

Chapter 8 – The Dark Triad

“- July 12, Year 580 of the King’s Calendar .-“

“His Royal Majesty, Aiden Perenolde, by the Light’s Mandate King of Alterac, Master of Alterac Keep, Ruler of the Valley, and Defender of the People True, formally invites Wayland Hywel to Court, on this day of July 12, Year 580 of the King’s Calendar, there to finally determine his character, his role in recent events that have so affected the peace of the City, and, by grace of the Light and the Good, what place might be found for him in the Realm.”

What a nice invitation, except I got afforded no title, no accompaniment, no period of preparation, and my ‘place’ was yet to be determined so this wasn’t even the king commanding the plebe to come over or else.

I was being addressed as a *foreign interloper*.

I need to get my family out of the country.

“Very well. I will be ready momentarily.”

The sergeant rolled up his scroll “We are to escort you.”

“And I will be ready momentarily.”

“I’m afraid we were ordered to escort you there without delay.”

There were six crownsmen. The sergeant was one, three were holding back the crowd filling every inch of street and window I could see, and the last two walked purposely forward in an obvious plan to flank or surround me up until they bumped into an invisible wall.

The Shield of Light shimmered into view to bar the street from one edge to the other just long enough for them understand what knocked them on their ass.

Unfamiliar, bold and arrogant, these men could only have been purposely selected from those who’d been nowhere near today’s happenings.

Still, the leader only gawped briefly. He looked between me and his guards. Surprisingly pointedly for someone who’d just seen me create an impenetrable forcefield on a whim. “Why you... Young Sir, I must insist-”

“Your fellow sergeant murdered my business associate in the middle of the public square.” I said flatly. “I will have none of you at my back. You can decide alternative arrangements while I see about *my* arrangements.”

The sergeant turned visibly indignant – falsely – and opened his mouth-

I flexed my hands and a shimmer of gold passed over me as Aegishjalmur activated for but a moment.

The sergeant’s words caught in his throat. The offending guards drew back. Around us, the people looked upon the sight we made and muttered angrily on my behalf with all the religious outrage of an angry mob.

The Helm of Awe was otherwise known as the Helm of Terror. The mind protection was just a side effect.

The sergeant turned pale and closed his mouth. “... Very well. We will wait here.”

I turned around without another glance and passed through the gate and out of sight, thankful that it was as tall, solid and gapless as the fence wall circumventing the whole property. Orsur Kelsier had a healthy love of privacy which I could appreciate.

Duke Lionheart was waiting for me just inside, still in his surprisingly effective sellsword disguise. Having sent his captain ahead – under *very* vociferous protest – with his wife and sister, the duke had escorted me back to the city with part of his detachment, arguing that he needed to drop off the prisoners personally to make a point. I didn’t mind the time it gave me to teach him the basics of Light magic, at the time, but now...

I conveyed to the spirits to form a sound muffling screen around us and finally nodded at the man.

He looked at me grimly. “I heard.”

I set about collecting precisely nothing because no way was I going to bring anything important along. Instead I sat down on the bench and looked at the flowers. Master Orsur’s gardener still kept tending them despite being let go, so the marigolds were quite vibrant.

Truly, Alterac City was infuriating.

One moment you’re pleasantly blindsided by a business proposal guaranteed to solve all of your problems. Next moment you’re spending your literal favour with Heaven to resurrect

people in the middle of the public square. Based entirely on a shot in the dark that bringing people back to life should be possible *somehow* for that conveniently hovering angel over there.

I'd watched the process *very* closely. If I got to witness it another dozen more times, I might even be able to replicate it. Just as soon as I figured out a way to keep souls from moving on in the first place. Say about a decade or five.

Give or take depending on what would result from the doom waiting for me in the direction of the vulture's nest known as Alterac Keep.

Richard sidled up to me. "It was you up on the mountain, yes? That made me see those things."

"I don't know what others see in a Soul gaze." That, at least, was consistent with the fictional ability I named it for. But I was finding my version to vary quite significantly in utility, never mind depth of insight. "I just know what I see, and what I saw was enough to make me come down to meet you instead of skirting past."

Richard was silent.

Then he stepped in front of me and went down to one knee. "Holy One. Please teach me your ways."

