined to comment on how that might be connected to the systematic murder of every last brave and competent man not part of the hive mind.

On Azeroth, the Fowl War was the founding epic of Alterac, after a fashion. It was the conflict that occurred between Strom and Alterac after the last emperor's reign ended, named after the bird heraldries of the two belligerents. But everything I'd read or heard about it only convinced me nobody actually understood what happened there.

For one, the actual Alteraci in that mess were the Trollbane family, who now ruled Strom, not their homeland here. For another, with the Lord of Ravenholdt Hall calling himself by that term just now, I had to wonder if there might have been three sides to that war, instead of two.

The clincher, though, was that everyone 'agreed' that the war broke out when the Arathi bloodline decided to literally abandon their empire to found a new realm – Stormwind – prompting the ones left behind to make their best impression of the War of the Roses. It was absurd – the ruling dynasty of an empire doesn't just pack up and leave. At most I could believe the heir went off on a colonization mission and then the father died back home-

My thoughts course corrected. Facts and pattern recognition came together in a different form inside my mind. The Light rung like a bell at the edge of my perception.

I looked at Lord Jorach Ravenholdt. "The last Emperor," I said lowly as the realization set in. "You killed him."

There were sharp breaths around me.

"The fist incarnation of Ravenholdt Hall did, yes." The man's expression didn't even flicker. "They grew bloated and proud during times of peace, and so fared very poorly during war. A war they themselves started by culling all voices of sense and reason for generations, not even caring to pretend secrecy by the end, never mind temperance or discretion. Their hubris destroyed them. It could have been the end of all mankind if not for the elves constantly culling the trolls since the War of Founding."

I couldn't decide if the silence that descended upon the room was more shocked or horrified.

"The Prince denounced them, and the weakness and cowardice their reign had made of the land, boldly and bravely. The Emperor sent him away along with the multitudes drawn in by his charm. It was a bid to preserve his life, to fling a light into the future while he saw about a more measured approach. The first gambit succeeded, the rest did not, and so here we are."

Unfuckingbelievable.

The silence now was definitely horrified.

“When the hidden knives are bloodiest,” Narett said eventually. Slowly. “The veil concealing them is also thinnest, tattered, flapping loosely and failing to conceal the crime. Sending the revealing flame away is always a mistake.” The alchemist sighed then and glanced between my father and me. “But I can understand a parent not wanting his child’s life snuffed out before his.”

*At least there was still unsettled land to run to, unlike on Earth in my time.*

The others were far less sanguine, now that the pall was broken.

“My Lord,” Richard said. “Give me the word and I will slay him where he stands.”

“Not in the house,” Dad said weakly. “Outside.”

“It needn’t be a mess, I can strangle a man just fine.”

“And you can do it *not here*. Not where Agnes can see or hear.”

“My spells give me a great degree of control over his movements, I can-“

“Everyone quiet.”

Everyone shut up.

I looked at the man, trying to figure out what it was that kept him so level-headed. It didn’t look like pride, save maybe in not being party to the same mistakes as the founders of his organisation, not anymore a least. It couldn’t be self-delusion either, after the Judgment I called on him just a week ago. All I could see was a man sure of his place in the world, lacking any delusion about how dark and ugly that place was, and nonetheless at peace with whatever came next.

It, quite frankly, pissed me off like no tomorrow. “You know, my best judgment tells me I can make use of you. It tells me I might be able to spare you with minor consequences. I actually think you sound reasonable and believe you’re completely genuine. But I really just want to kill you and spare the world the burden of your evil.”

That, finally, seemed to bring the man’s unflappability to an end. It also seemed to surprise everyone else, but I’d leave figuring that one out for later.

“Tell me why I shouldn’t strike you down right now. Tell me why I shouldn’t declare total war of annihilation on your entire organisation. Believe me when I say, it doesn’t matter how good and patient you and yours are about insinuating yourselves in everyone’s business. I have all

the means I need to tell your kind apart from everyone else.” I barely refrained from not summoning the Soul gaze and burning his mind from within like I could have done the dragon. If I tried that in my current state, I might not be able to get back up for another week. “You have five minutes.”

