

Chapter 14 – The Strategic Cost of Prenotion

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

There was no Christmas on Azeroth, because the one and only organized church here hadn’t gone around genociding everyone who kept to the old ‘devilries’, only to realize they’d run out of steam well before they ran out of infidels and should therefore just settle for co-opting what they could of the old ways. In fact, such an atrocity probably wouldn’t have happened even *if* the trolls hadn’t done the job for them.

Which is to say, the Zandalari Trolls strategically eradicated all of humanity’s shamans and druids and other seers and wise folk ahead of the Troll Wars, as proof of power and good faith to their local Amani cousins. It was why Thoradin accepted so easily Lordain’s condition of total conversion when the Troll Wars broke, and why no one else complained either. If anything, with the spiritual malaise everyone fell into after the old ways ‘failed’, the visions and power the Naaru sent the Tirisfal tribe became the saving grace of the beleaguered leftovers of humanity at the time of the War of Founding.

I had a very strong suspicion that the end result was only the least of what the Naaru were hoping to achieve, with those visions. Contrary to what a certain Chronicle back on Terra said, Lordain’s sister Mereldar was never a warrior. Not just because the humans here weren’t so insane as to bring their women and children onto the battlefield so their whole bloodline could be eradicated at once, but because she had always been an oracle. In fact, she received the visions from the Naaru – like everyone else who did – *before* Thoradin came to treat with them, not after the War of Founding was all over.

This was just my speculation, but I wouldn’t be surprised if the Naaru had intended for the Light to buttress and enhance existing traditions. To spark the same sort of mystical revolution that I’ve found myself stumbling my way through piecemeal. In a single year I became more powerful than anyone else I ever shared air with – yes, even Antonidas as he currently was – just because I had both the Light and the elements on my side. With both Alchemy and Arcane magic added to the mix now, I was having serious trouble imagining a limit to my future development.

There wasn't any inherent incompatibility between divine, arcane and spiritual mystical paradigms, beyond the different mind-expanding methods and mindsets required of each. Humans had a lot of trouble living long enough to master even one path, so I couldn't blame anyone for specialization. But I was now living proof that dabbling in all three could have a positive compounding effect on both power and skill acquisition. I doubted my results would have been so good without mastering the Light first – especially its oracular aspects – and I couldn't entirely rule out that I was a unique exception thanks to being a reincarnation with an eternity of introspection under my belt... but Richard and Emerentius were going to get an elemental of their own as soon as they had their breakthrough with Aura of Vigor.

Uther too, why not? He wasn't a friend yet, never mind a close confidant, but I knew him to be good. It was the perfect occasion. Though Christmas didn't exist, we did have Winter's Veil.

Winter's Veil was the traditional New Year's commemoration. It lasted from the Winter Solstice – which had been on the night of December 19 this year, so last night – until the Day of the First Moon, which was the equivalent of New Year's Day. This, I'd found out, involved some rather complex celestial measurements and calculations to decide when the next year actually began.

Observances and festivals were all tied to astronomy, and everyone still used a Lunar calendar here, which may or may not be Elune's hidden influence. The oddities stemmed not from the fact that Azeroth didn't have any more perfect rotation around its sun than the next planet, but also from having two moons, not just one. Moreover, while the bigger moon – the White Lady – had a practically identical cycle of phases as Terra's Luna, the smaller of the two – the Blue Child – alternatively took just under or just over a standard year to reach its Full Moon phase.

This measurement, in turn, was relative because Azeroth's revolution around the sun didn't equate to a perfect twelve-moon Lunar cycle either. I did not envy astronomers or Kul Tiran tidesages. This didn't even account for the counter-gravity exerted by the moons on each other, or on the world by the moons depending on how close or far they were from the planet. Especially when they were close to each other and aligned, during the celestial event known as the Embrace.

As a consequence, the Day of the First Moon was *not* necessarily the next New Moon after the December Solstice, but the first New Moon phase of the White Lady *after* the Blue Child has had its Full Moon phase of the year. Thus, where the people of Terra could get away with using either

leap years or the occasional 13-month lunar year to bring things back in order, Azeroth semi-regularly had something called the ‘Interregnum,’ which this year would last for eleven days. That is to say, everything between the last day of December and the Day of the First Moon was considered to not be part of any year.

This was intrinsic to how the people on this world kept the calendar year synchronised to the seasonal and astronomical cycles, but the name Interregnum was not chosen at random. The period between the end of December and the Day of the First Moon was considered – not just by us humans – to be symbolically outside time, and thus outside the authority of any powers, mortal and divine alike. Needless to say, this came with certain implications as well as risks and opportunities, from lack of taxation to certain mystical phenomena that *weren't* purely the result of placebo and make-believe.

