

## Chapter 18: The Shifting Flow of Fortune

### “- The False Lady .-“

She had been seduced.

Taking the girl's face had been a last-minute whim. She'd been using a throwaway face before that, convinced that the tall tales about a 'purified' traitor in the black dragonflight were just that – tall tales. In other words, in need of verification but almost certainly untrue, and thus guaranteed to not demand any sort of long-term commitment. For all that humans were the mortal race that posed the greatest threat to dragonkind, their rumors tended to be the opposite of accurate.

Then she saw the dragon in question by mere happenstance, flying over the border while she was masquerading as a Stromgarde army camp follower, and knew she had to look into this herself.

Infiltrating Alterac conventionally would have been too much tedium for too much risk. The Ravenholdt assassins were a troublesome adversary, she knew this even before she learned that the traitor black dragon had been in their ranks. Moreover, going in as an unassuming outsider was too much risk for too little reward, she was unlikely to gain any more information than she had already gleaned, never mind direct access to this 'Emerentius.' Worse, if she *did* get access, it would likely involve at least a show of allegiance to this 'Prophet,' even if just to appease his pet Duke.

Since open sedition was needlessly troublesome to navigate, it made more sense to join the other, stronger side. Conflict was inevitable either way.

Stealing the identity of a foreign noble was therefore the best option, but not one done lightly. Adopting a high-profile identity would tie up a lot of her time. If she did it as a short-term scheme only to dispose of the identity after a week or month, it would be an unacceptable waste of assets and leverage. May even invite investigation and suspicion, perhaps even discovery of her true nature in the worst-case scenario.

Compounding matters, her opportunity window to insinuate herself into Alterac's court was very brief. She didn't have the time to fully charm, enthrall or otherwise divert suspicion about inconsistencies in 'Ysolde Prestor's' behaviour. Or her father's, a Lordaeron noble who'd initially refused to entertain the Perenolde suit, and even had someone already in mind from down in Stormwind.

Many times had she already wondered if the price was truly worth it, but she dared not rouse her sire from his millennia-old torpor for mere rumors.

Then the young King of Alterac neatly derailed her entire mission by being so infuriating as to drive her to absolute distraction.

His mind was too sharp for casual enchantment, he didn't eat food that wasn't tasted and tested in front of him, magically and alchemically. He didn't drink from bottles he didn't witness being thoroughly cleaned *before* being opened and tested in front of him the same way. He didn't clasp arms with anyone who hadn't removed their cloak, he didn't shake hands without gloves on, he didn't kiss any cheek that had any sort of makeup on.

He didn't even *marry* her normally. Instead, Aiden Perenolde held a sudden, unannounced ceremony that very morning, with just the priest, parents and witnesses.

It was so unexpected that she'd almost been caught missing from her room! She'd meant to finally access the dungeon where the rumored bronze dragon was kept, while everyone else was too asleep and drunk to catch her in the act. She barely made it back to her chambers in time, and she had no time at all to find an opening to work her 'charms' on her 'father' who'd been getting cold feet.

Even that didn't matter because the young king got his way all by himself, somehow. She didn't know how, she hadn't been allowed in the room for it, it was galling.

Aiden Perenolde then had the insolence to 'reassure' her that it was all to 'spare' her the 'usual' courtship troubles. Which was to say, the local games of gossip, knives and poison that 'might be too much for a gentle lady from outside the country'. It wasn't just the women scorned she had to worry about either, he told her with such genuineness that even she believed him for a moment, it was enough to make her want to scream.

The man was demanding and gracious, thoughtful and condescending, mildly mannered but also refusing to take no for an answer, perfectly able to have his way even against her much older ‘father,’ who should have been beyond coercion because he was the subject of a different king...

By the time the priest pronounced them man and wife, her whole body was aflame with wanton devilment. If Aiden Perenolde wasn’t already a black dragon, she was going to find a way to turn him into one because this? All this?

This was unacceptable.

She had been seduced and she didn’t hate it, it could not be borne!

Even now, finally engaged in the lovemaking that the young king had refused her every time before – even when she snuck into his bedchambers – he turned away all her advances and only made a move when *he* was good and ready.

That, as it happened, was after they’d bathed together. Soaked in the hot soapy water long enough that nearly every contact drug she’d brought out for the occasion had long since washed away. It was outrageous, infuriating, the insolent man took pleasure in every discomfort he inflicted on her, it made her face burn and her blood boil with every one of her failures until she was driven to complete distraction.