Jorach nodded. “I’ve been gone and undoubtedly presumed dead for seven days. Darbel Montrose, whom you killed, was the other major contender to leadership of our order, if only through her outside importance as the King’s mistress. With both of us gone, there will be full blown shadow war over control of Ravenholdt Hall by now. Those who chafed under my strict standards will doubtless attempt to find new patrons, if not strike out on their own when their coups run into each other. Meanwhile, I expect at least a handful of my loyalists will have insinuated themselves among your pilgrims by now, as they won’t give me up for dead without seeing the body.”

I stared at the man.

So did everyone else.

“Loyalists.” I palmed my face. “You have factions. The Guild of Assassins has factions. Of course you do.”

“You needn’t show my face to the masses if you’d rather not taunt the King into another fit of madness. That said, I do have a distinctive token that will suffice for my people and only them, if I wore it over, say, a face-concealing scarf or hooded cloak. If you do decide the world has suffered me and mine enough, I would nonetheless recommend that you first parade me around like a trophy so you make the most of your captured asset.”

“... The sheer balls on this man,” Richard muttered in disbelief.

Somehow, I didn’t gape. But it was a close thing. “Are you being serious right now?”

“Yes.”

I’d never run into a situation when someone’s calm could piss me off so much. “You know, I actually do want to parade you around now, but just so I can get those minions of yours to also come forward so I can rid the world of them as well, and however many others I can round up through them. Does that change your answer at all?”

“... If *you* decide we are beyond saving, then so be it, and may whoever takes my place be wiser than to swear to such service as that which sullied us so utterly.”

I really wanted to be angry at him, but he wasn't making it easy at all. I wanted to believe him too, but knowing the Soulgaze had precisely the consequence I'd foreseen – it made me mistrust my judgment when I couldn't use it.

Then again...

“Richard, come over here.” I waited until he was next to me. “Look into this man's eyes.”

To his credit, Ravenholdt didn't hesitate to obey the implied command to meet the gaze of my paladin.

“The common man needs to put much time and mind into trying to understand people, often failing even after hours, days, years of talking and trying to get each other to come around to their way of thinking. *We* don't need any of that. The Light Reveals. It needs only a driving force, a *will* to enact a direct and instantaneous challenge. Your beliefs against his, no lies, no pretense, no ambiguous words. All you need to do is face your own potential false beliefs. Be brave enough to acknowledge the possibility that the Light will reveal more of you than him. Accept the risk that you might come around to his way of thinking. Empathise with him. Sympathise, even. The Light cares about feelings but has no concept of thought crime and judges only by actions based on which way *all* the facts fall.”

Richard's eyes were ablaze. “I can see it.”

“The Light works intuitively. There's only you and him, directly connected, synchronized. Two judgments. Two spirits. One single Truth regardless of either of your beliefs on *anything*. Shine the Light on it, Richard. The Light Reveals. *Commit.*”

There was no visible sign that the Souglaze was invoked for the first time by someone other than me, but the results were immediate.

I barely kept Richard on his feet.

In front of us, the Master of Assassins dropped to his knees with a cry of...

Wonderment?

The chains rattled in tandem with arcane flares as the manacles kept the assassin's hands from cradling his head. “Even – your servants – such calibre – out of this world.” Ravenholdt gasped, his breath rattling heavy with vindication as he looked up at me with the zeal of the converted.



“Truly, I am fortunate beyond all of my forebears. None that came before me were blessed with such rapturous certainty as this.”

... How much of me came through Richard’s soulgaze? If my paladin’s Covenant was to *my* Covenant, and my Covenant was the future itself, one he’d directly experienced in *our* Soulgaze, then here, now, Ravenholdt would have-

“He’s genuine,” Richard rasped as he swayed on his feet in my grip. “He’s – he’s not crazy, he’s not even deluded he – he’s committed. Just – not to what we’re committed.”