I blinked, startled. Richard just watched me, humble, dignified and completely serious.

"My ways." Not my skills, not my abilities that he'd already made a good head start on during our two days of travel, not my knowledge or anything else specific. "Are you... asking to become my *disciple*?"

"Is that not the way of prophets?"

Incredulity, thy name is Wayland.

"Is it truly so unbelievable? Now?"

Incredulity, thy name is also *I didn't reincarnate into this world to become a cult leader!* "... How does the Light feel about this?"

"Like what I saw in that vision is the highest cause there can ever be."

"... Alright, I can't do this blind anymore." I conveyed to the spirits to make the sound muffling screen around us extra muffling. "What did you see?"

Richard described what he saw in my soul in excruciating, sharp detail. He was a very enthralling speaker.

A way with words isn't all he's got, I thought dumbly. "I... am forced to concede that your assessment is correct." I had my work cut out for me, didn't I? I mean... the scope of your commitment is what determined how strongly the Light responded to you, but getting independent verification of how much I had stacked against me was...

Holy hell.

Later. I'll deal with that *later*. "Are you sure you can handle it though?"

"I believe you can teach me how."

"Don't answer so unthinkingly. And don't put all the onus on me either. My enemy is a nigh-infinite army of demons from beyond the stars."

Richard's face slackened. "... What?"

I paused. That word had barely come out, weak and breathless.

Now why would he react like that? He himself just finished describing the burning legion and orcs and Sargeraz glaring down from space while every dragon – oh. "I'm afraid that the *components* of that allegory you so vividly described aren't allegories themselves."

"... Oh," Richard said numbly, looking at me with... I didn't even know. "Fuck."

I drove Richard Lionheart to profanity.

Curse the devil, this was all Sargeraz's fault.

And curse the universe too, for not giving me the time I need to see this poor man or *my* poor self through this revelation. "Some trials defy teachings," I grunted, acutely aware of the doom gaining on me like a pack of hyenas. "I'm about to undergo one myself. Before that though..." I put my hand on Richard's head and called the Light to *carve*.

My hand flashed gold for a moment, and when I withdrew it the Aegishjalmur glimmered clearly on Richard skull, before fading out of sight beneath his hair and skin.

Richard looked shaken, but tried to hide it even as he put a hand over his brow. "I... have never felt a blessing like this."

My 'blessing' is my way of keeping your head from being messed with. “It’s only a blessing in a manner of speaking. One I’ll have to do to your captain too, at some point.” And however many other people Richard could keep topped up.

“... That’ll be a task, convincing him.”

No it wouldn’t be, that man was exceptionally loyal and biddable for someone so lacking in morals of his own.

I stood up and considered the home. The front yard. The flower patches. The home said much about the owner. It would be a shame if anyone got any bright ideas.

I set about circumnavigating the property, channelling the Light down and around me, grounding it, infusing it as firmly as I could with every footstep. With my awareness steadily growing along with my Spirit, I had a new sense of my surroundings now. One that reached deep enough into the house to find the man who’d crashed to sleep the moment he sat down. I’d had to carry him to bed.

I overlaid my spirit over his and called the Light to Judge. Both of us. It was the same thing I’d done that killed the murderous guardsman, equal opportunity smiting made blasts of Light *very* potent. But since Orsur Kelsier had actual ethics and I invoked Protection instead of Retribution this time, it only gave me a sense of his character. Nothing as thorough as our Soulgaze from the meeting, but enough.

“Boldness is impatient. Courage is long-suffering.” Orsur Kelsier was no Spartan, but it wasn’t like those ancient people from Earth had a monopoly on wisdom, especially when they were nowhere as memetic in real life. Besides, when it came to the Light, an incantation worked best when it fit you too. “Boldness cannot endure hardship or delay, it is ravenous, it must feed on victory or it dies. Boldness makes its seat upon the air, it is gossamer and phantom. Courage plants its feet upon the earth and draws its strength from the Light’s holy fundament.”

The Light expanded in front and behind me, into the earth, above me and higher to enclose the entire property in a golden dome. It faded quickly, but its presence did not diminish. It was still there, ready to repel anyone that did not fit the anchor’s notion of Worthy Guest. It wouldn’t last more than a month or two without me, probably not even if I managed to convince a priest to come and pray for it every week, but short-term solutions were still solutions.

