

Chapter 10 – The Light of the Soul

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

When Antonidas teleported the three of us half-way up the last trail to my home, it was to the sight of massive smoke funnels visible even in the night, the smell of scorched earth, and the not so distant glow of a brushfire where one should never be.

My heart sank. “Shit!” He couldn’t already be here, even dragons don’t fly that quickly! “I need to get up there, now!”

“Curses!” Antonidas swore, holding out a hand. “Climb up!”

I took it and hoisted myself behind the saddle. “Ravenholdt, catch up or don’t!”

“Wait!” He grabbed on the horse reins. “Beware, that was Darbel Montrose you killed back there. She has been in bed with the king in more ways than one. I know not what plans of his she saw to, but she only joined on our chase near dusk. The rest of the day she appeared only so long as it took her to teleport us ahead and regain the ground we kept losing to your contraption. Whatever this is may well be her doing!”

“Damn!” She had a whole day to herself, what did she do? “Understood, Antonidas, go, go!”

“Hya!”

The steed reared and sprung into a gallop up upon the air.

When we soared past the last thicket, I looked down to see all our fields on fire, the ward around the main house gone, the foundation itself cracked down the middle, and the glow of the Light only around my workshop, from which just *two* of our farmhands were returning fire to the *platoon of ‘bandits’ laying siege.*

...

It’s regicide, then.

My little Spirits of Water and Flame barrelled into me then, latched on me, clung to me, scrambled at my spirit in a deluge of panic and guilt. It was good I’d already deduced

everything that had happened, because their attempt to update me via mind meld was chaotic, turbulent and completely useless.

Except for one thing.

I surrounded us with a forcefield just in time for the bullets to glance off.

Antonidas pulled the horse to the right *hard*. “They have dwarven weapons as well?!”

“Not them.” I pointed down. “Land us there. The ward will let us in.”

“Your whole country is mad.”

“Not the country, our leadership is evil.”

Antonidas scoffed but steered the horse down until we passed through the wall of Light and touched down.

“Master Wayland!” My men cried in relief from the makeshift cover of our cart and a barrel, the guns in their hands drooping along with the rest of them. “It’s you, oh thank Tyr!”

I jumped off the horse, opened my mouth to reply, then closed it and stood in place, frozen. Bart was one life light, Barney a second, my father was inside, kneeling next to my fold-out bed where mother was lying, her light a sickly shade but still all *there*. Why was she just *one*? Where were the other two? Where were the little stars?!

I threw the Holy Light at my poor men but that was all I could spare on my rush to get inside, maybe I just wasn’t seeing clearly, the Void had been clouding my senses on and off all night, it might still-

I slammed the door open. My father jumped with a shout, knocked my last spare gun down in his rush to grab it and brandished a chair at me instead, before he recognized me and went slack, with relief so thick I could feel it... But that curdled back into grief, the chair clattered to the floor, the man fell back down to his knees, looking away from me and back to my mother with complete devastation.

My mother didn’t move. Just laid there, one arm over her eyes and on her side with her face at the wall, weeping quietly.

I stared at him. I stared at her. At the light that she was. The lights that now weren’t. The drying smears of blood on her legs. The towel thick with the rest of it, and traces of the afterbirth that came too soon.

“They got smart,” Dad said hollowly. “When they couldn’t get to us in the wards, they tried to smoke us out. And when that wasn’t going fast enough, their mage *bitch* did something to the ground. We thought the house would collapse, so we ran here, but... She-she stumbled-I didn’t-I could’ve caught her and I didn’t.”

I looked at him. I cast Holy Light and he only looked at me lost. I cast it on my mother too, but she just curled up tighter. I cast my eyes over the room. Walked to the bucket. Moved the sheet aside. Falric. Marwyn. I burned the sight of my two murdered brothers deep into my mind.

This entire nation must be purged.

I carefully replaced the sheet and walked back outside. Past the others to look through the golden dome at the wicked shadows of fear and doomed men. “Where’s Howard? Did they get him?”

Barney and Bart looked at each other. “He quit this morning.”

