

Chapter 9 – The Forbearing Despoiler

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

I sense a disturbance in the Light.

Or, at least, I sensed *through* the Light an approaching disturbance in my near future prospects.

A threat to my commitment to the future.

I spent the whole trip from the city to the bottom of Alterac Valley debating with myself if I should speed on ahead as fast as I can, or do the *opposite* thing of letting my pursuers choose the battlefield.

In the end, there was one thing that made up my mind.

I’ve gone and made someone very riled, and it’s not just the king.

There was something happening, a development with a significant chance of undermining my commitment to the course I’ve set for my life. Something was setting up to stress-test my resolve, a danger not... *necessarily* among those that had been following me since before I’d even left the city. Precognition was distinctly unclear on the matter, as it only was when the future hadn’t yet been decided. When things were too chaotic for the near future to be clearly seen, especially as a mere shadow. Still, logical deduction indicated one thing.

My parents are in danger.

Not a very wise course of action, a third of the Light’s applications were in Retribution and I’d made it clear that I had no qualms about exerting it. But I wasn’t surprised Aiden Perenolde thought himself beyond the reach of such things. What did worry me was that the danger was already there before Richard even had time to get there.

Dark had come hours ago. I’d made no stops. I’d gone as fast as I could and my bike was feeling the bumps *badly*, this was no paved road, never mind asphalt that didn’t yet exist. Despite this, my pursuers kept catching up to me in bursts. Since I wasn’t going to deliberately add to the danger to my family, I couldn’t afford to drag this out.

Little ones, go on ahead and check on the house.

~ Satiety, reluctance, we-can-help! ~

No, their lightning bolts were nice but weak without a ready-made alchemical bomb set up, the spirits were still babies, they wouldn't even get through enchanted jars, and for everything else I had better options. Most importantly, it had taken most of my attention to direct them during the ambush on Lionheart. In a life or death fight against elite combatants they'd just be a distraction. Their value was in scouting above everything else.

~ Satiety, shame, compliance ~

You'll grow into it, I consoled as they hastened ahead as fast as they could. *And this way I don't have to worry what else that masked man might be able to do besides seeing you.*

I stopped in the middle of the biggest, most open space I found after the cloud cover moved out of the way of the half moon. I leaned my bicycle against a nearby rock, pulled my shotgun from the down tube scabbard and flipped the safety. I could feel Geirrvif's gaze on me as the Light came to my call, but it wasn't the Valkyrie I addressed, or the raven perched aside her neck. *Seal of Justice, Inner Fire, Retribution Aura*. "Please reconsider this course. Leave me and mine in peace and nothing more need happen. I am willing to let bygones be. *Once*."

My stalkers paused, then began fanning out to surround me. One skulked around behind mounds and fern, a second vanished and reappeared around the largest tree still visible in the night, and the third dashed *very* fast around me in a zig-zag pattern to stop just behind the rock next to me. My second sight didn't care about obstacles, life was life to me, so I saw their auras even though I couldn't see *them* that far during the night, even with the moonlight. But...

I didn't hear them move at all.

"Time is not a weakness to me, just so we're clear." A crossbow glanced off my invisible shield with a flicker of gold just in front of my eye. *I didn't see or hear even a whistle through the air either, gotta stay focused*. "Message received." I gestured down.

The Reckoning blasted the person behind the rock like a lightning strike.

"Hn!"

He barely grunted, I thought over the whisper of spellcraft as I strafed away from a smoke bomb and around the boulder.

BOOM

Grapeshot met gambeson with a thundering blast.

The hooded man flew three feet through the air, crashed on his shoulder but rolled back to a crouch with barely a hitch, armor and undershirt shredded but his skin barely scratched.

What the hell?

The man leapt back into the night just as it began to rain ice.

That toughness was unnatural, where did he – my second sight, he's gone from that too!

My shield held fine, but the air cooled to the point of frostbite so I turned it completely impermeable while I reassessed my-

The earth shifted beneath me and I stumbled to a knee – *I guess mages aren't locked out of geomancy in real life?* – and an arcane missile barrage began to pelt me just as the Blizzard spell lapsed – *wait, Blizzard has to be maintained, the earthquake couldn't be her!*

Cold steel skewered me through the back.

The night lit up like day as the Light exploded out of me in a shockwave.

The assassin grunted again, but he still managed to recover and melt back into the night before I could smite him properly. I blasted the spot he'd been in just on principle. *The wound, I can feel it rotting – my shield, the knife passed through it, no, the Light **vanished** from its path as if sucked away by some-* “Void,” I growled, gritting my teeth as the Light filled my heart and knit it whole.

Crack – crack – POP.

My sight was obscured by fresh smoke – no, not just any smoke, I could feel it the moment I breathed in, felt the strain they put on my healing, three different compounds, some manner of tear spray, poison and sleeping gas of some sort that made it through the momentary breach caused by the stab. I considered but decided flashlight eyes would just mess with nightvision, while the Light purged the toxins from my body. “Has the Ravenholdt Manor stooped so low as to employ Void cultists now?!”

The aura of Lord Jorach Ravenholdt hesitated to my far right, but the mage – the woman from the ambush on Richard – blasted me with a frost bolt and began casting blizzard again, which meant she was exposed.

Rebuke.

“Ah!”

Hammer of Justice. I pulled my rifle from my back and aimed while she was stunned. *Imbue Spell – Exorcism, Crusader Strike, Bullet of Wrath* – SHINK came the knife for my back.