It was the same way I'd designed defences back home, though I was beginning to think that might not be secure enough, the longer I went without having Soul-gazed our farmhands. For one, their names were a bit on the nose, especially the last two. For another, Howard, Bart and Barney were paid employees, so not *technically* guests. The Light didn't care about technicalities like that, but I still wanted to be sure.

My powers are making me paranoid.

Of course, since the king's thugs had eschewed the principle of distinction to murder my new associate for the high crime of having too much of a conscience for the crown's cover-up, I was feeling quite entitled to my paranoia.

I made sure to explain to Richard everything I was doing, if only so he could explain it to the owner when he woke up.

There came loud and angry pounding on the gate, because of course they'd assume I meant to turtle in.

"Richard." I double checked that the sound muffling barriers was still there. "I'm being called before the king, and the summons is none too friendly. What would you, as my hypothetical disciple, do in this situation?"

"... Declare myself and publically pledge my protection, my loyalty and my faith."

...I have never felt more moved in either life. "Then it's a good thing I'm not saying yes." I could feel the Light in him waver, his self-doubt surging at my apparent rejection. "I refuse to make this decision under duress. And I refuse to accept any decision *you* make under duress about this. Commitment built on impulse is doomed from the start. If you're serious, though, we can discuss it properly later." I turned and lowered my face so that I wasn't too easy pickings for any possible lip readers or scryers from on high. "In the meanwhile, as a favour to me, I'd ask that you go to my home and lend my family your protection instead. We can discuss this further when I return."

Officially, Richard had already left the city again, so his presence at court wouldn't be expected.

"That comes without saying, I was going to offer regardless, but...Surely you will need protection as well?"

“I literally don’t have the words to convey how touched I am right now, but no, this is my decision.” Soulgaze *would* convey my feelings and then some, but it but it was unnecessary, and also rather distracting. It took a toll on the Spirit as well. I had plenty to spare now that I was constantly growing it, but the cost was about as much as I sacrificed to sustain my spirit minions for a day, so I should at least *try* to use restraint. Never mind that I’d already compromised on informed consent twice. Both times I had no other actionable way to ensure the right judgment call in the time available, but having to make excuses means you’ve already failed.

Truly a sad beginning to my all-new career as despicable cult leader.

The pounding on the gate stopped.

“If you could, please leave a message to Master Orsur that I probably won’t be able to follow through on my employment contract.”

“I will leave word with my men, if you think he will accept guards?”

“I meant a note, but I won’t refuse your generosity. Here, I’ll write a note that I vouch for you, so he doesn’t freak out when he finds them on his property.”

The sudden flare of the Ward that followed told me the guard had meant to smash it open. I ignored it and finished writing what I needed.

“Here. Be well, Richard. I’m leaving my guns here as well, just in case.” Except the pistol, my tunic was good enough for concealed carry. “If disaster strikes *somehow* between now and whatever little time it takes you to leave the city, feel free to use them.” I’d taught him – after Occitanier took the ‘risk’ first – the basics of shooting and trigger discipline on the way to the city, so it should be fine. “If things go sour... get my family out of the country?”

Richard clenched his fists. “... As you wish.”

“Thank you.”

The banging on the gate resumed.

“I’m coming, I’m coming! Light save me from unthinking brutes with less patience than a shrieking toddler!”

The guards were visibly surprised to see me come out, or maybe they were put off by my act of a sour old foggy? The sergeant, at least, composed himself quicker this time.

“Right. If you’ll follow us then?”

“After you.”

This time they didn’t push the issue and resigned themselves to just leading the way.

Whatever happened, at least it wouldn’t be covered up. The crowd was never not ahead of us, people left behind rushed through every other street to get in front for another look. There weren’t any crying mothers offering their children and begging for grace and blessings, but I could see the shape of them forming out of the future’s shadow with every step I took.

I had my spirit minions spread even further ahead than that, watching, listening, giving me far hearing and sight of everything happening, everything being done, everything being said all the way to the castle. The closer we got, the tighter the crowd drew until people were near enough to reach out and touch me, despite the pushback from my ‘escort.’ The closer we got, the more I could see into the Keep interior until my spirits reached the doors and ran wisp-first into a magic ward.