The idea that we'd have to wait for Muradin Bronzebeard to introduce the Winter Veil holiday to the alliance wasn't any truer than the rest of Loken's mistranslated propaganda. The dwarves' only contribution would be in their more festive and optimistic approach to the event. Chiefly in terms of gift-giving, though I'd already pre-empted that as well, last year. Which was good because doing it this year would only make me look like a hypocrite, once I did everything else I planned to do.

For humanity specifically, the end-of-year occasion was more solemn, with feasting and celebration reserved for the last two days. Besides sermons and wakes for the spirits of the departed – and Tyr of course – the people used the Interregnum to introduce children to the community – those that only came of age after the *summer* solstice – officiate marriages, annul marriages – given sufficient proof of infidelity or harm – make peace, swear oaths, *break* oaths by mutual agreement, sign contracts, nullify contracts prematurely – by mutual agreement even in defiance of royal seal – and various other milestones big and small.

Jorach Ravenholdt had given me to understand that even the assassins generally abided by these customs, and those that decided not to be part of the ‘generally’ soon stopped being part of anything at all.

He'd also given me to understand that everyone down below hoped – and expected – that I'd oversee or judge over all the formalities aforementioned. Richard and everyone else with an opinion told me the same, despite that my business associates had managed to wrangle a scrivener

to come settle down in 'Saint's Tier', and we even had an actual ordained priest down there now, in Uther. Somehow, ten times as many people as usual had decided that Saint's Tier was absolutely the place to bring their business and their families during the holidays.

You'd think that more people would look askance at the fact that I never attended any church service of any kind since the day I Remembered, but apparently not.

Of bigger concern for me personally was that folk rites still retained some animistic flavor, which Granodior generously looked upon with only the slanted eye of a landlord patiently indulging illiterate squatters. It was such a vexing feeling to experience, even by proxy, that I'd made him teach me what qualified as *proper* rite for communing with spirits, just so I could go around telling it to the relevant people.

I had to do it without even hinting at Granodior's existence, as he continued to want nothing to do with anyone but me. But for once I was willing to lean on everyone's willingness to do as I said without explanation, just so I didn't have to suffer through the spirit's grumpy exasperation more than once.

Interestingly, Granodior wasn't entirely annoyed just for himself. According to him, Greatfather Winter was something different from an elemental spirit, but nonetheless a very real entity that sometimes actually manifested out of the winter blizzard.

Yes, really.

Finally, and most important by far in the short term for me, was that the Night of the First Moon was when King Aiden Perenolde was going to hold his engagement ball. Naturally, this carried certain implications for my high-impact winter cleaning, which I had scheduled for the same date. It was a thoroughly effacing scenario that I was preparing, and without the Light I would surely have been sad and possibly depressed leading up to it. I still didn't feel particularly merry, and certainly not happy, but I was very much committed because the alternative was World War I Azeroth Edition, complete with guns and cannons and chlorine gas to the face. Just in time for hordes of aliens, dragons and demons to rape and kill us all right after.

I was not going to take the blame for Aiden Perenolde's choices, or the choices of any others. But as the lone change in initial conditions as defined by chaos theory, I was going to take responsibility.

Alas, clear commitment didn't translate into clear strategy, even if the tactical scenario was vaguely well defined. While my assets for the occasion were finally all secured, the majority of them were of the intangible sort, and thus being regularly swapped and upturned as new options appeared, or old ones became impractical. For example, I might have to completely re-think everything depending on what success – or failure – I achieved in finally dealing with my stubbornly depressed steam elementals that were still completely ignoring me.

Mostly out of shame. It was still stronger than their growing hunger. Somehow.

Thankfully, the tangible assets, at least, were no longer a concern. Granodior had long since prepared the item I asked for in the bowels of the earth, and Antonidas had finally procured the very particular fish and spices I needed. Not without a comedy of errors, admittedly. While the spices had been easy enough to source from the more whimsical bakeries around the Violet Hold, my magic teacher ended up slumming with the black marketeers, and spelunking through the Dalaran sewers when even that went nowhere. To no more avail than everything else he tried, alas. All of it drove him to just give up and resort to his very special approach to improvising abstract spell formulas to *summon* the things across space and time. Both times. Completely blind.

One of the fish I wanted was from a continent nobody had explored since our vrykul ancestors fled it. The other one was from a different continent that nobody on ours knew existed, except the elves. I had been completely wrong to assume some variation of the creatures would also be found here.