BANG

The thrice-blessed round went through her heart and ripped her spirit out when it blew through the other side.

One down.

I dropped the rifle and aimed my shotgun over my shoulder where mister Hood had gotten his knife stuck.

“Fuck!”

BOOM

The dagger somehow didn't shatter, but Hood had to leave it behind in his haste to not have his whole face blown off. I caught it and overlaid my spirit over it, it was another clumsy skill but enough when the Light was already doing something else.

Exceptional but conventional enchantments and poison, forcefield failed to stop knife but not the hand holding it, Void magic applied to item but not channelled through limb, restraint or inability, some other reason?

I set part of my mind on making my dome of Light spin round and round, it would hamper my multitasking but this way any further attacks would deflect off. You'd think it would be overkill for something that could theoretically tank nukes, but apparently not. Looks like I *hadn't*, in fact, reverse-engineered the Divine Shield proper.

I think I know who this is.

A new barrage of bombs obscured my sight, sleep and noxious fumes and poison one after another, then another just as that one began to disperse, then another. I reshaped my forcefield into an impermeable narrow cylinder sticking up and up into the clean air, then I widened it into a dome and closed it up, securing a fresh reserve. They were trying to outlast my air supply, or maybe herd me somewhere if I ran, Ravenholdt hadn't attacked me since the first shot so he'd probably been preparing a trap. But since I could still see where *one* of them was thanks to my second sight, it only served to conceal *my* movements.

I reloaded my rifle – *Infuse Spell – Levitate, No Safeties* – took aim at the Master of Assassins and fired.

To his credit, the man had used a smoke bomb on himself and broken into a zig-zagging dash the moment he heard the clink of my gun, but he lacked whatever stealth magic Hood had, so at this range it was like shooting fish in a barrel.

BANG

The bullet barely grazed him in the side, there wasn't even a grunt of pain, but the man ended up floating three meters in the air anyway.

“Say goodnight!” I said as brazenly as I could-

-and a hiss of pain came from my left because Consecrated Ground doesn't have visual effects in real life.

Holy Wrath!

Mighty bolts of holy power shot in all direction including *his face*, just as the man smashed *through* my shield like a ram of oily shadow, only to go wide because spherical Light constructs don't look any different when they spin.

“You clever little-!”

Judgement, Holy Fire, Penance!

“Arrrgh!” Screamed my would-be killer as his spirt *burned*.

Three crossbow bolts *exploded* in my face – *attached flasks, Ravenholdt's still floating, what kind of aim does he have?* – but I jumped through and grabbed Hood by the face because if my guess was right I might not get another chance. “Abolish Disease!”

“NnnghaaaAAAAAARGH!”

The scream of pain was long, loud, howling, turned *inhuman* as I poured the Light into him, matching my healing against old god corruption, burning, cleansing, searing everything that didn't belong with all the skill and resolve and determination I'd amassed, over months of treating every chronic illness under the sun and even turning back the ravages of age.

The shadow, the Void, it's so – how can anything exist with so much – what is this?

The scream became a roar that shook the earth, the trees, the rocks, even the cliffs all the way to the edge of the canyon seemed to groan, then the ground erupted like a literal volcano under our feet, hurling us violently from each other.

I landed badly, but the pain was nothing with the Light pouring through me in such volumes. I rolled to my front and pushed up, strafed away as fast as I could from the lava pooling, burning, smoking up to my knees around my forcefield. *I dropped my shotgun, shit!* I breathed harshly as I reloaded my rifle. I felt my confidence take the first blow it had ever suffered in this life.

Across the new pool of fire and molten stone, the assassin lurched back to stand too, his movements spasmodic, fitful, each jerk and stagger looking as if his bones didn't quite fit in his skin anymore. "You shouldn't have done that."

Exorcise the Unclean, Crusader Shot, Bullet of Holy Wrath, Envoy of Judgment, Spark of Holy Flame, Seal of the Penitent, I infused my weapon to the limit and past it, more and more and more until I shone so brightly I couldn't see my own outline and *more still-*

"Fahrad!" Lord Jorach Ravenhold shouted as he did *something* to get free from my spell and lined a shot with his repeater crossbow. "Get clear!"

Twang – BANG – CRACK

BOOM

Three trick bolts engulfed us *both* in a fiery blast just as the most holy round I'd ever shot shattered a wall of stone that suddenly burst from the ground to block its path, stopping it *just* short of the man's head.

I finally knew who this was.

"You really shouldn't have **done that**."

The master killer, master of disguises, master pretender, the one who matched the Lord of the Ravenholdt Assassin's League in everything even while sandbagging, the one who would go on to train, test and unwillingly oppose every guile hero worth a damn in the future, without *anyone* getting even a hint of what he really was. The only one of his kind who put up meaningful resistance against old god corruption all this time, I thought his hidden nature was just a convenient late-stage retcon, but if it's true-to-life...

“Fahrad,” my voice said while my mind chanted *Fire Resistance Aura, Divine Protection, Fortitude*. “The Trainer of Heroes.”

A ticking time bomb that could have destroyed the entire Alliance at any time, someone who didn't assassinate all the faction leaders purely because he was possessed of restraint to rival the hunger of ravenous gods, someone who *did* assassinate all his corrupted kin until he was the last one left, who was only removed from the story because of a newborn whelp's most ridiculously implausible plot armor.