~Satiety, surprise, indignation.~

I was only surprised it didn’t encompass the courtyard as well. *Come back, little ones, and take shelter in my spirit for a change.*

~Satiety, shame, joy.~

For beings that could diffuse until they could see across mountains, they could also make themselves very small. Small enough to hide in my aura so that the wards didn’t even flicker when I passed through.

Sloppy design or intrinsic limitation? Come to think of it, I’d never heard of shamans or druids being rendered *completely* impotent on warded or otherwise inimical enemy ground, whether Dalaran or Icecrown Citadel. *Probably a hard limitation.*

~Satiety, smugness, let-me-at-em!~

Calm down, kids.

~Satiety, begrudging – HATE!~

I feel it too. It was foreign, sudden, unnatural, and aimed at me from above. I didn’t give myself away by looking, but used the sight of the spirits instead. There was a catwalk so high up that it was completely hidden in the darkness above the chandeliers, but spirit sight saw through

such things as easily as the Light did through my own. A man, as muscular as one could be without losing nimbleness, dark leathers, dark hood obscuring most of his face, a thick horseshoe moustache and small soul patch on the chin, coloured... I couldn't decide if it was blond or red.

As if feeling our notice anyway, the man withdrew into the dark and down through a small hatch.

The assassins have already been called.

I hadn't even met the king and he was already showing his machiavellianism.

That's one.

The guards broke away, leaving me standing in the middle of court. Which was in full attendance but *not* yet in session. Which meant I got to be gawked at by every worthy and unworthy that managed to shove their way into the hall, not counting the nobility already present. They were murmuring, chatting, whispering, gossiping about me.

And not just about me, really, even if they were clearly pretending aloofness, the court had suddenly changed its agenda and that was so inconvenient, that one wasn't planning to attend today, that one hadn't prepared her case yet, he couldn't find out what the fuss was about, but *she* did so what was his excuse, the unwashed masses had made travel difficult for everyone but you didn't see *him* complaining, and now look! Even that poor excuse of a drunkard had managed to stumble his way in, at least this time he managed *without* rolling through every pig sty on the way over but I never, just look at him hollering, what an unsightly display, why the guilds still hired him to play Greatfather Winter every damnable year they just couldn't understand, were they *trying* to give the king a reason to execute him, where are the guards when you need them, I do so declare!

“Oh, pox on your blustering you wet fish!” The blind man hollered at the noblewoman talking smack about him from the upper gallery, angrily waving his hip flask as he bumped into five different people. “You've not near enough butter on them cheeks to act like this so early in the day! Or do you? What would Falconcrest say?!”

“Wh-what are you – how *dare* you insinuate, you lowly – I am a married woman!”

“Not *happily*, way I hear!”

The man's scandalous histrionics allowed a young barefoot girl the chance to escape the crowd and come over to me like the tritest publicity stunt, holding out – *up*, children were so small to me these days – a flower. It was a ridiculous, weed-looking thing, ruffled, clearly picked up in a hurry between sprints, possibly through the fence of a stranger. Eight tiny flowerets making up the ugliest posy I'd seen all week. *Bupleurum*, I recalled from the times I did my accounting near mother in the garden. Coloured *acid green*.

I crouched down to take it. Looked – still down – at the common girl. Looked at the flower. On a whim, I poked it with my spirit. It was a new, clumsy skill I needed to ask my little elemental minions to demonstrate once or twice every attempt, but they were more than willing to bear through it since they got to munch on the waste energy every time.

Lady Anna's explanations hadn't really given me much to go on in terms of druidism, back in the valley, but it did finally help me figure out how to match Arcane patterns to verifiable phenomena. When I spent those few hours trying sync a walnut's patterns to those of the human mind, I'd expected it to become slightly better at what it already did, *maybe* become a consumable capable of boosting cognitive function. Eating one or two walnuts a day did that naturally, and also reduced the risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, depression, lots of good stuff. I certainly hadn't expected to turn it into a miniature brain. That Odyn would actually make good on my terrible joke of a food offering I hadn't expected at all.