“Are our agendas in conflict?” Antonidas asked with his fingers formed into a seal that rendered Ravenholdt’s bonds still, and on that note what did these people think my agenda *was*? What did he mean ‘our’ agendas? “Is he a threat?”

“No – not to us, not here, he... He’s just completely unapologetic about finding his highest purpose in keeping the realm’s lowlives from running rampant. Not just in killing the vile, but in keeping a monopoly on... murder aforethought.”

Say what? Seriously? “And what did the Light have to say about that?”

“It... didn’t highlight any particular facts to the contrary.”

... A monopoly on premeditated murder *would* have the same deleterious effects on the supply and quality of its object as any other monopoly. But did that actually mean Ravenholdt was aware of that? Was *always* aware of that? Was he keeping effective assassination and subterfuge limited to a chosen few deliberately? Or was he just faking it till he made it? On the matter of people in need of killing, I was never going to deny that the world is always better off with people-shaped monsters dead, but we already saw Ravenholdt didn’t always get to choose his marks.

*But then you start to wonder where the line is for treason instead.*

I closed my eyes and tried to assess things as objectively as I could without leaning on the Light for input. I’d have to wait until I could Soulgaze people again myself to make sure, but in the meantime...

*Jorach Ravenholdt not being in charge of the assassins led to my home burned down and my brothers murdered in the womb.*

There was only one logical conclusion.

*I am emotionally compromised.*

“Richard.”

My paladin shook his head and regained his feet. “I’m fine.”

“What do you want to do?”

“What?”

“What do you want to do with him?”

The man was so honestly surprised I valued his input that it almost sent me on a rant about self-determination and yes-men. Fortunately for him, I had no more willpower for that than anything else right now.

Almost. “You’re the one with the first-hand insight, and the Light is only stronger in you for it.” That much I could still sense at least, even in my state. “I trust your judgment.”

The man was visibly touched, the regard he must hold for me must be high indeed.

He didn’t look entirely confident when he looked at the other man though. “... I really just want to kill him and his. Scorch the earth.” He sighed gustily then. “But I wouldn’t know where to begin rooting them out, even if we find and take their headquarters. Especially if they’re half as frustrating to deal with as him.”

As glad as I was to have my own feelings vindicated, that admission still felt unsatisfying.

Soon, though, Richard seemed to get an idea. Or half an idea, half realization from whatever it was he’d just seen in his soul. “You know what, let’s do that – let’s bet it all on skill, assassin. I don’t care how much use you can be, it’s not worth it, the world would be better off without you and your wretched legacy. That you rightly acknowledge Lord Ferdinand as the best master for you is hardly proof of character, when it can be said just as easily of anyone else.”

Alright, let’s maybe not go quite *that* far-

“If killing you will propagate such evil as you claim you and yours to be capable of unleashing, I might at least be persuaded to stay your execution until I’ve used you to root out the rest of the rats. Prove to me your men are as much of a nuisance as you believe. Give me proof of skill.”

Jorach Ravenholdt climbed to his feet, frowned thoughtfully at his assigned judge, then looked to me for approval.

Approval for what? “Make it good.”

The Master of Assassins flexed his wrists twice. “Very well.” The empty manacles hadn’t even reached the ground when the shadow of his existence skid to a wide halt right behind where Antonidas had been standing.

The wizard teleported behind me and enveloped Richard and I in his forcefield a full second *after* Jorach Ravenholdt had slipped back into reality out of the shadows cast on him *by his own clothes*.

*I was wondering how he’d slipped out of my spell, back then.*

“Holy fuck!” Dad screamed, clutching his heart as he jumped back. The chair tipped over as he stumbled into it, clattering loudly. “Bloody – fuckmothering – don’t do that!”

“My apologies,” the Master of Assassins said earnestly, holding his hands above his head. And mom’s kitchen knife. “I will make whatever amends My Lord dictates.”