“Right before this fine mess, mighty convenient isn’t it?”

“Tracherous bastard.”

He what? But...

No, it didn’t fit, the fallout with the king only happened today near noon. “How early? When did he quit exactly?”

“Right after breakfast. I suppose he musta told the Master and Missus yesterday though, cuz’ they already knew.”

“I’m telling you, he had something to do with this, why else would he leave now?”

Somehow, I didn’t know how, those words were enough to finish tipping my increasingly distressed steam elementals from grief and guilt all the way into self-loathing. The change in mood was so sharp and sudden that I felt lightheaded. I tried to find what scraps of reassurance I could for them, but I barely had any for myself.

The little ones broke free of my spirit with the shame of the ones who realized for the first time in their life that they were a burden. They looked at the house, looked at Antonidas with the jealousy of the not good enough, looked at the evil people with hate I didn’t know they could even feel, looked at *me* with dreadful determination.

And then merged into a single spirit before I even knew what was happening.

Wait, what-No! No, no, no, not them too!

“You *morons!*” I barked, catching them in a forcefield, I had to – what could I even – what are they thinking?! “What is wrong with you, suicide is *never* the answer, why would you-?” No, no bluster, no recriminations, that’s just wasting time that’s quickly running out, I could see it, the elemental cores hadn’t been fully consumed yet, the process wasn’t complete, or if it was it could still be reversed, their selves – there was a Shadow of them still left in their place, I could see it, I could-

“DO NOT!” The Raven turned full manifest just so it could bite and shout inside my ear. “Reject the slightest fragment of reality and you will no more have a *concept* of reality, only the self-deceptive illusion that eternally feeds itself. Even if you do not indulge again, the self-deception will gnaw at your good sense. You will never feel fully at ease, nevermore certain of the world because you yourself will have permanently undermined your willingness to acknowledge all parts of it! The Void does not *cast* Shadows, it *leaves* them by *sucking* the Light out, the life it makes is itself just as hollow, fake, decrepit, accursed and *undead*, why do you think this will be any different?”

I paused. I acknowledged the Shadow. I acknowledged its nature. Odyn was right, it wasn’t the same as the shadows of the future I could the Light casting before, why did I ever think so? Is this how they fool you?

But... even so.

I took a deep breath. “The qualities most essential to self-determination are courage to endure and contempt for death.”

My mind course-corrected. I moved past the Void to the Light beyond and travelled backwards on the wings of revelation to the *reflection* of the past upon the present, where this *utter foolishness* was eternally recorded in the annals of history. I saw them, the *complete imbeciles* that were too young to die to their own stupidity, latched with the Light on everything they were and *pulled* them forward, back into their proper place in the world.

The elemental spirit split back into nine minds, shocked, confused, but each and every one the same selves.

“... Clumsy,” Odyn said with all the air of someone pretending as badly as he could that he hadn’t been trying to teach something completely different. “Very traumatic as well, but they’re clearly too stupid not to forgive you.”

The little ones whirled in affront, then shrunk in shame at my glare. The fires kept burning. The night shuddered with the oncoming roar of a frenzied beast.

Antonidas stepped around the little spirits to stand next to me, glancing guardedly at the raven before speaking. “Do you want me to neutralize the attackers?”

“No.” The beating of great wings was almost on top of us. “No, I think that problem is about to solve itself.”

Verration the Black descended from the night sky and flew a complete circle around the dome of Light, bathing everything below in burning pitch. The flames grew taller. The smoke became too thick to see. The dying screams of Alterac’s soldiers were only slightly less frenzied than the roaring.

I looked with sight beyond sight to the emptiness flying through the night’s darkness. Fahrads... He shouldn’t exist. Not yet. Deathwing made a play on Alterac after the Second War, after Perenolde’s betrayal, but no other dragons not named Prestor figured into his plans. Fahrads wasn’t loyal to him, I knew that, but even if he was already playing the long game, his human identity would have been in his teens at most at that point. By the third war his persona was in his prime, probably his thirties, meaning the birth date of his human disguise would have been around the Dark Portal at the earliest, probably a few years later even. This identity shouldn’t exist now, or at the very least the dragon should be disguised as someone else. It was why it took me so long to figure out it was him, I’ve had to be careful not to make assumptions since I awoke.