Antonidas, ironically, minded it all less than I did, as he was able to do the summoning from his new accommodations on our mountain. I'd hired my business associates to raise an entire separate workshop for him. He said it spared him having to dodge everyone who had something to tell or ask him about his continued estrangement from the City of Wizards. But it was still an imposition on my part, and while I was paying him for all the trouble he kept going through for me, his agreement to help without making it conditional on me sharing my plans was more than money could buy.

Speaking of fish though, only one of them was going to be useful as is. The other one I only needed for the fat.

I entered my workshop and stood near the wall while Narett finished refining the last pygmy pufferfish oil. It wasn't distillation, but his process did require broiling it in a mixture with a number of concentrating compounds. Here, too, I had someone going out of their way to exceed my request. The oil in its base form should be good enough for what I needed, but Narett had offered to develop a refinement process, 'if only to sate his own curiosity about this heretofore unknown reagent.' I would have refused, but Antonidas did summon an excess of the things 'to have a comfortable margin of error so he didn't need to go through everything again' so it wasn't like Narett would deprive me of critical resources. Also, I had another reason for wanting Narett to stick around longer than usual this time.

Which is to say, I'd *intended* to come up with a softer approach to discussing my very strong suspicion about his – and Alchemists' in general – tension with Dalaran. Ultimately, though, I decided the direct approach would work best after all. Narett knew me well enough by now to notice when I was being circumspect, and I had too much respect for him to skirt and waffle. Most importantly, even after a whole night of Reflection on the notion of just *telling* Narett anything, I got none of the premonitions of tragedy that I did for Alonsus Faol.

The man finally straightened up from the glass flask simmering on the alembic. "This batch isn't finished yet, but I do have nine other vials filled and stoppered over there. I'd love to know what you mean to do that requires the power to make yourself one foot shorter, but somehow I will endure. Dare I hope you changed your mind about selling me a couple?"

"Not until next year, no, assuming there's any left. You'll have to talk to Antonidas if you just can't wait until then."

"Hmph."

Yeah, that was the answer I expected.

I ambled over to inspect the vials of pygmy oil, lifting each up to my eyes in the sunlight coming through the windows. The vials looked exactly like I recalled from my last life, art style

notwithstanding. I was really just killing time until Narett was finished. The next topic would require his complete engagement.

I wasn't really worried about efficacy, the liquid showed the same mystical weave to my second sight, and felt potent and consistent when I overlapped my spirit with it, no matter the vial. There wasn't an overabundance of them, so I couldn't be *completely* confident that I would learn how to replicate the effects by the time I ran out. That didn't really matter to the success of the operation though.

I *was* confident in my chances otherwise. Even if I failed to add their magical effects to my permanent repertoire of abilities, the one-off effect should last me long enough to make sure my 'solution' to Aiden Perenolde's enmity was as discriminating as it was definitive. Granodior had already promised his help, but Alterac Keep was warded against mystical intrusion thanks to wards built into its very foundation. Also, below a certain scale Granodior needed my senses and perspective for detail work. And there would be quite a bit of detail work, if I was going to successfully share my most diagram-shifting 'blessing' with so many people of a mind so different and even diametrically opposed to my own.

Being discriminative was very important, considering all the guests that were going to be in Alterac Keep on New Year's Eve. Especially the foreign ones. The ball was going to be attended by everyone in the kingdom who still wanted to maintain a pretense of loyalty, as well as a fair few foreign guests. Not just the prospective ladies and their retinues, but also other foreign delegations, among which would be numbered the ailing King Archibald Greymane of Gilneas. That was another man with progressively worsening mental problems, though rumors on the why were confused at best. I could only hope insanity wouldn't become a trend with human kings.

I wondered if this was the point where the groundwork was laid for Isiden Perenolde's later backing by Gilneas. The boy existed, according to Richard, but was only a toddler right now. Isiden was even heir to the throne until Aiden had his own children, so he was unlikely to be fostered out. But I wouldn't be surprised if Gilneas' ambitious king didn't see all the future possibilities that I was going to destroy, despite his other issues. Whatever they were.

All in all, it was very much a high-tension, low-action lead-up that I couldn't share with anyone because of my commitment to operational security of the 'don't tell anyone at all just in case'

variety. The silver lining was that I'd only need human help in the aftermath, to manage the fallout, so at least everyone else's hands could remain clean.

Relatively, anyway.

Eventually, the alchemist of still undisclosed age stoppered the last phial. I waited next to the tube rack for him to deposit it in its place. Sensing that I had something to talk about, and possibly the privacy weaves I'd been casting and enforcing around the workshop the whole time I waited, Narett turned to me expectantly. "Alright. What's going on in that overactive head of yours this time?"