I’d read many scenes like this in my previous life. You never really appreciate them, though, until your father is the one trapped alone with a master murderer on the other side of the forcefield.

“If it helps,” the murderer in question said deferentially. “That maneuver does require a certain preparation and state of mind.”

“You’ll work with Antonidas here until he has a way to hold you that you can’t escape.”

All ease wiped from his face, but the man nodded anyway.

“You’ll also work with the rest of us until we have some way to do that too, I’m sure you can come up with something.”

The man’s shoulders slumped ever so little, but he obeyed even through his grimace. “As you say.”

“I have a potion that will make it impossible to exert any mystical capabilities,” Narrett said as he came out of invisibility. “For a limited time at least. You know, if that is at all relevant to the situation.”

Wait, when had he vanished? I'd completely forgotten about him, and even in this state I wasn't *that* oblivious, what magic was this? Or alchemy? "I'll be picking your brain a lot, later. Jorach?"

The man sighed, waited for Richard to hold him at sword point, waited some more until Narett approached, accepted the potion and drank it all in one swoop. "Is that satisfactory?"

"Barely." It was something at least. "Magus Antonidas."

"Using my name is fine, Young Sir."

"Antonidas, then. Next time, protect my family first. I can probably come back from the dead, they can't."

The silence of the grave felt sinisterly familiar in the wake of my declaration.

So much so that, once again, only my father found the nerve to break it.

"... You can *what*!?"

"An on that note, please give me and my father some privacy. If the wizard agrees, Richard, you can bring Mercad here for what we talked about before."

“-. .-“

Fortunately, Dad managed to collect himself fine once there were no outsider eyes adding to his stress. He dealt with my latest leap in ability somewhat more calmly than usual – especially since it was still theoretical, thankfully – but that only spoke to the sheer number and intensity of the shocks he had received in such a short time.

Mother was unnaturally put together when I went looking for her, asking me how I felt and if there was something I needed and not to worry about the food, lunch will be my favorite, would we be entertaining guests? It was all said by rote after giving me a short hug, and then 'accidentally' avoiding all my attempts to move in for a real long one for ten whole minutes.

I briefly considered humoring her bubble of decorum and damn the consequences, but you didn't enable self-destructive behaviour. Maybe on the first day or two, but not after a whole week of compounding unhealthy coping mechanisms. There was emotional deflection and then there was *this* nonsense.

"Mother-"

“I’m not getting into this with you, Wayland,” My mother calmly interrupted me. “I can deal with my own demons. I’m the lady of this house and I’ll do my part, so you should go and do yours. Your purpose is not in here, it’s out there.”

“Don’t presume to tell me what my purpose is.”

The plate somehow didn’t shatter as mother dropped it in the sink, shocked at my tone. But she didn’t turn to face me.

I walked over to stand behind her. “Because I respect you as my mother, I’m going to respect your wish to deal with this in the unhealthiest manner possible. This once. But let’s be clear.” I leaned forward. “When you break – and you will – father and I are the ones who’ll have to pick up the pieces.” I stepped back. “We’ll do it, because we love you. But we’ll hate every moment of it, and you’ll hate yourself every moment of it, much more than you hate yourself right now.”

I waited to see if she was going to say anything else. When she didn’t, I left the house and went down to heal the people who didn’t deny they needed help.

*Give it time, I told myself. It’s enough that I didn’t enable her repression. For now, it’s all I can do.*

Narett caught me just outside, though. Without even a bit of pretense, he offered to ‘help mother with cooking and the like’ for the day. I was glad he did, the thought that mother might need to be put on suicide watch was only less horrifying than the terrible notion that she might go through with it when I wasn’t there. Soul-weariness aside, I had too many fires to put out right now to watch over her by myself.

I didn’t ask my father why *he* wasn’t sticking to mother. Not when he still failed in his attempts to not look like he was terrified I’d drop dead or lose my mind at any moment.

For better or worse, Richard came back with his long-suffering Captain soon enough that the awkwardness between my parents and I didn’t have time to sour into something worse.