But.

*But.* Finally.

*Finally,* she’d wo-

“Lover’s Frenzy, I assume?” the young king said in her ear, one hand locked on her breast and the other between her legs.

She didn’t freeze at first, but only because she was mid-whimper and didn’t realize what he’d said until after he’d locked his grip on her, clenched his fingers, ran his thumb repeatedly over- over-through- aah!

“Fast-acting aphrodisiac, absorbed through flesh but not skin, does not dissolve in water, an able choice I admit, but I assure you it’s unnecessary. Also, I am not ignorant to the other effect of the concoction, which renders the user susceptible to suggestion after the act. That you’d apply it to

yourself means you're protected from the same. Meaning you've either a secret talent for poisons, a secret mastery of alchemy, or you aren't human. What shall I look for first, milady? Pointed ears beneath your silken hair, or scales beneath this velvet skin?"

He knew?! He – no! "Mnnn~ah!" She wrapped her arms around his neck and ground against him with a moan, *just* before she might have hesitated too long. "You can – look under my – skin – all you – like – husband!"

She burned inside and out, at losing again, at how low she'd brought herself, at how she hadn't *entirely* pretended just now. It was worth it, she told herself. It had ruined his certainty about what he'd just called her out on. He wasn't so sure anymore about what he'd just seen through. He'd seen through her.

Her new husband turned rougher, drawing ever more wanton sounds out of her for the rest of their foreplay, then he ruthlessly withdrew the moment he'd scrubber her womanhood clean of the drug. He exited the bath and walked out of the room. Left her there. He – he just left her there! He left her there, alone, to stew in – without – pent up like some lubricious *ape* – she – he – that lowly wretch!

She took as torturously long as she could to get herself presentable, because if he was going to leave her unsatisfied and make her wait on top of it, she'd return the favour ten times over.

She finally went looking for him after no one came for her for over an hour, stewing on the inside from yet one more defeat.

She found Aiden in his private study – this was the first time she was allowed in – just as he was sending off a servant to arrange a meeting with Archibald Greymane about Isiden's fostering – he was giving his worthless nephew more thought than he was giving her!

Before she could say anything, a guard came running in, dashed past her and whispered something in the king's ear... which she didn't hear with her superior senses because of a ward on the desk, damn that man!

Whatever the message was, it made Aiden turn stiff and cold.

Ten minutes later, she was locked with her 'father' and their retinue inside a guarded suite 'for her safety,' while her new husband went to deal with whatever it was. She was denied details, unlike

her ‘father’ who *also* withheld her the details because ‘gentle ladies needn’t worry about such things,’ the audacity!

More than ever before, she regretted her impulsive decision to kill the Prestor girl and take her face. If she’d known this would happen, she’d have come as someone more inclined to bloodthirst, the Gilnean mistress perhaps? Archibald Greymane kept strange bedfellows, but putting on the airs of a ripe matron wasn’t beyond her skills. Then she might even have been allowed down in the dungeons, to add her own expertise to the bronze knave’s interrogation.

But no, she’d have had to cater to a doddering old fool instead, and his woman that she’d be replacing was the sort to have schemes of her own. Too much work for anyone to uncover and co-opt in the time available.

They were kept locked in almost long enough for her to seriously consider bringing out her spells, damn everything else.

The smite came with no warning. One moment she was fuming over having to restrain herself, the next she was screaming in pain, toppling from shock, collapsing to the floor from the searing blow to her very spirit. She cried out as her sight burned golden, her body and spirit both convulsed as she was judged by powers spurned, she relived her entire life in an instant but was not allowed any self-delusion.

When the gift of foreign strength entered her, she hadn’t the wits to question it until it displaced the largest, newly scorched tendril of fleshy pus around her soul. Settled in to burn hot and bright for a day, what – who – why – who dared?!

“Agh – wh-what happened - Ysolde?!” came her ‘father’s’ stammer as he knelt by her and pulled her up. “Daughter, speak to me, plea – agh!” Lord Prestor flinched as she met his eyes.

She flinched too, as the deepest essence of him was revealed to her. Her breath stopped when she realized the deepest truth of *her* had been bared to *him*.

She couldn’t react to the impossible feeling that *she* was the one found wanting.

“Wh-what was that? Who – *what* are you? Where is – what have you done with my daughter?! Where is she? Who are you? What are you?!”

It took all her strength to push him away, and she swore to herself that her scream was from effort rather than fear at the man's bared blade.