Good way to assess his character, though, when deprived of my all new, easy option that I was probably going to fail miserably in not using it as a crutch for the rest of time. Soulgaze didn't work through familiars. Well, it had worked through my spirits, but only because they just gave Richard farsight to bridge the distance. Not the same thing as the soul being completely removed from the mind by several thousand kilometres in a flying fortress in the sky.

I watched the flower's patterns. Resisted the urge to tug and twist them lest I make the poor thing crumble or wither in my grasp, what an omen that would be! But still... Even if *Arcane* magic was still miles away from not blowing smoke in my face, it wasn't like natural order was inimical to improvement. And I *had* been wondering for a while...

Can you lightforge a plant?

Light... How could this flower best help our commitment?

The Light flowed through me, out through my fingers into the flower stem, then further, upwards like sieve coursing through the plasmodesmata, up through the sepals, petals, through

the pistil and stamen until they glowed, knitting with the Arcane patterns I saw through the plant's fibres, weaving around and through cells, sewing, livening, enhancing everything in accordance with my expansive notion of *wholesome good*, then reaching into the ether towards... *something* when that wasn't specific enough.

I could almost glimpse it at the edge of my mind, entangled, encompassing, kaleidoscopic, hazy as if through a green dream. The plant's very nature as understood by *Nature* and all the spare potential still unused.

The flower perked up. The blossoms gained their own glimmering light. The stem straightened. Then it grew *downwards* until it had regrown its missing parts with all their leaves, then further to regrow all the way to the roots. All it was missing was a bed. Soil. And *that* pattern was scattered all around me, as ubiquitous as it was clear.

The Light spread out through it like a lattice and I tugged *just* so.

The mud and dirt from a thousand boots flew together in my hand to form an all-new flowerbed.

Yes, I concluded. *You can, in fact, lightforge a plant.*

How much earth could I move at once with this trick?

I dropped the golden glowing flower back in the girl's hands, dirt and all.

She gaped at it in wonder. At me too.

Nobody was talking anymore.

I rose and motioned with my head in her mother's direction, and that, finally, broke her out of her spell and sent her running back.

The silence continued. It was honestly strange, by druidic standards what I'd just done was barely a cantrip. I doubted mages would find it particularly remarkable either.

Suddenly, the side door opened and the king's majordomo stepped forth to speak.

"All kneel!"

The moment I laid eyes on the King, I understood why I'd felt doomed all day.

"Presenting His Royal majesty, Aiden Perenolde, Fourth of His Name."

I understood why I was now beset by such absolute certainty that my chosen way of life was suddenly doomed to end.

“By the Light’s mandate, of the nation of Alterac and all its outposts and territories King.”

The Light cared about feelings but had no concept of thoughtcrime and judged you only by actions on a scale of warm, fuzzy calculus.

“Master of Alterac Keep.”

The Light was atemporal, which meant it occasionally earned you a very forward-looking understanding of your commitment and relative *choices*.

“Lord of the Valley and Defender of the People True.”

And, as I was now learning, it could synergize with sufficiently exceptional self-awareness of what it truly meant that your commitment was *mutual*, resulting in the starkest, most unambiguous, most unmerciful premonition.

“Sovereign of the Most Glorious Order of the White Vulture.”

Like when you were about to do something so cataclysmically ruinous to your Sacred Covenant that nothing you did could ever make up for it, nothing before, nothing after, neither alone, neither combined, nothing at all.

“Long May He Reign.”

The majordomo finished his spiel just as I came to terms with the grisly reminder of what having options actually meant when the excuse of ignorance did not exist.

King Aiden Perenolde took his throne and sat down. His gaze did a perfunctory roam over the hall before settling on me. For the first time, I launched the Soul gaze without even a scrap of hesitation. It didn’t activate. There was no reaction. I got nothing. There was nothing earnest, not towards me, not towards others, not even towards himself. Just a false man who’d already made up his mind, looking sternly back to me, proud, regal, and bereft of any scrap of will that could be considered sufficiently authentic common ground for a Soul gaze to connect us by.

Psychopathy makes two.

The Great Hall descended into silence. The silence deepened and stretched on and on. Then further and further as everyone waited in awkward, tense, steadily more and more aghast silence as they knelt. Everyone was on their knees.

Except me.