Mercad Occitanier was sceptical about my claims of mind protection, and doubly sceptical about his highborn employer playing sycophant to anyone, ‘regardless if they’re a divine avatar or last week’s guttersnipe or whatever croc he’s peddling this time.’ But since he did it from a place of loyalty, I ignored his griping and talked Richard through the process of searing the Aegishjalmur into his skull. We needed Antonidas to conjure a mould of the stave for Richard

to use as visual reference, but he ultimately succeeded because he's a quick learner, and Mercad sat through quietly because he's a good and loyal soldier.

The captain was a *bit* less sceptical when it was over, but nonetheless made sure to convey to his lord how much he disapproved of being sent away –again – where he couldn't handle his safety personally. Alas, the reward for a good job is the next job, and there was no one else Richard trusted to be Regent of his lands in his absence. Not while his wife and daughter were in another country for *their* own safety.

The man nodded stiffly and proceeded to send me the most judgmental and threatening silence I'd ever been on the receiving end of, all the way to the end of the teleport spell.

Antonidas inquired after the staves and runes I'd used in the procedure, so I briefly lent him my latest draft of the primer to conjure a copy of for himself and Dalaran. There was no reason I could think of for why the staves couldn't be powered by the Arcane, with the proper twist in the pattern.

Sometime later, I finally walked down into the lair that a certain dragon had dug into what had once been our pasture. Antonidas had retired to his tent – Richard had thoughtfully had tents put up for all the 'notables imposing on my hospitality' – to contact the Council of Six with my reply.

He'd not asked whether or not there was anything I wanted put in or kept out of his update, which told me all I needed to know about what role he was *really* playing here. It certainly removed any lingering misgivings I had about what I planned to do, if the whole council actually agreed to speak with me.

Richard was sticking by me, though, and Dad also insisted on coming along despite the prospect quite blatantly terrifying him. I didn't blame him. Especially once we finally reached the curled up mass of flesh and scales doing their best impression of an inanimate wall one second away from going up like a bright explosion.

"If you're just going to sulk, then your existence will never be anything else than worthless."

The black and gold body moved like the wind and suddenly I was staring at an immense, serpentine eye.

*He looks different.* I studied the outlines as well as I could in the darkness. Fortunately, the Light still coursed through him enough that it seemed to shine from underneath his scales, more

so every time he inhaled. *No more pot belly, more catlike general shape than lizard.* Wings were different too, bigger, much wider span, three clawed fingers instead of one at the crux of where the wings folded, he could probably use them as a third pair of limbs, and his forelimbs were longer too, with almost humanoid mobility in the shoulders. The bone structure was different as well, more... symmetrical, length-wise. *He could probably walk on two legs comfortably now, maybe even fly standing upright.*

I couldn't help myself. "What a magnificent sight I've bestowed on this world."

The gargantuan creature suddenly vanished in a whirl of folding flesh and golden light to leave just a man kneeling with his head bowed low at my feet.

"There are no words for how wretched I am."

"There aren't, no." A merchant, a guard, the lord of all assassins, and now even a dragon, everyone was throwing themselves at my mercy these days. "You'll just have to stop being a wretch and then you'll have all the words you need."

"I am yours to command. Yours and your heirs'. Use me as you see fit."

Me and my heirs, he was explicitly locking himself *out* of the differing lifespan loophole. I mean sure, I'd solved the telomerase bottleneck ages ago, but I could still be killed. "Are you saying that because you mean it, or because you know I won't ill use you like the lowliest scum you've been living as?"

"Both."

A safe answer, but I couldn't really complain if it was also the true one. "The going rate is food, board, and five coppers a day."

A pause, then the dragon-turned-man raised his head to look at me in confusion. "I beg your pardon?" The coarse coppery hair and neat horseshoe beard made an odd contrast with his miserable demeanor.

I wouldn't have been able to pretend glibness in the face of the sight even if I wanted. Standing over him in the dark, I felt like I was looking at the most ill-starred man going senile from unwarranted pain and suffering before he even lived out his middle years. I had to help him somehow. If he remained like this and wasted away after everything, it would be a tragedy.