This dragon...

He became an assassin because it was murky enough to appease the whispers. It let him distract himself from the failing charge of his flight, and the madness of Deathwing whom he did his best to betray and sabotage indirectly. So far I had explicit evidence that at least some of the Legion expansion was accurate. By the time ‘adventurers’ killed Nefarian and Onyxia and the handful of other wyrms that crossed their path, by the time Wrathion began to steal the spotlight, there were no more adult black dragons left because this one had *killed them all*. How many had he already assassinated?

Even now in his blind madness he helped me, because me kneeling to Aiden Perenolde would have blackpilled him and he was so glad, so, so vindicated I hadn't.

Whatever I do, I'll need all the help I can get.

“There is one debt still owed to me, val'kyr.”

I sensed Geirrvif swiftly descend to hover behind me in the spirit world.

“I'm calling it all at once after all.”

The raven on my right shoulder finally snapped out of whatever it was. “You dare insinuate I'd only pay my dues under duress, such insolence! This is bigger than you, I've already dispatched help!”

That's a lot better than I – wait, what help?

“The kind that is needed! Though if you mean to make another claim to wisdom worthy of me, then go ahead and teach!”

Are you always so rude when putting your faith in someone?! And wasn't that supposed to work the other way around?

But his words found something in me, a memory rising from the depths of my first life when I was taking a break from my main passion to expand my horizons. When I was reading about the Pelasgians. Their way of life, their creed, their laws... Odyn was *exactly* like what I'd imagined them to be like.

The Belagines. The Laws of Beginnings, the guiding principles of mankind-that-was, the Ancient Guiding Laws of the Dacians that long before them set the foundation of human civilization.

At least if you believed such claims-

The Light shifted and glimmered in my mind. Each sentence and word of those forty-five passages became a single fractal within its many-faceted shape. For the first time since I first touched it, it felt like I wasn't seeing a mere reflection anymore.

I know what I'm going to do.

“You know what, Odyn, I think I'll take your offer.”

Antonidas watched us quietly. Behind me, Geirrvif levelled the entirety of her attention as well.

I motioned to my two men to stay and stepped through the ward right into hell.

“There exists in the sea a certain parasite called the tongue-eating louse. This creature eats the tongue of fish and takes its place. The parasite then feeds on the fish mucus, and if it is to die or otherwise be removed, the fish will starve to death.”

Antonidas followed at my side, an arcane shield protecting him from the smoke and the fire. Above us, the dragon continued to fly and spew flames and damnation.

“The astral body, the physical body, the mind, the blood, the sap of life that flows through your spiritual roots if you’re really unlucky, that’s just the endgame.” I turned my forcefield into a wedge and split the fire, smoke and molten stone in my way like a snow plow. “There’s the five senses, touch, taste, smell, sight and hearing. But then there’s proprioception, kinaesthesia, our sense of time, sense of weight, of pressure, sense of magic, and all the other senses we don’t think about until they fail or throb in pain. The Old Gods don’t impair those, their corruption *grows in their place.*”

The raven watched me. “The whispers.”

“No, that just means they’re sloppy. The corruption conflates with the senses, the subconscious processes that are so easily mistaken for true intuition, the many humours making up the body, the chemicals which allow the lightning signals to fire through your brain properly, and many other things. The oozing taint steadily replaces them until your senses, your organs, your body can’t endure without them there. It’s basically like becoming addicted to your own perception of reality, even your own sense of self, except now someone else is controlling them. From there they can hold you hostage and make you do whatever they want, whether overtly or through pavlovian conditioning. That’s what happened to Fahrads. I saw it, in him, that’s what he’s become. That’s what Verration *is.*”

Odyn was quiet. For so long that the dragon had time to fly over and around us twice more. In the spirit world, four golden stars blinked into being in the sky, then shot down straight for us at the speed of imagination.