Her dragon breath was pitiful, but somehow barely enough. The man fell back from her with a scream, dropped his knife and kept screaming as the fire caught on his hair and clothes. She felt a spike of terror when it looked like he might put it out. But the last of her molten spittle landed on the oil from the toppled lamp, fallen off the end table by the door.

The dying screams of Lord Prestor were long and torturous, but still ended before her shaking stopped. It took even longer to muster enough strength to climb back to her feet. The screams and choking from the servants were a wretched mirror of her own, as the whole room burned around her, filling with smoke and the smell of roast pork. She wrapped her arms tight around herself in dazed confusion and soul-deep pain.

She snarled in fury.

The dying screams ended to arcane missiles, and the flames to icy waves

That she needed more than one frost nova ignited what was left of her hobbled mind, until she felt such fury that the locked doors were pulverized on the way out.

She was-

“Good Gods, milady is that you? What – fire! You, get water! You, go warn the King that whoever did this is already in the castle! Milady, let me-“

She didn't know any of the guards, but she did after their eyes met. Worse, they suddenly knew even more about her. The leader's reaction was so sharp and loud that even the messenger paused to turn.

She almost didn't manage to act first. Again.

The hallway filled with fire *just* before it would have filled with naked swords.

And as she cast her eyes down to avoid further repeats of the same, as she stomped past screaming, writhing bodies and through her own flames, as she kept her head bowed low as if in shame, Onyxia, Daughter of Deathwing, swore that she'd find whoever had done this and make their entire bloodline pay.

## “-. The False Suitress .-“

When the Archbishop came to her, she thought he'd take her along on his procession to the southern continent, perhaps even introduce her to the people in her eventual parish. Her training at the Grand Cathedral was drawing near a close. She also knew that her parents refused to consider any suitors from outside their home country.

With all omens aligned with the prospect of her return, it was the perfect way to satisfy all parties. So when the head of the Church arranged a meeting, she was confident in the path that the Light had seemingly prepared for her.

She hadn't imagined that Alonsus Faol would ask instead for subterfuge and deception. But ask he did and accept she did, to attend the Alterac Grand Engagement Ball as his secret eyes and ears.

She could see the logic, she was a highborn lady fully flowered and unspoiled, but still a few weeks short of her majority. Therefore, any attempts at a whirlwind wedding would be illegitimate, even if they found a corrupt enough priest to officiate. More importantly, she hadn't taken her vows of anointing yet, and even if she had, the oaths of the Church didn't preclude nuptials. If anything, it was the opposite – the Light's virtues were the same ones that sustained a good and fruitful life, including children.

By presenting herself as one of the eligible maidens of Stormwind, she was even guaranteed at least *some* time in private with the king. With Ser Saidan in sight as her chaperone, of course.

She'd steeled herself for weeks of double speak and false smiles.

She didn't last three days.

The Court of Alterac was a den of serpents, to the point where she barely endured the first feast, before dropping all pretense that she would entertain any engagement prospects.

She imagined this was her punishment for taking the mission for the wrong reasons. She'd accepted not for duty, or even relish at the challenge. Instead, she'd agreed mainly because she was curious to find out more about this child saint that His Holiness was so taken with, perhaps even meet him.

This young man acclaimed as a Prophet when he was no older than her, the man who gained his own *dragon* somehow, after he *brought a man back from the dead*. The prospect was just too irresistible to miss.

May the Archbishop and the Light both forgive her weakness, but in the end the subterfuge hadn't been needed at all, to complete her true mission here. She witnessed all she needed before she even reached the keep. The powers of true far sight may still elude her, but the practice she got with more modest ranges let her witness more than enough.

By the time her retinue was in sight of Alterac Castle, she wagered she could make a fair guess about which of the king's men were corrupt. She knew the faces and the 'crimes' of at least one third of the people currently languishing in the royal dungeons too.

Were the local priests complicit, or coerced? Blackmailed? Perhaps their letters were being intercepted?

Court, if anything, was even worse. Appearances were so well confectioned it was nearly saccharine, but beneath the veneer was all pus.

It was a small blessing that hers was not the only foreign delegation. Key word being small. Stromgarde was a no show, the Kul Tiras contingent left early, Dalaran sent a single mage – recently dismissed under suspicious circumstances from the Council of Six – and the entourage from Lordaeron proved almost as fickle as their hosts. Lord Prestor was a fair enough man, but the Lady Ysolde was the sort that fit a bit too well in with the locals. Even the Gilnean delegation only welcomed her once she proved able to ease the king's illness, and not with open arms.