I was all out of patience for tragedy. “Should I call you by the names I know, or do you have another you prefer?”

“... I haven’t given it any thought.”

“So you do want to sunder yourself from the past, but don’t have good ideas for how yet. That’s alright. While you figure that out, I’ll be calling you Emerentius. In the language of the greatest empire you’ve never heard of, it means ‘to fully deserve.’”

The dragon... The man...

He looked like he might cry.

I seriously considered hugging him, but on reflection I realized it wasn’t what he needed right now. Right now, for the sake of his mental health, what he most needed was dignity. Anything else could wait. “My dad’s great-granddad used to say there’s no dignity as great as becoming an honest farmer.” Of course, the man also said that one shouldn’t let pride affect your ability to be an effective asshole, but I’d already proven the two were not mutually exclusive. “The going rate is food, board and five coppers a day.”

“I’m... afraid I still don’t understand.”

“The other dragon I had as a farmhand ran off. Congratulations, you’re hired.” I reached down and hoisted him to his feet. His human form was strong and every bit as heavyset as a man could be without making acrobatics impossible, but still shorter than me. “For anything beyond the remit of your job, we’ll be settling separately as it comes up. My current offer on that front is sanctuary, training in the Light, and my life-long friendship in exchange for you no longer moping like some flush mushroom.”

I waited for him to say something. Do anything.

He didn’t though.

I let him go and stepped back. “That’s all I had to say. Whatever you decide, I hope you find a way to be well again.”

“... I don’t know how.” The man-dragon said hesitantly. “I would swear myself as your thrall if I did not know you would spurn such debasement, however well earned.”

I didn’t show how much that conflicted me. “At least you’re self-aware enough to know it’s debasement.”



I turned around and set off without waiting for him. Richard and Dad looked between the two of us as I rejoined them, but they fell into step without a word. Finally, just when I was wondering if I'd handled that wrong, I heard my dragon disciple fall into step behind us, albeit at some distance so the others wouldn't feel threatened.

We emerged to the sight of the noonday sun shining brightly down on the world. Antonidas was waiting for me some ways to the right. Jorach Ravenholdt was sitting on a boulder precisely where I'd ordered him to wait for our return.

When he and Fahrad – Emerent now – saw each other, there was a long moment where they both sized each other up.

To my surprise, Emerent spoke first. “For the sake of our past comradery, I will give this one warning – If you seek conflict with this place and its denizens again, I will not hold back.”

Jorach groaned and rubbed his forehead. Groaned. In *exasperation*, the nerve of him. “You don't need ultimatums and threats, I know where the wind is blowing just fine without them. The only reason I've not sworn myself to *our* new master properly is because he still won't let me. So long as the winds are favourable to the nation and mankind as a whole, I need nothing further.”

I had to take a moment to process the sad reality that the only person in my entourage who I could currently trust *not* to blindly follow me off the edge of Outland was the contract killer.

*Give it time.*

I hoped.

“Young Sir.”

“Magus d' Ambrosio.”

I saw him notice me use the formal address again, but he didn't comment on it. “It happens that the Council of Six is in session and can accept your communication right now, if it pleases you.”

Well now, don't I rate just the highest on the foreign relations priority list? “Convenient.” Though not in any way any of them expects. And they were clearly expecting plenty, including that I'd finally be active again today, if they were ready to drop everything else on such short

notice. *“If you stay on after my talk with your leaders, you can call me by name as well. Now show me how to operate this thing.”*

Antonidas clearly wanted to ask, but instead did as I bid and showed me what to turn and fit together so that the hologram of the Council of Six sprung to life in front of me.

“Greetings,” said one of them, a middle-aged woman by the looks of it, but who knew depending on how well they’d harnessed the Arcane to extend their lives?