"This thing between you and Antonidas."

"Gods, this again?"

"Yes, this whole thing between the Alchemists and Dalaran..."

"Yes, what about it?"

"It's thorium, isn't it?"

There was a moment of raw, bewildered disbelief.

Then Narett went white as milk.

I was right. "History would have gone a lot differently if the feat that ended the Troll Wars could be repeated. But it hasn't, and the fact that not just Dalaran but even the elves haven't figured out how to do it again leads me to believe that-"

"Do not!" Narett lunged at me and put a hand over my mouth, not caring that I was so much bigger than him now. "Do not speak of it! You mustn't speak of, you can't even mention th-" His tongue seemed to twist in his mouth - a geas? - then his pallor went completely ashen. "You cannot tell them! You cannot tell *anyone*, you cannot even speak of it aloud lest - if you have any respect for me at all, as an alchemist, as a teacher, as a fellow man, you will not utter the slightest word of this ever again!"

The idea that Narett and his not-a-society of Alchemists knew the secret of atomics, and in fact were even doing their moral best to keep that secret, might seem like a logic leap even with the Light lighting my way... but I was from Earth.

I knew my 1970s high school science. I knew about the Brahmastra. I'd read about occultists and alchemists. Some of my own *professors* had also been alchemists in their off-time, yes, the vocation continued even in the modern day, though in my youthful arrogance I'd secretly looked down on them for it back then. Most importantly, the internet made sure I found out about Fulcanelli.

I'd originally dismissed his story as an urban legend because of the whole 'divine hermaphrodite' nonsense that took over the story at the end. Now, though, with my alchemy teacher holding my mouth shut in literal, visceral panic, I was willing to allow the possibility that only the last third of that story was hogwash. Probably tacked on by someone way late in the telephone game, who clearly had an agenda and wouldn't know reality from alchemical allegory even if it hit him in the face.

I slowly reached up, gently grabbed Narett's wrist and removed his hand from my face. "I'd have hoped to have convinced at least you by now that I'm not foolish. Or callous."

Narett's face twisted into something dark, then chagrin, then shame for the briefest of moments, before he withdrew and reached blindly behind him until he found my rickety chair and fell in it. He hunched forward with his face in his hands. "... There is no secret so terrible that you'll leave it well enough buried, is there?"

I said nothing. What was there to say? When your enemy's an infinite army of demons from beyond the stars, and you can't take the slow and steady way even if you tried because it summons literal eldritch gods-enslaved monsters, could you actually afford to pretend atomics don't exist? Also, if gnomes didn't have nuclear power by now, they would soon.

"How did you even figure it out? How do you even *know* about – how do you know so many things from so many disparate – oh, why do I even bother? You will never give a straight answer."

Because I'm a reincarnation with knowledge of the future. "Because it's a secret every bit as sensitive as this one, and you said no to the only way I have to seal our otherwise blind trust. Precisely so you wouldn't risk slipping this secret, along with everything else you want me to discover on my own step by step."

Narett didn't dispute it, and he didn't suddenly change his mind about the soulgaze either.

Should I tell him I don't need Alchemy to be immortal?

No. This was already a monumental topic, tossing another in would just make things worse.

Back on Earth, when I'd read the supposed canon about the Troll Wars and how they concluded, several things struck me immediately.

One, the notion that nobody tried combined casting before could clearly be nothing else than pure dogshit.

Two, if it only took a handful of arcanists backed by a few scores of barely educated apprentices to create a cataclysm so big and mighty as to produce a literal pyroclastic flow – as that's the *least* outrageous explanation for what killed not just Jintha but the loa, the trolls' literal *gods* before they could react, so it had to have been in a literal *instant* – there was no way the spell wouldn't have been used as a deterrent or intimidation, if not deployed outright in literally every other mass conflict since.

And yet it never happened, and in fact the matter didn't cross anyone's minds ever. Not in history, not during Orcs and Humans, not during Tides of Darkness, not during Reign of Chaos, not by Dalaran against Arthas or Archimonde during Frozen Throne, not during Wrath of the Lich King, not by anyone during the Cataclysm, not during Kairozdormu's little time war, not when the Burning Legion finally invaded, not for anything ever. They didn't even try it on *Argus* when the good guys had a spaceship capable of literal *orbital bombardment*.

Comparatively, the Scourge were able to zombie swarm the high elves in a conventional campaign across an entire country without such a spell even being brought up, just so they could go and use the entire power of the Sunwell to create a single lich. The same Sunwell which, if the official narrative of the Troll Wars was to make the slightest bit of sense, should have been able to fuel at least ten of those 'columns' of 'fire' at the same time.