In the end, she stuck with the last because it was where she could do the most good.

King Archibald Greymane of Gilneas swung between pathologically shy and explosively paranoid, the latter being why he insisted on coming personally. Not to present any eligible maiden, but to negotiate the fostering of King Perenolde's toddler nephew.

Unfortunately, he wasn't able to follow through on any of it because of his frail health and paranoia. He was too thin, pale, tired quickly, he was irritable and lacked patience, he bore the company of strangers very poorly, was always anxious, barely managed to sleep, he had trouble thinking and concentrating, even his memory was failing. Worst of all, he suffered from tremors



in the hands, face and head, some of them extremely sudden and jerky. There seldom passed a day without him injuring himself in some way.

The silver lining, if you could call it that, was that the man's wish to avoid people meant he rarely left his guest suite. This put the burden for everything on his son Genn. It was an unfair toil, but the prince latched onto any opportunity to be elsewhere with a tragic, guilty relief. Not because of the burden of care, but because the king unloaded all his paranoia and hostility and condescension on him, whenever he was there.

A fool, weakling, scoundrel, traitor, a complete incompetent for still not making any headway in his plans of treason, what the king accused his son of changed almost daily.

It was that ultimate perversion of love, when one 'trusts' only their closest family with their 'true' self. The face they don't dare show in public. The proof of Genn's unparalleled status in his father's heart was in how the king didn't subject his mistress to the same hardship, despite her almost never leaving his side.

Light or no Light, she couldn't bear to see it. Not without doing something.

It took persuasion, luck, and the Light's guidance for her entreaties to bear fruit.

It was thanks to the newest holy arts that she succeeded. The arts His Holiness had introduced to the Church just before she was sent here. The arts divined by that same Prophet that was so completely avoided in conversation here. The diagnostic spell was the only one she had achieved any manner of skill in, but she expected it to become her mainstay.

Archibald Greymane had mercury poisoning. And not just the trifle from touching contaminated coins either.

King Archibald Greymane of Gilneas was an *alchemist*. And not just any alchemist either, but one well on his way to creating a philosopher's stone. She didn't know much about the vocation, alchemists – true alchemists – kept to themselves. But she did know that ingesting mercury was one of the late stages. It was why so many of them used to die, before their secrecy thawed enough that they dared seek help from the Clergy, for the Light's steadfastness and healing.

She did not know enough to judge. Perhaps the miracle elixir at the other end of the torment made everything worth it.

To her shame, her ability to purge toxins was almost non-existent compared to mending bone and flesh. True diseases had long eluded the Church, and mercury was one of the poisons that posed similar challenges. It was a prominent element in alchemy for good reasons. That gap in ability was not easily bridged.

Now, though, with this spell, she had the sight and insight that she'd lacked. That they'd *all* lacked.

She'd still only reduced his symptoms so far, but that alone raised her higher in the king's eyes than all but blood kin. She also managed to repair the damage to the lungs, and more general decay from insufficient air. She was almost ready to broach the topic of extracting the toxin outright. She should have focus enough to try without making things worse, at least.

She'd offer once she had a private moment with Ser Saidan, she decided. She wouldn't act without all due forewarning, she was not that kind of lady. Doubly so since it wasn't all good news. While the better rested and mellow king had begun to treat his son better, this also revealed a deep animosity between Genn and his father's mistress, who no longer commanded all royal favor.

The latest damage to the king's lungs was almost completely undone when Judgment came down on all five of them.

She flinched from the Light's sheer density. All at once, the mistakes of her life played out inside her head, with none of the biases or justifications.

But she didn't fall. She didn't sway, didn't start, didn't topple. She didn't hurt.

When the gift of foreign strength entered her, she was not caught off guard.

She saw a verdant forest surrounding a rent cove whose ground was not ground but instead moist flesh. On it was table with a jenga tower rising up into infinity. In front of it, a wizard matched spells with some sort of green-skinned brute, magic and might clashing in snarling contempt as dwarves, gnomes, trolls, elves, giant bug creatures and man-bulls and many other things were trampled underfoot.

Above them, three giants of flesh and metal matched the Light against Fel darkness, while beings of golden crystal stood opposed to two horned fiends. All around, dragons swarmed the sky from horizon to horizon. The Black licked at the pus spraying up from the fleshy ground. The Red ate

their own tail. The Green turned in their sleep. The Blue mourned and rejoiced. The Bronze wove threads of sand into looped knots.