The majordomo looked unsurely between me and the king and cleared his throat. “Behold your sovereign,” he said, looking at me and then the ground. Pointedly.

I didn’t move.

The excuse of ignorance did not exist for me. The excuses of modesty and incompetence did not exist for the king. Somehow, I didn’t know how, if I bent here even the slightest – If I even *pretended* to bend here with all of these people watching – it would precipitate consequences so catastrophic that all my attempts to make a better future would fall dead.

“In the Alterac King’s court, it is customary for petitioners to kneel.”

But I’m not a petitioner, now am I?

I didn’t move.

The future would be lost. My commitment to the Light would be undone. My commitment to the Light would be *knowingly* undone.

The herald scowled and looked at the castle guards. The same people who escorted me here converged on me, grabbed me by the arms, by the shoulders and pulled down, first one, then two, then the sergeant joined in, all three pulling at me with all their weight. Their efforts were vindictive, unrestrained and completely useless. I didn’t move an inch. I stood there and stared in the king’s eyes.

The Light will leave me if I kneel to this man.

Losing the last of his patience, the sergeant swung the butt of his spear at the back of my knees.

“Hold!” the king ever so deniably barked *just* a moment too late.

The Light flared with bright and cold Retribution.

“AAAGH!”

The spear shattered in the man’s hands. The Light smote down. The man was thrown to the ground, hands bloodied and eyes blind.

“Agh – y-you bast-what – wait, what did you do to me – you bastard, I can’t – I can’t see! I can’t see!”

The Light only resulted in ‘curses’ when there was enough rot in the Spirit that too little was left of it to run everything, after it was burned out. This man must have had much rot in him indeed.

But the encroaching doom... it *wasn't* centred on Perenolde? It overlapped him but revolved around something else – *someone* else...? All the possibilities that came to mind were as alarming as they were quickly discarded when they didn't make the premonition resonate at all, so who then? Or what? Were they here right now? Weren't they? Why couldn't the light tell?

Leaning back on his throne, Aiden Perenolde gestured for the distraught man to be collected and carried out of the hall. After the rest of my 'escort' did that, looking back at me angrily and fearfully all the way out the door, the king sent a glance to his majordomo.

“All rise!”

The people finally climbed off the ground and began reclaiming their seats and spots, the awkward mood at odds with their thirst for the next exciting development they were now sure to get.

And so, finally, the king addressed me.

“There is a particular word for people who take justice into their own hands in defiance of king and country.”

... You know what?

No.

“His Royal Majesty, Aiden Perenolde, by the Light's Mandate King of Alterac, Master of Alterac Keep, Ruler of the Valley, and Defender of the People True, formally invites Wayland Hywel to Court, on this day of July 12, Year 580 of the King's Calendar, there to finally determine his character, his role in recent events that have so affected the peace of the City, and, by grace of the Light and the Good, what place might be found for him in the Realm.”

The Great Hall of Alterac Keep could only ponder my recital of the summons I'd received, word for word.

“Such were the words of your summons *exactly*. No title, not the basest polite appellation, no advocate afforded, no grace period of preparation, no guest right offered to me *or* charge

brought against me, yet still my 'place' is 'yet to be determined' despite me being Alterac born and begotten. Why should I kneel if I've already been made an outlaw?"

The crowd did *not* react well.

"Silence in the Hall! Order! Order!"

An 'invitation' worded explicitly to disown me of my birth country, 'escorts' chosen from among the dirtiest crownsguard, the most open attempt at public humiliation, assassins already in the rafters, everything wrapped up in a public performance whose only purpose was to give Perenolde the barest scrap of deniability when I mysteriously disappeared, there was not the slightest point in going along with this farce.

"ORDER! ORDER IN THE HALL!"

The Captain of the Royal Guard struck the ground with his spear five different times before the people's outrage finally settled into a simmer.

"Well now," Perenolde said finally, slouching in his seat. "Dare I ask how much of everything else leading up to this was precipitated by this... propensity for misinterpretation and hyperbole?"

I won't play this game either. "Get the Archbishop here to perform the rite of Judgment Unmerciful and I'll readily submit alongside all of my accusers."

So fast that you could be excused for missing it, Perenolde's mask cracked. "A tendency to jump straight to extremes as well, it seems."