“You definitely shouldn't have said that”

The earth yanked itself from under my feet and tossed me away like a sea breaker, my bike broke in half as I smashed through it, my forcefield bounced me off the rock like a ping-pong ball so hard my brain rattled inside my skull. *I need-*

Fahrad rode the fiery wave of rock, deflected off my spinning shield- “Persistent bastard!” – then magma and earth flowed *upwards* while I was dazed, turning his arm into a smouldering, smoking, gigantic rocky version of itself. “Terribly sorry about this.” Then he *picked me up* and smashed me into the ground.

SMASH

SMASH

SMASH

SMASH

Alter shield anchor point!

CRASH – CRACK

The arm of fiery stone broke apart under its own strength as my forcefield suddenly became quantum locked to the planet's core.

Holy Shock!

Fahrad jerked in place, stunned and blinded by the burst of Light.

BANG

My holy bullet blasted through his lung and out the back.

Shit, I was aiming for his head, just one more-

Fahrad *roared* so loudly it felt like the earth fell away from under me just from that – BANG – my next shot went wide as I lost balance *again*, the lava flames erupted all around to obscure my sight, somewhere behind me the Lord of Ravenholdt Manor cried out in pain and fell to his knees clutching at his ears, what felt like the whole valley *quaked-*

“F-Fahrad?!” Ravenholdt gasped, bewildered. “What-“

“——— ! ! ”

With a thundering, rumbling roar, the moon was blocked out by the colossal form of an ancient black dragon.

I stared at the dark shape, aghast.

Fuck me, he's as long as Alterac Castle's belfry!

The ground shook again as he landed, the air rung sibilantly as he breathed in and out, magma splashed around his claws as he shook his body, his scales clattering rhythmically.

I am getting seriously fed up with today.

He's the reason, it suddenly dawned on me. *He's the reason why kneeling to Perenolde would have been catastrophic!* But if this is this supposed to be the *least* of bad options, how does that make any sense? If *this* isn't absolute catastrophe, what the hell would he have done if I'd knelt, woken Deathwing up early?

The Light sounded in my mind like a knell.

Shit.

I looked from my rifle to the dragon. *I'm gonna get a hammerspce bag just so I can carry a cannon with me from now on.*

That was when the dragon spat lava at me.

And it wasn't just a spray this time.

It was a *river*.

A whole lake's worth of liquid rock blasted me, pooled around me, engulfed me, *swallowed* me all the way to my chest, my neck and higher, higher until I was a golden little ball of human and air, completely submerged beneath a rapidly rising, deepening lake of bubbling slag.

He's trying to bury me alive.

No, he'd *already* buried me alive.

I widened my bubble to the limits of my range, the limits of my ability to visualise, I had to-

The dragon stomped through the lava into the ground, his magic splitting the earth beneath me into a wide crack. When my new forcefield didn't let me fall, he just controlled the lava itself to envelop me and raised the *earth* high up instead, spewing more and more until there was nothing but magma around me in every direction for ten meters and counting. I contracted my forcefield and drilled upwards through the flaming dross, striking air again with *far* too much effort – *oh shit, close, close, CLOSE!*

I plugged the hole *just* before the dragon's breath reached me, he'd been waiting for me to try just that, the bastard!

More magma came pouring down, blistering hot, shaking as the dragon began stomping on it, on me, he'd gone and buried me alive and wasn't leaving until he saw the body, fuck my life, who the hell released the evil overlord list on this world?!

How do I get out of this?

There was no answer. Nothing save the glow of red behind the gold, the shrieking of shifting molten stone, and a brainwashed dragon's promise of foul murder.

I – I need... What do I need? What do I have?

... Twenty minutes.

Twenty minutes on top of however long the air lasted. I could hold my breath for at least that long on my worst day, passive Light-aided conditioning made you Olympic in everything and that was on the low end of records. Add *active* channelling and I could go even longer.

I took a deep breath, then slowly let it out and sunk to my knees, clasped my hands in front of my face to meditate and *think*.

Light constructs were a balancing act of power output and spatial parameters, I'd tried to invent mobile ones but it went *terribly*, forcefields only worked because they had a *fixed* spatial

reference, myself or something really easy to define, like the centre of the world. As bizarre as it sounded for the stuff from which everything was ostensibly created, constructs were its least intuitive application. *Adding* to existing construct let me cheat, but the dragon was clearly on the lookout for this, and the scope of his breath weapon easily matched me. I was sure that cracking the Arcane would finally let me overcome all these limitations, but I hadn't.

Dammit, it doesn't help to know that hardlight is theoretically possible if the proper photonic manipulation hasn't been invented yet! Stuff like this is why I've been looking for someone to teach me arcane magic all this time!

I could make handholds, footholds to walk on air, or close enough... But my multitasking had limits, if there was any way to have more than one thought in your head I hadn't attained it yet, if I tried that I'd still need to prioritize my defense field, I'd move at the speed of molasses... And he's already proven he can control his magma to follow me faster than that. What did that leave?

I pressed my knuckles against my forehead and reconceptualised the shield protecting me. Before this I'd *assumed* that training it to become an unconscious reflex was the apex of what a divine shield could be, nothing had ever even strained it. But Fahrhad had managed to bypass it, something that shouldn't have been possible... unless it *wasn't* the ultimate defense I assumed it was. Adding rotation compensated for some of that vulnerability, but...

*The **original** Divine Shield... wasn't it practically made of floating symbols?*

... The runes came to the forefront of my mind, the language, symbols, I just needed to create an intuitive formula.