“Lord Wayland, Duke Angevin, and dependents,” Antonidas intoned. “Be known to the Leaders of the Kirin Tor. The one who just greeted you is Archmage Modera. From her right, in order, you have Archmages Vargoth, Kel’Thusad, Drenden, Prince Kael’Thas Sunstrider of Quel’Thalas, and finally-“

“Korialstrasz.” I said. “Prime consort of the Aspect of Life Alexstrasza, leader of the Red Dragonflight, Queen of Dragons.”

You couldn’t quite cut the silence that followed with a knife, but only because the ridge was quite windy at this time of day.

“What’s this?” Vargoth spoke first, even though I’d seen Kel’Thusad recover first only to wait.

“I beg pardon for my abruptness, but we all have more urgent things to do than play pretend.” I looked at Krasus with the most non-judgmental look I could muster for someone who’d made it his life to deceive and mislead. He had no ill intent, I had to remember that. It may not be the same thing, but I still hadn’t told anyone about being reincarnated either. “With all respect due to the guardians of life, mankind can handle its own affairs. In the interest of not interfering with the affairs of dragons, however, I’m willing to consider allowing supervised access to my newest disciple to one of you. Specifically, Lady Rheastrasza. Please let her know not to come as a goblin.”

I waited for a reply. No one said anything, on either side. There were many appalled looks though. And some not so appalled ones, especially from Kel’Thusad and Kael’Thas.

That was fine by me. “A Kirin Tor envoy under no false pretenses will, however, be entirely welcome for the meanwhile. I value authenticity very highly, you see. In that same spirit, I am hereby informing you that I’ll try my very best to poach Antonidas from you. I’m sure he can go back to lead you all like he’s supposed to, if destiny really must have him at the head of

your council in ten or fifteen years. I really am a man, not a dragon like *some* people, so I can't see all that accurately so far ahead."

It was hard to tell if I was the subject of most of the judgmental looks, or Krasus.

"I wish you a better week than mine." I moved to disconnect the device, but paused and did give a flat stare this time, to all six of them. "Just so we're clear, if you try to put a leash on me again, we're going to have problems."

I disjoined the transmitter, causing the arcane hologram to disappear.

"What the *hell*, boy?!"

Oh dear. Dad was not coping well at all. "I can let you talk to them next time?"

"What-NO! No, that's not what I meant! Oh Tyr, bandits, soldiers, dragons, and now this! Tyr save me, what did I do to deserve this?!" My poor father, having finally reached the end of his rope, threw his arms in disgust, turned around and stomped off as viciously as his legs could take him.

I waved in parting. He gave me the finger. Good man.

Antonidas was staring at me, aghast.

I dropped the transmission device into his hands. "Krasus is a good and noble person, but with three for three on the number of dragons who've stuck their nose in my business within the span of a single week, I'm going to err on the side of transparency for the foreseeable future." I put my hands on his shoulders. "I'm glad it's you here, though. Literally the best possible option. Now." I let him go. "Do you want to be alone for a while, or do you want to come down to the pilgrims with us?"

Antonidas looked between the transmitter and me, his appalled face loosening into something that looked almost lost. "I... think I will keep to myself for a spell. By your leave?"

"I'm sorry for my part in things, if it makes any difference."

"... It does, actually." The mage gripped the transmission stone tightly and turned to leave. "I can at least trust *that* to be genuine."

I watched him leave. I pondered the immense power of credibility. I'd seen not even a moment when Antonidas even entertained the thought that I might be wrong or lying about his mentor.

I glanced at Jorach. “Go get ready. Don’t bother with hoods or masks or the sort. I want to know exactly what he achieved here.”

Jorach hesitated. “If that is your decision.”

“It is.”

“I’ll accompany you,” Richard told the assassin lord. “Just in case, you understand.”

Jorach grunted, showing his back to the man with not an ounce of fear. “Don’t I ever.”

I waited for them to be out of earshot. Then, finally, I turned to Emerent. “If nothing is changed, Rheastrasza will die for the sake of your kin in the future. She’ll successfully purify a black egg, and then let her own egg and herself be killed by Deathwing as a distraction while the purified black egg is spirited away. I’d ask forgiveness for not asking permission, but as I said, I like to keep things honest. I’d have made the same call regardless.”