I didn't reply. There was no point. Of course he'd refuse, the Judgment would get him too.

"Many people are dead in your wake," Perenolde said. "Of those who aren't, some are still blind and deaf."

"Some actually recovered then?" I asked idly, meeting the eyes of the more sour-faced sycophants in the hall one after another. All of them averted their gaze. "That's good, it means they aren't completely hopeless monsters. Anymore."

"... You admit to attacking them."

"I admit to *self-defense* and *defense of home and hearth* against people with no qualms against murdering a fourteen-year-old."

Perenolde scoffed. “You’re hardly a normal man, by any standards.”

“That I’m *exceptional* is no excuse for attempted murder against my person, or anything else.” He said man, not child. He was trying to avoid looking like he was bullying children.

Fair enough, there wasn’t a grown man in sight as tall as me.

“They call you a Saint,” the king changed tracks. “What say you to that?”

“The Light’s most beloved virtues are compassion, tenacity and respect.”

A non-answer for a non-question.

“Some even call you a Prophet. What say you to that?”

“I’m surprised it caught on, I was only ever called that twice.” By an angel, but I wasn’t about to add fuel to whatever pyre he wanted to burn me on. The crowd was muttering about that already. Loudly.

What was even the point of this charade? How Perenolde looked to the commoners might not matter to him, but what did he expect this to look like to the nobles? The few he hadn’t mortally aggrieved to point of blood feud? The many he *had* mortally aggrieved to point of blood feud? It would have made more sense to just order me quietly eliminated so that I mysteriously vanished like a fairy tale sage into the mists of time and imagination. Why put me on the spot like this? Why put *himself* on the spot like this, when the ship had already left port?

The only explanation I could think of was that he couldn’t afford to waste even this little chance to gain face.

How precarious is your rule, really?

“There is just one thing that I don’t understand. Or I suppose two things,” Perenolde said. “What were all those people after you for? What did you do that made them raise their knives? And why didn’t the matter reach my eyes, if it was so important? If it was so *innocent*, as you claim?”

And with that, it was clear now. Why he would approach this so inimically. Why he procrastinated on summoning me until now. Why he won’t even bother trying to establish a proper rapport. It wouldn’t even be that hard, I *wanted* to get my designs out there, yet here we were.

It was you who tried to kidnap me in the beginning, after all.

The Light eased all my burdens every moment of every breath, but suddenly I couldn't help but feel tired. I was so tired of this. Tired of guarding a secret that was never supposed to be a secret, tired of fearing for my mother and father every time they crossed the fence, tired of worrying that Narett would be picked up from his house one night and disappeared, tired that anyone else I associated with would be shanked by 'thugs' and 'bandits' in the market square, tired of the futility and the villainy and the unearned grudges everywhere I looked and *stupidity*.

All because one man was so full of himself that he projected his mores and his sores and his *weakness* on everyone.

Narcissism makes three.

You know what?

“Charcoal, sulfur and saltpetre.”

Aiden Perenolde blinked in incomprehension.

You know what the Light *hasn't* disagreed with me on for the whole year and change since I first recalled my past life?

“The recipe for dwarven gunpowder. That was the great prize I was to be disappeared for, apparently.” I shrugged as if unaware that the hall undoubtedly contained at least one ambassadors or spy from literally everywhere. Well, everywhere human at least. “It really was quite strange, it's not like I was hoarding it or anything. I put it up for *auction*, I was literally looking for a business partner to market it as far and wide as possible. But after the seventh kidnapping attempt I decided not to bother trying anymore.”

Aiden Perenolde stared at me in astonishment. Incomprehension. Incredulity. I could practically see as his oh so perfect mask shattered the moment the penny dropped.

“A shame really, there would be tons of it for sale everywhere by now, I imagine.”

The penny dropped for everyone else.

Then the blind drunkard slurred “But he can't mean it was all on the crown's orders, surely?” and the Great Hall of Aterac Keep descended into utter chaos.

Aiden Perenolde glared at me, mouth open and eyes wide.

I returned it flatly. Shamelessly. Scornfully.

“Order! ORDER, ORDER!”

There was no order. There was no order so much and for so long that the king adjourned court early and sent me away just so the crowd would follow me out of his sight.