†‡ †H‡N‡H†, †‡ ‡‡R‡‡, †‡ †M‡M, †‡ ‡I‡I, †‡ ‡F‡‡M‡R, †‡ ‡†M‡R‡I, †‡ ‡‡R‡‡M, †‡†M ‡I‡ ‡F‡I
‡M†‡, ‡‡N‡ ‡R ‡‡R‡I‡M‡N‡ ‡H‡‡ ‡N‡‡F‡R‡

“No Thought, No Words, No Need, No Will, No Matter, No Energy, No Force, None All May Bend, Move or Aggrieve This Bulwark.”

The runes came into being around me, shaped by imagination and fuelled by eternal power and will. I felt the difference immediately, and it was radical.

But still, somehow, the spell felt incomplete...

The Icelandic staves came to me then, strings of concepts and meanings that only needed a guiding mind. Hólafur to displace all obstacles, Gegn Galdri to block out all spells, Lukkustafir to ward off all evil action and will, Angurgapi to prevent leaks and breaches, all tied together by...

Rosahringur.

The circle of protection all-encompassing.

All sense of outside weight faded, discomfort faded, the pressure on my defense disappeared, the glare of the molten rock stopped weighing on my eyes, the permeability of my shield reappeared but I knew no strike or foulness would seep through anymore, nor would my life-giving air drain. From one moment to the next it felt like my burdens had all gone away. For the first time ever, though I never knew the difference before, I didn't merely feel invincible.

I *knew* I was.

I slumped where I sat, all the weight gone from my shoulders, from my mind, my full ability to think and focus unburdened for the first time since the fight began. I could already tell this wouldn't last forever, why the Divine Shield was only a temporary measure. The spell was my first ever that actually burned power at a greater rate than I replenished, at least without actively meditating on it. But for as long as it lasted, I was free to do anything I wanted, untouchable to any obstacle or strike.

I looked up and considered the hardening dark. Despite my breakthrough I couldn't see through it, not even Ravenholdt's aura like I could before. Whatever Void magic the dragon used to escape even my second sight, it was steeped into everything around me.

Should I just jump free?

The rock, soft or hard, it didn't matter, it would crumble in my path like wet paper. I wondered if this would work against walls, or if it was too much of a conceptual divergence from 'obstacle' when I was the one causing the grief. I wondered if the spell worked conceptually at all, or if it was just a dead end in translation.

I still had almost ten minutes of air left.

The muffled echo of a roar barely reached me, but I felt the shaking and perceived the renewed rise in temperature all around much more clearly.

I pulled on the Light *hard*, infusing my new forcefield with as much strength as it could take. If I stood still and didn't overdo it on anything else, it should last me as long as the air with energy to spare.

Then I thought back to the Great Hall. Recalled how mud and dirt from a thousand boots flew into my hand to form a flowerbed. When the girl offered me the flower and I cast an arcane spell for the first time. Discerned an arcane pattern *fully* apart from the rest and managed to manipulate it for my own ends. I opened my eyes and looked around with sight beyond sight. This magma wasn't *dirt*, but...

But its Arcane lattice was new, different, completely inconsistent with those of the surrounding nature, its pattern completely at odds with the earth and the air, not *unnatural* but still wholly, fundamentally, utterly out of place.

I set my entire mind on it, my will, my determination, the Light spread out into the molten rock, up all the way to the surface, down through ores and minerals, everything that didn't belong and past that to everything that did belong, the soil, the stones, the earth below and further still. The magma had seeped down, deep into the valley through the massive crack the dragon had tried to bury me in, scorching, seeping, hardening where it had no place.

I recollected my attention and followed down after it, sharpening my awareness, my focus. It was a searing, darkening, cloying mass of arcane patterns and infinitesimal oily shadows *disguised* as arcane patterns that looked no different from everything they infested, right up until the Light fell upon them with all its holy wrath and they *burned*.

Correction, not unnatural *only at first glance*.

~ ... - ! - !? ~

What was that?

The Light burned downwards through all of the dragon's Shadow only to find more and more, burn more and more, further and further down until the painful sublimation of the Shadow to Light woke something up.

~ Torpor... Ache... Surprise... ~

A sleepy soul. A welcome pain inside a foreign mind. A spirit spanning the horizon.

~ Surprise. Joy. Fascination ~

A Spirit of the Earth that didn't expect to wake up. An earnest welcome to the searing needle I'd driven in his mind. Because he'd only gone to sleep against his will.

~ Who are you, little light? What fortune answers my need unknown? What is happening in the world above – the Corrupter! ~

Alterac Valley... it had its own spirit! An Elemental Spirit of the Earth was sleeping under our feet all this time, colossal, massive, was it really limited to just this valley? It seemed so much larger than that, but its sleep... it was unwilling, forced upon it, no, *inculcated* over time, by the dragon trying to kill me right now! I suppose Black Dragons wouldn't appreciate competition, or wouldn't it be more contested ownership? But land isn't the demesne of a spirit, it's their *body*.

Titans, what exactly was the plan here? What even is the black dragons' job when every rock and hill has a spirit, doesn't that put them in direct competition? Even before the mollusc ooze started dripping out their ears?

~ Dismay, Fear, Outrage ~

The Spirit was afraid, the dragon had already overcome it once, it didn't want to be forced back asleep. The taint still ran through it, it would be so much easier and quicker than before for the dragon to incapacitate it again, the land was turbulent, haunted by a million ghosts, weighed down by the suffering of ages and sick with the mass graves of unnumbered dead. The Spirit was slow and languorous, sickly, but refused to fall back, not without doing something, anything, it didn't know what, it didn't care what.