Per minute.

Long story short, I call bullshit.

However, if it wasn't *purely* a feat of magic, say if there were to be some veins near enough to the surface, of a certain primordial element that becomes fissile when exposed to processes that induce

neutron capture, which turns out to be one of several inevitable and necessary mechanics in literally every Arcane transmutation, conjuration and energy-state related spell out there...

You wouldn't notice it at all, normally. Splitting one atom didn't do anything, no more than fusing a couple did. It took *thousands* of atoms fusing at once on your skin just to make you feel a little warm. Moreover, only the bigger and flashier elemental spells were noticeably exothermic, and there were other explanations for that than nuclear physics, especially in a world where people didn't know about atoms at all. Not even the gnomes knew about it back then, I was pretty sure.

Until I brought up the topic even *Antonidas* had only 'agreed with prior speculative papers' that something smaller than 'particles' must exist, and even then only through deduction based on the fact that his oh so special cutting spell severed things too neatly. Considering that there are and almost always have been gnomes in the Kirin Tor, this lack of knowledge was a big deal. It told me that either Gnomeragan haven't cracked atomics yet either, or they have a healthy respect for state secrets despite all the other known gnomish foibles.

But if a single gram of hydrogen could produce 616 billion joules, or the equivalent of 145 tons of TNT, then a surface vein of thorium suddenly turning into Uranium 233 while the forces of physics are being instructed to 'blow this entire area the fuck up' by means of exotic wave-form patterns converging upon the same spot from every direction...

Back on Earth, lore nuts used to go on about how elements and ores from Azeroth couldn't be the same as those from Earth, even if their names and appearances were identical. Thorium even came up in that discussion specifically. An old quest called it 'the strongest of metals,' so strong that a lockbox made of the stuff would be impossible for a full-grown yeti to break open. Naturally, that would be nothing at all like the Terran version of Thorium, which was barely better than iron in terms of hardness, and often worse depending on the isotope.

Since reincarnating though, I'd found that to not be the case at all. Even without accounting for the language differences, all the elements had the same properties I remembered. I could only conclude that the differences were down to lore writers not knowing what they were talking about – par for the course in 95% of everything ever written – and having to subordinate the overly simplistic crafting system to character and zone levels.

Neither cobalt nor iron exposed to *inherently destabilizing chaos matter* would be harder than abrasion-resistant steels or mangalloy, which in turn were stronger than titanium. In a sane world, Dark Iron would have remained the endgame material through all the expansions.

Of course, in a sane world retcons would be made only to fill up plot holes, not make bigger and worse ones. Point the last – the art. Setting aside how the concept art for the firestorm back on Terra looked only a little bit different from a mushroom cloud, all the art *here* was speculative and post-dated the battle. As well it should, as none of those present for it could have seen it clearly. Why? Because looking at something hot enough to carbonize *gods* from the inside out would be so bright as to be literally blinding – kind of like, oh, a *nuclear explosion*.

I pulled my spare fold-out chair from under the worktable and took a seat next to the man. “If I told you,” I said lowly, “that there is a menace coming to this world so terrible as to make even this worth delving into, what would you say?”

“I’d call you a liar,” Narett said hollowly. “And then immediately call myself a coward for making accusations based only on emotion.”

“That’s not an answer.”

I waited. I waited a good while.

“You cannot tell them,” Narett breathed finally. “Any of them. You mustn’t. The entire basis of arcanism is to go against common sense, they will not, they *cannot* help themselves, they will use it, and then they will abuse it even if just to see how far they can go.”

“Probably.” I agreed. The warnings and disturbances I felt in the Light from my own ideas had more than doubled since I began to learn Arcane spells. “But my question stands.”

It stood. It stood for quite a while with no answer.

I had plenty of patience, but this was not the time for it. “I’m not going to wait for anyone’s permission,” I warned him. “There *is* a menace coming for this world, and it’s one so terrible that we will be facing literal extinction if it’s not denied every foothold.”

Naret lurched from his chair and stepped away from me, looking blankly at the wall with his fists clenched. I wondered how much he’d already deduced before, of what I’d just revealed about the

future. That I knew any of what would come in the future, however it happened. His entire body was rigid, and his face was stuck with tension. When he spoke, his voice was rough but his words final. “If ever a time comes when *absolute catastrophe* is the least of terrible options, then *we* will take responsibility.”

No you won't because I'll have already done it myself, I thought grimly, acutely conscious of what longevity and immortality could do to one's perspective of time. *The time is much closer than you think*. “I apologise in advance for the disappointment I'll cause you.”