Tentacles and tendrils of blood and bile seeped up from the bedrock. Two burning eyes glared down from amidst the corpses of gods littering the Great Dark. The Fire burned. The Air roared. The Water roiled. The Earth languished in sorrow deep below. Each and every time the chaos churned, block upon blocks of the trembling tower fell down from heaven.

And right there in the middle, cross-legged on the table at the base of the jenga spire of time, sat a man with blond hair and a beard and blue eyes. He was taking blocks out of the tower's base, coating them in glue, then putting them back in place, one by one by one until a wholly new, unyielding foundation grew taller than his hands could reach. So he used the falling blocks to make a club instead.

Then he got up, bashed the wizard over the head with all the force of salvaged time, took the green brute's staff, and swung it hard at the tower, smashing everything upwards from his hard work apart.

The man's eyes met her own as the future fell to pieces around them. Then the eyes were gone. There was only Light shining forth. The axe came down and smashed through the table, rending down into the flesh below. It ~~screamed~~ screamed.

Lady Mara Fordragon reeled back, away from the king on his chair, up to her feet from where she'd sat on the small seat nearby. She struggled to hang onto the – the vision – *soulgaze*, some inner certainty told her – to sear it as clearly as she could inside her mind.

She knew, now.

The Prophet was real, he was true, he was here.

And as the results of the Judgments of everyone else in the keep echoed in her spirit, she knew that not even a third of them would make it past his wall.

Not even the dragons.

Save one.

There were four dragons in the castle.

“Ohhh,” moaned Archibald Greymane, eyes wide and grief-stricken as he looked up at his son, whose first thought had been to check on his father despite everything. “Oh... Oh my son, I killed your mother... I persuaded her to take the mercury together, curse me! I didn’t want to face it. Like a coward, I didn’t – wouldn’t – every time I refused your help, every time I said a real man doesn’t need it, every time my tongue spewed its poison at you, I lied. I was just punishing myself for my sin. Punishing *you* for nothing, my poor boy, I’m not worthy to be in your sight...”

Such family hardship healed in an instant, it was a miracle. A miracle while Mara could barely stem a measly illness of the flesh.

“Wh-what was that?” Ser Saidan rasped somewhere behind her. Much closer to the ground than his massive two-meter bulk should be.

She would have turned, but the king’s eyes met hers.

The symptoms of mercury poisoning were the whole point, she suddenly knew. Mercury being poison was not disputed. Alchemists merely considered it all worth it for the mental effects. They did not consider paranoia and other psychological issues to be *symptoms* of the mercury, but a consequence of the self-reflection – and reassessment of everyone else – that mercury induced.

If they survived long enough to come to terms with all the lies told to them – by others and themselves – they might just get close enough to enlightenment to see into the final mystery.

She did not see how it was worth it. Even if imbibing the poison tore the veil off all self-deception, it was not a quick or easy process. Was this why Alchemists were so solitary? They became absolutely horrible people for – so long a time, too long for even the ties of kin to endure. Was the final discovery worth so much? Losing everything and everyone that made life worth living in the first place?

The second soulgaze of her life ended with the feeling that Archibald Greymane now asked himself the same.

“My Lady!” Saidan’s voice came, louder. There was rustle of plates and heavy footsteps, clank and thud of his large shield against the floor, then his hand was upon her shoulder. “My lady, please! Are you alright – that was – the Light, I can -“

She reached up for his hand reflexively, looked back to find him transfixed, then followed his gaze to the Lady Tharia and was promptly transfixed herself. The woman – she was covered head to toe in gruesome scars, *old* one previously hidden, and her eyes-

The third soulgaze of Mara Fordragon's life ended with her backing away in open-mouthed horror. She didn't have time to warn the others before they, too, met the serpent-like eyes.

Saidan Dathrohan jumped between them with no time to spare, molten flame spraying around his shield with the smell of pitch and dead multitudes. The dragon breath singed her sleeves, caught the king's leg and the prince's arm, knocked their senses askew so harshly that they couldn't think through the pain and she *screamed*-

"Light," the knight grunted. "Give me strength!" The man set his legs and dove forward, splitting the fire breath harder, wider.

Wide enough that they finally escaped its wrath and could finally think again through the pain.

"RUN!" The knight bellowed. "RUN, RUN NOW!"

It was all she could do to help Genn Greymane carry his father out the door.

The last thing Mara Fordragon heard on the way out was a dragon's roar screaming out of a woman's throat.