~ Self-denial, Sickness, Help me Little Light Inexhaustible ~

The dragon Fahrhad was at odds with himself. The Spirit didn't care about him but it did care about the oily shadows infesting *his* self. And he believed I could do something about it.

I blinked in stupefaction over my clasped hands. How the hell am I supposed to do that?

~ Corrupted Earthwarder fights his own self, Insidious Taint gives way to Holy Flame, The Holy Flame Obeys the Exalted Prophet of Heaven ~

The earnest plea overlapped the full breadth of my reason and the Light's revelation to confirm what I already knew. I couldn't do what it asked.

~ Shock, Dismay, Plea ~

No, I was too small. I couldn't heal an entire country's landmass of taint built up over hundreds of years, I had no limit to how much power I could pull but I did in *output*, if everywhere else was like it was here... it would take over a hundred years of nothing *but* that just to make a dent.

~ Bitterness, Weariness, Despair ~

... But that didn't mean the Spirit couldn't learn how to do it himself.

~ Despair, Desperation, Hope ~

If the Spirit could call on the Light he'd already be doing it, so that couldn't be-

~~~ Bitterness, Bitterness, Bitterness Unrelenting ~~~

The intensity of the emotion was almost suffocating. The Light had ever been coveted by the Elements even as it burned them from the inside, ever just beyond their reach since the First Ones succumbed to the Cloying Emptiness. Alright, okay, that – that was a lot all at once.

~ Remorse, Shame, Apology ~

*It's... alright. That wasn't my idea anyway. I... might have something but...*

But if it worked and it *wasn't* something the Spirit already knew how to do, then I would be giving it the ability to cause mass extinction to anyone, anything, at any time on a whim.

~ Surprise, Indignation, Reassurance ~

No. Not good enough from beings provably prone to subversion by the worst forces. I want a Vow.

~ ...Acceptance, By My Name of Granodior, Let Us Affirm. ~

Well. I thought he'd be angrier at the perceived blackmail, but he didn't hesitate at all. That was something?

I withdrew my attention from the deep and set it upon my surroundings again. The mind of the Spirit followed and overlapped mine, unsurely, cautious of me, cautious of my *wellbeing* as I looked for the patterns, the order of things until I – *we* – could both see the Arcane. The Spirit was intrigued. Then I called the Light and added it to our sight, to our minds, sealing the Spirit of our Pact and the Elemental Lord turned heartrendingly *covetous* even as the Light burned

him from within. He almost lost track of everything else before I aimed our combined awareness at the Arcane, through it, along it into the magma and earth once more.

The Light spread out through the Arcane like a lattice, illuminating patterns within patterns within patterns until I found the ones that I knew from a past life, substances, molecules, atomic bonds.

One by one and then all at once, I beheld the contrast between the dragon's magma breath and the true earth, the rocks, the dirt, the ores, the minerals, all the way down to the noble metals and all the other building blocks of matter and I *pushed*.

And pulled.

I pushed and pulled on the foreign patterns, pushed and pulled and pushed and pulled, repeated a dozen times every instant and faster and faster to my limit, then faster still all the way to the *Spirit's* limit once he understood what I wanted, until everything vibrated on the cusp of disintegration and fragile, malleable change. And then...

One final effort.

Once upon a time, I was a materials scientist. I knew all the elements and a thousand and one molecular formulas by heart. And I understood exactly what could happen during accelerated particle bombardment depending on what and where you aimed.

The Arcane, conveniently, could make the end result happen without the middleman.

All the magma beneath me turned into powdered quartz.

~ **Covetousness** – Surprise, Amazement ~

It was the amazement of an adult praising a child's first hand-drawn circle, right up until the Spirit realized that all the taint *pretending* to be proper matter and Arcane patterns was now loose, unprotected and completely visible.

~ ...Understanding, **Enlightenment**, **Determination** ~

The Spirit's will crashed upon everything in a hundred yards *except* the space I occupied, the earth shifted, soil and sand turned into each other repeatedly, then each into more of themselves but just different enough to lose cohesion or colour, on and on repeated. Then the changes grew finer, slighter and more numerous until everything around me was vibrating, dislodging and tossing patterns, particles, invisible oily shadows, each of which became steadily *less* invisible

as they were clumped together. Until, finally, the taint was all collected into a writhing, off-colour lump that was swiftly enclosed in transmuted amber wrapped in a shell of silver ore – no, silver *metal*.

~ Quality Assured, 100% purity guaranteed, Accept no substitutes ~

I couldn't help but laugh. I've gone and inflicted a completely different kind of corruption upon a genius loci. What have I done?

~ Stalwart Conviction, Gratitude Devout, Our Pact Shall Endure Everlasting ~

Granodior withdrew from me, pulling the lump of taint down and down into the depths, a mental flash of a volcanic caldera passed behind my eyes before I could even ask where. But a part of him stayed behind, stayed with me, a fragment of Self freely given for me to accept or discard as I wished.

I accepted it. It settled in my aura like a new appendage, sprouting roots and sieves that ingrained themselves in my Spirit so that it never withered away. The moment it did, I knew what it could do. What I could do now. Talk through. Listen through. Call through. *Summon* through, even beyond the boundaries of his territory when my Spirit grew plentiful enough. Such a thing...

*Is this how supernatural abilities are gained? Could I design and grow immaterial organs of my own? What would they even be? Tendrils? Ears? A thousand and one eyes?*

~ Anxiousness, Solicitude, I Am With You Still ~

Granodior could do a number of things now too, like snap me out of unnecessary distractions. He was impatient to get to work on purifying the land, purifying *himself*, but was willing to defer on that until my fight with the dragon was over.