Narett's head snapped around to look at me in pure anguish.

“I won't involve the mages,” I said, standing up as well. “I'll make as certain as possible of the trustworthiness and discretion of anyone else involved, and I'll make sure collateral damage is as minimal as I can make it. But that's the best promise I can make.”

Emotions flew over Narett's face, and he made to speak several times, before a dreaded resignation and disappointment was all that was left. “Do what you will.” His tone was bleak. “You've discovered the secret all on your own, however you've done it. I've no claim on anything you do next.”

That's as good as saying you won't teach me anything else from now on.

No claim means no responsibility either, and some might argue that further involvement with me of any kind would qualify as endorsement.

I didn't drag that issue out into the open, and neither did he.

Narett rode out the same day. That had always been the plan, he was in high demand back in the city around this time. But I still couldn't help but wonder if this would be the last time he associated with me. Where before I only worried about Aiden Perenolde's thugs coming for him in the night...

Now I found myself experiencing an all too different sort of unease.

The day just before First Moon's Eve was the last and biggest day of carousing, when the solemnity of the Interregnum was a distant dream and everyone goes out feasting, visiting, singing, and generally having a good time. Or causing drunken mischief with or without – and to – everyone else. It allowed for the *actual* First Moon's Eve to be dedicated to sleeping off your hangover, after which the afternoon and night could be dedicated to welcoming – or cursing – the new year's arrival in private with family and friends.

That Aiden Perenolde chose First Moon for his ball could only be a deliberate provocation. I didn't *know* what went on in his head, but I wouldn't be surprised if he chose that day specifically so he'd have a higher chance of no-shows, and thus a higher chance of having someone to judge a 'traitor' for propagandistic reasons. He could even spin it as a slight against the foreign delegations on the part of the absentees – like Richard – even if no one really believed him. The dignitaries obviously had to be there for at least one or two uninterrupted weeks to justify the effort and expense of the trip to begin with. It would be a flimsy fiction, but not the worst he'd done.

Regardless, that was going to be tomorrow's problem. Which was good because today was shaping up to be... I didn't even know. I could feel in the Light that there was a major significance of nebulous origin almost on top of us, but I couldn't puzzle out its nature even after four consecutive nights of turning it over in the Light. Not because it wasn't *clear*, but because there were a whole bunch of other things converging at the same time, which would define... how the main one unfolded? Or how I took it? We? Us? Us who, exactly?

The most bizarre part was that none of the approaching somethings felt in any way related to what I was going to do tomorrow. Or, well, some *did*, but they didn't feel like they would in any way affect my resolve to go through with it.

At the same time, the major significance of nebulous origin felt more important than tomorrow, plus everything that had happened to me and mine all year. Combined. But *not* more important than some of the stuff I myself had done, like arguing with a Valkyrie over whether or not Odyn had earned himself getting strangled. Or getting his raven familiar strangled, the degree of separation there was still unclear.

Then, too, there was a second biggest major significance of nebulous origin that the first one seemed to be dragging along like a lackwit on a sled, except it wouldn't have anything to do with me specifically for at least a few years. Probably, anyway.

Bloody confusing. And worrying. And frustrating. Probably why other psychics and oracles just leave it at 'I sense a disturbance' after the first couple of years.

Absurdly, all this bizarrely non-alarming tension had for once made me seek escape in the mores of day-to-day life. The timing arguably couldn't have been better too. Which is to say, I'd been down in 'Saint's Tier' just after dawn to 'bless the start of the festivities,' again in spite of the fact that we had Uther there to officiate such things now.

I'd still expected it to be more of a bother than anything, but the authentic merriment proved beyond contagious. I even surprised myself by not immediately absconding back to my lofty perch. I was instead so completely entranced by the sight of my parents getting completely swept up in the holiday spirit – my mother *smiling* – that I lingered with them as long as I could before the people started to crowd us.

I then turned the Aegishjalmur upon the busybodies that didn't know how to mind their own business, with a very clear admonishment about their unseemly behaviour. Just because it was the holidays didn't mean I was suddenly going to tolerate mobbing. I made sure that was very well understood before I made my climb back up the mountain.

I spent a while watching from my terrace just to be sure, but everyone seemed to take chasing me away from the festivities exactly as hard as I hoped. They were now giving my parents their space to enjoy the day as freely as they did themselves, which was nice.

Glad that I wouldn't need to waste my time running surveillance, I turned away from the cliff and set off for the house. I'd just seen Orsur Kelsier drive in on his wagon down below, so that was the first of a bunch of surprise developments identified. I'd have to get a guest room ready for the man myself. Since we continued to be the best employers, we'd given our farmhands the Interregnum and next week off.