The last thing she saw was the Light weakly outlining Saidan Dathrohan with power he'd never grasped before.

### **“-. The False Goblette .-“**

They still made her wait. After all the trouble she went through to get herself captured, sold to a circus, and hauled all the way to Alterac's capital as the festival's star attraction, they still made her wait. Every chance taken, every leeway afforded, all occasions come and past, everyone in the Capital and many beyond had come to see the savage greenskin in a cage. Yet still no sign of the all-knowing boy.

All the events planned for, every trick played, every insult sneered and trick inflicted on the more daring simpletons, and here at the end still nothing. It was ridiculous, absurd, unacceptable, it had been weeks!

What kind of diviner missed all this?

As a final insult, the 'good' king of this benighted land had 'kindly' declined the circus access to anywhere closer than the outer ring of the city. To 'protect' his more refined subjects and guests from 'unfortunate exposure.' She didn't know if the exact words belonged to the king or just the guard captain that delivered them. She didn't much care either, she wasn't here for either of them.

She was on her second day of considering that maybe, *possibly* the insolent boy had actually had good reasons to ask that she not come over as a goblin. Once again, she decided that if it had really been that important, he'd have made it an actual condition instead of a mere request. If he was truly as all-knowing as he claimed, he should know that a dragon's visage was no trifle to take on and off like a rag.

When the giant golden dome snapped in place around the central keep, her cage was too well tucked away inside the smallest tent for her to see it.

She definitely felt it though.

And the roar, *everyone* heard *that*.

The nearly riotous stampede to get a better look meant that she didn't have to put any effort into escaping. Sneaking around until she reached a roof was only slightly more difficult. She ignored the inner voice saying that she wouldn't have had to go through all this trouble, if she'd just snuck her way into the kingdom outright, goblin or not. The blacks tended towards elaborate schemes, the only way she'd stayed ahead of them was by doing it even better.

She stood on the roof of the random hovel and saw a giant dome of gold. A giant dome of Holy Light with a huge dragon right on top of it. Bigger than her. He stood. He watched. He was *black*.

They made her wait for *this*?

She stood and stared at the strange sight of a black dragon... not doing anything.

'Emerentius.' The kinslayer. An assassin of lords and kith they'd never known existed.

... She *had* been politely invited, and it was almost certain the boy-saint knew about her secret work to purify black dragon eggs. Since there hadn't been black dragons trying to assassinate her every moment of the day since, the invitation may still be in good faith. It wouldn't do to make any hasty decis-

The inside of the dome flared brightly.

Over one hundred lives were instantly snuffed out.

She gaped, wide-eyed.

Then even more lives began to end, men, women, and then even two children died to – foul murder – butchery – treachery!

*Treachery!*

She shed her goblin form and took to the sky with a roar.

The other dragon's head snapped towards her instantly.

She braced herself for an attack, but none came. The other merely straightened, rose to stand on just his hind legs with ease she envied, and watched her approach. His altered body structure was a remarkable surprise that threatened to enthrall her, the Life magic within wanted to understand and adopt it post-haste, to be able to stand so erect, so graceful. But she pushed it down.

He looked surprised. He had the gall to be surprised, wasn't his new 'master' supposed to be some peerless seer? Or did the boy play games as well?

She soared high, made a wide sweep of the castle and the dome around it, then banked low to land on the face of the mountain peak right above it and him. "Why the surprise, oh kinslayer? Did your 'master' not invite me himself, or was that a ruse?"

The other stared at her. "Rheastrasza?" He rumbled incredulously, heedless of the many humans pointing, staring, listening and panicking all around them. "Lady Rheastrasza, is that you?"

"You do not sound pleased to see me."

"... This is not a good time."

“It is always a good time to stop the foolish and brazen.” She tapped the transmission stone under the scale of her palm, tried to contact Korialstrasz. Her heart sank when it failed. Had they – he couldn’t have been slain, she’d have felt it! “Cease whatever this is at once!”

“I cannot.”

“I will not ask again.”

“I will not fight you.”

“Then this will be easy!” Her flame filled her gullet to bursting, then she leapt and dove down, bathing him in her hottest, most purifying fire of life as she flew by.

He crouched low over the dome and took it. Didn’t make a sound as her fire scorched his flesh. When she banked around for a second sweep, she saw that the damage was much reduced compared to all other blacks she’d ever burned. What did get through was already healing.

She almost abandoned her course. She’d been told all the details the mortals could find about his ‘Lightforging,’ if it was really true... If he really *had* been freed from the Old Ones’ influence...