*I'm almost out of air.*

I opened everything I had to the Light and *pulled*, replenishing my strength, my protections, my Divine Shield, my mental fortitude and everything else. Then, for a third time, I reached with the Light along the Arcane. The Light blazed. The taint was burned away.

My second sight lit up with the auras of a familiar armless man, an unfamiliar second man, and an all-new wholly *visible* dragon aura fighting the one unseen in the air.

*Oh give me a break, what now?*

As if waiting for me, the new dragon broke from the sky grapple, shot down and banked just above me and *breathed*.

All the magma around and above me cooled, cracked and crumbled into dust within seconds.

*Wat the – disintegration? What dragon could-?*

~ No ~

Not disintegration, acceleration of entropy – acceleration of *time*.

The creature suddenly dodged right and turned his ongoing breath on the enemy.

The combined weight of two massive dragons rolled over my immovable shield, blasted away all dust, dug a deep groove through it and away, sparing me the added trouble of breaking free myself, how *considerate* of this disaster of a night.

*The Bronze Dragonflight – they're **protecting** me?*

A horse dug furrows in the dusty earth as the mage astride it skid to halt in a flutter of robes right next to me. “Saint! I am Antonidas D’Ambrosio, envoy of the Kirin Tor!” Who and what now?! “I’ve no idea what is happening, but the black dragons are enemies of all, I will defer to you!”

Where the hell did he come from, what the fuck is the future leader of Dalaran doing here – what did he mean, defer to me?! Defer on what?! “I... Can you-“ Plans were useless when you didn’t know what everyone could even *do*, what were they even doing here, why? Where was Ravenholdt? I couldn’t see in this dark through so much dust and smoke, even the dragons looked like wraiths, but he’d been still – his aura was still aware but tense, crouched behind a flash-frozen magma bank. He was bandaging his arm, his light wavering dangerously so at least I could stop worrying about him, but – maybe just the objective? What even was my objective? “The black one, can you ground him?”

“Very well.”

Just like that?

Fahrad threw the bronze to the ground, but he didn’t go down easily, biting on the offending limb, pulling the black after him and down, rolling through the magma, through the earth as they dragged along the ground, spitting glittering dust against molten rock, shaking the earth, snarling, *roaring* until the black finally threw the bronze off and leapt back into the air.

A neigh rang in the night.

And the white horse galloped *up* upon the air, its hooves sparking like flint as the man on its back swung his staff in a wide sweep, sending an atom-severing arc of red light straight at the black one's neck.

Fahrad swerved sideways. The spell got him across the shoulder instead, slicing scales and sinews and more, blood bursting, ripping from him a shriek of pain, a snarl, a spewing torrent of lava that deflected off an Arcane forcefield with no strain-

The bronze barrelled into his side the same moment and then the two were clinching, flailing, spinning dangerously as they flapped their wings in a vain attempt to keep flight, barely keeping from losing total grasp of the currents-

The mage rode earthward behind the black dragon and brought his bladed staff down like a scythe.

The red arc severed his entire wing at the joint.

The black dragon screamed, fell, crashed *hard*, shaking the earth, a haze of dust billowed up, more of it as the wing also fell, then further as the bronze one slammed down on top of the black, claws grabbing at each other's limbs, at the earth, throats, horns, crests, scales ripping away as I watched and wondered if the idea I just got meant I was going crazy.

The bronze finally managed to get the upper hand and bit down on the black's face, locking his nozzle and jaw shut tight between its teeth.

"Now, Prophet!" It yelled through its clenched jaws. "Claim your glory!"

*Is there anyone who doesn't expect something from me?*

But I didn't hesitate.

I charged in, dropped my shield, jumped on the dragon's snout and Soulgazed a monster.

Calm, kindness, kinship, love, the four pillars of peace rose tall before me in the Earthwarder's inner world, holding up the pitch-black sky with what I mistook for the inexhaustible strength of ages until I breathed the lice. Then the illusion crumbled, spilled apart into a swarm of chittering worms, crashing on me, burying me, crawling into my mouth, my ears, down my throat, up my nose and everything else, vermin feeding vermin and *on* vermin and on me and *in* me *Light Help me!*

~~What's this?~~

Gold erupted from me like the Sun itself, blasted the lice, the maggots, destroyed the spawn of flies scurrying down my throat and windpipe to my lungs, scouring me clean until all that was left was the sunless aftertaste of dreams haunted by ghosts. I looked down and saw no ground beneath my feet. I looked up and saw that the towers were utterly corroded, made of anger and ego and unwillingness to yield, almost completely eaten through by maggots and termites spawned from willing murder. I looked at the pillars and saw the swarms gnawing through them and masquerading *as* them, piling atop each other in an endless thirst to eat away what was left. The slightest hit and they would crumble, and with it the world, all sanity, every scrap of will to endure.

~~A visitor!~~

Fahrad. Verration. The Black Dragon. He yearned to be free, but when that proved impossible he condemned to use the means of the cloying and empty to stave off their hunger, killing by choice so he wouldn't be reduced to a devouring butcher deprived of it. Burned his decency for the sake of lesser evils to appease the greatest, wasted his life in the hopes the world would grind him under it before the maws crushed him between their teeth. And the ego that fought that inner war never had a judge nor a witness, let alone the Light of Promised Salvation. What was even left to sacrifice?

~~Everything~~