Hopefully no one else in our guild came over. None of them lived closer to this place than Alterac City, which was two days away, so anyone who was here today wouldn't make it home in time to

be with their loved ones. It would have had implications all around depending on how much coercion was involved in the decision.

We still had the pavilion set up outside if the need arose, as Richard had made it a permanent donation, but the thought of that ridiculous man only had me rolling my eyes. I hadn't had to outright *order* him off to spend the holidays with his wife and sister in yon different country across the sea, thankfully. But he'd been so awkward and regretful about 'abandoning me' at such a 'critical time' and could he still not persuade me to let him help with whatever it was I was planning after all?

Honestly.

Suddenly, I stopped. There was a light in Antonidas' workshop. Even though he'd left days ago.

The packed snow crunched under my feet as I detoured over. When I knocked on the door, the 'come in' was as startled as it was absentminded. I went through the door, only to be met by the sight of the mage rummaging almost chaotically through several different folders while floating books were turning their own pages all around him as he wrote something down at carpal tunnel speeds.

"Shouldn't you be in Dalaran with your family that I made pine after you by keeping you on retainer, for which my mother took it on my behalf to apologize in the form of pies?"

"Just a few more minutes," the mage grunted, pointedly leaning over the desk so his voluminous sleeves hid what he was writing. "I had a sudden idea that couldn't wait – well, that I *thought* couldn't wait but is shaping up to be more time-consuming than I hoped, even if it works – but I'd left some of the reference materials here."

"Dare I ask?"

"You will do as you will, as always, but I will not answer this once. It might still be nothing."

My eyebrows climbed up. Some of the titles on the floating books were from my assigned reading on enchantment, and others weren't familiar at all. Was this one of the more pleasant surprises in store for me perhaps? Or was I just tempting fate? My precognition was so overloaded today that I couldn't tell either way. "Well, alright then."

“As always, I appreciate your forbearance.” Antonidas stepped back from the table – still blocking my view – and cast a spell that packed every book, note and paper he’d been rummaging through in his bag of holding. Only when everything was squirreled away did he turn to face me, looking almost furtive. “Well. That’s all I came back here for. Let me wish you the best tidings again, for the New Year. I’ll see myself off.”

“I’ll walk you to the spot.”

Antonidas didn’t *need* any pre-prepared teleportation circle, and in fact his abstract approach to spellweaving allowed him to draw on the energies at both departure and destination points to teleport. It was why he could do it from anywhere to anywhere, something which only a handful of the oldest Kirin Tor mages could accomplish over long distances. Everyone else had to use leyline intersections of power, or multi-line roundabouts if they wanted to make an actual portal.

Suddenly disappearing still caused a fairly strong air implosion though, which left a mess behind, so mages avoided doing it indoors unless it was a room specifically set aside for it. They especially didn’t do it around important research and paperwork if they could.

Once Antonidas vanished, I checked in on the ever-steaming cauldron – still sulking, wait just a few more hours little ones – and then visited Emerentius’ lair to make sure he hadn’t lied when he took my advice to shapeshift into an unknown face to enjoy the day. I was always very careful not to give him any explicit commands unless he was being particularly obstinate about self-flagellating himself into an early grave, so it was always possible he might choose the wrong sort of agency to exert.

Fortunately, today was not that kind of day. Well, unless he’d gone somewhere else entirely, but that was entirely up to him. Hopefully nobody would get too badly on his nerves down there.

It was around dusk, while I was laying out the freshly aired bedding and was considering a second trip down to get my guest and parents, because a massive blizzard had just come out of nowhere, that *utter misery* barreled into my sixth sense. It was shocking, a comet of gloom and wretchedness borne down from the sky on dragon wings, dreadful and woebegone grief from a wound freshly reopened. The dragon landed, the woe spilled forth, and my father all but carried it to our door.

I snapped out of my shock and made it to the entry hallway just in time to watch the door all but slam open from the force of the snowstorm. I could barely see the dragon's outline in the blizzard, but I didn't care. My mind was fully on the sight of my parents stumbling over the threshold, my father holding my mother up while she tried in vain to stem her tears with hands covering her face. I was stupefied.

Then my father let go of mother just for a moment, scrambling to close the door behind him, and she saw me. She promptly lost the battle with whatever dregs of restraint she'd managed to hang onto. She burst into wretched, heaving sobs, stumbled away from dad, *beat* me away with a pained cry when I tried to meet her, and fled deep into the house, down the hall and down the stairs, out of sight and hearing behind the loud, harsh slam of the storm cellar door.