A slow, deep breath. A rattling exhale. Eyes shining in the clear day like glass in the rain. “... Compassion like yours should be impossible.”

I shook my head. “On the contrary, compassion like this is the most common. That it’s rare is the first notion you need to lose. But I won’t rush you.” You don’t rush healing. “In the meanwhile, I’ll want you to write up everything you know about your colleagues and their methods and haunts.”

“I see. Of course.”

Wouldn’t do for the Master of the Assassin’s Order to get an inflated sense of his own importance. “Also, you’ll be teaching us and especially Antonidas how to detect dragons in disguise like you.”

“There aren’t any quick and dirty ways, our disguises aren’t *disguises*, they are true transformations.”

Just as I thought. “All the same, whatever you can think of, we’ll use.”

“As you say.”

“Good. Now come. Show me what it’s like to experience the world on dragon wings.”

“That I will do gladly.”

He did do it gladly, and the exhaustion that had been weighing down my spirit all day finally started to feel lighter.

When I reluctantly decided it was time to go down, I offered to let Richard ride behind me, but he manfully deferred on the wonderful experience. He chose to be borne in Emerent's fist instead. Because that was how Ravenholdt was going down there, he reasoned. It wouldn't do not to have anyone immediately on hand to strike him down if he tried to do a runner after all. Or worse.

"You've gathered a real treasure here," Emerent murmured in my ear on arcane winds as he bore us aloft. "The best and foremost of humanity, and first among them is a man so brave and good, so true."

And a bloody *duke* on top of that. "Yes, I have."

"I will defend it as if it were my own."

"Make one of your own too, while you're at it."

"I don't think I have it in me, but if I say that it will just make you sad, won't it?"

"Give it time. Immortality heals everything eventually."

"Even maiming?"

What kind? "Magic and technology will get there sooner than you think. But we won't need to wait that long regardless."

We landed right in the middle of the biggest encampment. From the air I'd counted over *two* hundred people in total, their numbers had begun to grow today much faster than before.

They were disappointed when I flatly told them there would be no grave exhumation. Some were heartbroken. A couple even left cursing me for giving them false hope for their precious daughter, despite the fearful awe from seeing me descend from on high on a giant monster. The strength of humanity could manifest in the oddest places.

Parading Jorach Ravenholdt around like a trophy did, however, have precisely the effect he'd promised me. And there were a fair few people with chronic issues around too, which I *could* help with. By proxy, at least.

"Richard, Emerent." I told my disciples. "I'll talk you through it. Diagnosis first, and then the rest. Since I'm still indisposed, you'll have to learn on the job as quickly as possible."

*Resurrecting the long dead aside, maybe a seance or five won't be amiss, if I can figure it out,* I thought as the petitioners gathered enough courage to form a line. I sent Emerent to talk to the ones who had difficulty standing or walking, since they were less likely to run away from him. *I'll need the practice for when I do need to start fishing for specific souls in the afterlife, in the future. Maybe.*

My disciples listened, learned, practiced and then some, all the way to late evening. Richard discovered a wellspring of patience for complex targeted treatments, while Emerentius found his own talent in reaching as many people as possible at once, especially in his dragon form. They learned so well and so diligently that I gave it two weeks before they picked up everything I could teach them.

So well and so diligently that even Richard's uncanny ability to track the exact location of my Master Assassin at all times finally failed him.

Jorach Ravenholdt stepped into my shadow right as dusk fell, murmuring quietly from my left. "In the interest of informed decision-making, the time window to assassinate King Perenolde with our current assets is not entirely closed quite yet."

The balls on this man really were unbelievable.

"No," I denied him, thinking of arcane magic, Light warding, material transmutation that was just a spirit's whisper away, and the sad reality that the sickness afflicting Alterac went well beyond any one person. "No, I already know what I'll do about that."