They were spectral, golden and blue, born forth on feathery wings and led by one that was grander and brighter than all others. “Odyn. Is that your help?”

The raven shook its wings. “Ah, the lovely Eyir, here at last. Took them long enough!”

A god’s favor. Four angels of the Light. Their shining goddess. And me.

Against a dragon come to finish what an evil king and his foul henchmen started. Because I tore the veil off his madness and forced the mollusks of yore to take an active hand.

“I will make no promises of salvation,” Odyn murmured, misunderstanding my silence. “My val’kyr exist to shepherd and safeguard souls that have already left their bodies, they can do very little in the living world by themselves, little but dreams and inspiration.” When Geirrvif attacked me in front of Lionheart without even a shred of restraint, she hadn’t expected her attack to hit anything besides my spirit, the only reason she manifested into the physical world was because I bid the Light to *Reveal*. “The parts of the self are not easily severed by shadows, for all that the Void likes to lie otherwise. It was *your* Light that restored life to that hapless coin counter. As ever, all strength must spring from man. Could I send my warriors...”

But he couldn’t, because everyone else kept living down to his worst expectations, and Helya was a petty witch. “It’s alright.” I opened my spirit to him, to Geirrvif, to the others as they finally landed around me, their forms see-through and insubstantial but *present*. “I don’t need them to do anything more than that.”

The raven gave me one last glance and returned to the spirit world. Geirrvif joined her mind to mine. The other val’kyr joined their minds to hers. Eyir gave me a hard stare from behind her winged helm, then overlapped her val’kyr with her spirit, and through them me. I conveyed my plan at the speed of thought, and they were aghast, incredulous, disbelieving. Up until the raven landed on Eyir’s helm and tapped its claw.

Granodior.

~ Alertness, Expectancy, I Am Here ~

The Spirit of the Valley... Fahrhad hadn’t put him to sleep out of malice, though he’d certainly sold it that way. It was to protect *it* from the fatal conflict that would have resulted if it was around to challenge him and trigger the Old Ones’s override. *I’m going to do something... emphatic. Don’t let sign or sight escape your bounds, can you do that? If Deathwing gets any glimpse of this, he’ll kill us all.*

~ Confusion, Fatalism, Agreement. ~

“Antonidas.” I held up the bag of dragon knockout bombs. “These pellets... can you make him breathe them somehow?”

“I can make it so he has no choice.”

Good enough for me. “I’ll tell you when.”

Then I walked out to the middle of the scorched earth, took a deep breath and roared to the sky.

“VERRATION!” My voice rang through the air, through the Light, even through the Arcane as far as I could reach, so loud that the dragon *staggered* in the air. “I’ve not some grand arena to stage our final confrontation in, so I hope you’ll accept this cornfield!”

The dragon roared, swooped down and landed ahead of me with such force that my home groaned behind me, his eyes wild and angry and aimed straight at me as if daring me to Soulgaze a second time.

This time I was harsh. My Soulgaze was bright, unmerciful, instantaneous, it bridged the gap with more ease and swiftness than ever before because I was the only one between us two who’d *grown*. I purged the swarm the moment it touched me, banished the dark to the edges of the mind, displaced and seared away the vermin and corpses of vermin that had replaced the substance of his awareness. When they were gone, I buttressed the crumbling pillars of his will with *my* will, the threads of his spirit with mine all the way to the soul. Instead of Shadow and Void, what grew to patch and rebuild everything left of *his* consciousness of Self was the Light.

And when our minds were so entwined that the dragon couldn’t *not* see everything I could see and was doing, I cast through the Soulgaze a second spell, the psychometry that had become instinct after using it on my father so many times. I saw everything of Verration and everything that *wasn’t*, and because I did, so did he.

Then I set myself against the dark and pulled *hard* on him as I withdrew back to the living world.