I called on the Light to descend upon me, pour into me, fill me all the way to my greatest limit, then beyond even that to the limits of what I could *imagine* my limit becoming, gathered and gathered more and more until I couldn't fathom the scope of what I held inside, then unleashed it upon this wicked world all at once.

~~You don't want to do that~~

Everything burned away all at once, everything, leaving not even ash behind. Just the four pillars of self, still standing and scoured clean, but thin, weak, on the verge of crumbling under their own weight.

~~You shouldn't have done that~~

The world shook. A new tide of maggots and vermin and bugs spilled forth from the Void, writhing, chittering, uncountable, sweeping forth, crashing into the pillars so hard they creaked, they groaned, a million million teeth bit and ripped at them, at the dark, at each other, at themselves, at *me* for all that the Light burned them the moment they came close, more still until I was completely buried. But still the Light burned all away, vanquished, sublimated the evil, sending the rest cowering to gain ground and strength at my willing expense until the mind was fully illuminated once more. I'd reached its very limit.

But not *my* limit.

For one, looming moment, I considered burning the Light and whatever else it took, my spirit, my will, my life if necessary, burn it as hot as I could. It would cost me, but not as much as the dragon whose mind would be completely scoured away. Already it was crumbling, the infestation that was eating and *replacing it* had also been the only thing keeping it upright, buttresses built out of vermin corpses atop other corpses. The biggest danger of my life up to this point would end, the dragon would die but his soul would be finally free, he'd even be spared some four decades of added sin. A life ended so many others would go on, that was more than fair trade, wasn't it?

But... that's how they get you, isn't it? That's how it always goes on this world. Demons and eldritch abominations corrupt the good, the corrupted subvert many others around them, people die, many more suffer, and when eventually a hero or pure luck allows for the corrupted to be exposed and vanquished, evil laughs at our triumphant speeches because, at the end of the day, we're the only ones who actually lost anything.

*Compromise with objective evil is objective defeat.*

Instead of hot, I burned bright. Bright and brighter, as bright as I could and then I *threw* the Light out wide, as wide and as far as it could spread.

The Light lit up the mind and past it until it was swallowed up. But in that moment when it fully illuminated the dark, in that moment when the vermin swarms pounced on me and *in* me as I was defenceless, I saw the fullness of the Old Gods' insidious design and was *stunned*.

~~You really shouldn't have done that~~

I crashed out of the vision with a choking gurgle, the foul taste of maggots and louse heavy on my tongue, clogging my nose, my lungs, dripping like tears from my eyes and nose as I slipped

and fell off the dragon to nearly break my neck against the ground, if not for the arcane spell that found me just in time to break my fall instead.

~ Shock, Alarm, Wrath ~

The barest scrap of Light descended on me and *burned*, burned like I'd only felt Granodior burn except a hundred times worse... But the pain was welcome because the alternative was corruption eternal.

"You – you failed!" The bronze dragon breathed in shock, his bite going weak. "How did you fail, you weren't supposed to fail!"

"Yogg-Sarron," I coughed with the vomit. The corruption... its vector was psychic but its effects *weren't*, not all of them. The Aegishjalmur held strong around my mind but that wasn't enough, not when your brain couldn't properly produce neurotransmitters. "N'Zoth, flesh, blood, the flesh, it's all meat!" The thought occurred to me to me to summon the Light for aid, but it came so slowly, so late – the faintest shine was already scouring me by that point, Geirrvif – she was the Light's vessel this time, but barely a glow made it through from the spirit realm to try and stave off the darkness filling me. The brackish blood of squirming evils, it had seeped out of their prisons over thousands of years to infest the dragon of earth, and through him now *me*.

"*You mortals and your self-sacrifice, even when it avails you nothing!*" Odyn's voice boomed in my ear like the light at the *other* end of the tunnel in the howling dark. But his rebuke rang false, Manu, Yemo, Trito, Prometheus, Vainamoinen, Tyr, Kvasir, Odin himself, they all sacrificed first, so much. "*...Yet still brave and true to all your boasts to the end of oblivion where even my mind cannot follow alone. The chance will come for you to convince me that my respect is not wasted, you hear me? Get up and be the Light upon the World!*"

I latched onto the Light like the salvation it was, bathing in it, relishing the pain, the healing, turning it inward through my flesh, my bone, my spirit, along *my* Arcane patterns all the way to my unconquered soul and bid it to *Exorcise the Unclean*.

"What is happening to him?" Antonidas demanded as he went to one knee and fed me a potion. "What gibberish is he spouting, will someone bloody well explain *something!*?"

"I barely know more than you, help me move him, we have to get him away from here, quickly!"

Jorach Ravenholdt hauled me up by one arm while Antonidas took the other and they began dragging me away. I pried my eyes open and saw where all my Light had gone. There were golden filaments running through the black dragon now, but they were fading back to devouring darkness even as I watched.

“How did you fail, you weren’t supposed to fail!” The bronze rattled through clenched teeth, eyes wild. “You weren’t supposed to fail, you should have vanquished him, you utterly vanquished him, I saw it!”

Black blood spilled out of the black dragon’s mouth, sizzling like acid, climbing *up* and into the Bronze’s clenched mouth to make him let go with a pained hiss.