I complied. I was more than ready to get out of there. But I stopped at the nearest crossroad to brood in full sight of everyone because I was just as ready for my spirit friends to eavesdrop on every conversation they could, unseen to normal eyes and unnoticed to the few magical ones amidst the smoke of candles and tea steam.

I’d not been idle during that travesty. Once told to avoid the notice of any strange veils and shimmers and patterns that felt *off* to the natural order of the world, my spirits learned very quickly how to not interact with wards and mages. And while the entrances to the keep were warded thoroughly, the higher floors’ windows and balconies had many gaps, at least three of which I was sure were intentional. Not to mention the wear and tear in old forgotten walls, the secret passages that nobody knew to maintain, and those chimneys...

Most of what I got was gossip. Some things were missed because the spirits were few and young and they couldn’t look everywhere. Aiden Perenolde couldn’t be spied on when he met with the same sorceress whose protection spells felt like the same from the ambush on Richard. They shut themselves in a locked room with no windows. There was no gap, no keyhole, the place was even airtight and spelled against incoming light and magical interference.

But the wards *did* start to stutter for some reason after the king and woman were joined by two men. One was... Jorach Ravenholdt. He looked almost identical to his older self I remembered, except there was still brown in his hair.

The best assassins have already been called.

The other was the hooded assassin from the rafters, who idly aimed a smirk right at the keyhole of the next room over where my little spirit was hiding... and did nothing else.

~Aberrancy, malaise, fear~

Yes, I... felt it too, who is that man? Why does he feel that way?

“Duty compels me to advise against this one last time,” Ravenholdt said as soon as the door closed.

What a world this is, when the master of assassins is the lone voice of sanity.

“You have advised and I have heard it.”

“... The Church will not forgive this. Not after he literally demonstrated the power to bring back the dead.”

“Just before which he had to murder another man. I don’t know what arts those are, but they’re not holy ones.”

...

The king scoffed in disdain. “As usual, I am the only one who sees clearly.”

Machiavellianism, psychopathy and narcissism all in the same man.

“As always, the loyalty of Ravenholdt Manor must be with the Crown, but-”

“So it must.”

“-*but* what if we fail? This is no normal quarry. He may yet prove mighty.”

“Then I suppose you will live long enough to say I told you so.”

“... You think he would let us live?”

“Hah!” The king laughed scornfully. “The day a saint misses a chance to be sanctimonious is the day this castle goes up in smoke. That is the one way in which saints are all reliable.”

Aiden Perenolde... he believed.

I could see it now. The Light confirmed it with all the strength of universal hindsight. Aiden Perenolde believed *everything* about me. And because he believed, he also believed I would never be anything but his mortal enemy.

What other fantasies do I star in?

“... As Your Majesty commands.”

“Quite. Now go and do your job.”

“I suppose this is why all those wise men and sages always mysteriously vanish in fables.” The voice that could only belong to the mysterious hooded man was gruff and plain, but somehow still made me feel as if something oily was crawling up my back. “There’s no room for them in the world of man anymore.”

“If I want wit, assassin, I’ll ask my jester. Or do you want his job?”

Tense silence.

“I thought not. Montrose, you stay behind.”

The door began to open, so I withdrew my spirits from that dark place. Insistent as the little ones were that there was no risk to them since they'll just reincarnate in the Elemental Plane, that didn't reassure me when I had no way to get them back. Not them specifically at least.

You really need names.

~Satiety, reluctance, undecisiveness~

I couldn't find it in me to begrudge them their procrastination, I wasn't sure how it would change them either.

I returned to the Kelsier home, slow as the trip was with all of Alterac's citizens constantly crowding my path. Richard had long since left, but four of his men were there, all of whom I was at least familiar with and submitted to my Soulgaze without protest, so I was successful in reassuring Master Kelsier that they were safe to trust. Not that it was hard, there was no man alive that trusted and believed in me as much as he did, now.

Then I retrieved my guns and went on my way to choose the battlefield, considering and then resignedly discarding any ideas to run away.

Because you know what the Light *hasn't* disagreed with me on for the whole year and change since I first recalled my past life in this place?

Azeroth needs an arms race more than it needs peace.