Verration *screamed*, in rage, then pain, then shock as I pulled on his mind, as his mind pulled on his *spirit* as I wrenched it out, the Light a lattice around it and through both of us as I returned to the waking world without letting the Soulgaze lapse. His body stumbled back but the rest of him *didn’t*, a second, hazy outline ripping out of the flesh like a double vision of blood, fire and ear-splitting desperation.

“Antonidas, now!”

The tranquilizing bombs shot from somewhere up in the air – invisibility? – and exploded right in the dragon’s face, but didn’t disperse more than a foot away from the nose due to a force bubble that warped in place right after.

“Now, val’kyr, contain him!” I thundered even as I strained to gather all the power I could call. “I don’t need you to rip his soul out, just loosen it from the rest! I don’t want him dead, I need to *see*.”

The angels swooped down to surround the monster, one at each cardinal point, Eyir above the dragon to set their combined will upon his. They called the Light in the spirit world. At the very same moment, I gave them the Light in the world of the Living. Their wings unfurled, their swords raised high, the Light shone tall, and their combined will *pinned* the dragon’s soul where I’d dragged it in the wake of his mind and his spirit, on the very threshold of life and death.

“Light,” I called, stretched to the very ends of my effort. First the guard, then the assassin, and now, for the third time in the same day, the Rite of Judgment Unmerciful descended upon me and a *dragon*. “I need you!”

The golden pillars erupted from us violently, powerfully, from me, from the angels where they stood, from the dragon at the very center of their formation. The towering golden brilliance blew away the smoke, the dust, the night’s darkness. Gold enveloped the dragon, enveloped the valkyries where they hovered on feather wings, enveloped me, latched on us all, infused us, rose further and further up like great spires surrounding a colossal tower to pierce the swirling clouds, determined, demanding, burning everything that did not belong and *kept burning*.

“GUOOOAAAAAACH!”

With a howling scream, the dragon died. There was no question as to the outcome, there was too little of him left.

But that didn’t mean there wasn’t enough to *heal*.

“Beyond the flow of time and thought of the gods, there lies the Living Eternal Fire, out of which all come and through which everything takes form. Everything and nothing are its breath, its emptiness and fullness are its hands, motion and stillness are its feet, everywhere and nowhere are its center and its face is the Light. Nothing is made without the Light and everything that comes out of the Light is the Life which that takes form.”

With a rattling gasp, Verration came back to life, his breath shaking, still corrupt and broken, but alive enough to tremble in renewed agony because the Judgment of the abominations infesting him for thousands of years had only just started.

“Like the thunder brings the light and out of the light, the grumble and the fire which overflows, so is thought. Thought becomes our word and then our doing. The light of Self is our thought and also our most prized possession. The light gains strength through the word and the will of Self lights the fire, through which all that is around us becomes.”

The corruption... purging the mind would never have been enough, its vector was physical, like a brain parasite it can just hook itself in again, infest again at a moment’s notice. But since it was not just conditioning, that meant the alternative to death needn’t be equally long-term reconditioning. The corruption was foreign and unclean and unwanted and it would all burn.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!”

The dragon’s body screamed and screamed and *screamed* until he lost all breath, all *life*, only to wake again, gasp for air and scream again, and again, thrashing weakly, helplessly as the corruption was exposed, displaced, loosened and scoured out of him bit by bit.

“Don’t tie your soul to anything worldly, to things, to animals, to silver and gold, for as they come, so they leave. All that is seen, is birthed, grown and then it goes back to where it came from. Only the nature of things stays eternal and has innumerable and endless branches, and so like the springs of your mind and your soul, they do not show themselves. For a breath and a fire make everything that grows to grow, weeds, trees, animals and ourselves. And out of the same hearth they arrive and return, and this hearth is eternal!”

The dragon’s soul screamed too, but its eyes sought mine, shocked, confused, disbelieving, resentful, and suddenly drowning in *want* when he finally realized what I was doing.

“Acknowledge the bad thought, shield yourself as you shield from the thunder, let it go the same way it came, for it urges you towards unnatural things. Shield from bare words and from falsehood. They are like the powder of the field which covers your eyes, like a spider’s web for your mind and your soul. They urge you towards pride, deceit, theft and bloodshed and their fruit is shame, helplessness, poverty, illness, bitterness and death!”