“No,” Fahrad – *Verration* moaned as his mouth was released, black veins pulsing through the white around his coal-red eyes. “No, you won’t, I won’t!” He thrashed, lurched savagely, black pus gushing out of his wounds, his pores, eyes, nostrils, from his slacking mouth to singe and overwhelm the bronze one with their acrid smoke. “I won’t be taken in!” The black pus gushed out of him, writhed, wriggled, twisted, ate through the bronze dragon’s scales like a curse of decay. “I won’t believe in lies! I don’t believe your lies! I won’t fall for the lies! C’thun--Sarron--N’Zoth – the Light, you just want to steal my Light, you would snatch the last grace from my grasp, KAIROZODÖRMU!!!” The black blood began slicing, pushing, rotting everything to the point of paralyzing pain that finally allowed the black dragon to shove the bronze away, the sludge *gushed* out of the missing wing joint like a geyser of tar. “I won’t fall! I won’t fall!” The dragon screamed at the top of his lungs. “I WON’T LET YOU!”

The black taint coagulated into a churning, glistening, rancid replacement for his missing wing that bashed the bronze away, sent him rolling in pain from the smear eating at his eyes, then the black dragon jumped into the air and flew away southward as fast as he could.

I saw all of it happen. Even with my head lolling and my blistering eyes more closed than open from pain and exhaustion, I saw it all happen despite that I’d not been able to perceive the black dragon before. I’d seen into the Void and *been* the Shadow it leaves behind when it swallows the Light out of the world. Maybe there were other tricks still hidden from me now, but not this one.

The Light rang in my mind. I forced aside the pain, turned away from the abyss to focus on the sign. The two disparate threats that I’d been feeling the whole day merged into one.

My eyes snapped open, my head shot up and I lurched out of the two men's hold, stumbling after the echoing wingbeats of the fleeing dragon. "What – that – what *way* is that? Where is he going? I know the way he's going, that's where my *home* is! Why is he going there, **we can't let him go there!**"

"Careful there, I know not what black arts he–"

**“Does no one have any shame in this country?!”**

The Light of Judgment Unmerciful came down on me and the Master of Assassins both, bright and terrible.

Lord Jorach Ravenholdt fell to his knees with a hoarse scream, holding his head and heart.

I staggered under the momentary pain – so that was a tad thoughtless despite everything, good to know – but I managed to keep more or less a straight line all the way to where the bronze dragon – Kairozodormu? – was curling into a ball, ranting and cursing in draconic as his eyes and dozens of other wounds smoked and sizzled.

"I don't know what you want from me and I don't have time to ask right now, but you came to help me." With some difficulty that was thankfully quickly giving way to my usual ease, I conjured half a dozen lightwells all over the great beast. "If this isn't enough, find me later."

The dragon glared at me painfully as I walked away, desolate *accusation* in his eyes for some reason, he looked *lost*, what grand design did I fail, who else has plans for me they didn't share?

*"Everyone who ever heard about you, no doubt,"* Odyn landed on my shoulder in the spirit plane. *"Except me of course, though when that changes I will be sure to let you know immediately. Then you can astound me again with how much more creative you are about creating drama in your life."*

I ignored the blustering. Did he see what I saw? In there? Did Geirrvif?

*"No. We do not possess, nor do we mind-meld without consent, and whatever spell you've made goes well beyond mere mental abstractions."*

There's nothing 'mere' about mental abstractions.

*"I used to think so as well, until you."*

Ravenholdt was gasping and trembling on all fours when I returned, looking up at me with pained eyes. But he was neither incapacitated nor deaf or blind despite what he'd just done,

never mind whatever else he'd been before this... Which either meant his *present* intentions and conviction were just barely enough that the Light didn't judge him beyond redemption...

Or he'd not had particularly foul convictions to begin with.

I tried to justify his poor showing of the night. Told myself I was the worst possible matchup for someone of his skills. His horseshoe moustache dripped with his sweat and there was already grey in his brown hair, his prime was already passing him... But that was wishful thinking. The man's lacklustre showing was at odds with the ability and emotion he displayed in that single moment when he thought I was about to kill his friend. "Next time you want to kill yourself, don't put the responsibility for it on someone else like a *coward!*"

"I-didn't-"

"You have one minute to make your case, any case, I don't care."

"I - I'm-" The man pushed up but failed to stand, swaying hard, looking up at me with tight eyes. His case, any case, he didn't have one, he hadn't prepared to need one, didn't expect to see the next dawn, one way or another. His mouth opened and closed, his eyes tightened. I could see several thoughts passing through his mind, but there was a grim dignity in his manner that didn't waver even down on his knees at my feet. "I have these."

Some spell surged in Antonidas' hand from where he stood aside.

Ravenholdt didn't heed the threat, he dug through his pockets and pouches on his legs as well as he could with just one hand. His grey leathers were missing the right sleeve all the way to the shoulder, the edges were scorched, his skin was severely burnt beneath the bandages. I cast Holy Light just to speed things up. The man was shocked, then moved, ten ashamed. He averted his eyes and finished spreading half a dozen pressure pellets on the ground. "Soporific grenades. Enough to fell even a dragon." The man's expression faltered as he looked towards where the dragon had fled and back. "But Fahrad is the one who made them, a new invention just for this mission, at the time I didn't suspect - I suppose that claim was as much of a lie as everything else."

"... No." I decided, reluctantly impressed that he made no bargain or plea. "No, if he explicitly invented it for this *and* used those exact words, it was probably true." Even when attempting *suicide* the dragon was self-righteous, what lunacy.

"You-think he-?"

But now we were just wasting time, so I branded the Aegishjalmur onto his head just in case, turned to the mage, grabbed the lapels of his cape and pulled him up to my face. “Tell me you can teleport!”