Inside the dome, people old and young continued to die ever faster, and then a child fell to murder again, a girl not even flowered.

No, she could not ignore the many times before, when the blacks made dead fools of the rest of them with ruses much more convincing than this.

The black did not move at her second plume of fire. Or the third one. Or the fifth.

On the sixth pass, she made as if to breath on him again but bodied him instead, if the dome fell then Korialstrasz should-

The black jumped over her, grabbed her by the wing on landing, wound around one full circle before she understood what had happened, and sent her hurtling dizzily away, to crash and rolled to an indignant stop in the middle of the public square.

She scrambled back to all fours with a snarl. She didn’t know how she’d avoided pulping or otherwise harming any of the humans around her, but his disregard for them sealed her path. Her breath came in fits and sparks. The snow melted and steamed around her, both the falling flakes



and the layers around her feet. Once more she tried to reach her Queen's consort. Once more, she failed.

*He doesn't need continuous contact with the dome, she thought as she rose back in the air with wrath and frustration. This will be harder than I thought.*

"Please, milady," the black pled, and he sounded so earnest, damn him. "Do not create conflict where there is none."

"Oh, but there is and you know it," she growled, landing once more above him. "You are overstepping your mandate, black dragon, and infringing on mine."

"My loyalty has changed, but it needn't conflict. Please do not do this."

"Then *you* cease. *Then* we may speak."

The other briefly closed his eyes in resignation. "For what you may yet achieve in the future, I will not bring you lasting harm." Any hope that he was surrendering perished when his eyes opened to show determination shining like the sun. "But even so, you will not interfere."

"What a lofty claim!" She rumbled in turn, making sure not to let slip her inner disquiet at his odd behaviour. Pushed away how earnest he still sounded, what it could mean for him to be so strong in holy power, she couldn't let herself believe it, not after so much. Not when she didn't know Korialstrasz' fate, no so easily, not so soon, not now, not when children kept dying. "Perhaps I should read into it more."

"Do as you must."

She obliged.

Rheastrasza of the Red Flight took to battle against her ancient foe.

And on the streets below, men, women and children ran for their lives, driven by quaking earth and the roars of dragons.

**“-. The Rightly Guided .-“**

(earlier that same night)

He was praying when he felt Wayland perish.

It was only his faith that kept him in the Light despite his shock.

It was the freshly revitalized will to try new things that guided his next act, but he only succeeded thanks to experience.

He projected out and up. His awareness resolved itself high into the sky, far above any bird or cloud. The entirety of Stormwind Kingdom far below was his to know, and he knew he could peer into the dark swamp to the east, or south into the Vale of Stranglethorn if he wanted.

He did neither. He turned instead to the North and flew forth, hastened to trace back that connection even though it left his body empty. The soulgaze was no paltry divination, it embedded a deep synchronicity that did not fade unless deliberately spurned. He didn't know if Wayland knew, but he did know that he could use it to find him. So he did, flying at the speed of imagination, so quickly the world became like a tunnel of light around him, up and onwards to the North, all the way to the edge of the continent of Azeroth, then further.

When he stopped above the boy's mountain home, his vision resolved into a scene of endless hunger and absolute destruction. A dark star eating the world, bite by bite, devouring the very forces holding matter together, sucking out even the Light of creation itself to feed its yawning maw.

When he tried to get closer, his vision began to tear and ripple as the pull began to tug at his own edges. The monstrosity was even inflicting itself upon the spirit world. Defying the pull took much of his strength, but at least it let him reach and see within. Darkness. More darkness. An Angel of Death.

She was there, curled up on the ground. Curled around Wayland's spirit, who writhed as the Valkyrie struggled to keep it from tearing completely loose from his flesh and blood.

She was failing. Even if it weren't constantly drained to feed the ravenous darkness, a valkyrie's Light did not easily cross into the living world.

He almost spelled Wayland's doom when he reached out to them, her focus shattered, but there was no other choice. If an angel's light was reserved for the world of spirits, man would just have to bear the burden in the realm of life.

He prayed as fervently as he ever did in his life.

He barely succeeded, and it would have been for nothing if Wayland hadn't invoked his protection spell in time.

It – Light – such weakness he'd never felt – even at his most sickly as a child – where was – he – his body – it was so far away, he – he couldn't – he had to...

He would have been lost to the green dream, if not for all those days he spent at sea, weaving runic enchantments into his body and staves upon his bones.