The lies, the fear, the delusion, the corruption was exposed, displaced, loosened and scoured out of him with each death, leaving the Light to restore, heal and *become* what was lost with

every new life. Remade everything *wrong* in the flesh and past it, refit it to what was still right and healthy in the Soul, even if that meant replacing everything that was no longer there!

“Remember that the heartbeat... the flowing of blood through the veins, the healing of wounds, the beauty of the eyes and the wonder of the formation of the body, they... They are made through the power and breath of the lively and eternal fire. You have forgotten that the body is just a grain from the small that is seen. Remember!”

“**GRRRAAAA AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!**”

Life fled and returned through dozen deaths. A hundred deaths. A hundred *hundred* deaths until I had almost nothing of myself left to strain.

A hundred hundred deaths followed by new life each and every time all the way unto dawn.

Until... Until finally...

“S-stop, please!” Verration begged brokenly. “The fire – the Light – so beautiful – Rapture! You’d dangle it in front of me – nothing awaits me save the maws!”

“Be... like the towering mountain and raise your light above everything that surrounds you. Be sober like the earth... and you will not lack anything. Helplessness... comes for evil and falsehood, for what you give is what you receive, what you sow is what you reap. The light of your soul and the light of the one next to you, they have the same hearth and remain without shadow!”

“~~Your preach~~ *me* hope,” the words of sanity finally ripped their way out of a hoarse dual voice. “It’s... no different from cruelty, your Light – it reaches me – through a thousand deaths you still hold out your hand – don’t dangle salvation before me now, please! The want – it devours all sense, you can’t – I can’t...”

“You – damned – lizard!” That *want* was the first want that was *his* in... I didn’t know how long. “Have you no shame? Does a man see into a dragon’s heart better than he does? Where is your pride?!”

“Plaudits – clemency,” Verration groaned in the throes of renewal. “At the end – all you will receive – disappointment!”

“Onyxia, Nefarian, Deathwing the Damned, no! You are nothing like them!” He premeditated nothing but the death of his flight’s worst monsters, otherwise did only what men hired him to

inflict on other men. He never warped minds, never harassed, he didn't indulge the sadism imposed on him, he never projected his degeneracy on his victims, he never even concocted mental justifications. The only disappointment here was that Aiden Perenolde came by all his evil completely honestly!

"Your mind," the dragon rasped. "I see it – no mercy – no rancor – no disdain, I – I can't–"

"You don't have to. That's why I'm here. You are Fahrad, the Trainer of Heroes! You are Verration, the Black Dragon who inherits the charge of the Ruler of the Earth!"

"I – I am–"

"I AM." That – that was a good chant. "I AM. I AM. I AM I AM I AM I–"

"-AM, I AM, I AM, I AM, I AM!"

The Light Judged one last time.

"The unwise – is urged – by craving – but the wise contains it! The unwise suffers when – when the craving brings him to failure and fall, but the wise always... always finds the winning in losing and –"

"-and the Ascension in Descent!"

The Light Judged one last time and the dragon lived. Its mind and spirit and body all felt no pain.

Because...

Because...

"THE END..." we both spoke at once. **"IS THE BEGINNING!"**

I collapsed. The Light winked out, but the darkness didn't return because the Sun was finally above the mountains. The angels fell to their knees, their lights dim, their spirits worn and sheer but their faces reverent. There were people around me. And farther away. Family. Strangers. I could barely see them. I could barely see anything. I could barely see. I could barely hear. Calls. Words. Warmth upon my face. Feathery wings on the unfelt currents of the world unseen, brushing my face.

Words were said. Tears were shed. Acknowledgment came in the same breath as someone offered a drink from a flagon.

Great burnished wings flapped from the ridge where we grazed our cattle, only to turn away and disappear over the canyon.

And in front of me, pained and exhausted from the ritual of a thousand deaths, rose the first, resounding, rapturous cry of a Lightforged Dragon.