I stood there in the hallway, gaping. I was absolutely dumbfounded. I was even, for the first time in either life, dangerously close to feeling betrayed by the Light. *None* of my premonitions had hinted at anything like this. Just what the hell else was going to happen today that *this* would be completely irrelevant in the grand scheme of things? And even the not so grand scheme of things, what the fuck?

Behind me, the door final snapped shut.

"Dad." I turned, my voice as harsh as the snowstorm outside. "What the *hell*?"

Domar Hywel leaned his head on the door for several long, strained breaths. When he turned around, his face was grim and tight and he conspicuously looked in mother's wake instead of meeting my gaze. "They called her Holy Mother."

...

I suddenly realized, with that oracular acuity that had made the bliss of ignorance into a sad and distant memory, that the storm cellar was the part of the house farthest from the master bedroom. The master bedroom that was now *my* bedroom, because Master Zidar could be very clever and efficient when it came to putting his best effort into a building project, so he'd decided mid-way through the renovation that an all-new nursery would be a good 'surprise.'

"Fuck."

"Yeah," Dad said bleakly, rubbing his face wearily. "That's pretty much it."

I... This...

What could I even say? "... I'm going to check on Emerentius," I decided completely unnecessarily. Because I didn't know what else to do. What even could you say when something bad happened and it wasn't anyone's fault? "If you can get things laid out, I'll make some tea ahead of dinner." I turned and passed Dad on the way to the door.

Only to stop with my hand on the handle when Dad held out an arm to bar my way.

"You do that, son." He still wasn't looking at me. Where our spirits touched, I felt nothing in him other than shame. Why? This made no sense. "But after that, I think it's time we talked."

"... Yes," I agreed, not looking his way either. "I think so too."

Looking inward, I tried and failed to find any genuine surprise at all of this happening now. Of course something would rear its head on the personal front too. That's just how it goes.

But at the same time, I didn't find any resentment either.

What I felt from outside was a different matter entirely.

I opened the door and stepped into the storm. The blizzard was oddly painless on my skin, and it didn't steal my breath even as I stepped further and further away from shelter. I ignored all of it in favour of what I could sense beyond the physical.

"There is something in the wind," Emerentius grunted when I finally reached him, enveloping me under the shelter of his wings. "And old power but... strange. Fogged, but not literally. Vague?"

"Befuddled," I supplied, because I sensed the same. "And there's something else too, or an echo of something. Like it only came because it was... Lured? Enticed?"

"Solicitude," the dragon found the right word this time. "Yes, that feeling I know well."

The blizzard was here by its own choice, but not at its own *behest*. Someone had cajoled it to come here. "Quite the combination," I huffed. "Makes you wonder about who's behind it. Was anything special happening down there when the storm broke?"

“Nothing particularly grand or public *yet*,” the dragon said, though he gave me a meaningful look despite that. “But it did send everyone running for shelter just in time to miss your lady mother breaking down.”

Well.

Wasn't that something?

Granodior, I thought. *Is anyone dying or in pain? Stranded?*

Other than those instances that had nothing to do with this because someone is always dying or in pain somewhere, the answer was a definitive no.

Both here *and* elsewhere. Apparently, the blizzard was so widespread as to cover all of Alterac's heartland, but the very strong winds were also unnaturally gentle on the living, and the downfall failed to trap or bury anyone despite the sheer volume of snow it was putting down everywhere.

Someone is either making a point or has no sense of scale.

Greatfather Winter was it?

Granodior, alas, had nothing more to say.

I let Emerentius retire to his den and took my time walking back to the house. I cast my senses as wide and intently as I could. The blizzard felt like a muddleheaded old foggy upon my spirit, but didn't make it hard to breathe despite the wind being so strong as to fell trees and build giant snowbanks in their wake. I didn't hurt.

This is fine, I thought wryly, to that old mental image of a dog wearing a hat while sitting on a chair in the middle of a burning building. Despite how appropriate that memory felt to my current situation, I found that I wasn't any more worried than before.

Even with this newest development, it still wasn't *my* building that I was seeing come down in flames in my mind's eye.

The mages who founded Dalaran had once deployed nukes without knowing what the hell they were doing. The Alchemists could deploy nukes at any time because they did know what the hell they were doing. Someone or other had summoned a huge winter storm by means of an entity at least as vast as my Earth Spirit partner, but it wasn't doing any harm. All of this was apparently

just the start of what was to be in store for me tonight. And I'd deliberately held back until the grandest and most public international event that Alterac had seen in over a century, all the while planning and replanning my strategy until history's most flagrant regicide was reduced to a mere secondary goal.

But sure, Mom and Dad.

We can talk.