“It – seems – we both – saved each other – “ rasped Archbishop Alonsus Faol as his head lolled on the floor, fallen weak and empty from his nightly prayers inside the Sanctuary of the Royal Chapel in Stormwind Keep. “But – what was that – it was – it *is!*”

Wayland! Wayland was under attack! He was dead, had been dead, he was dying again that very moment!

Alonsus only found his feet on the fifth try. He stepped on his mitre, knocked the Holy Book off the altar, knocked two candlesticks over and down on the way out, but he ignored all of it. The candles were unlit, darkness was nothing to the Light, and the Light would surely forgive him for prioritising its most beloved son.

The Archbishop stumbled, hobbled, strode, ran and sprinted with nearly mad urgency, out of the Church, across the grounds, through the queen's garden and into the keep through the nearest door he found. Sentries balked in shock and tried to catch up, but they failed because the Light drove him. With every breath he felt stronger. With every step he got faster. With every moment he felt a growing premonition that something terrible would happen soon.

*Please, Light, don't let me work a miracle only for him to suffer or do something more terrible!*

The servants cried out at the sight he made, but he didn't have time to look or act any less mad than the crisis unfolding. He demanded to know where to find the king's mage, and dashed where he was directed too fast for whys and thank yous.

If only he'd had the slightest foreboding! Then he might have accepted King Llane's offer of spending the last night of the Interregnum with him and his, instead of bowing own to let them be with family and friends as was the way.

The guards outside the royal suite barred his path from sheer shock at his dishevelled appearance. He almost wanted to conjure a shield and barrel through. Almost. The Light was with him, his strength would smash even the locks on those big doors.

"I need to see the king's mage!" he shouted instead, so loud that all inside would hear him. "Right now!"

Refusal, denial, questions, demands to know why he was in such a state, things were fit to become even more of a circus than they already were, before the doors opened from the inside.

"What's going on here?" thundered the voice of Anduin Lothar. "What racket is – Your Holiness! What in heaven's name?!"

Alonsus barely got his request out, him all at once by the shortness of breath he'd been spared on the way over. He was ushered in, led to a chair and hovered over by the King and Queen and Arathor's heir while he regained his speech.

"I need –" he wheezed, finally, standing back up. "I need – Master Medivh!" he cried in relief on seeing the sorcerer there. "Thank the Light you're here! Forgive me your majesties, but I need the help of your mage! Sorcerer, you claimed to be unequalled in matters arcane, I need you to prove it! How far away can you traverse by spell?!"

The four exchanged glances, but King Llane, Light bless him, did not make light of his urgency.

"Where do you need to go?"

"Alterac." The Archbishop cradled his forehead, unsure if the image of woe he just saw was a new vision or recent memory. "As deep in the heartland as you can get me."

"What happened-?"

“What *is* happening, there is no time, I need to get there *now* or not at all, *please*. Can you do it?”

“I can,” the mage himself finally said, equally curious and grim. “I’ll be wanting an explanation, but if it’s so urgent as to have Your Holiness come charging in like a feral beast, we cannot dither. Do I have your permission to scan your surface thoughts?”

“Why – visual reference?”

“As true to your desired destination as you can.”

“Anduin, summon as many guards as you can!” the king commanded, even as he was ushering away his wife. “We’re going too.”

Alonsus almost staggered in relief, and a raw self-recrimination. How witless and single-minded could he be that he didn’t request proper help himself? And more? A king, a man among men, the greatest of mages all before him, willing and eager. Yet even as he begged for profane passage to the other side of the world, it never once occurred to him to ask the mage to also come along. How –? Why –? In such a dire hour – had he internalized the prejudice against the arcane arts so deeply that –?

The Aegishjalmur came alight around his mind. Not at Medivh’s probe, but a second one, subtler. He looked for it. Found it. Lost it. He could not understand what had just happened.

But Gegng Galdri ignited like a furnace in his breast. And as the Light poured into the stave to turn away some evil spell, the Veldismagn came alive with defiance, and Lukkustafir showed the blind wherefrom sprung the evil it failed to turn away.

Alonsus turned his inner eye to see its path.

Behind Medivh’s own mind, a demon stitched into the fabric of the man’s flesh stared back at him, its face completely startled and misgaged.

It was the same face from Wayland’s visions.

For one, fatal moment, Alonsus Faol was stunned into complete inaction.

He barely had time to throw up his arms before a wave of indiscriminate destruction exploded out of Medivh with catastrophic might.



